



Section 7

WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'
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SECTION 7
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Introduction

The book you are about to read was written over the course of a single day in October 2014. This is the fourth time we've run the 'Novel-in-a-Day' event, and it continues to amaze me the sheer range of individuality that talented writers are able to bring to bear on a story.

For those unfamiliar with the concept of Novel-in-a-Day, it simple:

- A skeleton of a plot is worked out in advance of the day
- That plot is broken into 24 sections, which are divided amongst the participants randomly
- The writers have just 24 hours to write and return their chapters, working with no knowledge of the wider story or their place in it.

I hope you enjoy reading the book as much as we loved putting it together

Tim R.

25 October 2014

Section7

Chapter one

by Lee Powell

Jason Waterson stood listening on the phone in his office. He swallowed, opened his mouth and closed it again. He pushed the receiver harder against his ear - his knuckles turned white as blood drained from his face. The paper work strewn across the floor crackled under his weathered shoes as he began to pace back and forth.

“That’s a stones throw from The Times,” he said.

“Just get someone down there now.” Said the voice on the phone.

Jason ran his free hand through what was left of his hair and headed for the door.

“Thank you Mrs Colley. I will make sure they get the message. We very much appreciate you bringing this to our attention,” said Lerner Jones as she hung up.

Brian Wilson spat clumps of potatoes chips onto his screen as he convulsed hysterically. His belly jiggled like jelly as he began reciting fragments of Lerner’s call. “... I mean, how the hell do you do it?”

“Do what?” said Lerner leaning flirtatiously across the divide between their desks flipping her hair from side to side in mock attraction.

“You actually take that shit seriously. The great unwashed masses with nothing better to do than complain about comic strip alignments and font types. Oh, and let’s not forget the classic last week,” He chuckled noticing his screen and wiping it with his shirt sleeve.

“What’s her name, the old hag from Watford - you know - the rhubarb and custard pie lady - you actually spent an hour tracking it down in the archives and got back to her.”

The grin on Brian’s face vanished as he stood up knocking his bag of chips onto the floor. His podgy fingers seemed confused, first pointing to his own chest and then towards Lerner. She turned and followed his stare. Waterson’s was wavering her over towards his office.

“I have not finished with you,” she said, making a clawing motion at him with her hands.

Lerner grabbed her peppermint tea and headed towards her harried looking boss. Waterson closed the door behind her.

“You look tired,” Lerner said.

He ignored her and moved towards the window as if searching for the right words to speak. She sat down and stared at the old clock on the wall that had stopped years ago. Her eyes began to wander - folders stuffed with ink stained notes littered everywhere. Books and newspaper clippings overflowed from sagging bookshelves and bulging filing cabinets. A water cooler with no cups. She realised she had never seen him use his laptop - it had not moved from beneath a large dictionary on the floor since she

started with The Times. Waterson, she marvelled, was still very much old school - how he managed to run such a tight ship with a fountain pen and desk phone was like magic to her.

Waterson stiffened and lifted his chin.

“I need you down at Green Bank. There’s been another bombing.”

“Where exactly?” Lerner said trying to read Waterson’s body language as he scratched at his eyebrows.

“Details are still coming in. Mike’s on the police scanners now - you’ll need to get specifics from him.”

“So, what’s bothering you?”

Waterson pursed his lips and let out a weak smile. “I have no one else.”

“You don’t think I can handle this?”

“Popular opinion pertaining to the bombings is facing east towards the Arabs, but I’m not so sure.”

“The lack of fatalities you mean?”

“Exactly! If I wanted to send a strong message to ‘western infidels’ I’d target populated areas at a high traffic times to ensure my communication was effective.” He rummaged his pockets and retrieved a packet of Nicotine gum and began chewing on a piece. “I’m not comfortable putting you in the line of fire when I’m not certain who’s shooting, but I do need your objectivity on this Lerner. Are you up for it?”

Lerner nodded. Waterson stared at her and nodded back slowly and then made his way to the door and opened it for her to leave.

“Take a photographer with you. I want a report within the hour.”

Mike Farrington sat at his desk in front of three oversized monitors with his eyes closed listening to a police radio. On an oversized yellow post-it note were the words: *"I used to do crack cocaine until I discovered journalism."* There wasn't an inch of his surrounding partitions that hadn't been usurped with newspaper clippings of the middle east. A fax machine beeped and a red light lit up on his desk phone. He ignored them both.

"Mike," said Lerner.

He raised a hand to hush her for a moment then turned down the radio volume and tossed his headphones onto his desk into a row of empty Coke cans.

"Dogs are shitting in our backyard again." He opened a draw and pulled out a USB cable and started stuffing into the back some device. "Damn hubris of the British colonials playing off the Arabs, French and Jews - that's where this whole shit-storm started."

"What are you talking about?"

"Forget it! Waterson told me you'd be heading down. Look, all we know is that there's been another explosion down at Green Bank - corner of Brewhouse Lane. Legal firm, Wright and Warner, seemed to have been the target. Police arrived five minutes ago. No fatalities reported as yet, but ambulances are on their way."

"Anything else?"

Mike pointed to red light blinking on his desk phone. "No, but bonus points if there's a dead lawyer in there somewhere. I gotta take this."

As the elevator doors opened Lerner could feel her pulse rising as she double checked her bag for her press pass, pens and purse. She cursed as her notebook slipped from under her arm onto the

elevator floor. She checked her watch and pressed the 'close' button more than she needed too. *Police were probably cordoning off the area - she was running out of time.*

When Lerner entered the photo lab she could feel the sweat on her back clinging to her shirt - the place was empty. Empty with the exception of Remy Cistini. She took a breath and braced herself.

"Ah, Ms Jones," Remy said as his eager eyes devoured every inch of her five foot six frame.

"Where are Thomson and Garret?"

"Out on assignment."

"There's been another bombing down at Green Bank. Grab your gear. I'll fill you in on the way."

"Hold your horses. I'm all for an eager women, but I've got to get these up to editorial pronto." He grinned pointing to some images. "You wanted front line action as a war photo-journalist - we'll here's your first chance to make an impression. Let's go - Waterson's orders."

Lerner headed for the door in an attempt to rush Remy. It didn't work.

Remy was still flapping about with his camera bag on the pavement when Lerner finally managed to hail a cab.

"I've left my 35mm."

"Forget it, we run with what we got."

She snatched his camera bag and tossed it into the back of the cab. Remy climbed in next to her.

"Green Bank, corner of Brewhouse Lane please - quick as you can" she said to the cabby with a smile

"Right'o love."

Remy inched closer to Lerner as he feigned tightening his shoelace. His ego and aftershave buzzed around her like a fly she couldn't swat. She opened a window and stared at the rising smoke less than a mile to their west.

"It would have been faster in my car," said Remy.

Lerner laughed refusing to turn and face him.

"What's so funny?"

"If you drove a 'Smart' car instead of a Ferrari we wouldn't be having this discussion."

The traffic came to a standstill about hundred and fifty meters from Green Bank. Lerner closed her window and tapped the driver on the shoulder and handed him a ten pound note. "Here's fine. Keep the change."

She opened the door and started walking briskly.

"My god, there's people everywhere," said Remy struggling to keep up.

As they neared the corner Lerner could see the police had already blocked entry into the area. The fire brigade and ambulance services were the only ones getting in and out. The chorus of sirens and fire alarms were overwhelming. She could taste the debris in the air.

Remy tried to get a few shots of the smouldering building, but he was only getting heads in the crowd and smoke in the sky. He fixed his camera onto a monopod and held it above the crowd as they pushed their way through, but the people were huddling tighter together as they got closer - it was too hard to manoeuvre his limbs let alone his camera equipment. He glanced at Lerner and shrugged his shoulders looking for guidance - they couldn't move forward or see a damn thing now.

“Follow me,” Lerner shouted, backing up and making a bee-line for the obscured side of the city block to their right.

“It's worse than Portobello Road on a Sunday,” panted Remy, stopping to snap an old man playing a single string guitar with a small dog on his shoulders.

“Damn it Remy, please focus.”

As the crowd thinned at the periphery Lerner noticed another swarm of people rushing towards them from an entirely different building. She could see curiosity and fear in their faces as they shouted into the mobile phones and followed fire wardens wearing red hard hats. A cyclist with a bleeding leg and buckled wheel was shouting abuse at a man wearing a pin stripe suit, but she couldn't hear what he was saying through the racket of noise. Lerner approached one of the fire wardens.

“What's going on?” said Lerner.

“You need to get to the designated safety area - we've been told to evacuate.”

A blast erupted from the bowels of a nearby building. Lerner could not tell exactly which building, but instinctively dived to the ground dragging Remy with her. Flocks of birds scattered like puffs of black anti-aircraft gun smoke in the sky - then they were gone. Another blast sent tremors through the ground, and then another - much louder. Fists of orange flames punched their way through bricks and mortar. Pieces of glass and steel shrapnel sliced through the crowd.

Lerner had no clue how long she laid there scared to move. Her ears pulsed with pain as she padded her debris ridden hair - her fingers searching for blood. She pushed herself up onto her knees. Through the dust cloud she could see the fuzzy outlines of the

horror caused by the explosions. Stricken bodies, shredded limbs, ashen faces and wild eyes of the victims trying to comprehend the aftermath. Time slowed to a crawl. Then the worst of it, a sound she will never forget accosted her ears, the tormented howl of the people.

Lerner turned around and found Remy curled up into a ball clutching his ankles - he didn't appear to be injured.

"You okay?" she asked, patting his arm.

Remy stared at her blankly and rolled over and faced the other way. Lerner pulled the camera from his bag and stood up clumsily. She put the camera's view finder to her eye, but the lens was shattered. She tossed the camera aside and reached for her phone in her front pocket. Her conscience was screaming at her to stay put and stay down in anticipation of another bomb, but there was something else deeper inside that willed her to get closer to the source of the explosions. She stumbled forward. With each step she looked for a place to dive down again. After fifty meters, she stopped taking photos, slid to her knees, vomitted and began to cry.

After some time, Lerner Jones picked up her phone, pressed record and began to dictate the scene to her trembling hand. She was in no state for pen and paper - Waterson would have to deal with a digital file.

Chapter two

by Claire Woodier

Lerner blinked at the blank screen in front of her. She had a deadline looming, but she really hadn't a clue what angle to take. Steve caught her eye from the booth across from her. He mouthed, "What?" silently. She shrugged. This re-hashing of the same story was starting to exhaust her. Did she really need to write about it again? She had been there, got an incredible first-hand story on the front page, and received the praise for it. It was the inevitable aftermath of commentary, opinion and coverage of the recovery that was now stifling her. Because she had been there and had written all about it, she would have to do all of this that followed. It was boring. She responded to Steve with a silent sneer aimed at her computer.

She decided to gain inspiration from a trip to the coffee machine, miming the coffee cup in her hand in Steve's direction in lieu of a verbal offer. He winked with thanks.

She got four paces away from the machine when she heard her phone go. She had been waiting on a comment from the Fire Chief, and rushed back to catch him. He had been a bugger to get hold of, but she felt guilty the moment she thought it. He *had* had his

hands full recently.

"Hello this is Lerner," she gasped. She took a deep silent breath to calm her voice after the dash across the office.

"Lerner. Hi! This is Paul Cambridge." He waited.

"Wha- Who?" Lerner asked, rifling through her notes on her desk to check the name of the Fire Chief.

"From The Daily Echo," he clarified. Lerner stopped her search and took a seat on the edge of her desk.

"Paul Cambridge!" she smiled. "How the devil are you? Bet you're feeling gerr-REAT!" she put her hand over the mouthpiece of her phone to cover her sniggers as she silently invited Steve across from her to get in on the joke.

"As a matter of fact I am, Ms Jones. I'm doing incredibly brilliantly today! The sun is shining and the birds are singing, at least I'm sure they MUST be somewhere-" He looked out of his window at the grey wall he had a view of. Lerner rolled her eyes at Steve.

"Indeed they must Mr Cambridge. Pretty sure Reuters reported positive sun and bird activity around the Cotswold area this morning."

"Indeed!" Paul chipped back; his wry smile was weary of the ribbing, but upturned by the banter.

"In fact," Lerner continued. "I bet if you turn to page 3 of your publication, you'll probably find a 6-page editorial on the subject." She popped a pencil between her teeth as she smiled and waited.

"You may be right Ms Jones. In fact that's pretty much the reason for the call. How do you fancy coming to work for us here?"

"At Happy Chappy Central?" she let out, forgetting herself. "I mean-"

"I understand what you mean, Ms Jones. We are aware of our message. I wondered if you were getting fed up of writing that same story yet."

Lerner turned round and sat down to face her blank screen head on. He had her pegged. He didn't wait for a response.

"We need someone to cover our more serious stories, and you have the kudos right now. We pay well, way more than you get at The Times, because guess what, people actually READ our paper."

Lerner frowned with concentration. "You want to what?" She had lowered her voice as well as her head in secrecy.

"I want to offer you a job Lerner Jones. I am impressed with your writing. We need someone to give us gravitas-"

"Gravitas? Doesn't that conflict with your Children's Television lilt you put on everything?" Lerner interrupted.

"You trivialise us Ms Jones. We still report the news, but just in a way that is optimistic. Our readers like to feel like they have a brighter outlook. Is that something you feel that you could do for almost double your salary?" Paul Cambridge winked at his assistant as he waited. Lerner Jones had her mouth open poised for something intelligent to say, but the 'double your salary' line had stuck in her throat.

"If you do decide to stop having a stroke, perhaps you could give me a call to discuss it further," Paul said.

"I-um... yes! I'll give it some thought."

"Very well. I'll expect your call tomorrow. You'll be too busy trying to find a new way to talk about the aftermath of that blast to consider it properly today." He hung up.

"Er!" Lerner was cut short. "Right then!" she exclaimed as she put down the receiver. Steve mouthed "What?" across the desks.

Lerner sighed and shrugged again. She pointed at her watch and then the door, which was code for: "Tell you later."

Lerner went back to her notes. She still didn't know which way to go with her article; now due in an hour and a half. She remembered she was in the middle of a coffee run, and resolved to have chosen her angle by the time she got back. Her only trouble was that her mind was now racing with the 'Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free' card she'd been handed.

She got the article in with precisely minus 26 minutes to spare. Jason was obviously not pleased, but uncharacteristically silent on the matter of her being late. She had found that being actually caught IN the news gave you some leeway with deadlines. She gave him time to read through her piece before knocking on his open door.

He had printed off her article and was reading it with his feet up on his desk. He had a purple highlighter pen ready, the lid in his mouth.

"Interesting slant on this Jones," he mumbled.

"Ta, Jason." Lerner shifted her feet. She had chosen to talk about the pressure on the Fire Services in London during the three blasts; how they coped with such a pull on their resources, particularly in these times of Coalition cutbacks. It was a downbeat piece of course; critical of the government and its lack of support for our emergency services.

"You've gone a bit 'Extreme Makeover: Home Edition' on us with this one," he said looking at her over his glasses. Lerner blinked in reluctant acknowledgement. Jason turned back a page and read to her:

"Inspirational men and women of the fire service."

"Ultimate sacrifices."

"Incredible commitment to the safety of others."

Lerner shrugged in reply to the long 'Paddington-Bear-Stare' she was on the receiving end of. She knew she was being asked a question. His blink that broke the stare meant: "Well?"

"I've been offered a job at 'The Echo' Jason."

"Hence the optimism," he shot, without looking up from the paper.

"Perhaps," she admitted. She felt cheaper already.

"I can hear your brain cells dying at the mention of it," he drawled, finally looking at her whilst spitting the pen lid into his lap. Lerner said nothing. She continued to look at her feet. She hated the idea of dumbing herself down. Working at 'The Times' meant you were respected. That certainly wasn't the case at 'The Daily Echo', but you were at least able to eat as well as pay rent on that salary.

"You look knackered," Jason said. "Why don't you take a break? You went through it at Bond & Lacey. Probably got PTSD or something." He was shuffling piles of paper around his desk.

"I haven't got PTSD!" Lerner scoffed quietly. "Don't have to have PTSD to consider taking a job that is double my income," she mocked. He was partly right though, she thought. She *was* knackered. She was tired of giving everything of herself every time she did a new story. Nothing was trivial, and the fact that she actually went through that explosion, then had to write about it, reliving it, and then had to write about it still, analysing the ins and outs of it, meant she hadn't been able to let go of it.

"We don't want you to go Jones," said her Editor. "but there's

no coming back if you change your mind." He'd got Lerner's full attention as he popped a Gaviscon into his mouth.

"Sir?" She asked.

"You know times are hard for newspapers dear girl." He began to crunch the tablet in his mouth. "Your job was by no means in jeopardy, but I need to make cuts. There's no way if you go that I can take you back." He held his chest as he swallowed.

"Wow," Lerner said, wide-eyed from his directness. "That's harsh!"

"Brutal truth dear girl," Jason said and gestured toward the door with her article. "Now get out."

When she got back to her desk Steve was waiting with an open bottle of wine and two washed out plastic coffee cups. He sat on her desk as he poured and they both winced as they drank.

"This is shite," Lerner said, taking another gulp.

"Been open over a month," said Steve, examining the bottle.

"I think I need something else Steve," Lerner confided, looking at her friend for affirmation.

"You ain't kidding!" He said, grimacing.

Lerner knew Steve was talking about the wine, but she chose not to complicate their friendship with any elaboration. The thought of getting into another epic project, a story that would take months to research, made her sink into her seat.

"Think we need to up the budget on the plonk," murmured Steve.

Lerner nodded and gave her friend a peck on the cheek. "Steve my friend, you're absolutely right." She picked up the phone and called her Features Editor. Steve was still reeling from her public

display of affection when two members of security showed up at her desk, requesting she pick up her personal belongings and accompany them off the premises. He watched as his Booth Buddy practically skipped off towards the exit, grinning and giddy.

Chapter three

by Astrid Stevens

Lerner paused outside *The Daily Echo* building. This was it. There could be no going back now. Too late to have doubts about leaving *The Times*, too late to change her mind about joining *The Daily Echo*, and too late to go back home and hide under the duvet. Smile, Lerner, and think of the money! She took a deep breath, tugged her jacket down over her hips to straighten it, shook her hair back from her face, and strode purposefully through the glass door marked “Reception”.

The reception desk was manned by a bored-looking teenager, chewing gum and staring at the mobile phone that she was holding beneath the table, both thumbs twitching rhythmically on the shiny glass screen. A game of some sort? No, probably not — it would be Tumblr or Facebook. Something that the girl clearly found absorbing, at any rate. Lerner waited to be acknowledged, then finally gave up and interrupted.

“Lerner Jones to see Paul Cambridge.”

The girl didn’t look up. “Yeah? Is he expecting you?”

“I hope so! I’m coming to work here. First day on the job. I’m Lerner, by the way. You are...?”

The girl sighed but didn't respond. She picked up the desk phone and held it under her chin while she scanned a dog-eared sheet of paper for the extension number, then dialled it. The call appeared to be answered almost immediately. "Person in reception for you... Well, I don't know, do I? How would I know that?... Yeah, I'll tell her." She put the phone back on its cradle, and returned her attention to her mobile. "He says to take a seat and he'll be down in a sec."

Lerner looked around her. The reception area was a paean to Nordic style with touches of kindergarten cheerfulness and a veritable jungle of rubber plants, yucca and some sort of fern that Lerner couldn't identify. She reached out to touch the leaves — definitely real, not plastic. Lerner sat gingerly on the edge of a bentwood birch chair upholstered with cream leather, moving the vibrant red and purple cushions to the adjacent sofa. On the walls were framed newspaper pages emblazoned with *The Daily Echo's* masthead. Lerner spotted the newspaper's very first issue amongst them. She remembered the launch a while back, of course, not long after she had moved to the UK from Australia, because it had made a bit of a splash in journalistic circles. Everyone had admired the idealism of the brave new concept, with its mission to focus only on positive and upbeat news, but on the other hand everyone had said it couldn't work. It was hard enough to find a single uplifting story with which to end each news bulletin, or to fill the "good news spot" hidden away on page 17, but to find enough examples to fill a daily newspaper? Well, that was quite a task. Still, here was *The Daily Echo*, apparently thriving, growing its readership, cheering people up in a trashy sort of way — and, of most importance to Lerner, offering to pay her generously.

A tall, dishevelled-looking man came through the door behind the reception desk, and approached Lerner with his arm outstretched in welcome. Lerner stood up, and shook his hand. His grip was firm, and he looked her straight in the eye. “Welcome to *The Daily Echo*,” he said. “I’m very glad — that is, we’re all very glad — that you decided to join us. When we spoke before, I wondered whether the prestige of working for *The Times* would win out.”

Lerner smiled. “Who knows? I might go back there when I’ve saved up enough money to compensate for the pay rates.”

Paul let go of her hand and laughed at the old joke. “Most of us here are saving up to work at *The Times* or *The Guardian*. Not many of us start our careers there and work backwards, as you seem to be doing. What age are you now? 30?”

“28.”

“If I may say so, Lerner, it is a pleasure to have you on our staff. Few feature-writers of your age are as established or respected as you have become. And we need more people with a younger outlook on the features team. So much of the good news out there is entirely un-newsworthy, or of interest only to the older demographic.”

“I’m looking forward to the challenge.” It may sound like a platitude, Lerner thought, but it was true.

Paul held the door open for her and ushered her through. “I’ll show you round. We’ll start upstairs in the editorial room, then I’ll see if we can track down the Editor-in-Chief for you.”

The editorial office was smaller than Lerner had expected from her initial impressions of the reception area. In contrast to the airy atmosphere downstairs, it seemed cramped and untidy, smelling of

dust and stale pizza. There were two rows of desks running in parallel down the centre of the room, each cluttered with a computer screen, papers, books and enough empty cardboard cups to qualify as an archaeological survey of commercial coffee outlets in the UK. Lerner spotted debris from Starbucks, Costa and Caffè Nero amongst the unmarked, brown-stained white cups of what she speculated might be some nearby Italian sandwich bar. In the corner, a waste-paper bin overflowed with more of the same. The office was empty of people.

“Sorry there’s no one here to meet you. I think a couple of them are working from home today. But we do a lot of work with India, so they might just be running on a different schedule. When you and I are pushing the old bacon and eggs around the breakfast plate with a fork, the Indian team are opening their tiffin carriers for lunch.”

Lerner nodded. “How do you find working with outsourcing? Is it easy to manage? And how do you control the quality of what you get?”

Paul collected some empty cups and stacked them together, tried to put them into the bin, then placed them back on the desk. He pulled a face. “It’s OK, I suppose. The off-shore team trawl the internet and the news feeds for likely stories that fit our guidelines, then they pick out the positive bits and tweak them or rewrite them, before sending them through to us here for final editing, layout and publication. They’re four and a half hours ahead of us, so by the time we get into the office each morning, the previous night’s stories have already been spun into the gold of positivity. It’s a bit like having our very own Rumpelstiltskin at the features desk. In the morning, we rush like mad to post up the new stories,

then things tail off a bit over the course of the afternoon. At least, from that side of operations. The off-shore unit comes up with about half of our material, and we write the rest in-house. But you know about the in-house work already from our previous discussions, of course, since that is why we have lured you on board. The workload varies a bit across the year as well, obviously. It was Diwali a few weeks ago, so the team here mucked in and came up with all the stories for a few days while the Indian team were on holiday.”

“And do you have trouble finding enough positive stories? You must need loads of them. Isn’t it hard to maintain a balance when you also have to make sure that you are covering all the important news as well?”

“That is, indeed, the trick. Sometimes finding a silver lining is next to impossible. Murders, for example, are reduced to cozy banalities about how a community bravely rallies round to help the bereaved. Earthquakes are an opportunity for the creation of striking new architectural design and for increased employment in the construction sector. On the other hand, double-yolked eggs and amusingly-shaped vegetables take on new significance. Focus on the positive, and only on the positive. That’s all our readers want to see, and it’s all we are ever going to give them.”

Paul led the way out of the editorial office and across the landing into the advertising office. In contrast to the previous room, this one was noisy with activity. Keyboards clacked, and there was a constant hum of voices on telephones.

“Everybody?” Paul knocked on the open door to attract the attention of the dozen or so advertising staff. “This is Lerner, our new features writer, formerly from the land down under, and fresh

from *The Times*. Just starting here today, so please be nice to her!”

Lerner smiled round the room. Those who weren’t on the phone stopped what they were doing and nodded friendly greetings in her direction. “G’day, everyone. Nice to meet you.”

“Welcome to the mad house.” “Our heartfelt condolences!” “Just remember that nothing is ever as bad as it looks.”

“Don’t mind them,” said Paul. “They love it here, really. Back to work, you lot! Get selling those advertising pixels.”

And he closed the door on the office, heading off up the stairwell again, speaking over his shoulder to Lerner as he did so.

“Of course, Lerner, you know all about the revenue problems facing newspaper businesses in this day and age, so you’ll appreciate that advertising is key for us. We’re lucky in that companies want to be associated with good news. It’s a bit like sponsoring a yacht race — if you sponsor a boat, it might sink and that would be bad publicity, but if you sponsor the event as a whole, then you win regardless of the outcome for any individual crew. So as a vehicle for promoting positivity, we can attract plenty of advertising revenue. If we keep our running costs down, for example by off-shoring, then we don’t do too badly. Not that you need to worry about that area, since your focus will be purely on news stories and features, but I thought you might like to know a little bit about how we are funded.”

“You said that I would have authority to investigate new stories?”

They had reached the top floor, and Paul leant against a windowsill on the landing to continue the conversation. “Yes, indeed. One of the lucky few! We’re hoping that your glowing record at *The Times* will bring us a bit of journalistic credibility. I

mean, we're good, and people like us, and we have a huge online readership from all round the world. But if we focus just on cherry-picking from the Reuters feed, or rehashing the human interest stories from online local newspapers across the globe, then we simply won't get where we want to go."

"And I can cover real news events?"

"Naturally. But only with a positive slant."

"How about a personal angle on a recent incident?"

"Personal is fine. Have you got something in mind, then?"

Lerner took a deep breath. "Yes and no. I was at Bond & Lacey last week, when the place exploded. We'd all been shepherded out to an evacuation area, and that's where it hit. I reckon it might be an idea to pull something together about that."

"It's a thought, certainly. Although I'm not sure how you would imbue that with the necessary spirit of optimism." He clapped his hands together and stood up straight. "Right then — top floor, top brass. Let's see if our revered Editor-in-Chief is in her lair."

At that moment, the door in front of them opened and an elegant, grey-suited woman stepped onto the landing.

"Paul! Are you coming to see me? I'm heading out. Dennis has a lunch thing I need to go to."

"Don't worry, we won't keep you. I just wanted to introduce our new features writer. Lerner Jones — Lucy Caldicote."

"Nice to meet you, Lucy."

"Ah, yes. *The Times*, isn't it? Delighted to have you here at the *Echo*."

Lerner felt a sudden urge to make an impact. "We have been discussing a possible topic for my first feature. I'm thinking of writing a piece about the bombs in the City. I was caught up in the

most recent one, you know.”

Lucy’s gaze seemed cool and a little intimidating. “And what angle do you think you will take?”

“I reckon it’d be good to recap on the background of the terrorist attacks, and maybe discuss some of the theories about who is behind them and what they hope to achieve. Then go on to cover the latest bombing from a more personal perspective, both as an eye-witness and by interviewing some of the injured. Possibly with some sort of tribute to the three who died.”

Behind her, Lerner heard Paul suck his breath over his teeth in a way that she knew was intended as a warning, but she carried on regardless. “The attacks seem to be increasing in intensity, at least in terms of the numbers of casualties, so I think that the ongoing threat is potentially very interesting to readers.”

Lucy let her finish, her expression unchanging. “Quite. But I don’t think we need to mention any ongoing threat, or increasing intensity, do we? Remember that we have a duty to give our readers the good news they deserve. Our readers don’t want to be bombarded with negativity. The sun always shines at *The Daily Echo*, and there are no clouds on our horizon. Let’s make sure we keep it that way. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to be somewhere.” And she glided gracefully past Lerner and Paul and stepped daintily down the stairs.

As soon as the footsteps faded out of earshot, Lerner broke out of her stupefied silence. “What was all that about?”

Paul shook his head. “That, my dear Lerner, was the guiding light behind the *Echo*, if a light can be said to guide from behind. I would say ‘don’t mind her’, but I’m afraid that minding her is exactly what you *must* do. To all intents and purposes, Lucy is the

ethos of the *Echo*. If it doesn't pass Lucy's ray-of-sunshine test, then we won't publish it. Simple as that."

Lerner frowned. "But covering big stories like this..."

"It's certainly a juggling act. No one is expecting you to leap right in today with ground-breaking revelations about terrorist bombings. Maybe think of something more upbeat for your first piece, don't you think?"

Grudgingly, Lerner agreed. There would be time for incisive journalism later.

"Right then," said Paul. "You've seen the premises, you've met the inmates (well, some of them), so now it's time to give you a desk and let you settle in."

They went back down to the still-empty editorial office, and he cleared a space on the row of desks for her, pushing the stacks of materials aside to the neighbouring workstations. "There you go! This will be your desk, and you can use this computer." He turned on the computer and watched the screen flicker into life. "I'll just go and get your login credentials sorted out." And with that, he left the room.

Lerner picked up the receiver of the telephone next to the computer monitor, and held it to her ear. Dead — she'd have to arrange to get that connected. She opened the desk drawers, saw they were still full of the previous occupant's papers and personal effects, and closed them again. Then she dragged a worn-looking swivel chair from a neighbouring desk, sat on it and adjusted the height. Down too far. Up too far. Down again. The computer was now displaying a screensaver that had no doubt been chosen by the previous untidy resident. There was a picture of a cartoon sun, smiling anthropomorphically and emblazoned with a banner

reading “Don’t Worry — Be Happy”.

Easier said than done, she thought to herself. But then, the first day in a new job was always going to be worrying.

Chapter four

by Victoria Griesdoorn

Her pencil between index finger and thumb, Lerner spins it around on her digit. She relaxes her focus. The centre point of the pencil blurs as it travels; only the gross movement noticeable.

Immediately in front of her, on her desk, lay open the press dossiers of the people who lost their lives in the Bond & Lacey bombing. Her computer screen shows a partial BBC News headline, an open word processor page obscuring it with a half-finished in-detail feature on those involved.

The blurring of the pencil centre reminds her. She takes the pencil horizontally between finger and thumb and moves it up and down rapidly. She smiles as the wood seemingly turns into gummy.

“Arrrggh...!” Lerner grabs hold of the pencil and jams it behind the hair band of her ponytail. She pushes off from her desk and gets up on her bare feet, her pumps abandoned in the desk’s leg well and her rolling chair travelling into Mark’s, at the cubicle behind hers. Lerner shifts her weight from one foot to the other, imitating a lonely horse in an empty stable. With her palms at her temple, softly bumping them into her head, she splays and arches her fingers backward. Around her, the newsroom is a flurry of

activity. Voices mumble from all sides; some into telephones, some to each other. Colleagues are gathered in informal groups; at desks, around a whiteboard, some halfway down the office caught in a conversation on their way to or from their cubicle. The low mumble is occasionally interrupted by a bouldering laugh, or a cough.

Mark turns around upon the two chairs impacting. “If you press any harder we’ll have to clean that word slush right off your monitor. Are the words stuck in there? Not wanting to play nice?”

Lerner drops her arms, her breath a huff. She rearranges her features into an approximation of a smile before she turns around. “Exactly!” She takes a step toward Mark and reaches out to reclaim her chair. His blonde hair is crumpled on one side as if he’s been rubbing it vigorously with a fist. He’s on the same deadline she is.

“The piece needs to be in at 6pm?”

“Yeah.” Lerner sits down in her chair again, folds her legs, taking the pencil from her hair and tossing it on her notepad. Mark follows her movement with his grey eyes. “It’s a reserve in case there is no hot ticket item today. But the words won’t flow. I’m trying to find an angle into this feature. But these people’s profiles have been all over the news... I can’t see a new way in.”

Lerner rubs her eyebrows but stops when the crustiness of her eyelashes remind her that she’s wearing mascara.

Mark grins. He swirls his chair around at speed and arches into the tiny clock display on his monitor. “Yes! I think it’s time for an early lunch.” He throws a look over his shoulder while he reaches for his phone. “I’ll call my new friend. She’s new here and can probably use some pointers about proper journalism.” Mark’s finger punches in four buttons. He holds the receiver three inches

away from his ear.

Behind Lerner her phone rings. She can feel the corners of her mouth move toward her ears.

“Come on now...,” Mark says, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

Lerner picks up her extension. “Tomfoolery department.”

“Ha! Time for lunch, m’lady?”

Lerner throws down the phone before answering. “Sure. Why not.”

Mark gets up, before putting the receiver down in a mock bow. Lerner’s phone rings again. They both look at it then glance at Mark’s.

“Nope, not me this time.”

Lerner holds one finger up to Mark, before reaching over. “Hello?”

A man’s voice speaks. “Am I through to Lerner Jones?”

He sounds young, on the good side of middle-aged, with a slightly gravelly undertone to his timbre. “Yes, this is she.”

“Hello, Ms. Jones. I was referred to you by a mutual acquaintance who’s worked with you as a source before.” A momentary silence falls.

Lerner adds two more fingers to her display at Mark. He grins and sits back down.

“Great. How can I help?”

“I’ve got a story for you, Ms. Jones.”

“Oh, yes? What is it about if I may ask?” Lerner picks up the pencil from her notepad.

“It’s about one of the victims of the Bond & Lacey incident. I understood from your colleague I spoke to just now that you’re working on that story?”

“Yes, I certainly am.” Lerner throws a look over her shoulder. Mark is still in the same position. She smiles and holds up a thumb. “I’m free to meet you today if you are, Mr...?”

“Yeah, we can meet for lunch.”

Another silence. Lerner turns her thumb upside down, huffing noiselessly. “Sure. But we’re not in the habit of buying stories with lunches, Mr...?”

The voice on the other side of the line scrambles. “No, no. That’s not what I meant... Nathan is my name. I mean... I can buy my own lunch. No problem.”

The man opposite Lerner is even younger than she thought. Early thirties? Perhaps even late twenties. He’s dressed immaculately; well-cut suit, nice mid-green tie that complements his black hair and high cheekbones. In finance, maybe?

The waitress puts away her notepad and takes their menus from them, having interrupted their chitchat earlier. “Thanks,” she says, before wondering in the direction of the kitchen. The café is barely half-filled. The high-backed booths are the most popular seating option and strategically placed in front of the windows so the establishment looks busy from outside. The décor is ‘tasteful chain’: not unique enough to be characterful but modern enough not to be tasteless.

Nathan Bearfield takes a clip of business cards out of inside pocket. He slides one across the table and looks at Lerner through his eyelashes. “Lunch is on me.”

Lerner cocks her head and picks up the card.

Nathan Bearfield

COMPETITION COMMISSION

Lerner looks up at the green tie. “Sorry...? Who are you?”

Nathan imitates Lerner’s head pose. “I must say I asked you here under false pretences. I have no information for you about a bombing victim. You’ll have to do your own research where that’s concerned.”

The waitress returns to serve them their drinks. Lerner takes a hurried sip of her diet coke. Pain shoots through her front teeth on contact with the ice-cold beverage. She rubs her lower lip over them as her eyes widen.

He continues, “I am conducting my own investigation.”

“Into what exactly?”

Nathan sits forward and crosses his fingers around his orange juice. “We’ve received a complaint against The Daily Echo.”

“...Against the Echo?” Lerner recoils, then takes out her notepad from her purse.

“Yes. And it’s not complicated. You won’t need notes for now.” Nathan reaches over and takes the pencil from her.

“Hey!”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get it back. Just no notes for now.”

Lerner sighs. “I’m listening.”

“The Daily Echo was thought to be an independent agency.” Nathan drinks some juice. “But we’ve received intelligence from a source that indicates they might be part of a larger newsgroup.”

Lerner grabs her pencil from Nathan’s side of the table and makes it go gummy in the middle. “And this is news, why?”

He continues, “Not news necessarily. Not in the way you’re thinking. But the corporate construction isn’t very transparent. It looks like the Echo is trying to get out from under the market concentration laws; making it look like it’s not the large corporate

subsidiary that it is.”

“So wait, you’re saying that they’re being investigated for antitrust violations?”

Nathan winks.

“Yes, compared to what’s happening after the attacks, this is not news at all.”

He nods. “Indeed, so no need to write it down. But I do need your help.”

“Of course you do,” she says, while noticing the waitress carrying two plates and making her way over to them. Lerner opens her mouth to continue but pauses and thanks the waitress instead, while the woman serves out their food orders. “So you need an inside investigator to dig themselves in...”

Nathan takes a bite of his salmon ciabatta. “That would be grand.” He smiles while chewing.

“I’ve only worked there a week!”

Nathan points his finger at her. “Which means it won’t be surprising you’re asking questions all the time, now would it?”

“Nice lunch?” Mark has watched Lerner sit at her desk doing nothing for a solid five minutes before she picked up her pencil to play with it. “You do that a lot,” he says, while nodding at her hand. “Only when you’re blocked on a story or do you just like making pencils puke?”

Lerner turns in her chair to face him. She sticks her pencil behind her ear. “No, not just when I’m stuck on a story.”

“Poor pencils. Maybe I should start a relief fund.”

Lerner gets up and walks away. “Yeah, you do that.” Halfway down the newsroom she stops and hollers at him, “can I continue

to mess with them if I pitch in?”

Mark boulders and winks at her. “Ha! Poor pencils.”

Lucy Caldicote folds her arms as she leans on the front of her desk. Across her office, Lerner rests her elbows on her knees, sitting forward. “I took a little time to think about his proposal but it doesn’t sit right with me. If I was still at The Times I would have jumped on this task but I value my new job here, so I don’t want to go behind your backs.

Lucy claps her hands together softly. “Well, that’s worth a feather in your cap. I’m glad you told me. Can I see that business card?”

“Yes, of course.” Lerner produces it from her trouser suit pocket.

“Thanks.” Lucy looks at it while arching over backward to dial an extension. “I’m taking this information seriously. I’m calling Mr. Shimar now.” The ringing is a faint tone from where Lerner is sitting.

“Security,” comes a low voice from the other end of the line.

“Amir. It’s Lucy. I’ve just been informed of a possible situation.”

Chapter five

by Vania Guzman

The intermittent hum of the air conditioning unit overhead combined with idle newsroom chatter served as incendiary to Lerner's already frayed nerves. She chewed on a pencil as she stared at her draft on screen. After a half-hearted attempt at editing, Lerner attached the draft to an email and sent it off to Paul Cambridge, the features editor. Then she waited. It was not long before the man himself came to her desk.

"Ah, Miss Jones. You are a very charming lady but as witty as you are, I suppose being laid off does not sound very amusing to you. Now tell me, did you really intend to send that email or was it an accident?"

His eyes were hard and cold, like black coffee that had been left out to cool.

"Mister Cambridge, please excuse me for a moment. I – I think I need to fix my things."

Lerner felt her voice grow rough, almost challenging now. In spite of herself, she looked at the privileged sod who had the license to tear her work to bloody pieces, broke the pencil she had been chewing in half, and threw the pointed end to the corkboard

like a wayward dart. The strange anger only rose; soon enough, Lerner was simultaneously throwing off things from her desk and packing up her things in boxes, unable to decide between a tantrum and a preparation for resignation. She decided it was far better to live off of cold, greasy scones for breakfast, lunch, and dinner just so she could afford the next pub crawl, than to stay in The Daily Echo for a second longer, writing saccharine tripe.

Caught up in a fevered daze, Lerner could only stare as the editor laughed. Gone was his hardness; a genuine amusement lit up his eyes as he took the broken half of pencil hanging from Lerner's clenched fist.

"You'll fit in just fine here, Lerner. Quite honestly, I've never seen anyone write with such a passionate ire for baked beans. But keep your fits to yourself. If you pull this when Caldicote is around though..." He drew two fingers across his throat and stuck his tongue out. "Believe me love. I've seen it happen. The poor sod lost all credibility for it and he's never entered a decent newsroom since."

"Thank you. I suppose I'll keep that in mind, though Caldicote never struck me as the type to put in a bad word for people. Have you ever seen Annie, Cambridge? I'd always imagined Caldicote as a grown up Annie, set to spread sunshine over a sparkling Thames."

Paul stopped laughing and cocked his head. "Lerner, you need some coffee to clear that mad head of yours. And get me one too, while you're at it. I like mine sweet and black."

He left Lerner alone with her thoughts. It was fortunate that it had been a slow day; few people had seen her spastic fit, as they were out burning some fags in the fire escape or catching up on

some lunch by old Andrew Allium's deli. She skulked off to the vending machine, cursing as she realised Cambridge conveniently forgot to leave her money for the coffee. Fortunately for Lerner, the machine did not need any kicks to force it to dispense the goods it held hostage, and she did not have to throw yet another tantrum. She took both her own cup –creamy and sweet- as well as Paul's cup and went trudging back to the newsroom. By then, Paul was too busy for a chat, and he accepted the coffee with a wordless nod of thanks before going back to staring at his laptop screen. Lerner returned to her messy desk, now faced with the task of cleaning up after herself.

A strange sort of stress was beginning to gnaw at her composure—leaving the Times seemed like a fool's choice now, and regardless of what the Tarot said about the wisdom of fools, Lerner was quite sure her playing the part had no silver linings in sight. Of course, The Daily Echo would forecast otherwise. A running joke in the newsroom was that the Echo only needed one weather forecast: Sunny.

Lerner took a sip of her cheap coffee and began reorganising the little pieces of sticky notes that flew off her computer screen during her outburst. On one of them, written in black ink, was *N. Bearfield*.

"Bearfield..." She mumbled the name to herself, over and over again, like a mantra that she believed would allow a tidbit of universal wisdom to fall into her addled mind. The visage of a sharp-dressed man haranguing her with questions coalesced into a memory. "Nathan Bearfield!"

She thought him an entitled dullard, all dressed up in a fancy business suit, winning people over left and right through sheer

charm alone. Then when he started speaking, Lerner saw him for what he was—one of those loons from the Competition Commission hungry for some conspiracy theory about monopolies and consumer rights just to exercise their God-given right to tamper with the invisible hand.

Out of boredom though, she decided to humour his curiosities. Lerner *was* curious herself; just what how did The Daily Echo operate? A few minutes of internet searches reveal the simple facts: the paper was independently owned from major media groups. There were some overseas funds that had a notable stake at about twenty percent.

In short, nothing worthy of Bearfield's attentions, at least on the surface.

"The Daily Echo, official mouthpiece of the Londoner's good morning." She sank into her chair and stared up at the ceiling, mumbling to herself. "I can't believe people read this mushy tripe. But it's pretty clear we don't share the same perspective as the other papers. Has Bearfield even read The Daily Echo? It's nothing like the Times."

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. "You shouldn't talk to yourself like that. There are enough barmy writers in here. We need the saner ones to keep them in line. I was hoping you were one of them."

It was Judy Valentine, another features writer, though admittedly less respected than Lerner was, thanks to one legendary incident that involved spiked eggnog and the building's custodian. Judy sat on the cubicle opposite hers and they often shared meals on slow days. Today was a slow day.

"I don't want to hear that from you, Judy."

“I saw you and Paul earlier. That was some show you put on.” Judy winked.

Lerner tried her hardest to stop her face from turning crimson in embarrassment. “We all have our bad days.” She stammered and picked at the piece of paper that held Nathan Bearfield’s name. “Which reminds me, don’t you have a deadline to chase?”

Judy winked again and waved at Paul; his face darkened. “You’ve got a lot to learn, Lerner.”

At that, Lerner took one long, withering look at Paul then at Judy. The Daily Echo was a completely different environment from the Times newsroom, it was clear enough. “Alright, you gits. I’m heading out. I’m done for the day. Finished.” Without waiting for either of them to say a word, Lerner left the newsroom, aching for some fresh air.

“Heading out early, Miss Jones? Take care now.” The doorman called out after Lerner. He was old and genteel, and Lerner liked him. At least he made sense, unlike everything else that had just transpired.

“Thank you Edmund, you take care too.” She walked out of the doors and into the frigid streets.

As always, London was filled with a menacing throng of people, blocking the way to everywhere. Lerner felt an urge to push everyone out of the way, just to get someplace quiet, safe, away from the exhausting bustle that was the city. Ever since the bombing, she felt an apprehension for crowds. They were masses of hysteria waiting to happen, and once it happened, there was no escape. Work was the only certainty she had, and now, the madness that was The Daily Echo threatened to take even that sanctuary away from her. All this, with Nathan Bearfield added

into the churning flux of confusion that threatened to unravel her composure. Going back to Australia to hide under the covers and be waited on hand and foot by her dear parents seemed like the best choice at the moment. But Lerner never was good at making the best choices.

And she smelled a scoop.

“Alright, Nathan Bearfield. You came to me last time, and now I’ll come to you.”

The walk to the Competition Commission building was longer than Lerner had expected, but she barely noticed it, using the time to organise her knotted thoughts into coherent questions – not unlike preparing for an interview. When the building finally came into view, Lerner’s apprehensions grew, and she felt a sudden need to check her hair in the mirror and fix her coat. The Competition Commission was housed in a cushy government building, decked out in Greek columns and clean corners.

Lerner persevered, walking in; she was poised, cool, collected, at least in her mind as she walked up the steps and into the building. She marched up to the receptionist –a young woman with a pert face- and smiled.

“Good afternoon, Miss. What can I do for you?”

“Ah, yes, thanks. I was hoping to get in touch with someone from the Commission today, you see. A Mister Nathan Bearfield.”

“Alright, we’ll make a call for you, ma’am.” The receptionist took the phone and dialled it, cradling the phone between her neck and shoulders. “Someone–“

Lerner flashed her old Times journalist pass.

“A Miss Lerner Jones is looking for Mister Nathan Bearfield from the Commission. Is he free for interviews or appointments at

the moment?" The receptionist furrowed her brows. "What? I'm afraid I don't understand. Yes, Nathan Bearfield from the Competition Commission."

It was Lerner's brows that furrowed now. The receptionist put the phone down and stared at Lerner with confusion, and perhaps the slightest tinge of suspicion.

"I'm sorry Miss Jones. It appears that there is no Nathan Bearfield in the Competition Commission."

Lerner tried her hardest to keep from strangling the pretty receptionist with the phone cord, and after a few deep breaths, she did succeed. What she could not do, however, was to speak.

And so she left the Competition Commission, nursing a headache that could only be cured by a good gin fizz.

Chapter six

by Michael Bywater

Not known, she thought, Sorry, luv, can't help you and No-one of that name here and I'm sorry, caller, but that name is not listed in our internal directory and sometimes a brusque Yer wha? and other times an odd robotic voice – or, rather, a human being speaking in an odd robotic voice, somewhere across oceans

(... the Wet'll be breaking now in Darwin, weeks of going mad in the Build-Up then the first rains and the sky flashing alight, the relief better than any sex though who was the guy? Alex? Was it Iain? Tim? Micko? Some guy...)

as if a Filipina gal was trying to imitate a robot programmed to talk like a Filipina: *I am SO-rree BUT the naME you aarh REqueSTing is nnot foUNd*, and screw you too.

All those voices saying "No". A journo holds a shell to her ear, thought Lerner, she doesn't hear the sea. She hears a rush of voices saying "No". Except for the ones who have something to sell – or, equally likely, someone to sell – and from those bastards, you don't want to hear.

Ironic, really, to find yourself working on the *Echo*. Mission Statement: The Paper That *Loves To Say "Yes"*. Actual mission

statement: The Paper That Is Mostly Suppressing Anything Resembling the Truth So That Its Readers Walk Around In A Blissful Fog Of Ignorance. And for this she'd left *The Times*? For this she'd turned down *The Daily Mail* – The Paper That Knows You're A Tory-Voting, Premature-Ejaculating, Provincial Voyeur And Wants To Make You Crap Your Strides – and *The Express*, The Paper Whose Splash Story Is Written By A Bloke Who Has A Weather App On His iPhone And Just Exaggerates Whatever It Says. For *this*?

Lerner stared at her own iPhone with loathing. The Connected World. Jeez. Sometimes you just wanted to live in a Disconnected one. But. At least she was still a journo. At least she wasn't stuck in a cubicle farm in Mumbai with a PC and 200Mbs internet, snipping off anything possibly *disturbing* from the news feeds and repackaging it for the advertisers. Advertising ruled the world, with Google as its sugar-smeared bloodsucking proboscis.

"Tiny bit negative, are we?" she said, aloud. Habit of living alone. Screw it. She stroked her finger over the Home button. As usual, it did nothing. It had been doing nothing for ten days. They should change the slogan. "iPhone. Don't burn your fingertips on a hot wok or you'll fuck with our technology, jerk." She typed in her passcode.

"Okay Siri, call Nathan Bearfield."

"I'm sor--"

"Screw you, Siri."

Lerner called up Bearfield's number. Dialed. Waited.

"Hi..."

The briefest of pauses.

"...Nathan Bearfield."

"Of the Competition Commission?"

Another tiny pause.

"Yes. Yes, is that you, Lerner? Ms Jones?"

"We should talk. I've given it some thought..."

"You want to fix a meet? Royal Horse Guards Hotel suit you? In an hour? Can you make that? Do you know the place? It's--"

"I know the place."

"An hour. Great. Lobby. *Great*. Smashing."

Clicked off his phone. Got that off the blokes in the movies. The ones who never say "Goodbye". She'd seen the same YouTube compilation. Arseholes. Real blokes... real blokes said "Goodbye" all the time. Usually by text.

It was all a bit smooth, she thought in the taxi; all a bit... almost prepared. As if he'd known she'd get back to him. No. As if he'd been *briefed*. She imagined some smooth bastard, a preening hair-gelled prat with an Audi TT and a reined-in wife who'd screw anyone with a platinum AmEx, giving him the briefing. "Mkay, Nate, when she calls back – and she *will* call back, believe me – tell her to meet you--" et cetera yadda blah.

Not the kind of bloke who'd work at the Competition Commission.

Not that kind of bloke at all.

Hell of a building, though. Used to be some sort of politicians' club. She looked down at Google Maps, trying to calculate the trajectory of the IRA mortarbombs. She'd been five. 1991. It hadn't made much of an impression out in Katherine, where her dad had been stationed, except on the Aussie military, who, like every other

military in the world, were professionally fascinated by anything that went *bang* when it wasn't meant to. Including women. It was the first time Lerner could remember being caught up in the idea of a *story*. Something happened. People with notebooks and big motorized cameras rushed to the scene, waving Press cards and (a detail she added later, perhaps the clincher that sent her to London to become a journo just as the trade of journo was ceasing to exist) bottles of whisky. The police let them through. They wrote things down. They rushed for telephones. They "filed" their "copy". They drank their whisky and shouted at each other, then rushed back to their offices (all, of course, in Fleet Street) and called for "copy-boys" and spoke of flongs and the stone, of inkies and printers' pie: words she learned from her Uncle Mark, who'd been a compositor on the *Telegraph* before he saw the way the wind was blowing and thought fuck this for a game of soldiers and came to Adelaide to drive a cab.

Knew all the words, she did. Never saw any of them. By the time her Qantas 747 landed at Heathrow in 2004, it was already gone, all of it: the hot metal, the Street of Shame, the pubs -- Auntie's, the Back 'Arrer, the Stab in the Back, the Mucky Duck, the King and Keys (the *Telegraph* journos' pub, distinguished by never having had a nickname) -- the Linotype machines, the foreign correspondents, the copytakers ("Is there much more of this?"), the smell of ink, the streets shuddering under the giant presses, the gossip, the bullshit, the *whole thing*. Gone. Dispersed to all quarters, Wapping, Canary Wharf, Farringdon, even bloody *Kensington*, the *Daily Mail* moved to Barker's department store, sports hacks clicking on their computers where ladies lingerie had once been. Perhaps late at night some drunken journo would see a

ghostly negligée wafting through the Specialists' Room, which wasn't a room any more, just a sign.

Unlikely, though.

Journos weren't drunk any more.

Sometimes, Lerner thought, that was a bit of a shame.

"So," said Nathan so-called Bearfield, "Ms Jones. *Lerner*."

His voice was as smooth as his suit -- Anderson & Sheppard, probably, she thought: the unstructured look which requires a highly-structured body inside it.

"So glad to have this opportunity to speak," he continued, "but you had better go first, I think, as you called this meet."

"A pleasure," she said when the waiter had brought their coffee. "You see... the *Echo* may be a rag, a shame, a diet of pabulum, but I am still a jour--"

"Milksops."

"Excuse me?"

"*Pabulum*. Latin. Bland food."

"Latin?"

"Classics. Cambridge, I'm afraid. Taught by the great Mary Beard. Quite an honour. Smokes, you know, but lives in terror in case her husband finds out. One of the the first things I learned."

"What? That Mary Beard smokes?"

"No. That everyone has a secret."

"And what's yours? I mean, apart from the fact that you don't work at the Competition Commission. People who work at the Competition Commission don't arrange a *meet*. They're like everyone else. They fix up a meeting. The only people who arrange *meets* are--"

"Spooks."

She waited for him to laugh. It would be a self-deprecating laugh. That was the sort of guy he was. Or -- he couldn't be more than twenty six or so – the sort of guy he was learning to be. The odd vowel, a trace of Aussie in the voice, marked him as a Londoner, not quite the plummy Pom he was aiming for.

But he didn't laugh. He looked at her coolly. Level gaze. Again: learned. And not from Mary Beard.

"The Competition Commission have no record of you," she said.

"Nor would they. And you have no record of this conversation as of this moment," he said. "You're a journalist, *Echo* or not. Let's pretend you're still on *The Times*. We admired your work. We admired your coverage of recent... *events*--"

"--not entirely to our advantage."

"Very good. Emperor Hirohito, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We understand each other, as they say. And we both understand the meaning of "off the record," you because you are a distinguished journalist trying to make a few quid off the gullible netsquitos--"

"The what?"

"Netsquitos. Buzzing around the Web taking a tiny bit here and a tiny bite there and somehow getting the impression they are well fed. I don't hold it against you."

"*Pecunia non olet*?"

"'Money has no stink'. The Emperor Vespasian."

"Don't sound so bloody surprised. We do have Latin in sodding Whoop Whoop, y'know."

"Of course. Yes. And of course, he never said it, just as we never said what we have said, or what we are going to go on to say. You

understand 'off the record' and I understand the Official Secrets Act, which I am lucky enough to have at my back."

"So--"

"So I am, yes, a spook, as you put it."

"You said it."

"You transmitted the signal. I merely decoded it. Doing my bit to blah blah the freedom of this blah against the onslaught of those who would yadda yadda yadda. As you might put it. Behind you."

"What?"

"Number 1, Horse Guards Avenue. Where I work. MI7."

"MI7? There's no such fucking thing. What do you take me for?"

"There is such a fucking thing, and I take you for a highly intelligent woman who can understand what I am about to tell you. MI7 is a secret branch of the Intelligence Service and before you tell me they're *all* secret branches, let *me* tell *you* that, like Orwell's animals, some are more secret than others. MI7 is the most secret. We dealt with Press and Propaganda from the beginning of the First World War in 1912 until we were officially disbanded – stood against everything we were fighting for, y'see – in 1940."

"Bullshit. The First World War started in 1914."

"Not according to our sources it didn't."

"So. Disbanded in 1940 and yet somehow nearly seventy-five years later--"

"No. See if you can guess who reinstated it. I'll give you a clue."

He grinned at her. An oily grin; a vast, burst smirk stinking of deception and self-delight.

"Tony..."

"...Blair. Good impression, don't you think? Utterly secret, of course; our activities and our existence. The political sensitivities

in the land of the Free Press – put together in India for mere rupees as it may be – wouldn't stand for it. And now... put it this way. As you have seen – as you have *reported*, before you shifted allegiance – there are many disparate elements who combine to form an implacable enemy of... well, of *us*, to put it bluntly, thanks to Blair and that drooling dry-drunk in the White House. An implacable enemy which longs in its perverse way to announce a new world order. Caliphate, *umma*, dictatorship of God, call it what you like."

"Ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant."

"'Where they make a desert, they call it peace.' Quite so. Whoop-Whoop."

"Latin. Tacitus."

"Attributed."

"I think we are going to be friends, Lerner."

"I wouldn't be too sure, Mr Bearfield."

"I am entirely certain, Ms Jones."

Another pot of Dragon Pearl tea later, Lerner's mind was a blur of threats, cajoling, flirtatious advances, sober exhortations. She was of the Imperial strain. She was here under sufferance and her visa could be revoked. Her writing had been scrutinized and those in charge *knew* where her sympathies lie. They also *knew* where her parents lived and where her father had driven that morning. She would have the story of a lifetime when eventually it, like the weather in Darwin, inevitably broke. She would be in no personal danger. All she had to do was...

... to rat out her colleagues and find out who was running the ideological show behind the soothing pabulum of the *Echo*, and

what that ideology was, and where the money was coming from, and how it reached them, and where it eventually went...

...was all. And wasn't that a challenge to her deepest journalistic instincts – because, bugger it, his and her trades were the same, really; both wanted to *find out the story*, and though she might not get the byline, those in charge would make sure that she got the credit where it counted: among those ranks of quietly-dressed, quietly-spoken men and woman who ran, and always had run, the entire... sodding... *show*.

"But the main thing is," he said, "you get to *know*. You get to know the *truth*."

"I need time to think," she said as they walked from the hotel lobby.

"All the time you need."

A November river-mist shrouded the newly-lit lamps along the river. London at its most beautiful. At its most inviolable.

"Yes," she said.

"I thought you might say that," he said. "Now. How easily can you take a week off work at short notice?"

"I've not been there long enough to... not easily at all. Impossible, in fact."

"I thought you might say that," he said.

He was standing very close to her. He put his arm around her shoulders. For a moment she hoped he would kiss her. *Da mi basia mille*, she thought: *give me a thousand kisses*...

Then she felt herself pushed hard between the shoulders, flying forward. She saw the lights of the van coming out of the mist then rocking as the brakes squealed and the tyres slid on the damp road, then she heard the bang as it struck her, but felt nothing.

Chapter seven

by Rodrigo Seisdedos

As Lerner tumbled down on the street, the driver got out of the van and approached Nathan. "Is she OK? Is she OK?", he kept repeating.

"She's unconscious. Let's check out how bad is it," Nathan said.

"Why the hell did you push her? We were supposed to taker to a safe house quietly and neatly!"

"Safe house? You bet! Budget cuts have deprecated any safe house we used to have. Didn't you get the memo?"

"But what if somebody saw everything and calls the police? We'd be toasted!"

"Angus, you've been watching too many american movies. This is London. There's hardly ever anyone on the streets when something happens."

"Nevertheless..." stammered Angus as he saw a male silhouette on a white suite approaching from the far corner behind the van, at the opposite side of the avenue.

"She's going to be OK," Nathan said. "There're some scrapes and her right knee seems to have taken the worst part of it, but I think she's going to be OK," he repeated, probably trying to

convince himself and Angus too, who was still shaking like a barman preparing James Bond's favourite drink.

"Somebody is coming!" Angus whispered.

"OK, let's move. Do you have the syringe?"

"Yes, er... No, I must have left it in the van."

"So what are you waiting for, damn it, move!"

"Why are you yelling at me, for god's sake? That's completely uncalled for."

"Oh, excuse me, Angus. Am I hurting your feelings, now?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, you certainly are. You were supposed to pinch her inside the van, not on the street."

"I'm terribly sorry, Angus. Please let me rephrase: would you mind bringing that syringe of yours, before that man gets here and we have to provide a good explanation I can't think of right now, so you don't end up in jail with a 7' cellmate who will teach you what a *real* syringe will feel up your sweet and tender fucking ass?"

"Well, a word to the wise is sufficient," Angus replied as he jumped into the van and got the syringe out of the glove compartment.

Angus handed off a small medical kit to Nathan as the other man continued to approach the scene.

"He's almost here!", said Angus, "What do we do now?"

"I'm going to call for an ambulance. You just go get your stuff and we'll meet at the hospital. I'll call you when we get there."

"You mean *all* of the stuff?"

"All of it! We have bought ourselves a few days. Let's seize them at will."

Angus stepped on its van's pedal at full speed as Nathan discretely injected Lerner. Nathan then hid the medical kit under

his garments and took his phone to make the call.

The pain of the pinch made Lerner regain some consciousness—at least that's what she thought— but everything seemed to revolve around in her head.

The highly pitched sound of the wheels scratching the asphalt while the van left echoed on the surrounding building's walls.

Some sort of professional conditioned-reflex evoked in her mind what would fit as a good headline for *The Daily Echo*: "Young journalist survives an explosion just to perish on a hit and run". A few seconds later, she fainted.

"May I be of any help?" said a voice behind Nathan as he hanged up the phone. Nathan turned around.

A man on his fifties dressed on a white robe was standing there with a stethoscope around his neck. "It's all right, I'm a physician," he said. "Let me take a look."

"Oh, don't bother, sir," Nathan replied. "She's just shocked, no serious injuries. I checked already."

"Are you a doctor?" the man asked.

"Er... No," he muttered. "But I saw the whole thing. It was nothing, really."

The man took Lerner's pulse at her wrist and held a hand at her forehead. "She's cold. Would you hand me your jacket?"

Nathan shivered. Cold? Was the shot too heavy for her weight? He was sure to have made the calculations accurately. Had Angus given him the right kit?

"Your jacket, sir?" the man insisted.

"Yes, of course," he replied. "Here you are. You know, I already called for an ambulance. They should be here any minute now," he said, trying to calm down.

"Well, I hope they do," said the man as he covered Lerner's torso with Nathan's jacket. "Lewisham Hospital is just a few blocks from here. Time is of the essence. We'll take her there."

"We? What did he mean by 'we'?", Nathan thought. "Had the whole matter gone completely out of hands?"

"It was supposed to be my free day, you know?" the man said. "I should be attending a family activity, high school sporting event. But that's a physician's life, I guess... Doctor Jason, at your service."

"Nathan Bearfield, not a doctor," he replied. "What a stupid response," he said to himself.

Nathan walked around the waiting area at Lewisham Hospital like a lion on a cage. Lerner was still at the emergency room and doctor Jason was nowhere to be found. He looked at his watch every now and then just to notice that time did not seem to pass on him. It felt like an eternity.

With anything else to do in the meantime, he called Angus and asked him to get to Lewisham immediately. If anything went wrong at least he'd have a vehicle to get out of there and cover their tracks.

Nathan approached the nurse's desk once more. "Excuse, me lady, has miss Jones left the emergency room yet?"

"Sir, you asked me the same thing less than ten minutes ago..."

"By the way, have I told you how beautiful your eyes are?"

"No, you have not, sir. But at least you did not make any inappropriate comment about my breasts, like that doctor Jason you already know did a while ago."

Nathan made an enormous effort of not looking at the nurse's

chest after that sentence. He felt as he was being tested somehow.

"Would you mind to check once more, please?" he winked.

"OK, I'll do that for you," she smiled. "Let me see... As a matter of fact, sir, miss Jones is already at the recovery floor, suite 4007."

"You're an angel, nurse, thank you very much," he replied as he run to the stairwell not willing to risk an elevator jam.

Suite 4007 was at the end of the aisle. As Nathan approached to it he thought that the *double-o seven* part seemed like an irony for a new asset to become part of the MI7 crew.

The door was closed. He knocked, but got no response. He decided to open it anyway and get in.

Doctor Jason was there checking Lerner's chart and making some notes on it.

"Young fellow, glad to see you. I have good news for you: she's going to make it."

"Was she in real danger at any time?"

"Well, that's up the Lord to say, actually, don't you think? When your time comes, it comes. But at least this time, it did not come, I mean, it could, but it didn't. Or something like that..."

"Is she going to experience any sequels? Any body harm?"

"Her right knee got squashed, much like a nut cracker job, actually. But nothing a couple of nuts and bolts can't cure. Nut cracker, nuts and bolts..." he smiled, "See the irony? I estimate a two weeks recovery period, maximum."

"Oh, that's a little out of my expectations", Nathan muttered.

"Well, she'll be waking up any minute now, so I'll leave you two alone for catching up. I have to join that sporting event. By the way, she has *nice boobs*, don't you think?"

Nathan had not noticed that, neither would he at the moment

anyway.

Lerner slowly came round in the suite. Nathan was sitting besides her. A recollection of recent events became to shape slowly on her memory. Suddenly, she remembered the feeling of someone pushing her in front of a white van was her last lucid moment of her immediate past.

"I didn't have a choice, Lerner. I cannot put you in the field before you learn some the basic tricks of the trade. I needed an excuse to get you away from the office for a while."

"What? You had me hit by a van so I could get some time off? Are you insane?"

"It was not the original plan, I must confess. But your injuries are not serious. After a couple of weeks of recovery you'll be as good as new, and we'll have plenty of time to teach you everything you need to know."

"Not the original plan? And what was the original plan? Abduct me?"

"Er... Sort of. But it was still the matter of the plausible alibi we needed to build. This turned out much better, at last. You may have visitors, and everybody will swallow that it was just an accident and not a MI7's training course."

Lerner made an effort to reach a flowerless vase on the night table and threw it on Nathan, missing him by just a notch.

"I'm sorry, Lerner. But this is not a game, it's the real deal. Sometimes things just don't go as planned, but the final goal must not be forfeited under any circumstances. You wanted to become an asset as much as I wanted you to become one. There's always some risks, but it's on you to make this work and feel good for what you're doing for the greatest nation on Earth".

Lerner calmed down as Nathan's appeal to her patriotic instinct seemed no more than a standard speech to catch pigeon-like naive citizens. But he was right. It was on her to make all that count. And she would.

"I guess I'll have to call the office then," she said.

"Let me do it for you. Who should I call?"

"Paul Cambridge, he's my boss at *The Daily Echo*. Would you do me a favour?"

"Of course, name it."

"Tell him you're an asshole."

"Point taken."

Someone knocked at the door. It was Angus carrying a large suitcase with him.

"Let me introduce you to Angus James," Nathan said, "my partner at the MI7, and coincidentally, the white van driver. But rest assured that he has no responsibility on the accident. It was my decision and he was not aware of it."

"I'm very sorry, miss Jones. I hope you're feeling better now."

"Both of you better hope I'm not, otherwise I'd be kicking you in the balls as we speak. But we'll have two weeks for that to come, won't we?", she added with a smile.

"Angus's role is to give you some useful gadgets for the field and teach you how to use them," Nathan said. "Here's where the fun begins."

"Oh, I cannot wait any longer," Lerner replied sardonically.

"I'll leave you two alone while I make that phone call to Cambridge."

Angus opened his suitcase and deployed on the table a large collection of gadgets.

"So," Lerner said, "you must be Q."

"Actually, we don't have such position names at MI7, miss Jones. I wish we had, anyway. What you see here will be of outmost important for your work on the field. This lipstick, for instance, looks like a regular lipstick, doesn't it? But in fact it is a poisonous venom conveyor. Anyone you kiss while wearing this lipstick will have a sudden and horrible death."

"And how do I avoid to die myself after applying it to me, if may I ask?"

"Oh, that's a good question, miss Jones. A good question for which I don't have an answer yet, so let's better forget about this piece of equipment for a while."

Lerner looked at him with surprise. "What have I gotten myself into," she thought.

"This device, on the other hand," Nathan added, "will serve you in a case of distress. It looks like a pen, writes like a pen, but if you write the word "help" it will immediately report your position within one-foot accuracy so we can track you down and help you get out of any dangerous situation you're in. Do you want to try it?"

"OK, do you have some paper?"

"No, miss Jones, and you probably won't have it on the field either. You must improvise."

"Well, how can you write without paper?" she asked.

"Already, then. Let's try the next thing..."

Angus spent the whole afternoon trying to show Lerner his devices and have her use them in a useful-intended way, with somewhat moderate success.

Nathan came in later with several delicious stuff from the cafeteria.

He wanted to make Lerner feel a little better after all that had happened.

He was just about to serve all the stuff when, suddenly, doctor Jason entered the room in a rush movement and locked-closed the door behind him. He was sweating all over his forehead.

"Wow!", he said. "I finally find you again, miss Jones. I've been looking for you all over the floor. Did you get moved?"

Lerner looked at him with surprise. "No, I've not been moved. Excuse, have we met?"

"Let me introduce you to doctor Jason," Nathan said, "the man who saved you life at the ER."

"Oh, I wouldn't put it that way. It's a team's work, you know? How's everything going this evening?"

"Quite well, actually," Lerner replied. "In fact, I can bend both of my knees the same, as if anything had happened."

"Well, that's not surprising at all. Nothing really serious happened to any of your knees."

"What?" exclaimed Nathan. "But you told me that..."

Someone knocked fiercely on the door. "Open up immediately or I'll have to force the lock."

"What's all this about?" Lerner said.

"I have no idea," Angus replied.

Nathan walked to the door but doctor Jason interfered. "You don't want to do that," he said in a tremulous voice.

"Why not? Come on, let's stop playing games here," Nathan replied as he pushed doctor Jason out of the way and finally opened the suite door.

Two strong-build men on male nurse suits were standing outside the door. One of them entered slowly into the room. His

badge read "Nurse B. Callahan, M-Wing."

"So here you are, *doctor* Jason," said the man. "Would you come with me, please? You have *patients* awaiting for you..."

"Sure, my friend, sure. We don't want to keep them waiting, right? If you excuse me, lady, gentlemen, but when duty calls, duty calls. I'll see you some other time."

Doctor Jason walked out of the room in no rush. The other man who stood outside took his forearm and walked him through the aisle.

"I'm sorry. *Doctor* Jason is one of our most prominent patients on the M-Wing. He's harmless, but he likes to trick other patients into he's a real doctor and occasionally he escapes his confinement to pay visits to them. He's a good guy, but high maintenance for us, unfortunately. I hope he's not caused you any trouble."

"Excuse me," Nathan said, "what is the M-Wing?"

"The mental-illness wing," Callahan replied.

"Oh, I see. And how such a patient escapes his confinement so easily?"

"Confinement is a way to say it, but in his case it's a pretty loose form of confinement. Budget cuts, you know?"

"Yeah, I've heard that before," Nathan said.

"And as I've told you, he's harmless," Callahan continued. "He just has this fixation about women's breasts. Anyway, your real doctor is due in about five minutes. You'll surely want to talk to him instead about your condition, miss Jones. Thank you very much for your patience."

Lerner looked at Nathan in anger. "So, Nathan Bearfield, you've had me treated by a nuts, made me believe my life had been at stake and that my knee was shattered into dust? You're really

something..."

"You know," Nathan replied, "the good side of all this is that you're insurance will get a much smaller bill to pay for... Anyway," Nathan proceeded before giving a chance to Lerner of replying, "how's been this thing of yours working so far? Are you ready to rock?"

"I really suck at this, don't I?", Lerner said in despair.

"Oh, don't worry, miss Jones. After a week of practicing in the hospital you'll be the greatest asset we can have on the field. I can feel it!", Angus replied.

However, Nathan and Angus shared a concerned look to each other. It was not going to be so easy.

A red-haired female nurse which looked almost twice as big as the male ones that came after doctor Jones entered the suite.

"Good evening, which one of you is Mr. Nathan Bearfield?" she said.

"That would be me," Nathan replied. "What can I do for you?"

"Would you come with me, please?" she said, as she held him strongly from his arm.

"Of course," Nathan said as they walked through the door. "What is it about?"

"I have an order for a colonoscopy exam on your name signed by doctor Jones."

"What?"

"Don't worry, it won't take too long."

"No, you don't understand, this is a big mistake!"

Lerner and Angus laughed while Nathan's screams echoed on the aisle...

Chapter eight

by S.R. Martin

Lerner ran her index finger along the raised line behind her left ear. Smooth taupe adhesive covering the wire left no indication of an edge. The device and its twin behind her right ear were not noticed by the nurses at Lewisham. The only reason one might have cause to question was occasional murmuring from the direction of Lerner's bed. Ostensibly, she was talking to herself or having a focused conversation with a nonexistent friend.

The old man in the next bed shifted upward onto his elbow. "Say, lass, it's bad enough we have to be here in the same room, but could you lower your voice a little? I cannot sleep with all that mumbling."

Lerner said, to someone else, "Hold on." Then to the old man, "What did you say?"

"I said, I am trying to get some sleep and I cannot with your incessant yammering."

She rolled over to face him squarely. "How can you sleep anyway in this place? The lights are on all night, the nurses take vitals every hour, and nobody has consideration for the noise they make when they move down the hallway."

“Well -”

“I am on the phone with my employer, okay?”

“Phone?”

“Yes.” She reached to the opposite side of the bed for her iPhone and held it up for him.

“Oh, I see,” the old man said glumly.

“Why don’t you ask the nurse for some earplugs?” Lerner rolled onto her back again, staring at the ceiling, and refocusing on the conversation taking place in her head. To someone else she mumbled, “Could you turn your bass down? You’re booming again. Yes... a bit lower... there. That’s much better. Okay, I’m listening.”

And indeed, she was listening, soaking in the audible training tips and wisdom of the UK’s preeminent intelligence organization.

In a voice so quiet that sounded to any outside observer as random gibberish, a voice amplified and fed back to her through the wires behind her ears, she spoke to Angus James.

“I think the nurses won’t be back for the next half hour,” she said.

“Good,” said Angus. “Now I want you to feel under the edge of your bedside table. You should find a small plastic bag taped there.”

Lerner ran her fingers under the table, found the bag and pulled it off.

“Now, don’t remove it yet, and I want you to-“

Lerner winced. “I just pulled it off. Sorry.”

“Not to fear,” said Angus. “I wanted to explain first. There are buttons inside. They look like pharmaceutical capsules. Cold medicine, or something like that. They are actually audio and

video transmitters. The capsules are for video with audio, and the pills are audio only. Do you understand thus far?”

“Got it.” Lerner held the bag out of site of the old man, who had drifted off to sleep in spite of his complaints.

“Now, these buttons can be attached to just about any surface by giving them one lick. Don’t lick it twice! The adhesive will stick to your tongue and you won’t be able to remove the device without surgery. And that wouldn’t do.”

“One lick. Got it.” Lerner opened the clear plastic bag and removed a capsule. “I think I can make out the little camera in this.”

“Yes,” said Angus. “Very tiny, isn’t it? The lens is on a gimbal, so no matter what orientation you plaster it, we can slew it. Now is this a good time to get up to go to the loo?”

Lerner watched the activity of medical personnel outside the open door to the room. “Yes, I think so.”

“Okay, get up and go to the bathroom. And take your iPhone with you. That is going to be your best friend for the next phase of your training.”

“Really?” said Lerner. “But it’s my personal iPhone. Nothing special about it.”

“Oh, but it is,” said Angus. “You’ll see. Now, in the bathroom, attach one of the white pills to the underside of the sink.”

Lerner rolled out of the bed, minding the gap in the back of her hospital gown. The application of weight onto her right leg still caused pain to shoot through her knee. “Maybe I did really hurt myself,” she thought.

She entered the bathroom, closed the door and removed a white pill from the bag. With one careful lick, she moistened one side.

She felt something sticky touch her finger. “Oh, dear - I hope I haven’t - “

The pill hit the floor behind the toilet.

“What happened?” asked Angus.

“Ah, I flicked it away onto the floor. You have me scared of those things. I don’t want anything superglued to me.”

“Have courage, now. It would only be a problem in your mouth. Can you pick it up?”

Lerner made an attempt. “No. It is stuck on the floor.”

“Is it in plain sight?”

“Not really. The maids here are not terribly thorough. Can it stay there?”

Angus paused. “Let’s give it a go. I don’t want to waste another one. And you probably won’t need it.”

“So why put it here in the loo?”

“Because, this is how you are going to disguise the fact that you are out and about, rather than in your room where they expect you. It is a deceptive tactic, and we find it works very well. Now leave the bathroom and make sure you leave the light on. You’ll find that you can lock that particular door from the inside.”

Lerner pressed the lock button on the door handle. “Yes, it works. Closing the door now.”

“Good,” said Angus. “And now for the day’s agenda.”

Over the next ten minutes, Lerner deposited video capsules throughout the second and third floors of Lewisham, walking slowing with a rolling IV stand that happened to be standing outside her room. She developed an economic series of motions to remove each capsule from her bag, lick it and stick it within two

seconds. Some locations were painfully indiscrete. And yet, they remained undetected by the busy orderlies, nurses and doctors racing through the corridors. Lerner knew of her success from a brief beep relayed to her ear wire after each installation. MI7 then verified that both audio and video was streaming from each site.

Angus transmitted his next instructions. "Okay, now we are going to transform you. Your current getup won't do for infiltration. Can't have a conscious patient where your going. And we've got to hurry. Your nurses may discover you are missing from your room. But we've got your return route adequately monitored. See the third door on the right?"

Lerner pointed. "That one?"

"Don't do that, Miss Jones," said Angus. "No gestures. Try to remember that."

"Understood. Then I am walking to the correct door?"

"Sorry, I misled you. My right, your left. Look to your left, and now it is the second door."

Lerner stopped in front of the door. "Okay. Do you want me to go inside?"

"Not yet. This is your ultimate destination. Just wanted you to get your bearings."

She looked at the number above the door and made a mental note of it. "This doesn't look like a recovering patient's ward."

"It's not," said Angus. "Come along, then. I need you to find the elevator. Continue down the corridor, and you will come to it on your right."

"I see it," said Lerner.

"And pop one of your capsules under the edge of the control panel when you get inside."

“Don’t you want it somewhere raised, so you can look down on the occupants?”

“No. And you’ll see why later.”

Lerner entered the cab. A doctor with a clipboard rushed in before the door closed. He punched a button for the fourth level.

“Where to?” he asked Lerner.

Lerner stared blankly at him. Waiting.

“Which level, miss?” the doctor asked.

Lerner waited. “Which level?” she repeated.

The doctor knitted his brow.

Angus piped in, “Five. Level Five.”

“Five,” said Lerner. She pulled her iPhone out of her gown pocket. “Sorry, I was distracted.” She saw the doctor look on either side of her head. She placed her hand over one ear, smiled, and smoothed a lock of brown hair over the ear.

At the fifth level, the doctor left first. Lerner waited, then hit a button to hold the door closed. She mumbled, “Where do you want me to put the camera?”

Angus answered, “After some thought, I like your idea. Put it as high as you can, but make sure one end has a clear shot with no obstruction.”

Lerner pasted a capsule in the top corner of the cab, extending her arm as high as it would go. After the characteristic beep, Angus called back.

“Good show. The fish eye lens is best suited for small spaces such as your elevator. Now, proceed down the hallway to room 3F. Do you see it? It should be marked with a dark blue sign.”

She fumbled for another camera capsule, “Do you want me to stick a camera to the wall here? I’ve only got one left.”

“No,” said Angus. “Instead, hold that capsule pointed in front of you. And keep that capsule for use later in the same manner. By the way, you’ve done an excellent job so far. I’m surprised no one has noticed you. Even the doctor.”

“Without makeup, I look rather plain,” said Lerner.

“I would have noticed you, Miss Jones,” said Angus.

Lerner smiled. “All right. I am pointing the capsule down the hallway. I see the door on the right.”

“Good. Don’t arrive just yet. Slow your gait.”

Lerner slowed down.

“Okay, pick it up a bit. Now, or you’ll miss it,” said Angus.

The door to room 3F opened wide. An orderly with a large rolling hamper walked out and proceeded in the opposite direction.

“Now get in there before the door closes!” said Angus.

Lerner skipped a few steps, the best she could muster given the pain in her knee, and dove through the doorway. The door closed and locked behind her. “It’s a laundry room. You want me to change into something.”

“Right. And you will need to find a set of tops and bottoms and a cap. So have a go at it.”

She rifled through three mounds of green garments on a metal table. “These are dirty, Angus. Do you want me to wear dirty scrubs?”

“Yes, and time is wasting, so hurry. Oh, and find a face mask. You’ll need one of those.”

Back on the second level, Lerner moved through the hallway, forcing herself to exude composure. The medical staff gave her

little regard, with the exception of some polite greetings and head nods. She presumed that it was not uncommon to see a different face in the complex.

“Now you are going to see the power of teamwork, technology and calm, cool, collective restraint,” said Angus. “And you must promise me you will not react in any way that would blow your cover.”

“I am an investigative journalist,” said Lerner. “I live for this. Just tell me where to go.”

“Stop outside the room I told you about earlier. But before you get there, a man may hand you something.”

“Okay,” said Lerner. “What does he look like?”

“Plain, old-fashioned orderly in whites. I don’t know of his appearance beyond that.”

“What is he going to hand me?”

Angus replied, “A syringe.”

Lerner gulped. She halted her steps and looked down. She moved to the side of the corridor and pulled out her iPhone, pretending to talk into it. She raised her voice above the standard mumble. “What am I going to do with a syringe? Am I going to stick anyone with it?”

“Hold, now, Miss Jones. And lower your voice.”

Lerner continued looking down, putting her free hand on her forehead. “I thought I was being trained as an observer.”

“You’re projecting,” said Angus. “Don’t project. You are to follow your instructions, to the ‘T’, as stated. No more and no less.”

“What is in the syringe?”

“When you become an operative, you can’t second guess the

directions given to you by your handler. To do so could mean your end, and the end of us all. Only through strict adherence to your instructions will we succeed in our mission, and live to not tell about it.”

“What is in the syringe, Angus?”

A pause ensued.

“I’m not quite sure,” said Angus. “But that is not your affair, you see. In this exercise, you are an operative. And you’ll have to follow your instructions, or we may have to reconsider your utility to-”

“Okay, Angus. I was just taken aback. I just want to know what I am going to do with the syringe.”

Angus’ breath popped over his microphone. “All in good time, my dear.”

Lerner felt a tap on her shoulder. She spun around to see a man in white medical garb with a metal tray. On the tray was a small syringe, half full of clear liquid, with a pink cap covering its needle. She alternated glances at the needle, then at the man’s blank stare.

He pushed the tray gently into her stomach. She took the signal and grabbed onto it.

“Good, I see you have the payload,” said Angus. “Now when you go through the door, do so with deliberate haste.”

Lerner took a quick lungful of air and pushed through the double doors.

“Go through the next set of doors, and then take a right,” said Angus.

She followed his directions and pushed through the final set of doors to find -

An operating room.

Beeps of a heart rate monitor and regulated breathing resonated off the green and white tiles of the walls. Green scrubbed nurses and attendants surrounded the operating table. A lone figure in white hunched over the table, his back to Lerner.

Two nurses raised their heads to see Lerner standing frozen at the doorway. One shouted, “Bring it over!” Another ran toward Lerner and took the tray.

The nurse with the tray was met halfway to the table by another nurse who grabbed the syringe, removed the cap, and plunged it into an IV valve, pushing its contents into the IV bottle. She then removed the syringe and tossed it into a hamper labeled “SHARPS”.

Lerner stood motionless.

“Well,” said Angus, “go over and take a look, hmm? You’ll find I didn’t put you or anyone else in harm’s way.”

“Yeah,” Lerner mumbled.

“This is training after all. The real work is much more dramatic, I assure you. But I think this illustrates the basics, don’t you?”

“Mm-hmm”.

“So pull out your camera and show me the room. Go over to the patient and give me a view.”

Lerner followed suit, discretely holding her capsule between her left thumb and forefinger, her hand down by her side.

“When you get to the table, raise it so I can have a look,” said Angus.

“Morbid bastard, are you?” said Lerner.

Lerner stopped behind the nurses opposite the surgeon. She could see from the brightly lit opening that the patient was undergoing a heart procedure. She saw the beating heart and

stumbled backward.

“Angus, let’s forget about the camera for a while, okay?”

A harsh, piercing tone interrupted Angus’ reply. It became a series of blaring claxons, alternating between Lerner’s ears.

“What is that, Angus,” she said, perhaps too loudly, as one of the nurses turned around to face her.

“Okay,” said Angus, “we’ve got to get you back to your bed.”

“Now?”

“Yes, right now. You’re boss is coming through the main lobby.”

“Paul?” cried Lerner. “Why now? He’s working deadlines this time of day!”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Angus. “He’s here. So, the exercise is over. Start back immediately.”

Lerner flashed a wink at the nurse and sped off through the doors. She didn’t pull down her mask, figuring that it might help her glide unnoticed down the hallway.

Another loud beep penetrated Lerner’s skull. “Christ, Angus, what is that one for?”

“Your vitals nurse has showed up in your room. Get ready! We’re going to test the pill in the loo.”

“Okay.”

“And don’t speak until I tell you to.”

“Okay.” Lerner managed a quick trot, limping on her right leg.

She suddenly heard an electronic hum. Then, three booming knocks.

“Speak!” shouted Angus.

“What am I supposed to say?”

“Not to me! Respond to the knocks. What do you say when someone knocks on the loo door?”

Lerner said, "Who is it?"

"Louder!" shouted Angus.

"Who is it?" yelled Lerner, limping without company down the crowded corridor to her room.

A new voice came through. "Time for your blood pressure."

Lerner recognized the nurse's voice. "I'll be out in a minute. Can you come back later?"

"How much later are you going to be? I gotta get your readings. I came by earlier, and you were still in there. Are you feeling all right?"

Lerner arrived at her door, and realised she couldn't respond without giving herself away. The nurse was standing at the loo door, knocking again.

"Miss, are you okay?" she said.

Lerner scooted down the hallway, and shouted, "I'm all right! Now can you leave me alone for just a few more minutes?"

No response.

Angus piped in, "Your boss is on Level two. He will be rounding the corner in ten, nine, eight- "

Lerner leaped into her room and stood behind the vitals nurse. She grabbed the nurse's shoulder and spun her around.

Lowering her voice, Lerner belted out, "I need you to go to Room 217. Can you get over there immediately?"

The nurse looked puzzled. "Well, yes, I can, but what's the problem?"

"Just go, and I will be there shortly." Lerner led the nurse by the arm out of the room and pointed down the hallway. The nurse clutched her blood pressure cuff and ambled along, looking back in mild confusion.

Lerner closed her room door, pulled off her green cap and face mask, and slid under her bed covers, drawing them up to her neck.

She huffed a few breaths, and let out a relieved sigh. Then she looked to her right.

The old man was sitting up, eyebrows raised.

She said, "Not one word, old man. Not one word."

He smirked and waved his hand at her, laying back down and rolling to face away from her.

A knock sounded. "Are you decent, Lerner?"

Lerner laughed to herself.

Angus' voice returned. "Good show, Miss Jones! Now we'll need to figure out how to get the loo door unlocked, and-"

"Let's do it later," mumbled Lerner. "My boss is here." Then, to the door: "Come in, Paul."

In walked Paul Cambridge, in the same rumpled brown suit she recalled from the first time she met him at The Echo. Hat in hand, he offer a brusque greeting. "Morning, Jones."

"Well, if it isn't the mayor of London! Come have a sit, Boris!"

"You know, one day you're going to say that in front of the wrong people and they might believe I really am Boris Johnson."

"If Boris lost twenty stones." Lerner smiled uneasily as Paul pulled up a chair next to her bed. "What is it, Paul?"

Her boss looked tired and tense. He wiped his hand across his jaw, then grabbed his hat and squeezed it. "Another one, Jones. They did it again."

"Bombers?"

"Yes. This time it's at least five dead, some reports say seven. Probably more coming."

"Where?"

“Edgware Station. All we know is there was some action across from the Hilton Metropole at a small grocery owned by a bloke they call ‘The Angry Arab’.”

“Who calls him that? Specifically?” Lerner raised up the back of her bed with a remote control under her covers.

“They’re all angry, you know,” said the old man from his bed.

“Do hush up!” shouted Lerner. “What else, Paul?”

“I don’t know any more. Only that the Circle Line is now closed. Police and firemen have the station closed off. They are holding back, and there are indications they will close the streets all the way to Hyde Park.”

He dropped his hat on the floor. Picking it up, he looked at Lerner’s tasseled hair. “You need a comb.”

She laughed. “No more than you, Boris. So who is covering the story for The Echo? And how are you going to extract something positive out of this?”

Paul sighed. “There is no bright side to any of this. I know that if you were back at The Times, this story would be your baby. In fact, I believe your public would have expected you to comment and cover the situation.”

“My public, Paul?”

“You were trusted there. It’s why we wanted you at The Echo. I pulled out all the stops to get you into my department.”

“But not to cover terrorism.”

“To have you in our court in case there was a need to cover such things. And, now...well, I need you.”

Lerner squirmed under her sheets. “Paul, I am not exactly in any condition to go back to work right now.”

Angus interjected, “Tell him about the surgery!”

“And I have surgery coming up any day now - “

“Depending on the lab results!”

“...Depending on the lab results,” said Lerner. “How can I start on a story if I am sequestered here?” She shot a glance at the old man. “With this?”

“Heh!” the old man cried out.

Lerner stuck her hand out from beneath the sheets and beckoned for Paul’s hand. “I can’t do it right now, okay? After I get out of the hospital.”

“Well, I’ve given it great thought,” said Paul, clasping her hand, “and I think you can cover it based on notes and inputs from others. We can send you the briefs, and set you up with a typewriter right here-“

Lerner heard Angus in her ears: “No! Tell him again, tell him you can’t do it. “

She spoke in response to Angus. “You know that isn’t going to work.” And then to Paul, she said, “Why don’t you have your nighttime crew in India do it? They rewrite and doctor every piece written for the paper anyway. You don’t need me.”

“In this case, I absolutely do, Jones. Your previous experience is something no other journalist in the UK has. And this is not a fluff piece. We rewrite our stories because they can be rewritten. But this one is different.”

“And you want to go up against The Times. At long last.” Lerner let go of his hand.

Paul sat silently for a moment, then got up to leave. “I’ll send you all the recent clippings. Our cubs have some observations that I am sure you’ll be able to use. They’re quite bright, you know. They have to be to chase after the likes of you.” He grasped his hat

and stood somberly at the door. “I know that in some ways, this is work that you wanted to escape. I implore you to think about the benefit to the pursuit of truth. That is the positivism that we will gain for The Echo. Please do this.” He raked a hand across his disheveled hair, and swung the door open. “Cheers, love. Do you want this closed?”

“No!” shouted the old man, at the same time Lerner said, “Yes.”

She waved off Paul and pointed at the old man. “Leave it open for this old colt’s tooth.”

Paul said, “You keep your hands off her, mate. There’s a quid in it for you.”

“Ah, she can hold her own,” said the old man, rolling over again to attempt sleep.

In the next few minutes, Angus ran through numerous scenarios designed to dissuade Paul from engaging Lerner in the latest outbreak of terrorism. Lerner was too immersed in her own thoughts to pay much attention.

“Well, this won’t do at all. I can’t have you writing stories while we are putting you through the more rigorous training,” said Angus.

“Can I have some peace now?” said Lerner. It’s already been a long day.

“You know, we could just spirit you away and be done with it.”

“Then why don’t you, if it’s that important?”

“Because there is an art to espionage, Miss Jones. You have to be able to conduct it whilst those around you suspect nothing.”

Lerner tensed. “Then I should be able to do both jobs. Be an operative for you, under the cover of my journalism.”

Angus started in, “I’ll have to talk more to Nathan about this. I

don't see how we can get you prepared without a true sabbatical. If your employer will not leave you alone - “

Lerner said, “That’s enough for one day, Angus. Good-bye.” She reached behind her ears with her fingernails and ripped off the wires.

She got up, winced from pain in her knee and promptly tossed the ear devices in the loo, flushing it immediately. “I don’t like those things,” she said to herself, finally experiencing natural volume in her ears for the first time in eight hours.

She pulled off the dirty scrubs, laid them in a pile in the corner of the room, then got back in bed. She had drifted into a light snooze when she heard an unwelcome voice.

“Time for your blood pressure!” said the nurse.

Chapter nine

by J.C. Rock

Lerner's first day back after the bombing had been largely uneventful up until lunchtime. There was the requisite number of co-workers coming up to her to welcome her back and see how she was feeling. Each time she would smile and thank them, sometimes complaining about how sore she still was. Lerner had managed to do all of it without rolling her green eyes once. She was quite happy when lunch time came and most of the others had filed out, leaving only herself and a few others left on the floor. Her cramped office gave her a bit of privacy, but with no door in place that privacy was limited. She wanted to catch up on some work so stayed at her desk through lunch, trying to get her in-box down to a manageable level.

She munched on a granola bar when her phone began to ring. She frowned slightly when she recognised the number. *What does he want?*

"Hello," she said, clearing her throat. "This is Lerner Jones."

The voice at the other end of the connection was tinny. "Lerner, its Nathan. How is the first day back?"

"Going good so far. Might take me a while to get back into the

swing of things, but it's good. Why are you calling?" Lerner looked around out the windows of her office into the general area to see if anyone could be listening in.

"Right to the point, good." The connection cleared up as if the man were driving and had just driven into a better cell area. "I need you to get into Mrs. Caldicote's office if you can and have a look around."

"What am I looking for?" Lerner's heart started thumping in her chest.

"Nothing specific," Nathan said. "Something that seems out of place. Communications with other media outlets, perhaps. Just anything that seems out of place for someone in her position. And it might be a good time to try out that flash drive I gave you. See if you can get her appointment list."

Lerner didn't want to do this, but she was determined to prove herself. The tone of Nathan's voice told her it was more of a fishing expedition than anything, or perhaps just a test of her loyalties. "Everyone is at lunch now, I can go now if you want."

"Perfect. Don't push it though, if you can't get it today..."

"No, no. It's fine. If there is something there, I will find it." Lerner clicked the phone off and stood, grabbing her bag as she left her office. A quick glance at the clock showed there was still 20 minutes left of lunch. She was cutting it close, but that was OK.

Lerner cast a quick glance around then started walking stiffly down the hallway toward Lucy Caldicote's office. She was nearly there when a voice called out to her, making her jump.

"Lerner, welcome back." The man's voice was a deep baritone in the space.

Lerner turned at the voice and smiled. "Thank you. It's good to

be back.” She couldn’t remember the guy’s name but thought he had something to do with selling advertisements for the paper. They exchanged a few pleasantries then she glanced at her watch, making it look like she was in a rush. “Sorry, lots to do.”

“Of course,” he said, waving her on.

The carpeted floor whispered under her heels as she walked toward Lucy’s office. She crossed through the outer secretary’s office and into Lucy’s. The desk was a jumble of file folders and bits of paper strewn about and it made Lerner wonder how the woman managed to get anything done at all. Lerner sat down in the comfortable leather chair and carefully went through all the folders on the desk, trying her best not to disturb anything too much. Everything there seemed perfectly normal; mock-ups of individual pages, purchase orders to be signed and printed out emails. Nothing seemed to be what she was looking for.

Lerner moved on to the desk drawers. They contained much the same as those on top of the desk, along with a massive collection of pens, rubber bands, and a half eaten pork pie. She turned up a corner of her mouth at the thought of the pie as she wondered how old it was. In the bottom drawer, the one that squeaked loudly and made her wince, she found a picture of Lucy and her husband George posing near the railing of a cruise ship. *Nice suit*, she thought of George’s attire, *definitely not a Bogan*.

She put the picture back and shut the drawer, glancing around the floor. There were a few papers strewn here and there, most likely fluttered down from the desk itself. Leaning against the outside of the desk she noticed a small leather portfolio with the flap closed. It looked locked at first but she reached out anyway and flicked at the flap with a finger. There was a small clicking

noise and the flap popped open, revealing some papers inside. Lerner glanced up at a slight noise and strained her hearing. Once she was confident no one was coming, she pulled the handful of papers out of the portfolio and quickly scanned the top few documents. She only had a few minutes left to spare so didn't study the documents fully, but saw enough that it might just have been what she was looking for.

Lerner started to shove the papers into her own bag, but thought better of it. If they turned up missing she didn't know what Lucy would do. The answer came when she noticed the copier in the secretary's office just outside. She rushed to the copier and put the papers in the feeder and pressed the button. It took nearly a full minute for the copier to warm up and start the copies. Her eyes stayed on the clock the whole time; only five minutes to go.

Once the copies were done, Lerner put the originals back into the portfolio and closed the flap until she heard the lock catch. She stood to exit the office when she suddenly remembered the flash drive.

Lerner pulled the drive from her bag by the black lanyard it was attached to and slipped it into a usb hub sitting on the desk. The monitor on the desk came to life and after a few seconds of waiting a menu appeared. Lerner read through the options of the program that started running off the drive and chose #5. A loading bar filled the centre of the screen as it started copying over the Outlook data containing Lucy Caldicote's appointments and contact list.

A ding from the elevator echoed down the halls and Lerner looked up. People were starting to come back after lunch, she had little time left and the loading bar was only halfway completed. As the program finished copying all the data over, Lerner looked

around the office making sure nothing was too out of place to give away the fact someone had been there. She moved the portfolio over a few inches and then seemed satisfied with its location.

Once the loading was complete, Lerner pulled the drive from the usb hub and the computer made an error noise because she hadn't stopped the drive properly. She stood and slipped the drive into her bag. She started to walk around the desk. A voice stopped her, making her jump.

"Miss Jones? What are you doing down here in this office?"

It was Amir Shimar, the Head of Security for the paper. His brown eyes bore into her with suspicion.

"Goodness, you scared the life from me," she said.

Lerner glanced around quickly. She had no reason to be in the office. She glanced at the desk, thinking quickly. "Just dropping some papers off for Mrs. Caldicote." She pointed vaguely to a pile of manila folders on the desk, trying to sound confident. "Working through lunch to try and catch up after my absence."

The older man nodded, though his eyes scanned the desk and the rest of the room briefly. "I know how that is." Amir cast a critical eye on Lerner. "Just making my rounds, checking things are as they should be. Damn bombings have everyone on edge."

The monitor on the desk winked out as it went to sleep and Lerner prayed the security guard hadn't noticed, or at least wouldn't understand what it meant. If he suspected she had been messing with Lucy's computer then he was sure to ask a question or two. Lerner didn't give him the chance to say anything. She walked around the desk and put her hand on Amir's shoulder, turning him toward the door.

"Indeed they do. Myself included. I'm glad you and your team

are keeping an eye on things here.”

Amir glanced back but Lerner guided him forward and out of the office.

“It was nice chatting with you, Amir, but I really must be getting back to my desk. My in-box is still quite full. The news waits for no woman, eh?”

“Indeed,” Amir said.

The two parted ways at the secretary’s door, with Lerner heading back to her cramped office, and Amir continuing on down the hall. But not before glancing back into the editor’s office.

Chapter ten

by Tammy Coron

Lerner's apartment is exactly what one would expect from an overachieving journalist; perfectly organised, perfectly clean, and perfectly decorated. Various awards lined the walls. One reads, *'Young Journalist of the Year awarded to Miss Lerner Jones'*. Another reads, *'Feature Writer of the Year: Miss Learner Jones'*.

Her apartment is of average size with modest furnishings. A small bedroom, a decent sized living area, a tiny bathroom, and an eat-in kitchen is all Lerner requires. Most of her time is spent in the kitchen or the bedroom— which doubles as her home office.

Lerner tosses the stack of files onto the kitchen table. With her first mission as an MI7 asset now behind her, Lerner pours herself a drink. She begins the tedious task of looking through every single sheet of paper she copied from Lucy's office.

Unfortunately, her search yields no results. Nothing. Not one single piece of controversial material. She wonders if she's made the right choice. Was it worth the risks involved? What would have happened if Amir actually did discover what she was up to? She pours herself another drink and continues her search desperately hoping to uncover something— anything.

After sifting through thousands of words written across a few dozen pages, Lerner is convinced the papers hold no secrets. Pouring herself another drink, she now focuses her attention on the memory stick. She grabs it, and the bottle of vodka, and heads for the bedroom.

She sits down at the computer. The dimly lit screen is the only light that fills the room. Her bed is small and made perfectly. Lerner wouldn't dream of leaving the house with her bed coverings in disarray.

There is a picture of her parents on the nightstand. Next to it, a small black notebook with a pen laying on top. Lerner hasn't slept well and uses the notebook to jot down her thoughts in the middle of the night. The past few weeks, since the bombing, Lerner's been plagued with nightmares. She remembers the day well, but her mind has a way of twisting the truth into something unrecognisable while she sleeps.

She inserts the memory stick into the side of the computer and waits for it to be recognised by the operating system. As expected, the data was encrypted, but getting past the encryption was not a problem.

"Ok, Lucy. Show me. Show me what you've been up to lately, " Lerner says. Frequently, she can be heard holding conversations with herself. Some say this is what sets her apart from the other journalists. Not that she's ever cared what other journalists say or think about her.

After reading through Lucy's electronic diary, it's clear to Lerner that Lucy is rather dull and boring. Just like the copied pages, the memory stick contains nothing of significance. A few personal appointments, as well as the standard calendar stuff, but nothing

controversial. The only *dirt* Lerner discovers is Lucy's infatuation with Brad Pitt. Apparently, Lucy has had several *imaginary* meetings with him in which they frolic around like lovestruck teenagers. Lerner pours another drink, raises it to her lips, sighs, shakes her head and sets it back down, untouched. Clearly, her first mission has her a little on edge.

Just then, the phone rings. Lerner fumbles around trying to find, and it turns out to be in her pocket. She wildly rips it out of her pocket and promptly tosses it up on the air. She nearly face plants trying to catch it, but it lands on the floor instead. She picks it up and finally answers it.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Nathan. How'd you make out?"

Lerner is a little drunk at this point and starts to unload on Nathan, "Why did you have me do this? Did you know I wouldn't find anything? Was this some kind of test? What were you..."

Nathan interrupts, "Lerner! Stop! Meet me tomorrow at the Royal Horseguards Hotel. It's on Whitehall Court. Do you know the place?"

Annoyed, Lerner mumbles into the phone, "Fine. Whatever!" and then hangs up.

Frustrated, miserable, and quite intoxicated, Lerner heads outside for some fresh air. She stumbles down the steps muttering something about poor choices and the destruction of humanity. Her mind bombarded with disturbing thoughts. What's this world coming to? People killing each other, for what? What makes us so cruel?

Lost within her own thoughts, and halfway down the road at

this point, Lerner suddenly realised she was on a collision course with a man who was coming towards her.

Whack!

“Excuse me. Was I in your way?”

Lerner slowly looks up. Embarrassed by her inability to navigate her way, as well as her seemingly low tolerance for booze, she realises with whom she just collided. She can feel the warmth rush to her face as she tries to hide her embarrassment.

“Paul? Why... wh... what are you doing here? At my apartment? And, so late...”

Paul reaches out to Lerner, steadying her a bit. “Hi, Lerner. I... I just wanted to come by and check on you. You seemed a little bit off today. And, uh... I was worried. Worried about you. Are you ok?”

“I’m fine, Paul. I guess these bombings have me a little on edge.” Lerner lowers her head, and stumbles back a little. Once again, Paul reaches out to steady her. She could feel his breath on her neck as she melted into his chest. She never noticed how good looking he was until just now. Maybe it’s the vodka. Or, maybe she’s feeling lonely and unsure about the future. Either way, something was happening between them, and she wasn’t about to let him go.

With a tiny grin, Lerner looks up at Paul and quietly whispers, “Do you want to come upstairs for a nightcap?” He agrees, and the two head back to Lerner’s apartment.

The alarm is loud and obnoxious, but it does its job; Lerner is awake. Immediately, she notices she isn’t wearing any clothes. Paul is nowhere to be found. He must have left in the middle of the

night. More importantly, Lerner's sleep wasn't interrupted by terrifying images of the bombings.

She climbs out of bed and into the shower. Her head is pounding as a result of way too much vodka the previous night. But there's no time to recover. She needs to meet with Nathan this morning.

Fifteen minutes later, Lerner is back at the kitchen table sipping some tea and looking through the files she copied yesterday. "What are you hiding, Lucy? I know there's something here. What is it? What are your secrets?"

Gathering the files, and her courage, Lerner heads out to meet with Nathan. On her way out the door she looks back towards the direction of her bedroom and wonders how things will evolve between her and Paul. Was this just a one night stand? Will they even talk about it? She has no idea and no time to consider the possibilities. She turns and walks out of her apartment leaving last night's passion, behind, in the bedroom. She'll tend to that later.

On her way to meet Nathan, Lerner is certain she's being followed. She refuses to give in to her fear and presses forward to the predetermined meeting spot.

"Over here!" yells Angus. He was waiting outside for Lerner to show up. "Come on. Nathan is inside waiting for you." He grabs Lerner's arm and leads her inside.

They walk past the reception area and into a back room that's tucked at the end of the hall. Nathan is on the phone, sitting at a small table. "No, I don't care. You'll have to take care of it yourself. There's nothing I can do about it. Look, I have to go. She's here." Nathan hangs up the phone and motions for Lerner to sit next to

him. "Sit down, Lerner. Let me see what you have."

Cautiously, Lerner takes a seat next to Nathan while Angus stands behind her. This makes her quite nervous. She vaguely remembers blowing up at Nathan last night and wonders what her fate will be. "Nathan, I'm sorry about last night. I... I..."

"Don't worry about it. It was late. It was your first job. It's ok. Show me what you have." Nathan reaches over with his hand outstretched.

Handing Nathan the files, Lerner says, "There isn't anything in there. I told you that last night. There's nothing. Not even in her diary."

Nathan grabs the papers and begins to thumb through them. He glances towards Angus as if to secretly convey something. Angus steps out of the room. At this point, Lerner is sure she's about to get whacked. She's watched movies where spies kill each other for messing up or knowing too much. She pushes the hair from her face.

Nathan stands up. Lerner shifts in her chair waiting for Angus to come from behind and shoot her dead. "Lerner, I need you to do some more work."

"What? What do you need?"

Angus walks back into the room with a box. He sets it down on the table. Nathan reaches in and pulls out what appears to be some kind of bug or listening device. "I need you to install a few of these. The Boardroom. Lucy's office. Hell... even her home, if you can manage that."

Lerner jumps up out of her seat. "No way! I've already risked too much. Do you know that Amir almost caught me yesterday? If they suspect I'm up to something - buggin' her home for Heaven's

sake - do you know what they'll do to me? Jesus, Natan. I could get fired. Or, worse! I'm not doing it."

"Sorry, Lerner. You don't have a choice. You're well past that now. You really should have considered these things before you agreed to help us."

Nathan hands Angus the equipment he took from the box. "Angus, please explain to Miss Jones how this stuff works. Get it done, quickly. We don't have time to screw around. This needs to get done. And done right." He turns back towards Lerner. "I'm not sure what you thought you were getting into, Lerner. But, understand that this isn't a game. Your hands *will* get dirty. Now, pay attention to Angus. He'll explain how these things work. I have other matters that need my attention. Good day."

"Sir, do you want me to give her all six?" asks Angus.

Before leaving the room, Nathan replies, "Yes. And please make sure she understand how they work. We can't afford for this to go wrong."

Chapter eleven

by Curtis Beaird

“Angus! I said it is broken. The whole bunch of them are broken!”

“What do you mean, shhh? People shout into their designer handheld mobile devices all the time. This is a newspaper office Angus, not a funeral home.”

Lerner kept fiddling with the periodic irritation of her contact lens while waiting for Angus’ questions to end.

“I don’t know. I opened the box that you sent over. They were all dead except one. It had a throbbing glow, then flickered, then was out.

“What? You’re kidding. You want more info than that? You guys at MI7 are really top of the line.”

“Yes, I’m at my desk. Stealth? What do you mean stealth? It is a zoo in here. Lucy is pounding on me for the story on the Duchess of Cambridge. Mr. Scruffy Hair Paul is cruising my desk eyeing me for a date. I’m not so sure I couldn’t tie ribbons on a couple of these things. Tell Lucy they are earrings and her vanity would have her wearing them to the board meeting. But, they have to work, Angus. They have to work.”

“I should what? Come up for air? Listen Angus. I have a time

frame here. I'm holding a handful of dead bugs. The board meeting is late this afternoon. You guys get me something to work with now. I screw this up and we can skip the ninety-day employee review. I'll be helped to a swan dive from the Penthouse Floor. Trust me, the squint-eyed security guy Amir thinks I'm a loose cannon anyway."

Lerner held the fresh bugs in her hand, wispy little things no bigger than a small strand of thread with a period at one end. After fiddling with them for a while, she discovered the first batch worked. She hadn't activated them at the fake hard drive properly. Well, If they wanted an IT guy to do this, they should have hired one.

Rain in sheets lashed the windows. Wind pressed the glass. The building seemed to shudder. Everyone in the office was distracted by the storm. Lerner slipped a bug into her hair and headed for the lavatory.

"On your way to Lucy's Throne?" Paul asked with a grin.

Lerner winched and did what she didn't want to do. Stop. She turned to face Paul, hoping the bug was secure enough to escape notice. The Echo's office had cameras of its own. Amir was good at a lot of things. Suspicion being chief among them. He pursued surveillance as an art form. Hiding the device in her hair might escape Amir's eye on the wall. She was not so sure a face to face would pass muster.

"Lerner, I've been wanting to apologise to you."

This startled Lerner. She always figured Paul for less than stellar with a heavy lean toward clumsy. She figured that he was about to confirm her opinion.

“Lerner, I am sorry for my behaviour. I should have been more direct and simply asked you out to lunch.”

With that, Paul took a step closer to Lerner, looking her square in the face.

“Paul, I’m sorry my contact is irritating my eye. And you know, there is something about “Lucy’s Throne.” Give it some thought. Excuse me.”

With the first foray into the risk of planting a bug behind her, Lerner felt more confident. She had no idea what good a lavatory bug would provide; however, it did help her up the learning curve. While giving herself a C+ for her first attempt, two delivery people in white coats stepped into the centre of the office pushing a food cart. A three-layered cake with happy birthday, gold on white icing, sat in the middle of the tray. A huge 50 perched on top of the cake.

“Yes, this is going marvellously, Angus.”

“No, I haven’t figured out a way to get one into the board room yet.”

“Yes, I know that is the critical area.”

“Angus, I’m standing in the middle of the office watching a birthday cake being rolled across the floor. Do you mind if we do the phone buddy thing later? I could use this distraction.

Forgive me Angus, but this whole thing is beginning to remind me of a scene from a James Bond movie. You worry about stealth and then just call me up on the phone? Why am I not wearing a bug? If this thing doesn’t work and I become another suicide on the sidewalk. Later Angus.”

Lerner's hair now sported two bugs. The inside of her left arm dotted with tabs of clear sticky tape. Lerner's father always joked, "If you want it hidden, hide it in plain sight." She stared at the Duchess of Cambridge story filling the computer screen. Plain sight. Might as well. Lerner hit print rather than send. Who knows, "Queen Lucy" may not check her inbox. Get credit for the story. Drop it flat on her desk.

The Editor-in-Chief of the Echo practiced an open door policy, which to her meant she literally left her door open. Lerner availed herself of this practice a couple times in the past. She picked up the feature story from the printer and marched herself through the open door and into the editors office.

Her cell phone rang. "Angus! You want me to die, is that it? I'm in her office, Angus. No, she is not here. Angus, you and Nathan need to be game show hosts, not MI7 employees."

Lerner placed the story in the middle of The Editor-in-Chief's desk. She took a quick look around and decided on an almost in plain site spot under the edge of the desk. Pulling the bug from her hair, she saw it float to the floor. She bent at the waist to pick it up and saw his reflection in the window. Amir Shimar was standing behind her in the doorway staring at her derriere. Distractions. What would I do without distractions? Lerner felt over the floor and found the bug, and in plain site, taped it to the side of the desk.

"May I help you, Ms. Jones?" His gaze never leaving her backside while she gave him ample viewing time before answering.

"No thank you, Amir. I dropped my contact lens. It has been giving be a problem all day."

Lerner turned to leave the office. She accepted the assurance of his help and moved past the cake and back to her desk.

The office filled with people. Gray suits. Black Suits. Ties and cuff links. People of importance and means who gather to decide fates and futures. Today, they gathered for Lucy's birthday party and board meeting. They sang the song and cut the cake. Gifts appeared all around. Lerner stepped toward Lucy handing her a small white box tied with a gold ribbon. Earrings, a pair of brilliant onyx and pewter treasures purchased on High Street, both adorned with the wispy little things Lerner carried in her hair all day.

“Oh, they are beautiful. I must wear them now!”

Lerner flipped open her phone. “Angus. I just watched Queen Lucy wear two glamorous bugs into the board meeting. The gang is here. Listen closely. I'll be on the curb in twenty minutes.

No, smart guy. I won't be doing a swan dive from the top of the penthouse. Be there. I'm done.”

Chapter twelve

by Montrée Whiles

Lerner turned slowly around as she surveyed the mod in which the news staff did their duty to *The Daily Echo*. Bright light streamed in through the windows which walled the room. Turning back to her desk, she inspected the placement of various items and made minor adjustments. A wisp of hair fell across one eye. She brushed it back. Satisfied, she turned toward a loud voice in the almost empty newsroom.

She recognised the features editor as he walked briskly through the entrance. He was waving a sheaf of papers above his head as he called across the the almost empty room to another colleague. A sign chained to the ceiling read, *copy editor*. A white-haired, bespectacled man was reading at the desk under the sign.

“I printed a hard copy for you, Merrill” Paul Cambridge said as he hurried down the ramp into the mod that served as the hub for the newspaper’s production.

The man turned away from whatever he was reading on his desk and raised a mug to his lips. He swigged a gulp then set it down. He scowled before replying.

“At least I’ll get something done today. Where’s IT when you

need them?”

“I called them, Merrill, all of their systems are all down. I was able to get through on Eden’s cell number. They’re dead in the water.” He plopped the papers down on the copy editor’s desk.

“Serves them right, the damned good-for-nothing, condescending know-it-alls! Okay, let’s have it. I’ll work on yours.”

He paused to pick up the papers from his desk and flip through them. Paul waited patiently for Merrill to finish. He glanced over at Lerner and flashed a smile.

“Have everyone bring me a hard copy of what ever they have sitting in the inbox on my computer. Blasted technology!”

“Thanks, Merrill. I’ll threaten them with the spike just so they know you mean business.”

“You’re a good man, Paul.”

He rolled his eyes after he turned away from Merrill. Continuing on toward Lerner, he stopped long enough to toss his keys on a desk. He crossed the floor in long strides, an appreciative look on his face as he looked the newest features writer up and down.

“Hi, Lerner.” He reached out to shake her hand as he approached. “Welcome to your first day.”

She stood as they shook hands. He held hers a moment longer than was necessary, then released it. His disheveled brown hair was in contrast to his otherwise neat and meticulous appearance.

“Thanks. It’s been an easy transition.” She leaned back against her desk.

“Don’t mind Merrill,” he whispered conspiratorially as he nodded in the direction of the copy editor. “He’s a good sort, really.”

“Oh, I won’t. My da’s a bit of a curmudgeon sometimes. I think I can handle him.”

“Today is morning briefing-and-brunch day, aka B and B. Folks don’t start to show until just before it begins. That happens down in the executive conference room.”

“Sounds great. I missed my morning cuppa today. Got a call from Melbourne at o’darkthirty.”

She brushed a stray wisp of hair back then combed her fingers through her dark hair. Her green eyes were bright.

“You don’t have to pick up your phone when it rings, you know. Hope there’s nothing wrong.”

Paul shifted his feet a little and looked past her briefly before meeting her eyes again.

“It was mum. Needed a little mother-daughter time is all. She’s a dear, really.”

“Great. Oh, let me point out things you should know.”

Lerner sidled over to him and paid attention to the different areas of the mod as he pointed them out.

“My boss, Lucy Caldicote, is up there.”

He pointed to the area above the *upper deck*. A balcony extended over the walkway above the mod. Behind it were the windows of the Editor-in-Chief’s office.

“All editors are along the windows there,” he pointed from one end of the longer wall opposite of Lucy’s office to the other end. “Their teams range out toward the upper deck.”

He named off a few other areas within the mod then pointed along the wall under the *loft*.

“Break room, loo, supplies, janitor’s closet and photo room,” his finger ticked off each door as he addressed it.

Making a mental note as her boss singled out each location, Lerner couldn't help noticing his subtle cologne. Sandlewood and sea breezes came to mind.

"Okay, so I'll drop by in about thirty minutes to get you. You can go with me to B and B. Today at four, you and the rest of the features team will get together. Human resources wants you to pop by today around half three and you and I will meet up with Lucy just after B and B," glanced up as another person entered the mod. "Oh, hang on."

Paul walked over to his desk, brushed his keys aside and picked up a stack of folders. He handed them to her once he returned to her desk.

"These are for you. We'll go over them later. Pencil me in for about fifteen minutes before five. I'll meet you in the small meeting room across from where we had B and B."

"Got it," Learner took the folders and laid them on her desk. "I suppose there's a pop machine in the break room?"

"Yes. The Eatery Bistro is occupies the penthouse suite of the building. You might want to take a moment to visit."

"I'll do just that," she said as he turned to leave. Her eyes followed him up the ramp and through the entrance. She turned quickly to her desk, flustered by the heat she felt rising in her cheeks.

True to his word, Paul had arrived at exactly thirty minutes later. B and B went quickly and her boss had taken time to introduce her to her colleagues, other team members and his boss. She was particularly pleased to have been introduced to Lucy. Lerner had been an admirer since she had attended a lecture by Lucy for one

of her journalism classes while at University. Lucy was known for her integrity, professionalism and expertise in the field of journalism and as an editor. She was well respected in many circles.

I'm certain Nathan is wrong about Lucy. I won't believe it's true, no matter what.

Paul was waiting for her when she entered the meeting room. A pitcher of water and a couple of glasses were on the tray in front of him. He was reading through documents in a folder, but looked up when the door opened. His smile shown in his eyes when he saw it was Lerner.

"Come on in. Have a seat," he said as he waved her to a seat arranged suspiciously close to him.

"Wow, what a day. Tell me the pace slows down at some point."

She sat in the proffered chair and reached for a glass and the pitcher. Having poured, she set the glass next to her folders after taking a sip. She waited for Paul to respond.

"Nope. The B and B is as slow as it gets around here."

He laid the page he was reading down and turned toward her.

"I'm all in. It promises to add a little excitement to my routine."

"What did you think about the contents of the folders I gave you earlier?"

"Most of it was pretty straight forward. The work flow is in line with how I would have organised it. No problems there."

"Your team mates?"

He watched her closely as she thought a moment.

"Fine bunch of journalists. I've read some of their bylines."

"Yes, they are. You're the first new team member since the newspaper opened."

Lerner pulled out a folder from the stack and set it on top. After opening it, she paused and looked at her boss.

“I was pleased to meet with Lucy today. She seems to be everything her reputation says about her. In fact, I jumped at the chance to join the paper here because she was the editor-in-chief.

“She’s great to work for. I have no complaints. Her reputation is well earned.”

Turning back to the document she had in front of her, she scanned through a few lines then looked up. Her finger rested on the place where she’d stopped reading.

“I couldn’t help noticing with all the revelry at the brunch, that the finance team seems rather, uhm, subdued. In fact, by the time the briefing was over, they seemed to have all disappeared.”

“You noticed that too, huh? Two members of that team, Mickey and Rooney, had family members in the branches that were recently attacked. They were listed among those dead. The other two, Kazumi and Rashid had contacts at the first bank attacked. The person killed was one of their contacts.”

“I see. That explains it.” After a moment of thought, she continued, “I don’t see anyone being able to put a positive spin on these attacks. I wouldn’t want to be on the team that has to do so.”

“Fortunately, that topic doesn’t fall to us for stories.”

“Fortunately.” She glanced down at the folder in front of her. “This one entry in the perks and picks sheet you gave me caught my attention. Mental health days?”

“Yep. Sometimes the job can be like that. Is guess that it for you?”

“Yes. Nothing else on my mind that I can think of.”

Lerner gathered up her things and was about to stand when she

felt his eyes on her. She looked up and saw that she was right. Sensing that he had more on his mind, she waited.

“You doing anything tonight?” Getting up his nerve he continued, “How about dinner tonight?”

“Sure, why not?”

“I know a great little Chinese place not far from here.”

“Sounds great. Tell me where and I’ll meet you there.”

Paul pulled a business card out from beneath his stack of folders.

“I was hoping you’d say yes.” He flashed a crooked grin as he handed her the card. “I’ll be there around half six. The address is on the card.”

They left the meeting together, Paul taking the elevator down and Lerner taking one going back to the mod. Making a point to visit briefly with some of her new coworkers, she was longer getting back to her desk than she had intended.

He doesn’t waste any time, she thought after she returned to her desk. He’s not bad though. Should I really go out with my boss?

She packed up her laptop and a copy of tomorrow’s assignment. Turning her pen caddy over, she took the memory stick from the pile then replaced the pens. She opened the centre drawer in her desk and moved the trade paperback book to the front. After lifting the cover page of the book she pulled the contents a small box, out of the recess in which it was hidden. She inserted the memory stick into the port and waited for the green light to stop flashing. Lerner returned the box to the recess and pressed the cover closed. She dropped the stick in her purse.

Before leaving the building Learner had one stop to make. She took the elevator to the floor on which the board room was housed. She slipped into the empty room, closing the door behind her. Moving around the large table to the book cases on the wall behind it, she stopped at the far side and reached overhead to the shelf above. Feeling for the wires she knew would be there behind the books, she confirmed that everything was still in place. She exited quickly. The same addition was confirmed in Lucy's office earlier in the afternoon.

Done for the day, she retrieved her things from her desk, bade the colleagues who remained at their desks bye for the evening and headed home. She needed to get changed and return in time for her meet-up with Paul tonight. Before all of that she needed to give attention to the memory stick she had in her purse.

Her car chirped after she pressed the button on her key fob. She tossed her things into the passenger seat then moved around to the driver's side door. She got in, removed the audio player from the glove box and retrieved the memory stick from her purse and plugged it into the device. She plugged in the ear phone to the player and her ears. She pressed play before starting the car and making her exit from the car park. She recognised Lucy's voice on the playback. Things got pretty interesting just as she exited the garage.

"Five were killed in the last attack."

Pause

"Some of my staff members know some of the people who died."

A longer pause.

"That's fine. Perhaps the next attack will be then."

Pause.

“Yes, even though it’s short notice. Yes, Wednesday can work.”

The call ended.

“Strewth!” she whispered as she leaned back in the seat. “So, it’s true!”

She pressed play again.

Chapter thirteen

by Tim Edwards-Hart

Nathan Bearfield had been waiting 10 minutes and his Monteviot Darjeeling tea had already arrived. His most recent asset recruit, Lerner Jones, was every bit as smart and ambitious as he was, so when she messaged asking to meet, he simply stood up from his desk and left the building. As he walked the short distance to the Royal Horseguards Hotel, he sent a secure note to the Office to log the asset meeting and the rendezvous location. He briefly considered going via the florists at Charing Cross Station in order to maintain the public appearance of a hopeful suitor, but the detour would add at least 10 minutes and her urgency was clear. Arriving early would have to seem hopeful enough. He paused to savour a sip of tea--it really was very good--then re-read Lerner's message.

Meet me. Usual place. 10 minutes. Please be there!

He was becoming used to Lerner's confidence, so the demand to meet at short notice was not surprising. But the "please" caught his attention. Lerner was unfailingly polite, but she was polite in the

way of someone who already knew they were going to get their way. The please in her message suggested otherwise. She was also, for the first time since he had met her, late. The combination of the message and her timing was strangely disquieting. He tasted his tea, and waited.

Lerner arrived a few minutes later. He watched her enter the lobby and walk up the steps into The Lounge restaurant. She looked different. It took Nathan a couple of breaths before he could identify the change: it was the way she moved. Her movements were usually smooth and assured, like an athlete, but now she seemed flustered. Almost clumsy. It was as if her confidence was gone. No, not gone, he corrected himself. Shaken. He put down his cup and stood to greet her. When she saw him, he noticed her fist tighten around something she was holding in her left hand before she strode towards him, oblivious to the patrons reading their newspapers by the windows. Grabbing her hands as she reached the table, he felt her press something into his palms as he kissed her cheek in greeting. Feeling the shape of it, he guessed it was a USB memory stick.

She dropped into the cane chair facing the window and immediately poured herself a tea, hands trembling slightly. "I listened to it," Lerner nodded at his hand, "It's... it's big, Nathan. It's dynamite."

He sat down. "Tell me the part that's got you excited, I'll hear the rest later. But remember where we are, and the image we need to maintain. Why don't you..."

"There'll be another one Nathan. Soon."

Nathan stared at her.

"Lucy knows someone Nathan. She knows someone in..."

"The organisation?" Nathan provided one of the key words for the suspected terrorists.

"Yes. And they're planning a 'party' for this week: Friday."

Another explosion! Nathan wanted to drop all the careful words and just talk directly, but he knew if someone overheard any part of their conversation, especially now, the repercussions would be dire. He chose his words carefully.

"Another party? So soon? Where?"

"I don't know. But it was clear it will happen Friday."

"You'd better tell me what you know. It would be a terrible shame if we didn't get the invitation until it was too late."

Lerner took a deep breath and looked around the room as she considered her words. Looking back to Nathan, she took a sip of tea, put her hands on the table and leaned in. "I heard her talking to someone--a male, I think--and it was clear that he was connected to the party group. He and Lucy seemed to know each other well, very friendly, and they clearly knew a lot about the party scene. I was surprised to hear her say she was expecting the next party this Friday. But she didn't give a time or place. Presumably her friend already knew. Because of that conversation, I... er joined in the discussions in the common room."

Nathan nodded his understanding that this was a reference to the recordings from the bug placed in the boardroom.

"I was a bit surprised, but there was no discussion of any planned parties. Not even a hint that they knew of one. In fact, the only mention of parties was in regard to their risk for staff morale and the importance of protecting company assets after some of the negative outcomes from recent parties. As best as I can tell, no-one in the in the common room was aware of the planned party. If it's a

surprise party, Nathan, Lucy's on the planning committee. I don't know if she's arranging it, funding it, or simply supporting it, but she knows all about the party and seemed to want it on Friday."

Nathan found himself sitting upright at the back of his seat. Lerner's revelations were not what he had expected to hear and he was amused to notice that, despite his training, once he got caught up in Lerner's story his body still subtly expressed his surprise. He focussed on his next breath, feeling the cool air of the hotel restaurant flow in through his nostrils, then the warm air from his lungs escape. More centred, he looked back to Lerner. She had calmed down while speaking and seemed to regain her some of her poise. When she drank her tea, her hands were no longer trembling.

"You're right Lerner, this is big. Party invitations at such short notice are hard to arrange, so I'll need to look into it. I'll listen to the music obviously," he glanced at his hand holding the memory stick to indicate the recordings, "then I might share it with my sister, Mr Hive and my Dad." he wondered if she'd get the references to the SIS, MI5 and the Ministry of Defence. "Between them they'll have some ideas. In the meantime though, I think we need to respect the care they are taking to keep this party private, so I suggest you steer clear. No more hanging out in the common room, do you understand? If you think you might overhear a conversation, move away. I'll try to find a party planner that can help us prepare a different kind of party for those involved."

Nathan wondered if he'd been clear enough. The problem with euphemisms was their propensity for misinterpretation. Suddenly he realised he could be direct, "I don't know about you, but I've been bothered by a lot of bugs lately so it's a relief to know that the

forecast indicates that there will be no bugs for the next few days."

"No bugs at all? That seems hard to believe."

"Tell you what, why don't you go back to work and, if you think you see a bug, just imagine it isn't there. Since I know how troublesome your bugs have been, I promise I'll contact you if the forecast changes."

Lerner looked at him over the edge of her tea cup and smiled. "This is nice tea. We really should come here more often."

Lucy swore under her breath at the TV screen in front of her. It was brand new, installed to help her follow breaking news, but periodically the picture would be almost completely obscured by grey static. The TV came preconfigured so, apart from turning it on and then off, the guys who installed didn't even test it. They never saw the problem. She hadn't really noticed it herself until this afternoon: after challenging her staff to look for more ways to find good news headlines in the explosion stories, she had hoped the TV news streams would help and was actually beginning to form some ideas when the picture went again.

There was a knock on the door. Lucy looked up to see Amir Shimar, her Head of Security, waiting politely. "Come in Amir, come in. What I can do for you?"

"Thanks ma'am. I was walking past and saw you were in, so was hoping you could sign these requisition orders for the project we discussed last week."

"Certainly! Pass them over." She beckoned him to her desk, "You don't know anything about TVs do you? This one's on the blink and and it is driving me insane. Every 5 minutes or so, the picture is almost completely wiped out by this grey static and those

lines."

Amir passed over his paperwork in return for the TV remote and turned to face the TV. He stood watching the interference pattern for a minute then put the remote down just before the grey fuzz disappeared from the screen. "How often did you say it does it do that?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, may be every 5 to 10 minutes," Lucy replied as she signed the last of his requisition orders.

"I'd like to time it if I may."

"Sure, but it's just a TV. Don't you have other things to do? I can just get IT to come in and replace it."

Amir checked his watch as he said, "Sorry ma'am, this may now be a security concern. I don't want to alarm you, but I've seen interference like that from certain types of radio transmitters. It seems unlikely, but I'd like to be sure before you had anyone else come in to see."

"What type of radio?"

"If it's alright ma'am, I'd rather be sure than cause alarm."

"I'm already alarmed," there was an edge to her voice, "what type of radio?"

"Low power, high frequency transmitters, ma'am. Typically used for short distance broadcasting. But similar interference could be caused by phones, or a microwave oven, or a malfunctioning printer, or any number of other things so I'd really like to see it again myself and check the time interval."

Lucy didn't reply, but stood up from her desk and moved around to wait beside Amir. She felt none of the patience that he seemed to display. She leaned against her desk and watched the news ticker roll across the screen without reading a word.

After six minutes the grey fuzz and wavy vertical bands returned.

"Is that how long it normally takes?"

"Well, that *felt* longer than normal but, yes, that's how long they all take."

Amir looked at the screen for a few more seconds, then walked up to the TV and removed it from its mounting bracket. He ran his hand over the wall, the bracket and then the back of the TV itself. "I'm sorry to say this ma'am, but I think someone has placed an audio recording and transmitting device in this room."

"You think I've been bugged?"

"Yes ma'am." Amir left the TV, still on, lying against the wall and carefully scanned the room. "It's likely to be somewhere close. If it was near your bookcase or the door it wouldn't affect reception. Also, they wouldn't hear you as well, so I think they'd want somewhere very close." He moved back to her desk and began to run his hand under the edge.

"Should I check the drawers?"

"I'd wait ma'am. Unless they're amateur I think it unlikely they'd place it there. Too much noise from the drawers opening and closing."

"You seem to know a lot about this."

"That's the reason you hired me ma'am. You know my history. Everything on my CV was true, except it was highly redacted. You should be concerned if I didn't know this stuff." He lay down as he talked to better see under the desk.

"Aaah." He reached up and, using a penknife, peeled some sticky tape off the underside of Lucy's desk. Stuck to the tape was a length of black wire with a small knob of plastic at the end. "Here it

is ma'am. It is voice activated, so it doesn't record hours of silence, and transmits it's recordings every 6 minutes--ten times an hour--because it only has limited memory."

He placed the bug on the floor and squashed it with the heel of his shoe. He stared briefly at the exposed innards, then cut a small wire with his knife.

"The battery in that thing wouldn't last more than a week, so it has to have been placed there recently. Won't take me more than 15-20 minutes to find out who did it. Would you like to help?"

Lucy's face was grey as she said, "Lead the way."

Fifteen minutes later they were in Amir's office, watching CCTV footage of the corridor outside her office. Lucy's calendar was in the system, so Amir had created a quick routine to display footage from times that she was not in her office. In a clever move, he had set it to first display early mornings and evenings from the last week, then to loop back and display the rest of the days, then loop back for the nights. They were watching the week outside her office screen in fast reverse, cleaners and admin staff scurrying backwards across his screen like demented beetles. Anytime someone exited Lucy's door, Amir slowed the video so they could see who it was. Lucy worked long hours, so there were few people entering in her absence outside of business hours. Until they got to Friday. Amir paused the screen as someone stepped out Lucy's office late Friday evening. Amir stepped through a few frames until they could see the person's face.

"Lerner Jones." Lucy almost hissed the name, "I'd like to flay her alive. I can't believe she did that. Amir, please put that footage onto a secure file for me. I want to show it to her, along with the squashed bug, when I fire her this afternoon. The sooner she's out

of here the better!"

"No ma'am, don't do that, don't fire her. I have a better idea"

Chapter fourteen

by Laurence Ramsey

Angus James returned from the office kitchen, bearing a red mug emblazoned with the logo of a crown and the words “Keep Calm... and Carry On.” That should be the department’s motto, he thought to himself – although “Keep It Secret... and Carry On as cheaply as possible” might be more apt. That phrase would be too long to fit on a mug though. He sat down at his desk in the open plan office and took an appreciative sip of the coffee. It was good. Really good. He remembered with satisfaction his role in acquiring the department’s coffee machine. He had wanted something that brewed a decent cup, not the filter drip muck they grudgingly provide in most government departments. A real mug of proper coffee from freshly ground beans – that was what you needed to motivate you in the mornings and to provide a pick me up on boring afternoons when you were stuck at work with not enough to do. He had found the machine on eBay – an unwanted relic from a small factory in Southall whose boss had been unable to do simple maths: If you take thirty workers with fifteen minute breaks and buy a state of the art, fully automatic machine that dispenses a cup of coffee every fifty seconds (after individually grinding the beans

and heating the filtered water to precisely 90 degrees Celsius), then the result will be long queues. Even worse, there will be a large number of disgruntled workers without beverages at the end of their breaks, moaning about the slow coffee machine. Angus chuckled to himself: with management like that no wonder British manufacturing industry was dying. No wonder the economy was dependent on posh public schoolboys and mathematics geeks trading arcane financial products in the City.

Speaking of posh public schoolboys... before he logged back in to check his email, Angus looked across the desk to his colleague Nathan, who was still wearing his headphones. "Sorry I didn't offer to get you a coffee but you seemed engrossed in listening to that audio file. I didn't want to disturb you by asking."

Nathan didn't hear him. The guy was as white as a sheet – like Prince Hamlet on the battlements at Elsinore after receiving a posthumous visit from his old man...

"You OK, Nathan? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Nathan slowly took his headphones off. He hadn't heard Angus's question.

"Anything wrong mate?" Angus persisted.

Nathan turned towards him as if seeing him for the first time. "She was right," he said in a quiet monotone.

"You've lost me Nathan. Who's this "she"?"

"Lerner Jones. I need to talk to you."

"I thought we were talking. Sounds like it to me anyway. Although you're not making a whole lot of sense at the moment."

"I mean talk privately. Let's go to the breakout area." With that Nathan stood up decisively, pulled his jacket off the back of his chair and slipped it on. It was a perfect fit. Angus marvelled – the

guy looked like a mannequin in a shop window. His jacket seemed to have been freshly pressed rather than casually retrieved from a chair back. Angus gingerly picked up his own jacket. The garment was badly crumpled, as if it had been manhandled by a sadist who got his kicks by ill-treating clothing. Angus decided ruefully that it must be down to the quality of the tailoring – his off the peg high street offering couldn't compete with Nathan's Savile Row Special. By the time he had reached this conclusion, Nathan was already striding over towards the breakout area – a small meeting room at the edge of the large main office. The area had been added as an afterthought and was situated under a vent of an air conditioning system designed for the whole room. As a result it was noisy and too cold to sit there in their normal shirt sleeves. The racket generated by the system was a plus point if you wanted privacy, no one standing outside could hear you when you spoke in a normal voice so there was no need to whisper.

Angus closed the door and the two sat down at the small conference table. "You're being very mysterious, what's wrong?"

Nathan told him. It was Angus's turn to grow pale.

"So," Nathan asked after a while, "What do *you* suggest that we should we do? I think I'm sure but any alternative suggestions would be gratefully received."

Angus lifted his head from his hands. The breakout area seemed even colder than usual. "Christ. I don't know. If what we've been doing here gets out... well, careerwise we're finished. They won't just throw the book at us – it'll be the whole damned library. And the bookshelves too, for good measure. I can handle myself but you're too pretty to go to prison. The old lags would be passing you

around like smuggled cigarettes.”

Nathan smiled, “I’m ex public school and as Evelyn Waugh said ‘Anyone who has been to an English public school will always feel comparatively at home in prison. It is the people brought up in the gay intimacy of the slums who find prison so soul destroying.’ Although I’m sure he meant something else by the expression ‘gay intimacy.’”

Angus gave a small chuckle and relaxed slightly. But only slightly. “You might be right there. Seriously though, here’s my take on things. We’d be royally screwed if news about what we’ve been doing gets out so let’s just pretend nothing happened. I reckon we’re out of our depth on this one. The file that Lerner Jones sent you – let’s just act as if it never arrived. Keeping quiet and doing nothing might not be an ideal course of action but it’s the best thing we can do.”

Nathan thought about this for a while. “I think we should tell the boss. It’s an important lead to the terrorist bombings.”

“Tell Victoria? That would be crazy. Do you want to know what I think... to be honest, she’s been over promoted as it is. Too young and experienced. And she knows it. Insecurity makes her overly prickly and aggressive sometimes. She’s a high flyer: unless she screws up now her future is assured. Deputy Director of Operations at MI7 for a couple more years, then a swift shimmy up the greasy pole to Director. A bit of a wait and then a move across sideways to one of the other intelligence departments and another shimmy upwards. Maybe she’ll take some time out along the way to get married to some stockbroker and drop a couple of kids – unless she is really ambitious and stays single for career and country. Eventually she will retire to a villa in Tuscany with a

discrete OBE from King Charles or King William for services rendered. Maybe she might even get to be Dame Victoria Mason if she makes it across to head MI5 – although she’s a Bristol graduate not Oxbridge so that’s unlikely. Still possible though. My point is that she’s not going to take kindly to this news. She’s likely to drop us deep in it so she can save her own skin.”

“Nevertheless, I need to tell her. What Lerner has discovered needs to be known by people who are in a position to take appropriate action. I can’t just sit on the information, this is life and death. OK, you’re right when you say we are out of our depth but wrong when you say we can do nothing.”

“I didn’t say that we *could* do nothing, I said that we *should* do nothing. There’s a difference. Christ, what a mess.” Angus shook his head slowly and regretfully.

“So what’s your argument for not telling her, Angus? Apart from the fact that it would potentially be bad for the both of us.”

“I don’t have one. Listen, if you want to tell her then we should go and see her in her office. Now. Together. Get it over with. Agreed?”

“Agreed, though I’m not looking forward to breaking this particular piece of news. She isn’t going to like it.”

As they had expected, Victoria didn’t like it. In fact, she was spectacularly and volcanically angry when they told her their story. The two men had compared notes about the event later that evening over a pint in the “Southwarke Arms”, the pub closest to their office.

Nathan had said that it had reminded him of the account of the eruption of Vesuvius in AD79 given by Pliny the Younger in his

letters to Tacitus. Angus demurred, saying it was more like the eruption of Krakatoa in that Charlton Heston film. What was it called? Oh yeah, “Krakatoa, East of Java.”

“Although strictly speaking,” Nathan informed him, “Krakatoa is west of Java.”

Angus reminded him that no one likes a posh smartarse and took solace from his drink.

Their meeting with Victoria had begun well. They had refused her offer of tea or coffee. She had complimented them on their recent work. The unusually bright November sun shining through the window brought back memories of what, for the most part, had been a pleasant summer. After they had engaged in a couple of minutes of small talk, Nathan bit the bullet and succinctly explained the situation to her. When he had finished, a furious Victoria had begun her tirade by casting aspersions on their paternity and intelligence followed by doubts as to their manhood. Then she had cooled down a bit. A slightly cooler but still angry Victoria Mason was a more formidable opponent.

“I really can’t believe what you two stupid bastards have done. You know me, I like initiative in my people and within reason I will reward results obtained from out-of-the-box thinking but you have well and truly buggered things up for all of us. Potentially, anyway.”

“With all due respect, Victoria,” Nathan had said, “Surely it doesn’t matter so much how we obtained the information, what matters more is the information itself. Looked at this way, although shocking it might be regarded as something of an intelligence coup de main.”

“Coup de main? *Coup de bloody main*? If this gets out it will be

the coup de grace for all of us. Listen, I'll try to keep it simple so that even you two fools can understand..."

"There's no need to..." protested Angus feebly.

"Shut up Angus, I'm talking now. You can have your say later. Or better still, don't say anything. OK, first of all when this department was secretly reconstituted in 1997 we were given the remit of dealing with the foreign press. This chiefly involved a strategy of counter-acting propaganda that might be of benefit to potential or actual enemies or rivals of this country. Our activities were Not, repeat Not, to be directed against the UK press. Under any circumstances. This might be an unimportant distinction to you but to our masters it is of critical importance. It distinguishes their enlightened rule from all the tinpot dictatorships, crooked cabals and authoritarian regimes that clutter up the rest of this benighted globe. The government need to be able to claim that they do not interfere with the free running of the press in this country except where a matter of critical national security or an ongoing military operation necessitates it. At such times, the press will be hit with a DA Notice telling them what they can and can't publish. In any case, under most circumstances the government don't have to worry. Their relationship with the press is normally close enough not to present a problem. Apart from a few mavericks like the Guardian and Private Eye, the papers are owned by big businessmen who use their tawdry rags to further their economic interests and occasionally to ride a particular hobby horse of theirs. In return they get to schmooze with the Prime Minister and the government will lend a willing ear to any concerns that they may express about matters of policy. Any attempt to interfere with this comfortable status quo would enrage these businessmen and

encourage bastards like Vladimir Putin to draw uncomfortable parallels between the way we handle the press in Britain compared to the way he brutalises the press in Russia. So our rule is strictly “Hands off the UK Press.” You have broken that rule. The rule that has been drummed into you from day one in this department. The rule that should be part of your DNA.

Next, you are not field operatives. You have not been trained for intelligence fieldwork. You may think of yourselves as James Bonds but you’re not even George Smileys. You are bloody civil servants who are being paid a reasonable wage to do a not too onerous job. We don’t have the authority or the capability to conduct fieldwork in MI7 – especially not unauthorised fieldwork. Where did you even get the kit from anyway?”

“I... er... used the department’s credit card to buy it from a shop on the internet,” Angus reluctantly admitted.

“Bloody hell, this just gets worse. You know the checklist that we have to follow when buying kit. It has to be approved by the Crown Commissioning Service. It can only be bought from a list of approved suppliers. There are rules and procedures put in place to prevent the Chinese eavesdropping on us by sticking backdoors in hardware and software. Not to mention the Russians, French, Germans or anyone else for that matter. The Yanks don’t listen in as we have an agreement not to spy on each other – along with Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The five eyes agreement. But everyone else can and does spy on us so any kit we buy has to be extensively tested and not just bought from some anonymous seller on eBay.”

“It wasn’t eBay,” protested Angus.

Victoria ignored him and continued. “What you have done was

not just unauthorised but illegal. Have you ever heard about the offence of Misconduct in Public Office? Let me quote the act to you. She pulled a thick book from the bookcase behind her and after a couple of minutes searching found the appropriate paragraph: ‘An offence is committed when a public officer acting as such wilfully neglects to perform his duty and/or wilfully misconducts himself to such a degree as to amount to an abuse of the public’s trust in the office holder without reasonable excuse or justification.’ The maximum penalty is life in prison“. She closed the book with a thump. “Of course, you won’t get life. There’s an outside chance that you won’t even get a custodial sentence at all – just lose your jobs and your pensions. You will, however, take my career down with you. Hell, if the jury don’t believe I knew nothing about your little escapades I could end up in prison too.”

She glared at Nathan. “Finally, in yet another act of crass stupidity you revealed the existence of this department – to a journalist of all people! We are meant to be a closely guarded secret. As far as Joe and Jane Public are concerned we were disbanded in 1940. If news of our existence gets out, I will personally serve your balls on a silver platter to the Prime Minister. The nutcases who peddle conspiracy theories on the internet would have a field day if they knew about us. Our targets will start putting two and two together and maybe looking into some of our critical and important operations involving their countries. We are so effective precisely because we are so unknown. Once secrecy is compromised, we are worthless. I hope it is not already too late.”

The room lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. Victoria avoided looking at them for a while and then said almost plaintively, “Really guys, I don’t understand you. How could you do

something so crazy? Hopefully we can just forget about it. Consider yourself the recipients of a heavy but unofficial bollocking. Never, ever do anything like this again. The UK press is off limits. *Strictly* off limits. Do I make myself clear?”

Nathan and Angus nodded sheepishly.

“OK, now get out of my office.”

“Shouldn’t we let MI5 know what we have found out?” asked Nathan.

Victoria looked at him balefully, her eyes narrowed: “Tell me Nathan, is there something uniquely special about you? Do you have some superhuman power due to your upbringing or genetics that the rest of us mere mortals don’t possess?”

“No, Victoria.”

“Then why do you think that MI5 need to be told what is happening by you? Don’t worry. I am certain they know exactly what is going on without needing to reveal what your clumsy and illegal espionage has discovered. What you have done must remain strictly secret. Just between us. We can’t tell MI5 what you have learned without revealing how we found it out. That would cost us our careers and almost certainly land us in jail. You wanted to play at being proper intelligence agents so now act like them. You both need to grow some balls – now is not the time to start growing a conscience instead. Now get out of my office.”

Chapter fifteen

by Julia Pierce

The problem with hunting a pair of targets, thought Harry, rubbing his head, was that the first one often came easy, but the second could be a right pain in the arse. Which was pretty much how it had turned out.

The package had arrived at his dilapidated flat above the Blackwall Tunnel Approach that morning via UPS, the courier visibly trying to avoid breathing in the stench of dog dung and rubbish that littered the scrubby walkway outside. Below, cars sped past in a constant stream, spewing forth a level of fumes that would give any half-decent public health official sleepless nights. Not that anyone ever came to this part of the East End unless they absolutely had to, of course. As Harry signed, the courier glanced down to make sure his transport was still there, wheels intact. A small group of feral children was approaching from the north. He didn't want to hang around.

Closing the door, Harry headed for the bedroom, where a short, round blonde clad in the remains of last night's makeup and a cloud of vodka fumes snored noisily.

"Lisa... LISE..." He shook her awake. "Oi, come on, darlin' -

time to make a move. Sorry pet - I've got a job on... I can hear your boys shoutin' for yer". He handed her a glass of water. Lisa was his neighbour, so he felt he owed her this small kindness before tossing her some clothes and waiting by the door to bang the message home. Since her last boyfriend went down, she'd taken to paying him visits from time to time, more often than not when the debt man was due. She'd three boys under ten, and if the bailiffs forced their way in on them when they were home alone, the whole estate would be out for a lynching. Funny how the rules worked, but you looked after your own round here. He remembered that she'd said the boyfriend was coming back. That was the end of all this then, he supposed. Not that it mattered. He preferred to be on his own - it made his jobs easier. The last thing you wanted was someone asking questions and making you think too hard about the whys of what you did.

A bang on the door interrupted his thoughts. Lisa flinched, the age old habit of someone living on the edge of chronic debt and destitution. "See yer round," she muttered, rubbing the worst of the smudging from under her eyes and squeezing past the bulk of Harry's gut to make her escape. Outside, a tall, shaven headed man stood, rubbing his hands together nervously in the cold. Charlie Hall was Harry's best friend. Two years below him at school, their mothers had been mates. Charlie's parents had taken care of Harry when his mother got into drugs, and he'd repaid them by looking after their son, finding him a constant stream of work of one sort or another, through various contacts in his local. He supposed he just had that sort of face. Up for it. No job too big or small.

Charlie made them cups of sugary tea as Harry ripped open the brown envelope. The contents were sparse, just how he liked it. He

didn't want a life story; this was good - a few CCTV shots of two men and a simple brief. "Subjects: two. Royal Horseguards Hotel, Whitehall, early evenings. Usual drop, A1."

All the details they needed. Who, a good stab at where to find them, where to take them, and A1 - alive and unhurt. That part could be tricky, though experience had shown him that most bosses gave them a little leeway on the last bit, especially when you had a couple to grab.

"How'd you get this one?" Charlie asked.

"Went for a piss at the pub and came back to a fresh pint and a note," Harry explained, swigging his drink. "It's a good one - 20k on delivery. Looks like it's a suit job - Horseguards is posh and right up west. Get yer good stuff on, otherwise they'll think we're out nicking. Better get a wash in as well - meet you in thirty at the van."

The blue Ford transit was concealed in a lock up in a block on the far side of the estate. The plates were cloned, part of a deal that Harry had secured from some Kurds a few years back in exchange for him and Charlie putting the wind up a banker that owed an outstanding wad of cash for coke. All they'd had to do was turn up at a club and have a word in his ear, leaving him crying and begging for mercy. Some people just weren't cut out for stepping off the straight and narrow.

Charlie was checking the van's load, sifting through their equipment - ropes, tape, plastic ties and a medical bag, the contents of which he was now transferring to a briefcase. "I got something special off Emma," he muttered. It had to be done, but mentioning her name was usually a sure-fire way to start Harry

bitching. With his family history, he wasn't overly keen on Charlie sparking up a relationship with the local dealer.

"Muh," came the grunt. Clearly, Harry wasn't going to take the trouble to waste words on this development, which was something of a relief.

"Rohypnol... Roofies. She mixed me up a couple of doses with a bit of smack. You just have to stab it in and they'll be off on one, nice and easy." There it was, smack, the trigger word that was guaranteed to make Harry spit. "Says it would take down anyone. Cos..." He faltered. He had to say what was on his mind, but that wouldn't go down well, either. But Harry hadn't said anything yet. He chanced it. "I don't like the look of this job, mate. They're paying too much. Who hangs about in Whitehall? Spooks? What if they're pros? I know we do a good job, but not if we don't know why we're up against. What if they're too much?"

Next second, his head hit the van's floor. "Now listen," hissed Harry, pinning him down against the cold metal with his bulk, "you an' that stupid cow might have cooked up some muck, but we do things properly. If anyone's a pro it's me...and you, if you do what you're told." He took his weight off Charlie. "Now, get in and stop being soft. Job's on. Time to get it done and think of the money," He punched Charlie softly on the shoulder. "...an' stop rubbing your hands like that, yer lanky git. Yer look like one of those big grasshopper things..."

In a quiet corner of the Royal Horseguards Hotel's Equus Bar, Angus James nursed a whiskey in an attempt to warm himself. A long afternoon arguing with members of the Cabinet had left him both spent and chilled to the bone. He pondered on the millions

Whitehall had squandered on refurbishments of the Cabinet Rooms - you'd think they'd have a little more to show for it. A working radiator would be a rather nice addition, for a start.

His eye was drawn to a splendidly neat-looking, dark haired man by the bar. Yes, that was him, Nathan Bearfield, his intelligence counterpart at MI7. While Bearfield and his team worked behind the scenes to manage the content of Britain's newspapers, spiking stories that might damage Britain and its agents, James' division concentrated on matters of foreign news. The man turned and raised his newspaper in acknowledgement, then brought his bottle of beer over to James' table.

"Thanks for coming - sorry I'm late. Christ, this place is perfect - just look at the layout. Socialising, intelligence-style. I don't quite understand how one room can have so many corners? An architectural conundrum. Gets me every time."

"It's closing for a refit soon," James answered, drily. "No doubt they'll rip this all out and turn it into an open plan cavern with terrible acoustics, where everyone else's business is suddenly your own. Then we'll have to find somewhere else for our chats... They should set up a division just for that. Locations specialists. They manage it for films. Might be a more productive use of time for a few of the members. Speaking of which, what's going on? I thought they were going to call a meeting about the business of the leaks to the Telegraph any day soon? My side of the department is spitting. We've no idea why your lot didn't head it off. Surely someone there could have offered them something better to print? I thought they'd have buried it under an avalanche of royal babies?"

"Yes... Well, the wheels were turning but then they came to a dead end. No point convening to promise the earth unless someone

can isolate the source. Miles is heading it up, so I'd put a note in the diary for next Easter if he carries on at the current pace..." Bearfield tailed off. "I'm sure that heavy chap in the corner is staring at us. Bad suit. Looks like an Essex-boy day trader."

James cast a glance in the direction Bearfield indicated. "Gone. You're paranoid. We're Seven, not Five. Our existence is hardly interesting - unless you're on Private Eye's news desk, I suppose. Went to school with one of them, actually - decentish bloke. Father's arms trade - always good to know, though haven't used it yet. Has no idea what I do, of course, so our 15 minutes of fame has yet to come..."

"Hmm. Doubtless. No, something isn't right. Sorry - sure I just saw him looking through the door. I'm off to the loo - going to have a nose about. Perhaps he's from Five? Doesn't look the usual part, though. Can't think what they'd want?"

Bearfield headed off through the heavy double doors into the panelled hall, as James picked up his discarded paper. Nothing of note lay inside - a job well done, he noted.

Out in the hall, Bearfield cast his eyes around. Nobody. Must be the tension getting to him - the whole of his department was on edge. Sometimes it was good to get an outsider's perspective on these tricky matters, especially from someone like James whose opinion you valued. He headed towards the bathroom.

Inside the door, concealed behind an internal wall, Charlie and Harry lay in wait.

"Do you think he's coming?"

"Course," Harry answered. "I made it obvious enough. And even if I didn't, one of them's gotta go at some point. Physics, innit?"

Bearfield entered, his vague look of recognition turning to surprise, as Harry and Charlie launched themselves at him. Within seconds, he had been dealt a heavy blow to the temple that felled him. Charlie stepped across his body and peered through a crack in the door. In the hall outside, a party of tourists were filtering through from reception on the way to their rooms, blocking their escape.

“Shit, we’ve got a problem. If one of them decides to take a piss, we’re done!”

Harry thought fast. “Grab him under the arms - let’s play drunk. He’s just a mate who’s had a few, we’re helping him home...”

“Yeah, but then we’ve got to leave him in the van. What if he wakes up? I hit him good, but he’s in alright shape. He might not be out for long. What if he starts banging about?”

Harry gritted his teeth. “I know what you’re after, but don’t even go there. We’ll tie him and gag him and that’s that. None of that drug shit, okay? Won’t be long before his date starts looking for him, so we’d better get to it.”

Back in the bar, James had lost himself in the crossword of Bearfield’s Times, and it was a full 15 minutes before he realised his friend had failed to return. Dismissing thoughts of watchers and spies, he surmised that an urgent call had kept Bearfield from the room. It was time, however, that he made a move. The debrief on the cabinet meeting was scheduled for 6pm, and even the pavements were horribly overcrowded at this time of day. Better make a last check on him first, though, he thought.

Out in the hall, he saw the toilet door open a crack and then close. Bizarre. Something awakened within him. Training, till now

never needed. He stepped closer, positioning himself on the hinge side. As the door opened again, James turned and kicked out, slamming the tall, shaven-headed man on the other side into the wall behind, leaving him dazed. The man's tubby accomplice attempted a punch, which James parried and returned with force. Behind him, the taller of his attackers stood and began to stagger towards him. James aimed a kick to the knee, which sent him to the floor again. The tubby man renewed his attack. This time, James sidestepped and slammed his assailant headfirst into the toilet door. Then suddenly, he felt a prick in his thigh. The tall man had done something... but what? He couldn't think... his mind was clouding... Slowly, James sank to the floor in a heap.

The rain dripped down Charlie's neck as he clumsily loaded the big one into the rear of the van, head lolling and fingers twitching. It didn't look right - should've listened to Harry before he panicked and hit him with a dose, but what else could he do? The big one deserved it. He'd knocked Harry right out and his own knee was throbbing badly. They'd barely been able to carry the big one to the van. But the drugs...he'd dosed up the first one just in case, when he thought Harry couldn't drive and he was on his own. Once it had kicked in, though, he'd had second thoughts. They just didn't look right. What did Emma know, anyway? He'd only been seeing her for a month - if this all went tits up, she might squeal. It was too late - looked like these had had too much. They needed a doctor. He knew there would be comeback. The smaller one was rasping, his breathing ragged. Christ, nobody had ordered a couple of corpses. A1 - that was the deal. He rubbed his fingers rapidly. Best not to think about it. Best get there quick, before one stopped

breathing. He slammed the door and ran round to the cab, where Harry's bulk leaned painfully on the door, hands on the wheel, waiting to set off into the night.

Chapter sixteen

by Megan Nanfito

Act normal. Just act normal.

Lerner took a steadying breath and entered the newsroom to The Daily Echo. She was pleased to see she was first in and flipped on the florescent lights. As she walked to her desk, it occurred to her that this was the first time she'd ever come in early.

Wouldn't that look suspicious? If anyone noticed - which she seriously doubted - she'd explain it away by saying she got a tip that couldn't wait. Or whatever. No one would ask.

With clumsy fingers, she unlocked her desk drawer, and found the receiver right where she left it. In her mind, she heard Lucy on the recording, the certainty in her voice. *Another incident on Friday. Tomorrow.*

Suddenly, she felt heat on the back of her neck, the tin in her ears, the buzz running through her bones, the wind knocked from her lungs. Not even month ago. The explosion played over and over, like a song that wormed into her brain. The soles of her feet prickled and though she was on solid footing, she had to see for herself that the ground wasn't splitting. Grit between her teeth, every time she ate she could taste it, felt it scratching her throat as

she swallowed.

Almost a month later, and the bombing at Bond & Lacey festered inside her like a wound she couldn't stop picking.

With the recordings, Lerner had the power to stop it from happening again.

As her co-workers streamed bleary eyed into the office, she shoved the receiver into her briefcase and headed for a private spot. She had work to do.

Unfortunately, privacy at The Daily Echo meant she set up shop in a bathroom stall. At least she had walls, more than she could say for her actual desk.

She plugged the memory stick into her laptop and waited while the audio files transferred. If the next incident was really going down Friday, she hoped Lucy was talking in specifics. Exactly which building would be hit. The exact time. The full name of the person Lucy was connected to.

Miss Jones and MI7, listen up. My second-cousin, twice removed, Ronald Prescott Caldicote from the Cotswolds, is lining the Shard with C4. He'll set it off at 3:07 pm Friday.

If only Lucy could cooperate like that, Lerner thought. The files finished downloading with a *ding* and she was about to take a listen when she heard the bathroom door swing open.

"Did you see he'll be on Graham Norton Friday?"

"This Friday?" She recognised her editor's voice and held her breath. "Damn, I've got plans this Friday! I'll have to record that one."

The sinks turned on, Lucy and her friend chatting so casually

about celebrity gossip, the weather, Parliament. Small talk, for small people uninvolved with the murders of four innocent men and women.

When Lerner was alone again, she turned the volume down to the lowest setting - just in case - and opened the audio files.

Heart pounding, she braced herself, biting her tongue, and she heard... nothing.

She picked up her laptop and pressed it to her ear. Still nothing to hear. She clicked around her audio player, picking different time codes, adjusting the bass and treble. With every trick she tried, all she got was static.

She slammed her computer shut and jammed it into her bag. The bugs couldn't lose battery power, the receiver was still functional. It dawned on Lerner that only one thing could've happened: someone discovered her bugs.

The Daily Echo was staffed with bored, cynical journalists. Lerner's co-workers weren't stupid, but they called IT for help adding attachments to e-mails. Not exactly tech nerds. So, she reasoned, either Lucy found the bug in her office and disabled it herself, or the head of security, Amir Shimar, did.

"Morning, Lucy." She knocked on the doorframe to her editor's office and reminded herself not to look at the spot where she had planted the bug.

Lucy looked up from her computer monitor. "Miss Jones? You're here early today."

Lerner kept her eyes on Lucy's long, thin hands. If Lucy had anything to hide, her hands would betray her. A shake, a tremble, a shiver – anything but steady. She waved Lerner into the office.

"Yes, I got a good tip on a story."

"Really?" Her fingers brushed a strand of grey hair from her eyes. "What about?" She curled her hand around a water bottle, and pulsed her fingers like she was manually pumping a heart.

She needed to somehow let Lucy know she knew, without letting Lucy know what she knew, just in case Lucy didn't know anything. "Er...Goodacre & Kirk. You know, the first law firm that was bombed."

"Oh, but that's so dark!" She flapped her hands. "I do hope you can put a positive spin on it."

Stop moving so much! "Yes, of course."

"You more than anyone know," she jabbed her index finger at Lerner's face, "how exhausted the public is with doom and gloom." Lucy's index finger was straight as a rod. No shake, no tremble, no shiver.

She didn't do it, Lerner thought, disappointed.

"Are you feeling okay?" Lucy asked, dropping her hand to her desk. "You look a bit ashen."

"Yes. Just... haven't been sleeping well."

Lucy took Lerner's hand, her eyes rimmed with pity. "Of course. Remember, I'm here if you need anything. Alright?"

She wrenched her hand free and dashed away from her editor's office. Maybe she hadn't discovered the bugs, but she was still hiding something.

If Lucy didn't do it, she thought, *that leaves...*

"Good morning, Amir."

The head of security looked up from the coffee pot in the break room, his dark eyes scanning her face. She watched his lips, the tight skin creasing in a pucker. Then, he smiled. "Good morning,

Miss Jones. How are you today?"

"Good, thanks. You?"

He poured strong coffee into his mug, dumped in one sugar packet. "Can't complain. It's not our business."

"Right, yeah." She studied him, any sign of unease or stress. But, he just smiled benignly back at her. He was either a good actor, or he didn't disable the bugs.

"Do you need help with something?"

"Oh! Yes, I-" She was bad at this MI7 Intelligence stuff, no good lies springing to mind. "I wanted to see if you heard that Benedict Cumberbatch will be on Graham Norton tomorrow?"

He furrowed his brow at her, his smile straightening. "No. I... I hadn't heard that."

"Aren't you a fan? Someone said you were a fan?"

"Yeah, I suppose."

"Oh. Good." Lerner nodded and did the only thing she could think to do: run away.

She tried to take her own advice, to act normal, but she wasn't a good actor. Someone disabled her bugs, someone knew what she was up to, but she had no idea how to handle the situation. She needed to talk to Nathan.

Claiming she had to meet a source, she left The Daily Echo and headed for MI7 headquarters at 1 Horse Guards Avenue. Standing on the sidewalk outside the great limestone building, she looked for some insignia or signage or MI7 branding. She didn't see anything straight away. Perhaps they didn't want anyone to know where they were headquartered, she reasoned.

She entered the building and a redhead girl with more freckles

than there were stars smiled from reception. "Good morning."

"I need to speak with Nathan Bearfield, please." The girl blinked dumbly up at Lerner. "Nathan Bearfield. He's in Intelligence."

"Um..." The girl pursed her lips and looked down at a computer monitor. "What was that name again?" Lerner slowly and carefully spelled out his name. "Um, okay. One second." She grabbed the phone beside her and mumbled into the receiver.

Lerner stepped back, arms crossed, taking in the blank walls and the muzak playing lightly in the background. In her mind, the MI7 headquarters would be...busier. Darker, too. She pictured red light in the fixtures and agents running around in night vision goggles playing with guns housed in ballpoint pens. James Bond stuff. But this place was more boring than The Daily Echo.

After five minutes, there was finally some sign of life in the building. Instead of Nathan and his suits and order and smarm, a woman came forward.

"Good morning!" She stretched out her hand and shook a piece of her straight blond bob out of her eyes. "My name's Victoria Mason, I'm the manager. How can I help you?"

Manager? Lerner thought the head of a secret government agency would have a title more impressive than *manager*. And she expected someone older, a decorated military man. Not a 30-something woman in a cheap M&S skirt and blouse.

"I need to talk to Nathan Bearfield. He's an Intelligence agent. Is he in?"

She regarded Lerner curiously. "Okay. Did someone put you up to this?" She stretched up on her toes, looking around Lerner, a smile playing on her face.

"I'm sorry?" She found herself turning around, as if there might be someone behind her, heaving a conspiratorial laugh. She shook her head at herself. "Please, I really need to speak to Nathan Bearfield."

"Nathan - what?"

"Bearfield!" She restrained herself from stomping her foot, but not from her fingernails biting into the palm of her hands. "Young, dark hair, smart dresser."

She dug through her memory, analysing every meeting with Nathan. Surely he gave her some password or code or clue - anything that would prove she wasn't some nobody walking in off the street. But, her memory was like the recordings on her computer: cold, clear, static.

She felt the redhead at reception watching, and leaned in closer to Victoria. "Look, I don't know MI7 procedures, but Nathan's recruited me as an asset and I *really* need to speak with him!" She blew her hair out of her eyes and added, "Please."

"Did you say MI7? Like Johnny English?" Victoria chortled, practically slapped her knee. "Do I look like a super spy to you?"

"Well..." She didn't *not* look like a spy. Weren't spies supposed to blend in with a crowd?

"I think someone's having a bit of fun with you. This is just a conference centre."

Lerner's brain took a second to catch up. "A *conference centre*?"

"Well," Victoria clicked her tongue, "events, too. None for any secret government agencies to my knowledge. But if they're so secret, I wouldn't know, would I?"

A steady, high-toned ringing played between Lerner's ears. Was

she really so naive? After Bond & Lacey, she was so willing to believe anything, as long as it gave what happened to her some meaning. A purpose. Not a random act of evil she couldn't control. Even something ridiculous, like a pretty boy off the street claiming to be in a secret government agency.

But the recordings! a hopeful piece of her piped up. She *had* heard Lucy, that wasn't a trick or a lie. Another incident was happening *tomorrow*.

"Here." Victoria grabbed a business card off the reception desk and pressed it into Lerner's palm. "If you're ever holding an event."

Lerner walked outside of 1 Horse Guards Avenue, conference and event centre, unsure what to do next.

Chapter seventeen

by Eric Christiansen

Lerner looked up and down Horseguards Avenue. The leaves were blowing slightly.

“Now what, Lerner?” She asked herself. She knew she was starting to reach the deep end - the dark deep end. The icy feeling of panic was starting to settle over her lungs and heart. Taking some risks was a matter of course for an investigative journalist, but finding out that the bottom of this hole was an unseen depth filled with powerful ministerial vipers was a little too chilling for her bones.

Time to give this to the professionals.

“999 what is your emergency?” the calm tones of the operator warmed Lerner to her core.

Lerner took a deep breath... and was unable to speak.

“999, *what* is your emergency?”

“I – I, ah, I may very well have some information as to who is behind the bombings.” Lerner said, realising that her role as observer and scribe - being a semi-anonymous public figure - had ended. She was now an actor on the stage.

“Name and location?” the operator asked.

As Lerner was about to answer she heard the operator whisper to a co-worker, “Bomb-nut number seventeen. I got you by four!”

The stress of these past few hours finally exploded into anger.

“My name is Lerner Jones. I’m at number 1 Horseguards Avenue. I am an asset of MI7, and I demand to be picked up instantly! You will not place me on hold, you will not talk to whomever it is you’re keeping score with. You will call your supervisor, and you will get me into a police car now!”

The operator paused, “Wait one.” To her credit she did not place the call in the queue. “Rachel, please come over here, please.”

Lerner could hear a quick mumbled conversation.

“This is Rachel Muldroon, shift supervisor, what is your emergency?” “I have information about the bombings. I do not feel safe, and I need to speak with an investigator.” Lerner’s breath wavered, “Please, Rachel, I’m scared and I need to get out of here. Number 1 Horseguards Avenue. Send them my way.”

“Yes, Miss... Jones. You should have a constable on sight shortly. Please keep your phone on.” “Thank you, Rachel. What fine weather we’re having, don’t you agree?” “Yes, Miss Jones-”

“Lerner, to my friends.”

“Yes. Lerner. The sun was a pleasant surprise, not quite as bright as... Auckland?”

“Melbourne, actually.” She replied with a shaking laugh.

Lerner was close to tears. The thin lifeline that talking about weather and great places to walk in the sun was all that was keeping her upright.

After a respectable two minutes, she saw a constable rushing to her.

“Miss Jones?”

“One moment, sir,” Lerner said. “Thank you Rachel, I have a knight to guard me until the chariot arrives.”

“Goodbye, Lerner. If you’re a nutter you’re going to be in for a long pitiful time.” Rachel said as she close the connection.

“Constable, I believe I have information about the bombings. At least a small amount. Please call for transportation.”

“The call has been put out, Miss. May I have your identification?”

Lerner dug out her ID. It was a few years old, showing Lerner with rebellious red hair and grin to match.

“Thank you, please keep your hands clasped and to your front.” The constable led her closer to the building. “Please lean against the wall if you need to, you look two steps away from a restful night in the gutter.”

The police officer spoke at length to his shoulder microphone. Glancing down at her card repeatedly and looking at her in verification. She was simply glad to be free of responsibility for the moment. After a minute, her card was handed back, interrupting her internal narrative.

“Pardon?” she asked.

“The car just turned the corner.” He nodded over her shoulder.

She could see the green blinking lights bouncing from one window to another as the car moved down the street. Lerner took a deep breath and smiled at the constable. “Thank you.”

He nodded, and stepped off the curb to speak with the newly arrived officers. She saw the three of them pause their discussion and glance at her. The older constable held open the back door, “Miss Jones, if you wouldn’t mind?” As she reached the car, the younger officer stepped behind her and clasped her arms, “For

your protection, and ours, we'll be securing your wrists, miss."

"Wait, what?" Lerner was dumbfounded. "I called you guys. I'm trying to help."

"And we appreciate it most sincerely, Miss. This is just until we get back to the station."

She was cuffed and lowered into the back of the car.

"I'm trying to help!" Lerner yelled as the door was shut.

The officers spoke for a moment longer, then entered the vehicle.

"Officers - ," she began.

"Miss, please let me stop you," the older constable interrupted. "You are currently not under arrest. You are currently not wanted for any crime. Please let us do our job and we'll all get out of this faster."

He turned to his partner. "Get us going."

Just as the car was pulling off, a black sedan screeched around the corner and barely missed taking a bite out of the police car. The car stopped, blocking the road to the front.

"The hell is this?" the young constable asked.

The sound of a siren approached rapidly from behind.

The three of them turned and saw another identical dark black sedan stop diagonally behind them. Trapping them.

From the first car two men appeared with fitted suits and ear-pieces.

The constable on the sidewalk reached towards his belt, but the men produced a silver badge each.

"Special Branch," one said.

"We'll be taking her with us," the other declared.

She didn't know why she was scared, but her instincts told her

that things were significantly worse.

The ride to the Special Branch station was thankfully quiet, and in a way that eased her fears more than she realised, the handcuffs had been removed. Lerner marshalled her thoughts. She knew what she'd heard on that recording. She knew that she was well inside the fringe of a conspiracy. She knew that Nathan was...well, someone of interest. She just hoped MI7 was willing to help out a new recruit if she needed it.

She was led into a small interrogation room.

"Please wait here, Miss Jones. We'll be a bit getting our paperwork setup, then we'll talk, yes?"

She turned to fully face the officer, "Am I free to go if I choose?"

"No Miss, we'll need to talk about your 999 call first. If you lied on the call and forced a blood-pressure spike on a handful of officers, then you'll be dealt with justly. If you do have information about the bombings, we are very interested indeed to hear it. At the moment, we're going to play it like you have information. We know who you are, a few of us here actually enjoyed some of your more interesting Times articles, so miss, take a seat. We'll get you some tea -"

"Just water if you wouldn't mind," Lerner interrupted him.

"- Or water if you wouldn't mind, and we'll be back in few minutes."

Thirty minutes of bored fear passed for Lerner. It was like being in an incredibly slow moving car crash. She knew things could turn out badly, but that wasn't enough to keep the adrenaline running, so she was actually getting tired of just sitting.

"Okay, Miss Jones." Two men entered the room "I'm Inspector Lancy, and this is Mr. Smythe."

As they sat across the table, “It’s a pleasure. Call me Lerner, please.”

“Hello Lerner,” Mr. Smythe said, “Seems you might have some information for us about these recent attacks?”

“A little, at least maybe enough to look in different places.”

She gave her story to them. Trying to be as impartial for her personal account as she normally is for her working reports. Her concerns about Nathan, and finally, her suspicions of Lucy.

“Yes, how do you know your editor had prior knowledge?”

“I... I recorded her.”

“Without her knowledge?”

“Yes. She said that this Friday, tomorrow, would be ‘convenient’ for the next attack. *Convenient!* People are dying, and she’s trying to calendar in these things with her schedule!”

“Miss Jones, these allegations are very serious, and frankly somewhat incredulous.”

“Yes, Mr. Smythe, I know. This isn’t something I’m thinking is all fluff and candy floss.”

“Let’s listen to it.” Lancy said, “Do you have the recording online? Your phone? God forbid, a mini-cassette?”

“I, gave it to Nathan.” Lerner said, deflating.

“The same Nathan that recruited you?”

“Yes. Nathan Bearfield.”

“No back-ups, Miss Jones? This is the age of ‘the cloud’, you know?”

“No. Nothing. Look, get in touch with MI7. I don’t really know who Nathan is working for, but contact them. If he is working for them, maybe, maybe they’ll have the recording. They’ll tell you I’m working with them. It can’t hurt. Information flowing, is

information known.”

The two men looked at each other for a second.

“Lerner, you’re quite new to the Daily Echo aren’t you?” Lancy asked.

“Yes. I’ve just moved from the Times.”

“Perhaps you have been set up?”

“Set up? You mean a *prank*?” She leaned forward over the table slightly. Angry.

“Perhaps a little hazing. ‘Welcome to the Echo, don’t have on shoes too big for you.’ Type of thing like, like.”

“Are you two being serious? People have died, more people will die tomorrow. Call MI7!”

Smythe glanced at Lancy, then back to Lerner.

“Miss Jones, there is no MI7. There hasn’t been an MI7 since 1940.” Lerner sat back into her chair. Lancy and Smythe stood and left the room.

Another cup of water was brought in, and was untouched.

After an hour, the door opened and Lancy said, “Miss Jones, you can go. You called with good intentions, but perhaps your co-workers may be pulling one on you.”

Behind him, Smythe said, “I’ll walk you out, if you please.”

Lerner was confused. More-so she was upset. She could feel this wasn’t a cruel joke. She was saddened to think that tomorrow more innocent lives may be ripped apart by another bomb. Would there be children in the area? How many families destroyed by this violence.

At the building’s exit, Mr. Smythe put his hand on her arm, pausing her movement.

“Miss Jones, take care. I don’t take Lancy’s view that this was a

prank to put you in your place. I don't know what you've found yourself involved in, and it could be quite dangerous."

Lerner nodded.

He continued, "You write articles. You report. You know the basics - characters, motive, actions, and consequences. Miss Jones, be cautious. Perhaps Nathan, your 'MI7' contact - could these people actually be the bombers?"

Chapter eighteen

by Rainey Cloud

Usually this worked.

Lerner leaned forward, resting her forearms on the handles of the spinner, and reached for the water bottle for a long pull. Maybe she wasn't hydrated enough and that would explain why she couldn't think. The little grey cells were thirsty and couldn't function properly without their Avian.

But even after draining more than half the bottle, Lerner was no closer to making a decision than she was an hour ago.

This was the default behaviour any time she was sorting out a story. Time spent at the gym in gruelling, mindless physical exertion always produced the spark of inspiration or the one brilliant question that she hadn't asked yet to get her feet moving in the right direction to complete the task at hand, whatever it was. This always worked.

Always, until now.

Now she was just exhausted and frustrated. And still a bit scared. Climbing off the cycle, she gathered her things and headed towards the showers, checking her phone for messages as she went.

“I need help,” she murmured out loud

Evidently her theory of needing to absorb water in order to think clearly was true. Proper hydration would certainly be the only reason she would think of her boss while showering, right?

Enough of that, she didn’t want to waste these precious cognizant moments contemplating her motives too deeply.

With a new sense of purpose, she pushed open the glass doors to exit, fastened her Mac and walked briskly to the stairs leading underground. Since there are only four tube stops from here to the office, she decided to talk with Paul in person instead of ringing.

The queues were short and seats were plentiful, which is always a relief. This may be a golden, sunshiny day after all.

Curious by nature, Lerner looked around and played “Twenty-ish” by herself.

‘Who are you?’, ‘Where are you going?’, ‘What type of book would he be reading?’, ‘Where’d she find those gorgeous boots?’. On and on, she’d ask herself questions about people and what was happening around her.

Lerner’s dad told her ‘twenty questions’ was a good exercise in keeping her mind sharp, which she needed now more than ever. Since she usually had to play the game by herself, she had adapted it over the years to suit her life’s situations. The game had tremendous benefits for a journalist.

The gent wearing the black hoodie caught her eye again. He looked sketchy, at best. The chancer had long legs, but was of a medium build, like a runner. Almost lanky. He was leaning against the seat with his head back. Maybe to make it seem as if he were

sleeping. He wasn't. She couldn't see his eyes, but Lerner felt them on her, nevertheless.

She tried to appear calm, turned her head and ran her fingers through her still damp hair. A quick look up told her she was a stop away from where she wanted to exit, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

The doors opened and she waited. He didn't move. At the last moment, she dashed out. She pushed her way through the throng of people standing on the platform, attempting to see whether he followed her or not.

Breaking free to an open area, she moved at a quick pace toward the stairs.

What was the matter with her? She was becoming more paranoid as the days progressed. Thinking every odd looking person was following her or had more nefarious reasons for being close to her. Lerner's normally perceptive character was being overtaken by a suspicious and insecure little twit.

Taking a deep breath upon resurfacing from the underground, she braced herself for last bit of trek to the office and started walking just as her phone chimed a message. Digging it out of her pocket, she looked around and spotted a tall, black hoodie.

I see you.

Time stopped for a moment. Mind blank again, paralyzed with fear, as she gazed at the screen of her phone.

Behind you.

Panic propelled her to start running. Fast.

"Jones!"

She heard the deep voice calling her name, which caused her to race faster. Or as fast as she could move in her dress shoes. She

almost missed the next shout, before her mind registered recognition and she slowed.

“Jonesey! Lerner, wait up!”

Paul’s voice seemed to finally pierce through chaos going on inside her head and Lerner eventually slowed to a stop to turn around.

“What’s the matter with you? Didn’t you see my texts?” he called after her. Paul’s voice wavered as he caught up to her, out of breath from running. Not that he was out of shape at all, but that was quite an unexpected sprint.

“Cambridge,” she huffed out with relief. Her eyes squinted with confusion again as she looked down at her phone. Yes, it did say ‘Paul C.’ above the text identifying the sender. Why hadn’t she seen that before?

“What happened?” Paul asked as he got closer to her. People were casting glances at them standing still and out of breath on the sidewalk.

“You idiot!” she shot at him. “You scared me to death!”

Recoiling from the verbal attack, he took stock of her words and actions and gave her a closer inspection. He could see real fear in her beautiful green eyes.

Ordinarily, Paul didn’t spend much time looking at or thinking about a woman’s eyes. Lerner was different.

When he drew within reach, disregarding the city audience, he took hold of her shoulders and leaned close. With a solemn face and voice, searching her eyes, he asked, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

So many whirling thoughts. Panic faded. Her face was flushed already, but seemed to grow with heat. Her pulse and breath

already at a high speed, kicked up a notch. Every nerve ending was standing at complete attention and could track his thumbs every movement as they rubbed up and down her biceps.

Numb again. Blank.

As she stood in the middle of the thoroughfare looking up into his warm gaze, only one thing came to mind.

“Could we go on our date now?”

He shook his head as if to clear the cobwebs away and chuckled. “Erm. What?”

“Could we go on our date now? You asked me out before, and now is a good time,” she tried to explain.

Still smiling, Paul dropped his hands and replied, “It’s a work day. Weren’t you on your way to the office?”

Oh.

Remembering everything at once brought back a slight bit of panic, and she answered while leaning to the side to see around him, “Yes, but I was only going to see if I could get a meeting with you to talk about something that has come up.”

“What are you looking for?”

“I was...,” she trailed off as she saw his concerned look, “I haven’t the foggiest.”

At his deep sigh and keen eyes boring into her soul, she caught his hand and began walking back to the tube station. “Have you been to the Museum lately?” she asked.

Dubious, he replied, “Which one?” He let her pull him along.

“The Museum of London. It has a new exhibit I’ve been dying to see. The Man Who Never Lived and Will Never Die.”

“Ah. The new Sherlock Holmes one. I’ve wanted to have a look at that, as well. Alright, we’ll go to the museum. In broad daylight.

During the workweek. The things I let you do to me are not the things I want you to do to me. I had other plans for our date,” he boldly proclaimed.

Lerner’s steps faltered a bit at that declaration. Well.

“So, what do you think,” she was asked him as she bent to examine the pocket watch cleverly shown under a magnifying glass. Lerner could just make out the marks left by the watch repairman.

“What do I think about what, Lerner? You haven’t told me anything that I would have an opinion about one way or another, other than that the predicament you find yourself in at the moment revolves around a story.” He tried not to stare at her curved backside and continued, “One that may or may not be an actual story for print.”

Paul averted his eyes as she straightened.

“I mean, what do you think I should do? I want to see where this trail leads, but I’m not sure it’s safe,” she said.

Lerner didn’t know what she was asking. Was she wanting permission to use her time following these clues? People have died already, but she didn’t want to tell Paul that. He might guess what she was only hinting about. Were there more players involved than she knew about? Of course there were. She wanted to find them, to stop them from hurting more people. She wanted to write the real story.

And not get killed.

Paul took her continued silence and contemplation seriously. Stopping her, he tilted his head down to catch her eyes. “Do you think this story is dangerous?”

“Well, all stories have some element of danger, don’t you

think?” She was being deliberately vague.

“You should call the authorities. I know you, Lerner. You don’t exaggerate or make something up out of thin air. If there is danger involved, call the police.” Paul wanted her agreement.

“Yes, of course,” she answered looking down as they continued to stroll. She didn’t want to get into the rubbish about already talking with the so-called authorities. Their derision was best forgotten. They were the cause of most of her self doubt in the first place. They made her feel like some conspiracy nut.

This was her job. A journalist. Searching for answers was thrilling to her. What was stopping her now? Implicating someone she might know? Loss of job? Putting other people’s interests above her own? Thinking that maybe she was protecting someone? Or was she only fooling herself and putting more people in danger if she didn’t follow through with the leads she had?

Proceeding through the maze of displays in the museum’s newest showcase, Paul added, “I think you will do what you think needs to get done. You are a brilliant journalist and a smart investigator. I have every bit of faith that you will accomplish all that you set out to do.”

They stopped in front of another piece of art and she looked up at him. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

As they finish their tour in silence, Lerner let the atmosphere of the rooms sink into her. So many fond memories. Familiar memories from stories read long ago. Holmes had given inspiration for many modern professions, hers included. She found strength and determination with every piece they pass, every quote she reads.

By the time they walk outside, she felt a huge burden lifted. No

longer worried with the doubts and fears from this morning. Only a strong sense of urgency remained. That, along with her tenacity should do the trick.

Smiling with renewed purpose, Lerner stood on tiptoes to give Paul a quick kiss.

“I had a wonderful day,” she said as she turned to catch the cab coming toward them. “Thanks so much for your help. I’ve got to go see about something. Cheers!”

Quick as a wink, she climbed in the taxi and waved back at Paul still standing on the steps of the museum.

“Right. It was an evocative exhibit indeed.”

Chapter nineteen

by A.L. Maher

Four bombs. Four big bombs that have hurt and killed a lot of people, and for what? So that some dopey mouth breathing dildo testers can claim that making money is a bad thing. Yay... let's all go and eat fucking vegetables.

Lerner, draped her jacket over the back of the chair and logged into her computer. She punched in the security codes and did a few quick google searches in a vain attempt to justify why she would be in the office at this shitful time of the night. Satisfied, she got up, pushing the chair back, it rolled across the plastic matting, then caught on the old and frayed carpet, overbalanced with the weight of her leather jacket hanging off the back and fell over with a muffled clunk.

She huffed, too tired to give a shit, too stressed out about Nathan and wandered over to the window overlooking the carpark and out across the empty streets. A blue cast held over the slick wet bitumen and the streetlights rippled as the rain hit the puddles.

“Rain. Of course it’s raining. It’s London.” She said to no-one in particular. Not that anyone would be around at this time of the morning. “Where the hell are you, Nathan.”

She checked her phone once again for any messages. “Fark...”

The bug was in her jacket pocket, a USB drive and the ‘wires’ as Nathan called them. From what she had heard she knew that there was some heavy crapola going down and that her boss was in so deep, she’d need a scuba gear just to breathe.

“Christ Nathan, you’re supposed to meet me here.” She peered through the gloom but still, there was no movement. “Where the bloody hell are you?”

She meandered back to her desk muttering under her breath and did another couple more searches.

“Just stick these around he said, It’s simple he said.” She checked to make sure that Amir hadn’t come in as yet, still muttering “I’ll do the rest he said. Bollocks you will.”

She knew that no-one would be around this time of the morning, no-one except maybe the cleaner. Yet she felt so James Bond.

Picking her chair up, and slumping down on it she thought back on what she already knew. Tapping some notes into her phone.

- *Goodacre & kirk*
- *Barclays Bank*
- *Bond & Lacey*
- *HSBC*
- *Caldicote is involved and sure as shit so is Amir.*

She tapped the phone against her head while racking her thoughts as if trying to dislodge an idea, a connection, anything. Drawing a blank she looked over across the cubical farm that normally played host to the office meerkats. Amir’s office with its door open wide

beckoned.

Hmmm. I wonder...

The cleaner came in vacuuming as she made her way to Amir's office. He gave her a nod and a smile as she approached. She gave him her best "G'day" then made out she had forgotten something, so he wouldn't think it strange she was going into the *Head of Security's* office this time of the morning.

She turned around and grabbed a handful of random papers from her desk, then headed back. By now the cleaner had moved on, making the whole facade irrelevant, but 'if you're going to bullshit, bullshit well' as her old man would say.

She missed them, the silly ol' buggers, Dad the most. She could see him there now, standing in his short shorts and St Kilda footy jumper, pie in one hand and a beer in the other screaming abuse at the umpire. She swore he reckoned if he shouted loud enough at the TV the 'umpie' would hear him. He had a head on him like a sucked mango, but a heart of gold.

"Just come 'ome love," she could hear him saying. "You're missin' the footy."

She'd much rather be back home, shouting at the television while St Kilda got a thumping. A much better alternative to sneaking around in her bosses offices.

But she wasn't home. She was here, 12,000 miles away in a crappy newspaper building. Instead of sinking a beer, she was planting a bug, and instead of shouting, she was sneaking around, trying to find out who it was that was blowing up pencil neck bankers and corporate lawyers.

She didn't like Amir, he was a smarmy prick at the best of times.

He reminded her of one of the “daddy-long legs” spiders back at home in Melbourne. Except those lanky spiders were harmless and this guy was a grade one a-hole. His hands had more “feelings” than a Morris Albert song. He’d nearly copped a smack in the mouth on several occasions when his hands had roamed a little too close to her arse. That’s the other thing Dad had taught her as a kid growing up in Melbourne. A fucking good right hook.

She sat down at Amir’s desk staring at his iMac while beautifully framed photographs scrolled across the glossy screen. Family portraits, mixed with a smattering of Bollywood movie stars. He had committed some Photoshop crimes, superimposing him self onto the arms of these babes of bollywood.

She hit the space bar to wake it up and it prompted her with a password.

“Shit.”

She looked around the room for some clues as to what his password would be. Nothing came to light. The only thing of any interest was a family holiday shot which sat on his desk. A typically Indian, almost cliched holiday scene on a movie set. The family beamed back, Mum, Dad looking proud, and Amir, arm around what she could only guess as some bollywood actress. She couldn’t see where Amir’s hand was, although from the look on the poor woman in the photograph, she could imagine.

“Ahhh. I wonder” She muttered, and once again grabbed her phone.

She typed “BOLLYWOOD ACTRESS” into google, and a myriad of results popped up on the screen. It didn’t take long to find a woman who looked the same.

“Sonam Kapoor, you poor bugger. So you’re the object of his

desire.”

Once again she woke up the iMac. The password prompt flashing at her.

“SonamKapoor” – she typed.

Nothing.

“Sonam_Kapoor”

Nothing.

“MyHandOnSonamKapoorsArse”

The screen woke up.

“You sad and pathetic little man.” She grinned as she opened up his email. She had a quick scroll through, nothing jumped out apart from a renewal subscription for “Nakedbollywood.com”. Although she dare not open that. She saw the little speech bubble jumping up and down and clicked it.

Sure enough, there was an active SMS exchange, more importantly it was happening live.

“Thank you Apple-Messenger.” She said as she watched the full transcript pop up in front of her in real time.

AMIR -- We still on?

LUCY -- YUP - 3:30 AM, my place

AMIR -- Nice, don't forget the camera, I want to film it

“You dirty bastard.” Lerner said to herself, leaning into the screen. It scrolled a little further.

LUCY -- Don't be late...

AMIR -- SHIT!

LUCY -- What happened. You ok?

AMIR -- I was just drinking a cock and jizz exploded all over my face!

LUCY -- WTF!

AMIR -- OH Dammit, I meant coke and fizz - stupid bloody auto cucumber.

AMIR -- Auto Cucumber!

AMIR -- GOD DONUT!

AMIR -- CUCUMBER!

AMIR -- Screw it, I give up!

LUCY -- Just get here man. 27 Harcourt Street. Don't be late.

Lerner Checked the time, 3:20, She had ten minutes to do a fifteen minute walk. No problem. She could run that. She looked up, and gave a silent thank you to “Cod Piece Pete” at the gym for pushing her that little bit harder each spin class.

She grabbed the bug and wires, stuffed them into her armband, normally reserved for her iPhone when she worked out. The sharp corners dug into her skin, but it was too bulky to be holding while she ran across town. That would have to do. Then she dashed out the door and onto the wet streets.

Her feet pounded the path as she ran, splashing through the puddles. Sweat rather than rain soon dripped from her brow. Before long, she was turning the corner into Harcourt Street. The large white archways and oversized doors of each residence flashed by as she ran.

Her heart was pounding, she was near to the end of her endurance when the Caldicote's Range Rover came into view. She stopped short, resting an arm on one of the many black wrought

iron fences that decorated this part of the city.

Shit there is some money round here!

She could spot Amir's Car easily too. His early 90's Subaru stood out like a hard on at a eunuch's convention among the Range Rovers, Porsches and BMWs.

With her heart nearing normal and the breath finding its way back into the lungs, she gathered her thoughts.

The bug. She needed to be able to hear what was going on inside Caldicote's house.

A quick mental calculation told her that if she tried to jump the spiked wrought iron fence surrounding Caldicotes, she would be becoming intimate with something about 6 inches long and hard. Normally she'd welcome that kind of promise, but not like that. However on closer inspection she found that one of the post was out, if she could squeeze through that gap, maybe she could hear what was going on inside.

She approached the gap in the fence, but it soon became apparent that even her demure frame was too big to pass through.

She sat down on the step back resting on one of the oversized matching stone lions guarding each side of the entrance. A dribble of light came from a crack under the door, but apart from that she was in complete shadow.

If there was just a way to slip the tiny wire in.

Then the idea hit her.

Bingo MacGyver!

She pulled a lace from one of her shoes, and tied it around the end of the wire. She then slid the wire under the crack in the door pushing it as far under and to the side as she dared. She held her breath and hoped for the best.

Lerner finally got home. It had been an adrenalin fuelled evening. Now that she had stopped she felt exhausted. She collapsed onto the bed, spent.

She lay naked, the sheet the only thing keeping her from Nathan who sat across from her. He was wearing nothing but a pair of silken boxer shorts. He slid his hand underneath the sheets, brushing her leg with gentle fingertips. As his hand moved up, up, up, her heart beat that little faster, her mouth dropped open ready to receive his kiss, her legs opened also ready to receive.

“Take me,” She whispered

Nathan looked down on her, tracing the contours of her naked body with a series of soft butterfly kisses. As he reached her mid section, he looked up. Their eyes met and he spoke.

“Meh, Meh, Meh, Meh, Meh,”

The alarm she had set earlier woke her with a start.

“NOOOoooooooo.” She rolled over, not quite ready to accept that her sleep, and dream was over already. Then she remembered, she had to get back to Caldicote’s. She had to get that bug back and she hoped to christ that the bloody thing had picked something up.

She took a quick shower to wake her self up, then turned the water to cold, to cool herself down. The dream still way too fresh on her mind for anything other than a hand shandy or cold water. Under the circumstances, the cold water seemed like a more appropriate course of action. She got dressed, again in her signature pants and top that allowed enough room to run in, and started out towards the office.

“Lerner!” Paul Cambridge greeted her as she entered the office.

“The Echo’s Finest investigative reporter”

“Hey Paul, looking sharp today as usual.” Lerner replied, nodding towards his bedhead and three day slash three week growth. “New tie? Haircut? Something about you is different today Paul?”

She brushed past him as he stammered, “Wait what? Hey, any reason you’re so late in today? A good story I hope?”

“Workin on it Paul, I’m workin’ on it.”

“Let see if you can beat this little cracker” he held up a draft front cover with the headline. “Explosions Used To Signify Big Savings - Make your money go BOOM!”

“S’nice Paul.” She called back as she made her way to her desk, “S’real nice, Run with it.”

She pulled the bug from her arm band and put it inside her desk drawer, making sure to lock it before getting up again.

“Hey Paul?”

His puppy dog brown eyes looked at her, reminding her once again of home and her old retriever sitting on her foot, always eager to please, grubby and knotted hair ruffling in the breeze.

“Lucy in yet?” She asked, then immediately regretted it, This would mean he would come wandering over trying again to engage her in yet another long and boring conversation. She had once been stuck at the water cooler for 20 minutes while he describe to her in graphic details the difference between a Sulpher Crested Cockatoo and a Long Billed Corella. Just because she was an Aussie he thought she’d be interested.

Sure enough he came wandering over. He was waiving an empty envelope around accentuating the points as he spoke.

“Yeah, she is just in a meeting at the moment. Not sure how

long she will be though. Hey I was watching this show on discovery the—“

She reached over and plucked the envelope from his hands, and gave him her cutest smile she could manage. “Need to borrow this too. You’re a gem.”

“It was about the Australian —”

She pretended to get a message through her phone.

“Oooh, Can’t stop Paul, Gotta a hot lead. Tell me later yeah”

“— Dung Beetle, fascinating little... crea ... ture ...”

“Later Paul.” Lerner called back as she rushed through the doors. Once safely out of sight backed up behind a wall she stopped and sighed. “Too damn close.”

She approached Caldicotes place with a purposeful walk. She noticed that she was under the dutiful gaze of an old later walking her poodle. She stopped at the house a couple of doors previous and pulled out the envelope from a pocket. Then she popped the envelope into the mail box, Or so it would appear. Using a trick she had picked up at the Times christmas party. Slight of hand and the disappearing card trick applied to pretty much any piece of paper. With the old woman watching still, she walked up to the next door.

“Hello, Nice day innit.” She said, putting on her best cockney. “S’a flyer f’ra new lap dancin’ club down at Soho ... want one?”

The old woman smiled and pulled the tiny dog along with a “Come along Sherry, come and do your widdiewods.”

The woman and the killer poodle out of the way she jumped up the steps of Caldicotes. Over near the letterbox, she dropped the envelope, and when she bent down to retrieve it, snatched up the shoelace, pulling it, and the bug back through from under the crack

in the door.

I bloody hope this works

Paul saw Lerner come back into the office, and came toddling over, one finger pointing in the air.

“Oh god ... what now?” She made her way to her desk.

“So the Australian du—“

“Sorry Paul, Got to get this research sorted.. On a hot lead here, Maybe later yeah.”

“Oh.. Ok Lerner”

Lerner leant on her desk and gave Paul a smile. “Hey Paul, I could murder a coffee, Could you?” She batted her eyelids. She wondered if looked as tired as she felt.

“Sure... No, no probs.” He wandered off, taking his puppy dog eyes with him.

“Finally some peace and quiet.” She muttered to herself putting the USB cable into her computer. She pulled out the little white earbuds and transferred over what she had captured.

Silence ... nothing ... footsteps ... silence ...

“Hmm so anyway, I was thinking that...” *That’s Lucy*

Silence...

“Take it, and use the butter, then add...” *Lucy again.*

Jesus christ are these the worlds most uninteresting terrorists?

Silence...

Footsteps ...

“Ok, Lucy, smack, slurp.” *Amir this time.*

Oh god, they are sucking face...

“I’ll see you around 3 at Berry Buck and Mills... It’s going to be a

blast.”

Lerner sat bolt upright...

“Shit a brick!” She checked her phone. It was 2:07.

Chapter twenty

by J.D. Eckstrom

One hour.

One hour until the bomb goes off in the offices of Berry Buck and Mills. One hour until the fifth bomb of the month exploded, killing yet more people. One hour.

At least, Lerner was fairly certain it was one hour. And she was almost positive it would be at Berry Buck and Mills. She frowned and rapped her fingers on her keyboard. Was ‘nearly sure’ good enough for the police? Did they have to listen to every bomb warning from a concerned citizen? They must have an awful lot this month, from pranksters and confused old ladies on the tube. Would she have more clout as a reporter? She grimaced. Not as a reporter for *The Daily Echo*. Terrorist bombings were out of the newspaper’s normal coverage. Lerner would never have gotten permission to write any story if she hadn’t been at the third bombing.

She glanced toward Caldicote’s office. She’d been at the third bombing, hadn’t she? And she’d been able to write a story on it. She’d been able to talk to the police as well and get a little extra information. The police may not take a concerned citizen seriously

if it was 'nearly sure', but if the citizen was so certain she had a photo of the bomb in location?

"Where are you going, Jones?" Ethan Martin watched her over his screen.

"Um." Lerner shook out her coat sleeve and checked Caldicote's office again. Shades still down. "Lunch break."

"A second one?" Ethan raised his eyebrows.

"Well, you know. Gotta keep up the energy!" Lerner darted out of the newsroom as Caldicote's shades shuddered. She could get to Berry Buck and Mills in ten minutes. All the other bombs had been in the first floor cloakrooms. She could get a couple photos for the paper - the police, of course, the police - and then call them and be able to tell them that she was standing and looking at the fifth bomb. She checked her watch. 2:02. Fifty-eight more minutes until the bomb went off.

She got her front wheels out of the parking lot before she began to suspect her estimate was off. She leaned over the steering wheel. Bumpers as far as the eye could see. What was everyone doing? Yes, it was Friday, but why was everyone starting their weekend already? She floated her hand over the horn. Locating a bomb before it went off again had to be more important than whatever nonsense they were rushing to. The heel of her hand eased down. Too bad she didn't have a police siren. Honking now would only guarantee that they never let her out. She let her hand up again and checked the dash. 2:04.

It was 2:06 before she got her car entirely on the street. These damned Londoners! What were they rushing to? Couldn't they see she had more important business? Why would the whole damned city turn out to block her way? She squirmed in her seat, banging

her hands on the wheel and craning her head to see out both windows. Could she run faster? Was it easier to push through the crowd of people than the crowd of cars? It would be more legal, at least. But there wasn't a parking spot in sight - probably not in the entire district. If she stopped the car in the middle of the road and leapt out the door ... she'd never see it again and she'd never be able to afford the fine. 2:14. She groaned and rolled her head on her neck. Why wouldn't these people *move*! She spotted an opening in the next lane and jerked her wheel around.

"Yeah, yeah." She waved her hand over her shoulder. "Honk all you like, lady, I've got a bomb to take care of!" And once she pointed the police in the right direction, she had a story to write. How would she put a positive spin on this? *Good news, London! No longer do you have to wait for the next episode of your favourite thriller - all the fun of dangerous and unpredictable bombs will be coming right to your afternoon commute!* If she got there in time, though, no one's commute should blow up. *Sad news, London! This afternoon several dozen lawyers again survived!* 2:21. Back to the thriller it was. Just *move* already!

It was 2:23 before she could see Berry Buck and Mills. It was 2:27 before she saw a parking spot; 2:29 before she saw a parking spot and managed to get in it. She leapt out of her car, kicking the door shut, and ran toward the building. She only had thirty-one minutes left now to find the bomb and alert the police.

"Watch it!" The man scowled at her, rubbing his shoulder as if she'd really wounded him.

"Sorry," Lerner said. She sucked in air. The building looked painfully normal. The windows glinted above her, the front door gleamed as people in crisp suits went in and out. Nobody knew.

Lerner looked at their faces as they went by. Should she tell them to run? To get the hell out of the area? What if she didn't find the bomb in time? What if the police couldn't disable it in time? The last bomb had killed five people. What if they had placed this one better? Would it kill more people? Lerner ran for the door.

"Excuse me, miss!" The security guard shifted his weight in his chair, not quite rising. "Miss!"

"Damn," Lerner muttered. Why did these lawyers insist on such tightly guarded reception? She cranked up a smile. "Yes, sir?"

"Check in at reception first, miss." The security guard kept his eyes on her despite the other people walking past him. He couldn't possibly be checking their passes without twitching his eyes toward them. Why did he have to pick on her? Did she look out of place? All right, so she wasn't in a suit. And maybe she had to catch her breath a little. It was still no reason to single her out to pick on. She walked toward him, straightening her shirt and pressing a hand against her stomach as she tried to keep from panting.

"Hello, sir," she said and leaned her hip against the counter. "I was hoping I'd be able to do an interview - for my paper, you see, I'm a reporter..." She pulled out her press card.

"Who were you going to interview, miss?"

"Uh." She'd been too busy finding out where the bomb was planted to worry about finding out details like who worked at the damn law firm.

"Do you have an appointment, miss?"

"Uh." Lerner really wished he'd quit calling her 'miss'.

"I'm sorry, miss, you can't come in without an appointment arranged and a pass waiting at the desk. We want to be careful with our security, miss." The security guard had his arms on the passes

waiting at the desk. Lerner couldn't see more than a letter here and there. If he was so concerned with security, why wouldn't he just let her in to find the bomb? Lerner opened her mouth to try that argument. She thought better of it before any words came out. If the police didn't take her warning seriously, this doofus wouldn't. She smiled awkwardly at him and turned back toward the door.

Now how was she going to get in?

She looked up and down the street. She had to get inside. She had to search for the bomb. She couldn't just stand on the sidewalk and let the building blow up. No matter the traffic, too many people were still at work. How many would be wounded in this attack? She pulled out her mobile. 2:33. If she called the police now, could she convince them in time?

"Should get rid of those people," a man grumbled as a couple walked past her.

"It would raise taxes, wouldn't it?" the woman said back to him. Lerner turned to look where they'd come from. A homeless man sat huddled under a tree. He had spread out a ragged tarp with cardboard signs laid out on top. He wrapped his arms around both knees, rocking back and forth. He must be cold in this weather. Lerner sighed and turned to look at the building again. She didn't have time to go back to the office and find a way to make an appointment. She couldn't fake it with the security guard still sitting there. She'd have to call the police and hope they'd decide to believe her within - she checked her mobile - twenty-five minutes. She should have called a half hour ago, then, instead of wasting all this time in traffic. At this point it would be best if she could just find ...

She turned back to the homeless man. Her university boyfriend

had made a point of speaking to every homeless man he passed; he said they were as good as janitors for knowing the back door into places. Especially the ones who were settled into one place. Lerner almost leapt onto the tarp.

“Hey!” she said. The homeless man jerked his head back. Lerner crouched down and tried to modulate her voice. “Hello, sir. What have you got here?” She poked at one of the cardboard signs. It read ‘More Love’ on the front and had a shoelace tied through holes in the upper two corners. Was it meant to be hung around something? “What *have* you got here? Can I look at one?”

“Go ‘head. Can take one. ‘Sa necklace.” He unwrapped one hand long enough to wave, then clamped his fingers around his knee again. He leaned his head forward so his beard brushed across his fingers. Lerner picked up one of the signs. It made a rather bulky necklace. She turned it over. It said something else on the back. Quite a lot more on the back. She squinted. *More love less hate more respect for our world and our environment less bombs less land mines less war more hugs ...* Did the backs all say the same thing?

“Wow. How do you make these?”

“Find ‘em. Find pieces. Gotta pen.”

“You’ve made a lot. Do you sell them?” Lerner forced herself not to look at her watch.

“Nope. Take it free.”

“Are you sure?” Lerner asked. He had on the inside lining of a coat, and his ankles were bare under his trousers.

“Only deal, you give me money, you wear the sign for as many days as pounds you give.”

“As many ... oh. Okay.” Lerner studied the sign. She didn’t know

that she really wanted to wear it. But she didn't want to leave him without any money. She rummaged in her pocket. "Say, do you mostly live around these parts?"

"'Sa my tree." He patted the trunk.

"Yes? I was wondering, do you know if this place has a back entrance?"

"Law firm?"

"Yeah."

"What for?"

"It's ... it's important." Would he believe Lerner's story about the bomb? Lerner didn't want to try. She didn't know if she could survive a homeless man thinking her an escaped loony.

"You gonna steal?"

"What? No! What would I steal? Oh, I suppose papers." Lerner twisted the shoelace around her finger. "I don't want to steal anything, I just ... oh, it really is important, and I don't have much time left!"

"You taking a sign?"

"Yes," Lerner said. He looked at her. Lerner lay down three pounds on the tarp and put the sign around her head. He rocked back and forth for a moment, not looking at the money. Lerner found her arms wrapped around her own knees and hastily let go.

"That way." He pointed over her shoulder. "Down the alley. Leave the fire escape door open."

"Really? Thank you!" Lerner hopped up. "Oh, wait - that's three pounds, so that's three days for the sign, isn't it? Thank you, sir!" She ran for the alley with the sign bouncing on her chest. 2:36. Shit, time was nearly out. She found the fire escape door propped open and pushed halfway in before checking around. No one in

sight, inside or out. “Okay, let’s find this bomb!” She slipped inside.

All the previous bombs had been placed in ground floor cloakrooms. All she had to do was check all the cloakrooms on the ground floor. There couldn’t be so many. She could do it in twenty-four minutes. Less than twenty-four minutes. She had to do it in less than twenty-four minutes if she didn’t want to blow up as soon as she found the bomb. She noticed the stares as soon as she began running and brought herself up. Walk. Walk calmly to the cloakroom. And maybe take off the cardboard and shoelace sign. She shoved it under her arm and speed-walked to the cloakroom.

She pushed open every stall door. She checked behind the toilet and the doors. She didn’t know where precisely the bombs had been in the cloakroom or even what they looked like before they exploded. She was checking under the sinks when the door opened.

“Oh! Um, hello. I, uh, dropped an earring.” Lerner tugged her hair over her shoulders to hide the earrings still in place.

“Oh, that’s too bad.” The woman didn’t even smile. Didn’t people normally give a sympathetic smile? Who just stared blank-faced and strode into a stall? Lerner bent over and scanned the row of sinks. Nothing but pipes. Surprisingly shiny pipes, really, the janitors paid attention to detail here. Lerner left the cloakroom and looked for the next one.

She found three women’s cloakrooms on the ground floor and no signs of a bomb by 2:40. She jiggled her foot. Her information hadn’t been wrong, had it? Was the bomb somewhere else? At a different time? In a men’s cloakroom? Lerner grimaced. She’d kept out of sight of the security guard at the reception desk but someone was going to complain if they found a woman in a men’s

cloakroom.

“Gotta make sure they don’t find me, then.” She plastered on a smile and put her hand against her ear when a group of men passed her with suspicious looks. “I plan to have it in to you by Tuesday, but I want to take a long weekend so I had better not be found by the boss.” Sometimes she really loved the invention of blue tooth. She slowed down in the hallway by the men’s cloakroom. This took a little more care. She checked up and down the hallway, listening to the footsteps and voices. Could she dart in fast enough that she wouldn’t be noticed? Would speed or nonchalance protect her better? She checked her watch. 2:42. Two minutes just thinking about it! She shoved open the door.

To her surprise, the men’s had pipes as shiny as the women’s. Every corner of the mirror gleamed. She only saw one crumpled paper towel on the floor by the trash can. The janitors must tend to everything as soon as it fell. At least it would let her go through the cloakrooms quicker.

She could see the second men’s cloakroom. She could even see the door. So could the security guard. He’d definitely ask why ‘miss’ was going in the wrong cloakroom. He’d ask why ‘miss’ came from inside the building when she didn’t have an appointment. Could she distract him? She didn’t have an accomplice, but how could she possibly do it on her own? The flow of people going in and out didn’t seem to faze the guard. He nodded and smiled and darted his eyes over each one. What would be enough to distract him? As if thinking of him attracted his attention, his eyes swung toward her hallway. Lerner threw herself back. What sort of creepy powers did the security guard have? She waited a minute with her heart pounding before she started to lean around the corner.

“Ow!” She grabbed at her hair. What had she gotten it caught on? She looked around, wincing as it tore her hair free. Yellow tape stretched across the door behind her. “Ow.” She tilted her head sideways to read the tape. *Danger! Chemicals! Chemicals?* Dangerous chemicals in a law firm? Why on earth would there be dangerous chemicals in a law firm? Lerner tugged at the edge of the tape. And why would janitors who polished the pipes under the cloakroom sinks leave a bright yellow tape stretched lopsided across the door with ragged edges? Lerner tried the knob.

The knob turned but the door didn’t open. She leaned her shoulder against it and pushed. It creaked slowly open. Well, good door to keep dangerous chemicals behind if they had any. She squinted into the dark. What was this room meant to be? A maintenance closet? She kept her shoulder against the door and swept her hand over the wall for a switch. When she at last found it, she thought the bulb must have gone out. Then she heard a sizzle and a light flickered. She eased inside and hung onto the doorknob as the door swung itself shut. After several seconds, the light stayed on. The janitors must ignore this room. They’d left the folding chairs out in the center of the space, although it blocked half the shelves. They’d even left the scraps of duct tape on the legs of the chairs.

Lerner squeezed her phone. Duct tape on the legs of the chair. That could not have been the janitors. That could not be dangerous chemicals, either. It could, however, be a bomb. Lerner pulled the phone out of her pocket. At least it looked like the most suspicious area here. She scanned the shelves. She really should have googled what a bomb looked like. What did it look like in television shows? Something square and metallic, with red and blue wires. There

were always red wires. How big would it be? Big enough to fit between the two chairs? Maybe they had balanced it on top of the two. But why not just put it on the floor? She crouched next to the chairs. They must have wanted to keep it out of the water. Could bombs be shorted out by water? Then why did they have tape on the legs? It would make more sense to have tape on the seats of the chair keeping the bomb in place.

“Man, it smells,” she muttered. She hadn’t noticed the scent before, but the cardboard sign must have picked up some of the smell of urine. She held it away from her. She didn’t want the smell getting on her clothes. “This *must* be the place, it must be! So where the hell’s the bomb?” They must have taken it away again. Changed their minds. Ripped it off the tape - why was the tape on the legs? She leaned forward, resting her hand on the floor, to study the tape closer. Her hand slipped on the cement floor into the puddle of water. “Ugh.” She lifted her hand and shook it out. The smell of urine got stronger. “What ...?” She sniffed at her palm. Definitely urine. “Oh, gross!” She leapt to her feet and looked frantically around for a towel of some sort. “Gross, gross, gross!”

She found a neatly folded towel with dark oil stains on one of the shelves. She wiped off both hands, rubbing until her skin turned red. Urine on the floor. She’d put her hand in urine! Why on earth was there urine in here? This was far too classy a joint for puddles of urine. She turned to look at the chairs.

Oh. Two chairs with duct tape still around the legs and a puddle of urine. That wasn’t a bomb. Why would these terrorists balance a bomb on top of a couple of chairs? But - *two chairs*! She hadn’t heard any mention of kidnappings with the other four bombings. She hadn’t seen any sign of it. The first bomb hadn’t killed anyone,

and surely it would have killed someone taped to a chair. Was it an escalation? But who had they picked out to kidnap? All the bombs had been at different companies! They weren't even targeting one profession; the last bomb had been at a bank. Who had they kidnapped? What had they done to them? Where had they taken them?

"At least I know they're not far," Lerner said and wrinkled her nose. "The piss is definitely still warm." She looked at the puddle. Time to call the police? Except she still didn't have a bomb to show them and she didn't know that a reporter announcing a puddle of urine would command more respect. "Damn it!" She pulled out her phone to take some pictures of the room.

She got two before she heard a car screech outside the window. She went for the window, tripping on the chair and hopping futilely in an effort to see out. She spun for the door and tripped on the second chair. She shook it off her foot as she struggled for the door. The knob slipped from her hands when the car slammed into the wall. If she didn't have a bomb she'd have a car crash.

She went for the courier entrance. The people milling in the street behind wore clothes similar to hers, not suits. She might avoid detection by the security guard.

"What happened?" she asked, phone held up.

"That damned crazy bugger just ran his truck into the wall!" a man said, shaking his head.

"Ran his truck into the wall?" She took a picture of the blue van. "On purpose? What happened?"

"Hell if I know! Just ran like mad!"

"Just ran like ..." Lerner's phone sank. "How many people? What did they look like? Were they carrying anything?" The man

turned to look at her.

“What’s it to you?” he asked. Lerner bit her lip.

“What’s going on?”

“That noise! What happened?” Lerner looked over her shoulder. More people were heading for the entrance, as people clustered on the street. The damned security guard was coming, too. She turned to look after the van. It swerved down the street, the back corner crumpled and the door threatening to flap open. No. Too much of a coincidence. It had to be the bombers. She checked her watch. 2:53. No time at all for the police now.

“Excuse me!” She ducked past the grumpy man and grabbed at a bicycle leaned up against the wall.

“Hey!”

“Sorry!” Lerner yanked the bike around and swung her leg over. In this traffic she might be able to keep up with the van even on a bicycle. She leaned over the handlebars.

Hell of an hour.

Chapter twenty-one

by Sue Cowling

Lerner pedalled furiously after the van! Damn it, she thought. Why don't I think first before acting, then I might have chosen something slightly faster and a lot safer than this death trap on two wheels, to chase a van with four wheels and a powerful engine. Not only that, she was also very aware she was not wearing a cycling helmet either, and that did not inspire confidence manoeuvring in and out of the busy London traffic to keep track of the van. Then there was the fact the bike had a serious wobble; typically only she could have chosen a defect bike to give chase. How the hell did the courier manage to work with this museum piece?

The only good point was the further she pedalled from the offices of Berry Buck and Mills the more the courier's shouts were beginning to fade, and there were defiantly no flashing lights yet, to suggest anyone had called the police. Although she was not sure if that was a good thing or not, a little backup here might be good. Lerner relaxed slightly, settled into pumping her legs, breathing deeply and grinned to herself, maybe she was good at all this detective stuff after all. Something different to the more usual side of her work, still she could think about that thought later, she

needed to stay focused and keep the van in sight, and try not get herself killed at the same time.

The explosions were definitely no laughing matter, these were dangerous criminals who had killed too many people already, and if she was right those same criminals were in that van in front of her, and almost certainly on their way to create another explosion and possibly more deaths. Lerner knew she needed to stay on their trail and see where they ended up, then work out what to do.

So busy was she trying to get things straight in her mind, and keep an eye on the van at the same time that she almost hit the one pedestrian crossing Threadneedle Street, it was only his yell as he fell backwards that caused her to not only hear him, but see him too, making her swerve quickly to one side, she had only just clipped him, but still it was enough to cause him to fall backwards onto the pavement.

“Bloody idiot, people like you need to be kept off the roads, locked up for good,” he shouted as he scrambled to stand up.

Lerner could feel her face flush, she should have seen him but the van was her focal and there really was no need for him to shout at her like that; he only fell over in the gutter, it was not as if he had hurt himself. Seeing he was okay she smiled, lifted one hand off the handlebars and wobbling even more, gave him the finger, and then as an afterthought shouted out “Sorry”. Then she started pumping the pedals faster in case he decided to chase her, he could probably run as fast as she was pedalling, if he wanted to catch her. Really she was amazing herself today, the things she was doing.

The van turned into Bishopsgate and Lerner pedalled harder still trying to keep up with it, the dam bike just did not want to cooperate with her, the front wheel appeared to be slightly buckled,

making steering straight almost impossible. Also she had an awful feeling that the guy driving the van had seen her in his mirror, which was not a good thing, not a good thing at all. It was at that moment the lights decided to turn red and the van squeaked to a sudden halt, causing Lerner to see the back doors of the van looming nearer to her. Okay she wanted to keep close, but not that close dam it.

“Shit,” she screamed, squeezing the breaks on the handlebars tightly and putting her feet down flat on the ground, trying to keep her balance, as well as to help her stop, she swore she could smell the soles of her shoes burning. Lerner managed to stop with the front of the bike just a few inches from the back of the van. Sighing with relief, she looked up and it was at that point Lerner knew the van driver had defiantly recognised her, as the van begun to back up towards her. Scrabbling with the bike she tried to move back, only managing to hit the car bumper behind her, and hearing a loud shout from the driver of the car and his horn sounding.

At this rate she was going to be a very squashed reporter, without a story, Lerner, seeing that the van was intent on killing her, threw herself off the bike towards the pavement just in time, as the van revved up and moved back faster turning the bike into a mangled mess, and then hitting the car that had been behind her too.

Lerner sat on the pavement, rubbing her grazed hands, she could not help shaking, realising that could have been her mangled in with the remains of the bike. Looking up she saw the driver of the van grin, a grin that did not quite meet his cold steel blue eyes, before putting his foot down on the throttle and driving off, just as the driver got out of the car.

Lerner could see the car driver was pissed off, who would not be, first a bike bumping his car then a van finishing it off. The driver looked down at her obviously thinking she was not going anywhere, he would deal with the van driver first, and started running down the road in pursuit of the van, leaving his car and keys where they were.

Lerner seeing an opportunity, scrambled up, brushing dirt off her clothes, and tugged at the bike, pulling it away from the car, as well as half of the bumper with it, dropping the mangled mess in the gutter, glad to see the back of it and its wobbling wheels. The driver of the car was still occupied, so taking advantage of that she jumped into the car closing and locking the doors before starting it, and driving off in pursuit of the van. In the rear mirror as she passed him, she could see the car driver look on in shock, then start running again, but this time after her.

This was defiantly a better way of travelling, much more comfortable, if slightly noisy, there must still be a bit of the bumper trailing on the road. Lerner would have stopped to check but already the blue van had disappeared, and that was not good news. Lerner pushed her foot down on the accelerator and ignoring the speed limits carried on down Bishopsgate and turned left into Eastcheap. This was familiar ground, very near the offices of The Daily Echo.

Why was the van coming this way, what was its destination. Lerner's mind begun to tick over faster then usual and the beginnings of horror begun to creep in, jeez that was the next target. They were going to plant a bomb in the offices of The Daily Echo. At that moment the blue van came into view again, she needed to do something to distract them, give her time to come up

with a plan, a plan for what she was not sure, but somehow she needed to give herself some time.

Seeing a baseball cap on the seat next to her, she put it on pulling the peak down to hide her face, not much of a disguise, but better than nothing. Hopefully they thought she was still sitting on the pavement licking her wounds. Traffic was quite heavy and the blue van was only a few cars in front of her, but enough space to give her some extra cover.

Lerner needed to contact the offices of the Daily Echo they might think she had totally lost it, but she had to at least warn them what was possibly on its way to them. Keeping one hand on the steering wheel she felt in her pockets for her phone, nothing, trying to steer with one hand she felt down beside the drivers door and by the handbrake, usual places to lose your phone in the car, still no phone. That's when she realised that she must have lost it somewhere along the chase, either when she stole the bike, or when she came of it, dam it no phone was very bad news. Now she was beginning to panic. The steering wheel felt sweaty and slippery under her hands; jeez she really could not afford to panic, not now with so many lives at stake. The blue van was making its way up towards Great Tower Street, a ticking time bomb. Lerner could not think like that she had to be ready to raise the alarm, as soon as she got to the building.

The van made its way left towards Byward Street and by this time Lerner knew she was right and that was their destination, the offices of the Daily Echo, dam it this was not a good day. The offices were now just a few minutes away and Lerner knew she could not just pull up behind them, they had to think she was not chasing them, they had to feel safe.

Seeing a narrow side road that she knew was a shortcut to the offices, Lerner slowed, causing the cars behind her to start hitting their horns, ignoring them she turned sharply into the road and stopped the car, cutting the engine. It was a relief to have some silence, a moment to get herself together.

Knowing she had to act fast Lerner got out of the car and begun running down the road, she hated these small side roads more alleys really, dark, dank and full of large bins overflowing with decaying food waste from nearby restaurants and cafes, trying to run and hold her breath was not easy, and all she could think was that she would not get there in time and any minute there would be a large explosion and that would be it, she would have been too late.

Seeing another bike leaning against the wall, Lerner smiled, got on and begun pedalling as fast as she could, soon reaching the end of the alley. Getting off and throwing the bike against the rubbish bins, she leant over to get her breath and calm herself. Then she peeked around the edge of the building into the road where the Daily Echo was. No one in sight, she walked out slowly watching for any signs of movement.

Lerner sees the blue van parked outside the courier deliveries entrance and approaches the rear of the van on foot.

Chapter twenty-two

by Kimberlee Gerstma

Outside the delivery entrance of the Daily Echo, Lerner crouched behind the blue transit van. She pressed herself against the cool metal door and tried to peer inside. Squinting, she didn't see much, but within a couple of seconds, light streamed inside the van as the driver's-side door opened. She immediately ducked, but caught a glimpse of the shadowed figures of Nathan and Angus slumped inside the back of the van. She slipped to the opposite side. Hearing footsteps, Lerner jumped behind a couple of stacks of pallets piled high near the loading dock.

The smell of old wood and creosote from the pallets stung her nose, and she worried for a moment that she'd sneeze. She pressed her index finger beneath her nose to quell the irritation. Between the wooden slats, she could make out the tousled hair of Paul Cambridge as he rounded the back of the van.

Her heart pounded. *It couldn't be Paul.* She shifted position to get a better look. *It was Paul.* He stopped in front of the rear doors and stood completely still for a moment, causing Lerner to cover her mouth with a hand and hold her breath. Her legs started to shake, and the electric tingle of lightheadedness gripped her.

Paul? How could she be so wrong about someone? All of the hours spent working together? The date? Was she completely obtuse?

Paul looked around to the passenger side and then squatted down to look below the van. Finding nothing, he resumed his position. The ring of keys jangled between his fingers. He slid a key into the door lock, but before he pulled the handle to open the doors he scanned to his right and left. Surveying the area, he scrunched his eyes and took a longer look around. Satisfied that he was alone, he pulled the handle and opened the door.

Lerner exhaled in a slow, quiet breath. She turned a few degrees to her left to determine the best way for her to escape unseen. The loading area was deserted, so she couldn't rely on finding anyone or getting help. When she looked back, the rear door of the van was open, but Paul was no longer standing in front of it. Figuring he'd climbed inside the van to deal with Angus and Nathan, she gathered her courage and decided to make a run for it. She had always been athletic, so a mad dash of several hundred yards shouldn't be difficult even though her heart was already hammering inside her chest. Other than the dim sound of city traffic, it was so quiet she was certain he could hear the racing of her heart and the jagged sounds of her unsteady breathing. She bent into a runner's pose and got ready to bolt. Taking a deep breath, she pushed herself forward. Run.

A second later, she left the security of the pallets and a loud swish cut through the air. Her right calf met with a piece of wood swung in her direction. She yelped in surprise and tumbled across the pavement, banging her knees and skinning her hands as she tried to catch herself. The wood beam bounced and came to a

clattering stop on the ground next to her. She curled into a ball, holding her shin, rocking in pain. Tears blurred her vision, but she could see Paul standing above her.

"Get up," he said through clenched teeth.

"Go fuck yourself," she hissed.

"Such language from sweet Lerner. Tsk. Tsk." He leaned toward her. "You need to get up. Now," he stated, grabbing her shoulder. He dug his fingers into her flesh.

"Are you serious, Paul? This is insane."

"I'm completely serious. Get. The. Fuck. Up. Now."

"What the hell do you think you are doing? This isn't you," she hoped she could reason with him.

"It most certainly is me."

He pulled her shoulder with strength she didn't realise he had. She tried to shove his hand away, but his grip was too tight. Lerner struggled to stand. Her shin throbbed, and she wondered if it was fractured or just bruised. She shifted her weight to her left leg and balanced on her right toe. Paul put his arm around her shoulders to steady her. For a half-second it almost felt like a decent gesture until she felt the muzzle of a gun pressed against her side. *A gun?* She had no choice but to comply.

Paul led her to the back of the van and pushed her inside the open door. Lerner fell between the doors, her left shoulder and side landing on the hard floor of the dirty van. She winced and rolled to her back, but struggled to pull her legs up without causing further damage. She ended up landing on the real estate of Nathan's lap, but he was in no condition to complain. Nathan was tied to the side of the van. His lovely suit torn and crumpled, stained with his blood. He had been beaten. His head hung down and he appeared

to be unconscious.

Paul ripped a piece of white fabric from what looked like a pillow case. He grabbed a handful of Lerner's hair and pulled her toward him again. He reached up and placed the material around her head, making a gag. He tied it in the back of her head with a sharp knot that pulled several strands of hair. She had a sudden and desperate urge to hurt him. She looked around for the gun and saw it sitting on the floor of the van. Paul followed her eyes.

"Don't even think about it," he said. "You don't want to be stupid."

"I've already been stupid," she replied. "I thought you were a nice guy."

He gave her a crooked little smile.

Panic seized her, and common sense rushed out of her head. She *did* want to do something stupid. Anything to get herself out of the situation. But she knew she didn't stand much of a chance against Paul even if she could somehow get the gun. She sure as hell didn't know how to fire one.

Comfortable that she wasn't going to make a move, Paul pulled a black plastic zip tie from his pocket and secured Lerner's hands together, looping a second zip tie through the first and hooking it to a heavy metal eye on the side of the van. He similarly tied her feet. He pushed her closer to the van wall and tightened the tie so she had less opportunity to move. Pleased with his work, he showed her the gun before he shoved it into the waistband of his pants.

"You stay here with your boys. I need to cause a bit of a distraction." He gave a half-smile as he said it, and then shook his head in disbelief. "Lerner fucking Jones. Always chasing the story."

Who would have thought you'd end up here like this?"

He slammed the door of the van and left the three captives alone. In the confines of the van she could smell the blood wafting off the guys, and beneath that, there was a faint chemical smell.

Lerner heard a low moan coming from across the van. She wiggled around as much as her restraints would allow so she would be able to see. It was Angus. His blue eyes were bloodied and swollen. His upper body and face had taken the brunt of the beating Paul or some other thug had given him. The gag across his face was soaked with blood, and his shoulder was slumped forward at an angle that did not look at all natural. It was broken or dislocated, that much she knew. Either way, he would be in excruciating pain.

Beyond Angus, she saw a large bundle of packages. It took a minute for her eyes to focus, but when they did, she guessed that it was a pile of explosives. An explanation for the chemical smell. She had never seen explosives in real life, but she had seen enough action films with criminals blowing things sky high to imagine what the stuff would look like. Her stomach flipped over and over. Between the fear, the adrenalin and the nausea, her system was quickly becoming overwhelmed.

Her mind was playing the scenes over in endless loops. *Paul was a criminal. He wasn't just a criminal, he was a terrorist. How could this be happening? Nathan and Angus had been right all along.*

Behind her she heard a soft rustling and muffled words. Nathan was no longer unconscious. She tried looking over her shoulder to him, but couldn't turn far enough to make eye contact. He continued to struggle for several minutes before giving up.

After a short time, Lerner heard a noise outside of the van. She hoped that someone had come to find out what the van was doing outside. She tried to bang her fists against the wall, but could barely raise a thump. The door flew open and three sets of eyes landed on Paul. He stood in front of them, gun drawn, smiling.

"Aww... you missed me?" He asked. "Okay, missy. Since you are the least damaged, you are going to assist me with these two."

He waved his gun at her before brandishing a pair of wire snips. He cut the ties holding her to the side of the van and pulled her legs forward. She winced and tears welled in her eyes.

"Still a bit tender then?" He sighed and pulled her the rest of the way by her hips. He swung her feet around and they dangled over the bed of the van before he slid her forward and helped her to stand on the ground.

Outside the van she noticed two large leather chairs on rollers. He'd taken them from the executive conference room. He had used a box knife to slice the back of each chair, exposing the metal frames. Paul pulled one of the chairs forward and used another zip tie to attach Lerner's bound hands to the frame of the chair. He ushered her aside so he could jump into the van and remove Angus. There was a lot more moaning as Paul wrestled Angus out of the van and into the chair attached to Lerner. By the time Angus was secure in the chair, he was sobbing beneath his gag. Lerner couldn't see, but she knew that there were tears mixed with blood streaming down his face. Paul repeated the process of getting Nathan out of the van and secured into the second chair. He closed the van door, pulled the gun out of his pants and pressed it against Lerner's ribs again.

"Let's move," he stated in a flat tone.

She leaned forward against the back of the chair and pushed. Angus rolled slowly ahead of her as she babied her leg. Paul pushed Nathan along and then up a slight ramp to the top of the loading dock. He returned for Lerner and Angus. She pushed forward while he pressed against her, moving them all up the ramp to join Nathan. It looked like they were participating in some twisted version of office Olympics. It was so ridiculous she wanted to laugh.

They moved through the double doors into the dark delivery area. Everyone had gone home for the weekend. Paul ushered Lerner and the chairs into a crowded storage room. He shoved Angus, the chair and Lerner against the wall, bracing his leg against Angus for leverage while he worked to secure Nathan's chair to the metal shelving unit with cable ties. Once satisfied that Nathan wouldn't be moving, he did the same with Angus. He pushed a set of file boxes over near Lerner and forced her to sit on them. He pulled out additional cable ties and leashed her to the other wall unit.

Paul ducked out of the storage room and disappeared. Lerner had no clue where he was going, but she was sure the situation was not going to improve.

A couple of minutes later Paul returned. This time he was pushing a wheeled cart. On the cart, he'd stacked the packages of explosives from the van. He wheeled it into the middle of the room, right between the three of them. The room became even more claustrophobic.

Lerner felt like she'd been punched in the stomach. Panic set in again. Her breath came in ragged bursts. She started choking on her gag. Paul looked up from what he was doing. He stepped over

to Lerner and pulled her gag down.

"Calm down," he stated. "Breathe."

Lerner gulped in deep breaths. Her whole body shook in violent waves.

"I said, CALM DOWN!"

Paul slapped Lerner across the face. A red mark appeared on her cheek. He leaned close to her and she could smell his breath, sour and damp.

"Poor Lerner." He laughed like a maniac. He pulled the gag back up to her mouth and shoved his fingers inside with it. She retched.

"Dumb bitch. I don't have time to deal with hysteria."

He laughed again.

"I don't know why I'm even wasting time speaking to you."

Paul returned to his task of setting the explosives.

Lerner started to bite at her gag, chewing at it like an animal trying to escape a trap. Paul took note.

"Fuck it. I seriously don't have time for this."

He went over to her and pulled the gag from her mouth one more time. She felt relieved until she saw him turn around and pull a roll of duct tape from a bag on the cart. He tore off a piece of the sticky film and covered her mouth in one solid sweep. He pressed his body against hers, grabbed her ears like handles and placed a kiss on her taped lips.

"Too bad I don't have more time, Lerner dear. I think I could have enjoyed an hour or two together."

Paul wiped a finger across the tears rolling down Lerner's face before he grabbed her hair, yanked her head backward and forced her to look up at him.

"I hope you've gotten your fill of this story, you nosey bitch. I'm

going to take great delight in watching this building fall. You will be nothing but a pile of rubbish. I wonder how our colleagues will memorialise you once they realise you were in the building. Who will get *that* story I wonder? And what will be made of the news that Angus and Nathan were with you? It will certainly be interesting to watch it all unfold."

Paul crossed the small space to test the ties on the men and ensure they would hold. They wouldn't be going anywhere. With his roll of duct tape he replaced the gags on Nathan and Angus as well, getting their blood on his hands in the process.

Paul walked to the door. Before he left, he turned to face them. He ran his hand through his shaggy hair, smearing blood across his forehead, making him look even more deranged. He didn't even appear to notice.

"What does one say in a situation like this? Goodbye? Hmmm. I don't know. That doesn't really seem appropriate," he paused. Giving a flick of his hand he walked through the doorway. "Well, I guess this is it," he finished. He closed the door and left.

Chapter twenty-three

by M. Peyton Culbertson

The young girl stood on the edge of the roof. She was aware of her mother's voice, urgently trying to coax her down. She wanted to explain to her mother that it was going to be all right, she knew what she was doing. She closed her eyes and let the wind blow over her face. It felt like the wind was trying to pull her bed sheet cape off of her back. That seemed like a good thing to her. Obviously, the more the wind caught her cape, the higher she'd be able to fly.

She stepped forward, pushing off of the roof and into the wind. Eyes still close, she felt the sheer joy of weightlessness. At last she was flying! She could hear her mother crying out her name in terror, "Lerner!"

Lerner Jones jerked back to consciousness, only to find herself still bound and gagged in one of The Daily Echo's store rooms. She wondered to herself if she would ever learn. She couldn't fly when she was six, and she couldn't fly now. Her problem was that she never stopped believing she could fly. It looked like her recklessness was going to cost her much more than a broken arm this time.

She looked around the poorly lit room. She could barely see past Angus and Nathan. Even in the dark she could tell how bad they were doing. Even the toughest men could only take so much and they'd been through most of that in the past few days. It had impressed her that they had lasted this long but she had to ask herself how much more they could take. One thing she was good at was getting in over her head. This time was no different.

She struggled against her bonds again to no avail. Her fellow captives weren't going to be much use right now. It was all they could do to keep from being out of it completely. She looked around the room hoping to find anything that could help her. Seeing a soft drink vending machine in the corner, inspiration struck her. Strategically throwing her weight around in her chair, she was able to scoot it over to the vending machine. She turned the chair around and tilted it so she could slam the back of it into the front of the machine. The lighted, fiberglass mural of an oversized soda can half covered with ice, buckled under the impact and simply pushed her chair away. She tried again only to be further frustrated. Angus raised his head to look at her through his one eye that hadn't swollen shut yet. The expression on his face looked like he might be thinking that she had lost her mind. Unfortunately, at this point she couldn't be sure he wasn't just responding to the noise. They both had been pretty out of it for awhile.

One more time, she tilted her chair forward and let it fall back into the machine. The sign started to buckle again, but this time it cracked. It was reduced to shards. Several pieces of the sign stuck jaggedly out of the edges of their former frame. That was the opportunity she was looking for. She worked her chair around so that tilting it back brought her bindings into contact with the sharp

edges of the former sing. The sawing motion she made drew a little blood, but was eventual enough for her to cut through her bonds. After that, it was nothing for her to pick up a shard off the floor and cut her feet free. The only thing that slowed her down was the shard digging into her palms and drawing a bit more blood. She was surprised that pulling the duct tape from her face actually hurt more than cutting her hands.

Now that she was free, she picked up her chair and placed it back where it was when she'd been tied up just a moment ago. She was about to start to work on cutting Angus's bonds when she heard the lift engage.

She muttered an expletive to herself. It had to be Paul coming back to check on them. Placing a hand on Angus's shoulder, she said, "Hang in there, we'll get you cut loose shortly."

His one eye went wide as he mumbled something through the duct tape over his face.

"Don't worry," she said in a reassuring voice. "I've got a plan."

It was all Angus could do to groan in frustration. By now, even Nathan was starting to pay attention.

Lerner rushed over to her chair and got back into the same position she had been in before Paul left. With any luck, the room was dark enough that Paul wouldn't notice until she could figure out some way to handle him. There was no plan. She'd only said there was because it sounded more cool than telling the truth.

"Here we go again," she thought to herself. "Leaping without looking."

They heard the lift come to a stop and its doors open and close as someone definitely got off on the floor. Paul strode in a moment

later with what had become his usual air of pomposity. Lerner had gotten her duct tape back on her face just in time.

"So," Paul's voice had become almost menacingly polite, "How are we all doing down here? I trust you are all comfortable."

Angus and Nathan struggled against their bonds. If they'd had the strength, they would have ended Paul right then and there. Lerner just stared at him viciously. She could only hope that he couldn't see the smile that was forming under the duct tape on her face.

"What about you, my dear," he asked, "are you comfortable?"

Lerner mumbled something inappropriate under the duct tape. She had to be careful. The adhesive wasn't nearly as strong when she put the tape back on. She could feel it loosen with every move of her facial muscles.

"What's that?" Paul leaned closer, cupping one ear as though it would help him understand a gagged woman better. "I can't understand you."

She really wanted to smash his face in at this point, but she needed to wait till she had the upper hand. She fixed his gaze and mumbled again.

Paul reached out and took hold of a corner of the tape over Lerner's mouth. He pulled it off of her in one swift motion. She had to be careful to pretend that it hurt as much as it would have if this were the first time and the adhesive was still at full strength.

"There. Is that better?" Paul sneered.

"Yes Paul. I cant thank you enough." She couldn't help being at least a little sarcastic. "Thank you so much for ripping off my gag as roughly as possible."

Paul brought his face to within inches of hers. "I sometimes

forget how charming you can be. Remind me again why we never hit it off."

"Frankly Paul, you're a little creepy."

Paul was clearly offended. "What have I ever done that any rational person could consider, 'creepy,' as you put it."

"Seriously Paul?" her voice had taken on that tone of exasperation one gets when they are explaining something to a child for the hundredth time. "You have me tied up in a store room, with two other people, surrounded by enough explosives to take out half the city block. Can you at least take a moment to think about that?"

Paul put a hand to his chin in a contemplative gesture for a moment, but only a moment. Waving that hand into the air in a dismissive gesture he said, "This is hardly the time for us to debate this. I only came down here to check that the three of you were still secure." He went over to check Angus's bindings. "Besides Lerner, you won't be around much longer to defend your point." He gave her a sly look.

"You've already failed to kill me once. What makes you think you'll get it right this time?"

"I wasn't trying to kill you then." Paul tugged at Nathan's bindings to check them. He seemed to enjoy the pain he was causing Nathan. "I had no idea you were visiting the firm of Bond and Lacey." He gave her a quizzical look. "Why were you visiting a solicitor any way?"

"Creepy boss," she shrugged, "I wanted to know my rights."

He stepped back in front of her. With one finger under her chin, Paul tilted her head back so he could look down into her green eyes, one last time. "Believe it or not, I'll miss you. But of course,

I'm thrilled to be getting rid of your MI7 friends."

"Have you even heard of the Internet?" She was almost laughing.

"I don't understand."

"I bet you get that a lot." She smiled. "MI7 disbanded in 1940. I'm not sure who these guys are, but as a reporter, I thought I'd play along and find out."

"It is such a shame you won't live to find out." He noticed the bloody shard from the vending machine on the floor behind her chair. He looked over at the broken machine and it hit him.

He turned back to Lerner just in time to feel her knee impact with his groin as she got up from her chair. Bending over from the pain, a quick hand from Lerner guided his head into the corner of the chair, knocking him out cold.

"I don't know," she said. "I kind of feel like I will."

She grabbed the shard and pulled off Angus's gag. As she cut him loose she said, "Nathan doesn't look so good. Do you think you can help him out of the building?"

He nodded and they both helped Nathan out of his bindings and to his feet.

"Through that door," she gestured into the darkness. "You can get out through the courier entrance."

The two men shuffled off into the distance.

She searched for the closest fire alarm lever to pull so she could evacuate the building with as little hassle as possible. She spotted one. Rushing over to it and pulling it, she thought to herself, "Not bad for not having a plan."

Chapter twenty-four

by Nils Cordes

Lerner had to think of Tibor, a lazy Czech student who used to copy all her notes in postgraduate studies because he couldn't be bothered to show up for classes himself. He was somewhat charming, but so utterly out of her league – professionally – that she would have loved it if he found somebody else to bug. Looking at Paul Cambridge lying in the corner of the shabby store room, she pictured it being Tibor. But that wasn't fair. Tibor was just an annoying kid, Cambridge was a criminal.

Once, looking through Lerner's notes, Tibor had corrected a quote from some journalist or other she had copied down in class. Instead of "Lord Jones", it now read "Lerner Jones": *Journalism largely consists in saying "Lerner Jones Dead" to people who never knew Lerner Jones was alive.*

From the looks of things, a lot of people would soon be vaguely interested to find out that Lerner Jones *had ever been* alive.

Nathan was groaning beside her. He sounded like she felt. The blood on his lips had started to dry, but the bruises on his face were quickly turning from purple to an ugly shade of yellow. Lerner was sure that his jaw was at least partly broken, but there

was nothing she could do.

Angus had his eyes closed. She was not sure if he was still awake, or even conscious. She knew she had to act quickly. Not because Cambridge would wake up anytime soon – she doubted that – but because she was afraid that the explosives could go off at any moment. What did *she* know about bombs anyway?! Their small room was filled with a deep humming sound that seemed to emanate from ... somewhere inside the bomb.

"We've got to get you guys out of here," Lerner said and picked herself up.

Nathan was following her example, but the knees only barely bore his weight.

"Angus out?" he asked as he was supported by Lerner.

She nodded.

"Let's get you outside first."

They slowly walked to the door of the room and peered outside. The courier's entrance was just a couple of yards away. Warm evening light seeped through the windows. An unlocked but annoyingly heavy steel door let them outside and they stepped onto a small parking lot. The sidewalk and busy streets were about 150 yards away.

"Can you make it over there? I gotta get Angus out."

Nathan nodded and limped away.

"Call the police!" she yelled as she sped back into the building.

Angus had clownishly fallen over, his head resting next to his knees. Damn, it would be hard to get him out of here by herself. He was breathing, though. Lerner grabbed Angus's arms and pulled them as hard as she could over her right shoulder. Slouched under 6 feet of meat on her back she tried hard as she could to run

towards the door, but hardly moved at all. The sound coming from the explosives were becoming louder and she started to panic.

It felt like over five minutes before she got Angus anywhere near the wire fence next to which Nathan was slumped down. Her throat ached from the strained breathing, she could hardly catch a breath when she released Angus and coughed violently instead. Then she fell nearly on top of him. The three of them lay beside each other on the concrete and all Lerner could think of were the people in their shiny new Volvos and Mercedes passing them by, not noticing a thing.

Were they safe here? Was anybody on the block safe if the bomb went off? Again, the images of Bond & Lacey came to her mind, shrapnel flying through the air. Black smoke. People everywhere crying, bleeding. She felt the tears on her face but noticed how she started to breathe easier again.

"I gotta go back," she said to no one in particular.

Lerner walked back through the courier's entrance and quickly looked towards the store room. She could hear the humming sound from the room well into the hallway. But she walked past it and into the gallery that lead to the lobby. She was exhausted but otherwise felt okay. She could see a couple of men in elegant suits move towards the elevators, deep in conversation. There were at least four businesses in the building. Then there was the Daily Echo, her colleagues who probably had no idea she had been missing. They had to get out of the building immediately. *She* had to get them out.

Responsibility weighed on her shoulders just like the massive body of Angus had, her breathing became choppy and she knew

the strain of the past hour was beginning to affect her judgement. She needed help. Where is Security when you need them? Her eyes darted from one figure to another, trying to see if Amir was anywhere patrolling the halls.

Fuck it, she thought.

"There's a bomb in the building. Everybody get out."

Her voice barely reached the men who were waiting in front of the elevator doors. They merely looked curious.

"A bomb," she shouted, "GET OUT OF HERE!"

The taller of the two men came running over to her, seeing as she needed assistance.

Again panicking, Lerner backed off. Everything was taking too much time. She needed a break to think and rest, but nobody was going to just call it a day and invite her over for high tea. She started to think of her parents, of being able to see them over Christmas. A picture formed in her mind of everybody sitting down together, chatting, joking. How is your boyfriend, hon? Her Mother would ask. Fine, thank you for asking. He recently tried to kill me with a bomb, can you please pass the white wine?

The man in front of her was talking to her but she could not hear a thing he was saying. She stared at him with glassy eyes. Journalists should *make* the news, not *be* the news. Come on Jones, get a grip on yourself!

With perfect aiming she smashed her fist into the small red box on the wall. The glass shattered and sirens immediately filled the hallways. No one would hear her now, but please be smart, she thought, and run outside as fast as you can.

"There's a bomb in the building. Get everybody outside as fast as possible."

Her voice was calmer now. The man's eyes widened but he understood. Sirens have a way of getting a point across.

"I'll help evacuate the building," he said and ran off. He jammed open the doors to the emergency stairways just as the first people came hurrying down. Lerner ran after him, wanting to help. The lobby was filling up with people. Elevator doors kept opening and regurgitated worried-looking men and women. Some walked slowly, carrying their suitcases, but the overall tension made it clear that this was not a drill. Groups formed just outside the lobby's glass front, dominated by an image of nervous chatter. *Too close*, Lerner thought, remembering the recent bombings.

She ran over the faux marble floors to the front entrance. For just a second, her eyes fell on an emergency exit door to her right. It led to the first floor. The stranger had stemmed it open as well. But nobody was coming down the stairs. Against her better judgement she ran into the stairway, taking three steps at a time. She yanked open the door to the first floor and peered into a dark hallway. It was after five, everybody had already gone home.

She swore and wondered seriously why she was suddenly acting like a hero. Her subconscious kept yelling at her to get out, but she wasn't paying attention. The adrenaline must have kicked her mind into overdrive. Seeing people running, fleeing from the building must have short-circuited something in her brain. Don't be the news, she said to herself and really began to feel scared. Then she turned around and jumped down the stairs again.

The unexpected jolt to the building made her miss a step and she fell right onto the next landing. It felt like an earthquake, but she knew better. With horror, she watched as the bannisters wriggled like snakes and the ceiling looked like it was about to

collapse. The floor shook hard and smashed into her ribs. She could not hear the sirens anymore, the whole building was making a kind of noise to extinguish all noise. Then the floor stopped moving again. Large pieces of rubble fell from the ceiling. She got up again and jumped down another flight of stairs, when a second explosion shoved her off the ground and set her flailing in the air. She landed on her feet inside the lobby and immediately headed for the front doors. She only had eyes for the little guy on the small green sign running, like her, towards the exit as she stormed out of the building like she was trying to win gold in a 40-meter sprint. She could not see the cloud of heat and smoke that engulfed the whole ground floor, expanding towards her. She just ran and kept running until she stood in the middle of the street. Her back turned towards the building, she held her breath and wondered where all the Volvos and Mercedes had gone. The street was empty except for a few police cars.

When she turned around she witnessed the former Daily Echo building crashing into itself. There must have been some kind of Dolby Surround Thunder happening before her, but the only thing she could hear was her heart, beating at 200 times a minute and trying to get out through her throat.

The last thing she thought was whether 150 yards really was enough to be safe from such an explosion.

When she was able to hear again, she was sitting on the passenger's seat of an ambulance. Somebody had attached something to her arm. A cold liquid covered her wrist. She stared straight ahead into the cloud of smoke, shades of people sitting on the ground. She imagined them crying, bleeding. Again. She could

not fight the urge to cry and collapsed in an uncontrollable fit of tears and sobs. Her shoulder hurt, but she seemed to have made it out surprisingly well.

Then anger rose in her and she screwed her face into a mask, trying to stop the tears. She thought of Cambridge and how she had to step over him to get out of the dreaded store room. She suddenly wanted to apologize to Tibor. Finally, she remembered Nathan and Angus and her pupils regained that ability to focus on things.

Lerner stood up, thanking the A&E trainee by her side. She walked past police cars, ambulances and people. So many people. She found Nathan sitting inside one of the ambulances on the west side of the building. Lerner had to swallow a sob, seeing him alive. They were all so damn lucky today.

"Thank you," Nathan mumbled pulling her into him. Half his face was covered in a yellow bandage.

"Angus?"

"He be fine. They feeding him his fav'rite lunch."

Nathan nodded towards the man behind him, tubes running into his mouth and veins.

"Good."

"I said't before, but," Nathan took a breath, "you make a fine MI7 agent."

"Huh." She grinned but never felt less qualified than right now.

"No kidding," he said but then groaned as he moved a wrong muscle.

"Better than you anyway," said Lerner. "You guys have been through hell."

"And back."

"Huh."

A nurse walked past her and asked to please give the patient some space. She pushed her large blond head between her and the patient and helped Nathan onto a seat in the back of the car.

"We be in touch," Nathan called to her.

"I'll drop by in hospital," Lerner returned.

The nurse smiled briefly at Lerner, then closed the doors from the inside. With another annoying siren blaring in her ears, she watched the yellow-and-green of the ambulance mix with the grey of the dusty air and disappear.

Lerner stood there for a moment, lost in thought. That nurse looked strangely familiar. A blond head with an unnaturally bright smile came back to her mind. This woman reminded her a lot of Victoria Mason. But could that be?

Lerner's mobile phone rang and jolted her back to the present. She pulled it out of her pocket, surprised at the weight in her hand. Until now, she had not even been aware that she had been carrying it around all this time.

"Hello."

"Hey, this is Lucy. I'm just callin' round to see if everyone made it out. You okay?"

"Yes, yes, I'm ... er ... I'm fine. Thanks for checking up. How about the others?"

"So far everyone's accounted for. I think we were lucky. I haven't got a hold of Paul, have you seen him?"

Lerner's pulse quickened.

"Er, no, I haven't seen Mr. Cambridge since the building came down."

"Alright, hang in there, 'kay?"

Lerner hung up, took a deep breath, then shook her head. Anger was beginning to rise in her again. Her body ached for a bath with some scent of vanilla. A hot coffee perhaps. Slowly she walked back towards the front of what used to be a building. She wanted to hit the Tube and head home. On her phone, she pulled up her contacts list and scrolled to the entry of Paul Cambridge. She hesitated just for a fraction of a second before she pressed "Delete".

She then scrolled further down to the bottom of the list and looked at the name. She pressed it and immediately heard the ringtone through the earpiece. She lifted the phone to her ear and was soon greeted by the friendly voice of the man she had worked for until just weeks ago.

"The Times, Jason Waterson speaking."

"Hey, this is Lerner."

"Lerner! Godalmighty. How are you? What's going on over there? Are you at the Echo right now?"

"I am, but I'm about to head home. I'm feeling wretched."

"I imagine. Listen, if there's anything ..."

"Well," Lerner interrupted. "I rather think there is. I suppose I've gone freelance now, and ..."

"Yes."

"Well, I've got a story for you if you're interested."