



# Section 7

WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'  
ON OCTOBER 25th 2014

SECTION7  
Originally published 2014

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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 Alisia Faust*

Lerner glared at the partially written document on her computer screen. The curser flashed mockingly at her pause.

*Flash.* Any minute now and the words would flow through her fingers.

*Flash.* Any minute now...

*Flash.* She had a deadline.

*Flash.* It was coming up soon.

*Flash.* No matter what, she would make that deadline.

"Jones."

Lerner glanced up and met Mr. Waterson's quizzical gaze. "Yes, Mr. Waterson?"

"What the hell are you doing?"

"My job, sir."

He ran a hand through his short cropped hair. "Doesn't look like it to me. You should have left twenty minutes ago!"

"What?" This time it was Lerner's turn to look quizzical.

"I asked you twenty minutes ago to cover the breaking story in the City."

"The City? Has there been another attack?" She flipped to her

email tab, scanning her unread messages for a hint of what her boss was talking about.

"Somewhere near or about Schoen Brothers."

"The law firm?"

"Is there any other Schoen Brothers?"

She bit the inside of her cheek. "Apologies, sir."

He waved away her apology and continued, "It should be around there, but if not then you know to just follow the crowd."

"What about the Hinderman story you--"

"Finish it later. I need you in the field... Or would you rather I send Owens?"

Lerner glanced at the skinny lad to her right. His nose was an inch away from his computer screen and his eyes were mere slits from a hard squint, but his fingers flew on the keys. Owens was about as fun to talk to as a hippo on her menstrual cycle, but he was smart and quick on his feet.

"Consider me gone," Lerner replied. She shuffled the piles of papers into more of a mess as she searched for her notebook and mobile.

"Good, let's just hope you get there before everyone and their mothers have already heard the news."

She gave a half-hearted smile as Mr. Waterson retreated back into his office. Throwing the last few items into her purse, she grabbed her coat and hurried to catch a cab.

Lerner shut the car door on the taxi driver grumbling about a lousy tip, and rushed towards the shivering crowd gathered behind the yellow police tape. The low murmur of hushed conversation hissed around her, filling her mind with a dull buzz.

"Lerner!" A voice called from behind her.

She turned to see a familiar redhead stepping out of another taxi and groaned. "Oh god, Jessica, I did it again, didn't I?"

"You did," Jessica said. A warm smile exposed two neat dimples in her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry. I was already late and it completely slipped my mind--"

"That you'd need a photographer? Well, you're lucky we've all worked with you long enough to know your habits. Mr. Waterson sent me a minute after you'd left. Figured I'd still be able to catch up with you."

Lerner smiled her thanks. "Shall we dive right in, then?"

Jessica nodded and secured her camera, then gestured for Lerner to lead the way. Lerner expertly weaved through the mass of observers. She pushed past the cries of shock, dismay, and heart-ache and built a wall to keep their bleeding emotions from seeping into her concentration. Soon she was leaning against the police tape. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared at the broken rubble. She barely recognised it as the foundations of a building. Jessica was already busy snapping pictures.

Craning her neck, Lerner scanned the stream of uniforms circling the site. Firefighters scurried in and out of the building with EMTs threading their way towards the rubble. Officers hovered near the perimeter of the site. Lerner watched them, their faces blurred by unfamiliarity. She frowned slightly, and glanced at Jessica, who shrugged.

*Where could he be?*

Lerner followed the edge of the site when she finally caught sight of the man she'd been looking for. She smoothed her skirt

and put on a winning smile. "James!"

An older man with salt and pepper hair poking from beneath his helmet turned. The already deep lines on his face deepened at the sight of her. "Ms. Jones."

"Oh James, there's no need to be so formal among friends."

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?" he asked in a tone that suggested her visit was the opposite of pleasant.

"Well, I just thought I'd say hello to an old friend in front of what used to be the ... Schoen Brothers?"

His lips twitched.

She continued, "What happened here? Is it the same attack as the ones on Goodacre & Kirk and Barclay's?"

He gave her his usual noncommittal answer. "At this time we are still conducting our investigation and cannot reveal any details to the press."

"Of course not. Luckily, we've grown very close--and I like to think quite fond of each other--these past few years, so it couldn't hurt to throw your good friend some bread crumbs."

"I'm sorry--" he began, but Lerner interrupted him.

"And you do owe me, James. I hope you have not forgotten."

Colour stained his face until he was nearly purple. "I have not forgotten." "Then I'm calling in that favour." H e s i g h e d .  
"Look, I can't just go around sharing details with the public."

"Just the basics then. I already know this used to be the Schoen Brothers. Was anybody hurt? Any dead?"

"None dead. Luckily, the place was nearly empty, it being the lunch hour and all. Of course we're still searching through the rubble, but so far only one person has been found with superficial injuries."

Lerner chewed thoughtfully on the end of her pen. "That's certainly a breath of fresh air considering the tally from the previous attacks."

"Let's hope it--"

The blare of an alarm startled them. Lerner whipped her head towards the noise--which emanated from Debenham's. The shrill alarm rang in Lerner's ears. Shouts from firefighters pierced through the ringing, and Lerner watched as a few of them raced towards the building.

James had already disappeared into the sea of uniforms. Lerner spotted Jessica threading her way towards the crowd, contorting into impossible positions of balance to catch a few shots of the scene on film. Lerner also fell in with the crowd.

People swarmed out of the department store like ants swarming a picnic. They followed closely at each other's heels before fanning out in front of the Boots across the street. Lerner spotted a young girl who looked to be about eighteen chatting excitedly to an older woman beside her. The woman yawned and rolled her eyes.

Lerner approached the girl. "Hello"--she glanced at the girl's nametag--"Ashley. Do you know what's going on? Was this a practice drill?"

Ashley's eyes lit up. "Don't think so, but nothing bad seems to be going on though, does it? So I dunno. It was a bit mental, though. I was trying to make my sale, right? This lady was wearing just something awful--like a mix of horse piss and sour apples--just pure shite like, and I was leaning her towards something classic, you know a Chanel or something, because for older ladies the classics are always a hit ... Actually, what are you wearing? I think you'd love *Chanel No. 5*--"

"Thanks, but I'm good," Lerner said through clenched teeth. Old? She was only twenty-eight! She hadn't even broken thirty yet!

"Huh, that's what the lady said too, but I was wearing her down though. Was about to make my sale, wasn't I, when this BLEEP BLEEP just starts blaring! You know? Totally ruined my sale and now we're out here in the cold and I haven't even got my coat. Was rushed out in such a hurry I only had time to grab my bag."

"You think someone pulled it?"

"Pulled what?" Ashley asked.

"The alarm. Do you think someone pulled the alarm?"

"Oh, yeah, most likely, but maybe not. I wouldn't put it past management to pull a stunt like this. They're a whole lot of wan--"

"Right, got it. Thanks for your time."

"I guess." Ashley immediately turned back towards the older woman and resumed her animated chatting. The woman's enthusiasm level never wavered.

By this time, everyone had exited the department store and the crowd spilled in front of a few stores, including Starbucks, which had an unusually long line of customers.

Lerner pushed her way back towards Debenham's, ignoring the shouted requests from officers for everyone to please depart the area. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. No one seemed hurt. It was probably just some stupid kid trying to be cool. No story here.

She sighed, and headed back towards the main road, but spotted fiery hair on the steps a few paces away from the commotion. Jessica was diligently taking pictures, like usual.

"Get anything good?" Lerner asked.

"Of course," Jessica grinned, her shutter snapping every few seconds, "I only know how to get good." L e r n e r s m i l e d a n d

gestured towards the chaos. "So, what do you think of all this?"

Jessica flipped through her snapshots. "Never was much of a fan of Debenham's."

"It doesn't seem like there's a story here."

"No, I suppose not ... hey, wait a minute. Look at this." Jessica held out her camera.

Lerner squinted at the image. "All I see are people. Lots and lots of people. It's like a never-ending sea of people."

"No, look here." She pointed to a thin man with dark hair half hidden in the crowd. "Look at his face and then at his hand."

Lerner brought the camera closer. His expression was completely blank, and he clutched something in his right hand. She couldn't quite make it out. "What is that? A lighter?"

"Not sure."

"But see how he's holding it up? Nobody does that for a lighter unless they're about to light up. It's almost as if it's a ... trigger? God, no." Lerner was sure the shock on Jessica's face matched her own. She shoved the camera back to her colleague and turned back towards the scene.

Suddenly, she was on the ground, trying to catch her breath. Thunder shook the earth and dark smoke lingered overhead, suffocating the white clouds out of existence. She couldn't see straight. There were people everywhere. Her head throbbed, dully at first, but each thud turned into a sharp scream that pierced her ears.

No, that wasn't her. The screams were from the people scattering like cockroaches under a light. Many were on the ground, crawling, crying as their fingers and faces were trampled. Others lay motionless in an ever-growing pool of crimson. Their

bodies jerking unnaturally beneath the feet of others. Something whizzed past her, and another body collapsed.

Lerner was vaguely aware of something pulling on her.  
"Jessica?"

"Lerner? Lerner! Are you okay?"

"I ... What?"

"We've got to get out of here." The urgency made Jessica's voice sound wrong. Her eyes were wide and her movements desperate.

Lerner closed her eyes for a second and took a deep breath. When she opened them, the noise had softened to a continuous hum and she felt more alert. She scrambled to her feet. Something else flew past her, and she flinched automatically, throwing her arms over her face for protection.

"Come on," Jessica said, crouching low. "We have to find cover."

They sprinted towards the main road. Lerner's heart pounded whenever a puff of air shot past her. Deafening booms rumbled behind them.

*Are we being shot at?*

Jessica led them behind the ugly modern art sculpture. It was a concrete ball with tentacles reaching and circling and twisting together, all settled atop of a stone pedestal. It was meant to represent the callous indifference man held towards endangered species--or something equally nonsensical.

"I never thought I would see the day when I could finally appreciate this piece of shit," Lerner said.

Jessica laughed weakly. She still had her camera clutched in her hand. "You think I should get shots of this?"

"Don't you dare."

The girls sat in silence, until the destruction ceased.

Lerner gingerly got to her feet and peeked from behind the sculpture. Her stomach twisted. The line of shops between Boots and Starbucks were in various stages of ruin, with pieces of the structures crumbling off in a stream of broken bricks. People littered the street. Some were picking themselves unsteadily off the ground, but most were moaning in pain, too weak to stand. Everyone was coated in a layer of rusty red.

More emergency responders arrived. Many rushed aide to their fallen comrades, but they all easily controlled the scene.

Jessica was already patrolling, listlessly taking pictures, as if her body were on autopilot. Lerner saw how her hands trembled.

"Jessica, go home," she said.

"No, I have to get this. For the story."

"After what we went through, no one will blame you for missing a few pictures."

"I'm fine. I've seen disaster before."

"But you never had to experience those disasters first hand."

"No, I suppose not."

"This is different. Go home, get some rest. Okay?"

Jessica hesitated, then nodded.

After placing her in a cab, Lerner returned to the scene. She caught James, and her chest tightened at the blood on his uniform.

"Don't worry, most of it doesn't belong to me," he said. "Got a little banged up during the explosion, but luckily all of the shrapnel missed me. What about you? Are you hurt?"

*Shrapnel, not bullets.*

"I'm fine. Just a few cuts and bruises from the fall. But those people? How many injured? Any dead?"

He sighed. "So far we've found three dead and over thirty

injured." "Damn," she whispered.

"Yeah."

"Debenham's was the distraction," she mused.

"What?"

"I'm saying they--whoever *they* are--orchestrated the false alarm at Debenham's to ensure there'd be a crowd right in the middle of the area of explosion."

Somebody called for James and his expression hardened. "Ms. Jones, if you are not injured then I advise you to go home. Please excuse me."

Lerner watched him leave, feeling strangely unsettled.

Disregarding James's advice, she returned to work and threw her items carelessly beside her desk. The story was in her fingertips and she needed to get it out while it was still fresh on her mind. She stared hard at the blank page on her computer screen, focusing on the blinking curser, and hoped that it would stop the tremor in her hands.

## Chapter two

*by Barry Lees*

The phone rang and Lerner picked it up. It was not a number in her contacts list so it was either some claims management company touting for dubious business or a worthy member of the public with some hot information. Probably the former.

“Hi, Lerner Jones speaking.”

“Hi Lerner it’s Paul Cambridge here.”

“Who?” Lerner knew immediately who Paul Cambridge was, the Features Editor at the *Daily Echo* but didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing she knew.

“Paul Cambridge from the *Echo*, Features Editor.”

“Oh, hi Paul, what can I do for you?”

“I have been reading your stuff for the last six months and your piece on the bombings convinced me that you would be a great asset to the *Echo* and I would like to offer you a place on my team. You know we are going places so it is a great opportunity for you.” Cambridge sounded enthusiastic but it seemed like he had rehearsed the speech and came across a little unsure.

“Paul, you are offering me a job at the *Echo* just like that. I am a serious journalist, you know that. Why would I want to join a lo-

brow comic whose idea of news is a smiley face alongside poorly regurgitated and badly written newswire articles?” Lerner had to skim the *Echo* on a regular basis just to keep up with the opposition but her opinion of it never got very high.

“Lerner, we are hugely successful, our circulation figures are astronomic. We charge premium rates for advertising even on page 42! We give people something to smile about in the morning and they obviously like it. Now we want to move on up a notch. To directly compete with *The Times* and the broadsheets. You are well respected in the industry and, to put it bluntly, your name will give us a lot of credibility that, yeah, we are lacking in some circles. Lucy and I feel that if we can get you on board then we can also attract other top journalists and really start to make a difference. In six months time, if things work out, you can be earning double what *The Times* are paying you but I know that money is not the main thing. Just think about it. It really is a great opportunity to make a difference”

Lerner leaned back in her chair, unsure how to respond. Covering the spate of bombings had taken its toll on her. Death and destruction was never easy but some of the heart rending tales to come out of innocent lives lost and families devastated had really made her question her commitment to serious journalism. Actually being on site at Bond & Lacy when the bomb went off had affected her badly. Three people had died and many more had life changing injuries. She could have been one of them and it had been difficult to remain coolly dispassionate as she wrote her copy. It was increasingly difficult to get out of bed in the morning to face another day of bad news. Other peoples lives torn apart by things they had no control over while Lerner watched and reported. Two

months ago Lerner would have told Paul Cambridge what he could do with his job. Now maybe a change of direction, regrouping, refocussing might be just the opportunity she needed .

“Ok Paul, I will come back to you with an answer. Give me a day or so.” She did need to think about it seriously and with her maxed out credit cards and a seriously heavy mortgage any extra money would be welcome.

“Thanks Lerner. Look forward to hearing from you and working with you. You will be a great asset and can help us push this thing forward in the right direction.” The phone went dead and Lerner stared at the screen.

Across the large open plan newsroom Lerner could see Jason Waterson, Features Editor of *The Times*, her boss, standing, looking out through the glass wall of his office. She had once had a bit of a crush on Jason but far too many screaming arguments about unrealistic copy deadlines had killed that feeling though she did have respect for his ability and leadership. She would have to talk to him, which was not going to be easy. Jason was a straightforward guy, yes or no, black or white, with us or against us, no shades of grey. Any hint of looking at other jobs and you might no longer have a choice.

Lerner headed over to his office passing people she had worked with for years, famous names in the industry and the not so famous, the backroom people who kept the whole thing moving. The floor was a hive of activity, phones ringing, computer screen flashing, instructions shouted, an intern crying in a corner amidst a bedlam of noise. She knocked and pushed the door open.

“Can I have a word please, Jay?” Lerner leaned through without actually crossing the threshold.

“Of course, Fast. My door is always open, you know that. What can I do for you?” Jason had cracked the joke about her being a “Fast Learner” on her first day and the name had stuck.

Lerner walked in and over to his desk and sat down. Jason walked to the other side and sat down, smiling.

“I have just had a call from Paul Cambridge at *The Daily Echo* and, ah, he said... he suggested... ah, he wanted to talk to me about, ah, my career. He offered me a job,” Lerner could feel her hands shaking and her feet were tapping the floor.

“And?”

“And what?” Lerner replied

“And you told him to stick his comic job where the sun don’t shine. Right?”

“I said I would think about it.”

“OK. So you have thought about it. Now go tell him to stick his fucking comic job.”

“It’s not that simple. Things have changed for me. Those bombs have made me look at what I do, what I want from my career. At the moment everything is so fucking negative. Wars, disease, suicide bombers, hate everywhere you look and I have to pretend it doesn’t get to me. To report the facts. Well sometimes it would be good to see some positivity and *The Echo* seems to have a big head start on that.” Lerner felt there was no other way of describing her current feelings, maybe bordering on depression.

“You are a serious journalist, Lerner. Well respected and you have written some great stuff for us. Why would you even think of joining an outfit whose news gathering is outsourced to a fucking call centre in India?” Jason pulled no punches. He had been brought up in an era when journalists wrote their own stories after

serious investigation and research. Nowadays the tabloids just spewed out the same content picked up off the Newswire and written with their own political spin.

“It’s not a call centre, Jason. It’s a well respected writing team which *The Echo* uses to supplement a lean and mean editorial staff in London.

“Sounds like Paul has done a job on you.”

“I am thinking about it.”

“Think long and hard, Fast. No top class journalist leaves *The Times* to go and work for a second rate rag like *The Echo* without seriously damaging their credibility. And you are top class, Fast. You will go a long way here. This is a one way street though, you make the wrong choice and there is no coming back. You walk out on me now and that is it, no matter how much I like you and respect your work. You leave *The Times* to work at *The Echo* and it makes us look bad and it will not be forgotten.”

Lerner could see Jason was getting angry. Her fights with him over deadlines and editorial changes gave her a good insight to his current mood. As usual with Jason it was with him or against him with no grey area.

“I am sorry Jason but this is just not right for me any longer. I need to look at other options and you don’t give me any room to breathe.”

Jason put his hands on the sides of his laptop, in the middle of his desk, and pulled it towards him. He lined up the front edge exactly with the edge of the desk, checking the edges with his thumbs, making sure the fit was perfect. He was considering how to react. Lerner was good but it was obvious she had lost the edge recently. The bomb blast had shook her, in more ways than one,

and some of her copy was beginning to edge towards opinion rather than the dispassionate reportage he wanted. Maybe her skill would come back, he was prepared to give her the chance. Maybe it was gone for ever and a much more difficult conversation was not too far off.

“So what are you going to do, Lerner?” he asked.

“I think I am going to talk to Cambridge again.” She replied.

“That is not the answer I wanted. I have got to have your commitment one hundred percent or you can go now.”

“Ok Jason, if you put it like that I am going.” She got up to leave.

“Wait.” Jason picked up the phone and pressed 1-2-3. “Security? Please send someone up to escort Miss Jones off the premises. She is leaving us.”

“Jason, you can’t be serious. How can you do this? You are being a complete bastard. You can’t sack me just like that.”

“Sorry Lerner, that is the way it is. Us or them; there is no middle ground. See you around.” He got up and moved to the glass wall again surveying the newsroom floor.

The security guard arrived at the door. “If you will follow me, Miss. We can collect your personal belongings on the way through.”

Lerner followed the guard, still visibly shaking, aware that the whole office was silent and everyones eyes were on her as she walked to her desk and started to clear the few personal items she kept at work.

## **Chapter three**

*by Aiden Dunfield*

Lerner Jones stood in the lobby of The Echo, waiting for Paul Cambridge. He'd called a moment ago and explained he'd been delayed in a meeting, but would be down in just a few moments. She understood, of course. After all her years in journalism, she knew that editorial meetings over-running their neat little calendared time-slots were just a fact of life.

She looked around the large lobby, a miracle of architectural glass and steel, a transparent oasis sitting quietly in the midst of the city.

She felt a wave of agoraphobic panic rising up her spine, and sitting in one of the tastefully arranged chairs, she closed her eyes, willing it away. Her throat constricted as the smell of the cordite washed over her. Behind her eyes were flickering frames, subliminal pictures from a badly adjusted projector; a blue sky with panicked pigeons fluttering high in the perfect day, sunshine pouring down onto screaming people, pools of blood so red it hurt to look at them.

Through the ringing in her ears, she could hear the question screamed over and over as the bloody hands scrabbled at her legs.

"What happened? What happened? What happened?"

"Are you all right?" said a voice from the real world, as a hand touched her shoulder. She opened her eyes and found herself looking into the suspicious eyes of a stocky man. He wasn't any taller than her own , but had the build of a professional wrestler, and exuded physical competence. She didn't doubt for a moment that the friendly hand on her shoulder could instantly take her to the floor.

"Yes," she said, "I'm fine, really. I just skipped lunch today and got a little shaky."

"Oh, I see," said the stocky man. "Can I get you anything? Or escort you to the cafeteria?"

He exuded suspicion.

"No, really," she said. "I'll just sit here for a minute if that's OK."

"I'm sure that will be fine," said the stocky man. "Are you meeting someone?"

This seemed somewhat impertinent from a man she didn't know at all, and she was about to snap an answer, when a familiar tall figured stepped up.

"Yes," said Paul, "she's waiting for me. Is there a problem here?"

"No, sir," said the stocky man, "not at all. She seemed a little ill, and I was just making sure she was OK."

"Thank you, Amir," said Paul, "but I'll escort her. Just FYI, she'll be working here starting today."

"Yes, sir," said the man. "Welcome aboard, ma'am," and gave her a searching look that made her feel as if she'd been frisked from hairline to shoes. He turned on his heel and strode away.

"That's Amir Shimar," said Paul. "He's the head of our security division here, and has always been a suspicious sort. His job, I

guess, but he can be a little overwhelming. Since the bombings, he's been wound even tighter, if that's possible. Anything that looks a bit out of place is likely to come to his notice."

He glanced at her as they walked toward the elevator.

"Amir is right, you do look a little pale," he said.

"Yeah, I know," she answered. "It's just been kind of a rough morning."

She wondered if she should just tell him the truth. No one here knew that she'd been there when the Bond & Lacey bomb had killed and maimed what seemed to be everyone around her. No one anywhere knew it, although she expected that the police would sooner or later identify her standing there surrounded by death. Doubtless, some cell phone video or surveillance system got her picture before she turned away and just walked home. She knew it wasn't true, but she felt like she was the only one left unscratched in that roaring hell.

A flicker as she remembered her first look in a mirror, and the red droplets that seemed to be everywhere. She'd scrubbed in the shower till her skin was raw, and every single stitch of clothes right down to the shoes she'd been wearing had gone into an incinerator.

She smiled at Paul. "First day jitters," she said.

He laughed and said, "We've all been there. But you're going to like it here."

They stepped onto the elevator, and Paul pushed a button. "15" glowed red.

"You'll be on 15 with me and the rest," he said. "You have your own office, but closing doors is discouraged unless you have a phone interview or some such. Most of the features writers do have their own, but just outside your door is the bullpen of junior

writers, researchers, and support staff. We find that it encourages them and benefits the senior writers to interact as much as possible on the job."

The elevator slowed and a soft tone sounded. The doors opened, and Lerner was surrounded by a hushed hum of conversations, moving paper, and keyboards. The space was, at the end of the day, a cubical farm, but had been cleverly designed with glass and open space so that each of the writers and researchers were provided what appeared to be a very private space combined with an open work-flow in which conversations were encouraged.

Paul led Lerner through the area, stopping now and again to comment or introduce her to a researcher, or ask the status of a project. Everyone seemed relaxed and competent, and generally pleased to see him. Lerner got the distinct impression that people who worked here were simply expected to perform with very little supervision, and always know their place in the organisation.

"Your office is right over here," said Paul, guiding Lerner toward a bank of modest offices. They were ceiling-to-floor glass on the "bullpen" side, which meant they provided some privacy for conversations, but no more real privacy than any of the stations in the bullpen. Just as they arrived at an office which she noticed already had a "Lerner Jones" nameplate affixed to the door, an older woman who was having a conversation with a small group of people noticed them.

"Paul!" she said, "hang on a minute." She crossed toward them and as she approached, she held out her hand. "I'm Lucy Caldicote," she said. "You must be Lerner." When Lerner nodded acknowledgment, the woman rushed on "Good, so good to meet you. I'm the Editor In Chief, and I normally meet with new people

when they settle into their offices, but since we're both here, I thought I'd pop by and see how it's going. Well, let's step into your new digs, shall we?"

The three went into the office, and Paul closed the door behind them.

"Have a seat," said Lucy, "try out the chair. If it's not what you like, we'll get something else going. You see there is your temporary login to the computer, and Paul will be telling you more about how to file stories for edit. Feel free to bring anything you like to decorate your office, but we discourage anything that's blocking or covering the glass -- Paul has told you about how we like an open office environment, I assume? At any rate, feel free to do as you like with the other three walls." She stepped over to the window behind Lerner's chair. It's a great view, I envy you," she said, "I'm up on 16 and on the other side of the building, so I don't get so much of downtown. You **MUST** come by and visit later this week and meet the upstairs staff."

Lerner glanced at Paul for a second, trying to read him, but his face was completely neutral. Didn't this woman ever take a breath? And, at that moment, Lucy paused, apparently considering whether to continue. She tapped a well-manicured nail against her lip for a moment.

"As I said, I normally have a more formal meeting with new staff members," she began, "but I think it's important that you understand this new position right away."

*Uh-oh, thought Lerner, here it comes.*

"I'm sure Paul went over all this with you, and you are here on his recommendation, so I'm also sure that you know what's needed. But to save any later misunderstandings, you must know

that your position as a feature writer here is a little unconventional. The Echo is founded on the principle that people will pay for good news, or at least a positive spin on bad news. We've been very successful with that model, but we have lately begun getting pressure to -- perhaps be less 'fluffy' on hard issues. The bombings that have occurred lately are, of course, a lead story. The feature writer who used to occupy this office..." she paused and looked around the office as if she'd just seen it... "that writer couldn't work within those constraints. He felt that the issues the country is facing must be addressed. He felt we were 'glossing over' the news. That's completely untrue of course. We are just finding the positives in what can only be called bad news. There's a difference, can you see?"

Lerner nodded. "Yes, ma'am, I can."

"Oh, good, then. We won't be seeing any doom and gloom from you then, or at least none that doesn't have a positive message -- I just knew you'd understand. Paul said you would."

Every time Lerner blinked, she could see the little girl with the shattered leg, clawing at her pants as she tried to stand, scrabbling hands, the ringing blast still roaring in her ears, the blue sky, the perfect day, as the child screamed "What happened? What happened? What happened? What happened?"

She opened her eyes to see the older woman waiting expectantly.

"Yes, ma'am," said Lerner. "I don't see a problem with that."

"Good!" said Lucy. "Come along, Paul, I need you to take a look at this, you can come back later and get Lerner up to speed on the rest." She turned back to Lerner. "Welcome. Go ahead and settle in, and we'll chat more later." She smiled brilliantly and swept

from the office, pulling Paul in her wake.

Lerner sat back in her new chair, and slowly began unpacking her briefcase. Below her on the plaza, she could see the crowds of people walking, clueless, waiting for the slaughter.

She shook her head. There was no slaughter here. And she'd better get herself together to write that convincingly, or that narrow woman with the staccato speech and her rose-colored requirements would have her back out on the street.

## **Chapter four**

*by Mike Devitt*

“Coffee?”

Lerner jumped from her chair as the deep male voice shook her from staring at a monitor with nothing on it. She was struggling to settle into her new role and could not piece together a sentence let alone a whole paragraph. ‘The Times’ had been so much more civil (well they didn't use Office 2000 for a "start), and being hounded by a combination of Paul Lambert's halitosis every day (was it that or just that he drunk so much coffee his teeth had turned the colour of beans) and his ardour which was symptomatic of Lerner changing jobs - male attention: all of this was giving her the wrong start to the day.

She had spent the first week politely declining the offers of ‘lunch’ or ‘a drink at the pub after work’ or with one employee ‘a good old shag at his place’ said extremely loudly so that the rest of the office could hear it! She had looked at what he had to offer and Tim most definitely shopped for ‘smalls’. On day three, he had sat opposite her and noticed that he had a hole in his trousers.

“Oh bollocks, looks like I need a new pair” he exclaimed.

“Lerner, could you come and help me with my trousers?” He

announced. He promptly turned toward her and was busy pulling through one of his scrotums. It hung there like a wrinkled kiwi. She had turned away in disgust but everyone had pre-warned her about Tim and she had been advised that he just needed to get new people out of his system: he was testing her to see how far he could push, she just didn't know how long she was supposed to endure him.

“Resistance is futile” he whispered in her ear, but this week he was haunting someone else in the office.

“Why don't they just get rid of him?” she had asked Paul, but having spurned his advances as well he had stopped talking to her, however he had decided (via e-mail) that SHE did the coffee run every day from now on. This gave him the chance to thank her somewhat condescendingly and then dismiss her new subservience with a good stare at her rear end. So much for equality at work! Was this the male populations way of dealing with the bombings? She had seen the aftermath up close and the devastation to lives and property was terminal. Perhaps she was still shell shocked from being so close to something that was common place in other countries. She was not the type to jet over to Iraq or Syria and write about the frontline but her contributions in Britain had got her noticed. She thought she was on the up when the ‘Daily Echo’ offered her a job she couldn't refuse but now she was here, it just seemed to be a kennel full of misogynists. She grabbed the coffee offered to her and took small sips to see if that would stimulate any injection of inspiration.

Whilst she tried to think about the feature she was going to write, her phone rang. The company had just bought some new ‘Sasco’ phones and if the number was internal then it showed the

face of the caller. If it was external then it was easier to ignore if she wanted. She watched the phone light up with 'withheld number' and chose to ignore it.

"I MUST get this done," she mumbled to herself but the phone rang again, same source. Her hand hovered over the receiver but this time something stirred inside ( it must be important for them to ring twice in succession) and she felt compelled to answer it.

"Good Morning, Daily Echo, Lerner Jones?"

"Aah Mrs Jones."

"It's Miss."

"Oops sorry, Miss, er, yes, I need to speak to you about a private matter. I think I may have a story for you. Can we meet?"

"Who is this?"

"Oh yes, apologies, but I think it's best I don't tell you over the phone."

"Ohh Kaaay. And what story would this be?" She looked at the phone. Was this just another male wasting her time?

"Can't tell you that either. How about I meet you in Cafe Quongo in, say, half an hour? Can you make that?"

She could and everyone knew that journos frequented Quongo.

"Sure. How will I know you?"

"Don't worry, I already know you."

This gave her the shivers. It was like the days when she used to scour social media sites for information about people. Their lives were unwittingly opened up through placing photographs of themselves and partners aligned on a site with little or no security. Armed with the all important meta-data showing the dates and times shots were taken collating a story became quicker, more efficient. Lerner was a student of new technology. She had been

swept in to journalism and influenced those around her with ground breaking techniques in research.

“Right, I'll see you in 30.”

She hung up and stared back at her still blank screen.

Quongo was a good ten minute walk from the Daily Echo. Lerner stooped to see what kind of day it was outside and whether she might need a brolly. There were a few dark clouds massing behind the Gherkin but she wanted to take as little as possible: her hold-all should be enough. She undocked her laptop and slipped it inside one of the leather compartments and made her way to the lobby. As she passed by the Editor's office she heard a female voice call her name.

“Lerner? Step inside, just need a minute.” It was Lucy, the editor of the paper.

“I've got a meeting... don't want to be late!” She pointed to her wrist.

“It will only take a minute. I just needed to know how that feature article was coming on?”

That was the one without a single word typed so far.

“I'm all over it!” She replied.

“Great, can I have it tonight?”

“Er, yes, yes, yes of course.” Too many yesses, she thought. It's going to be obvious that I'm behind.

“Lovely, see you later.” And she waved her away whilst reading some thing on her screen.

Lerner hurried out the door and made it to Quangos in eight minutes. The new deadline already becoming a stick to be beaten with. She knew that copy had to be written and submitted on time.

Even though she may have some latitude being the new girl, her last boss had told her that 'You're only as good as your last day' and this had stuck with her: this meeting with the source needed to be quick.

Having ordered her favourite Macchiato she sat for a moment and savoured the happy atmosphere of her surroundings: the tap, tap, tap of the coffee filters and general chit chat from behind the counter, she homed in on the words 'anything else?' while she waited.

Several suits arrived and stood in the queue waiting to place an order. Lerner was careful not to look too eager in case (a) they weren't her source and (b) they got the wrong idea (the prospect of another testicle display was too much to bear). She gave them eye contact for a second, but even though she knew their stares were longer, she chose to look outside the window to see if anyone else would arrive. She checked her phone, in her eagerness and rush she had arrived ten minutes early. Perhaps, she could use the time to start the article. As she leant over to pull out her laptop she heard a voice.

"Good morning Lerner, I'm Nathan Bearfield" a hand was placed for her to shake as she resurfaced with her device. This was one of the suits at the counter. He was clean shaven, dark haired and everything she admired in a man: all round smart. She clasped his hand with the fingers of her left hand in an awkward handshake whilst placing her laptop as a defence between them.

"Hi, I'm sorry but I need to get down to business. I've got to be back at the office soon." She replied.

"No problem, I'll make this quick then. Would you mind?" He placed his hand on the top of her screen and attempted to close it.

She shuddered for a moment (like, how dare he touch her equipment) and snapped it shut.

“Thanks, I just wanted your full attention that's all” he smiled warmly at her.

“Ok, so the reason I asked to see you was that I've been tracking you for some time.” He let that line sit between them for a moment before continuing. “And I've got to confess, I have no story for you at all.”

“I don't have time for this.” Lerner stood and began to pack her laptop into her bag.

“No, please, just hear me out. Could you sit down for a second? Please, this is important.”

Lerner blushed and looked around. It seemed like everyone had stopped their own conversations to listen to theirs when Nathan's pitch had risen. She let the bag slip back to the floor and slid back to her seat.

Nathan leaned in.

“We think that the Daily Echo, is not quite the paper it's reporting itself to be.”

“Oh really? Who is we?” She tried hard not to sound sarcastic.

“I work for the Competition Commission and we have received a complaint about the Daily Echo.”

Oh great, she thought more good news about her new place of work.

“What kind of complaint?”

“Well, like I said, we think that the paper is, erm, not independent. We think that it is part of a wider group of papers.”

“And what does this have to do with me? And so what if they are?”

Nathan, sat back, shifted in his seat, re-adjusted his suit and leant in again.

“I’ll answer the first question in a moment. If they aren’t independent they could be breaching market concentration laws, and this is where you come in.”

There was an uncomfortable silence between them now. Lerner looked at her macchiato for help but it was all gone.

“Me?”

He nodded.

“What can I do?”

“Well, being new and having an inquiring mind there is an opportunity to do some digging. You know? The kind of awkward questions that established employees just wouldn’t ask?”

Lerner took the spoon from her empty cup and sucked on it, hoping that in some way a little more caffeine would help. She didn’t want to say an outright no to a man with the law on his side but she also didn’t want to seem like she was turning into a snitch on week two of her new employment.

“I’ll think about it.”

He stood up.

“Remember, you have a professional obligation here, if you choose not to help and the paper isn’t what it purports to be, then you’ll end up being out of a job anyway.”

He gave her another teeth white smile, turned and made his way out of the door. She wanted to reply to him but all her retorts were emotional. She sat back and blew out her cheeks.

Never pick up the phone if you don’t know who it is, she reminded herself.

The journey back to the office took 12 minutes. It seemed to

take twice as long without the focus of the deadline, fogged now with the spectre of the request that had been made of her. As she passed Lucy's office, there seemed to be a board meeting going on. As she looked through the clear glass at all the attendees she wondered who the real power was. Lucy's door was closed and she only managed to catch the eye of one business man, but as usual, he wasn't staring at her because she was a high flying journalist. He started with her breasts and worked his way down to her heels. It was like walking through a full body scanner and the thought of him made her retch.

Back at her desk, she smoothed out her skirt, placed her pens in a uncooked spaghetti fan and re-docked her laptop.

Tim passed by.

"You thought about it yet?" He asked.

"Oh Tim, thought about what?" and then wished she hadn't teed him up.

"Us, together. Sweaty lust."

"In your dreams," she replied, trying to think of a smart response.

"You have been actually." He looked to the sky for a moment. "Nice beaver."

"It's shaved" she said mischievously, but Tim, not missing a beat, responded.

"Good, the hairs always get up my nose." And with that he was off.

She laughed to herself and was then reminded by the blank document sitting in front of her of an immediate and more pressing concern. She turned and looked back to Lucy's office. It was not right that she had this new burden placed on her only a

week in. She wanted to impress the bosses, prove that she was a team player. The meeting seemed to have finished as the door opened and the smell of egos fell out of the room. Handshakes and fake smiles were exchanged as the group filed out leaving Lucy tidying her office. Lerner seized the moment.

“Need some help?”

Lucy was re-adjusting the chairs around the oval table. “No, I’m all good thanks. You look like you have a question?”

“More of a statement really, I think. I’ve been approached by a man from the Competition Commission.”

Lerner studied her new bosses face, her 49 years of life gave nothing away.

“And I wanted to bring this to your attention.” Still nothing. Lucy just stared back at her “So I’ve been asked to find out whether the paper is truly independent.”

“What do you believe?” Lucy asked.

Lerner wasn’t expecting that response. She did not know what she believed. It had not been a question for her.

“Well, we are independent... aren’t we?”

“I think we are going to need Amir.”

“Amir?”

“Yes, Amir, is our head of security. Thanks for bringing this to my attention.”

She turned away from Lerner picking up her handset as her feet found the window ledge. She placed her hand against the receiver for a moment.

“Be a love Lerner and close the door on the way out, thanks.”

Lerner headed back to her desk. Her phone rang again. The display said ‘withheld number’.

## **Chapter five**

*by Waleed Ovasse*

Lerner remembered that weekend, it had been years ago in high school, when she joined her friends venturing deep into the outback, miles and miles past the Dingo Fence. The largest man made fence of its kind, it stretched across Australia, dividing the wild from the tame. And that weekend as they ventured through the dust, she had felt herself become wilder as well, as her and her companions lost their inhibitions and joined the untamed beauty around them. As spring unfurled its gnarled fingers, she and Kurt, the boy she had, had a crush on all year, snuck away from their pack and found each other in the dark. Throughout the week that they stayed out there, letting the sun wash over their pale bodies until they all became a deep tan, enjoying each other's company, and finding herself with Kurt, she experienced pure and simple happiness.

It was the simpleness of that weekend, the simplicity of the Dingo Fence, that brought a sharp contrast to her current predicament. That wonderful weekend of joy, happiness, and love had faded into her current future. Lerner Jones, celebrated reporter of The Times, stood in The Daily Echo newsroom staring

at her computer screen, looking at what she considered real reporting on The Times website. But she wasn't reading it, because every time her eyes would meet another headline of the ongoing investigation into the terror attacks, it was as if an explosion would occur in her mind, and she would relive the tense moments before, the alarming moments during, and the pain afterwards of the explosion at Bond & Lacey. By some unnatural occurrence, the Dingo Fence had been broken, and the world was turning wild again. And she couldn't handle it.

Finally, nodding to an intern as they passed, she got up and walked to the break room, unable to stare at the screens around her any longer. She wore a suit that day, narrow white pinstripes covering her from shoulder to ankle, with a silk shirt underneath. Her heels clicked on the hard floor as she found her way. She noticed the same intern as before, laughing at something on one of the screens, and it only accentuated her discomfort.

She couldn't pinpoint a reason she hated the cloying nature of her new job. She was being paid very well for her time here, but ultimately, it was as if she had stepped down to a lesser form of journalism. A form that endeared itself not to the people who wondered about the world, but those whose own cynicism meant that they refused to care, only to mock slightly. The positive spin was getting out of hand, becoming a mixture of misplaced snark and useless sunshine.

She leaned against the counter, the coffee mugs behind her and the unopened milk cartons showing through the refrigerator's clear window. The intern, whose name she could never remember, passed in front of the break room door, smiling again.

Something in her head broke, and with a quick swing she

knocked the coffee mugs to the ground, most splintering on impact, her years of spin classes plus the unnaturalness of the past few weeks coming to a head. Her left arm took out the coffee creamers and the little stirrers and sugar packets, making the floor a mess of everything a coffee drinker dreamed of, except thankfully, the unmistakable stain of coffee itself.

She breathed heavily. Seeing the broken handles, the ceramic pieces of half words, and the draining coffee creamer bottles, it brought a sort of calm over her. She leaned back against the counter again. Positivity was only as good as the people absorbing it, she thought. Her mind slowed down as she stared at the creamer puddling around her heels.

“Nathan Bearfield. Competition Commission,” she whispered. The smell of dairy was thick in the small break room, and she could almost taste the hazelnut creamer. A confusing choice for a utilitarian drink, she thought. She looked at her morning coffee as the only way to get going, not something to be overly indulgent with. Her mind flitted back to Bearfield. How could he think that the *The Daily Echo* was being controlled by some other larger group? Most major outlets were depressing, whilst this one was disgustingly positive. She preferred her coffee black, rather than filled with sweet sugary nothingness.

A janitor poked his head into the room. “Everything ok?” he asked. Wordlessly, Lerner pointed to the floor. The janitor sighed. “Really? You could have just thrown them all away rather than...” He stopped, seeing it was pointless to complain.

Lerner stepped over her pile of destruction, took a twenty pound note out of her pocket and handed it to the janitor. “I’m sorry for your trouble.” She walked out of the room and back to

her desk.

One of the oddest parts about moving from Melbourne to London, Lerner thought, was the true lack of having a car as a necessity. She sat in the tube station, across from *The Daily Echo* building, looking at the other members of her congregation in the holy church of mass transit. Four businessmen, a doctor, three nurses, two police officers twirling their caps (obviously off duty, or perhaps on duty, one could never really tell), and her. It was the middle of the day, and with the recent attacks, perhaps people were staying away from the Tube.

She sat there, wondering if any of them really knew how they were being manipulated on a daily basis. Advertising, movie bias, documentary bias, news bias, academic bias, everything and nothing vying for their attention and promising them the world if only they would believe.

She overheard the nurses talking about a new vaccine that might be coming to market, and Lerner remembered an article she just had to write trying to put a positive spin on the anti vaccine campaign among some parents. She had to choose to just leave out important facts, rather than upset the editorial board.

The train whisked into the station, with a rattle and a couple cracks, screeching to a halt. Several dozen people got off, hurrying to their destination. Lerner sat down, crossing her legs, and took out her notepad.

She had researched what Nathan had wanted to know, if there was any undue influence among the editorial staff of *The Daily Echo*, whether the major media outlets were exerting control over the small online newspaper, and ultimately if *The Daily Echo* was

truly independent. The facts she had found out were pretty clear, and she had written them down verbatim as she had found them: *The Daily Echo* is independently owned, except for a major 20% stake by a couple international investment firms. This, coupled with the exaggerated quality of the news reporting, and the cloying nature of the editorial board, she wasn't sure how any of it made sense.

"May I ask the time?" asked an old man sitting next to her.

"Of course!" She took out her phone. "It's four in the afternoon."

"Thank you," said the man, and returned to staring off into space.

Lerner looked at her phone again and noticed an email from one of the younger reporters, Darren, who had taken to the dark humor exhibited by the editorial staff a little too well.

"Do you mind giving this a quickie and shootin' it back to me?" Darren asked in the email. Lerner opened the attachment, which had thankfully downloaded before she had gotten onto the train. It was the usual puff of the newspaper, but with the quintessential Darren snark, this time about United Kingdom politicians not being able to keep their hands off the budget, or each other. Only Darren could make fun of a Baroness without coming off like a complete idiot.

The train stopped, and Lerner got off. A light rain had begun to fall, so Lerner quickened her pace. Perhaps she should have called first and made an appointment with Bearfield, but she was in a hurry, and he would have to make time for her. After all, he had approached her, not the other way around. She had to be important to his cause.

London had become a startling place to her after the Bond &

Lacey attacks. Perhaps the attackers had won, making her fear the very streets she walked on, or perhaps they had chosen their target well, as the firm looked like any other building, any other facade in London. The click of her heels became thunderous sounds in her mind as she tried to block out everything around her, trying her best to keep moving. Maybe she should have taken a taxi, but she wouldn't let them take away her independence. She would fight them the only way she knew how, by keeping on.

The Competition Commission was a nondescript white stone building, much like any other government structure, unable to distinguish itself from the hulk that was the English Government. Lerner bounded up the steps and made her way through to reception.

A young woman with light brown hair greeted her. "How may I help you?" she chirped, almost robotically.

"I'd like to be directed to Nathan Bearfield's office please. It's very urgent that I speak with him immediately," said Lerner, trying to stress the immediacy in her voice and posture.

The receptionist's fingers flew over her keyboard, typing in Nathan's name. She frowned. "Any unusual spellings in that, ma'am?"

"No."

The receptionist frowned again, typing some more. "I'm sorry ma'am, we don't have a Nathan Bearfield on record working at the Competition Commission."

"I'm sorry?"

"There is no record of a Nathan Bearfield, his office, or position. I'm sorry ma'am."

Lerner stepped back from the desk, nodding placidly. "I'm

sorry for the trouble. Perhaps I have the wrong building.” She walked out of the Competition Commission, and stood in the drizzle. From the attacks to taking a job at *The Daily Echo*, and now a possibly fake government agent, it was clear that someone or something was giving her a hard time.

Her mind once again snapped back to her time past the Dingo Fence, staring at the long strands of metal that stretched far beyond anything the eye could see. Her friends had joined hands as they had crossed it as one, embracing their friendship and their bond. But now, Lerner stood alone on the cold, wet, pavement, unable to contemplate her next move, either back or beyond a different sort of Fence, one that could possibly lead her to greater harm than she ever imagined.

## Chapter six

*by Adela Torres*

Lerner had been looking at the visiting card for a while now. It didn't really deserve such interest: Mr. Bearfield's name in a neat capital font, an address, a telephone number and a generic e-mail for the information desk of the Competition Commission. Lerner was quite sure that the e-mail would *not* reach the Competition Commission. The phone number may reach Nathan Bearfield himself, though; and the temptation of calling him out on his lie was strong.

But why the lie in the first place? What could anyone gain from posing as a Competition Commission employee? Were there really doubts about *The Daily Echo's* editorial line, or was that another lie?

In front of her, the flat screen of her state-of-the-art computer showed the only two existing paragraphs of her next article for the paper: a fluffy, happy piece on the scientifically proven psychological benefits of painting your home, due yesterday. They weren't very good paragraphs; they had appeared after of three hours of furious typing and erasing, but even she had to admit they were bland and purposeless, the prose meandering, boring and

bored-sounding. Not *Daily Echo* material at all. She should erase them and start over. She should concentrate on her work. She should forget all about Nathan Bearfield, the liar, the man that didn't really work for the Competition Commission. She should, in fact, pretend that she was working because Lucy was looking at her and frowning.

Her hands hovered over the keyboard. She was only mildly surprised when she saw them go for her phone instead. *Yeah, like I didn't know I'd do that.* She keyed the number on the card. A male voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Mister Bearfield?"

"Speaking."

"Mister Bearfield, this is Lerner Jones."

"Ah, Miss Jones. Nice to hear from you. Have you thought about our offer?"

"In a sense, yes. Listen, would it be possible to meet? I'd like to," Lerner kept her voice completely casual, "talk about your offer."

"Certainly. When?"

"Is this morning too soon?"

"I think—yes, we can do it. Can you meet me at the Royal Horseguards Hotel?"

She knew the place. Posh. "I can be there in half an hour."

"I'll wait for you, then."

And that was it. As conversations with mysterious liars went, this one had not been especially sinister. Lerner tapped her phone softly on her table, frowning. Then she got up and caught Lucy's eyes again. The expression on the editor-in-chief's face said that

she was exactly aware of how much Lerner *wasn't* working.

"I—I have to go out for a bit," Lerner said, knowing she sounded guilty and hating it.

"So I see," Lucy said in a mild tone, and didn't say anything else, which made Lerner even more nervous. She picked up her purse and, trying to look cool, left the newsroom.

Nathan Bearfield, perfectly groomed in his well-tailored suit and tie, blended perfectly with the Royal Horseguard's lounge elegant décor. Lerner felt suddenly too informal and modern, and not dainty enough for the carpeted magnificence of the hotel. She gestured to Bearfield, who smiled when he saw her and rose from his red armchair to greet her.

"Miss Jones, good to see you."

"Please," Lerner said, still trying to determine how she should play this. "Call me Lerner."

"Lerner. I'm Nathan, then. Sit down, please. Would you like something to drink?"

He was having tea. *How terribly British.* She sat down and ordered the same.

"So," Nathan said, "how about it? Do you think you could help us?"

"Well," Lerner said smiling, "that depends, doesn't it?"

"On?"

*Right. Direct it is.*

"On whom I may really be helping, Nathan," she said brightly. "Because it certainly isn't the Competition Commission. Who do you work for? Or are you just a nut?"

She waited, tense. Nathan made a show of pouring himself

another cup of tea. He was good, she had to give him that.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t check?” Lerner continued. “You don’t work for the Competition Commission. So what is this really about, *Nathan*?”

There was a brief pause.

“You’re right, of course,” Nathan said placidly. “My apologies. I see that I should have been upfront from the start.”

Lerner, who didn’t expect an admission so soon in the conversation, raised her eyebrows.

“I don’t work for the Commission, true, but I *do* have an official position, and my offer stands. Would you at least consider it? We really could use your help.”

“You’ve lied enough,” Lerner crossed her arms. “Tell me who do you work for. And *no visiting cards*,” she snapped, when Nathan put his hand in his inner pocket. He laughed, and withdrew the hand.

“All right, all right, I’ll tell you the truth. I’m an intelligence agent. I work for MI7.”

Lerner’s frown deepened.

“Yeah, pull the other one. There’s no MI7.”

“Miss Jones, I’m impressed,” Nathan’s eyebrows rose.

“And stop patronising me,” Lerner growled. He couldn’t be much older than her, despite his City looks and his manners and his irritating smugness. “MI7 was disbanded in the forties.”

“And reinstated in 1997,” Nathan said, unperturbed. “Do you know what was its purpose?”

“Propaganda,” Lerner said.

“Right again. More precisely, Press and Propaganda. During the first World War MI7 carried out successful propaganda campaigns

overseas, and it also took care of the enemy's propaganda efforts in the homeland."

"Very patriotic, I'm sure."

"Don't knock it till you've tried it," Nathan smiled, thinly. His cup of tea was cooling off, forgotten, Lerner noticed. "Of course it was all a bit—heavy-handed, which was all right for the time. Things were clearer, more black-and-white. Then, as you said, the unit was disbanded. Until Tony Blair re-instated it."

"There was no news about it."

"Of course there wasn't. A Military Intelligence unit devoted to *propaganda*, in the enlightened final decade of the twentieth century? The very idea!" Nathan could do sarcasm surprisingly well, thought Lerner. "No, no. The re-instatement of MI7 was kept secret. Its mission, of course, had changed with the times and needed—a more discreet approach. Besides, the Government didn't think that the public would consider it a very good idea."

"No, it wouldn't", agreed Lerner. "So what you're telling me is that you work for a secret Military Intelligence Unit no-one has heard of since the forties. Which is, of course, *much* more credible than your other story. Not melodramatic at all."

"The other story had the advantage of being far more credible, while this one has the advantage of being true. Would you like to see my ID?"

"Would it convince me?"

"Probably not. It's a very pretty ID, but MI7 is far too jealous of its privacy to make IDs saying 'We're a real secret government agency, trust us on this'. I work close by, at Horseguards Avenue, as a matter of fact. You can check. But I can tell you this: we are real, we work hard, and one of our many, many tasks is to keep an

eye on the free press of this country.”

“To make it less free?”

“Please don’t insult both our intelligences, Lerner,” Nathan said. “We already have capitalism for that. No, our aim is not control. Part of our work is to detect trends and biases, to get a feel for the general flow of information and see whether there are isolated or even organised attempts to... redirect the flow. This is the very condensed version of what we do, of course.”

“How condensed is that?”

“Neutron-star level. Look, I don’t want to rush you and I certainly don’t want to alarm you. But there’s one thing I haven’t lied to you about. Well, two. One is my name, and the other is the fact that your help would be quite appreciated. We’d like to know more about the inner workings of *The Daily Echo*.”

“You want me to be a spy?”

“Now who’s being melodramatic? No, I want you to be a—a consultant, if you will. Nothing sinister. You have experience in the journalism field, you have worked in two very different media, and you are smart and quick-witted. Your vision and opinions would be useful to us.”

“Why? What has *The Daily Echo* done to get your attention?”

“Nothing in particular,” Nathan looked at his tea, seemed surprised to see the cup still full, stirred it a bit. “It’s a rapidly rising paper with a strong online presence. We want to get a complete picture, that’s all.” Nathan didn’t look up immediately and Lerner narrowed her eyes. *Here be liars*, she thought.

Nathan looked up and smiled ingratiatingly. “Besides, you’d have to admit that *The Daily Echo* doesn’t devote itself to what you may call *real* journalism, right?”

Right. But Lerner had had enough of ‘real journalism’ since the —the incident, and the *Echo* paid her very well to write feel-good pieces that didn’t need any real skill beyond knowing how to use a spellchecker. What kind of sinister conspiracy could happen in that modern, airy newsroom? The darkest thing she’d seen there had been Paul’s sense of humour.

“As you say,” she said, shrugging, “the *Echo* is not exactly investigative journalism at its finest. My information would most likely bore you to tears.”

“That’s fine.” Nathan sipped his tea, made a face, put the cup and saucer aside. “Most of the intelligence work is boredom incarnate anyway. So, would you help us?”

“I’m thinking about it,” Lerner said, and she was. She had the time, and what the hell, she could try, for a little while at least. See how it went. If it was interesting, maybe she could contemplate a change of career. *Lerner Jones, MI7* sounded quite cool to her mental ears.

“You don’t need to give me an answer now, of course. Take all the time you need. But I’d ask you to keep this meeting a secret until you decide, if that’s all right.”

“Look,” Lerner said, thinking quickly, “I’m probably a fool, but all right. I will do it.”

“You will?” he seemed genuinely, almost childishly delighted. “That’s wonderful!”

“Understand that I’m just accepting a trial period; if this doesn’t convince me I’ll be out faster than you can process.”

“It’s a strictly voluntary collaboration, Lerner,” Nathan corroborated, making placating gestures. “We *are* the Government; we can’t pay you anyway, so this only works if you

want it to.”

“Yes, well—I imagine there’s no contract or anything. What happens now?”

“Well, what happens now is that we’ll meet periodically for a nice cup of tea and some conversation. Your privacy will be protected, of course, and there’ll be some tedious non-disclosure agreements to go through, which would absolutely convince you that I work for the Government. Nothing spells ‘official’ like bureaucracy, eh?” Nathan looked at her for an instant and when she said nothing he got up and smiled. “As a token of goodwill, may I show you my workplace? It would probably be more convincing than an ID at this point.”

It would, if she had the opportunity to ask other people about this MI7 business. On the other hand, it meant leaving a safe public space in the company of a stranger *and* a known liar. She seized him up: neat, polite, sedentary; public-school material. He didn’t look the dangerous type, which of course didn’t mean much; she had to admit she’d been hair-triggered since the explo—the incident, and was probably overreacting now. But she was certain she could at least run faster than him if the need arose. She got up.

“All right, show me.”

“It’s not far, we can walk.”

Nathan picked up the bill for both of them with exquisite delicacy and they paused under the hotel’s canopy to look at the clouds covering the sky and drizzling dull grey light on them. Ah, November in London. They started walking slowly down Whitehall Court, towards Horseguards Avenue.

“So, when will the first of these teas come about?” Lerner asked curiously, raising her voice over the traffic hum.

“We’ll have to see. But first, may I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Do you have any vacation time coming?”

“Not really. Why?”

“It’s—How easy it would be for you to get a week’s vacation at short notice?”

Lerner thought of her lonely, sad two paragraphs, and Lucy’s expression, and laughed.

“As easy as in ‘No way in Hell’. The *Echo* may not be *The Times*, but there’s a lot of work to do and I happen to be behind on mine. Sorry.”

“Well, that figures,” he sighed. Lerner turned to see why his tone of voice had changed so abruptly and then he pushed her, hard, right into the middle of the road.

She was fighting to regain her balance, too shocked to realise what had happened, when she heard a noise; and she didn’t even have time to identify it as the squealing brakes of the white transit van that hit her.

## Chapter seven

*by Ioa Petre'ka*

The engine of the van thrummed, periodically spitting and lurching as it idled, betraying a subtle but pervasive lack of routine maintenance. The driver of the van stared out over eight knuckles, leg distended and foot wedged between brake pedal and flooring, at the distorted head-shaped smear that now adorned the windshield. A single length of black hair, rooted along the side of the smear, fluttered angrily in the wind. Starting with some sudden internal awareness, the driver's posture relaxed, lips fluttering as he chastised himself for going rigid during an accident. *Worst thing you can do, be a rag doll not a porcelain*, he chanted out from some old memory, then shook his head tartly, failing to get the sound of skull on glass out of his mind.

Gradually, he became aware of a minor disturbance along the ground. In the very corner of what could be seen from his position, a limp white hand fluttered and flapped like a beached fish against the dark ground. Breaking free from the moments of post-impact shock, skulls still thudding in his mind, the driver flipped the van into reverse, gently eased up on the brake and manoeuvred the van into a diagonal across the street. He could now clearly see the body

of the woman lying in the road, her hand still periodically convulsing, fingernails clacking against concrete.

Now with the angle changed, a still, antagonistic shadow became evident, even obvious, carved out along the ground from behind a parked car along the side of the road. The shadow of a man crouched, back arched, hands extended toward the splayed form on the ground, jaw working around silent words. And then the shadow of the right hand flickered, fingers forming a sequence of signs and symbols.

*All clear ... no observers ... request finisher.*

Turning his gaze from the repeating gesture, the driver stepped out of the van and hurried toward the woman on the ground. The tall man squatted beside Lerner and checked her pulse along the base of the neck. With familiar precision, he pulled one of her eyelids open to check for concussion, then worked down her limbs with brief convulsive movements, looking for bone breaks or lacerations.

“Save for the swelling on the right knee, she’ll be fine”, he said quietly. The crouching shadow shifted, and the driver reached into his coat pocket, removing a yellow highlight marker. He uncapped the marker and twisted it just so causing the end to break off in his hand. A small black syringe rolled out from within the empty barrel of the marker. The driver gave Nathan Bearfield a hand up, and the syringe. Then the driver turned on heel and retreated silently to the van.

Bearfield was only partially aware of the white van dwindling down the road as he went down on one knee beside Lerner. Her eyelids had begun fluttering rapidly against the sunlight, irises swimming within the stupor of marginal awareness, small little

half flashes of pale green and bloodshot white, small little half  
wsSords uttered, reduced to the staccato clacking of teeth and a  
rattle of dry tongue across the palette, voiced with whistles, rasps  
and moans. Bearfield reached down to support her head, and  
slipped the needle point of the black syringe behind her left ear.

“What... what... wha...”, she murmured with decreasing strength  
as the vitality of consciousness slipped from her eyes. Bearfield  
pulled the syringe back, then carefully capped it and placed it back  
inside the highlight marker barrel, twisting the top shut and  
slipping the pen into his suit pocket. He let Lerner’s head gently  
roll to the side, then stood up briskly, patting his pockets for the  
mobile. Reluctantly, Bearfield pounded three nines on the screen  
and made the call.

Lerner awoke from an abstract nightmare that seemed to have  
been plaguing her for hours with broken shapes, sound and  
colourless light. The room she awoke to was unfamiliar in every  
way, though it was also warm and dark around her, protective.  
Whenever she tried to move, it felt more as though the room were  
moving instead. Bit by bit, she became aware of diverse oddities.  
She found, for instance, that there were soft plastic tubes pulling at  
her nostrils, and when she swallowed, cold air rushed down the  
back of her throat. Wherever she shifted, a forest of cables, tubing  
and wires lurched around her, clattering against themselves and  
her arms.

Gradually she became aware of the room beyond her strange  
entombment, from the looming machines around her that sighed  
endlessly, occasionally pausing to chatter or emit brief bursts of  
colour-coded light, to the sharp odour of ointments and death.

Lerner realised that one of the tones had become—*had always been?*—synchronised with the the beating of her heart.

“You shouldn’t be moving”, came a nearly familiar voice from somewhere beneath her feet, “you’ve been in an accident, your at Lewisham Hospital. You were on your way to work, I should call someone.”

Ignoring this, Lerner struggled against whatever soft prison surrounded her. There was something about the sound of that voice that made her want to disappear in whatever fashion was most convenient. She discovered, as many have to great chagrin, that being strapped to a hospital bed makes disappearing rather difficult. Her eyes rolled down, and along the bottom of her vision she could see the blur of a man, sitting legs crossed and doing something repetitive with his hands, methodical.

“What—”, Lerner said, “who are you?” Words all rough and dry.

Bearfield rose from the chair in the corner and stepped into the soft light around the bed. In his hand a half-peeled orange sat seemingly luminous in the backlight. He pried a wedge from the globe and placed it in his mouth. Lerner stared up at the man, Agent Heathfield? No, Bearfield it was. He loudly ground the pulp of the orange between his teeth.

“Paul. Paul Cambridge, that’s who you should call,” she replied softly.

Swallowing the orange, he reached into his coat jacket and produced her phone. She weakly tapped on Paul’s icon and then slumped back painfully, only aware at a most basic level of the ensuing conversation between her editor and the mysterious agent.

Nathan paused at the door, turning back toward her and said “I pushed you in front of a van”, then looked down at the palm of his

hand, as if confused by the presence of the fruit. Setting it aside with an awkward gesture, Nathan turned back to her, "I did it deliberately."

Lerner's eyes flashed to the orange and then back to the evidently homicidal man standing in the door. "Then what are you waiting for," she snapped. Then something in the back of her head clicked, and battered by a roaring and sudden pain, and felt the room go dark again.

Sunlight awoke her, and she rolled on her side. The room had changed, the machines were gone and she was no longer caged to a bed by a dozen umbilicals. Lying back again, eyes closed, she tried to recall the events of last night but found them swimming in illogical loops. Disconnected half memories competed with fragments of some nightmare. She let her eyes fall across the strange room, until they landed upon an object that at first she could not fully see, but as her focus sharpened, the warmth drained out of her bones. For on the bedstand a sad, withering strip of orange peel sat curling. There was something important about that, something missing for her mind, a flash of white and black, a palm pressed into the middle of her back, and a malevolent sharp pain behind the ear, the disconnected crack of bone on glass.

*Bear...*

But when the door clicked open, it was a strange man who entered the room. His blue eyes widened when he realised she was staring back at him, and he quickly retreated from the room, closing the door behind him.

Beyond the door, a quiet conversation was being conducted, and Lerner strained to turn these soft and indistinct sounds into

words. Failing, she frantically pressed the red button to call a nurse. But the door opened abruptly, too soon, and Agent Bearfield strode into the room with the stranger close behind.

“Ah”, he said, circling around the bed and gently removing the call device from Lerner’s hand, revealing the severed end of the cable.

“Why am I here, why are you doing this?” she asked, glancing at the tall stranger, “I demand to know it!”

“Everything will be okay, you were not hurt, we saw to that”, Nathan replied, “we’re here to help you.”

“We? Help—”

“Yes, I would like you to meet Agent James”, he turned and gestured to the man standing behind him, “he’s the driver that struck you in the road.”

Lerner laughed once, too loudly, and swallowed in pain.

“It is simple, you could not get away from your work, so we gave you an excuse to,” Nathan continued, “a rather convincing one.”

“So you just put me in the hospital, I could have faked it!”

“No, you couldn’t have,” he said and then turned to Angus, holding his hand out.

Angus reached into his pocket and pulled out a small leather case, handing it to Nathan. “This,” Nathan continued, “is what you are going to be working on while you continue your cover of being too injured to leave. Here, examine these,” he opened the case and began spreading unfamiliar objects across the bed table.

Despite herself, Lerner leaned up on her elbows to get a better look at what he was carefully arranging before her.

“James, you will explain to our friend here what she is to do with these?”

The brown haired giant picked up a chair from the corner of the room and sat down beside the bed. "This," he said, holding up a black cable with a spherical bulb on the end, "is a camera." His voice was gentle and strangely high-pitched, "and this is a simple directional microphone."

Bearfield stepped forward and put a hand on James' shoulder. "Your job here is to gather information from the people around you, using these tools, and of course without getting caught with them. You get caught with this," he pointed at the devices, "and it will be up to you to explain yourself. You will of course never hear from us again."

With the equipment assembled, James silently demonstrated their usages for Lerner, taking care to point out the common mistakes that people make, and then handed over the delicate tangle of filaments and bulbs and buttons.

Lerner's fingers felt thick with pain medication, but she managed to get the wire coiled around her forearm the way she had seen Agent James do it, and flourished the tiny microphone at Bearfield.

James reached down to her wrist, "No, that's... you can't let the fabric touch the microphone like that, you'll hear nothing but that."

"Try holding something casually, you don't want to just have your arm up in the air for no reason," Bearfield said, "and I can see the microphone from over here, you need to use misdirection and shadow."

Lerner nodded and placed her finger on her chin as if in thought, but the sleeve slipped, revealing the length of black cable down her arm. She sighed in frustration.

"Not to worry," James glared at Bearfield for a moment, then

turned back to Lerner, “you’ll have plenty of time for practice alone, I’m sure.”

## Chapter eight

*by Lia La Chapelle*

A phone rang from the corridor. Lerner tensed. The sound pierced her ears, tinnitus from the explosion. Her pulse quickened. The rise and falling tone blossomed into screams, shouts for help. Everywhere chaos. She shook away the memory.

Pathetic. Other journalists went to the front line all the time. They saw things much worse.

Lerner swallowed a dry lump and reached for a glass of water on her bedside table. Her hand trembled as she brought the room temperature liquid to her lips. Get it together. She gulped it down.

“Mhm. Okay.” Angus entered her room, phone to his ear. He looked at her and nodded. “Thanks.” He flipped the phone shut and buried it in his pocket.

“Let’s play a game.” Angus plopped down in the chair beside her hospital bed.

Lerner was grateful for the company, but the way he smirked made her suspicious.

“What kind of game?”

He pulled a slim black phone from his jacket pocket and placed it on the table along with an earbud. “You have the devices we gave

you, yeah? I'm going to see if you've been paying attention, we're going to play a little spy versus spy."

"What, here?"

"Check your drawers."

Lerner raised a brow and leant over to the bedside table, a small fabric case sat in the centre of an otherwise empty drawer.

"My clothes. where--"

"I've hidden two listening devices and a camera in the nurses' station. Infiltrate and sweep." Angus grinned. "Recover the items and I'll tell you where your clothes are hidden."

Lerner's arms fell limp. The press would likely be outside the hospital waiting to snap a shot of her and grab a quote or two--and few would extend to her the professional courtesy of not running a feature photo of her in her hospital pyjamas.

"Have you seriously hidden my clothing?"

Angus nodded. "I expect the staff will dispose of them when they find them. Every mission has stakes, Grasshopper."

Lerner swung her legs off the bed and glared. "Do you even work for MI7?"

"No. By the way, nice knickers."

Lerner's cheeks flushed. "They have names for men like you."

"As much as I love flattery, you're running out of time." Angus stood and reached into an inside pocket. "Tell me them all when you get back."

Lerner caught the shine of steel, but Angus wrapped the metal, cool and heavy, around her wrist before she could react. The cuff clicked closed, he shut the other on the bed's railing.

"What the--are you mad?"

"Tick-tock, love." Angus swaggered out of the room whistling

Rule Britannia.

Lerner yanked the cuff, rattling the chain against the rails. She folded her thumb and little finger in toward her palm tried pulling her hand free. The metal dug into her hand. She swore.

What had Angus and Nathan said? They'd run through so many things when explaining fieldcraft to her--and her head wasn't in the best place right now. She batted her temple with her free hand. Bobby pins--was that something they said or just a thing they do on the telly. It didn't matter. She didn't have any.

"Are you just going to sit there?" Angus' voice buzzed from the bud he'd left on the table.

Lerner snatched it up and placed it in her ear. She grabbed the phone. He'd likely bugged it.

"You can see me? Uncuff me, right now."

"Oh that's clever. Be sure to tell that to the terrorists."

Lerner placed the phone down on the bed. "Twat."

She retrieved the fabric case from the drawer. Perhaps he was gracious enough to put something useful in here while he was rifling through her belongings. She unzipped it. Inside lay several listening bugs and discrete wireless cameras--nothing useful. Bugger it.

Lerner pulled the zip closed--the zip. It was thin, durable. She slid it into the keyhole in her cuff and twisted. Nothing.

"Oh, that's brilliant." Sarcasm dripped from her earpiece. "But I don't think that zippers work like that, you see generally one pulls the slider up or down a pair of metal teeth..."

Teeth. Lerner ignored the rest of Angus' taunt and moved her focus to the cuff's locking mechanism. The zip wasn't flexible enough to jimmy the lock, but maybe she could use it as a shim--

jam it into the teeth.

It fit. Now came the risky part. In order to pop the lock, she had to tighten the cuff. Lerner flexed her fingers. If it didn't work things would become much more uncomfortable. She pushed the zip in as she tightened the cuff, just one notch any more than that--

It clicked. The cuff fell from her wrist. Pride swelled through her body. She couldn't help but smile.

"Well done," said Angus. "Now comes the hard part."

Lerner rubbed her wrist. He couldn't have let her bask in her success for a moment? She shoved the phone he'd left and the case of surveillance equipment into her pyjama pockets and headed for the door.

"Is there something you need?" A nurse in dark blue approached.

Lerner fumbled with the camera behind her back. She pressed it onto the wall.

"No--no, just stretching my legs."

"Well, alright, if there is anything, just buzz." The woman returned to the nurses' station where three others in varying shades of blue congregated by several mugs.

Lerner exhaled and flicked on the screen of the phone Angus had left her. She tapped open the program and switched the camera online. The back of her pyjama top filled the screen. It worked. She stepped out of the way, trudging down the due-for-a-polish linoleum.

A white coated doctor approached the station and looked over a file with one nurse. Another left. One in dark green arrived, only to leave again. Lerner furrowed her brow. There was no way she could sneak in there unnoticed.

“What’s the plan?” Angus crackled in her ear.

“I dunno, maybe I could swipe a uniform? Like a disguise?” Doctors always had a locker room that they changed in on those hospital dramas. Lerner bit her lip. If she could sneak into one of them, maybe get one of those surgical masks--

Angus’ laughter broke her concentration. “And then maybe you could perform surgery on the Queen. The staff knows each other, try again.”

Lerner scowled. Was he purposely trying to rile her up?

Two nurses strolled past complaining about an annoying patient. A light buzz came from one them. The nurse sighed. “That’s her again.” She turned and headed in the other direction.

That was it. Lerner scurried up to each room door and peaked in, searching for people sleeping. She found one, an old man, curtain partly closed. The gentle rise and fall of his breath could be seen through the blanket. Lerner tip-toed in.

She crept next to his monitoring equipment.

Her earpiece crackled. “Blimey, you’re not going to kill him are you?” A stunned Angus reverberated in her ear. “I knew some women were serious about their clothing. But Lerner--I must say I admire your dedication.”

Lerner rolled her eyes and pressed the call button to summon a nurse. She quickly exited to find another patient.

Lerner stood round the bend from the Nurses’ station watching her screen. There was a fluttering in her chest as the last blue uniform departed to answer the call of an unsuspecting patient.

She hurried in behind the long L shaped counter. She swept her gaze across them, open files, a computer, a landline, a couple half-

drunk cups of tea. Built into the wall were shelves filled with hardcover binders.

Lerner tapped at the device searching for the app she'd need. There were two, a bug scanner that'd vibrate when close to a listening device, and the infrared, which could pick up on the heat the camera and bugs outputted.

Better two birds with one stone. Lerner selected the infrared. With great care she looked at the now colourful station through the screen. The computer flared a bright red, whereas the teas simmered a lukewarm yellow.

A tiny dot of orange stuck out between the binders on the shelves.

Gotcha. Lerner smiled. She grabbed the camera and placed it into her pocket.

"I made that one easy for you," said Angus. "The next two will be harder, best hurry."

Lerner scanned through the room again. Nothing. She knelt down and checked under the counter. the lone chair and the wain skirting. The listening devices should show heat. She tapped her fingers against her thigh. Unless, of course, it was being concealed by something else that was hot.

Lerner stood and switched to the bug scanner. She waved it over the computer tower, the keyboard, mouse, and screen. Her palm vibrated. There was one behind the monitor. Lerner reached back and peeled it off.

One more. And only one place where it could be, the phone.

"Take cover, cadet," Angus ordered in her ear.

Lerner dropped and crept under the counter. A pair of white trainers entered the station. Lerner held her breath as the nurse

grew closer.

The nurse stopped in front of her. A quite buzz came from the blue trousers, followed by a long aggravated sigh. The nurse stomped out.

Lerner exhaled loudly and brought her hand to her racing heart.

“You’re welcome,” said Angus. “But, I’m afraid we have to cut this exercise short. Your boss is at the hospital. He’s on his way to your room right now.

Lerner climbed out from under the counter. What was Paul doing here? She stood to leave, but not before grabbing the last bug from the phone.

Angus was outside her door as she approached. Lerner tossed the equipment he’d planted at him and smirked. He pointed into her room and strolled off.

On her bed, perfectly folded, was her missing clothing. She stuck them back into the drawer and returned to her hospital bed.

“Ah, there she is.” Paul entered through the door, his arms opened wide. He wanted something.

“Here I am.” Lerner gave a weak smile. The adrenaline from beating Angus at his little game was still coursing through her. She had to be careful not to rouse Paul’s suspicion.

Her boss eased down into the chair by her bed and placed his hand on her arm. “How are you? Are you alright?” Paul frowned. “No, of course you’re not. After what you’ve been through. What a silly thing for me to ask.”

“I’m fine, really.”

Paul let out an exaggerated sigh and clasped his hands together. “I’m glad to hear that, really I am.”

He was acting strange. Lerner sat up. "Is everything alright?"

Paul shook his head. "I'm afraid I've some bad news. There's been another bombing. An HSBC branch this time. Five dead, seven injured."

Lerner brought her hand to her mouth. "So soon?"

"Lerner, I hate to ask this, but considering your recent experience, I think it'd mean a lot to our readers if you covered it."

Lerner wrapped an arm round her waist. "Oh, Paul...I don't know."

"I don't expect you to go out and interview anyone, or anything like that. I understand you need to be here until you're tip top. I've had someone take some notes for you, and the rest of the info you can get from other news sites." Paul brought his hand to his heart. "I'm not a total beast."

"I'm not sure I can put a positive spin on this. I'm still--I'm still working through it, you know?"

"Yes, of course, of course." Paul's hand found its way back to her arm. "But that is exactly why you should. Imagine the impact it will have. Lerner Jones, survivor of the Bond & Lacey bombing, turns tragedy into a source of inspiration. It'd a strike against the terrorists."

Lerner rubbed her head. What Paul really meant was it'd be a massive boost to the Daily Echo's readership. Her writing the story, was the story. Her chest tightened. Normally, she'd not mind the attention, but she wasn't ready to go there again, not yet.

She pushed her hair behind her ears. She'd forgotten to take out the earpiece. For a brief moment today she'd forgotten about the bombings--it felt good. Paul was full of it for the most part, but on one point he might be right. Angus' game had taken her from a

dark mood and made her feel empowered. Perhaps others out there could use a distraction as well.

“Alright, Paul. Send me the files.”

## **Chapter nine**

*by Elle Dechene*

Lerner emerged from the Tube into the City and was buffeted by a cold, sharp wind, her trench coat billowing open. “Bugger it,” she muttered under her breath, struggling to find the ends of her belt, crossing them firmly around her and knotting it, all while balancing on one leg and juggling purse and messenger bag. At least it wasn’t raining. Managing an umbrella would be the final straw, she thought.

Stepping forward, she landed with all of her weight on her sore knee as another gust of wind threatened to push her into others emerging from the Tube. She gasped and shifted her weight to her other leg, making her way more carefully to the building entrance of The Daily Echo.

“Let me get that for you,” a familiar male voice said. Lerner looked up into brown eyes partially covered by disordered sandy brown hair, which owed very little of its disarray to the weather. Her supervisor, Paul Cambridge, always managed to look tousled in precisely the same manner. She suspected a heavy use of hair spray, and more time in front of the mirror than required by her own straight, shoulder length hair.

“Thank you,” she said, pasting a pleasant but cool expression on her face as they moved through the lobby towards an elevator bank.

“Good to have you back at work,” he remarked.

“Yes, so sorry, again, that the accident happened so soon after joining the paper.” Too many ‘so’s’, she thought, always the editor.

“Never mind that, we’re happy to have you with us. Your work at the Times was impressive. I’ve a feature story in mind for you, but of course I encourage you to share any ideas you may have for a story.”

“I’d like to write a feature on the recent string of bombings,” she replied. “After all, having been onsite for one of them gives me an inside view.”

Paul’s lips pressed together briefly. “A string of bombings doesn’t really fit into Lucy’s vision. Let’s talk after the mid-morning meeting.”

Lerner bit back a retort. It *would* be difficult to put The Daily Echo’s happy spin on that story.

They parted ways upon emerging from the elevator, Paul heading towards Lucy Caldicote’s office and Lerner to find her desk in the newsroom, the expected stack of articles produced overnight by the India team for review and editing, and a cup of coffee.

The coffee was prepared by the temp, and like everything else about the paper, tended to be over-sweetened. On the first day of work she had been appalled at what the sugar content was doing to her teeth. Now she finished the cup in a few gulps, grimacing at her screen, but happy not to have to make it herself.

Lerner blocked out the din of the newsroom. The morning flew by, as she settled into the familiar rhythm of quick read, minimal

fact-checking, editing for language, and then forwarding each article to the Managing Editor as completed.

“Conference room in 5, people!” Rory, the Managing Editor, called out as he swept through the newsroom.

Lerner gave herself plenty of time to hobble to the conference room, so much so that she was the first one there. She sat down at the long table in what had already become her ‘usual’ seat, and waited as the others trickled in, each new arrival hurrying over to welcome her back and inquire after her well-being.

No one expected her to stand up during this, which was just as well, or else she would have felt like a jack in the box by the start of the meeting. As it was, she did feel a strange sort of happy glow, wholly unexpected. She barely knew any of these people, and they certainly did not know her. But everyone acted as though they were her bosom friend, and after a while she began to feel as though she was. The power of repeated suggestion and highly sugared coffee. She would have to keep it in mind for the future.

The meeting went pretty much as expected. The power of happy thoughts was once again hammered into their heads by Lucy and Rory, as well as what stories were ‘appropriate’. Lerner glanced at Paul, but his face remained impassive as he nodded along. Bombing stories were out of the question, then.

By the time the meeting was over, and they had been reminded once again by Lucy -- as always, immaculate in a lovely grey suit -- that their mission was to make the world a better place by making bad stories sound good, it was only an hour before her lunch break. She spent that time at her desk, finishing up the morning’s stack of articles.

News seemed to have spread to other departments that she had

returned, and every few minutes she would have a well-wishing visitor. She met some people that morning whom she had never seen before, and did her best to remember everyone's names.

"Lunch?"

Lerner suppressed a twinge of annoyance and looked up yet again to find fellow features editor Sophie hovering.

"Oh lord, you've got the *Tree of the Year* piece," Sophie rolled her eyes. "Ah, the Fortingall Yew in Perthshire. Do spice that up with more information on Yew."

Lerner's eyebrows rose in query.

"Almost every part of the tree is toxic, especially for horses. Kills them, they just go to sleep and don't wake up. Anyway, lunch plans?"

"Thanks for asking," Lerner said, "but I'm still working my way through these articles. I think I'll keep at it through lunch. Paul said he might have a feature piece for me and I want to clear my desk just in case."

Sophie rolled her eyes. "Look, if you wanted to do real news, you should have stayed at the Times. You were at the mid-morning meeting. We're happy, light and fluffy here, and mostly just editing the pieces already rewritten by the India staff. It may kill me. Ta, then."

Lerner returned Sophie's casual wave and dove back into the tree piece. Googling "yew trees", Lerner considered bolstering the description of the Fortingall Yew -- one of the ten trees being considered for Tree of the Year -- with information on its extreme toxicity. On consideration, Yew looked quite promising for those tired of their current life partners, although one would have to somehow encourage them to eat the foliage. Perhaps ground up

and added to a serving of soup, as a spice. This place was already getting to her, Lerner realised, as her cell phone rang.

The phone rang a second time, and with a sigh she picked it up. Although the caller id was blocked, she had a guess as to who was calling, but wished he would have waited until after her first day back at the paper. Or even, after lunch.

“Hello Lerner,” came Nathan’s brisk voice, as completely confident that she was on the other end of the phone as he was about all things in life.

“Hello Nathan,” Lerner replied.

“We need to move quickly on identifying who may be guiding the paper’s editorial selections. Also, the ownership structure,” he said without further preamble.

“It’s all rainbows and unicorns here, Nathan. Hardly a hotbed of intrigue,” Lerner protested. “Lucy makes the decisions and she wants to world to be a happier place.”

“Think. Pacification of the masses, distraction. Where did the money come to establish a London newspaper in the City? The Caldicotes may have money, but they’re not funding the paper themselves.”

Lerner made a startled sound of acknowledgment. Truly, this place had a weakening effect on the mind. Maybe she should make her own coffee.

“Is Lucy really calling the shots? I need you to get access to any documents that might shed light on who is really setting the paper’s agenda,” Nathan continued. “And not just The Daily Echo. Find out which other news outlets she is in contact with. Get a copy of Lucy Caldicote’s calendar.”

“Nathan!” Lerner protested in a quiet scream, hunching over

her cell phone. "One week of training and you expect me to be super spy? I'm not Hardison!"

"Hardison?"

"Don't you watch Leverage?" Then she remembered who she was talking with. London public school, classics at Cambridge. Probably not. "Never mind, I'll do my best," she promised.

"Right. I'll stop by this evening," he said.

"Fine, bye." Lerner went to end the call, but Nathan beat her to it. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at her phone. What if she'd already had plans?

Time to reconnoiter.

Pushing back from her desk, she made her way to the office of the Editor In Chief. As she approached, the big glass window that fronted the newsroom showed that Lucy's office was empty. Lerner's adrenalin levels shot up as she realized that any activities in Lucy's office would be exposed to everyone in the news room.

Hillary, Lucy's assistant, was just standing up, and Lerner stopped in front of Hillary

"Yes, Lerner?" Hillary said rather impatiently.

"I'm so sorry, are you on your way out to lunch?" Lerner asked.

"Just for a few minutes, I really shouldn't leave while Lucy is out but I must," Hillary replied.

"I'll cover your phone if you'd like," Lerner offered. "How long will you be gone?"

"Thank you! Just 15 minutes or so, I have to pop in to a bookstore and grab a quick gift for a friend's get together this evening, I completely forgot over the weekend."

"Worry not, I'll watch the shop," promised Lerner. She settled

into Hillary's chair and waved her off.

Heart beating faster, Lerner opened the calendar program and was relieved to see Lucy's schedule appear. Unfamiliar with the sophisticated calendaring feature, she opened up a temporary word document and began copying and pasting days into the document. Lucy's schedule was quite full, and she stopped after three months' worth, then saved the file to a memory stick. The file finally finished copying, after what had felt like an eternity, and Lerner put the memory stick in her pants pocket. It seemed to burn a hole through the thin fabric, announcing its presence to everyone.

Rather than risk opening documents at Hillary's desk -- who knew what IT could trace? Lerner certainly didn't -- she then got up and made her way to Lucy's office door. *Look natural*, she admonished herself.

Heady with the success of obtaining Lucy's calendar information, Lerner imagined herself as a cross between Lois Lane, intrepid girl reporter, and Daniel Craig's James Bond, ready for anything. This spy stuff wasn't so hard after all, she thought as she opened Lucy's office door and stepped through.

She wasn't quite sure what to expect to find when she entered the office. Of course, she had been in it before, but never unauthorised, and always seated at the round table set in front of Lucy's desk.

Besides the normal stacks of paper on the desk, could there be a folder, cunningly peeping out from beneath others, entitled *Super Top Secret*, or perhaps *SECRET SECRET SECRET*? Or perhaps an email would be open on the computer, revealing all of Lucy's

secrets.

No such luck. A quick look through all of the folders and papers did not reveal anything particularly secretive.

Glancing through the window showed that no one was paying attention to her. Lerner stepped behind Lucy's desk and took a quick look at the list of emails showing on Lucy's monitor. Nothing jumped out at her immediately, and she didn't dare take a picture. In fact, she was feeling quite uncomfortable on this side of Lucy's desk.

Lerner moved back around Lucy's desk and considered the stack of articles, gnawing on her lower lip. The secretary would be back at any moment, and Lerner did not think that she would have enough time to go through all of the files in more depth. None had looked more promising than the others. She was still brooding over what to do when the office door opened.

At the sound of the door opening, her head whipped around and she saw Amir Shimar, head of security, standing there. She stared at him, and he stared at her.

"Hello," she said brightly, riding on a wave of adrenalin. The blood was pounding through her ears, making her feel distinctly aware of every moment they stared at each other.

"Ms. Jones," was his initial reply. He was the kind of security head who knew every employee's name, no matter how long they had worked for the company. He seemed to consider what to say next, and then came out with the most obvious question. "What are you doing in here?"

"Oh," she replied, trying to think of an excuse. "I'm looking for some documents."

“Oh?” Shimar replied.

“Yes... I’m covering for Hillary.” She was building the excuse up as she spoke, and felt that she was convincing Shimar as much as she was convincing herself. Not much, in other words. “We just got a call from one of our advertisers, and they wanted some information. I’m trying to find the files now.” He continued to stare at her, and she stared back at him, not sure what more she should say. “It looks to be in this stack, so I’ll just borrow it and get it back to Hillary later,” she finally continued, scooping up one of the stacks closest to her. “I should be getting going.”

His eyebrows rose when she said that, but he did not say anything in reply.

“I’ll let Hillary know if anything else is needed.” And with that final explanation she ducked out of the room, slipping past Shimar. She stole one glance back at him, still clutching the files to her chest, before escaping into the maze of the newsroom computers. He was watching her leave, a slight frown on his face.

Maybe she needed a few more courses from Nathan.

## **Chapter ten**

*by Jaysen O'Dell*

Unlocking the door to her flat, Lerner understood her anxiousness for the first time. Exposure. CCTV, guards, cabbies, and the bobbies. So many eyes witnessing her betrayal. Now safe at home her emotions had nothing to keep them pinned to the back of her mind.

Placing “the package”, her keys and the daily post on the entry stand, she shrugged off her jack. When had she picked up the mail? It was habit, true, but there was no recollection of the event. Her autopilot was working to help her hide in plain sight. Nathan had told her “stick to habit” as if it was a special skill to be acquired. How did she do this without thinking?

Walking past the doorway to the “kitchen”, nothing more than a small fridge, a storage cupboard and a hot plate, Lerner turned looked left into the bathroom. Her favourite feature of this shit hole apartment was the cast iron tub. She was already thinking of which wine she would pull from under the sink to pair with her favourite bath salts. Should she deny herself this pleasure as penance for the felony crime she had just committed?

Entering the “living area” Lerner was struck by the filth of her

existence. Lingerie and workout clothes on the floor, office attire draped neatly over the couch. The bed unmade for days. Or was it weeks? Did it matter? In prison you only had one change of clothes and they told you when to clean.

“Fuck me” she muttered out loud. “I need a drink”.

Adding her shirt and skirt to the back of the couch she headed to her closet of a kitchen. A tumbler for a wine glass seemed right. Cabernet Blanc. Bitter enough to keep her sin, betrayal of her ethics, fresh, but drinkable enough to help her forget. Quickly.

“Fuck me! I need to get out of this mess”.

Finding her corkscrew was beginning to be a problem. She was able to hack her boss’ computer faster than she could locate her most heavily used kitchen utensil. The thought “is a corkscrew even a kitchen utensil?” struck her as funny. As nervous laughter started to choke her throat she felt a tightening in her chest.

She removed her bra and added it to the pile on the floor. She wondered what a man would think of a wife who committed several acts of espionage, refused to clean her flat, and poured wine in the nude. “Men only notice the tits and ass” was her conclusion.

The cork screw was in the fridge. She needed to put it on a chain. Or buy more than three. Twisting it into the bottle she stopped on a simple thought. “What would Amir say if he saw me standing her right now? Just like this?”

She didn’t care for Amir. Continuing to remove the cork she realised that her greatest fear was not discovery. It was being called to the mat for violation of ethics. She would have less concern finding Amir looking at her mostly naked body removing a cork from a wine bottle than him truly uncovering what she had just done.

“Fuck Amir” she thought as she poured her wine.

Amir was a pain in the ass. He would have been better suited to the family profession of bean counting. Instead he brought all the pent up rage of an man whose family could not arrange a marriage, could not get him a woman to screw, with him every place he went. He was harmless most of the time. Maybe a bit creepy with his double breasted suits and emaciated looking face, but unless he had reason he simply leered at people like they were his future meals. She had given him reason.

Thinking back to the confrontation in the office, Lerner was surprised by a thrill she'd only ever experienced during foreplay. It wasn't Amir that thrilled her. It was the risk. An adrenaline rush of sorts. Every hair on end ready to fight. Or run.

What was she running from? She did make her get away with no real accusation. The large set of papers could be anything. It could have been her using office equipment for personal reasons. Or a preference for hard copy to reduce eye strain. Maybe she found Lucy's computer unlocked and and was just securing it. Anything he thought he knew was conjecture.

Lerner's thoughts drifted into several plausible explanations for her actions. Ones that would pass a review from Lucy and even a few that would be reasonable if she was brought before a magistrate. A last excuse struck her. Working the idea into words so she would start to believe it the walls echoed “I could say that I was looking for suppressed information about the Bond & Lacey explosion; personal interest and all. Personal connection. Damned ‘happy news’ policy. That would...”

She remembered seeing a man running just before the explosion. Was he wearing a double breasted suit? He was dark

skinned. He was extremely thin. Is it possible that Amir was there?

Lerner realised that she was starting to panic. She had violated everything she thought she stood for. Journalistic integrity - staying out of the story, providing as unbiased a view as possible, not manipulating the players to make the story something different - was gone. She was the story. She was endangering the one thing that mattered to her. Her ethics had been thrown away for a man representing a country that was not her own. She was their pawn now.

The sudden realisation that she was trapped forced her to the toilet. Vomiting so violently that the water splashed back onto her face, the significance of her position sunk in. She was now a felon in a foreign country. At best deportation. At worst a stay in Her Majesty's prison. Actually that wasn't the worst. The worst would be the exposure of how quickly she sold her integrity for revenge.

There it was. It wasn't a tall, well dressed man who she *wanted* between her legs that pulled her into this. It was the base desire for revenge. She was no better than the people that set the bombs. She vomited again.

She removed her panties and flung them through the doorway. Looking at herself in the full length mirror Lerner saw that she had every right to expect Nathan to notice her as a woman. Hours at the gym keeping her thighs firm, stomach flat, arms shapely. She was careful with her diet to ensure there was enough fat intake to keep hip and breast curved and firm. She did not look like a teenage boy. Why did she want him to see her as more than a source of information? Men were like toys to her. She could get just about any man she wanted. How was he able to manipulate her into being his spy.

Bending over she started to draw a bath. Hot water to heat the cast iron. Set the stopper. Add the salts. Light candles. Pour wine. That was the routine.

She brushed her teeth. Realising that a glass or two of wine after emptying her stomach would be a bad idea, she walked across the hall to the kitchen. She grabbed some cheese, and fruit. She hadn't realised how infrequently she had eaten while completely nude. She had to remember to do this more often.

Lerner heard the water splashing at the overflow prevention drain. Her bath was ready. Crossing the hall she spotted "the package" and decided she had a right to know what she was risking her future over. Picking up the envelope she found at the office, she pulled her copied documents out. The thumb drive fell onto the table. Looking at it she realised "I'm now a cyber-criminal". Putting the drive back into the envelope she carried the papers into the bathroom.

Given her habit of relaxing in the tub she had everything setup for working. She placed the papers on her rolling shelf. Settling into the tub she was careful to avoid splashing water onto the papers. The warm water gave her further evidence of how tense she was from the day's activities.

After relaxing in the hot water for a few moments Lerner reached over to pick up the top sheets of paper. Thank God for colour copiers. Lucy has always used multiple colours to make notes as an editor. These papers were covered in red. Clearly the individual from their offshore team needed two work on his writing skills. He'd be unemployed in the morning. After several pages of red Lerner set these aside and grabbed the next sheets off the stack.

These sheets were in purple. “Look for local opinions from multiple classes.” “Find commoner to submit local ‘happy thought’ about their everyday.” “Get MP to tell us how their lives are models for the common man.” Lerner’s impression of Lucy as an “aristocrat wanna be” was reinforced. Setting these aside she reached for the next sheets.

The green ink that Lucy used added targeted branding into stories. Mention of an advertiser’s nearby storefront in a story about a kitten rescued from tree. A note to contact Jim to see if he wants his store mentioned by name in an article about a new car park,” Of course there is a fee” is surrounded by asterisks. All Lerner can think of is “journalism for sale”. How she is different, selling access to the Daily Echo for hopes of access to Nathan, strikes her as a problem to work out later.

Lerner sees nothing in the papers that is remotely connected to the explosions. Pushing the papers away she rises slowly from the tub. The cool air instantly raises goose bumps over her body. Wrapping herself in a towel Lerner goes back to the entrance table to get the thumb drive. Dropping her towel as she reached her small computer desk she places the drive in a USB slot.

Looking around Lerner found her comfortable pyjama pants. Pulling them on she realised the curtain was open. As the curtains closed she wondered how many times she had walked around her flat naked for all the world to see. Sitting in front of her system she realised that she would need to convert the “office” diary file to something her system could open. Twenty minutes of internet research and she was looking at Lucy’s diary. Weekly meetings with department heads, content teams, board members. Nothing that seemed unusual for someone in Lucy’s position.

Lerner felt sick again. All that risk. “Selling her soul” to Nathan. For nothing. Why was she doing this? She was a good person who wanted to be good at what she did. This was stupid

She wondered if this added stress would turn her into a bitter hag tainted by suspicion. Right now she needed to focus on her career and bedding the right man. Instead she’s worried about Amir, not the right man, Nathan, maybe the right man, and Lucy, not a man at all.

Oh, and a load of terrorists.

Even with all that, Lerner could not shake the idea that the only thing she really cared about was her integrity. That was gone forever. No matter how hard she would try to hide it, someone at MI? — 3, 9, 7 — she couldn’t even remember — could ruin her no matter where she went. It wasn’t even about journalism. She stole private information from her employer. If it ever got out...

She sent an email to Nathan with the prescribed code, “Meet me at the hotel at 10. I have what you want”. She wasn’t sure what the code was as it seemed obvious. All she noticed was that there was nothing specific about the hotel or the package.

Lerner reassembled the package making sure to place the USB drive at that bottom of the envelope. The package looked like a normal parcel of papers. The reality that “it is nothing more than a parcel of papers” trickled slowly into her mind. Chuckling at that realisation she turned out the lights and went to bed.

The beeping of the alarm slowly penetrated into Lerner’s consciousness. Rising from bed she looked for clean undergarments. She wanted something pretty but functional. No need to meet Nathan unprepared for a possible romp. Why she was

suddenly obsessed with sex escaped her.

Lerner picked up spandex shorts, a sports bra, and stuffed them in her gym bag. Spying a clean thong she added that to the bag as well. “Always be prepared” she thought to herself. A silk shirt and tweed knee length skirt completed her outfit for the day. In the bathroom she washed her face and applied a thin makeup. She would apply the “notice me” makeup after her workout at the gym.

Stockings and heels put on, jacket selected, purse in gym bag, the package in gym bag, oyster card in her hand, all she needed was her keys. Located, placed in the gym bag and Lerner was out the door.

Her normal gym was around the corner but the chain had one a few stops away. She wanted to use that gym today. This would let her avoid any prying eyes. Entering the tube she headed the opposite direction she needed to go for her meeting with Nathan. Arriving at the gym she requested a locker for the day and started her workout. She couldn’t do her normal spinning class. This wasn’t her gym. Instead she worked with some weights and the tread mill.

After showering she stood at her locker looking at her options. Only one bra, one shirt, one skirt. Thong or bikini? She opted for bikini, pretty but not presumptions or slutty. Her makeup was applied using the techniques learned in her television presentation classes at university. Dark edges to define, contrast to draw attention, complementary to de-emphasise.

Pulling her purse and the package from her gym bag Lerner headed to the desk to let them know should would need the locker until the evening. The whistle from the weight room let her know that she had achieved the desired look.

Leaving the gym Lerner opted to take the tube to Westminster. Even though it isn't her native country, she felt walking by the parliament and Big Ben would give her comfort. She was wrong. Noticing that she had 20 minutes before she had to meet Nathan, she walked toward Westminster abbey. More than one tourist stood with her husband and children for "selfies" with a big clock in the background.

Following the crowd Lerner found herself at the southeast corner of St James' park. She walked slowly north and watched swans swim slowly on the surface of the pond. Men in £1000 suits hurried past her. More than one turned for a second look. As she approached the parade ground of the horse guards Big Ben sounded quarter to 10. Looking back over St James' park she could see the dome of Buckingham palace in the background.

For whom was she doing this act of espionage? The Queen? Nathan? Her host country? Herself? Was this a "last impulsive act of youth" before she became like the tourist women posing with their families? A wild fling of sorts before settling down?

She turned east toward Whitehall. Tourists taking pictures of the guards reminded her of the CCTV cameras watching every move. Crossing Whitehall she continued east on Horseguard Ave to Whitehall Ct. She could see the entrance to the hotel. She could dump the package in a rubbish bin and walk away. One last chance to live in a world where "this never happened". She walked to the entrance where Nathan was waiting.

"You're right on time" he said as Big Ben was ringing in the background. "Come inside and let's have tea."

"All right. Do I hand this to you now?"

"Right. I can take that. You seem very calm. I take it you had no

issues.” He took the package and tucked it under his arm.

“Actually I was caught by our head of security. Luckily I was able to walk away without real incident”

“Here we are, sit.” It seemed that Nathan hadn’t noticed Lerner’s statement of being caught. “Tea please” he told a waiter.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes. Amir noticed you. Yet you are here. So it wasn’t as bad as you think. We know about Amir. If he had the slightest doubt you would be looking for bail.”

“Why are there three seats here?”

“We will get to that.”

“Mmmm. I read the documents. This is a waste of time.”

“Let us be the judge of that. Here’s tea. Let’s relax a bit. Thank you for... looking nice. Very nice.”

“You’re welcome.”

After several minutes of small talk the tea was finished.

“You asked about the third chair.” Nathan touched the chair and a man walked up to the chair. He was taller than Nathan with longer, lighter and curlier hair. Well dressed but slightly disheveled. He was noticeably younger than Nathan and Lerner. “This is Angus. He is here to help with our next mission”.

“Good morning ma’am.”

“God, do I look that bad?” Lerner said knowing that Nathan would pick up on the joke.

“Christ Angus! Don’t insult her like that”.

“But I ... uhh ... sincerest apologies ma’am”

“Damn it Angus!”

“Ha ha ha” Lerner let the awkward Angus off the hook. “Lerner Jones.”

“Yes. Yes. Angus James. I assure you, you are ... amazing. Shit that wasn’t right. I’m sorry.”

“That *was* right. Call a woman amazing and you win. Don’t swear though.” Lerner was talking to him like a younger brother.

“To business?” Nathan was clearly not amused by the exchange. “Lerner we need constant surveillance. The kind you can’t provide. That’s where Angus comes in.”

“Right. I’m a tech specialist of sorts. These are observation tools.” He placed several small devices on the table. They ranged in size from a school child’s eraser to a chalk board eraser.

“They’re bugs?” Lerner asked. “Shouldn’t they be smaller?”

“No no. Not bugs. Bugs are different. These are the smallest. Don’t think about the movies or telly. That’s not real. These are real. This small one does audio and video. This larger one detects phone signals and triggers national security to start recording.”

“Isn’t that all automatic?” Lerner asked.

“In the movies yes.” Angus explained “Constant recording of audio is technically possible, but the size... we’d never be able to store it all. So we listen for a call, then start recording. This device is attached to the phone systems and automates the start of recording.”

“Technical understanding is nice, but let’s move on.” Nathan was clearly anxious to move into the real details of the job.

“Ideally you’d place the small one where we can record images of who she talks to in her office and, if possible, the images on her computer screen. This larger one should go in an area where she’s likely to use her cell phone. I’ll give you several so you can get the office phone as well. These medium sized ones go into conference rooms so we can get images of the participants as well as record

audio. I'll give a several of these as well. All new. Wear gloves when you handle them to avoid leaving finger prints."

"What is this really about" Lerner asked. "I can't imagine that Lucy is involved with anything related to the bombings."

"Who said she was?" Nathan asked.

"You are asking me to place "bugs ..."

"Observation tools" Angus interrupted.

"Observation tools", Lerner repeated, "... in her office and business. You're implying that she is your target."

"I tried to tell you ... " Angus whispered to Nathan.

"Lerner, you aren't here to think. Or decide. You are here to help us accomplish a goal. That goal is to obtain information critical to maintaining the security of the nation. That's it."

"I can accept that. But you need to accept this, I'm not helping you anymore. I'm a journalist, not a spy. I think and decide. I don't hide things, I expose them. You're asking me to go against everything I've learned to be. And all for a nation that isn't mine."

"So you are walking away?"

"Yes. If I do this I'm no longer fit to be a journalist. I'll no longer have the trust of my employer or sources. I might be working for you. If this gets out I'm ruined. I'll never work for a news organisation again."

Angus was fidgeting. He clearly didn't anticipate meeting a woman that wasn't ready to do what was asked.

"Be still Angus. You're drawing attention. We don't want attention. Notice how evenly she spoke. Never raising her voice. She's a natural. You need to be like her."

"What's in this for me? I have all the risk and no reward." Lerner felt dirty. She wasn't asking for anything. She was trying to

make a point about the one sided nature of this relationship.

“Listen, I’m taking all the risk. You have nothing in the game. How will you protect me?” Lerner had gotten to the point. The risk was too great. She wanted out.

“Nathan, we need to rethink this.”

“Angus, your opinion is unwanted. You are a great technical mind. Keep your advice limited to that for now.

“Lerner, you think we haven’t been protecting you? Do you know that the machine you used to make these copies tracks when copies are made, how many copies, and exactly what was copied? Do you remember putting in your access code to start the copies? Angus here, he’s was your guardian angel last night, weren’t you Angus?”

“Record of copies was deleted from the system using vendor access per national security arrangement. Counters reset. Supplies shipment error entered into system to make up for the ‘missing’ supplies.”

“See Lerner, Angus is protecting you. And that little hack job you did... Angus, any comment?”

“Backdoor placed on system by vendor per national security arrangement. Exploit coded to leave no foot print unless ‘new vulnerability’ is announced.”

“Thank you Angus. You see Lerner, you can’t leave. You are already exposed. The world just doesn’t know it yet. Now that you’ve given me this package, you can’t even claim to have been ‘researching information from a source’. We own your future. Is that clear?”

Lerner realised too late that she really should have found the rubbish bin. She was in no matter what her desire was.

“I guess you win. Give me the ‘tools’.”

Angus handed her a sealed bag. “Instructions for placement are in the bag. Call the number on the red bag when they are all in place. Don’t forget to wear gloves when handling the devices. I put three sets of gloves in the bag for you. Don’t forget to wear the gloves.”

As she rose from her chair Angus stood. “Thank you. I’ll remember the gloves”.

Nathan rose to follow her to the door. After they exited the hotel lobby he said, “Next time, wear the thong.”

## Chapter eleven

*by Matt Tobin*

Lerner Jones knew what deadlines felt like. She knew what it felt like to stare at a blank page, to grasp for an angle that couldn't be found, a lead that couldn't be written, a hook too weak to morph paragraphs into narrative, a metaphor too stretched to be worth committing to the page.

She always typed with a retro mechanical-action keyboard that clunked loudly across the room as those initial doubts transformed into those initial keystrokes. And still, she knew how every tentative mistyped keystroke caused by jangling nerves and overdoses of caffeine only seemed to reinforce the time being wasted and what little time she had left.

And finally, she knew what it felt like to have the deadline loom so close, the outcome seem so bleak, that the doubts slide away and the keyboard sounds grow from gentle clacking to the roar of tenuous arguments, misquoted sources, and desperate cliches that would become indisputable public fact when the presses ran overnight.

Now it felt like her life had been supplanted by a series of looming deadlines. Rifle through the drawers, steal the documents,

plant the bugs. Up and down, in and out, before they see you, don't get caught: a gathering roar of jangling nerves grasping to retain a tenuous handle on the uncontrolled narrative raging around her.

She paused to steady herself before she entered the Daily Echo office. *Its just the same*, she thought, *just the same as those blank pages of a newspaper*. She didn't need to fill every page, foresee every future. Plant the bugs, deliver a feature, it didn't matter: she just had to do her part, meet this deadline before she looked at the next, her life broken up into one fifteen hundred word feature after another.

Lerner Jones straightened her blouse, flicked back her hair, set her smile to what she thought to give an inclusive *here-we-go-again* vibe, and strode into the Daily Echo office. On the day she entered the office with her smug superiority and MI7 spy gear in her satchel, her colleagues were too busy curating kitten videos to notice her arrive.

Lerner was proud of her plans for the first microphone: She thought it proof that she was thinking like a real spy. And it would be easy, too. She planned to stick the very first microphone to the underside of her own desk.

If, at some future point, the bugs were discovered, it would be found that the respected investigative journalist — and to her mind the only member of staff worthy of either adjective - was bugged too. Just another disgruntled, faceless stakeholder unhappy with hard-hitting investigative press: move along, nothing to see here.

She would have been surprised then, had she learned that in planting that first unnecessary bug she drew attention that would then follow her for the rest of the day.

Still just a few weeks into her new role at the Echo, colleagues in

her office were already suggesting that Lerner Jones wasn't living up to her name. Not as a journalist, of course, because despite the Echo's cynical marketing arm trying to promote her recruitment as a shift towards journalistic credibility, they all knew that no one would live up to their former journalistic glories at this paper, and passing comment on one was to pass comment on them all.

No, in the true spirit of newspaper wordplay - one of the few newsroom traditions still encouraged in today's churnalistic click-bait culture - Lerner wasn't living up to her name, in their view, because she was naive and yet to *learn* what working in the 24-hour news cycle really meant.

Halfway around the globe, two colleagues who the Londoner's referred to as happiness elves — in part due to their dubious role of adding linguistic smiley faces to gloomy news items, but mostly so they didn't need to bother learning their names — polished their last article for the day.

As the country's workers arrived at their desks and searched for any news that had broken in the half hour since they scanned headlines on their iPads over breakfast, a story that started its life in American as an article bemoaning the world's unpreparedness for the current Ebola epidemic was republished under the headline *Ebola prepares us for future outbreaks*.

With their last story published, the happiness elves - Dinesh and Mitali for those who recognised that outsourced work were still individuals rather than a mass noun - found themselves turning to the 24-hour web-cams that the Echo's management installed in their London offices to promote the impression of a single cohesive modern workplace.

And so it was that they were watching as Lerner reached into

her bag, scanned the room, and scrambled under her desk to attach the first of the microphone receivers.

MI7 didn't need to recruit spies and plant bugs. The cameras were already in place. They just needed a million cut-price eyes to pour over all the data they produce.

In this case, there were four eyes watching as Lerner flirted with her colleagues and casually slipped a hand under their desk as they dreamed about slipping a hand somewhere else.

"What is she doing?" Mitali said.

"Who knows," Dinesh said. "Those English are crazy crazy people."

This was a common theme of his that Mitali had heard many times before.

"What kind of crazy culture pays other people to write lies for them so they can feel good about themselves," Dinesh would say. Or: "Who are these crazy people who need to be fed the same news wrapped in different headlines hour after hour?"

Mitali knew the staff in the London office looked down on her and the other outsourced workers, but Dinesh would always have none of it.

"They look down on us because we're cheap," he said. "But what does it say about their quality and their standards that they can be replaced so cheaply? And what does it say about their culture that they don't even care?"

"Well, they say they care," Mitali said. "They just don't care enough to click on different articles."

"Exactly: in ten years time, there's going to be a lot more of us and a lot less of them. And we're the ones being judged for it."

They often sat around like this in the afternoon, spying through

the webcams, joking that they were foreign correspondents reporting on the observed inhabitants with dead-pan delivery.

“We just need to rewrite their headline,” Mitali said at last. “*Workers sacked, jobs sent overseas becomes British startup takes on the world.* Problem solved.”

By late morning, Lerner had already bugged the main office space and the boardroom, with only her editor Lucy’s office left to go.

It was some time after the rest of the office cleared out for lunch that Lucy eventually left her office also.

Lerner dashed across to the open doorway and stepped inside. She considered leaving the door open - snooping with the door open has the makings of inadvertent stumbling - but the open plan office beyond had too many desks to remain unpopulated for long, and she had been at the Daily Echo long enough to eliminate navigational error as an excuse.

Better to close the door and hope she could talk her way out of it if she was caught inside.

The last time she was here, the documents she stole hadn’t provided MI7 with any assistance but she instinctively tested the drawers of the filing cabinets anyway to see if they were locked.

In the centre of the room, a large glass table supported a computer, cordless phone, and a combined multifunction printer/scanner/fax machine because the manufacturer had forgotten to delete the last obsolete function from the model a decade earlier.

A half-eaten sandwich sat open in front of the keyboard: if Lucy hadn’t stepped out for lunch, she may not be gone for very long.

Much to her dismay, the printer were devoid of incriminating evidence. In the movies there was always a page left in those

machines to betray the bad guy. Then again, the movies also have soundtracks to make it clear how far away the bad guy is from returning. The only soundtrack she was working to was the blood pulsing through her head.

She looked for a place to hide the microphone. Had the table really been glass the last time she was in here, or was there another desk that had already been replaced? She couldn't remember now, but the see-through surface wouldn't help her hide her bug.

Beyond the office door, voices filled the open plan office space as her colleagues filtered back into the room. She strained to hear, but couldn't tell if Lucy's voice was among them.

Lerner balanced herself on the chair, and then stepped up onto the desk, a few inches away from getting tomato on the soles of her shoes. The phone rang as she did so, and somewhere between her surprise and her panic she kicked the phone out of the receiver and it tumbled onto the floor. The phone rang on, louder now that it was beyond its base station and therefore expected to be harder to find.

Between the handset's cries for attention, Lerner heard footsteps hurrying towards the office door. She jumped off the table and scrambled after it.

By the time the door handle started to turn, Lerner was lying flat on the floor, phone in hand, clawing at the red cancel button as quickly as she could.

She found the button, but she was hiding behind a see-through desk and the door started to open.

The happiness elves had watched the morning's activities unfold with amusement as they twisted a few lead paragraphs for

afternoon rewrites of the morning stories.

For the English afternoons, all they were asked to do was to add a new title and a new lead paragraph, and the rest of the article would sit unchanged from the morning. And still the clicks came through like clockwork: breakfast, the commute, arrival at work, morning tea, mobile browsing over lunch, back on the Desktop by mid-afternoon when office workers were looking for a desperate escape. Publish live changes of news that is three days old, and still the clicks come through.

Now though, they were watching the web-cams again. They knew all the London office by name even though they never seemed to return the favour, and as they saw Lerner sneak into the editor's office, they knew she was the new hot shot journalist that had been poached from elsewhere.

Whatever she was, whatever this was, she was certainly more interesting than the stuck up editor that treated them like dirt. So when Mitali saw Lucy in the hallway walking back towards the office area, she picked up the phone.

Before she dialled, she spoke to Dinesh.

"You know that script we've been saving up for a special occasion? Time to fire it off, don't you think?"

"What are you doing?" Dinesh asked.

"Divine intervention," Mitali said. "Timing so perfect its almost cliched. But then, in modern newsrooms, what isn't?"

"What do you want?" Lucy's voice said.

"I was just..." Lerner stammered part of a response before she looked at the door and realised Lucy wasn't talking to her. The door was still shut, the phone had fallen silent.

Shimar, the IT nerd who had somehow insinuated himself as head of security, was responding in her place.

“I just received a call from Bangalore. Those website hacker pricks have struck again,” Shimar said.

The crack of door that had been open closed again, and the voices faded out of range.

Lerner jumped to her feet. She couldn't afford to climb back onto the desk and hide the microphone in a light fitting now. Being caught in Lucy's room, there was a chance she could explain that away. But standing on her desk when the door swings open, that would be a little harder.

She had to plant it near to the desk so that phone calls would be audible. The device itself was just a small piece of wire, but it was an unfortunate colour that stood out against the table's aluminium legs.

She needed to find something that was unlikely to be moved. She lifted the phone handset from the multifunction printer. She couldn't see a tell-tale layer of dust to confirm it had fallen out of use, but it was the best she would find at short notice.

*If the terrorists are still using fax, she thought, then we've already won.*

She stuck the wire microphone along the inner edge of the handset and placed it back in the receiver. Would the fax machine cause interference? It would have to be good enough, either way.

Outside, the conversation seemed to have ended with Shimar's heavier footsteps walking away from the door.

Lerner cocked her ear, waiting for Lucy's lighter steps to follow Shimar's. She heard a slight shuffle but nothing more. Had she left? She couldn't tell. She stretched her body flat, twisted her neck

until her face was half-buried in carpet hairs, and strained her eyes to focus on the shadow's through the crack between door and floor.

She managed to distinguish the falling shadow of Paul Cambridge's left foot right as the door swung open, smashed into her cheek bone, and knocked a side tooth over the back of her molars.

The shadows materialised into a pair of black leather shoes. The freed tooth rattled around Lerner's mouth like a roulette wheel before coming to rest at the back of her tongue. In order she gagged, retched, swallowed, choked, and panicked.

Cambridge was experiencing a similar degree of surprise.

Lerner did something of a cartwheel to her feet, an instinctive reaction to get away from the shoes and the door frame. Her body jolted, lodging the tooth half way down her throat. She was still trying to work out whether best to swallow it or bring it up when Cambridge spoke.

"What on Earth were you doing on the floor?" he said.

Lerner tried to rasp a sentence, struggled to rasp a breath. Her throat swelled with the panic, tightening its grasp on the tooth. She could taste blood pooling in her mouth. She clutched at her throat and pushed past Cambridge, staggering towards the bathroom.

Watching on the web cam from India, it was around now that the happiness elves saw her face turn a pale shade of blue and her breathing all but stop.

Hands grappled her around the throat, spun her around. Arms took her around the waist. Not Cambridge's, the tone was too dark for that, thick and strong and bound with a wristwatch. Shimar's, they must have been his arms, restraining her so they could take her away for questioning up some dark alley.

The arms pushed hard against her diaphragm, summoning wind from deep within her body. The process was repeated three times, from three different angles, by three different arms with three different wrist watches, each time sucking her clean out of air. It sounded so loud she thought the air was being drawn through her ears.

The fourth squeeze set the tooth free on a river of water and bile. Lerner was led to the bathroom sink, where she did her best to clean herself up before turning to thank her rescuer.

An entire office worth of faces returned her stare — Lucy, Cambridge, Shimar. She recognised his wristwatch: he had been the first to deliver the initial embrace, and then after she had been passed around the circle, the effective force. The other faces had heard the commotion and were simply doing what their profession demanded: sticking their nose in to see if there was a good story or an amusing video of a cat.

‘Thank you,’ Lerner muttered in embarrassment. She braced herself against the bench top in sheer exhaustion.

‘Don’t mention it,’ Shimar said, ‘I thought we were going to lose you for a second.’

Cambridge was operating the winder on a window, encouraging the room to air. He allowed each of the peering faces their view of the freak show then respectfully marshalled them out into the hallway and back down the stairs.

‘We had better give her a chance to breathe.’

After gathering herself for a moment, Lerner recovered her tooth from the plughole. She thanked Cambridge again as they walked out of the bathroom and up the hall towards the open office.

Cambridge's eyes flickered towards Lucy's office door, and Lerner followed his gaze to see the door closed, a cover-up while the others played pass-the-parcel with her now aching torso.

"They didn't notice — nice diversion you created there. If anyone asks, you were eating these," Cambridge said, dropping a handful of nuts in his hand. "I always carry them with me, just in case something like this comes up."

He winked at her.

"What on Earth were you up to in there?" Cambridge said. "An award-winning journalist coming to a shit-hole like this? Their either paying you a shit-load of money or there's more to your story than you're letting on."

"I'm all about the money," Lerner said.

"Well, just be careful," Cambridge said. "This place gets to everyone after a while."

When she was back at her desk, Lerner checked the receiver she had stashed away under some pages in her drawer. Six microphone transmitters, six active signals.

On the other side of the world, the happiness elves were penning their next imaginary headline.

*Spy spied: Lerner learns.*

## Chapter twelve

*by Keith Blount*

Lerner was huddled tensely forward in her lush leather chair, absent-mindedly tapping her teeth with the chewed and chipped red nail of her index finger. She was waiting, not entirely inconspicuously, for the skeleton crew of *The Daily Echo* to file out and go home for the day. To anyone glancing in her direction, she hoped to convey the impression of writer-thinking-deeply-about-story, but, in truth, the entire circumference of her awareness was being pulled in towards the receiving unit hidden away in her drawer, like a little fishing boat spinning on the outer current of a whirlpool. All day her thoughts had been like light around a black hole, unable to escape the existence and proximity of the receiving unit, its inescapable reality, silently recording her own treachery along with the conversations and movements of the people who had given her this safe, cosseted job.

To pass the time, she gazed through the window, observing with longing the activity on the streets below, where people were leaving their offices and heading for the Tubes or pubs, the muted blacks, browns and greys of their winter jackets starkly contrasting the blood red of the crumpled paper poppies on their lapels and breast

pockets. The smell of fireworks and bonfires still lingered in the air, tangible even in the strip-lit sterility of this small office (she still had trouble thinking of it as a “news room”). Dead leaves scuttled across the street like so many forlorn insects. Lerner took all of this in, these passing, less complicated lives, and focussed on the movement outside and the monotonous drone of the 24-hour TV news that was always on in the background inside, in a futile attempt at calming her own nerves.

A question that had been gnawing away at the edges of her mind ate into her consciousness yet again: *What am I doing?* Followed by other unwelcome, newly-familiar thoughts: *I am lying to everyone. Why am I doing this?*

“Hey.”

Lerner started, jamming her nail into her upper gum and wincing. She hadn’t noticed Paul Cambridge sidle up to her desk. He was smiling down at her chipperly, his warm, brown eyes expectant, a look he often had when talking with her for some reason. What was it he was expecting? She couldn’t fathom. He was tall and golden but slightly faded and worn somehow - like, in fact, a building from his namesake city. Nascent crow’s feet clawed at the corners of his eyes, and there were one or two grey hairs above his ears. His hair, as usual, looked as though he’d just woken with surprise from a deep, luxurious sleep. She wondered if he spent time making his hair look that scruffy. Probably.

“Hey,” she responded.

“So, how are you settling in?” He ruffled the hair at his crown as he said this. Perhaps maintaining hair that untidy required constant vigilance.

“Good,” she said. “Thanks.” She smiled. Warmly, she hoped.

“Not regretting it, then? It’s a bit different here from *The Times*, I bet.” He raised his hands to indicate the small office around them. There was no one else around, just the sound of the TV and cabs and buses out on the street. “I mean, it’s fair to say that we don’t so much break stories here, as sift through the pieces.” It was a joke that had the hint of a recital that had long since lost its charm even to its performer.

“It’s different, yeah, but no, I’m liking it. Really.”

“Great!” He sound as though he really did think this was great.

She continued smiling at him while willing him to leave. All she wanted to do was download the files from the receiver and get out of there, but here was his loping form still looking expectantly at her, like a puppy hoping for her last Walkers crisp.

“You know,” said Paul, after an awkward pause in which he had apparently been searching for something to say, in the manner of someone looking for a pen in the seams of the sofa only to come up with a sticky, hair-covered penny, “it’s kind of an apt name. Echo. In Greek mythology, all Echo could do was repeat what other people said. And most of our content comes from our team in India regurgitating what they find online. Usually with better grammar than our English staff, in all fairness.”

“Wasn’t that was Echo’s punishment for telling long, distracting stories to Hera so that she didn’t find out what her husband was up to?”

“Yes! Was it? Right.” He frowned at this and bounced on his heels a little, almost like Mary Poppins preparing to fly, but apparently trying to find the thread of his thoughts and reel it back in. “That’s probably quite a deep comment on the newspaper industry. The opium of the masses, and all that. Or was that TV?

Or religion?" He seemed to be having some problem finding any connection between his thoughts at all. "Anyway, no, what was trying to say was..." He looked her in the eyes for the first time, and she felt a curious warm sensation spreading across the back of her neck. "Uh, what *was* I saying?"

She raised her eyebrows archly and sat back in her chair. In listening to Paul's clumsy attempts at conversation, for the first time all day, she felt herself relax a little, as though at last all the poisonous thoughts were being released from her every pore. "I think you were onto regurgitation."

"Huh." He shifted his weight between his feet. She noticed a tiny stain on his green tie, and also noticed how that shade of forest green suited his eyes. "I guess I'm just saying that I know this must be a big change for you, and it might feel as though we're not a real newspaper when compared to what you're used to. I remember a time when newspapers didn't just copy out Twitter feeds. Not that I'm old, I mean, just that it wasn't long ago. Uh. But if we needed a quote, we'd pick up the phone rather than just trawling Facebook. But even *The Guardian* is little more than *The Twitter Digest* these days. Everything's already out there, we all just filter and repackage it." He seemed to be justifying his job to himself now. "But at least what we do, we put a positive spin on the news and don't leave people feeling so depressed about the world. That can't be bad, right?" The way he said it, it seemed as though he genuinely wanted to know.

Without meaning to, she glanced behind him at the framed photo on the wall next to the flat-screen TV, where Jeremy Thompson's unconvincingly-dyed thatch lent an added dimension of desperation to whatever dolour he was disseminating. The photo

in the frame showed Eric Idle nailed to a cross. Beneath it were the words, "Always look on the bright side of life."

Paul's gaze followed hers. "One of Lucy's motivational adornments."

"I guess that's the part I'm finding the hardest, actually - putting a positive spin on everything. At *The Times* the general emphasis was on how everything was falling apart, the universe tending towards entropy, that sort of thing, you know." She shrugged. "Is Ebola the new Black Death?' 'Nurse denied right to wear dangly cross over open heart surgery patients, end of civilisation as we know it.' How do you spin the news we have to report in a positive manner all the time?"

"Well..." He looked uncertain. "You just have to look for the silver lining around what are often very dark clouds."

"With deadly lightning shooting out, killing babies," she interjected.

He laughed. "Perhaps. 'Be a positive person.'" He said this in the cut-glass manner of speech of Lucy Caldicote. This was pretty much Lucy's mantra. On Lerner's first day, she had heard Lucy remonstrating with a sub, telling her, "Never ask a question in a headline. Betteridge's law: the answer is always no. And we are a positive paper."

Lerner stared at Paul blankly. "PMA. Positive mental attitude. Yeah, I know. But I think you may have hired the wrong person."

"Okay, little miss sunshine, throw me some examples of bleak stories and I'll give you the positive. It's not so hard."

"Really? Can I make them up?"

"Do your best."

She pondered. As she did so, it didn't escape her notice that his

eyes quickly took in the shape of her legs in her black tights, the swell of her breasts under her crisp white shirt. Her blood quickened briefly, but her sudden nervousness around him only reminded her of the device in her drawer. She retrained her focus on the conversation.

“Okay: Girl kidnapped by uncle wanted in connection with Operation Yewtree.”

Without missing a beat, Paul retorted: “Police have strong leads on missing girl, thought to be in care of loving uncle.”

“Yuck. Okay, what about, Ambush in Basra claims lives of four more British soldiers.”

“This Remembrance Day, The Daily Echo remembers all the brave heroes who have died to make our world a better, safer place.”

“Government admits eight billion investment into NHS unfeasible without massive job cuts.”

“Reign of bungling NHS middle-management brought to an end by new efficiency drive.”

“New statistics reveal 48% of marriages end in divorce.”

“People more likely than ever to lead happier, more fulfilling lives without societal pressures to remain in unhappy, sexless marriages.”

The “sexless” didn’t escape her notice, nor did the slight flush that appeared in his cheeks as he said it, lending him a ruddy complexion, but she continued: “Gas mains explosion destroys factory and kills ten.”

“Eyesore factory razed to ground, making way for new funfair.”

She laughed. “Right, last one: After effects of nuclear war cause mass radiation and devastating effects on all living things.”

“Earth to thrive with new, more interesting forms of life, say experts.”

By now, Lerner was smiling. “You’re good at this.”

“What can I say, I’m a professional,” he said, ruffling his hair again. “And don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it. We hired you because you’re *good*, and your name in this paper gives makes *us* look good, too.”

She shrugged. She wasn’t good with compliments.

Paul - finally - moved as though to leave her in peace, and she turned to the blue glow of her screen to pretend to work. But then he thought better of it and pivoted back around to face her. Once more with that expectant look on his face. She gazed up at his tall frame again. His hand was really ferreting in his hair now, as though he’d lost something there. His words, it seemed.

“So...” he said at last.

“Is there a sentence to go with that conjunction?” *Why did I say that? That was what my Year 3 teacher used to say whenever we said “But”.*

He grinned, though. He looked sheepish. “Uh, a few of us were going to head out and get some food somewhere this weekend. You interested in coming along?”

She frowned. “Maybe. I guess it would be rude for the new girl not to turn up?”

“Yeah, that’s a good point. You really *ought* to come.”

“So who’s going? Where and when?”

“Well, that’s the thing. Everyone else has had to drop out, so it would be... just with me.”

Her frown deepened. “Huh. They dropped out fairly quickly, didn’t they? Like, between sentences?”

“What can I say, it’s a fast-moving newsroom.”

The 24-hour news burbled in the otherwise still and silent office.

“So... a date?” she said, feeling as though she were drowning in the events of the day.

“You mean to say that you are asking me out a date? Very well, I accept!”

She shook her head, but was smiling. “Do you always trick girls into going out with you like this?”

“Well, it’s either that or Rohypnol.” Even as he said this, his eyes widened in horror at his own words. “Shit! Sorry. I have no idea why I just said that. That was beyond inappropriate. Why would I say that? I promise I’m not a date-rapist. Or an apricot-rapist. Shit. This is me walking away apologetically.” He began to back away. His face had gone a deep beetroot, which wasn’t as fetching to his eyes as his tie.

Lerner laughed. “I’ll have dinner with you, but you are paying to make up for that totally unfunny joke.” At first she wasn’t entirely sure whether she had agreed to out with him just to get rid of him, to let her get the task ahead over with, but she discovered as she spoke that she really did like him. That if she could just get through all of this, she might even look forward to their date.

“Yes! Thank you! I mean, absolutely! We can have a food-taster there to make sure I haven’t... No, stop, Paul. Okay, great! I’m going to leave now while I’m ahead. I’ll think of somewhere we can go and let you know tomorrow. Have a great weekend. Evening, I mean.”

“Night, Paul.”

“Miss Jones.” He bowed, turned, banged his knee into a chair,

and tried to look as though he wasn't hobbling to his end of the office. *News room*.

He practically bounded to the other end of the office. And then she was alone again, and with the absence of Paul's distracting hulk next to her, the receiver in her drawer started screaming its metallic clamour for attention again. Her mouth went dry and a sheen of sweat appeared on her palms. She waited until she heard the rustling of Paul grabbing his coat and bag, the Doppler of his departing footsteps. "Don't work too hard, Jones!" he shouted; this followed by the click of the door. At last, she opened the drawer to her desk with trembling hands. She half-expected her face to be illuminated by an unearthly glow as she did so.

From beneath notepads and Post-Its, she pulled out the little chalky-white box. Even though no one was around, once it was on the desk, she placed today's copy of the *Echo* over it to conceal it, perhaps from herself. She slipped her laptop from her bag, flipped open the screen, and, fumbling, next extracted the USB lead from her bag too. She plugged it into the receiver and the laptop, fired up Finder, and located the encrypted disk image she had created in a hidden folder of her hard drive. Once the disk image was mounted, she dragged the sound files across from the receiving device to the disk image, and then all she could do was wait.

Throughout this whole sequence of actions, every nerve in her body buzzed and vibrated as though at a new frequency. Every sound out on the street made her jump, and she expected Lucy or Paul or Amir to appear at the door at any moment and immediately recognise that she was a fake, that she was lying to and spying on them all. She felt like this all the time, now: as though she were lying to everyone. Even to her friends and family,

when she spoke to them, it was as though a barrier had lifted between them through which only the most asinine and perfunctory of messages could penetrate. The untellable truth was isolated, on her side of the barrier alone, stuck in her throat like a lump of coal.

Her armpits were sticky and she spent an agonising minute glancing between the progress bar on the screen and the door. When, at last, her laptop let out its perky “ching” to announce the completion of its copying task, like a puppy perennially proud of retrieving its slobber-covered ball, relief flooded through her. She quickly ejected the receiving device and returned it to her drawer, burying it from sight and mind once more, and slid her laptop and USB lead back into her bag.

One minute later and she was out on the street.

This feeling of every nerve vibrating with a new resonance didn’t leave her even in the Autumn air, among London’s commuters, shoppers and drinkers. The worst part had been passing Amir at the door. She could have sworn he had cast her a suspicious glance, but then he looked at *everyone* suspiciously. Still the laptop felt as though it had taken on its own life in her bag, as though she were concealing an animal she had disfigured.

*Okay, you’ve got the audio files out. That’s done. That’s over. For now. Now you just need to listen to them.*

But where should she listen to her recordings? She knew that she wanted to get it over with as soon as possible, that she couldn’t endure the feeling of that wriggling animal in her bag, her guilt, all the way home. What about a park bench? Wasn’t that normally where spies peddled their trade? Wait, no. That was where they

swapped briefcases.

Twenty minutes later, Lerner was ensconced at a tall table along a wall at the back of The Walkabout in Covent Garden with a pint of cider next to her laptop. Under normal circumstances, an Australian pub wouldn't exactly be her first choice of venue. Most of her fellow countrymen whom she had met in London tended to bore her by complaining about England, droning on smugly about how much better the weather was in the country they had left behind. Why was it that London seemed to draw out the worst of them? (Although, she had to concede, the English weather was appalling, and in her drunker moments, she may have even expounded on this subject herself.)

She had decided on The Walkabout because it seemed so unlikely: who would expect that a girl just out of work, in a crisp white shirt, grey skirt and black tights, supping cider with earphones plugged into her laptop, was doing anything other than listening to music while checking her email? (She had Mail.app open on her desktop so that this was exactly the impression she would give.) Who would think she was performing surveillance for MI7? And if anyone *was* after her—this was how paranoid she had become—then good luck to any Englishman trying to hurt an Australian girl in *here*. The men in the Wallabies T-shirts would surely have something to say to that. In the end, this had seemed the perfect choice. Or, at least, not the worst choice her addled mind could make.

For some time, she stared at the disk image that contained the audio files in the Finder application. Again, that question rose to the surface of her consciousness like a bloated corpse in a lake: *What am I doing?* Did MI7 even exist, or was she being played by

larger forces she didn't understand (as opposed to the putative forces she didn't understand)? How had the events of her life led her to this, to trembling over a laptop and working for an espionage agency that had supposedly been disbanded seventy years ago? She tried to trace events back to their source, like a child lost in the woods following a trail of bread that led her back only into further darkness.

She sipped her cool cider and looked at the after-work drinkers at the bar, care-worn but, compared to her, somehow care-free. Why had she even chosen to become a journalist in the first place? *She* hadn't chosen; some seventeen year-old, former version of herself had chosen, with whom she probably no longer shared even a single atom. That person had made decisions based on romantic ideas built on Hollywood and English movies, and through natural processes she didn't understand, that girl had disappeared, atom by atom, and been replaced by this woman, with synapses vibrating at unfamiliar frequencies, sitting in a theme pub with the fruits of possibly-illegal eavesdropping at her fingertips.

She sighed. Whatever the natural processes were, they were still in motion, and all she could do was go along with them. Perhaps she had taken the job with MI7 out of guilt at being bought off by *The Echo*, at running away from the horror she had experienced at the Bond & Lacey bombing, the lacerated faces, the walking wounded, limping away with the help of friends, and the body bags. Perhaps she had become a journalist for no real reason at all. But here she was. All she could do was double-click on the disk image, enter her password, and listen.

She selected the file for Lucy's office to begin with. Mostly, the recording consisted of shuffling and scraping, the pecking of Lucy's

finely-manicured nails on computer keys, the occasional dainty cough. Fortunately, the app she was using to play back the audio featured a horizontal graph showing volume levels, allowing her to scrub through to sections with conversation. Before she even got to the first conversation, however, a rugby type with a thick, hairy neck and bleary eyes had appeared at the side of her table with a pint in his hand. Lerner looked up at him, smiled, and said brightly, “Fuck off.” He shrugged and ambled away, looking for someone else to harass, no doubt. Lerner hit the play button.

Immediately she recognised the clipped, no-nonsense tones of Lucy Caldicote. Although there was no way of hearing the person on the other end of her line, from the greeting Lerner knew that Lucy was talking to her brother, Henry. There were a few moments of silence as Lucy listened, followed by Lucy assuring her brother that he hadn’t got Ebola but merely the flu. “Henry, if you start bleeding out of your eyes and sphincter, dear, I’ll start taking you seriously. I’ll even commission an editorial on you. But in the meantime, just take some Aspirin and have a lie-down. Unless you’ve been shagging some Liberian skirt we don’t know about?”

Lerner scrubbed forward. There was the occasional spike on the volume graph, always a cough, a door closing, or a car horn honking.

There were phone calls and visits from members of the *Echo* staff, Lucy chiding sub-editors, calling for coffee, but nothing interesting. Lerner sipped, scrubbed, listened, scrubbed, sipped, listened. At one point, she recognised Paul’s voice, and her heart quickened as she realised the conversation was about her:

“How’s the new girl getting on?”

“Great, she’s doing really well.”

“Seems like she’s got her head firmly stuck up her arse.”

“I don’t think so. She did just see people die in front of her fairly recently.”

“Well, if you like her, Paul, good. She’s under you. Just remember that a PMA is what we value around here. No doom and gloom.”

“Don’t worry, she’s a fast learner. Lerner’s a fast learner.”

An awkward silence.

“I’ll be going, then.”

Lerner carried on scrubbing forward, keeping her eyes on the volume peaks and troughs, through dull conversations and periods of typing. This was the part of spy-work they skipped on *Spooks* and in *Mission: Impossible*. She yearned for some way of scrubbing through these minutes of her own life.

Presently she came to a conversation from mid-afternoon. At first, she nearly skipped over it, as it sounded like nothing more than a lunch arrangement or something equally trivial, but she was once more interrupted by someone approaching her. She hit pause, and without looking up, once more said, “Fuck off.” When at last she did look up, a mildly offended barman was walking away and shaking his head. She realised her glass was empty. Cursing herself, she hit play again and prepared to scrub forward, but before she could, she heard the words “Bond & Lacey.” She felt the hairs on the back of her neck crackle. Her breath became caught at the back of her throat. She bit her lip as she scrubbed back to the peak that marked the start of this conversation, and hit play again.

“Yes,” Lucy was saying. “That’s right.”

A pause.

“No, she’s a nobody. It’s nothing to worry about, trust me.”

Another pause.

“Yes, she was. Mmm. Bond & Lacey.” And now Lerner’s heart was fluttering in her chest like a bat blocked in its cave by a landslide. “She was a witness, that’s all, there with *The Times*. It’s pure coincidence. Our dopey features editor liked the look of her tits, that’s all there is to it, nothing sinister, I assure you.”

A pause again as Lucy listened to whoever was at the other end of the line.

Lucy sighed. “She’s a droopy moo who came to us for the cash and to run away from what was going on, so it’s quite the opposite. Can we move on?”

More listening.

“I see. Hmm. Let me say this. HSBC was clumsy. Do you understand me? That’s not what I agreed to.” With these words, every muscle in Lerner’s body froze rigid, as though she had been ossified.

Silence again.

“One can only speculate, of course, but I do wonder when the next attack will be, don’t you? I wonder if one might be able to make an educated guess.”

Again, Lucy listened to the person on the other end of the line, and Lerner listened to Lucy listening. She was paralysed with incomprehension.

“Friday? It’s Wednesday now, is that even possible at such short notice?”

A much longer pause.

“Yes. Yes, I suppose Friday is fine. I’ll get things straight my end, but I don’t want to feel as though I’ve got more blood on my hands than— Hello? Hello? Fuck.” The click of the phone. Then a

long silence, followed by the clickety-clack of expensive heels leaving the office.

The audio hissed in Lerner's ears, and she found it hard to focus on her surroundings. The sounds and movements in the pub around her seemed now like those of a deep forest in which she had lost herself. The dense, humid air of the forest made it difficult for her to breathe.

"Fuck. Off," she said at last, letting out a long, sibilant sigh, feeling the panic rising in her breast.

Nathan Bearfield had been right about one thing: there was something going on at *The Daily Echo*, all right, but anti-trust was the least of it. It seemed that by running away, Lerner had run right into the very darkness she had hoped to escape.

## **Chapter thirteen**

*by Graham D. Stewart*

Lerner turned off The Mall and through the first entrance into St. James's Park. This had always been one of her favourite London parks. Almost a hidden gem and full of small wonders. She had first come here with her father when he had visited in her first year at university. They had discovered the pelicans together. She now thought of them as her pelicans and was surprised whenever people she met socially or through her work even knew of their existence. The park was where she came whenever she had things to think over; the angle needed for an article; the best way to refuse an offer to dinner when she knew dinner was not what was really being offered; to think about her new boss as a potential terrorist. It was also where she used to run before she found the gym more convenient. There was something to be said for a shower next to where you exercised.

As she walked across the park towards the barracks, she tried to make sense of what she had heard. Perhaps she had misunderstood the references. Maybe the fact that she had been caught up in an attack had ruined her objectivity. No, screw objectivity. Lucy had said what she said and there was no

mistaking the words. But it was Nathan's job to make sense of it all and to decide what to do about it. She had been debating whether it was safe to use her mobile to call him but it wasn't as if she would find a phone box in the park. In this case, she believed urgent overruled caution. She dialled his number. Two rings and it went to his voicemail. Shit. She tried to keep her voice as business-like as possible.

"It's me. And it's urgent. Please call me back."

She followed the path round the lake under the walls that hid Buckingham Palace from view and began walking back towards the direction of Whitehall. And the rocks on which her pelicans were usually to be found. She tried to think only of the pelicans.

She was almost at the bridge that split the lake in half when she felt her phone buzz in her hand. She had pressed accept before the first ring had finished.

"You took your time," said Lerner. It was her nerves: she hadn't meant to attack him.

"I do have responsibilities, you know?"

"Responsibilities?"

"Yes," said Nathan.

His voice was sharper than Lerner remembered. It lacked warmth. Perhaps he really was annoyed that she'd called.

"This is important," she said.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Lives are at stake," she said.

There was silence at the other end of the line and Lerner flushed at the thought of using such a hackneyed line. She was glad she was standing among trees and out of sight of the few tourists in the park marvelling at the presence of grey squirrels.

“This is not a joke,” said Nathan.

Lerner felt she was close to screaming in anger or frustrating. Possibly a mixture of both.

“Listen, you pompous oaf. Meet me at the usual place in ten minutes or I’ll take the recordings I made to The Times. What I have is more fucking important than you would believe. Does that sound convincing enough?”

“Fifteen.”

“What?”

“Minutes. I’ll be there in fifteen.” Nathan disconnected.

Lerner put her phone back in her bag and leaned against the closest tree. She was breathing heavily. But for the coat and the bag and the heels, she would have looked like a jogger resting after a sudden sprint.

Lucy wanted to go home. She didn’t have work she needed to get done but there was only home and George waiting for her. Anyway, it set an example for the staff to see the boss working past lunchtime. But she was bored and not just with George. At that moment, she looked up and saw her head of security walk past her open door. Her open door policy was just another way to stave off boredom. She could call people in. Not many entered of their own volition. She called after Amir Shimar and he turned and stood in her doorway.

“Come in, Amir.”

“I don’t want to disturb you.”

“You’re not. Trust me.”

Amir stepped into the room and gave it a quick once-over. Lucy wasn’t sure if that was his way of acting as head of security or if he

genuinely enjoyed noticing his surroundings.

“All well?” said Lucy.

“Hunky dory, as we speak.”

He nodded towards the blank screen. “Didn’t you just have this beauty installed at great cost so you could watch a continuous feed of many news channels?” He sat on the corner of Lucy’s desk. This was a privilege Lucy allowed very few of her colleagues and Amir knew it.

“Yes. At great cost and at great inconvenience for the keepers of the budget.” She smiled at the thought.

“And yet I see no news.”

“Bloody thing’s all wired up wrong or something. I get irritating interference all the time.”

“What sort of interference?”

“I don’t know,” said Lucy. “Crackles, fuzzy lines. I’m not an expert on interference. I just want a clear picture and clear sound.”

“Show me,” said Amir.

“You’re an electrician, now?”

But Lucy picked up the remote from her desk and aimed it at the screen on the wall. The picture came on bright and clear. Rolling news. Amir looked at Lucy.

“Wait,” she said.

Amir turned back to the screen in time to see a few jagged lines wiggle along the bottom of the picture.

“Put on the sound,” he said.

Lucy switched off the mute button.

Although the words spoken by the news anchor were intelligible, they were accompanied by an irritating background hiss and the occasional crackle, as if someone was letting the air

out of a warehouse of balloons while eating Rice Krispies. Amir signalled to Lucy to turn up the volume.

“Up?”

“Please,” said Amir.

He rose from the edge of the desk and began pacing around the room. Lucy watched him but said nothing. She let herself smile, though, at his attempt to marry his security to that of temporary TV repair man.

Amir moved to the wall on which hang the TV screen. He ran his hands under and then along the top of the device. He removed a small torch from his inside pocket and shone it in the gap between the wall and the screen. Lucy began to take this more seriously. She realised he was looking for something specific and she could only fear what that might be. He appeared to be content that the screen was free of whatever he was searching for and moved over to her desk. Lucy was about to stand but Amir motioned for her to stay seated. He dropped to his knees and began looking at the underside of the desk. Then he ran his fingers around the underside of the desk’s rim. Finally, he lifted the desk lamp and turned it over. Its base had a small indentation. In this indentation was a small strip of what looked like a black wire with a blob on the end. Amir smiled and showed it to Lucy, who thought it looked like some sort of dead caterpillar. Fried by the light, possibly. Then she realised what it must be and was about to protest loudly when Amir quickly put his finger to his lips and frowned at her. She was quick enough on the uptake to close her mouth before any words had formed fully.

Amir walked to the door and opened it. He turned to Lucy and gestured her to follow him. Lucy nodded and walked across the

room. Amir stood back to let her leave first. He closed the office door gently behind him.

Lucy managed to keep her fury inside during the walk along the corridor to Amir's office. Once inside, however, and after Amir had closed the door, she immediately slammed her hand on his desk.

"My office is bugged?"

"Oh, yes."

"Who? Who the fuck is bugging my office?"

Amir entered the password for his computer and gestured for Lucy to join him round his side of the desk.

"That is what we're going to find out," he said.

Lerner sat at table in the small coffee shop off the lobby of the hotel. It was the sort of hotel her parents would have called grand and meant pretentious and too expensive. But Lerner liked it. She liked its location and the fact that it was a converted great house. She looked out of the window and across to the park. The view was good, too.

A waiter brought her the coffee she had ordered. There was a small caramelised biscuit in the saucer and she picked it up and tried to unwrap it but found her hands were shaking. Ridiculous. Get a grip, woman. She forced herself to take a series of deep breaths and then looked round to see if she was being watched. She imagined she might look a woman on the verge of an affair or about to be dumped. Better than looking like a spy who has uncovered a terrorist plot. If that's what she had done, of course.

Finally, she freed the small tan biscuit from its wrapper and dunked it briefly in her coffee before popping it whole into her mouth. She didn't chew but let it sit on her tongue and dissolve

slowly. For some reason, this calmed her.

And then Nathan was there. He sat down opposite and signalled to the waiter before even acknowledging her. What a prat. Yes, he was good looking but he could also be a prat.

The waiter approached and Nathan ordered his usual complicated coffee with extra shots and soya milk and something to do with scalding that Lerner neither understood nor cared about. When the waiter retreated, Lerner leaned across the table to speak but Nathan held up his hand.

“It’s OK,” he said.

“What’s OK?”

“No need to apologise.”

Lerner sat back and stared at Nathan. “I wasn’t going to apologise,” she said.

“Oh.”

“Oh? I don’t need to apologise for dragging you away from some minor responsibilities. This is important. I told you.”

“Right,” said Nathan.

Lerner dug into her handbag by the chair leg and picked out the memory stick. She was about to slip it across the table when the waiter returned with Nathan’s elaborate drink. God, her father would hate Nathan. She was edging towards her father’s side on this at the moment.

“So you listened to the audio?”

“Yes,” said Lerner.

“And you’re shocked by what you heard?”

“You’re not just a pretty face, are you?”

Nathan appeared to ignore this. Or perhaps he thought she was being sincere.

“Did you hear about plans to change the way the paper is run?”

“No,” said Lerner.

“Funded?”

Lerner leaned forward again and raised her right hand and let her finger point towards Nathan in what she hoped was an aggressive manner.

“Cut the condescending crap,” she said. “Do you really think I would be shocked by ownership and funding deals? Do you think I would come rushing out to call you because some dodgy investors are looking to control the great bastion of the free press that is the Echo? Fuck off, Nathan. Fuck. Right. Off.”

She realised that she had spoken the last dozen or so words as a crescendo, so the coffee shop and the nearest sections of the lobby were now fully cognisant of her anger. It would look like a lover’s tiff and she wasn’t in the mood to care. Let Nathan worry about appearances.

Nathan, though, was actually smiling.

“Sorry,” he said. “You’re right. I recruited you because you were smart. Seems a bit silly of me to think otherwise now. OK?”

“OK.” Lerner took a deep breath.

“Tell me what you heard.”

She did. As concisely as if she were pitching an idea to Paul. Then she sat back to see how Nathan would react.

Not well, was the immediate verdict. Lerner could see not only that he was shocked (and she enjoyed momentarily the irony of that) but that he was struggling with what to say or do next. She took pity on him.

“I suppose you’ll have to report this higher up?”

Nathan nodded. “Yes. Obviously this is not what was expected.”

“Right,” said Lerner. “You’ll need this.” She passed across the memory stick.

Nathan accepted the small plastic block and cupped it in his palm. He expelled a long breath and offered Lerner a smile. Having something to focus on or touch seemed to let him recover his poise.

“Thank you,” he said. “I can see how this must have disturbed you.”

“Yes.”

“Scared you, even.”

“More than a little,” she said.

“Sorry I was so dismissive. A jerk.”

“A prat, I thought.”

“I’m happy to accept either epithet.”

“OK.” Lerner smiled.

“Temporarily, at least.” Nathan smiled.

Lerner thought this was really not the time.

“What do I do?” she said.

“You have to go back to work and you have to act normally. You know that.”

“Can’t I take sick leave or something?”

Nathan said nothing. He even picked up his coffee and looked as if he was going to take a sip but at the last moment pulled his mouth back from the edge of the mug, as if suddenly disgusted by what he had been about to do.

“That’s a no, then?” said Lerner.

Amir brought up the CCTV footage of Lucy’s office for the last week.

“These beauties last about a week so there’s no point in looking

back more than a few days. It's still working because your TV is still picking up its signal. And we'll concentrate on the nights. When did you last leave early?"

"Early?"

"Before six, say," said Amir. "When a lot of staff were still around."

"What this? Thursday. OK, say Monday."

The films rewound quickly and Lucy watched the date and time at the top flick past like a time machine dial.

"This is Monday," said Amir. "And look."

Lucy looked. She saw Lerner knock on her door, enter her room carefully and close the door behind her. Five minutes later she reappeared.

"The little bitch. Who the fuck does she think she is? What is she playing at. I gave that bitch a job. This is how she pays me back?" She looked at Amir and was surprised to see him smiling. "What? She's gone. She is out of here. I want her desk cleared. Search and cleared. Passes revoked. She places not one dainty fucking foot in my newsroom again. Ever. And no pay in lieu either or whatever outstanding money she might think she is owed. Got it?"

Amir said nothing.

"Am I missing something? What are you smiling about, for fuck's sake? This is betrayal, plain and simple."

"I agree," said Amir.

"That's a start. So start the process of purging her. And make sure she can't get a job elsewhere."

"That's one way of dealign with things."

Lucy took a deep breath. She wanted to hit something and

looked around but the room was full of expensive equipment. She thought she might have to hit Amir if she couldn't get her anger under control.

"What are you talking about? It's the only way."

"It's the obvious way. It also lets her know we've rumbled her."

"So? She's rumbled."

Amir nodded. "Is she that clever?"

"She's smart. I hired her."

"Do you think," said Amir, "that she is up to doing this alone?"

"I don't know. Why would she?"

"Exactly."

"Then who set her up to it?"

"We won't find out if you sack her, will we?"

Lucy felt all her anger flow away and a more constructive indignation take its place.

"I gather you have a plan?"

"I do," said Amir. "Indeed I do."

## **Chapter fourteen**

*by Anton Rasmussen*

Moments of insight like this have happened before. One doesn't get to MI7 without having done at least *some* of the dirty work of other MI sections: interrogation, elicitation, and source ops (HUMINT); signal interception and exploitation (SIGINT); document exploitation (Doc Ex); or analysis of all-source intel these weren't all the sections but made up the bulk of MI's workload. Still, even for someone as young as Nathan Bearfield, it wasn't atypical to have a resume full of cross-over projects conducted with multiple MI sections; so, not only had Nathan had these kind of hair-raising "Eureka!" moments before, they usually involved more than just sitting at a desk.

The real dirty work occurred in the field here Nathan first felt the rush of excitement during moments of discovery like the one he was presently experiencing. All the methods one learns in the field relate to determining, with as much certainty as possible, the veracity of information contained in sources being examined. Information that has the highest probability of being true or credible gets pushed forward becomes "intelligence."

To be sure, there's always an intelligence source always

someone or something that, based on whether examined information made any sense (field time honed such senses and, in BIS jargon, info that seemed credible “passed the smell test”), it was almost always possible to leverage background on a source.

In the HUMINT world, for example, leveraging human weak points (love of family, hate of comrades, pride in country, etc. etc.) for the purpose of putting the intelligence to use seemed most effective. In MI7, it typically came down to a deep understanding of language and psychology on how people interpret what they read or hear. Nathan was more than familiar with uncovering the deeper meaning of content brought to him by his sources (this was the essence of his job); but, something about this something about Lerner Jones’ description of the events from the third bombing seemed, well, like the definition of what it means to pass the smell test.

Mostly, work at MI7 only dealt with what other agencies might call Civil Affairs or Psychological Operations. MI7 was a nice blend of both. Most of the assets leveraged in MI7 most of the sources involved direct public contact and relations. Whether it meant coaxing reporters to run or not run certain stories at certain times or schmoozing an overseas editor to print news that might affect change in public sentiment in regions of interest, the main objective of MI7 was the “message.” What’s being said? Who’s saying what? What are the goals of individuals speaking through public forums? How can information being disseminated to the public be modified for higher level strategical reasons? These were the areas of intelligence operations that MI7 both tried to

proactively answer (determining who might be using what kind of propaganda and why) and reactively control (using propaganda for required objectives so-called propaganda “requirements” as a necessary tool in the MI arsenal). The main difference between MI7 and other sections, however, (other than *how* they did their intelligence gathering and reporting) was that MI7 had been all but covertly disbanded since 1940.

In one quick flash of insight, Nathan pulled out his ear-buds and began to scan the office. If anyone in the office could see his face (and, really, if anyone was looking in his general direction seeing his face would be pretty easy considering how open the office was) and see how his face had changed in such a brief moment, they’d see what it looked like for a seasoned MI7 officer to connect the dots, so to speak pale face, tired eyes, disheveled hair; Nathan knew he had to talk to someone about what he just put together after listening to Lerner Jones’ audio report.

“Hey man,” Nathan said on a quick phone call to Angus James. “I think we’ve got something you’re gonna wanna look at.”

“Oh yeah, what?” As usual, Angus seemed fairly distracted. He was probably eating crisps and wasting time on social media.

“Trust me you’re gonna wanna check this out. It’s about one of my resources, it’s about the third bombing.”

“OK, let me come over.” Nathan could hear the click as Angus hung up the phone. Not usually one to have guests near his desk, he noticed the pile of books on his second chair and started to move the books so Angus would have a place to sit.

In most office environments it might seem as though one

wouldn't want to be too loud (for fear that it might disturb others); but, at MI7, controlling the volume of intra-office conversations took on a new level of attention. Not only was it important to keep chatter to a minimum; but, the content of what was being talked about had to be censored lest someone slip something to another officer about who their source was or in what newspapers they had their hands. Fortunately for Nathan and Angus, Victoria Mason their immediate supervisor wasn't within earshot. Also, as luck would have it, the rest of the office was either busy coordinating with other agencies or sections, somewhere else in the office doing God-knows-what, or nursing the effects of too many pints the night before.

"See what I mean?" Nathan asked Angus.

"Oh yeah man; that's a big problem. OK. So, now what? I feel like we need to tell Victoria."

"Yeah, I thought about that but, I mean, is it enough? Is it worth telling her about my source? She'll probably just kick it back and tell me to corroborate with another source maybe even task one of our recruited assets."

"I don't think you can NOT tell her it's gotta go up the chain, Nate."

Angus might have been an imposing figure physically; but, usually he seemed kinda simple. Just another agent. But, after mulling it over a bit, Nate decided Angus was right. Now was not the time to break protocol. Plus, he could sense in those piercing blue eyes that Angus was a bit worried about what Nathan didn't know.

“First thing this morning is this shit?” exclaimed Victoria. “How are you going to bring me this garbage and tell me that it’s a priority MI7 report? You know that SPOT reports are supposed to only come when it’s an urgent matter with pressing need to be addressed, right?”

Victoria Mason was clearly heated. While Nathan and Angus had decided it’d be best to run their findings through the chain of command, it was Nathan who finally determined to send the report with High Priority in the SPOT report format. He debated sending up the typical intelligence report out from a template format that usually took about 72 hours before the analysts would return word on whether not the report was of any use, but, ultimately, Nathan decided to send the SPOT because he knew that Lerner’s details passed the smell test. He could sense it.

“Look, Bearfield,” Victoria Mason would revert to the more military inspired use of last names when she was most agitated. “Let me get something across to you. I know you’ve done a lot of field work with other agencies. I know your background; but, MI7 doesn’t work with domestic press. Never have, never will.”

Nathan began to feel like he’d broken some kind of law or violated some kind of understanding that he just wasn’t privy to. Still, it didn’t make sense why she was so agitated. He knew the info was good; he got the info from a reputable source; so, what was the matter?

“The thing that gets me, Bearfield, is that you had the audacity to go and work with a civilian reporter! A British reporter!! And reveal that you work with MI7. Were you trying to bang this broad

or something, Bearfield? How about you James? Seriously, what gives?

“Look,” Nathan said. He’d finally come to a point in their conversation where he felt he could interject his thoughts. “First off, Angus didn’t know about this.”

“Really James? You didn’t know who the source was?” she retorted.

“No ma’am, I didn’t. Never asked. But, when I heard what she said I knew we should send it up the chain right away.”

“Well it’s a little late for that now isn’t it James?” Victoria scoffed.

“See gents, the thing is, look I’m not upset when you’re out there doing the job and trying to get information on these attacks. I get it. Trust me. That Barclays attack put me into a place where, truthfully, I can’t even sleep at night now. Too much to think about. Too much shit. But now after HSBC, I know we’re all trying to figure out who’s behind all of this. I know that’s what it comes down to. But, and I’m only gonna say this once: We cannot break protocol.”

Before Nathan could respond, and he was already prepared for Victoria’s response since his first meet with Lerner, Angus chimed in.

“Couldn’t we just send it on to MI5, ma’am? I mean... it’s still intelligence information; might even be actionable.” Angus was ever the peacemaker.

“James! Are you daft? How are you gonna explain to 5 where you got this shit? No. We’re not sending it anywhere. Kill it. Shred the report. You send this thing up and you’ll be looking at serving

the Queen in a different capacity entirely behind bloody bars. Now get the hell outta my office!”

“Ma’am, if I could...” Nathan tried to make a suggestion but was quickly cut off.

“No. You can’t. Buck up gentleman! This is the job. Don’t grow a conscience now. You wanted to be MI7 agents, well, here’s your shot. Start acting like MI7 and kill this report. Look, the info’s probably out there more than with just this source anyway. I’m sure there were other witnesses than this... this Lerner Jones? 5 has it already; I’m sure of it. Now go. Get out. Get back to work and get me something we can use.”

With that Nathan and Angus stood, turned, and left Victoria’s office. What she didn’t know and what Nathan hadn’t told Angus either was that Nathan was already in contact with one of his buddies at MI5. It wasn’t just that Lerner was a reporter; no, in Nathan’s mind she was a source. And oh would she be...

## **Chapter fifteen**

*by Chanel Blake*

“Well open it,” Charlie said, nudging his partner Harry and motioning to the brown package with the job details.

Harry ran a hand over his shaved head then reaches for the package sitting between them in the blue transit van. To Charlie’s dismay he slowly opened the package and pulled out the instructions. The timing was agonizing but Charlie knew better than to rush his partner.

Out tumbled two photos and a page of instructions. Charlie snatched them from Harry’s hand as he eyed the grainy pictures taken from a CCTV news report. The first was a man with short, black hair – cut neat – and chocolate eyes. He was young, possibly younger than Charlie’s 29, but much better dressed, in a fine suit. Likely inherited his father’s company, or had a spout of professional good luck, something neither Charlie nor Harry had any experience with.

The second photo was another young man, this one with longer brown hair with a slight curl and bright blue eyes. He’s happy, no doubt another fortunate soul.

“What’s the instructions say?” Charlie asked.

Harry flicked on the overhead light in the van to get a better a look at the page. His words came out in short grunts, typical of overweight Harry.

“Abduct them and take them where the boss said.” Harry passed the paper to Charlie who nodded along with him.

“Sounds easy enough.”

Harry shrugged. “Looks like they’re known to hang around the Royal Horseguards Hotel by Whitehall Court.”

“Probably doing their all important business,” Charlie sneered. “Whatever that is.” He had always been resentful of the young and rich, and these guys fit the bill.

Again, Harry shrugged. “Think they’ll be there now?”

Charlie checked his watch, almost 6 o’clock. “Yeah, they’ll probably still be working. Unless they’re really crappy business men.”

“Never know,” Harry snorted with laughter. “Should we get on?”

Charlie didn’t answer before shifting the car into gear and heading down the road towards their destination.

“That’s all for today,” Nathan said, standing and holding his hand out to Angus. The two had worked together as MI7 intelligence officers for a few years. They grew close and Nathan considered Angus a good friend, if not the best.

“Great,” Angus said, running a hand through his curly brown hair. “Same time tomorrow?”

Nathan shook his head and clipped his briefcase closed. “I’ve got to check in with Lucy at the Daily Echo in the morning. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

“The Editor-in-Chief? What for?” Angus asked.

“One of her reporters, Daryl I think was the name, is working on a story that the MI7 doesn’t want to run,” Nathan said. “I’ll have to do a bit of persuading to convince Lucy to cut the piece.”

Angus chuckled, knowing what Nathan meant by persuading. “Lucky she’s such a cooperative woman.”

“Lucky,” Nathan said with a wink. “Some tomorrow afternoon, whenever I’ve done.”

“Sounds good, but only if you shower first.”

The two men laughed and together head down the hallway of the Royal Horseguards Hotel. Nathan nodded at the blonde working the front desk that blushed and hid her face as she giggled. He’d always prided himself on being a catch with the ladies, even though he’d kept his single status since leaving college.

Angus chuckled and shook his head. “Who’s that?”

“Mandy?” Nathan asked with a grin. “Just a very kind woman.”

“Kind how?” Angus asked, pushing open the lobby doors.

Nathan winked. “A good man doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“That’s bullshit, man,” Angus said, slapping his friend on the back. “You tell me about the girls you sleep with all the time.”

Nathan looked up at the taller man and shrugged, though his wicked grin was still intact. “This one is different.”

“Doesn’t seem any different.” Angus directed Nathan to the parking lot where their cars had been parked side by side since they arrived at the hotel this morning.

“Shouldn’t I be the one to decide that?” Nathan asked.

Angus only shrugged his response. The man was two year younger than him but could always see right through Nathan’s intentions. Mandy was no different than the other girls, except that

she was awful in bed. Why did a pretty girl have to suck when it came to sex? That's why Nathan wouldn't talk about it.

At their cars they shook each other's hand once more. "See you tomorrow," Nathan said.

As he turned for his Porsche there was the sound of screeching tires. Angus and Nathan stopped in their tracks and glanced back just in time to see a blue transit van pull up behind them. Before either man could react, two masked men jumped from the van and pursued Nathan and Angus.

Nathan looked to his friend just in time to see the tallest of the two men club Angus on the back of the head and send him falling to his knees. Nathan turned to run, but was stopped by a knock to his head. His eye sight blurred and everything went black before he even hit the ground.

"Faster, Harry," Charlie snapped.

Harry fumbled with the duffle bag and waddled towards where Charlie stood with both men on the ground. Then he reached into the bag and pulled out the rope that Charlie had packed earlier. He headed towards the man that he hit but Charlie stopped him.

"Do this guy first," Charlie said, pointing at the taller man on the ground. "He's bigger. We can deal with the other one if he comes to early."

Harry didn't disagree and got to work tying up the first of the men. Charlie stood guard, as he always did when it came to binding the victims. Harry was a better knot, having sailed in his youth.

"Now the other one," Charlie said, his hand plunged deep in his pockets and glancing around the parking lot. It was dark and there wasn't anyone about, still he seemed nervous.

“Okay,” Harry wheezed as he waddled over to the next man. “You get them in the car.”

Charlie complied and began lifting the first man into the van while Harry went about securing the other. It had been a quick and easy job, maybe too easy. That’s when Harry noticed the obvious bump forming on this man’s head. Did he hit him too hard? A quick check to his mouth, told Harry he was still breathing. Hopefully he would keep breathing until they dropped them off.

Charlie didn’t give him a chance to ask. Instead he pushed Harry aside and grabbed the man’s arms to heave him into the back of the van. Now both bound and unconscious, their tall statures were less intimidating. Harry leaned against the van, wiping the sweat from his brow, exhausted from the bit of movement required of him.

“Did we hit them too hard?” Harry asked when Charlie shut the back door and rounded the van to the driver’s side.

Charlie’s lips pressed into a deep grimace. “How many times have we done this?”

Harry shrugged. Enough times that he could count

“And have we killed anyone?” Charlie asked.

Harry shook his head. “Not once.”

“There’s your answer.” Charlie said nothing else before climbing into the front seat of the van and sliding the key into the ignition.

But Harry still hesitated. He glanced around and back at the well lit hotel. There was nobody at the entrance but they hadn’t been quiet abducting these men. Hopefully no one had seen. Before climbing into the van, something else caught his eye. He rounded the van towards where he had clubbed the smaller man over the head. He had been climbing into his Porsche.

*Gee, what a great car.* Harry ran his hand over the back end of the fancy vehicle.

“What are you doing?” Charlie hissed. “Let’s get out of here.”

Harry turned to leave when he noticed a dark briefcase on the ground. He grabbed the case, which on the outside had a name engraved in a gold plate. *Nathan Bearfield.*

“Guess we know who one of these guys is now,” Harry said, waddling to the passenger side of the car.

“Whachu got there?” Charlie asked, eyeing the fancy briefcase.

“Guess it belonged to one of the guys.” Then Harry’s eyes lit up. “Do you think the keys to that Porsche are in here?”

Charlie shrugged. “Probably.” Then he cocked his head to the side. “Don’t get any ideas, Har. We are not jacking a fancy Porsche. That would come right back to us.”

“Even if we sold it quick?” Harry asked. “Fast and dirty?”

Charlie shook his head again. “Hell no. It will be our asses if we screw this up over a car theft.”

“Well what if we come back for it later?” Harry asked. “Then it won’t be as obvious.”

“You really are a dumbass,” Charlie said with a laugh before shifting the van into drive and heading out of the hotel parking lot.

“No,” Harry protested. “I’m looking out for us. That car would be good money. Our ticket to a fancy life!”

“Or jail,” Charlie scoffed.

“Yeah, whatever,” Harry said, looking away and resting his hands on his round stomach. “You’re just jealous the idea wasn’t yours.”

“Oh yeah,” Charlie laughed. “That’s me, jealous of all your bright ideas.” He reached out and smacked his best friend on the

back of the head. "Don't be an idiot." He glanced over his shoulder at the tied up men. "They're our ticket to cash."

"If you say so," Harry grumbled.

"I do." Neither spoke again as they headed down the road to meet with their boss.

## 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 Greg Ray*

Lerner turned and headed toward Embankment and the river. Cameras looked down from the corners of all the buildings. *What had just happened?* She sprinted across the boulevard and down the footpath. Thankfully there were no tour busses at this hour. She cut over and onto the platform of the RAF Memorial.

The platform was empty, but she was not alone really — the Eye of London was always wide open. She'd never really thought much about it, but it offended her now to see it there. She gripped the railing, and felt the urge to reach across the Thames and just shut that for good.

What had happened? Bearfield, the Ministry of Defence, everything — it wasn't making sense. She was short of breath from her sprint out of Horse Guard, and that didn't make any sense either. *Caught between Earth and Water*. As a reporter she should have been more skeptical. MI7. That should have been Vauxhall, she realised, not the MoD.

Her eye followed a service craft piloting down toward Westminster. There was no help in that direction. She could not really see the shoulders of the SIS in the distance, but she felt their

rebuke. She turned her back on the busy waterway. Maybe it would be Thames House anyway, she thought.

A motor boat throttled its heavy engines behind her and the terror came back. The concussive sounds of the fiery explosion at Bond & Lacey rang in her ears again. Running. Acrid smoke, people down, people wailing. They planted those explosives not for the building but for the people in the evacuation area — they wanted more bloodshed. She saw again the fallen young woman, one side of her face torn away.

A break in the clouds brought light down on the RAF obelisk and the eagle atop burned with sudden gold. Unnatural light: the bird of prey, powerful wings spread, strong talons in the earth — cries of the innocent so small against its power. *"The whole earth is mine."*

She ran to the lee side of the obelisk but could not leave. There had to be an answer to terror. She had to do something. The cold stonework was sobering against her cheek — solid, rooted in a principle. *For those who gave their lives.* She knew the inscription from memory. *I bare you on eagles wings and brought you unto myself.* Someone had to believe her, someone had to know or tomorrow more would die.

"Emergency. Which service do you require?"

She had got the police on the line and told them she had urgent information about the bombings. The officer did his duty promptly by first determining that she was herself not in any immediate danger and then promptly put her on the phone queue. Shortly, a different voice came on the line. Lerner told again her reason for calling and the man said they wanted to bring her in right away for

a statement.

"I am in Whitehall and can be there in just a few minutes, whom shall I ask for?"

"It is important to maintain your location. We will come to you. Is it safe?"

"What?"

"Your location. Is it safe?"

"Well, of course, its safe."

That seemed a bit odd. Maybe the whole exchange had been a bit odd. But trust the London police, at least, to understand the gravity of a situation.

There was nothing to do but wait for the police to arrive. She went back to the railing to bide her time. A couple of American tourists came down and joined her on the platform. It was hard to ignore them.

"When did they put it in?"

She turned to the couple. "What?"

"The ferris wheel. We were surprised. I mean, I guess its kind of nice, but still, well, we were surprised."

Lerner bit back her tongue. "Long time. Two thousand, I guess." She tried to imagine how they could have come all the way to visit London and not know anything.

"Do you come here often?" said the man.

An unmarked sedan had pulled up on the street.

"Oh, just a bit of a bumble really." The Americans' expressions went blank.

Two men on duty came down the steps and Lerner stepped up to meet them. One of them flashed a badge for all to see.

"Please come with us, miss."

Lerner turned back to the Americans. "Yeah, nice chat."

"Now, alright then. Why don't you be a love and start us off by making a clean breast of the whole thing."

"What?!"

"Very busy its been, you can imagine, what with the bombings and all—"

"That's what I'm here about."

"Oh, I know that right enough. Would you believe I've talked to five of the Misses already this morning and didn't I work the phone all yesterday, too. Just tell us you made the whole thing up and then -- Bob's your uncle -- we can all have a bit of lunch."

The door opened and a second officer stepped in. Her interrogator turned his head to look, then scowled at her.

"Well, right enough then." He laid the folder he was holding across the table from where she was seated and took a step back. The new agent pulled up a chair and sat across from her.

"I am Detective Inspector Donovan, Counter Terrorism Command. And this is my associate, Sergeant Mallet." He looked down at the folder on the table.

"I'd like to make a report about the bombings. My name is Lerner Jones."

"Ah. From *The Times*?"

"Yes, but actually— I'm now with *The Daily Echo*."

"Oh. Huh."

"I only just started working there and that is part of what I have to tell you about."

"I thought you said this was about terrorist attacks."

"Oh it most definitely is. I was present at the Bond & Lacey

bombing, but that is not what I have to report. As I was saying, I just started working for *The Daily Echo* about a week ago. Now, hear me out." She took a breath and spoke with deliberation. "I was approached by a government agent, Nathan Bearfield, and he solicited my help in gathering intelligence for the agency."

Sergeant Mallet was scowling again. "And what agency would that be?"

"He said he worked for MI7."

Mallet blew air. "No such a thing!"

"Well, maybe not *now*," she corrected, "but then again it is secret intelligence, so what do the common folk know." She levelled her eyes at Mallet. He scowled again but backed off. "Well, anyway, I was *led to believe* that I was working as an asset for Secret Intelligence."

Lerner did not want to say what came next, but there were bigger things at stake than her personal pride. "But I wasn't. That's why I called you. This Bearfield said he worked for the MoD, but they've never heard of him."

Mallet was swaying on his feet now, smiling like that was just what he wanted to hear.

"No!" she said. "That just makes this more important, don't you see?"

"Oh? How's that?"

"Because I actually uncovered something — about the bombings. But it involves *The Daily Echo*. My editor-in-chief, Lucy Caldicote, knew about it even before it started happening. And I think— I think another bombing might happen right away, tomorrow—"

Donovan drew up sharp. "Where?"

"—but I don't know. I don't know where. That's all I know—"

Mallet lurched forward and smacked his hand on the table. "Lady, you realise how many calls we're getting in here since this thing started?"

Donovan's head snapped round to face Mallet with a hard look.

*Thank, God, Lerner thought. At least one person.*

Donovan's gaze returned to her, calm as ever. "We're going to need more than that to go on. You understand. Some kind of evidence, before we go cuffing your new employer and asking a lot of embarrassing questions."

Lerner sat back in her seat. She had pinned her last hopes on Donovan. But these Special Branch men were not going to listen to her and they were not just going to take her word for anything. Did they not understand the gravity of the situation? How could they not? They should be following up every credible lead. And she was not just some woman off the street. She was a well-respected journalist, an investigative journalist. What cold irony if being associated with *The Daily Echo* would prevent her from putting a stop to whatever was going on there.

But she had done good work, estimable work for *The Times* — the detective inspector had recognised her. Why was *he* not taking her more seriously? Something didn't add up. They were not going to trust her, but she didn't trust them either. Nathan Bearfield had gained her trust somehow, but, she realised, had not trusted her. Could not have. What is a covert operative to a journalist, but a story about to break. So, he could hardly have been expected to give over the address of his clandestine offices to anyone, least of all her.

The two men were staring at her. Lerner felt the heat rising to

her face. She was a good journalist, she had skills, but in covert affairs this was a rookie mistake. She had very possibly blown Bearfield cover, blundering into the Ministry of Defense and now CTC. For all she knew she may even have alerted someone in league with the terrorists.

There was only one thing to do now.

Donovan leaned forward. "Miss Jones?"

"What?"

Donovan's features tightened perceptibly at the change in her voice. "Some evidence for all this?"

The weak point of her case had just become her asset. Of course, Lerner didn't have a scrap of evidence for anything she had been saying -- she had given her evidence on Caldicote to the one man she could not find, Bearfield, and she had no evidence of him either.

Ignoring Donovan, she jerked her head over to Mallet. Mallet's head went back like he'd been slapped. She hardened her eyes and looked at him dead on. "I know what I know."

Donovan's calm voice interceded. "But in regards to the establishment of that? You are an investigator of sorts yourself. Surely you understand our position."

But Mallet burst out. "Look, do you have something for us or don't you?!"

"I can't prove anything. I just—" and she let her voice trail off.

Mallet threw up his hands. "We've heard more than enough here!"

Donovan allowed Mallet's declaration to stand, but he looked disappointed, she thought.

Mallet saw he had the weight of the moment and pushed on. "Way I figure it, you got pranked from the new job. A couple of reporters knocking back a pint and figuring to have you on for sport — show the new girl from the *Times* a little bit of what's what."

Donovan gave Mallet a cold look.

"Seriously, you can't be listening to this stuff!"

Donovan turned back to her. "And about this event tomorrow?"

"I don't know anything more. I don't."

Donovan put his fingers on the edge of the table and pursed his lips. This Donovan was no fool. Had she done the right thing?

"Well, Miss Jones, if you can give us anything concrete, you should be sure to get in touch with our offices."

That was a mere formality. He had not suggested getting back in touch with *him*.

It was over. Lerner was gathering up her things to go, putting on her coat. Sergeant Mallet had trucked out of their fast. She didn't know which was more likely, that he was bragging it all off to some of his mates -- or had his face buried in a chip butty somewhere. Maybe both.

Detective Inspector Donovan stood just outside the door, waiting for her exit. A tall man, perhaps his superior, had met him at the door and held him there in conversation. She was not out of earshot and could tell the man was talking about her interview.

"— possible these 'MI7' men *are* the bombers."

Donovan cut his eyes toward her. "Miss Jones, thank you for your report. I assure you we will be doing everything possible to ensure safety. Someone will show you out."

The third man looked down at her, expressionless.

She followed her escort down the hallway. She could hear the tall man talking again to Donovan. It didn't add up. They wanted her to think that they didn't believe anything she said. She had been duped alright, but not like a hazed coworker. If Bearfield really was connected to the bombers, what would he want with the evidence on Caldicote? That only made sense if she was right and Lucy was mixed up in this somehow. And what's more, it only made sense if the police suspected as much, too.

She needed to get up to City as quickly as possible. There was a lot that didn't add up and people were still in danger.

## **Chapter eighteen**

*by Linda Weeks*

Lerner looked up from her computer and sighed. It was so hard to concentrate, especially after what she'd just heard on the radio. She kept remembering the sudden, deafening explosions at Bond & Lacey the previous week and the sights and sounds of the horrible aftermath. There had been heroes that day, of course, and Lucy was very pleased with Lerner's first-hand account of the events and her reporting of the selfless bravery of those who'd rushed in to help while the emergency services' sirens were still announcing their arrival. Lerner had played her own part in the rescue too, but hadn't made a fuss about it.

"Just what our readers need!" Lucy had said, enthusiastically. "Great stuff!"

The Police still hadn't arrested anyone for the bombings and now there'd been another incident. It hadn't been as close to her office as the others, but Lerner had still felt the blast rattle the windows and had seen the pall of smoke rising as once again the emergency services raced to the scene. Now the newsreader had just announced that there were five confirmed deaths and seven people injured. When would it end? And were the targets random

or in a sequence for a reason – law firm, bank, law firm, bank. Where would they strike next? She knew part of the picture but there were still pieces missing. And what she did know scared her too much to think about. She sighed again and looked out over the now-calm city. The clearing-up was still going on and she could see lorries taking bricks, rubble and mangled pieces of metal and glass along the road and round the corner to goodness-knew-where.

“Heard the latest?” asked Bella, rather too cheerfully considering the latest news broadcast. Lerner looked round to where the girl from Accounts stood in the doorway.

“Yes, five have died and seven are in hospital,” said Lerner.

“No, not that! Oh, well – yes, that’s awful of course – but no! Mason’s ready to come out of hospital and I can bring him home tonight!” she danced happily over to the filter coffee machine in Lerner’s office, pouring a cup for herself and one for Lerner, who smiled kindly at the girl as she took the steaming mug. Bella had been a good friend since Lerner had started work as the newbie, and Mason was Bella’s cat who’d been at the vet on a drip for three days and two nights with gastro-enteritis.

“And ordinary life goes on,” she thought, gratefully accepting the coffee. She was just considering whether or not to confide her troubling thoughts to Bella when the phone rang, and Bella bounced joyfully out of the office with a “Byeee!” as Lerner picked up the phone.

“You OK?” Paul’s voice asked, with a note of concern. He seemed to be the only one who had any idea of how shocked Lerner still was by the events of last week. She was about to say “Yes of course, fine thanks,” but changed her mind.

“No, not really”, she said truthfully; then, before she’d even

consciously thought about it, heard herself saying “How about we go on that date you’ve been asking me for?” Paul was quick to respond.

“Too right! Name the time and place.” Lerner didn’t need to think about it; her favourite place in the whole of London.

“The Natural History Museum,” she said “and how about now?”

“Be with you in just a tick” and Paul ended the call as Lerner added some cold water to her coffee and drank it straight away.

The Museums in Cromwell Road were within walking distance of their offices and they enjoyed the walk in the sunshine, talking about nothing much in particular.

As they’d expected, security at the Museum was tighter than usual and not only was every bag being searched but all visitors were being scanned and having their pockets patted down. Once inside, Paul and Lerner made their way past Dippy the Diplodocus skeleton and made their way to the Deli Café, where they chose a light lunch of toasted sandwiches with a pot of tea for two. Lerner added a slice of orange and lemon cake because she found it hard to resist, her excuse being that it was part of a meal deal.

They sat near a window and looked out over the bustling city, making small talk throughout their meal. Then Lerner asked whether Bella had told him about her cat and Paul said that he already knew, as Bella had called across Reception to tell him that morning as soon as he’d walked through the door. Then he asked her whether she’d heard from her parents lately.

“We Skyped a couple of days ago,” she said, “I told them that we were all ok. They’re worried about me being here with all this going on.”

“I should think they were, especially with you being caught up

in it.”

“I wasn’t going to tell them that I was actually there, but of course they read my piece in the paper and guessed that I’d been closer than I let on.”

Paul looked at her closely, his brown eyes catching and holding her green ones as she glanced up at him for an instant before looking down, intent on stirring her cup of tea.

“And have you recovered from the shock?” he asked, his eyes noticing that her hand trembled slightly.

“I’m fine!” she snapped, and then “sorry – well no, actually, I’m not fine. I keep going because I have to, but I’m having terrible nightmares where I relive it over and over again. And then - ” she stopped, suddenly, brushing her long fringe behind her left ear.

“And then’ - what?”

“Nothing. This cake’s really yummy! Try some?” she smiled brightly, offering him a mouthful on her fork, which he took into his mouth and nodded in appreciation, still watching her closely and noticing how tired she looked. Not just tired, but scared, too.

“You probably have PTSD and should see a doctor,” he said, “he’ll be able to give you something to help you sleep, at least.”

“I might. Too busy. Things to do, places to go, people to see!” she said, jokingly, but her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

A waitress came to clear away their plates - leaning slightly closer to Paul than Lerner thought strictly necessary - and left them with their cups and tea things. “You came in at the right time,” she grinned. “It’s just starting to get busy!”

Paul reached across the table when they were alone again and took Lerner’s hand. “Let me help,” he said. “Talk to me.” Lerner didn’t reply directly but pushed some crumbs around her plate

with the fork. Maybe she should tell him. He was her boss, after all. She looked out of the window again.

“Look at all those people,” she said. “Enjoying their day out. We all know the awful things that have happened here this last month, and yet life goes on. The tabloids talk of terrorism, and certainly the things that have happened are terrible – but we’re not creeping about terrified and cowering in fear, are we?”

“The great British wartime spirit,” Paul agreed. “Undefeated, unbowed, unafraid ... except that I think you ARE afraid, Lerner. I wish you’d confide in me.”

“I can’t,” she said, taking her hand out of his. “That’s just it. I know something that I wish I didn’t, and I can’t say anything to anybody.” This time he didn’t speak, and she felt obliged to fill the silence. “Come on, let’s go,” she said, standing up suddenly.

“Where?”

“To see my friend. It isn’t far.”

Lerner led the way out of the café and back to the entrance hall, then on into the Blue Zone, finally stopping at the head of the Blue Whale. “Hello again, me ol’ mate,” she said. Paul laughed.

“This is your friend?!”

Lerner nodded.

“I first came here on a school trip when I was nine when my parents brought me to see England,” she said. “I never knew that creatures could be so big, and I fell in love with him and his smiley face. I was so sad to think it was dead and stuffed – and then so happy once I realised that it was a model. Ever since I came to live here I’ve never left this building without coming to see him. Something about him gives me a sense of peace. One day I’d like to see blue whales for real, in the ocean. They must have huge hearts,

don't you think?"

Paul watched Lerner lose her worried frown and saw a smile cross her face as she spoke.

"You look like you again," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"I feel like me, here," she said simply. "I feel safe."

"Are you worried about being caught up in another bombing?"

"Not as such ... I mean yes, I hope there won't be any more, of course, and that I won't be near any if there are, but that's not really it."

"Then what is it? You might as well tell me, Lerner. If you know something about this business you shouldn't keep it to yourself. Are you in some kind of danger? Tell me; or if you can't tell me, at least tell the Police and ask for some kind of protection."

"I tried, and they wouldn't believe me. And I don't want you to know anything because then you'll be involved, too."

"Now I'm really worried about you!"

They walked out of the hall, past two parties of excited schoolchildren going in opposite directions and pushing each other and shouting, and some of them trailing their bags along the floor. Lerner and Paul strolled through more galleries, through the Darwin Centre and out into the circular courtyard. Lerner walked across to one of the steps furthest away from the building and away from any other people. She sat down, looking back at the building. "I love it here." She looked up at the sky through the leaves of a nearby tree, moving gently in the breeze.

"Look, okay. If you won't tell me anything, let me tell you something." Paul sat beside her and turned her face to look at him. "Why did I recruit you to this job? Not because you're a good

journalist, but because you're a great journalist. And because you came to us with a great reputation. I knew that even before I interviewed you. You're great at what you do. You have an instinct for it, and for the people you're writing about. More than that, you're an investigator. If you've uncovered something, you should trust your instinct and report it. Whatever it is, it should be out in the open. You know I trust you to do the right thing, regardless of the consequences. But please be careful, because I care about you." More than I should, he thought. "Wait here" he added, and suddenly stood up and strode off towards the entrance.

Lerner assumed that he'd just gone to find the toilet, and sat watching two young children running across the courtyard and racing round and round adults who she presumed to be their parents; up and down the steps, shrieking with laughter. The little boy was pulling along a toy wooden dog on a string while his smaller companion was chasing him, giggling. Lerner wondered whether the dog's painted features would be scratched off as it bounced up and down the steps. The boy probably didn't care; he only knew that he was having fun with his family.

Paul returned and sat beside her. As she turned to look at him her hair fell across her face again and this time he was the one to hook it back behind her ear. Lerner noticed that he was holding something in his other hand. He'd been to the shop and bought a little metal badge of a blue whale, which he now fixed to the lapel of her jacket.

"You know I want to help with whatever situation you've found yourself in," he said, "but until you're ready to let me, this will have to stand in for me." It glinted in the sunlight like some kind of promise.

Lerner thanked him. Her heart thumped in her chest. She'd always wanted to be a journalist and report the truth, whatever she found, whether it was good or bad, and regardless of the consequences. Even if those consequences affected her. Anything less would be dishonest. I couldn't live with myself if others suffered because I was afraid, she thought.

"I've made my decision," she said. Though she knew she had no choice at all, really. She could pretend that she knew nothing, and would be safe. But then other people would be at risk. How would she feel if there was another bomb and more people were killed or injured? Voices echoed across the courtyard and the children rushed back to their parents, who were unpacking a picnic. The little girl tripped and scraped her knee. Crying, she climbed onto her mother's lap for a cuddle and soon settled and began to eat. The boy plonked his dog down beside his plate, sat down next to his Dad and grabbed his drink. Lerner wished that she was that age again, where her mother's hug would make everything all right. She didn't want to have to make this decision. But she'd made it, and would see it through.

"I know what I have to do," she said resolutely, looking Paul straight in the eyes. "And I'm going to do it. No matter what."

## Chapter nineteen

*by R. Dale Guthrie*

Lerner stood across the street from the Bond & Lacy law offices. A single, wedge-shaped building that stretched up into the sky forever. People were coming and going in a steady stream, like ants to and from their hill. Some of the workers even had ant heads, but this didn't bother her.

No, what bothered her was that the impossible building was going to be bombed, but she was frozen in place, only able to watch.

... Only able to watch as Daniel Craig, Pierce Brosnan, and a dark-haired Sean Connery converged in front of the building, each wearing a dapper tuxedo. They nodded to one another, and then stepped up to a bar.

A bar on the outside of a building? *Oy, the rich*, thought Lerner, *who puts a bar outside? Besides a beach resort, that is.*

Lucy Caldicote passed in front of her, and Lerner's heart leapt into her throat, but her boss's boss didn't seem to notice her standing just an arm's length away.

The Editor-in-Chief was on her phone, the cord stretched all the way down the street. The person on the other end was speaking

loud enough for Lerner to hear him, but Caldicote was speaking in unison, as if they had rehearsed the words. Their blended voices made for a chant-like quality, sending chills down her spine. “Forty-two is the answer. One hundred and ten percent. Two for one...” On and on they droned in a stream of numerical aphorisms.

The numbers were important, Lerner knew she couldn’t forget them, but where could she write them down?

“One in the hand is worth twelve in the bush. Nineteen eighty-four-four-four-four...” Lucy Caldicote rotated in place, the phone cord wrapping around her neck, and then down her body, though it didn’t seem to bother her.

Lerner padded herself down, but she lacked pockets, or a bag, or even clothes.

Across the street, the many incarnations of 007 were playing charades.

“... kick and one and two and three and twirl aaaand five, six, seven eight—jazz hands!” Caldicote said, though she remained still as the endless cord wrapped criss-crossing her from head to ankle.

A pinch on her arm drew Lerner’s attention, and she was writing on her arm with an old fashioned fountain pen, its sharp point digging into her flesh. But she wasn’t writing numbers, they were just intersecting lines, like a melting grid. It looked familiar but foreign somehow.

“Ten... Nine... Eight... Seven...” The phone cord was wrapped around Lucy Caldicote’s entire body, save for her mouth, her perfectly painted red lips forming the numbers with precision. The remainder of the cord now trailed across the street and into the the Bond & Lacey building, past the young Sean Connery and the older Daniel Craig who were locked in a passionate embrace as Nathan

Bearfield looked on, holding up an olympic judge's score card, only it read "MI7" with a red buster symbol across the acronym.

"... Six... Five... Four..."

Lerner's arm hurt, but the map made a kind of sense that had nothing to do with logic, and then a hand, a couple of shades darker than her own tanned skin, grabbed it and spun her.

*Amir!* she thought, but he nodded as if he heard her, a frown creasing his brow.

"One!"

A fire ball erupted around her, engulfing everything.

She jerked awake, the darkness of her bedroom nearly total and the sheets tangled around her sweating body.

"Not on fire. Not exploded," she said, as the dream faded like a figure walking into a heave fog. Lerner collapsed back onto the sheets, salty droplets trickling into her eyes. Or maybe from them.

"Just a dream. Just a bloody dream is all." She tried again to untangle herself from her sheets, but they were twisted around one leg. Like that telephone cord in her dream. She struggled harder, her fear amplified by her frustration, until she managed to fall out of bed with a hard thump against the wood floor, dragging the sheet with her.

Her hip throbbed from the impact, as did her forearm, which showed the deep half-moon impression of fingernails. An image of lines radiating and crossing in an uneven grid flickered like a failing candle flame in her mind's eye. And Sean Connery? She began to laugh at her disheveled state as much as at the bizarre twists of her muddled and fading dream.

"Numbers, James Bond, the boss lady, big boom. Subtle. Nice and subtle, brain." She sat up unwound the sheet from around her

leg. Her insides were vibrating with nervous energy and fatigue. A quick glance at the glowing clock face on her bedside table explained at least part of the bone weariness she felt.

“Four sodding thirty.” She dragged herself up from the floor and contemplated the bed. It looked hateful to her, like a broken promise. Instead of crawling back in, she wrapped herself in her comfy dressing gown and headed to the kitchen instead.

She peaked at the contents of her fridge, in the off chance it had magically produced something delicious and easy to re-heat. “Porridge it is, then,” she muttered, and put the kettle on to boil, the low rumble of heating water and expanding metal a balm to her tumultuous thoughts.

The shreds of the dream had mostly burned away, but the image of her Editor in Chief wrapped up in phone cord, reciting numbers stuck. And it was obvious that there wasn’t any hidden meaning there: the woman had taken numbers down while she spoke on the phone. That same conversation where she mentioned Friday being a good day for ‘it.’ The woman hadn’t said anything directly, but it was obvious that the bombings had been the topic of conversation.

She grabbed her notebook from the living room, leafing through it until she came to the series of numbers. What could they mean? Not for the first time that night, she wished that she had a copy of the recording, so she could hear the Chief editor’s intonation, pauses, maybe even catch something from the other side of the conversation. Had Caldicote been taking instructions? Was she really, truly part of this terrorism? If the chief was on the up-and-up, why hadn’t she assigned the story to the one person on staff who had been at the site of another bombing? Not that she was eager to confront another horror show like that anytime soon.

Spying on the woman hadn't ever sat well on her shoulders, but it was clear that Caldicote was involved, and knew more about the next bombing than she should. But then there was Nathan Bearfield and the phantom M7 offices. What was he up to? Had he assumed she didn't know, and wouldn't find out, that M7 didn't exist anymore. So if M7 was a fiction, then who was this Bearfield fellow, and why did he want to spy on a woman with ties to terrorists?

"Questions for later," she said to the empty flat. Now she had to figure out where the bombing was going to be. She knew when: Friday. Today. And her boss wasn't doing anything to stop it. If only she'd been obvious about it in the recording. "Yes, the bomb will go off at this address, at precisely four in the afternoon." If that had been on the recordings, then Lerner could have just turned that over to the police. Damn Bearfield, that wanker! She had thought she was turning the information over to the authorities, but apparently not... And now all she had was a series of numbers and her notes. Nothing for the police to go on, if they even believed her.

She looked at the series of numbers again, spaced out according to the cadence of Lucy Caldicote's spoken phrasing:

*51 515577 0 092218*

She was sure the numbers were key, but what did they mean? Not a London phone number—it was too long besides. She didn't know of any area codes that started with a five, even if you put in a leading zero. Probably, it was some kind of electronic pass code, but to what device?

The kettle clicked off, and the rumbling boil settled. She threw the notebook down. "Round and round in circles I go. I need to drink with more maths nerds."

In the kitchen, she stirred the boiled water into her instant porridge, and then poured the rest over a tea bag in the only clean mug left in the cupboard.

If only she still had that recording. If only she had more than her notes...

"Notes! She was noting the numbers. She had to be!" Lerner said, growing excited. She must have been jotting them down somewhere. There hadn't been any clickity-clacking of a keyboard, so she had to have been writing the numbers down. Surely there would be something to the way she noted them that would make their purposes more obvious.

She threw on fresh clothes, pulled her hair back and shoved some basic makeup to apply during the ride to The Daily Echo offices and headed out the door. Her uneaten breakfast steamed on the counter, forgotten.

The offices were as empty as her grumbling stomach, which was both a relief and a bit spooky. There was something about an empty office that was unsettling, like a street at night, after all the pubs had closed, and all the drunks had finally stumbled home.

She crept through the space, desks piled high with clutter, computers left idling with the Echo's logo drifting across some of the screens.

She peered through the glass of one door, past the stencilled lettering which read, "Lucy Caldicote" and below that, "Editor-in-Chief". The waste bin was empty.

“Bollocks,” she said, but entered the office anyway. Lerner settled into the leather chair, feeling like a trespasser. She had never sat at any of her employers’ chairs before, but she rather liked it. It felt powerful, imagining underlings sitting across from her, the desk imposing a barrier of authority, like a castle’s walls.

She pulled at the drawers, and was surprised to find none of them locked. Files in one, none of which seemed relevant to the bombings, but they wouldn’t if she was a conspirator, would they? She found the usual office supplies in one of the smaller drawers, a few bits of makeup kit for emergency refreshes and other personal items in another.

The surface of the desk was piled with items, but were fairly neat. Nothing out of the ordinary. A short block of yellow sticky notes lay next to a pen cup, many used notes stuck to files, the desk itself, and the computer monitor’s frame. None of them had any numbers scrawled on them, none were titled “secret terrorist bomb plans”. So she started digging deeper.

Half an hour later, Lena threw up her hands. Her snooping had turned up diddly-squat. She slumped in the luxurious office chair staring into the middle distance, her eyes falling to the stack of sticky notes. A memory surfaced unbidden of some old-fashioned detective story, the dapper gentleman swiping a pencil across the surface of a pad of paper.

Outside the office, footsteps echoed through the quiet space. Lerner jumped out of the chair, regretting the rumble of its wheels on the hard floor immediately. No one called out, so she slipped off her shoes, swiped the sticky notes off the desk, and padded to her own desk, ducking behind the low walls of her cubicle.

“Wake up, Jones!” came a cheery voice from behind her.

She nearly screamed, but kept her composure even as her heart thumped against her ribs.

“Sorry,” said Paul Cambridge, “I couldn’t resist. What are you doing here so early? Or so late, as the case may be?”

“I...” she cast about for a valid excuse, but his grin was disarming, and she didn’t see any reason to come up with an elaborate story. “I couldn’t sleep, thought I’d come in and work.” That much was true, even if he assumed she was working on an assignment.

“You were taking notes?” he said, nodding to her hand, which still gripped the sticky notes.

“Oh. Yeah, I guess so.” She feigned a yawn which turned real mid-way through. “But I can’t recall what I had in mind now,” she grinned, and tossed the pad onto her desk, as if it was just another office supply. “I’m really knackered, but it seems a desk is the only place I can get a few winks.”

Paul grimaced, “Oh, then I’m really sorry. Truly.”

She waved his apology away, “Don’t fret about it.”

“Well, I’ve got some catching up to do myself, so...” he nodded back to his office. “Oh, and maybe find a more positive angle to the cyberstalker story? Maybe about how the anti-harassment laws are helping to put an end to that kind of thing.”

“Oh, sure. Yeah, that’s a great idea. ‘There’s no news but good news’,” she said, parroting the unofficial motto of The Daily Echo.

He winked at her, then unlocked his office. The modest placard on the door read “Features Editor” below his name, visible as he swung the door open and entered.

Lerner let her false cheer slide from her face as she dug for a pencil in her desk. Hardly anyone used these old-fashioned

wooden pencils, but they were the best for laying down graphite the way she needed to.

Swiping across the top note as lightly as she could, she covered the surface with an uneven gray smudge. She set down the pencil, satisfaction giving away almost immediately to frustration. Two numbers, rather than four were now legible as indentations in the paper that the graphite had not filled in.

*51.515577*

*-0.092218*

Aside from a decimal point and a minus sign, and the fact that there were two, not four numbers, she didn't have any idea what it was that they represented. It almost looked like an unsolved subtraction problem, she pulled another piece of paper off a teetering stack on her desk, and scribbled the result out.

*51.5155 - 0.0922 = 51.4233*

The result wasn't even a little illuminating.

She laid her head on her desk, hoping the answer would be on the back of her eyelids. *Just a few winks*, she thought, and she was asleep.

Paul must have said something to the others, because no one attempted to wake her. It was a few minutes past eight in the morning when she finally emerged from more troubling dreams. At least she hadn't screamed this time.

Most of the office had arrived, raising the noise level to a

constant murmur around her, but hadn't been enough to wake her. Mostly it was the pain in her neck that had forced consciousness upon her.

"Top of the morning, love," said an entirely too chipper office mate, whose name she couldn't recall in her groggy state. He passed by and down the hall as he spoke. *Always in a hurry, that one.*

"Mmm," she quipped to his back. A few people glanced her way, rolling their eyes or quietly tut-tutting before they turned back to their tasks.

Paul leaned out of his office, "When you've got your morning cuppa down you, I've got some things to go over. No rush."

She nodded her understanding and went to the loo to freshen up.

The day passed with the usual deadlines looming, phone calls and office chatter all around her, but Learner couldn't concentrate on any of it. She didn't know when precisely it was going to happen, but a bomb was going to go off, and chances were that she was the only one willing to stop it. If only she could decipher the numbers, or find some other lead.

Her stomach was clenched into a knot, and her head ached by the time the clock read a quarter till one, when she realised she hadn't had a meal since the previous day. She skipped down to the curry place at the first floor of the building adjacent to her office, and wolfed it down.

Even as she got the first few bites down, her mind began to clear and focus. She was coming to a crisis point, she knew. Someone else was going to have to be brought in on this crazy situation before more people died. Could her supervising editor be trusted to

keep something like her spying on his own boss? If anything got back to Lucy Caldicote...

It didn't matter. People were dying from this terrorism, and she couldn't stay silent just because she feared for her own job.

She dumped the remainder of her curry into the waste bin and headed back up.

The features editor was sitting in her chair when she got back. "Hey, um. Hi there," she said, dumb-struck. He was looking at the note.

"What are the GPS coordinates for?" he said.

"The... GPS?"

"Yeah. I did a puff piece several years back about geocaching. Nerdy blokes who like to hide things all over the place, then post coordinates to forums for others to track down. It started before mapping on phones was a thing, so all you had to go on was the latitude and longitude. They'd find a thing, and leave something else behind." He shrugged, "Everybody needs a hobby, I suppose."

"Oh. Yeah. That must be what it's for. It's nothing. Did you need something?"

He pondered her for a second before nodding, "Yeah. I've got a new story for you. Going to shelve the cyberstalking piece for now. Meet me in my office in fifteen?"

"Sure," she said, noting the time, five minutes till two o'clock. "I just have to wash up and I'll be right in."

He stuck the note to her monitor and gave her one final contemplative look before heading back to his office.

Lerner scrambled to her desk when he was out of sight, drawing a few glances from nearby coworkers, but she was beyond caring. She did a web search for "GPS" and "Maps" and it brought her to a

site with space to plug in coordinates. Once they were entered, a pin dropped into the ocean east of the British Isles. She checked again, entered in a minus sign, which she figured must mean “west” to the software, because when the pin dropped this time, it was in the middle of the City, where all previous bombings had occurred.

The address had a single business associated with it: “Berry, Buck and Mills,” a solicitor firm. Another one. That fit the pattern.

It was time to tell Paul. She grabbed the address and the sticky note, and headed to his office.

## **Chapter twenty**

*by Emma Lindhagen*

Lerner's heart thumped at an unusually loud volume as she stood and snatched her purse off of her desk. If she left now, she could get to Berry Buck and Mills in time. She could warn them about the bomb, could make sure everyone got out in time. She could turn the trend. With each bomb the death-toll had gone up: none the first time but five casualties in the latest one. She could make the number plummet back down to zero this time, make sure no-one left the law firm in a body bag. The screen on her smartphone flashed, some app telling her something irrelevant but at least it called attention to that her phone was on the desk and not in her purse. She picked it up. She could call the officer in charge of the case. She *should* call him. But considering how their last encounter had gone, what good would it do? She could get to Berry Buck and Mills and warn people in less time than it'd take her to convince the policeman that she was onto something and not just some loon with too much time on her hands. She pocketed the phone, grabbed her jacket and headed for the door. Halfway to the elevator she ran into Lucy, the editor-in-chief, who was coming back from some meeting or other.

“Where are you off to in such a rush?” Lucy cocked an eyebrow at her stressed demeanour.

“No time to chat. Got a lead.” She jammed the elevator button, and luckily the doors opened straight away and she stepped in.

“Lead on what? The bombs?”

“If I’m not back in a couple of hours, I’m probably dead. Write me a real sugary obituary, eh?” She winked. Just before the door closed, she saw her boss rolling her eyes. Jokes aside, her pulse was racing. Was this the right call? She didn’t have time for second guessing herself, and moments later she was outside in the street. It took a few excruciating minutes to hail a cab, but it was still better than figuring out which busses would get her to the law firm and when these left. When one finally pulled over she was inside it in the blink of an eye, giving the cabbie the address. The backseat smelled strongly of some kind of cleaning product, but she supposed that was better than the alternative. She was surprised at the amount of traffic, it was barely past 2 pm after all. She wondered if something had happened nearby, an accident or construction perhaps, to slow down everything to what seemed to her to be a snail’s pace. As the cab inched its way towards her goal, her thoughts drifted back in time to a man who’d been her lover when she was still a journalism student. He’d called her Lennie, much to her chagrin, but other than that their time together had been thoroughly enjoyable. “Get a bike.” He’d told her when she revealed her plan to stay in London after finishing her studies. “The commute will drive you mad without a motorbike.” It was times like this she wished she’d taken his advice. Once they got a couple of streets away from the office, the traffic thinned out a bit and Lerner breathed a sigh of relief. It did little to ease her nerves,

though, and she fiddled restlessly with her purse, glancing at the time on her phone's display ever minute or so.

Once they finally arrived, she fished a bill out of her pocket and nearly threw it at the driver, exiting and closing the door without bothering with her change. She looked up at the building, where a sign confirmed that she had the right address. She took a deep breath and entered, stopping inside the main entrance to look around.

The lobby was empty except for a lone receptionist behind a rather large counter. Lerner licked her lips. She hadn't really planned this part, but she would have to improve. Straightening her jacket to make sure she looked somewhat presentable, she stalked over to the desk and put on a smile that was hopefully not too obviously forced.

"I'm here for an appointment with Mr. Mills, at Berry Buck and Mills." She lied. "The name's Jones." She added, praying that her common surname would give her some luck.

The receptionist checked his computer-screen and looked at her hesitantly. "I'm afraid I can't find any Jones on today's planner, Ma'am."

"Are you sure? They can't have... booked me with the wrong person?" She asked, fishing.

"One moment..." A few clicks later he shook his head. "No, no Jones anywhere."

"That's odd, I just spoke to his assistant a couple of days ago. There must've been some mix-up." She put on her best troubled face, crinkling her nose a little. "See the thing is, I'm a journalist. I work for the Daily Echo," She said, deciding half-truths were better than full lies. She pulled her work ID out of her bag and showed

him, leaning forward a little over the desk to do so. “You know, we do a lot of upbeat stories and I’m writing a piece right now on the positive reality behind the negative myth of the lawyer. I’m supposed to interview Mr Mills for it, only it goes to print tomorrow so if I can’t see him today...” She trailed off briefly and then put on a hopeful, and hopefully charming, smile. “I couldn’t just pop in briefly to see what the mix-up is? It’d be such a shame for him to miss an opportunity like this because of a scheduling error.”

The receptionist relented, and buzzed her through the door by the counter, allowing her access to the rest of the building. Instead of heading for the elevator and up to the offices above, she located the cloakrooms. Her mouth felt dry as she put her hand on the doorknob of the women’s and turned it. It opened easily. There were four stalls, all thankfully unoccupied, and sinks outside. She searched each stall carefully, looking behind, and even inside, the toilets. For all she knew the bombs weren’t sensitive to water. She found nothing, and cast her eyes around the room one more time looking for other hiding places. Shaking her head, she left and headed into the men’s room instead. Stalls, urinals, sinks, none of them hid a bomb.

She stepped back outside, brow furrowed in confusion. Could she really have been wrong? No. The fifth bomb was meant for this building, she was sure of it. They must’ve just put it someplace else. She glanced at the time and paled when she realised it was almost a quarter to three. She’d have to do something, pull the fire alarm, anything, and soon, if she wanted to make sure neither she nor anyone else died. She was just about to start looking for a fire alarm when she spotted two more doors on the other side of the

elevator. One was a couriers' entrance, with a glass window in it which showed that it led to the street behind the building. The other had warning tape across it, which read 'Closed for essential maintenance' and 'Danger! Chemicals'. Suddenly forgetting all about fire alarms, she approached the door and, ignoring the tape, turned the knob. The tape ripped from the door frame and the door opened, revealing a maintenance room bathed in darkness. She turned the light on and looked around the room. At the centre stood two chairs, the cheap, plastic kind. She approached and saw pieces of ripped duct tape on the chairs, as if someone had taped something to them and then had to tear the object back off. A puddle on the floor gave off a pungent ammonia smell and she frowned. What the hell had happened here? Whatever it was, it must be connected to the bombings. If you track a bear and find a dead deer, you don't start suspecting a wolf without reason. She checked the room swiftly but thoroughly, searching any space she imagined to be large enough for a bomb, but found nothing. What was going on? Had she been wrong all along? That didn't explain the chairs and the piss, and besides that she was still convinced her theory was right. Maybe they'd been here but they'd gotten interrupted and taken off? Or maybe they...

The screech of tires interrupted her thoughts. It came from just outside the courier's entrance. She rushed towards the door but before she was even halfway there a loud crash followed. She dashed outside just in time to see a blue transit van speeding off, its back corner badly dented. It must've backed into the building; she could see where the metal had impacted the facade.

In the corner of her eye, she spotted a courier's bike leaning against the wall by the couriers' entrance. She grabbed it, grateful

both that the courier had left it unlocked and that she'd opted for jeans today and not a skirt. Maybe she wouldn't catch them but she could at least see where they went, get the number plate, maybe even get a look at who was driving if traffic was on her side. It was time to put all those spin-classes to good use.

She swung her leg over the frame and got ready to take off, but when her foot hit the pedal she froze. What the hell was she doing?

## **Chapter twenty-one**

*by Noé Ramalleira Fernández*

Lerner started pedalling furiously after the van. She needed to get away from there quickly; she couldn't risk getting caught at that moment for something so inane as stealing a bike.

The van had already turned left on a crossing and was out of sight, so Lerner pressed on. All in all, she was only about ten seconds behind, but the traffic light in front of her was about to go red, and she didn't want more cars getting in between her and the van.

She sprinted on her bike, and she probably jumped the red light. But she couldn't care, all she could think about was that they couldn't get away. She glanced right to see if she had time to turn left before any crossing car would hit her, but she was already doing it anyway, so she just hoped for good.

When she looked in front of her again, she realised she was about to hit the back of the van. She steered left to dodge it and hit the kerb. The bike stopped dead, which made her crash into the handlebar, so she had to set her foot to the sidewalk to keep herself from falling.

She was surrounded by people. Some of them were joking and

laughing and talking loudly in Spanish, or Italian. She had almost fallen over an old, fiery-looking lady who was staring at her and grasping her suitcase. Lerner awkwardly mumbled “*scusi*” and got off the bike. She checked for the van, worrying she might have been spotted, but she couldn’t get a proper look at it.

There were two buses unloading tourists, just in front of the van, and the sidewalk was crowded with dozens of grandpas going left and right. They were all around her, busy like ants; some taking pictures or just dreamily gazing about; most of them getting their luggage off the bus and making quite a mess of it. They were grinning.

They felt alien. Lerner tried to remember the last time she’d seen people even smile on the street, but she wasn’t able to. It should have been probably just a month ago, though, really not that much time if you think of it.

She needed to focus. She figured, what with all the chaos on the street, probably only the lady she had almost crashed into had noticed her. But she had to be more careful and to start making better choices. The bicycle hadn’t been a good idea. Her leg hurt, her heart was pounding heavily after the sprint, and however good a cyclist she was, it was impossible for her to keep up with a van. She had to find a better way to follow them. For a moment she wished she could stop a cab, get in and yell to the cabbie “Follow that van”.

But no cabs passed by. In fact, the two buses were parked along right in the middle of the lane, entirely blocking the traffic. Their engines were running as if they were just about to leave, but both drivers had got off to the street to help the tourists get their suitcases. One of them was even taking a group picture; it was clear

they were not going anywhere soon. The drivers in the cars behind them were getting restless, honking their horns and shouting at them from their seats.

It was incredible to Lerner how quickly normal life resurfaced through the cracks and crevasses after a tragedy. She had seen it once and again during the past month. Every one of those drivers had probably been terrified for weeks. Maybe they hadn't lost anybody in the bombings, but their city had been attacked and they all felt it somehow. They might have even reconsidered their lives, made huge promises of being better people. And even so they were still able to get annoyed with each other the next day for being stuck in traffic. Lerner didn't know what to make of that.

The driver of the van was the only one that remained calm. Lerner couldn't see him, but the van seemed to be just patiently waiting for the buses to go away. That made sense, Lerner thought, they wouldn't risk getting pulled over by the police or drawing too much attention to themselves. "There's a bomb in that van," the thought hit her. "If something goes wrong, all these people may die here in London, so far from their homes."

She figured if she could walk through the crowd she would get ahead of the van, and maybe buy herself some time to plan something, or at least get a ride. She started doing it, elbowing her way as gently as she could, smiling sheepishly and saying sorry in as many languages as she knew. It was proving very difficult. When she saw the rear exit of the bus, she decided on a whim to use them as a shortcut.

She ditched the bicycle and jumped on the first bus, ran all the way to the front, hopped off it and on the next one, and kept on running. She had almost reached the front of the first bus when

she saw in the corner of her right eye a blue shadow passing by. The van had eventually decided to overtake the buses, and a couple of cars were following it.

Without being able to think, Lerner sat on the driver's seat; she put the bus in first gear and drove off, three cars behind the van, while the tourists yelled at her from the sidewalk in whatever language they spoke.

"Great," Lerner thought. "So much for planning carefully."

Following a van on a bike was stupid enough, but trying to do it on a bus seemed ludicrous, just out of a comedy. What the hell was she doing? She wouldn't be able to keep up with it for long, it was just a matter of time before the guys in the van would realise the humongous bus they had in their rear-view mirror was always the same. But Lerner quickly found out that the driver's seat of a bus worked quite well as a vantage point, and it was easy to check on the van from a distance. She could let some cars between them, and maybe that way she wouldn't get discovered.

For the next minutes she followed the van carefully, from a distance. She purposefully slowed down to make a couple of cars overtake her, and then they merged into a bigger street, one with a bus lane, so she got in it and calmed herself down a bit. "There you go," she thought. "Now I'm just a bus driver on the bus lane, they won't suspect of me now."

it felt sort of appropriate. She had stolen a bike and then a bus, and she was chasing a van full of terrorists, in a city which had been attacked, but now she was somehow doing what she was supposed to, and it felt *normal*.

The blue van was driving on its lane a couple of cars ahead of her, and Lerner was starting to feel confident that she'll make it.

All she had to do was keep on the bus lane and that alone would hide her. She was no longer trying to follow terrorists in a ridiculous bus; she was just another worker going about her job.

But the van made a sudden turn to the right, crossing her lane just in front of her. Lerner had to push the brakes heavily. She could have crashed with them. She could have killed them. They could all have died.

She bid her time and waited as much as she could before following them, and then she steered the wheel and started to turn the bus. She braked again when she saw through her side mirror a red shadow appearing from inside the bus. The luggage doors had been open the entire time. There was a red suitcase left in the middle of the bus lane.

The front part of the bus turned right away, but she realised half of it was hovering over the sidewalk. She had to reverse and then steer again, and she lost enough time for the van to disappear from her view. She panicked.

She accelerated as much as she could. There was no point in being cautious anymore, in trying not to get discovered or even worrying about following the law. She was desperate. She didn't even know after the first crossing whether she was following the terrorists or not, so all she could do was to just keep going, trusting her instinct, hoping for good.

She had failed the city. She had made a huge promise to it and she had ended up failing to plan ahead, to figure out what to do. She had stolen a bus, for fucks' sake, and driven it around town as if she was touring sightseers, and now she had lost the van.

She wasn't even sure where she was anymore, until she randomly took a left turn and realised she had already been to that

street. She had been there dozens of times in the past month actually. It was where her new job was, the Daily Echo offices. And there was a blue van parked in front of them.

Lerner got off the bus as if she was emerging from a dream, and started walking towards the van.

## **Chapter twenty-two**

*by Pete Becker*

Lerner's heart pounded and her breath came in ragged gasps. She didn't know whether it was the exertion or the excitement, but she did know that nothing in journalism school had prepared her for cross-town chases and encounters with terrorists.

She went rigid when she heard the front door of the van open. "Calm down," she told herself. "Panic will only make things worse." She peered around the corner of the van.

"Paul!" she shrieked. "Nice suit," she thought. He reached toward the waistband of his trousers and, after a few moments of fumbling, pulled out a gun and pointed it at her. His face twisted, and she feared that he was going to shoot her. His face went blank, and he walked toward her. Her moment of panic receded; she was still alive.

"Open the door," he commanded. She pulled the handle and the left-hand door of the van swung open. "Now the other." She reached in, pulled down the latch, and opened the right-hand door. He pushed her, hard; her thighs hit the sill of the door and she fell forward; she managed to get her hands in front of her, but even so, her head hit the floor of the van.

“Hands behind your back.”

She didn’t move, too stunned to grasp what was happening or to do anything about it. She felt the heel of his hand between her shoulder blades as he leaned on her. She gasped in pain but still couldn’t make herself move.

She felt something hard press against the back of her neck.

“Now, or you die.” he hissed.

She put her hands behind her back.

The clatter of metal on the floor of the van told her that he had set the gun aside. But the continuing pain in her back reminded her that he was bigger and stronger than she, that resistance now was futile.

Paul grasped her wrists with his other hand. With her wrists locked together, he took his hand off her back and reached into his pocket and removed a cable tie. Fastening it around her wrists with one hand was awkward, but he managed it. Pushing and shoving, with no help from Lerner, he got her completely into the back of the van, lying on her belly parallel to the rear deck. More confident now, he pulled out another cable tie and secured her ankles. A third tie pulled her legs up toward her wrists, and she was helpless in the back of the van.

He rolled her away from him onto her side and pulled a roll of duct tape out of a box near her head. She lay still, temporarily defeated, as he tore off a short piece and sealed her mouth with it. Two longer pieces criss-crossed over the first to complete the gag.

Then he began to sing, under his breath: “Start your day happy, start your day happy, ...”, the old jingle of the Echo, made even sillier by his singsong voice.

“I’ve got an errand to run. But don’t worry, I’ll be back.”

He slammed the doors of the van and closed and locked them.  
“Start your day happy, start your day happy.”

Lerner lay on her right side, eyes closed, struggling to breathe through her nose. She heard the slam of one door, then the other, and the inside of the van went dark. She heard the mechanical click and the electronic chirp of the doors locking. In the back of her mind she knew that she had to get herself under control, to resist the panic that was crippling her. A half-remembered mantra gradually came to the surface. “I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. I will face it and it will pass over me and through me. I must not fear...” Gradually her breathing eased and the roiling in her mind slowed. A thought percolated up: Frank Herbert would turn in his grave over her mangling of his beautiful words. But this wasn’t the time for literary criticism. This was the time for action.

She was startled by a loud bang followed by a metallic rattle. But that sound was familiar. Then it struck her: it was Sadie’s car starting. Sadie always left the keys in that junker, hoping that someone would steal it so she could collect on the insurance. Well, maybe she’d just gotten her wish.

Focus. Focus. Assess the situation. There must be something she could do.

She opened her eyes. She was about a foot from the back doors of the van. She tried to turn her head to her left to look over her shoulder toward the front, but her neck was too sore from being shoved to the floor. She rocked herself back and forth, and soon managed to roll onto her belly, up against the back doors. She turned her head to the right; not as painful as the other way. She couldn’t see much. There were no rear windows in the van, and the

doors blocked most of the afternoon light. The front was in the shadow of the building.

As her eyes adapted to the low light she began to distinguish some details inside the van. Some rectangular blocks, and a couple of nondescript lumps. The rectangular blocks resolved themselves into several boxes. The lumps were ...

The lumps were two people, trussed and gagged much like she was. She knew them: Bearfield and James, supposedly from the nonexistent MI7. Their eyes were closed and their faces were bloody. Neither one moved.

“Mmmmph” she grunted through the gag, trying to attract someone’s attention. No reaction. Again she tried, again no reaction.

“Well, this is getting me nowhere,” she thought. The doors were locked; the boxes made it unlikely that she could get to the front of the van, and even if she could get past them, the safety cage that protected the driver from flying objects in the event of a sudden stop blocked her, and even if she could get past it, the front doors were probably locked, too; she’d have a hard time getting to the lock buttons with her hands hooked to her ankles.

She was having trouble breathing again. Maybe because she was jammed against the doors. She started rocking side-to-side, to try to get away from the doors, but the exertion made it worse. She lay still, head down, eyes closed, snuffling noisily. She gasped, as best she could through the gag, when she realised that her nose was stuffing up. Something, maybe dust in the air, maybe blood on the floor, something, was triggering an allergic attack. She struggled harder, not trying to turn over this time, but desperately trying to get loose. As her efforts demanded more oxygen and her nose

became more stuffed, her struggles became weaker and weaker. Soon they stopped.

Paul grabbed the can of petrol from the back of the van and set it on the ground. He slammed the right-hand door of the van closed and reached inside and latched it. He slammed the left-hand door closed and pushed the button on the clicker. He heard the snap as the lock closed, and the beep that acknowledged the electronic command. He picked up the can and walked to a nearby car, still singing under his breath, "Start your day happy."

Sexy Sadie always left her car unlocked and always left the keys in the ignition. Everyone figured she wanted to get it stolen. But it was such a piece of crap that nobody would accommodate her. Until now.

Paul put the petrol can on the floor in the back and slid into the driver's seat. He turned the key and the engine let out a loud bang and the exhaust rattled. Black smoke came out of the tailpipe. He put the car into gear and stepped on the accelerator. The car juddered as it started moving, protesting all the way. He drove past a turn in the alleyway and stopped behind a pub. "Start your day happy, start your day happy."

This Eagle and Child was a pale imitation of the real thing. No Tolkien or Lewis hung out here, only Cambridge and Jones and other assorted hacks from the paper. Just as the pub was a faint echo of what a literary life ought to be, the Daily Echo was a faint echo of what true journalism ought to be. Paul chuckled grimly; those hacks had no inkling of what was in store for them. Start your day happy, indeed.

He stepped out of the car and glanced up and down the

alleyway; nobody in sight. He opened the back door and picked up the can of petrol. He removed the lid and splashed the contents over the back seat and floor, trying not to get any on himself. When the can was empty he jumped into the driver's seat, ignoring the fumes that clawed at his lungs, and reversed the car into an open spot right next to the back wall of the pub. He opened the door and took several steps away from the car. He picked up a few pages of newspaper conveniently left on the ground, wrapped them around a rock and wadded them into a ball, and set them on fire. He tossed his makeshift lighter into the car through the open door.

The fireball was bigger than he had anticipated. He felt the heat on his face, and smelled singed hair. Well, good. That just made it more effective. "Start your day happy, start your day happy."

He jogged back to the Daily Echo's rear entrance and stepped inside.

"Fire! Fire!" he yelled. Only a few folks were there this late on a Friday afternoon, but they all ran outside. "That way." He pointed in the direction of the pub, out of sight around the bend. Like the sheep they were, they all took off to see what was going on. "Start your day happy, start your day happy."

With the building cleared, Paul returned to his work. He yanked open the left-hand door of the van, and then the right. Lerner fell to the ground, half on her back and half on her side. She didn't move. Her face was blue. He stopped singing.

He dropped to his knees beside her, a stricken look on his face. "No, I can't let attachments get in the way of my job," he said out loud. He straightened his back and composed his features. He pulled a knife out of his pocket and cut the tie that held her ankles

to her wrists, then cut her ankles loose. He turned her on her back and yanked the duct tape away from her mouth, leaving ugly red splotches where it had been.

Let's see, head tilt, jaw jutting, squeeze the nostrils, blow into the mouth. Look for the chest to rise; yes, there it is. And again. And again. And now she was gasping for breath, breathing uncomfortably on her own. Her chest started to spasm; he turned her on her side, and she puked. Another spasm, and more puke. And again. And again. And finally the spasms eased. She opened her eyes.

He yanked her to her feet. She had already cost him too much time. "Move," he said, goading her toward the rear entrance. She stumbled along, numb and only half-conscious. "Start your day happy."

The doorway led into a good-sized room, larger than needed for the few supplies that the Daily Echo usually received. There were several carts inside the doorway, low to the ground and sturdy, useful for the occasional heavy delivery. He dragged her to one of the carts. He cut the tie that held her wrists, pushed one of her arms through the handle of the cart, and swiftly rebound her wrists on the other side of the handle in front of her. "Stay there," he ordered. Lerner was in no condition to disobey.

Paul ran back to the van. He pulled Bearfield out of the back, dropping him unceremoniously onto the ground. He half-dragged, half-carried him the few meters across the macadam and concrete to the entrance and inside. He hoisted him onto Lerner's cart and went back and got James.

With Bearfield and James both on carts, Paul pointed down the hall. "That way." Lerner, still groggy, pushed her cart toward the

hallway, but ran into the wall. “Pay attention,” Paul snapped. “Down the hall.” She managed to maneuver her cart to the hall and down it, only bumping into the walls a few more times along the way.

“In there,” Paul ordered. She managed to get the cart into the storeroom, far enough in that Paul could get his cart in behind her. Paul closed the door and locked it. “Start your day happy, start your day happy.”

There were four sturdy wooden chairs heaped in a corner of the storeroom, hidden by a row of shelves, remnants of an earlier time, a different business in the building. Paul grabbed one of them and set it upright. He cut the cable tie that held Lerner to the cart, then grabbed her arms and forced her into the chair. A new cable tie secured her wrists behind the back of the chair, and two more ties fastened her ankles to the legs of the chair.

He dumped James off his cart, then opened the door and backed out with the cart. He locked the door. When he returned he had the boxes from the back of the van on the cart. He closed the door and unloaded the boxes. “Start your day happy, start your day happy.”

“Paul, what’s going on? What’s this all about?” She didn’t feel like her mind was working right, and she had an awful taste in her mouth, and her lips were sore, and her neck hurt. But this was likely to be her last chance to make sense of all this, and maybe to persuade Paul to end it. Whatever it was.

He looked at her, and for a moment his features softened. “Sorry, Lerner, I didn’t intend to involve you in this. You’re a complication, but I’m not going to let you disrupt my plans.” His face hardened. He turned to the pile of boxes and opened the top

one. "Start your day happy, start your day happy." Lerner could see the labels on some of the boxes, but couldn't make out what they said.

"Paul, what are you doing? Are you going to leave those two trussed up like that? How can they breathe?"

"Lerner, this is bigger than one or two people. This is important. They're the enemy, and they deserve their fate."

"Even the enemy deserves humane treatment. Paul, you can't just leave them there like that. They're going to die!"

"That's right, they're going to die. And you, too. It's too bad you got your nose into a place where it didn't belong. But casualties of war, and all that."

"Paul, listen to yourself! Casualties of war? You're an intellectual! You know that war is never a solution. Besides, you're torturing them! Even enemy soldiers deserve compassion. Where is your humanity?"

It wasn't the best speech she had ever given, but it seemed to have an effect on Paul. He stopped fiddling inside the box. He hung his head. The jingle went silent.

He turned slowly and walked to the pile of chairs and pulled two more out of it. He arranged them next to hers. Then he cut the ties that held the unconscious Bearfield's ankles and hoisted him into one of the chairs. With two more cable ties he fastened Bearfield's ankles to the chair. Then he turned to James. Again the knife appeared, to sever the tie that held his ankles. Paul dragged James to the remaining chair, grabbed him by the arms, and struggled to lift him into the chair. But James had been faking, and when he got his legs under him his thrust took Paul by surprise. Paul reeled backwards against the wall, closely followed by James' shoulder.

Paul grunted as the wind was knocked out of him, but managed to turn sideways and knock James to the floor. Paul stepped behind Lerner and tipped her chair backwards, using her as a shield between him and James. Supporting the chair with one hand, he reached into his pocket with the other and came out with his knife. Holding the knife against her throat, he screamed, "Stay back! Or she'll die!"

The threat wasn't necessary. James gave Paul a murderous look, but look was all he could do. He had exhausted himself with that one rush; he couldn't get enough air through the duct tape gag, and he hadn't gotten up from where he'd fallen.

Paul took several deep breaths, then set Lerner's chair back upright. He walked over to James, keeping a respectful distance this time. "Get up," he ordered. James struggled, but managed to get his feet under him so he could slide himself up, leaning against the wall. Paul jerked his head toward the empty chair, and James staggered over to it and sat. Paul quickly tied him to the chair.

Paul picked up his roll of duct tape and, pulling off a length, stepped toward Lerner. "Paul, no," she screamed. "You know what happened last time! Please don't!"

"Shut up." He hit her, hard, across the face. She felt more than saw the duct tape being applied to her mouth. The one piece, and, as before, two more to secure it. Paul went back to his box across the room. "Start your day happy, start your day happy."

She watched him briefly as he fiddled in the box. Then her eyes drifted to the boxes themselves. Somehow, she managed to decipher the letters on one of the boxes. PETN. She knew that abbreviation; she'd written a story about it for the Times. Pentaerythritol tetranitrate. High explosive. Her eyes went wide,

just as Paul turned around.

He grinned. “Should be enough to level the building.” Then he left, locking the door behind him. “Start your day happy, start your day happy!”

## **Chapter twenty-three**

*by Keith B Walters*

All three of them turned upon hearing the sound of a key in the lock from the corridor outside. The door swung wide and in he stepped, Paul Cambridge, over six feet of badass right there. He sneered at Angus and Nathan as he marched past them, continuing on his path direct to Lerner. He smiled at her, smug in his demeanour - clearly pleased with all he had achieved and relishing showing off the fact to her.

"Just called by to say my bye-byes to you all." He said. Then, realising that waiting for a response from any of them would be in vain, their mouths fixed firmly shut with tape, he continued. "Sorry, babe. This could have all turned out so differently, eh? One of those 'if only' kind of things. Do you ever stop to wonder how things might have turned out for us if we'd stayed together? I know I do - some of the best nights sleep I have, thinking about that, thinking about you. C'est la vie, eh?"

He paced around the chair, glancing down at Lerner's bonds, checking she was still securely held there.

"Might just give you a quick farewell kiss." He grinned as he put his hands on his knees and leant in closer to her. "You know - to

show there's no hard feelings. For old times' sake and all that. What do you say babe, pucker up for me?"

Lerner shifted aside against her bonds, feeling the harsh sharp plastic of the cable ties tighten against the flesh of her wrists as she twisted her body, moving her head back as far as she could. She could almost taste the whiskey on his breath - that alone took her right back to the days they'd spent together, nights when they'd shared nightcaps of that very same flavour before sliding under the sheets in his bed. But this wasn't the Paul of back then, she caught herself for even stopping to consider the past with him? He was a completely changed man and had transformed from once being her possible future to her almost inevitable reason for an imminent demise. There was nowhere further for her to go, she realised to her horror. The other two, bound as she was to their own chairs were of no use to her, even more powerless than she, as a result of their injuries and what they'd been through.

Whatever force the men from MI7 had once possessed had now clearly passed. They were both no more use to her than just a couple of regular civilians - possibly even less so.

This had become very much Lerner's game now and it was feeling ,or end more like all bets were off and that the end was a forgone conclusion. She would die here at the very hands of the man she had once felt such love for.

Tired and battered as she was by the ordeal so far, and her head still filled with the images of the blast she'd been caught up in only days before, Lerner held onto the same strengths that kept her running, kept her fighting throughout all her fitness regimes. She knew that somehow, something would present itself to her to provide her with what she needed to achieve a resolution and

possible escape from Paul's clutches. Something had to give her the route away from the ticking clocks, the unforgiving pace of the blinking red LED lights, and the huge quantity of explosives she knew were so close by.

What did present itself to her came as a shock at first, pain coming along with it for the ride as Paul gripped the ragged edge of the duct tape at her cheek and tore it away with a swift and brutal tug. Lerner cried out as the tape tore from her skin and lips, felt the sharp sting of its removal and then the screaming pain that followed.

She felt the eyes of the two MI7 officers on her, both men powerless to assist as they watched Paul push his face against hers, his lips meeting her lips, making them sting further still at their touch.

But it was all she needed.

It came unexpected and yet very welcome.

Lerner wasn't about to let the opportunity slip by.

Quickly she opened her mouth and, before Paul had the chance to step back, she locked her teeth on his lower lip, biting down with all the strength she could will, tasting his blood instantly.

As quick as the man registered the pain and made to raise his hands to pull her head away, Lerner made her second swift move, driving her forehead forward, releasing her mouth from his and crashing her head into the bridge of his nose, caving it back into his skull.

Paul went down quick and hard.

The one blow to his head had been enough, driven by years of anguish and hatred as it was, but Lerner had no time to be pleased about the victory, her chair leant perilously forward and followed

the arc of his falling body, sending her crashing to the floor, still bound by the cable ties.

She managed to twist slightly in the chair as it fell, sending her pitching to one side, slamming her left side to the concrete floor of the store room and just having the wits about her to lift her head slightly to prevent being knocked out herself.

Angus and Nathan were struggling to call out to her - she could hear them mumbling under their gags. She turned in the direction of their gaze and saw what they were using to tell her. In the fall, the cable tie that had bound her wrists had snapped, her hands only trapped now by her own body weight under the chair itself.

Lerner allowed herself a brief smile at the humour of the situation - you couldn't make this up, she thought to herself - she started to ease her body weight, enough to slide her so wrists from under the chair itself. All the time she kept glancing across at Paul. His face was a bloodied mess, his lower lip hanging loose under a mask of blood, the centre of his face where his nose once resided was now just a crimson pulp of flesh. He didn't show any signs of movement. Lerner watched him cautiously, waiting for that horror movie moment when his chest would begin to rise and fall again. But that moment didn't look like it was about to come.

"No more harm." Lerner heard herself say softly. "You can do me no more harm, you evil bastard of a man."

She looked across at the two men still tied to their own chairs as she struggled to pull herself across the floor. They were both staring into the corner of the room. She knew what they were looking at. Paul may have been dealt with, but what he'd planted there and set in place as still very much set to cause more destruction.

The desk in the store room seemed so far away at first, but once Lerner had established a rhythm she found she was pretty adept at sliding her body across the floor towards it. There was nothing between her and the desk to give her safe purchase to risk standing, so she saw it as an island, her only possible refuge.

Besides, there was a small toolkit in the desk drawer there, she knew from having to ask Amir, the head of security, for help a few weeks before when the strap on her bag had broken and he'd fixed the clasp in no time with a small pair of pliers contained in the kit. She'd seen enough to know there was also a hammer, and a small sliding knife - just the thing to cut their bonds.

She reached the desk and reached up to pull out the drawer, not caring a bit when it came crashing to the floor, spilling its contents all about her. There was no one else around to hear it, no one else to fear - at least that's what she hoped.

Within a few seconds she'd located the small knife and snapped the cable ties from her ankles before standing and making her way over to the two men still bound in their chairs.

"Not really sure I should do this." Lerner said as she walked behind Nathan first, the knife held tightly in her fist. "Not one hundred percent certain that you two have been straight with me - but we can talk about that later. Right now I want out of here, same as you. So let's get going."

She cut the cable tie from Nathan's wrists, handed him the knife so that he could cut the ties at his ankles and then free his partner.

As the two men untied themselves and ripped the duct tape from across their mouths, each leaving blood trails across their lips as the tape tore there, Lerner paced around the storage room.

Within a few moments she had found what she sought.

Running across to the pile of debris by the desk, she retrieved the small hammer, then ran back to where she had been looking and smashed at the fire alarm box with all her might.

The bells rang out loud and clear, and all Lerner could do was hope that everybody would get out and to safety in time.

## Chapter twenty-four

*by theonlygolux*

The store room was at odds with the positive spin the Daily Echo insisted upon. Grim lighting blinked down on the four figures. Lerner looked around at Angus, Nathan and Paul, a trio of men she had let into her life who had proven untrustworthy across the board.

"Any chance you could uncuff us as well?" Nathan said.

Lerner glanced at him. He looked beaten on every plane. Blood crusted in the corner of his mouth, and his eyes were blackened and still weeping involuntarily. She winced and looked across at Angus. The taller agent hadn't moved.

"Remind me why I let you recruit me for this shit?" She asked him.

He looked as if he tried to shrug, but coughed in pain instead, "I hope it wasn't my looks." Turning his head, he tried to look at Angus. "How is he?"

She grimaced, "Worse than you. But still better looking."

Around his back Lerner found the cable ties had been pulled brutally tight, the black plastic cutting into the skin on their hands, and blackening the fingers. She pulled a face and looked around

for a way to cut them off.

"Hurry, Jones. We don't know how much time we have." Nathan was coughing now, fresh blood speckling his lips.

"I need something to undo these with." Lerner responded quickly. She could feel Nathan's assertion raising the spectre of the bomb in her mind. She tried not to let the images take over, the memories of the bodies at Bond and Lacey. The clouds of dust blown across the rubble of glass, marble and limbs the explosion had left behind.

She cast around the room. A stanley knife, or scissors. That wouldn't be unreasonable to expect from a store room. Lerner found paperclips, sellotape, reams and reams of pink paper, a hundred dollar bill and a laminated wallet sized picture of Bill Cosby. Nothing that would undo cable ties.

"Shit" she cursed under her breath, feeling it grow shallower.

"M'Kota R'Cho" Angus coughed, "Ch'Targh."

Lerner dashed to his side, "Angus? You're still with us?"

His head nodded almost imperceptibly. "Ch'Pok. Pahash."

She looked across to Nathan, who looked as lost as she was. "I can't understand you." She said carefully to Angus.

He spat blood and cleared his throat. "Pocket. My pocket." Lerner saw him roll his eyes to indicate his left trouser pocket.

"Just because we're all going to die in a few minutes doesn't mean you should be asking for hand jobs, Agent." Nathan muttered.

Lerner shot him a look as she checked the pocket Angus had indicated. His keys, upon which hung a miniature swiss army knife.

She gave him a quick kiss on the forehead, "Regular fucking boy

scout aren't you?" She slid round behind them and opened the tiny blade. "I don't think I can cut them without cutting you." She looked at the swollen flesh around the black plastic ties. "In fact I know I won't be able to."

Nathan breathed deeply, "Just do it quickly. A little more blood loss isn't going to kill us. But when that lot goes up it won't make any difference whether we're cuffed or bleeding to death - if we're still here, we'll be minced."

Angus exhaled stertorously again, "Tyttthodiplatys." He coughed, more blood hitting the floor. "Fuck."

Nathan looked sideways at him. "Glad you're well enough to swear. Why are you slowing her down?"

"Cable ties have a tab in the lock, lift that with the blade, they'll loosen. Won't need to cut us. It acts as the ratchet." He spoke slowly, each word obviously costing him energy.

Nathan grunted. "Wikipedia has spoken. Lerner?"

She looked down at the tabs, the tiny plastic cages around the rails. The tab was easy to spot, once she knew to look for it. "Yep." It took a little time to work the knife blade under the tiny plastic tongue, but once it was there the ties gave slightly, and as she pulled, they came entirely undone.

Angus was free first, his arms springing forward as the cuffs came free. His entire body crumpled slowly down, and he swore as his breath was forced, "Fuuuuuuck."

Nathan tried to stand as soon as he was free, but ended up on his knees, one hand outstretched to keep his balance. He recoiled when he realised his hand had come to rest upon the explosives. Once he had gathered himself he turned to his fellow agent.

"Angus." He said. "Angus. Agent James!"

There was no response. Lerner pulled Angus further upright, but his eyes were rolling in his head and he was barely conscious. She looked at Nathan.

"What do I do?"

He grit his teeth, "Take him, drag him if you have to. I'll make my own way." He tried again to push himself to his feet, and almost succeeded. "Go!"

Lerner looked at him, and at Angus, and then at Paul. "I have to check the building," she said.

Nathan swore at her, "No you don't. Leave it, leave him, just get us out while we're still alive. If the bomb squad get here in time, happy days. If not, fuck it."

She shook her head, "No. Lucy is in here all hours, Amir almost never leaves the building."

Nathan was on his feet now, wobbling. He looked across at her, the weariness in his eyes draining them of any sense of comfort. "It's going to be fine. Ignore everyone, just keep moving. Keep moving forward. That's how winning is done." He pointed at Angus. "He's relying on you."

"I'm sorry. I'm coming back, but I have to check. There are lights on in the building. Susan and Janine could be in there too, or even George. They're interns, postmen, they're not involved in this sort of thing."

Nathan's hand clamped down on her wrist, "No. You're not going up there. First rule of anything, stay alive."

She twisted free violently. "I have watched enough from the outside and rationalised not helping by calling myself a journalist, but I can't do that here. I know these people. If there's a chance they are in there I have to give them warning." Lerner looked at

him. "I'll come back and get you."

She ran. Feeling the lightness in her feet as a freeing of her spirit, an inappropriate levity swept into her and she grinned fiercely. Lerner hit the stairs running, swinging around their tight turns with the handrail, pulling herself up as she ran. The first floor office was abandoned, and she grabbed a phone, punching 999 in and waiting impatiently, her gaze sweeping the office for movement. She wished she knew where her mobile was.

The voice, when it came, was Scottish and female, "Which service?"

Lerner realised that she didn't really know which service she needed to specify. "All of them. There's a building with a bomb in."

She waited for a moment as the woman put her through and gave the details as rapidly as she could to the uninterested sounding man on the other end of the line. He assured her they were on their way and asked her to stay on the line. She apologised and put the phone down on the desk, leaving the voice squeaking out of the handset.

The other floors were quicker, and deserted. Amir's office was dark and locked, which was unusual. Lucy's floor had its lights on, but appeared empty.

"Lucy?" Lerner called, "Guys? Anyone? It's an emergency!" She didn't know what held her back from shouting "Bomb! There's a bomb!" but it felt as if it were over the top, a little too melodramatic. Perhaps her time in Britain had changed her more deeply than she was aware. There wasn't any answer to her calls, and she felt the sickness of worry in her stomach as she leapt back down the stairs. Nathan had been right, she should have left the

building alone. This time of day there should have been people here, it didn't feel right.

When she hit the carpark, her knees aching from the stairs, Angus and Nathan were still struggling through the door to the storeroom.

"What kept you?"

"I wanted to go through that prick's pockets." Nathan called back. Angus was still unmoving and Nathan had been reduced to dragging him. It was his feet which were getting trapped in the door.

Paul. Prick was right. "Anything interesting?"

"Don't know yet. Papers, wallet, a pocket watch. Probably not."

She held the door for a minute until Angus was free, and glanced inside as she let it go, wanting to assure herself that Paul was not simply playing possum. He lay as she had seen him last, sprawled on the floor, one hand outstretched toward the explosives. The explosives. Fuck.

"Let me take Angus." She said to Nathan. She had no idea how she would carry him, nine inches taller than her, she couldn't lift him under his arms and expect to get him off the floor, and when Nathan grunted and gave her the weight he was heavier than she had imagined. She could see that Nathan wasn't going to make it carrying his colleague, though, and they needed to get moving.

The exit was close, across the underground car park, past the barriers and out to the road. Then they could head towards the river, get to a safe range. Angus was dead weight against her. She wrapped one arm around him and stood upright, but he was too tall to lift and too limp for her to be able to obtain any useful

leverage.

"Goddamn it Angus, come on." She said at him, but he just hung from her, breathing heavily and bleeding.

She could feel him slipping already, so she lay him down for a moment. What if Paul hadn't been acting alone? The sodium lights of the car park were pumping out their nasty orange glow across the empty concrete, occasional cars, but no people. It reminded her of bad dreams, the sense of threat permeating the emptiness, the knowledge that if someone should appear she wouldn't know if they were a fresh danger or salvation.

Lerner felt the aches across her body, the pain in her muscles, as if she'd overdone it in the gym. It was the good pain, she tried to tell herself, the aches that meant you were getting fitter, that your muscles were conditioning, and growing stronger.

"Come on then, Agent Boy Scout." She said and hefted Angus again, lifting and pivoting, as if she were about to use a judo throw on him. Bent double, with him across her back, she could just get him off the floor. If she looked behind her she could just see his ankles dangling, his feet loose and huge.

The first few steps across the concrete were blows, each time Lerner had to re-hoist Angus onto her back another spasm of pain. As she moved she could feel her body begin to take over, though, the rhythm of her movement jolting down her spine and working with her pace to ease her through it, her long hours in the gym paying back the pain they'd caused as she dropped into familiar territory, hearing the music playing in her mind, the voice of the instructor. This was going to be ok, Nathan was right, it wasn't about sunshine and rainbows, it was about how much she could take and keep moving forward.

The square of bright concrete that marked the low sun creeping in from outside was close now, close enough for Lerner to taste the fresh air and the cold outside creeping into the stultifying warmth the building always generated at this level. It also let in the noise of rush hour. Cars and people in expensive suits, hurrying away from work at the end of another week.

"Fuck." She looked round at Nathan. He looked shocking, bloodied, bruised and haggard, a stark contrast to the plump wealth that hurried past outside. "What are we going to do?" She asked.

He looked up at her wearily, "Just get out of here. Don't make eye contact. Unlikely we'll be stopped."

They cleared the darkness and stepped into the light. Nathan right behind her, as promised. He pointed past her along the road. "That way. You shouldn't have gone back in."

They limped along the road until they came to a long heavy sandstone planter filled with immaculately tended but unhealthy looking plants. Lerner lowered Angus to the ground in shelter and squinted back along the street.

Nathan groaned as he lowered himself to the ground. "Whatever you're thinking, leave it be."

She breathed out carefully. "There are people on the street. If they're outside when it blows they could be killed." It wasn't something she thought she could bear, being responsible for the sorts of injuries she'd seen.

"It's a one way street." She blurted out suddenly, realising what she could do. She forced herself to her feet once again, and walked to the road. Cars passed her, and she put out one hand, hoping that someone would stop. The next few cars ignored her. She

waved and called, "Stop! Please!" It was no good, the drivers looked at her and hurriedly looked away, accelerating past the strange woman in such disarray. She heard a screech behind her and spun to look. Nathan had stepped out in front of the most recent car to pass her. He was pale and bruised, the skin across his face drawn and bloody, but the hand which held the gun was steady.

"Get out of the fucking car." He said to the man behind the wheel, and when the man made no move to comply, lowered the gun and fired four shots, flattening the tires and causing the driver to leap from the car and sprint down the street adroitly, his grey suit trousers turning dark where the shock had awoken his bladder. Nathan crumpled to his knees in front of the car, his head against its bonnet. Lerner heard screams in the distance, and then sirens.

"Where was the gun?" She asked.

"Trade secret," he croaked as he levered himself upright again. "Now will you get into cover?"

She nodded and went with him.

The Police turned into the wrong end of the street, ambulances and black Mariahs screeching in the silence. A fire engine's siren wailed in the distance, and as if to welcome them all, the building coughed. Its windows blew outwards in a sparkling exhalation of glass, and Lerner saw papers shot out of the orifices like wadding from a shotgun. Then the explosion deepened and she saw chunks of stone flying through the air. Nathan pulled her down behind the planter and she remembered that they had left Paul in the building.

"Fuck. Paul." She uttered the words unconsciously. "Fuck. I

just left him. Fuck. Nathan. Paul was still inside."

She felt Nathan's arms around her, tight, forcing her to stay down.

"He made his bed, he can die in it. Bastard would have done the same to us."

She shuddered, feeling the horror, "But he was unconscious. He could have told us... I should have..."

Nathan turned her to him, holding her face close to his own and looked into her eyes. His face was firm, forbidding, "You saved me, you saved Angus, you risked your life to make sure there were no innocents in the building and then you saved any passers by who might have been hurt. You cannot, must not feel guilty for not saving the one person who could legitimately be said to have deserved to die here. He made the bomb. He set the timer. He tied us up and tortured us. You owe him nothing. Nothing."

Lerner looked at him, tried to concentrate on his eyes, but saw the building collapsing in on itself. Heard the screams and groans of tortured metal. Hands found her and lifted her, asked her questions answered by Nathan. An emergency blanket was put around her shoulders and she was checked over by paramedics. She found a phone into her hand. Her phone.

There was bustle, but she was alone, left unattended, and she shrugged off the blanket and walked a little away. Who, what and where next? Everything felt alien, dangerous. She could see Angus being loaded into an ambulance, a blond nurse checking him over. Nathan was unsuccessfully trying to prevent them from loading him onto the stretcher opposite Angus.

She should phone this in. Instincts stirred and she started flipping through her contacts. A friendly voice, and telling

someone where she was. That felt important. She found Jason's number, her old Features Editor for the Times. He'd been a sweetheart, and understood why she'd gone. He'd buy this, and he'd look after her if she needed.

"Hey lass, what can I do for you?" His voice was loud and reassuring, familiar.

"I have something for you."

He chuckled, "Alien Abduction? Or something so terrible that rag you're at now can't turn a positive spin on it?"

"You have the news on?"

She saw the driver climbing into the ambulance, and raised a hand to Angus and Nathan as the nurse turned to close the doors. The blond woman's face, professionally bored, looked out and Lerner recognised her. Perhaps. Victoria Mason. Why would she be here, dressed as a nurse? What could she be doing?

"You know me. Always working. Lass? Lerner?"

She shook herself, a shiver running down her back.

"Sorry, Jason. I suddenly find myself freelance. Another bombing."

"Don't tell me those two things are related, lass."

She found herself smiling, despite everything. "You'll be surprised."