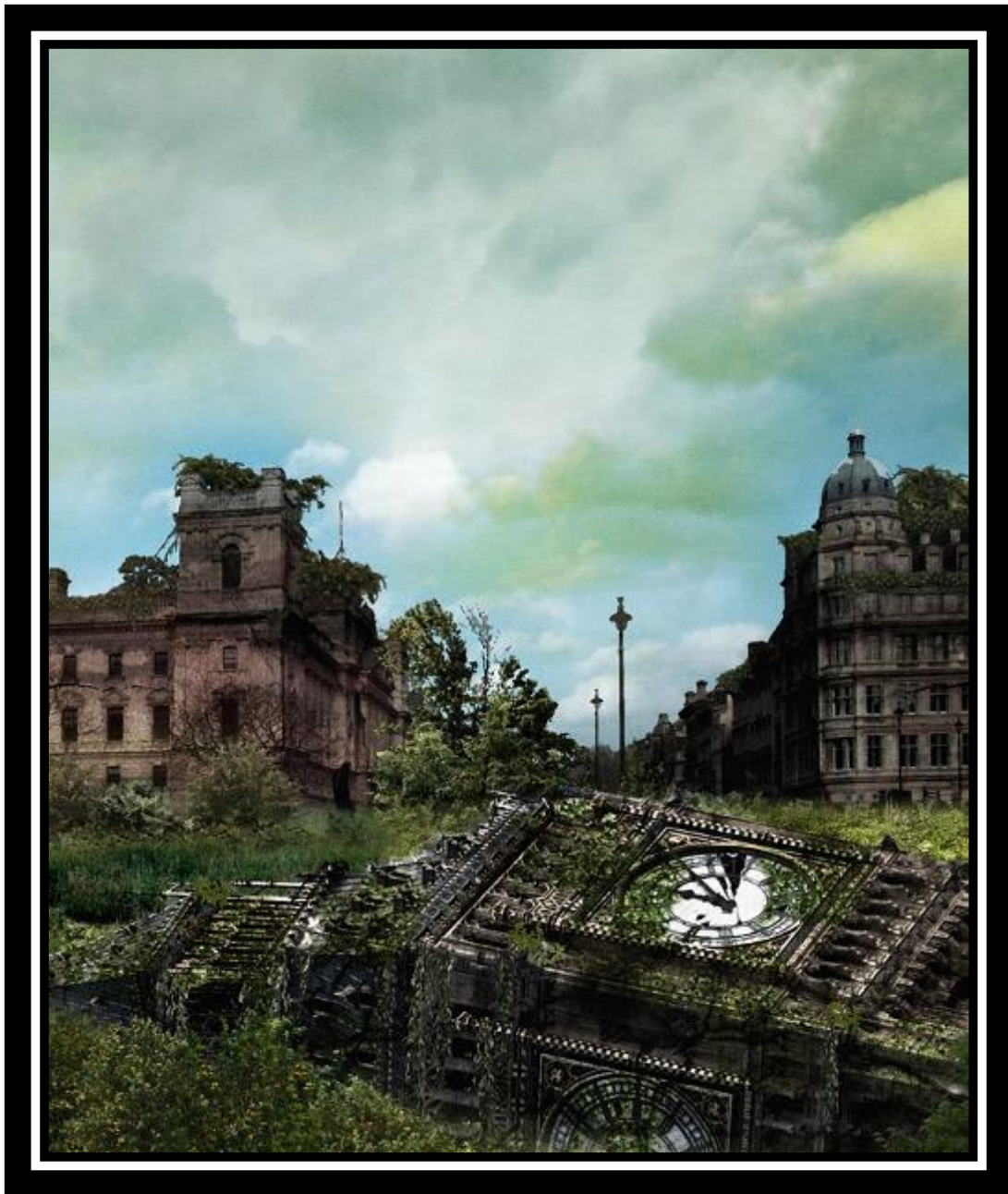


# No Future

Bradley Stoke



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# I Alex 2020

“And where did you say you worked?” she asked as she delicately squeezed Alex’s now limp but resolutely sticky penis between her red enamelled nails.

“I didn’t,” admitted Alex.

“Too soon on a first date, then?”

“It’s not quite the first date...er...” Alex began, but hesitated as he tried to remember the name of the naked woman sprawled on the mattress beside him. He couldn’t very well continue to call her *Alfa2020* now their relationship had gone beyond cyberspace, but he’d already forgotten her real name.

“We’ve mostly only talked about sex and, if I recall, something to do with local traffic congestion, Alex.”

Shit! She’d remembered his name, but what was hers? Did it begin with ‘A’ or with some other letter?

“I think we also discussed some other global issues...like...er...”

“Like what?” she snorted. She stroked his testicles while Alex ineffectually twiddled his fingers through her hair. “And the name you’re trying to remember is Agnieszka. Not Agnes. Agnieszka.”

“Russian?” guessed Alex. It was at least plausible. She was quite a catch for an internet date and very much in a blonde, slim and tall fashion that would be wholly consistent with someone of Russian origin. And she had that delightfully dismissive hauteur Alex associated with Russian women...

“Polish,” she corrected him.

...Or, indeed, women from anywhere to the East of Germany.

“My parents came from Poland,” she continued. “Back in the Nineties. I’m sure we’d mentioned that on the net.”

“I think we talked about global warming, the environment and stuff like that,” said Alex who was intent on returning the conversation away from the poverty of his memory to the wealth of his political and social knowledge.

“I don’t remember any of that at all,” Agnieszka remarked. She teased his left testicle with the sharp edge of the red tip of her longest nail. “You did talk about how rubbish this town is. No facilities. No pub. Just a crappy Wal-Mart and a Dunkin Donuts.”

“They’ve opened a Starbucks now,” Alex pleaded. “And I think there’s gonna be a new petrol station.”

“Well, bully for Ashton Lovelock, New Town. What made you want to live here rather than back in Swindon? I think Swindon’s a great place. Plenty of shops. And the M4’s nearby.”

“Well, it would’ve been easier for us now if I was still renting a place there. Your apartment’s just a mile or so from where I used to live...”

“More a flat-share than an apartment. Property’s so fucking expensive.”

“It was work more than anything else. My company’s based in a Business Park just ten miles from Birmingham. That’s forty odd miles from here. Just over an hour’s commute on the motorway...”

“...On a good day,” Agnieszka commented knowingly.

“...And property's not so expensive round here, at least not compared to Swindon.”

“And where did you say you worked?” Agnieszka asked again.

“Well, that's why I'm sure we must have talked about serious shit, you know, like climate change and immigration policy and terrorism and politics and stuff,” pleaded Alex. “I work for an on-line news service. It's part of the Disney-Reuters-News International media group. I help compile news for the news services.”

“The ones you have to pay for or the free ones?”

“Both. The BBC. The Telegraph. The Mail. And even Google News. They're all customers of ours.”

Agnieszka's face crumpled into an almost comical expression of sceptical dismissal. “It's all lies, isn't it? All the stuff that's posted on the net. Everyone says it's just propaganda. There's no money in News now, so it's mostly made up or recycled or planted or just showbiz trivia.”

Alex was genuinely shocked. “That is not true,” he spelt out slowly and precisely. “There's an absolute separation between editorial and news content.”

“Even on a News International outlet?” Agnieszka sneered. “I've seen the crap on Fox News UK. I'm just glad my parents came from Poland and not the fucking Republic of Waziristan. All they go on about is Fortress Europe and cars that run on deep-ocean methane. Where's the separation between fact and insular small-minded fantasy?”

Alex wasn't sure he was so pleased now that he'd invited this woman into his house. The last thing you want to happen while naked and just after having made love

for the last half-hour is to have to listen to someone disabuse you for what you do for a living.

“I just collate and edit the news,” Alex pleaded. “I don’t have anything to do with what News International or, for that matter, the BBC or Google do with the content. And I don’t think there are any lies out there. It’s just presentation and editorial.”

Agnieszka smiled. She obviously enjoyed Alex’s show of outrage. “And just what kind of news do you edit and collate then? Big issues like the environment, war and nuclear proliferation?”

Alex twisted his face into puppy-dog submission. “Entertainment,” he admitted.

“Pop stars and television personalities?”

“More internet gossip.”

“Like...?”

“Well, there’s a lot of it. After all the net is bigger than all the other media put together. And look at the success of VR. Virtual Reality. That’s exploded like there’s no fucking tomorrow...”

“Yeah,” said Agnieszka, with a wry smile. She cupped Alex’s balls in her left hand while her right stroked the length of his powder-stained penis where the glans was slowly retreating into the shelter of his foreskin. “I’ll give you that. You certainly know how to use the controls on *Hot Nights Interactive*.”

She bent her face down so that her lips, as bright red as the varnish on her nails, could brush along Alex’s now steadily reawakening penis.

“I try to please...” said Alex as he leaned back in a gesture of surrender.



“It’s not fucking politics or fucking religion or fucking environment you’ve ever talked about as far as I recall,” said Agnieszka. She tugged Alex’s penis up against her cheek while smiling at him from the distance between his eyes and his groin. “It was mostly nothing but fucking.”

And fucking was precisely what Alex and she did for the next few hours in Alex’s modest terrace at the end of a typical suburban car-lined street: each vehicle proudly displaying both tax disc and parking permit. In the muffled background of the couple’s pants and gasps came the occasional roar of overhead planes or the growl of motor engines, but the predominant noise was the mechanical electronic thud emanating from Alex’s sound system that he had pre-programmed to activate on just such an occasion as the one currently happening.

Alex knew that all was right in the world. This was his second first date this week and he’d lost count of the number of times he’d had sex so far this year with the various women he met through *Hot Nights Interactive*, not to mention those through *New Friends On-Line* and *Fun With No Commitments*.

Was Agnieszka any different?

Well, she was a first class lover that was for sure, although Alex had already guessed that from the on-line sex they’d enjoyed together. The controls might have been in human hands, but the physical contact was exclusively supplied by inexpensive computer accessories.

Agnieszka was undeniably head and shoulders above the normal standard of woman Alex had picked up on the internet, though given the difficulties in making friends by other—if you like old-fashioned—means, on-line dates were nowadays of a

somewhat better class than they might once have been.

And as Alex's penis felt the gushing warmth of Agnieszka's vagina gripping his burning stiffness, he knew, more than he'd ever known before, that this was an encounter which had to be repeated.

## **II**

# **Lindiwe**

## **2065**

After so many months of struggle and sacrifice, the arduous journey was finally over. Lindiwe had arrived. In the town's short history, few had suffered as much as Lindiwe to reach Ashton Lovelock. Few could have endured the adversity, hunger and rape. Few would have willingly paid so much from so little savings to make a home in the fifty year old English New Town.

But desperation had driven Lindiwe to extreme measures, as it had her fellow migrants who'd also survived the journey.

Lindiwe hadn't viewed the stops on her voyage as a tourist might, although there were few European tourists who would venture into sub-Saharan Africa these days. What she saw of the thousands of miles between Southern Africa and Northern Europe wasn't through the round windows of an aeroplane soaring above the clouds and streaking ahead of a trail of prohibitively expensive fossil-fuel. She saw no airports and most definitely no passport controllers. Had she met even one between Lesotho and London, she'd have been unceremoniously bundled away in the back of an immigration police-van either to be dumped back in her country of origin or detained in one of the countless refugee camps that lined the shores of North Africa. And from what Lindiwe had heard about these camps, her most likely fate there would be a lonely death while she waited for a decision from the many government agencies and private charities that were fruitlessly arguing with one another over the responsibility for feeding the millions of desperate souls in their care.

No one would want to be burdened with such responsibility when there were so many other more immediate needs to address.

Lindiwe didn't expect Ashton Lovelock to treat illegal immigrants with any more kindness than Nairobi, Cairo, Harare, Sarajevo or Rotterdam would have done if her presence had been discovered by an official at any point on her voyage. And when she *had* been obliged to declare her presence, well...

There had been several times when she'd had to use her body as currency to keep her and her companions safe. This had been the case from the very start of her journey when she'd had to sacrifice her virginity simply to secure an exit visa from the United States of South Africa. There were the weeks and, in the slums of Cairo, the months of working for very little pay and a great deal of verbal and physical abuse in occupations that were far more menial than her post-graduate degree and professional training had ever prepared her for.

Here in the Kingdom of England there might be an opportunity to make good the qualifications that were surplus to requirements in Maseru. Lindiwe had high hopes for Ashton Lovelock. Despite the crumbling decay of the hastily-built house she was staying in, it was a relatively young town with energy-efficient housing, extensive parking spaces, and a profusion of windmills and solar panels.

The truth was that Ashton Lovelock was a veritable paradise compared to her original home in Africa. The years of African famine hadn't reduced overall population numbers by very much. Maseru still housed a population far greater than its infrastructure could support. The police were ineffectual against the criminal gangs that made it hazardous to venture out whether at day or night. The few available jobs paid

very poorly if they ever paid at all. Offices and homes were collapsing from neglect. Queues of starving people wound through the high streets for the few goods the criminal gangs permitted to arrive in the shops. Only a lucky few were ever rewarded for their patience.

Ashton Lovelock, on the other hand, was a town of owner-occupation that had now become a neighbourhood of squats as the number of those who could afford to buy property in the over-crowded Kingdom of England had shrunk at the same rate as the supply of non-derelict housing stock. This town had once been home to a prosperous community of second and third generation Asian immigrants, but the regrettable policies of the recently deposed Government of National Unity had resulted in their total evacuation. This inevitably left a vacuum that was now being filled by the latest wave of immigrants: of which Lindiwe was one.

But she was only one of many. There were people gathered in Ashton Lovelock from all over the world, though almost all of them were pretending to have come via the Northern European Union. This was a necessary lie, made plausible in the aftermath of the National Server Centre Riots. Many came from Africa, at least as many from the Middle East and Asia, and, inevitably, refugees from the racially intolerant Republic of North America. Fortunately, the one thing everyone had in common was a shared understanding of English.

“Where can I find work?” Lindiwe asked her friend Apara whose optimistic postcards were the beacon of hope that had drawn her across two continents to this far distant island.

Apara shared the same single mattress with Lindiwe in a room that had once

been a loft extension. Three mattresses filled almost all the available floor-space and each of them, including the mattress the two friends shared, was home to one set of people during the day and another during the night. Apará and Lindiwe shared the mattress in the daylight hours. At night, a black married couple from Mississippi slept on the same mattress and frequently left behind the trace of semen stains.

“There are no jobs at KFC-McDonalds,” said Apará, referring to the franchise where she worked. “You’re just going to have to look for work elsewhere.”

Lindiwe’s heart sank. She couldn’t sleep on the mattress at night because Mr and Mrs Martin would be there and there weren’t many places open in the evening where she could hope to find work. This meant that her pursuit for employment would also mean going without sleep.

Nevertheless, bleary-eyed and bored, after a night spent in the vicinity of the bus depot in the company of others with nothing else to do, Lindiwe resolutely wandered the streets of Ashton Lovelock in the hunt for an employment opportunity. Not that there were many places to visit in the town centre. The proprietor of KFC-McDonalds, herself a South African immigrant, was sympathetic but pointed out that there was a long waiting list of equally desperate candidates. The other fast-food chain, Yo Sushi Pizza Hut, was rather less friendly and more or less told her that only Muslim men could apply. Other than that, the only supermarket—a Tesco-WalMart—was openly hostile and told her that the company had a policy of reporting suspected immigrants. So there was little hope there either.

Lindiwe soon realised that there were no jobs for her in Ashton Lovelock at all. The immigrant community had already taken all the available low-paid opportunities.

And this was much to the evident distaste of native English citizens, many of whom openly taunted Lindiwe with unsubtle reminders of the unethical practices of the deposed Government of National Unity.

The ever-widening radius of her job-search eventually encompassed a business estate on the perimeter of Swindon where Lindiwe at last gained a position but as nothing more demanding than a nightshift cleaning-woman. Although this position required an expensive two-hour commute by bus followed by a half-hour walk it was still better than having to spend the entire night avoiding the couple sleeping on her daytime mattress.

Her official tasks mostly involved switching on and switching off the various cleaning machines and robots. However, it wasn't long until Lindiwe discovered that cleaning wasn't everything she was expected to do, although it wasn't written into her terms and conditions of employment (which, in any case, were entirely verbal and agreed with a handshake).

During the first week that Lindiwe worked at the George Monbiot eco-business park, she became aware of the existence of rooms that were out of bounds to her and the other night-time operatives. There would invariably be an e-paper sign pasted on the door of these rooms that requested that they be cleaned later. In case there might be some misunderstanding, these doors were locked from the inside. This was odd because the only people supposed to be working at the offices so late at night were security guards and technical operatives.

It soon became evident what was happening when Lindiwe bumped into any of the people who'd been staying in a locked room. It was always a man and a woman.

The woman was invariably much younger than the man and usually an immigrant. Lindiwe also noticed the smell of sex that was lingering on their person. Her nostrils had become well attuned to the odour after the weeks she'd spent in Sarajevo in which her survival relied on the provision of blow-jobs to total strangers..

"I like all the staff to chip in," Lindiwe's boss explained as he handed her the meagre rewards for her first week's work. He was a slender dark-skinned man with a turban and a West Midlands accent. He was an exile who'd returned home after the change of government. "The benefits are extra pay. I can't promise a fortune but tips can make a difference."

"Why don't people go to brothels and massage parlours?" asked Lindiwe, who understood that her continued employment was almost certainly conditional on her accepting this extra work.

"The change of government brought about many good changes," Mr Singh said with a sigh, "otherwise I wouldn't be here, of course. But one measure the new government also introduced was to close the illicit sex establishments that were an unofficial refuge for the immigrant women who'd stayed on in the country, despite the constant pressure to leave. This operation is similar to many others you'll find all over this country. It's a way for the Business Park's landlords to use empty rooms in offices that would otherwise be decommissioned and for the punters to get what they want."

And what they wanted was something Lindiwe now had to provide about twice a week in one of the several out-of-bound offices. They were furnished with rather basic beds rather than desks, computers and chairs. The felt-covered partitions around each cubicle now served the function of hiding what was going on. There was a steady stream



of customers who came to enjoy the inexpensive pleasures that immigrant labour was now providing: their appetites whetted by the VR fantasies they could enjoy in the comfort of their own homes.

For Lindiwe this provided no pleasure at all until she squeezed into the office shower with the other nightshift cleaners to spray off the semen, urine and other bodily fluids that the customers believed was a necessary part of love-making but during which ordeal the vaginal penetration was probably the least distasteful part.

### **III**

## **Phil**

# **2103**

Phil hated the long drive home from Warwick Business Park to Ashton Lovelock. Not until the gates to the town were shut close behind him and he was once again under the protection of the most advanced and modern security technology that money could buy did he feel safe. No terrorist or vagrant could trespass the gated community of Ashton Lovelock. Not even a bird flying overhead or a mouse burrowing beneath the hi-tech walls could stay undetected for long by the town's computer systems, which also served to modulate the temperature, keep the rain off the walkways and ensure that the lawns were kept regulation length. And all this was within an entirely self-contained energy system with a zero carbon footprint.

All the same, there were several insecure kilometres on Phil's journey home from work where the windows of his battery-driven car had to stay sealed whatever the weather and it was essential to keep his tracking devices set on. Most of his commute was along a secure stretch of carriage-way. Few terrorists could trespass onto the tarmac beyond the electric fences and deep ditches that protected it. The road from the Warwick Business Park to the A46 was similarly protected but not at the expense of tax-payers but of the businesses based at the park.

There was more than ten kilometres of unsecured road—mostly in a poor state of repair—from Ashton Lovelock to the tolls at the start of the private roadway. The hover-mechanism of his car might be less energy-efficient and burnt up a lot of the battery charge, but it kept the car's chassis safe from damage and ensured that Phil and his Ford-Toyota Apollo got to its destination without being mired in a ditch or, worse,

car-jacked by plebs eager to plunder his car for valuable parts.

It just wouldn't do to imagine what would happen to Phil in such a situation. Highwaymen were known to kidnap law-abiding citizens such as him for ransom. They were the terrestrial equivalent of the pirates that terrorised the high seas and thereby helped to make imports so prohibitively expensive. There were rumours of an illicit trade in human body parts used by unrecognised physicians for plebs who couldn't afford proper health-care or, worse, used as raw material in the bio-labs such as the one at the business park just next door to Phil's office.

Those kilometres were the only few Phil ever got to see of the England the plebs inhabited. The pity of it was that he saw the same few kilometres every day, both coming south and going north. Familiarity with the sight didn't make him any fonder of it. There was rubbish piled up, as there was no waste disposal business to remove it. The buildings were in a terrible state of repair with slates falling off roofs and the lawns untended. The pavements that lined the roadside were crumbled and potholed and in almost as bad a condition as the road itself. This was also where the homeless lived under tarpaulin with their children running around half-naked like the savages they were.

Phil knew that there were different classes of pleb, just as there were different professions such as technocrats, executives and administrators. However, whereas the distinction between the professions was measured by academic achievement and seniority, the diversity amongst the plebs was vacuous and chaotic. There were those in paid employment or who were self-employed amongst whom there was a lucky few that owned road-vehicles that were characteristically in a very poor condition and often

relied on inefficient carbon fuels that their owners had to buy off the black market. The plebs clearly deserved their constant chastisement by the media for their fecklessness and irresponsibility. They sometimes had families with three or more children. Some were even eligible for state handouts and lived off these rather than make an honest living. They were a burden on honest professionals like Phil and this was the principal reason why he resented having to pay taxes.

Phil knew there were countless orders of pleb, but the distinction was difficult to discern among the faceless, ragged and malnourished scum that he dutifully ignored on his journey towards the robot-operated tolls that automatically recognised his car and let him through without him needing to pause on the hazardous side of the barrier. Some were of immigrant stock. Although they were generally known as illegals, a few had somehow gained English citizenship and therefore not technically illegal. On the rare occasion that Phil needed to speak to a pleb he had difficulty understanding a word they said through the dense thicket of regional and even foreign accents.

At least his tax money no longer needed to support the Northern English plebs now that their separate assembly had taken over this responsibility. If the Geordies clamoured for independence like the Scots, Welsh and Irish before them, Phil would have no objections in granting it to them.

Although the overwhelming majority of the English population could be classified as plebs they inhabited only a fraction of the Republic's habitable land. Most was owned and managed by agri-businesses, business parks, commercial parks and, of course, gated communities. The plebs had to make do with the space left over. And what did they have to complain about? It wasn't as if there was a place for them to live

in an agri-business compound or an assembly plant. That was reserved for robots. If only the plebs would stop breeding and just die out.

Phil drove the final kilometre or so within Ashton Lovelock to his home along roads, lined by pavements and lawns, that couldn't be more different from those infested by homeless scum. The garage doors opened well before his car rolled onto the driveway and a welcoming scent of lavender and fuchsia wafted out from his living room.

Phil wandered into the kitchen where a meal was already waiting for him, prepared by the robo-chef from the same genetically enhanced foodstuffs that were being designed and patented in the Sony-Monsanto Bio-Research faculty based at Warwick Business Park.

As he tucked into his dinner, Phil wondered what he could do this evening.

Phil wasn't married, although he had many girlfriends. Most of these were of the cyberspace variety that he couldn't dare to meet in real life and the others he'd met through VR dating. But somehow today he wasn't in the mood for cybersex. Perhaps he could arrange a social evening with Larry, Artie and Aaron and, but unless he could hold back on the alcohol he'd have to arrange a taxi to travel the five kilometres or so back home and it was always a hassle waiting for it to arrive.

Phil checked his mobile for messages.

Nothing.

What could he do?

Phil smiled. Well, why not? He deserved it and it would scarcely break the bank.

There was just one other contact with the pleb majority Phil maintained that

wasn't with taxi-drivers, waiters and bar-staff. And it would arrive within half an hour of being summoned.

He picked up his phone and scrolled through a holographic display of images of mostly semi-clad women that he'd bookmarked earlier.

The sort of women Phil preferred was the type that one could call voluptuous. Not fat, although very few plebs could afford to be that now. Obesity was a disease that famine had eliminated amongst the poor. The women that Phil preferred had an ample bosom, good-sized hips and thighs and—this was important to him—white skin. So many plebs were of a complexion that was all shades from black through brown to off-white, but Phil preferred women who were, if anything, rather paler than his own slightly olive-hued skin-colour.

Today was going to be Arabella's turn. Her real name was almost certainly not Arabella. Plebs often had names that were decidedly non-English, like Anoushka or Fatima, or ones that were drastically abbreviated to Shell or Tray or Madge. Arabella's status was set to *Ready* and she could be at his address within forty minutes assuming that she, or rather her driver, wasn't detained at the entry gate for too long. A few jabs with his finger on the touch-screen and Arabella was on her way and a provisional deposit transferred from Phil's credit account to that of the Empire Dating Agency (Ashton Lovelock).

Phil settled down to his delicious soy-lamb vindaloo while he watched the television news on the kitchen wall screen. It was the usual stuff about floods, droughts, famines and terrorism that numbed his senses and those of anyone else who troubled to follow current affairs. The riots in Yorkshire were a worry. Phil shuddered as he

watched the pictures of Shopping Malls in flames and mobs rampaging around the town centre in their traditional uniform of shell-suits and baseball caps.

Thank God Phil only did his shopping on-line.

At last the doorbell rang. Arabella's driver was another woman, perhaps in her early forties, who wore a smart uniform with the letters *Empire Dating* emblazoned across her jacket. She held Arabella's hand while, following protocol, she gave a little speech about what the service cost, how much the extras might cost, and the limits that Phil would have to respect.

"Definitely no excretion. Definitely no fisting. Semen on the face, but not in the mouth."

"Anal?" asked Phil as he admired Arabella's sizeable arse that was straining to escape from the skimpy white dress under which peeked the lacy edge of her knickers.

"Anal is fine," said the escort. "It's classified as a standard extra."

Phil took Arabella's hand to take her across the threshold.

"One hour or two?" the escort asked. "Or would you prefer half-hourly instalments?"

"Two hours would be fine," said Phil, as he tucked in his shirt to hide the overhang of his stomach over his waist.

Obesity might be rare amongst the plebs but it was by no means rare amongst the more privileged.

## **IV**

### **Alex**

### **2021**

Agnieszka made sure that her final exit through the front door was at least as dramatic as any other during the term of her relationship with Alex. This time, however, she didn't pause to shout up to him from the hallway before she stomped off to her car to drive off to one or other of her many friends and relatives who would soon once again be reminded just what kind of bastard, shithead or cunt Alex was. This omission was a novelty to Alex and probably also a relief to his neighbours who already knew far more about the couple's tempestuous love-life than they might have wished.

Well shit, thought Alex, as Agnieszka's environmentally unfriendly petrol car drove noisily away, if she thought he was a cunt then he might as well act like one. Or better still, he might even get hold of the genuine article.

Life with Aggie hadn't been that great an experience although having sex with her had been and continued to be right to the end. From the very start, Aggie had ideas about how to run the connubial home that conflicted with Alex's. And, as a habitually single man, Alex wasn't used to having to compromise.

"The way we first met each other is shit. Absolute shit," Aggie said. "On-line sex is shit."

"But *it is* how we met," Alex countered.

"That's because it's almost the only way anyone gets to meet anyone these days," Agnieszka admitted. "No one lives where they were born or went to school any more. Somehow you have to make new friends without the benefit of a social network



that you'd built up through school or university. And since everyone uses the internet, that's become the only way."

"So, it's not all shit."

"But it is at the same time," Agnieszka responded. "The person you meet on the internet isn't a real person. It's a kind of made-up thing that's fashioned for whichever dating or friendship site you've logged into. If we'd met on a BDSM site, then I'd probably have been *Agnes Leather* or something..."

"Rather than *Alfa2020*."

"Exactly."

It wasn't just sex that both kept and drove Alex and Agnieszka apart. The two of them worked in two different towns and for both of them the daily commute was almost more tiring than their actual jobs. Nowadays, Alex was working longer and longer hours which often continued until late into the evening. That might entail an expensive taxi ride home. If he drove home after even the smallest drop of drink, he risked being caught by one of the countless automatic traffic surveillance patrols that lined the roads and having to submit to a breathalyser test that he'd almost certainly fail.

In material terms, Alex's job at DRNI was going well. He'd been promoted from a job where he put collated news about VR Entertainment to one with the broader remit of covering VR Current Affairs. That was mostly because the distinction between Current Affairs in the virtual world and real life was becoming increasingly blurred. It was increasingly necessary to monitor the politics, economics and personalities of cyberspace as so many people spent a steadily greater proportion of their lives in that

domain. Real money was being exchanged in cyberspace and ever more effort was expended on its administration.

Nevertheless, Alex didn't need to spend much time immersed in Virtual Reality to find out what was going on there. In fact, he spent rather less time in cyberspace than the average visitor. If he had, it would have been impossible for him to find the time to actually do his job. His task was more to sift through the huge volume of blogs, notice boards, flash messages and the like generated in and around the virtual realm and then summarise all this in either short text articles or video messages presented by his website avatars (who looked a lot better than him anyway). And what he couldn't find out about the Virtual World for himself, he could easily retrieve from other news sites which fed off each other in a kind of mutual cannibalistic frenzy.

Alex strode over to the window and looked out across the street at the houses opposite and the slowly rotating blades of the wind farm just beyond. There was no sign of Aggie. On previous occasions she'd sometimes driven off and come back after less than an hour: tearful and open for reconciliation. In the early days of their relationship, this was exactly what Alex hoped for as a resolution to their frequent quarrels, but it had now become almost what he most dreaded. It was better when Aggie stayed away for a day or maybe two. Her sister in Gloucester or her best friend in Banbury or even her aunt and uncle in Rugby could be relied on to take care of her until Aggie was ready to return home.

Alex put on the television and flicked through the hundreds of available channels whose content was rarely of interest. It was all shopping, gambling, religion, chat, quizzes, soap operas and reality shows that were all cheap to produce and, for

many, addictive to consume

As always, Alex's attention gravitated towards the news channels. Fox News UK had its usual op-ed programmes. It was the Nick Griffin Show with the host ranting on for an hour or so on a news item that made him apoplectic with a furious rage that was consistently aligned with the views of right-wing pressure groups and the interests of big business. This kind of television was somehow hypnotic. Griffin had borrowed techniques from the American masters of right-wing television punditry to present an evidently English blend of outrage, patriotism and banal repetition.

Nick Griffin managed to lambast the liberal media for well over an hour. This was odd, because as most of the media was now lambasting each other for the same pretext it was difficult to tell which corner of the media actually was liberal. There was then a short section in which were presented a parade of news headlines in rapid and confusing succession. Famine and floods in Pakistan. War in Syria. More on Climate Change (not a day went by without at least one story on that). Presidential Elections in the Ukraine. Terrorist strikes in Beijing. Postponement of the Moon Mission. Then there was the Weather Forecast with the usual warnings about flooding in East Anglia and strong winds in Scotland.

Alex had more than enough of watching television when the credits for the Bob Spink Show appeared. There was only so much reactionary ranting he could take in a single evening. He still wasn't really convinced that disengagement from Europe was the answer to all England's woes.

Alex wandered over to the window to check if Aggie had driven her car back.

Nothing.

Reassured, Alex locked the front door, turned off the television and settled down for a session in cyberspace. This was a cumbersome process in which he enclosed his head in a helmet, pulled on gloves, and attached peripherals to his genitals; but if you wanted the full immersive experience of cyberspace, there was no alternative.

He then navigated through virtual space to his usual haunts to see who might be there. He was in luck. *Chickabiddy4* was waiting around with not much to do.

Alex had no idea what the real *Chickabiddy4* was like and he was unlikely to ever find out. In any case, she wasn't the sort of on-line friend you'd really want to meet in real life. The on-line fantasies he shared with her would probably have both of them arrested. She could even be a man for all Alex knew (this wasn't at all unusual), but it was a fantasy worth maintaining for the time he and she spent together. This was generally a session of cyber-sex accompanied by a not at all virtual arousal and eventually a very real release of semen (which very clever software was able to postpone for as long as he wished).

Was this infidelity?

Alex wasn't sure.

It wasn't sex in a real physical sense. And would Aggie (or for that matter the real person behind *Chickabiddy4*) really enjoy sex that included urination, fisting and bondage?

Aggie, naturally, had a different opinion.

"Just because you do it through broadband mediated by computers doesn't make it right," she argued. "You ejaculate on and with another woman. That sounds very much like fucking as far as I'm concerned. It's being unfaithful. It's worse than

prostitution because it's not done for money, it's done for fun.”

It wouldn't do for Alex to argue that it was surely more ethical that he indulged in it for mutual pleasure rather than one-sided exploitation. This wasn't an opinion that Aggie shared.

However, as Alex reflected, how many men in the real world could Agnieszka meet through on-line dating who didn't also practise on-line sex?

And if Aggie could never accept the sort of man she would meet through on-line dating, where else would she find the man she was looking for?

## V

### Betty

### 2037

Betty wasn't a naturist. That was a crappy thing to be. That was just like being a member of the National Trust or a Civil War re-enactment society. But she did make a point of wearing clothes as rarely as possible. She was proud and unashamed to assert herself as both Vegetarian and Green. And these were words that were definitely written with capital letters.

In this respect she was very much as one with everyone else who lived in the Broad Oak Grove commune.

Of course, when the builders of Ashton Lovelock named the street there was no grove and certainly no oaks, however broad. Like all names in this town, it was chosen to invoke a rustic memory that bore no relation to a reality either living or dead. The squat in which Betty lived was one of many houses that had failed to find a buyer in the uncertain housing market. It was now unsold and, were it not for the tender loving care of Betty and her friends, it would have already decayed to the state of nature from which it had emerged just over twenty years earlier.

Betty was obliged to wear clothes whenever she left home to shop at Cost Cutters, but she was under no moral imperative to be nude. It was more an eco-awareness thing. The clothes industry was just as bad as every other exploitative multinational industry. It despoiled the environment and oppressed the poor simply to supply consumers in wealthy countries with clothes that were both cheap and cheerful.

In truth, it wasn't that clothes were especially cheap these days. Neither, for that

matter, was food, fuel or very much else. Betty was no more able to afford much in the way of luxury than anyone else in the commune. The benefits system was like a points system nowadays. Only those who could clearly demonstrate that they couldn't find work would get any state subsidy for the luxury of not working, while at the same time there was a rapidly shrinking pool of employment opportunities. The only way that anyone in the Broad Oak Grove commune could make money was by selling stuff at rock and dance festivals. Otherwise, their survival was dependent on second-hand clothes, food parcels and soup kitchens.

The supermarket shelves were heaving under the weight of prohibitively expensive goods. The last oil crisis had made fuel more expensive and energy conservation more necessary, but the media was portraying it more as an economic rather than as an environmental issue. Nevertheless, those cut-price supermarkets that made cheapness their principal virtue—and Cost Cutters was about as cheap as you got—were now championing their Green credentials. But Betty wasn't taken in. Why should ordinary people have to suffer when the rich could still fly across the oceans just to get from one major city to another? What did that do for the world's sharply declining reserves of oil? What was so green about genetically modified potatoes that never rotted? Or gene-spliced pigs that could barely waddle with all that surplus blubber? Or those Frankenstein varieties of fruit and vegetables being generated in the laboratory? What about the obscene commercials that urged everyone to spend spend spend while the sea-levels rose, the hurricanes got worse and drought gripped so much of Africa?

Betty's conscience was clear. Well, almost. She did have a weakness for chocolate bars—especially those new brands coming from China. They tasted *so* good,

despite the lethal array of chemicals they contained and the likelihood that the confectionery's ultimate origin was a gene-spliced mutation in a vast agricultural warehouse on the banks of what little flowing water was left in the Yangzi River.

The walk back from the supermarket to Betty's commune was over a stream whose name was obscured by graffiti and whose flow, like all rivers and streams these days, was held back behind a wall that was designed to act as a flood defence. These days, when England wasn't suffering from drought it was under a deluge of heavy rain.

It was the flood defences that were the most worrying signs of irreversible climate change. The water level generally subsided a few days after a heavy downpour, but it would leave homes in low-lying areas like Broad Oak Grove in a very sorry state. It was for this practical reason that the houses on Broad Oak Grove were uninsured and uninsurable and now only fit for squatting.

Betty's grandparents lived by the sea in Sussex, so Betty actually knew a lot about coastal defences. Not that you could see the sea these days. The view was obscured behind a three metre high sea-wall that had been erected to protect the South Coast from the rising sea level and the occasional storm surge. Nowadays almost all Britain's seaside resorts and other vulnerable points on the coast were protected like that. Even London might soon be similarly protected, especially since the failure of the Greenwich Flood Barrier a couple of years ago that had admitted flood water into the heart of the City of London.

Betty arrived at the dilapidated front door of Number 2 Broad Oak Grove where posters rather than curtains obscured the view through the windows to inside the house. She turned a set of several keys in the various locks and slipped out of her clothes



almost as soon as she was inside. Fortunately, autumn was relatively mild this year. Even if it wasn't, the windmill in the garden and the solar panels on the roof would generate enough energy to keep the place warm.

Self-sufficiency wasn't really an option for the squatters. This house, like all the others on the street, was disconnected from mains electricity and their frugal energy supply just had to suffice. Nevertheless, the commune was able to survive if not exactly flourish. This was due to an enlightened policy of eco-awareness and the fact that the only energy-sapping technology used by anyone in the house was the ubiquitous laptop. In winter, however, the commune was forced to resort to using log-fires. This practice understandably split the housemates between those who thought that burning wood was good because it was natural and those who deplored the rape of the world's forests.

Betty strolled into the living room where Edie, Tom and Alicia were sitting around also naked on ancient thread-worn bean-bags while listening to the music being broadcast from Edie's laptop. It was some kind of electronic Arab-Chinese fusion sound overlaid with what sounded like Russian vocals.

"Been shopping?" asked Tom. He'd noticed that Betty was carrying a bulging cloth bag with the slogan *Don't Touch My Genes!* emblazoned on it.

"Yeah," said Betty as she wandered into the kitchen to put the various paper bags of lentils, rice, tofu and beans onto the shelves.

Tom followed her into the kitchen. He put his arms around her waist and gently pressed his lips on her shoulder.

"What did you buy?" he asked.

"The usual," she answered.

Betty knew that Tom wasn't really interested at all in her shopping expedition. If he was then he'd probably have been more enthusiastic about doing his own fair share. However, she appreciated the intimacy and returned Tom's kisses with a couple of her own. She then wriggled out of his grip so that she could put some frozen food into the fridge.

The couple returned to the living room where Alicia was rolling a spliff on the back of a newspaper and Edie was surfing the net on the same laptop from which was still booming the sounds of modern Russia. Betty settled down with Tom on the battered sofa they'd found abandoned on the street and waited for Alicia to finish preparing the joint.

Tom was very affectionate and his penis was in a half-way state of excitement that Betty knew she could stimulate into full erection with little effort. However, it was Alicia who was Betty's current lover and Tom was supposed to be hooked up with Tanya: a black girl from another squat just across the road. Betty didn't mind the attention, of course, and she was delighted to see that Alicia was visibly jealous.

The joint was prepared and passed around. It was almost entirely weed. The cost of tobacco was so high and its availability so restricted that it was now cheaper to smoke undiluted weed even though it made every hit that much stronger and seriously shortened the lifetime of a single joint.

Betty was feeling naughty. And, anyway, Alicia had been less than normally amorous the night before. She'd fallen asleep rather too soon for Betty's appetite. She squeezed her fingers around Tom's penis and jerked her hand up and down while she chatted with Edie about the news she was reading on the net.

“The elections in the Waziristani Republic were totally rigged,” said Edie with a sniff. “I mean, do they really want all that Islamic terrorism to come back? Fucking President Beck just doesn’t know what the fuck he’s letting the world in for!”

Betty wasn’t paying her much attention. Tom’s penis was as erect as it was ever likely to be and it seemed a shame to waste it. She got down on her knees and was about to give the man a blow-job when she noticed a sudden movement from Alicia. Was her lover going to cause a scene? After all, it was just a bit of fun.

“Fuck, Bet,” said Alicia who took position between Tom’s legs. “There’s enough here for two to share.”

With that Alicia placed her lips on the tip of Tom’s glans while Betty kept a grip on the shaft and proceeded to take as much of it into her mouth as she could.

And all the while Edie continued surfing the internet with the smouldering roach in her hand. There were too many women at play and she preferred her sexual activity to be more private. Also, with so much going on in the world, there wasn’t enough time in the day to keep up with it all.

## **VI**

### **Eden**

### **2048**

Eden had bought and sold so much land that he couldn't really be blamed for not knowing what he actually owned. Not that he was ever involved in the purchase. He employed people to do that for him. All he knew was that where land was cheap, the best medium-term strategy for a man of means and ambition such as himself was to buy it. A growing population and a declining supply of housing stock only pointed in one direction with regards to future profit for those with the wherewithal to survive the current economic recession.

It wasn't Eden who'd made the decision to tear down the ramshackle, decrepit rows of houses in the recently purchased Broad Oak estate, but it was his choice, once presented with the options, to replace it with a single mansion that could house only one man, his family, his guests and his many servants. Eden had probably been resting in his villa in Switzerland or maybe on his yacht in the Caribbean when the eviction orders were issued and houses demolished. No one had troubled to inform him about the protests, sit-ins and angry protests that accompanied the clear-out of the squatters and scum who'd previously been dossing in what was now his land. Their eviction would surely be no loss to either the estate that Eden St John-Easton had inherited or the town of Ashton Lovelock of which it had once been a part. It would be difficult to imagine how anyone wouldn't cheer to see the back of the filthy, unclothed, uncivil and over-educated rabble that were driven away in the back of police vans and the well-reinforced vehicles used by the security firm that Eden also owned.

Eden's current visit to Broad Oak Manor wasn't going to be for very long. There was a show in Broadway he'd soon be flying over the Atlantic to see and he was anxious after that to return to either his yacht in the Mediterranean or his villa in the Maldives. He felt rather more at home abroad than he ever would in a modest mansion in the English Midlands.

Nevertheless, even the wealthiest man had duties to attend to in his home country. There were accountants, lawyers and politicians to see and that could only be done in the United Kingdom that Eden feared was in danger of not staying united for very much longer.

Eden's penance for enjoying himself in luxurious homes drenched in the best sunlight on the planet was to spend the occasional week of purgatory in one of his English properties such as, for instance, Broad Oak Manor.

Fortunately, the English weather wasn't always as bad as Eden remembered it from childhood. Climate change couldn't be that bad if there were to be more of these balmy June days unspoilt by even a single cloud in the sky. The changing climate might have badly impacted on Eden's agricultural shares (especially in the southern United States and Russia), but it was worth it if there could be more pleasant evenings like this.

Eden had all of Broad Oak at his disposal, and he could see no reason why he shouldn't stretch his legs and enjoy it. Much of the estate was now blanketed with freshly grown lawns and woodland that replaced the original dreary suburban streets and back gardens. He could have taken the air accompanied by an accountant or a lawyer or one of his many female companions, but tonight Eden chose to stroll in the

gardens by himself. He spent very little time alone and he wanted some respite before he had to attend the meetings and conference calls that had been arranged for him.

And after paying all those millions for a plot in Middle England, Eden thought that he really ought to savour it.

The gardeners had done a good job in transforming the land into something presentable. At long last, the roads whose names had celebrated various species of tree were actually turned over to their cultivation. There was now elm, oak, beech and sycamore on land that once sported their names. Nevertheless, there hadn't been enough time for the trees to grow especially tall. Although the genetic modification that facilitated rapid growth and disease resistance made the landscape rather more densely forested than would otherwise have been the case, the trees could scarcely be described as towering. They seemed short even to Eden who despite his great wealth was not similarly blessed by great stature.

Indeed quite the opposite.

The foliage was no more thick than it was tall, so Eden could easily spot the presence of shadowy figures in what might otherwise be called a thicket. He was sure that they weren't his servants and he knew that he wasn't entertaining any guests. And even if he were, no guest would be skulking around like these people.

Ever alert to the possible risk of terrorism, Eden gripped his mobile in his palm. His forefinger stroked the red alarm button that would summon security staff to the scene. If these shadowy figures were foolish enough to threaten him, then within minutes their bullet-ridden bodies would be splattered across the well-manicured lawn.

As he approached closer, Eden could distinguish that there were only two

trespassers. They were becoming gradually less distinct as the sun dipped behind the trees. Eden decided to bide his time until announcing his presence, but he didn't want to get so close that he couldn't alert security in good time if these figures belonged to a cabal of green anarchist Muslim feminazi terrorists.

“What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?” Eden commanded. “Are you aware that you're trespassing on private property?”

There was rustling in the shrubbery.

“Don't hassle us, man,” one of the shadowy figures announced as she emerged from the dark. “We don't mean no harm.”

Eden was startled by the sight of a totally naked woman. She was probably in her late twenties, but thanks to the privations of a hippy life-style she hadn't put on the kilos of excess fat that almost everyone else found impossible to shed. He wasn't sure whether it was her nudity that startled him or the fact that her crotch sprouted more hair than he thought a woman could grow. Most women of Eden's acquaintance, including his wife, maintained nothing more than the merest suggestion of such florid growth. Maybe it was also the unexpected hirsuteness of her limbs and armpits. Only the most specialist pornographic website could have prepared him for such a sight.

Behind her was a similarly undressed girl who was probably only about eight or nine years old. There was enough apparent family resemblance for Eden to surmise that she was quite likely to be the woman's daughter.

Eden knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wasn't really bothered about his legal rights as owner of the property, but he always liked a bit of fun. As he normally had to pay for it, it pleased him to have an opportunity to get something for nothing.

He strode towards the woman and carefully focused his eyes on her face rather than her expanse of bare flesh.”You do realise that you’re trespassing on private property?” he said officiously.

“Yeah, man, whatever,” said this woman, “but there’s nowhere else to go. It’s not as if we’re doing any damage or anything.”

“The law is the law,” Eden reminded her. “Private property has to be respected. You wouldn’t like it if someone decided to squat in your house or garden.”

“Well, no,” conceded the woman. “But it’s not like we’ve got anywhere else to stay. And anyhow this is where we used to live...”

“You did what?” wondered Eden who was genuinely surprised.

“...When there was houses and roads and lamp-posts and things,” the woman elaborated. “Didn’t we, Benita?” she asked her daughter.

“I don’t remember,” the young girl replied. “It was a long time ago. *Ages!*”

“Yeah, we did,” said the woman. “It was round over there just by that new pond that’s been dug up.” She pointed in the direction of the ornamental lake and the exotic river birds with clipped wings that had been imported into the estate.

“That really is of no concern to me,” said Eden who didn’t appreciate the direction this conversation was taking. This naked bitch clearly had no idea who he was. “I have no choice but to evict you.”

“Yeah, man,” the woman sighed who walked purposefully towards Eden with a resigned expression. “I know the deal. You guys are all the same...”

As the woman cupped her hand over a crotch which was clearly tumescent under the cloth of his Camellia Geldoff jeans, Eden was initially inclined to protest that no,



he wasn't the same as any other guy. He was phenomenally rich. He'd done well from the astute investment of his inherited wealth in the rising Stock Market and the accompanying rise in commodity prices. He had everything he wanted. On the other hand...

The woman knelt in front of him while her bored daughter gazed on from a distance. She unbuttoned the expensively tailored denim crotch and eased out Eden's penis. Clearly this wasn't a sight that troubled young Benita who was more interested in watching the dance of golden butterflies over the lawn.

"My name's Betty," said the woman as she placed the tip of her tongue on the purple tip of Eden's glans. "Just so's you know."

Betty might be a stranger to Eden, but blow jobs most certainly were not. Fellatio was something he enjoyed on most days: usually at the service of a different woman each time. There would sometimes be two or more women competing for the gratuity that they hoped would be both forthcoming and generous.

However, it *was* unusual for Eden's penis to experience a blow-job from a naked woman of extraordinary hirsuteness in the open air on a sunny evening. He was rather enjoying the peculiarity of it as the woman slid his penis deep down her throat and lubricated the length of his shaft with saliva which dripped in large gollops onto the daisies between her parted thighs. She gripped the penis with one hand while her other cupped Eden's hardening testicles which she handled in such a way to control the release of his seed.

Eden surveyed his estate while Betty concentrated on his manhood.

He was shorter than most people. This was a fact that raised heels could never

satisfactorily address. Even selecting only the most petite escorts couldn't lessen Eden's resentment that it wasn't wealth, reputation or clothes sense that most people associated with him. Rather it was—and always had been—his stature. On the other hand, there were no heads higher than his as he gazed at the lengthening shadows by his mansion walls, the pale orange glow of the early evening sky, and the sight of a little girl. And this girl's eyes were focused on her mother and the swell of her mother's cheeks as she pushed Eden's erect penis back and forth in her mouth. She could, if she wished, regard the trail of saliva that slobbered out of her mother's mouth and dripped onto the soft pale hair of her motherly hips.

Despite his wealth and his deficiency of moral boundaries, Eden observed limits to the extent of his depravity. There were others in his circle of wealthy friends and acquaintances who might take advantage of the wealth of under-age flesh that world poverty and world travel made so available. All the same, it was while his mind wandered to the notion of sharing his semen with the very much pre-nubile but still naked daughter of the woman whose lips encompassed his throbbing member that his penis spurt forth in unrestrained fashion into the woman's mouth and over her matronly bosom.

Betty had achieved what she'd intended. There were few men who after releasing so much semen could button up their flies and then forcefully expel the woman who'd provided that pleasure. And not much conversation normally followed such an encounter.

Eden returned to the mansion. Despite Betty's efforts, she and her daughter would have to be evicted, of course. Eden couldn't tolerate squatters on his estate. You

allow one in and you opened the door to an unstoppable rabble. These eco-anarchists might think they represented the future, but like the many generations of utopian idealists before them they represented nothing more than a hopeless fantasy that would soon be dispelled by the imperatives most people were subject to: which was to earn a living and to be housed.

## VII

### Tamara

### 2092

After the many months of uncertainty and anxiety since Tamara had begun her desperate exodus, it could only be a relief to finally arrive at the Broad Oak Refugee Centre just outside the Ashton Lovelock gated community. She'd have been naive if she'd imagined that her welcome would be especially warm simply because the government of the Republic of England had reluctantly and belatedly agreed to provide asylum for a nominal fraction of the many millions of refugees spilling out of the devastated and still radioactive Holy Land. Nevertheless, she hadn't really anticipated quite the degree of hostility that greeted her and what was left of her family.

Tamara and the hundreds of other Jewish refugees in the convoy still identified themselves as citizens of the State of Israel, however much this was a nation that now existed in name alone. The charred wasteland that once held host to so many high hopes and aspirations was now under the reluctant care of the resentful citizens of Palestine. Israel's victory in the Holy War had been Pyrrhic at best. It was the official losers in the conflict who were now dominant in what had once been core Israeli territory. And this was simply by virtue of the fact that the number of Palestinian survivors was substantially greater than that of the equally wretched Israeli victors.

What had once been a short plane ride from the Middle East to the Republic of England was now a fraught journey for the Jewish refugees through the two competing and loosely federated European Unions. Not one nation state through which Tamara and her family travelled on their exodus would willingly antagonise their Muslim

citizens by expressing more sympathy than was necessary to the mostly despised tribe of Israel.

The protest that greeted the refugees outside the Broad Oak Refugee Camp's forbidding gates was not substantially different to the others that had followed their peripatetic trek from one temporary camp site to another. There were much the same banners on display which as always attributed the entire blame to the Jewish race for the military disaster that had devastated the Middle East. The slow but inevitable demise of the State of Israel had been equally as agonising as, but rather less spectacular than the apocalyptic annihilation of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Tel Aviv just over a generation ago.

Tamara was too young to remember much about the war although the images of mushroom clouds rising above the city of Jerusalem had been replayed so many times that she almost believed that she'd seen it for real. Like most Israeli citizens, her actual memories of the war were of a time spent huddling in underground bomb shelters. She was one of the lucky ones who weren't instantly vaporised or had survived only to endure a more painful lingering death from the radioactive fallout that fell not only on Israel, Syria, Egypt and Palestine, but also on non-combatant nations as far afield as Turkey, Cyprus and Iran. Although Israel had suffered at least as much as any other nation, to the extent that it was no longer a nation at all, Israeli citizens were still blamed for the catastrophe with undiminished resentment by those who'd suffered directly or indirectly from its affects. There were few people in the world who didn't know someone who'd died or was afflicted by radioactive sickness after Israel resorted to the ultimate deterrent as a response to the threat from its belligerent neighbours. As

if there hadn't already been enough distress from water shortage, crop failure and the long-heralded final collapse of the oil industry.

However much Tamara understood and in a sense sympathised with the protestors it troubled her that Broad Oak wasn't intended to be just one more stop on the journey but the final destination. This welcome wasn't one that boded well for the future.

The gates to the refugee camp shut close behind the trucks after they'd filed into the courtyard. The refugees disembarked, but the thickness of the camp's walls didn't muffle the sounds of protest from outside. Some were chants of disgust at Israel's role in the Middle East Apocalypse whereas others were the same gratuitously offensive anti-Semitic chants with which Tamara had become increasingly familiar during her years of exile.

Tamara and her family settled down to their new overcrowded home of ragged sheets, threadbare mattresses and leaking roofs. And home it was. At long last. Broad Oak Refugee Camp: home to the unwanted and despised. Shelter had only been provided because of Israel's role in England's imperial past when the nation was head of an empire powerful enough to dictate the fate of other nations. Now it was a republic as self-obsessed as the people of Israel with its own relative decline since the dissolution of the United Kingdom.

The Broad Oak Refugee Camp was asylum not only to Israelis, but also to refugees from Armenia, Kurdistan, Laos and Venezuela whose citizens belonged to the lengthening list of failed nation states. Amongst these, whether represented by actual governments or by governments-in-exile, there were also refugees from the now

irradiated Gaza Republic whose mere existence had been considered sufficient provocation for the missiles to be launched. At least the administrators of Broad Oak had the sense not to house Israelis in the same buildings as the Gazans.

“They should have stayed in the Gaza City slums,” complained Tamara’s mother. She could never forgive the Palestinian militia for the summary execution of her husband and Tamara’s stepfather. This happened in the desolate ruins of Ashdod where Tamara’s family had once enjoyed prosperity and an easy life. “At least the bastards have somewhere they can go.”

Tamara couldn’t really dispute the logic of her mother’s assertion. Palestine continued to exist as a state with real territory, but only the most romantic fool would genuinely prefer a radioactive wilderness to the relative security of the Republic of England. There was no need here to wear a mask to shield one’s lungs from radioactive dust. No need to use a Geiger counter simply to decide where to settle down for the night. Even the hardiest former resident of Gaza City couldn’t survive long in the fine dust and ash blowing about the extinguished cities of the Middle East.

“We have to treat everyone equally,” said Benita, an old woman whose job in the kitchen was to help feed the thousands of refugees crammed into the camp. “There are very strict rules which everyone has to obey.”

“Surely you can see the injustice,” pleaded Tamara’s mother to the older woman. “We’ve got nowhere to go. Literally nowhere. We Jews are persecuted wherever we go...”

“Not all Jews,” disagreed Juan Valdez, an elderly man whose mattress lay adjacent to Tamara’s. “American Jews are no more persecuted than they ever were.”

“They aren’t Israeli Jews!” complained Tamara’s mother. “And precious little welcome do they give their fellows. Did they help us in our hour of need? Did they help clear the Holy Land of the Palestinian scum?”

“I have to warn you not to use language like that,” said Benita firmly. “Whatever grievances you have must be put aside here. The administrators don’t take provocation lightly. The Sherwood Forest Refugee Camp has already been shut down because of rioting. We can’t risk the same thing here.”

“I still think it’s unfair,” said Tamara’s mother grumpily.

Despite Benita’s admonition, Tamara couldn’t help agreeing with her mother. It was all well and good trying to enforce a bland neutrality to maintain the peace, but what could this old woman know? She’d spent all her life in England. She was unlikely to have dallied long in the war-torn Middle East. The English might complain about the poverty that had returned to Europe and the humiliating break-up of the United Kingdom, but the worst they’d ever known was a brief episode of what had amounted to almost a dictatorship and which had served only to hasten the nation’s decline.

The Refugee Camp dormitories were overcrowded. Food handouts were sporadic, unpredictable and never really adequate. There was little to do in the grounds of what had once been a private garden and throughout which were now scattered tents and make-shift shelters in wait for the next intake of refugees. Nowadays Tamara’s life was principally focused on just two things. The first was the tedious and lengthy processing of her family’s petition for asylum. If this process ever came to a resolution, she and her family would be released into more permanent accommodation elsewhere and could start earning a living again. The second was the erratic arrival of the food



trucks. These were the very deliveries that the crowds of anti-immigration or anti-Semitic protestors outside the camp walls most complained about. Food was no longer plentiful even in England and many English were upset that a scarce and expensive resource was now being provided free to foreigners who were unable to work for a living.

Tamara was assiduous in seeking friendship with Benita in the hope that in this way she might benefit from a few extra scraps of meat but the old woman was scrupulously fair and only gave extra portions to the genuinely needy. And this was an ever-increasing proportion of the camp's population.

"Don't look so glum," joked Bilal on seeing Tamara seated alone by the side of what was once a pond but was now no more than an oval mound of grassy soil that would soon be covered by new tents.

Tamara smiled at Bilal.

After all, he was personable, young and extraordinarily attractive.

But he was also an Arab.

Although she wouldn't want her mother to know that her daughter was consorting with a goy and, of all goyim, an accursed Palestinian, Tamara had become rather fond of him. In fact, when they first met a few days after Tamara arrived, Bilal initially thought she was a Palestinian. Hers wasn't an uncommon name amongst Arabs. Tamara meanwhile was also not expressing any prejudice mostly because she too couldn't quite place Bilal's ethnicity. His accentless English was rather better than hers and he didn't sport the thick beard and traditional garb affected by some Palestinians.

"It's nothing," Tamara replied, but conscious that her eyes were still damp.

“Don’t be silly,” said Bilal. “It’s obvious that there’s something...”

“It’s my mother. She’s not getting any better.”

“It must be the cold and damp.”

“To have come so far and now when we’ve arrived...”

Bilal put an arm around Tamara’s shoulder while she nestled her nose into his ragged woollen jumper that was decorated with gaily jumping Christmas reindeer. Like the frayed MS Apple tee-shirt that Tamara wore, it had been provided for free by the dwindling number of charities that were sympathetic to the world’s dispossessed.

It was even more of a comfort for Tamara when Bilal and she sloped off together to the boiler-room in one of the several shelters that had once served as guest houses on the estate. It was one of the few places where a couple could find privacy and consequently it was in great demand: so much so that the couple had to reserve a time-slot by scratching their initials on the scrappy writing-pad that acted as a makeshift reservation system and was discreetly hidden on a shelf above the boiler-room door.

The boiler-room was already occupied. The door was secured from the inside to preserve the dignity of the couple (identified as *T+U* on the lined writing paper). Bilal and Tamara hid from prying eyes in the shadow of an old oak tree while keeping an impatient eye on the boiler-room door.

When Bilal and Tamara first became a couple, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. A girl needed companionship and protection and a man had his needs too. This wasn’t Tamara’s first such liaison on the winding trail of refugee camps between Israel and England, but it was the first time she’d had a relationship not just with a goy but with a Muslim. A Palestinian at that. OK. She didn’t know that at first. But he was

a good enough fuck that there was almost nothing Tamara wouldn't forgive him for.

Bilal had never known a Jewish woman even as a casual acquaintance, but he was actually rather less troubled about race and religion than she was. "We are all people of the Book," he would say, although Tamara wasn't quite sure that the Torah had quite the same significance to Muslims as it had to the Jews and their tempestuous history.

The boiler-room door opened at last and an amorous couple spilled out. They were both women and they both wore head-scarves. They giggled and averted their gaze from Bilal though they looked slyly at Tamara. They probably thought she was a Muslim. Her father's Moroccan ancestry made her ethnicity rather ambiguous.

And then they were in.

It might have once served as a boiler-room and it was still filled with pipes and metal chambers, but as the camp was heated by coal fires these days the room was now mostly used to store possessions that the refugees couldn't find anywhere else to leave. In amongst it all was a battered mattress with damp stains and a hole where a spring had once burst through. There was also a quite distinct late November chill. It was many years since the pipes had held warm water and the intermittent power supply was too unreliable for the building to be heated by other means.

Even so, Bilal and Tamara had already learnt that intimacy didn't require nudity. As long as they each had access to the fleshy bits that mattered, the exertion of lovemaking would soon heat them up. But before the couple fell together onto the stained mattress, they secured the door behind them. They were conscious that *Al + Pa*, whoever they were, would soon be outside the door and impatient to get in. They also

had to move aside the clutter to lessen their discomfort as they embraced in the shadow of the bizarre family heirlooms that filled the room. There was a portrait of the Mount of Calvary (now too radioactive to welcome visitors), a broken electronic keyboard and an array of battered ancient laptops.

Tamara took Bilal's penis inside her arse, not because it was the most comfortable place to be fucked but because with the scarcity of condoms she wanted to save the few she had for when her anus was too battered for penetration. She was sure she wouldn't get pregnant as long as she wiped off the semen with the old cloth handkerchief that she'd found in Hungary several months before.

It would be a disaster if she did happen to get pregnant,.

What would her mother say?

Tamara already knew the cost of carelessness, but thankfully the worst consequences had been kept at bay by the miscarriage only a couple of months after she was even aware there was a problem.

“When can I fuck you properly?” Bilal wondered.

Tamara wondered what grounds he had for complaint. After all, she'd sucked his prick, let him prod her anus and spurted his semen over her face. What more could a man want?

“When I next have a period,” said Tamara firmly.

Bilal nodded. He must have understood the wisdom of her words. His own family probably knew their son had a lover. Men were never as discreet as women. But if they knew that the dusky-skinned girl with the dark curly hair and the scar across her forehead and cheek was not a fellow Muslim but rather one of the most despised people

in the world, what would happen next?

Perhaps she would share the fate of the Jewish girl she'd once got to know when her family was stranded for several weeks on the coastline of Cyprus. She'd had her nose sliced off.

That was a far worse punishment than Tamara had suffered from the blade of the knife wielded by the irate brother of the Hassidic Jew with whom Tamara had just made love in the crowded slums of Ljubljana.

For the moment however Tamara had the blessing of the love of both Bilal and her mother. Such precious blessings were to be cherished. She kissed her lover passionately while outside the boiler-room door she could hear a gentle knocking from *Al* and *Pa* to remind her of another couple's furtive need for satisfaction.

## VIII

### Alex

### 2022

Alex watched little Betty crawl across the Karndean floor with affection. Children were so amusing. They expressed themselves so unselfconsciously and found so much of interest in the world around them. It was really rather entertaining.

But did he want to be a father to such a child himself? Alex wasn't so sure. In terms of time and money they were a wearisome burden.

And if he didn't want to be burdened by his own children, would he ever choose to trouble himself with someone else's?

Not really.

So what had persuaded him to start a relationship with Betty's mother?

Well, there was much about Bella to recommend. First and foremost, she was a great fuck. Alex had never enjoyed such intense sex before and he couldn't imagine how it could be bettered. Second, she wasn't bad-looking either, although experience had taught Alex that good looks and good sex don't always coexist. In Bella's case it was a kind of Mother Earth, hippy goddess, bushy crotch kind of beauty: not that Alex could now see anything wrong with that.

But with these major plusses came the inevitable minus and in Bella's case it was little Betty, who was crawling over the carpet, naked as always, and gurgling as she did so. Being a father wasn't one of Alex's chief ambitions in life and being a step-father even less so. If he and Bella were to stay together much longer he might be expected to do the morning school run, spend weekends at the sports field, and maybe

even attend school plays and prize-giving days.

What the fuck!

This was not how Alex mapped out his future however welcoming Bella's hairy vaginal lips were or how strong the grip between her motherly thighs. It was good fun while for the moment, but some time soon it would have to come to an end. What worried Alex was that whereas it was his previous girlfriend or partner who made the first such move, was this the relationship that would break the mould and oblige Alex to force the issue?

With a bit of luck, Bella might be unfaithful and make the separation that much easier to arrange. It didn't seem likely that it would end in quite the same spectacular way as it had with Agnieszka, with smashed crockery, a long crack across the television screen and enough animosity to entertain the entire street. But at least the woman was out of his life. No more tears and recriminations. And no more passionate reconciliations either.

With Bella there were no histrionics. She was remarkably tolerant of Alex's vices, whether they involved drugs or booze or cybersex. In fact she even appeared to tolerate the minor infidelities that Alex would vehemently deny if he was ever challenged but which he guessed that Bella must have suspected. Indeed, it wasn't anything that Alex ever did that troubled her but more those opinions he expressed that most came into conflict with the green, politically correct and occasionally mystical views that Bella held.

She was a woman who was not only well-informed on the green issues of the day but knew exactly the right words to express her views, while Alex floundered in a

morass of political incorrectness and naiveté. In truth, Alex was still not entirely convinced that climate change, species extinction, rampant consumerism and meat-eating really were the harbingers of evil that would bring humanity to its knees. As long as the light bulb lit up when he flicked the switch, the water flowed when he turned the faucet, and there were 24-hour News Programmes on the television, the imminent end of civilisation and also the end maybe of a lot more besides seemed pretty much remote.

“It’s not just about the future,” protested Bella as they lay together on Alex’s king-size bed. “It’s about the present too and how you should lead a life that’s in balance with nature.”

“You’re not going to see me hug a tree,” Alex retorted. “I’m not going to give up eating meat. And I already do enough recycling.”

“But you drive an old-fashioned petrol car,” Bella replied. “You fly rather than travel by train. You don’t have solar panels on the roof.”

“Until it becomes cheaper to go green then I’ll continue to follow the most economical model.”

“But economical for how long? We’ve had yet another unusually hot wet summer. There’s been flooding along almost every sea coast and river bank in the country. Not too mention the mudslides, floods, droughts and forest fires all over the rest of world.”

“It’s not totally proven yet,” said Alex, quoting from Fox News UK. “There’s climate change for sure, but it’s not necessarily anthropogenic...”

“So, it’s absolutely natural,” mocked Bella. “What about deforestation? And desertification? And famine? They might have nothing specifically to do with global



warming but they don't do any good for anyone. And the Iranian nuclear reactor going up like that. All that radiation spreading to Afghanistan and Pakistan didn't do the environment any favours."

"These things happen," argued Alex who just wished he could quite echo the fury and absolute certainty of a Fox News UK television commentator. "There's an explanation for everything and it's not necessarily to do with human economic activity. There have always been environmental crises over history..."

"I'm sure there have been," admitted Bella, "but there are an extraordinarily large number of them today. If it wasn't for the millions upon millions spent by Big Business to sway the editorial line of the newspapers, television and internet, there'd hardly be any disagreement at all with the overwhelming majority of informed scientific opinion that all this stuff going on and the rape of the environment is scarcely a coincidence."

Alex was always nervous about this sort of conversation. He was in a definite no-win situation. Anything he said that didn't acknowledge the imminent end of civilisation would appear to be at best complacent and at worst conniving with the interests of the polluting industries. Consequently, like most people, he kept his opinions between himself and the ballot-box, and took what comfort he could from those commentators on television or on the internet who so convincingly tore down the facade presented by scheming scientists and liberal politicians simply to feather their nests in ways Alex didn't really fully comprehend.

Bella's friends were, if anything, even more green than she was. These were people who continued to wear what might once have been fashionable in the late

twentieth century, though it was difficult to imagine a time when a fashion model would have sported woolly hats, coarse cotton shirts and open-toed sandals on a catwalk. There was Eve, whose hair was both short where she shaved it and very long where she didn't and had difficulty in keeping her nipples hidden from sight under the jumble of tee-shirts or ponchos she wore. There was Tina whose most distinguishing feature was her truly enormous boobs. Alex struggled hard not to allude to them when he discussed her with Bella but he still fell short of her standards of political correctness when he referred to her by her skin-colour. There was also Angie, who Alex rather fancied. She was a petite, slender girl whose looks were only slightly marred by the length of her pointed nose and the quite different fact that she'd shaved her head right down to the flesh (although this was generally hidden under one or other of her collection of woollen hats). But Angie was actually the woman the furthest from Alex's reach as she was absolutely and assertively a lesbian—a fact that both fascinated and slightly titillated him.

Then there was Ben, who was Tina's boyfriend and also Betty's father. He was bearded and baggy-clothed and a frequent visitor as much because Tina was Bella's best friend, but because he liked to be close to his daughter. Ben was father to at least two other children, of which Tina was the mother. His accent betrayed a privileged birth and education, the benefits of which were expressed neither in the way he dressed nor in the life-style he followed. Alex suspected that Ben was just playing at being a counterculture eco-warrior until such a time he got bored and returned to the family home. And then, instead of protecting wild animals, he'd perhaps be hunting them down on a horse.

“What a stupid idea!” said Bella indignantly when Alex suggested this to her. “You’re just jealous that he’s been born with certain advantages. He can see the futility of a consumerist life. What more do you need than friends, food and the roof above your head? If everyone were like Ben, the world would be a much better place and we wouldn’t be headed towards disaster.”

“No, of course not,” said Alex, who couldn’t see how ever-increasing petrol prices and an extra metre or two in the height of flood-defences really amounted to imminent global catastrophe.

Alex and Bella weren’t really living together although they slept together most nights. Bella’s real home was a room in the house she shared with Angie, Eve and a shy bookish fellow called Quentin who hardly ever ventured out of his bedroom. This was a fairly flexible set-up where a variety of boy- and girlfriends passed through and one where Betty sometimes had many playmates of her age and sometimes none depending on the conjugal histories of her mother’s housemates’ partners. But Bella chose to stay mostly at Alex’s suburban home and inevitably with the playful company of Betty and her battered toys.

Alex had become quite comfortable in this routine. When Bella was there, he never had to worry about what to cook as she was as much at home in the kitchen as Alex so obviously was not. He didn’t even need to worry about housework either as Bella treated his house just like her home, which was rather better than Alex ever did. And bedtimes were times Alex definitely looked forward to. He was sure Bella had taught him everything she could and yet there always seemed to be yet another carnal variation that would surprise him.

Indeed, Bella's amorous inventiveness had taken a recent turn for the more adventurous that Alex frankly found rather exhausting. Those motherly breasts of hers pressed hard against Alex's face while his erect penis struggled to keep anchorage inside whichever hole Bella had directed it. A trickle of saliva, semen and Bella's own vaginal juices trailed down the length of his shaft into the mutually tangled hairs of their crotches. Their bodies slid over a slither of perspiration that sometimes smelt of petunia oil and sometimes of something even more earthy.

"That was amazing!" complimented Alex, when at last their bodies were conjoined no longer. "Where did you learn that? From the internet?"

He'd meant it as a joke, of course. Alex always maintained the romantic notion, despite the nature of his own sexual education and the succession of women through his life, that sexual athleticism and sexual experience naturally led to greater sexual adventurism and that instruction was never really necessary. He expected Bella to simply respond with a joke.

Instead, she looked unaccountably sheepish.

"I've been meaning to tell you for a long time," Bella said.

"So, where did you learn your techniques?" pursued Alex still in a jocular tone.

"From Ben."

That was understandable. The couple had lived together for two or three years around the time of Betty's birth. They were bound to have tried out a few things.

"You never forget a trick once you've learnt it, even after a few years," said Alex in an attempt to disguise his resentment that another man had known his lover at least as well as he did.

“...Or after just a day or so.”

“You what?”

Alex wasn't sure whether this called for him to remove his arm from around Bella's bare shoulders, so he let it rest there but he inclined away from her.

“Or just this morning...”

“With Ben?” asked Alex.

“It's not been going so well between Tina and Ben for a while,” said Bella.

“I hadn't noticed.”

“Well, you never would.”

“But that doesn't mean...”

“Ben *is* the father of my child.”

“Oh.”

So, Alex found a way in which he could separate from Bella, but the tears still came more from his side than Bella's. For her, it seemed a quite natural thing. For Alex, it seemed almost perverse. And this was because Bella's transfer of affection from Alex to Ben was neither rapid nor abrupt, but one where for a while she continued to have sex with Alex on a regular basis and occasionally made love with Ben to one where it was Alex who was the occasional lover.

Then after a week or so when Bella and her daughter hadn't visited at all and only replied politely and cautiously to his phone-calls, Bella rang his door-bell to finally return her copies of his house-keys.

“It doesn't seem right to hang onto them,” she said.

“Well, that's alright,” said Alex who'd actually hoped more for a tearful reunion

than a dispassionate separation, “I’m going to be moving away from Ashton Lovelock anyway.”

“Where to?”

“Near London. Or somewhat nearer to it than I do now. The company I work for is in London and it’s a long commute.”

“You don’t want to leave too large a carbon footprint each day, do you?”

“Something like that,” admitted Alex, for whom it was actually more time and expense that was persuading him to make the move.

“Well, best of luck.”

## **IX**

# **Gabrielle**

## **2039**

Farming is a business like any other. It may also be a vocation, a life-style choice or even one of the few remaining outdoor occupations, but the one thing Gabrielle knew for sure was that farming is a business.

Although she had sympathies with the principles of organic farming and rather distrusted Genetic Modification, what mattered at the end of each accounting month was that she'd balanced the books and generated enough profit to stay in business. In a world where famine and food shortages were a daily reality for more and more people in the world, including those living just on the border of the European Union, Gabrielle was convinced that it was almost her moral duty to provide as much food to the world as she could from the farmland she owned.

Business was rather better than it had been for many years and the future looked promising. International food prices were continuing to rise and this in turn significantly improved her profit margin. Much as she was saddened by the television images of the unfortunate starving millions in Azerbaijan, Zimbabwe, Chile and Pakistan, it remained an undeniable fact that farmers like her were unlikely to be amongst those who'd suffer as a result of the changing face of global food economics.

Gabrielle's sympathies weren't bogus. She'd been a bit of a globe-trotter when she was younger. In those days, fuel prices made a flight to Africa and Asia affordable even to students and graduates willing to defer their loan repayments. She'd seen the real face of famine in Bangladesh, Mozambique and Uzbekistan that tourists wouldn't

normally be exposed to. A tour company would keep such horrors as much out of sight as possible. Her interest in Third World famine relief continued through her generous donations to foreign aid charities and her practical assistance in shipping out food that the supermarkets considered substandard to countries whose citizens had rather fewer scruples than spoiled London shoppers. She also made a practical contribution by employing immigrant Indians and Pakistanis on her estate, however much this was frowned upon by people in nearby Rickmansworth.

It made perfect economic sense, of course; just as much as did the cultivation of GM crops, cloned cattle, synthetic fertiliser and multilevel fruit farming. So when Gabrielle didn't attract the ire of the prejudiced for making a hiring decision for one sound economic reason, she was attacked by green idealists for putting business interests ahead of what they believed to be ethical farming. If they had their way she'd have to live on half her current income, lay off most of her staff, leave land fallow that was now used for meat and dairy, and the only beneficiaries would be the poor of Ethiopia and Venezuela who'd be shipped out all the vegetables that the supermarkets had rejected.

Such criticism was inevitable when you farmed so close to London. Indeed, hers was the first farm that one would pass by when driving on the busy A404 (M) from the M1 to visit the bustling new town of Buckland Common. She'd never have been criticised so much if she was living in Wales or Northumbria, but here where land costs were high and the distance to market was so short there was nothing she could do to satisfy her neighbours. When she didn't suffer taunts from Greens who could never appreciate the value of a good leg of lamb or beef on the bone, she had to direct her



farmhands to paint over racist daubing on the fences that enclosed her estate. Who'd have thought that farming would become so political in the twenty-first century?

The racist taunts resulted from the fact that so many of Gabrielle's immigrant farmhands came from the Indian subcontinent. Presumably it would have been less of a problem had they come from within the European Union, but Gabrielle doubted whether Georgians, Armenians or Moldavians would be treated with much more respect. Skin colour was obviously an issue, although a high proportion of local residents were themselves third or fourth generation Indian or Pakistani. The usual excuse for the vitriol was that the people Gabrielle employed were taking jobs that would otherwise go to honest Englishmen. This wasn't the kind of view that would be shared by anyone who'd ever tried to employ local people, especially from the London area, who would know one end of an agricultural implement from another; or for that matter who had the technical knowledge and qualifications in biology and genetics to understand what was required in modern agriculture: at least not at the level of wages now standard for agricultural workers in the United Kingdom.

And why the Indian subcontinent? Most farmers of Gabrielle's acquaintance resourced from rather less expensive foreign countries such as Morocco, Palestine, Senegal and the Congo

One reason for sure was that Gabrielle's longest-lasting lover, the one who'd most often shared her bed, was a second generation Indian Muslim who still had plenty of contacts in the subcontinent of his grandparents' birth.

Although he also had a wife whose upkeep he maintained and who he even occasionally fucked, he wasn't a jealous man. He didn't mind at all that Gabrielle was

a woman for whom the word *polyamorous* had been invented and was fully content to share her body with other like-minded men. Furthermore, Ghazi Patel was at least as keen on cock as Gabrielle. Indeed, as she watched him glug down a mouthful of semen or gurgle on a stiff cock deep down his throat, it seemed that he enjoyed the physical pleasures of a man rather more than she did. She liked a fuck but, although partial to buggery, she preferred to keep her anus in good condition so she could enjoy it the more on special occasions. Ghazi was less reserved. He liked to fuck a man up the arse and was even happier when a man did it to him. Gabrielle got sexual stimulus from Ghazi's expressions of orgasmic delight and often shared the spurt of semen when it was eventually released by the man who was fucking her lover up the arse.

Gabrielle had a taste for having both holes engaged when she consented to the delights of sodomy. It seemed a waste for her more sensitive hole to be neglected while the other was being penetrated. After all, why have sex with two or more men at once if you couldn't indulge in double penetration?

Another reason why so many of those on Gabrielle's payroll came from the Indian subcontinent was the standard of education they'd received. This was usually significantly higher than the level they'd have attained in England's failing school system. But the chief reason was actually almost charitable. It wasn't just that Punjabi or Gujarati men were good fucks, but it was also Gabrielle's response to the conflict between the republics of Pakistan and India that had displaced so many refugees and filled so many news site web pages.

The war was generally restricted to the India-Pakistani border and was ostensibly fought over the Kashmir, which was fighting its own civil war to become an

independent Islamic Republic like Iraq or Afghanistan. But no war could be fully contained and it had spilt over into the densely populated regions of Jammu, Islamabad and Rawalpindi. And where were the displaced Indians and Pakistanis supposed to go? If they were Muslim they might elect to live in Srinagar if they chose to accept Kashmiri citizenship and tolerate the daily bombing. If they had family further away from the front they might move in with them: although that served only to further swell the populations of Mumbai and Kolkata, now the two most populous cities in the world. Gabrielle, with the assistance of the Red Cross and other international charities, had decided to give practical help in the form of sanctuary for the displaced.

The fact that this made good business sense was also something of a bonus.

Gabrielle generally left her staff to manage the farm without much supervision, although she was still the main contact with the financial and agricultural companies. She'd like to give more responsibility to Ajit, the Chief Farm Manager, but although his English was excellent she was reluctant for her customers to think that she wasn't the one in charge. She also wanted to counter the impression that a woman of prodigious sexual appetite might give that she was somehow deranged in business matters. But she generally trusted Ajit's judgement when it came to the biotech products marketed by companies like ICI-Monsanto or WalMart BTech. After all, his qualifications and experience in Agribusiness was rather better than hers. He must have been a great loss to Rawalpindi, Pakistan, where he would still be living if it hadn't been so badly bombed by Indian stealth planes.

"I'm not sure about this," said Ajit, when the sales representative from WalMart BTech had left. "I know we like to do business with the company especially since

WalMart took over Tesco's, but the very notion of non-sentient animals doesn't seem right."

"It's just meat," said Gabrielle, who'd tasted the samples they'd been given. "Surely it's actually more moral to slaughter animals that don't feel pain, have no comprehension of the world, and in a sense have never really lived."

"They *have* lived," Ajit protested. "They breathed, they consumed and processed the mulched vegetable foodstuff they were given, they had blood coursing through their veins, they had hearts..."

"...but not minds," said Gabrielle.

"It's not right to reduce Allah's creation to the level of vegetables," continued Ajit.

"It's just meat. The things that generate it are just meat-machines. They're not sentient. They've never suffered. Surely it's better to eat meat that doesn't result from the death of a sentient being."

"I can't believe that people shopping in Tesco's or Cost Cutter's would choose to buy meat that originated from the obscene monstrosity you can see in this picture," Ajit remarked.

The pair reviewed the photograph in the WMBT brochure. It had no bones, no eyes, no ears and probably no brain to speak of. It had been engineered to perform the one job of converting vegetables to meat. Gabrielle almost felt sick at the sight of it. The nearest equivalent to it she could think of was the placenta left by a cow after giving birth.

"It could be produced for export," said Gabrielle. "The shoppers in British

supermarkets would never see the meat unless it was sold on the black market. There's a food shortage in the world. Meat is particularly nutritious and easily digestible. The statistics provided by WMBT, but also those quoted from *Nature* and other science magazines, are unequivocal. With the same input of vegetable and cereal foodstuff converted into mulch we can double, triple or even quadruple the amount of meat available to feed the world."

"I'm not a vegetarian," said Ajit. "But this isn't natural in any sense of the word. The genes of this monstrosity come from pigs, cows, fish and chickens. Ungulates and avians."

"Surely your moral code can see that any meat that is produced without causing pain and suffering is a good thing. And anyway there aren't many people who're complaining about the biologically engineered milk that's never seen a cow or the oranges that have never grown on a tree. People will soon get used to eating meat that's never belonged to a sentient beast. In fact, they'll soon wonder how barbaric we humans were to slaughter animals simply to fill the supermarket shelves."

Ajit studied Gabrielle thoughtfully.

"Are you saying that we should farm this stuff?"

"There are good economic reasons to do so at least on a trial basis. Did you see the amount of investment WMBT is willing to give us for doing so? If it doesn't sell, we won't lose out any more than we did when we grew those cold-weather olives..."

"They didn't really taste like olives. More like catshit."

"Perhaps people won't buy this stuff either."

"But if it *does* catch on? If everyone buys meat that's like this? What then?"

Nobody would farm sheep, pigs or cattle. The fields would be empty and the countryside would be nothing but fields of grain and vegetables. There wouldn't be any insects because they can't digest GM crops. There wouldn't be any wildlife except in the odd pocket of woodland."

Gabrielle laughed. "Oh come on, Ajit! You sound like a madman. Even the Green fanatics don't go that far, do they?"

"I hope I don't sound too apocalyptic."

"Don't worry. Look, we're running a business, you and I. The business case for farming this kind of meat is pretty watertight. I'd be very surprised if many farmers, apart from the organic ones, would turn down an opportunity like this to bolster the balance sheet. And anyway," Gabrielle said, nodding towards the latest bit of graffiti that had been spray-painted over the gateway to Greenfields Farm, "we have other worries at the moment. How *is* the staff coping?"

"We installed some extra security alarms and cameras around the dormitories," said Ajit. "A gentleman from the security company will be coming round tomorrow to evaluate the situation."

Gabrielle nodded.

"Well, for the moment I think we'll go with WalMart BTech's proposal, but I'll wait a day or so before I contact them so's I can think about it. Would that be alright, Ajit?"

He agreed but reluctantly so. Gabrielle could see that when Greenfields Farm started manufacturing pain-free meat, or however else it would be marketed, she'd have disputes ahead with her Chief Farm Manager. But one thing she wasn't worried about

was that he should hand in his notice.

After all, where else could he go?

# **X**

## **Alex**

### **2023**

It was like joining a club. Not a very exclusive club of course, as it already had over eight million members, but certainly one with crippling membership fees. It was a club to which Alex had long aspired to be a member and that was to be one of those who lived within the circumference of the M25 and could call themselves Londoners.

For sure, Rickmansworth wasn't that far inside the M25. The Metropolitan Line through the suburb continued above ground to places like Amersham that were way beyond the London orbital, but it was good enough. And living here was just about within Alex's income as long as he managed to keep his job and there wasn't another sudden hike in interest rates.

As a commentator on VR politics and economics, Alex's future employment was contingent on a section of the media that nowadays might seem unassailable but could so easily become a mere footnote of history like tablet computers and 3D TV. For the moment, however, Alex was as much a media presence in the world of Virtual Reality as anyone although his online avatar hardly resembled him at all.

As a Londoner, he could now join the daily squeeze on the Tube. Every day, for the prohibitive price of a season ticket, he could press his nose into other passengers' armpits while body odour and farts filled the carriage, but he could also now spend his evenings in the capital, where he could watch a show or drink in a pub. He could become part of the vibrant heart of one of the ten largest cities in Europe and still one



of the most wealthy and powerful in the world. However, he'd also learnt the necessity of keeping a watchful eye on the time if he didn't want to miss the last tube home and have to spend a fortune on a late-night taxi.

Unfortunately, the West End wasn't the part of London with which Alex was becoming most familiar. Rather, it was the mundane attractions of Rickmansworth like the Park Road Shopping Centre, the old pubs and restaurants on the High Street, and the modern establishments on Parsonage Road and Rectory Lane. A night out in Rickmansworth for a single man usually involved him watching a movie at the Fox Cineplex, which was only marginally better than watching it at home, or nursing a lonely pint in the garish but anonymous pubs on the Parsonage Road.

There was a huge choice of women to date within the London area, in both the real and virtual sense, but most of those who lived nearby in a strictly geographical sense were actually quite awkward to meet in a practical one. Almost everyone he contacted through dating websites lived in a part of London to the South, East or Central that was very tricky to get to. And, if things didn't go to plan, it was more awkward still to return home. Who could have anticipated the logistical nightmare of getting back to Rickmansworth from Richmond, Peckham, Epping Forest, Croydon or Uxbridge?

There were many nights when Alex ventured out from his modest one-bedroom, one-reception terrace house, walked all the way to the town centre along roads with rustic names like Meadow Way and Nightingale Road that were fast being swamped by new apartment blocks and housing estates. And then he was in streets filled with shrieking young men and women whose inhibitions were lost to alcohol and drugs. The choice was then between sitting in a desolate antique pub that sought to attract custom

with gourmet lunches and imported lagers or more modern establishments where he was wedged in by the youth of Rickmansworth and unlikely to find a comfortable seat.

“It’s crap here, isn’t it?” Alex heard one day when he’d ventured inside a pub that from outside had initially seemed promising but inside was nothing special at all. In fact, the only thing that kept his attention was the presence of attractive young women including—it had to be said—the person who was addressing him.

“I don’t know why I come here,” joked Alex in the hope of keeping her attention. “It can’t be the beer. It tastes like piss.”

“We just rent it,” she replied. “It’s recycled on the premises.”

Although it was an old joke, Alex gave the expected laugh and steered the subject of conversation towards finding more out about the woman who’d spoken to him.

She was attractive, but probably not to everyone’s taste. She had a freshly-scrubbed, pale-freckled appearance. Not even her skimpy outfit could make her look more urban. She looked uncomfortable in the stilettos she wore. The sheer stockings she wore over her full thighs didn’t really suit her. She was gripping a full pint glass in her hand rather than a more modest glass of wine.

“Are you waiting for someone?” Alex asked Gabby after she’d told him her name.

“Sort of,” she said. “Or perhaps not. Maybe you’ll do.”

“Sorry?” asked Alex who wasn’t sure he quite got the drift of what she’d said.

“I live near here,” Gabby said, without really addressing Alex’s question. “My Dad owns Greenfields Farm. It lies a few miles from here, just by the M25. It’s

surrounded by country lanes.”

“You wouldn’t think there was much countryside round here...”

“There’s not as much left as when I was a little girl,” Gabby replied. “The town gets closer and closer to the farm every day. Soon there won’t be any green belt round London at all. So, I’m a Farmer’s Daughter. Just like the ones you see on the web, but I don’t fuck goats and cows, let alone dogs and horses. Why should I when there are better studs to fuck?”

“There are?” said Alex who was both aroused and alarmed by the direction the conversation was taking.

“This is a good place,” continued Gabby, as she continued to survey the lounge. “It’s a kind of singles bar. Did you know that?”

“No,” admitted Alex, who now resolved to position the pub higher on his list of occasional haunts.

“Not a proper singles bar, of course. Not like the ones in the smoke. Ricky’s not that kind of town, even though it’s changed a lot in the last decade or so.”

“Is this the kind of place you come to regularly?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you ever go to nightclubs?”

“Of course I do, but the nearest decent one is miles away. I wouldn’t want to waste the night dancing to the same fucking moronic pap you hear in a place like this. All that twenty year old telly talent show drivel! How naff. So, tell me, Alan...”

“Alex.”

“Alex. Tell me, do you have a girlfriend? Or are you some kind of sad git?”

“A sad git,” said Alex, choosing to conveniently forget the one-night stand he’d had with Melissa from Kensal Green who wasn’t quite as good in the flesh as her photo on *West One Dating* suggested.

“Have you ever had a girlfriend?”

“Of course. Last proper one was in Ashton Lovelock.”

“That’s in the Midlands, isn’t it? What was she like?”

“A bit of a hippy. Very Green.”

“I have a problems with Green,” sniffed Gabby. “Being a Farmer’s Daughter and all. You can’t do business in the modern age, not with the pressure from WalMart, Tesco’s and the rest to supply product at a low price. If Greens had their way, we’d never eat meat. And food would cost three times as much.”

Opinions like this were refreshing to Alex’s ears after having heard so much about how his eating habits were raping the environment and poisoning the planet.

“I’d rather have affordable steak any day,” he agreed.

“Well, let’s just hope it doesn’t go the way of fish,” Gabby remarked. “Fish and chips costs far more than most people can afford.”

“No wonder there are no chippies left anymore.”

Gabby was refreshingly old-fashioned in her attitudes, despite her youth and high level of education. After a few more drinks she not only lit up a cigarette when they left the pub together but announced that her car was parked in the Rectory Road Multi-storey car park.

“I don’t know which is the more expensive vice these days. Fucking ciggies or fucking driving. It costs a bloody fortune to fill the car up and the parking fees are

criminal. Do you drive, Alex?"

"Used to. I had to sell the car when I bought a house in Rickmansworth."

"Really and where do you live?"

"Just over a mile or so from here."

"I'll give you a lift home, shall I?"

Alex was pleased at how little work he'd needed to do this evening. Nearly three months in Rickmansworth and he'd never suspected that his postcode search on the internet dating sites didn't need to go much further than WD3.

"How can you afford to smoke and drive?" he couldn't help asking Gabby, after he'd turned down the offer of a cigarette.

"Living with Dad helps," said Gabby, as she reversed her Four by Four out of the tight parking space on the sixth floor of the car park. "No rent or mortgage. Makes a fuck of a difference. Working for Dad helps even more."

"You're a Farmer as well as a Farmer's Daughter?" said Alex.

"Don't look so bloody surprised. Farming's not a bad profession, you know. It's like running a business and an employment agency and a retail outlet and everything at once. You've got to be pretty sharp to do all that these days. When Dad retires, I'm the one who'll take over the whole show. I just hope he doesn't retire till he's fucking ninety..."

"How old is he now?"

"I dunno. Quite old. Fifty or something."

The drive to Alex's house was almost as slow as it would have been if he'd walked. It was only when you were in a car that you realised the impact of the traffic

calming and one-way systems that bedevilled even an outer suburb like Rickmansworth. The roads were incredibly narrow for a Four by Four, especially when driven by someone who disregarded the drink-driving regulations. Cars were parked on both sides of every road. It took more than five minutes to find a space in the streets and cul-de-sacs around Ashwood Lane.

“Small house, eh?” commented Gabby, when she saw Alex’s home squeezed in the middle of a long row of virtually identical houses all with paved-over front gardens and white-framed energy-efficient windows.

“The mortgage costs me a small fortune,” Alex told her as he pushed open the door into a cramped hallway that led straight on to the staircase.

“I’m so grateful I’ll never have to get into the fucking property market,” remarked Gabby. “Where’s your bedroom? Upstairs?”

“There’s only the one,” Alex said as he walked up the steep stairs behind her.

The bedroom was small. A double bed dominated it and made the room seem smaller still. Alex had dismantled his bed in Ashton Lovelock and reassembled it in Rickmansworth with much cursing. And the bed was just about the only thing that Gabby was interested in.

She didn’t like to waste time. She didn’t say much at all as she pulled off her clothes, although she was careful not to rip them as she did so. Gabby was soon totally naked and very comfortable with it. It was unlikely that she was a girl who sat naked in the sun on holidays to Ibiza or Lanzarote. Her pale skin betrayed no tan lines or any other evidence of exposure to ultraviolet radiation.

She also revealed a vagina that could never be described as neat and tidy. When

Alex entered its slippery, moist and warm cavern, his prick slipped out so often that Gabby had to keep pushing it back inside.

“It always does that,” she said with no evident embarrassment. “I guess it’s meant to take two rather than one. When you’re fully stiff it’ll be okay. There are some condoms that’ll give your cock the friction you need...”

“Are there?”

“I can order you some off the internet, if you like.”

Sex with Gabby was simply, unequivocally and unreservedly just sex. While their two bodies were engaged with each other, sex was all that there was between them. All she wanted was to be fucked. She was very strict on the use of condoms, but also expert in revitalising Alex’s penis when it flagged.

“We’ve got all night, you know,” she said.

“I’ve got to go to work tomorrow,” Alex remarked feebly.

“Well, fuck that! There are more important things in life than work, you know. Just get your cock back inside me where it belongs.”

# XI

## Mark & Molly

### 2070

Times were good.

OK. Good in the sense that they weren't bad, but the upward climb in the value of the Stock Exchange and the related rise of living standards must count for something.

For sure, things would probably never again be as good in London as they were before the National Unity government took power and the subsequent dissolution of the United Kingdom. The City of London had forever surrendered its role as a hub of international business. It was Frankfurt that had now taken over that role in the European time zone. It would never regain its earlier status now that economic power was so evenly distributed across the world.

But for Mark and Molly, in their brand new home in the Greenfields Estate in Harrocks Wood New Town, could life ever be any better? They had at last moved into the second floor studio apartment that had taken so many years to save for, a second baby on the way, and they were earning enough now to contemplate even the prohibitively expensive option of marriage.

And it was much easier nowadays to commute to the City compared with the three hours it used to take the couple from Bishop's Stortford. It was a mere two-hour commute from door to door, involving a half-hour trip by bus and invariably wedged in and standing for the whole one hour tube journey from nearby Rickmansworth. They now had more time to spend with one another and, of course, with little Monica who saw rather more of the nursery and crèche than she ever did of her devoted but



unavoidably busy parents.

There were occasions when Mark or Molly, but never the two together, could enjoy an evening out with friends in the capital until the last tube beckoned them home. When they were younger this was all they ever did in the evenings, but those were the days of the National Unity government when any staff employed by the bars and restaurants that were at all competent were also likely to be deported as a result of the National Immigration Policy. In those days, service was truly dreadful and the quality of food and drink had dropped even further. Now, with so many deportees returning to England and being provided housing and jobs by a chastised coalition government still struggling to qualify for renewed membership in the Northern European Union, the bars and restaurants were once again properly resourced. Not that Mark and Molly were now able to enjoy the benefits.

Mark was a marketing officer for Tata Benz where he had the unenviable mission to encourage people to purchase cars that was not only expensive to drive off the forecourt but even more so in terms of insurance, taxation, fuel and parking. Inevitably, the marketing was focussed on the drive to keep down retail prices, but Mark was actually one of the employees who'd chosen not to accept the offer of a company car. Even before he filled the tank with biodiesel he'd be worse off financially with a car than without.

All the same, the message had got through to an admirably high percentage of the target consumer market. London was still periodically gridlocked and every road was subject to parking restrictions. Nevertheless, Mark guessed that there were rather fewer cars on the road than there used to be that were truly above board and legal. This

could be blamed on a feeble and incompetent justice system that was another product of the years of supposedly strong government that had so crippled the country.

Molly worked as a legal secretary for an international law firm that ensured that she was always kept incredibly busy. Despite her advanced pregnancy, she often had to work weekends. The repatriation of deportees involved so many unsuspected complications. An impoverished English government was pushed yet further into debt by the actions of those who'd been treated badly by the previous administration and were now exercising their right to claim compensation for lost trade, for illegally seized businesses and, in some cases, for the rough treatment suffered at the hands of over-enthusiastic immigration police. Most cases were extremely difficult to prove one way or the other as the database records had been deleted. If the data hadn't been leaked to clandestine websites, usually illegally, there would have been far fewer cases for the government to resolve.

Mark and Molly worked hard, even though their salaries were often paid late, the debts continued to pile up, and the demand for unpaid overtime continued to rise. But at least they had jobs. They were now in that minority of people under forty years old who'd managed to buy a home and who could just about afford to pay their monthly mortgage payments despite the crippling interest rates.

There were few opportunities for the couple to play as hard as they worked. Despite her early reputation as a free and easy woman, Molly couldn't find the time to be unfaithful to Mark even if she wanted to. Had anyone approached her at the office photocopying machine with the proposition of a quickie in the broom cupboard, she would have had to politely refuse. Long hours and hard work had severely sapped her

sexual energy. But not so much, of course, that she and Mark hadn't been able to conceive a second time.

Mark had always been the faithful sort. He'd never cheated on anyone. Even when he was single and could afford to get high (before the government of National Unity became so ridiculously heavy-handed in enforcing the laws on drug possession), he'd never been keen on casual sex. He would never make love with a mate's girlfriend or wife. That just wouldn't be right. How would he like it if the same thing happened to him?

When their long working day was over, Mark and Molly made their separate ways to the tube stations through the rain-soaked streets of London. (Who said that Climate Change wouldn't bring even more rain to already soggy England?) As a devoted couple, they set their mobile phones to broadcast their whereabouts so that the other would know whether their partner was in the office or on the tube. This was a facility that had mostly gone out of fashion after it had been so spectacularly abused by the immigration police to locate people they wanted for what was euphemistically known as questioning. This had sometimes led to injury and even death as the police struggled to meet their monthly deportation totals.

Mark was reassured to see on his mobile phone that Molly was now walking along Chancery Lane to the tube station, while he was standing in the carriage of the Metropolitan Line train to Amersham. It was rather less comforting to know that due to yet another incident on the line, he would continue to be delayed in a stationary carriage between Baker Street and Finchley Road.

All around him were similarly frustrated passengers: many dripping wet from

the heavy rain outside and all squeezed as tightly together as was possible. Most were also regarding their mobile phones, where they could send messages, watch television or just be entertained by music or films. Some passengers carried e-books, while a lucky few perched on the ridge of foam that passed for a carriage seat and were able to use their tablets.

Mark scanned his fellow passengers as best he could from the view he had past the elbows and umbrellas that poked near his face. They were less racially diverse than they would have been just over ten years before and dressed somewhat more shabbily. The age of cheap clothing, along with that for cheap food, was now just a distant dream. Nowadays people resorted more and more to patching up their worn-out socks and sweaters. There was even a good trade in supposedly indestructible fabrics that would never need repair. The one thing that remained cheap, of course, was electronic goods.

Along the side of the carriage was an array of plasma screens where once there would have been windows from which were broadcast soundless adverts for consumer goods, debt relief and film downloads. These were periodically interspersed by public information screens that informed Mark and the other passengers just how far the train was from the next stop and how long it would take to get there. The fact that these screens were stubbornly awaiting further information, as they had for the last ten sweaty humid minutes, provided no comfort at all.

Mark held his mobile phone up to within half a metre of his face and reviewed the news stories he could hear through the discreet ear-piece in his right ear. These were the usual type of stories. Things were still tense in the Middle East, of course. Israeli drones were targeting supposed threats in Jordan and Palestine and were countered in

kind by Iraq and Turkey. There was more on the recent murder of the Culture Secretary and her husband. The police were questioning someone with ties with the Confederate rebels in the increasingly militaristic southern states of the United States. Something about flooding in Woolwich and how the Greenwich Flood Barrier was holding back the rising waters of the River Thames from reaching London. But Mark spent rather more time reviewing the news about the upcoming marriage between Heir Apparent Princess Rachel and Bruce Banner, businessman and entrepreneur. It was nice to read good news occasionally and this made Mark speculate about his own wedding nuptials should he and Molly ever save up enough to actually go through with it.

He toggled his display back to see how Molly was doing. She'd taken a train on the Bakerloo line and was now approaching Warwick Avenue. At this rate, she'd be home before him and it'd be her who'd be making dinner for a change. Molly was a better cook than him anyway, although neither of them was especially skilled.

Mark read the short message she texted him: "V. crowded. Don't feel so gd. Love you lots."

The message immediately alarmed Mark. Molly was now about seven months pregnant. He hoped nothing bad would happen. The first pregnancy had gone remarkably well, despite the long daily commute to and from Bishop's Stortford. The worst of it had been the delay getting from their home to the maternity ward through busy traffic and the long wait for an available hospital bed.

Mark, of course, could do nothing to help. He was stuck in a stationary carriage while further up the line he imagined another line fatality was being cleared away. Not that he'd ever be told what had happened.

“Hope it’s nothing,” he texted back.

“I’m faint and sick. C U Soon,” came the prompt reply.

Mark had no idea what was the right thing to say at this point. He did a quick search of some medical websites but what he read only alarmed him further.

“Try sitting down,” he texted back.

“Not poss.”

“Yr preg. If u cant get a seat who can?”

There was no reply.

For the next half hour until the train moved again, as trains ahead of his up the line were also shunted forward, Mark continued to check Molly’s whereabouts on his mobile. He followed her progress along the Bakerloo Line past Kensal Green and Wembley Central to Kenton where surely she would take the escalator link to the Metropolitan Line. He was rather surprised to see that she’d missed the stop and had arrived at Harrow & Wealdstone.

Perhaps the carriage she was in was so crowded at Kenton she’d not been able to get out. He expected she’d now get on a southbound train. And why had she still not texted him?

Then he noticed with even more dread while his train at last slowly juddered onwards to Finchley Road that, after staying for five to ten minutes at Harrow & Wealdstone, Molly’s location was now moving remarkably rapidly along the roads south towards Northwick Park. Perhaps she’d caught a taxi. Wise move when you’re pregnant. Whatever the cost.

And then the phone rang and it was Molly’s number.

“Hiya Molly!” Mark cried cheerfully.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, sir,” replied a male voice. “Am I speaking to Mr Mark McEwan?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m a paramedic and my name is Martin Green. Your partner, Ms. Minchin, is being taken by ambulance to Northwick Park Hospital. We advise you to get there at your earliest convenience.”

“What’s happened?”

“Nothing life-threatening but it’s not good news,” said the paramedic. “It’s related to Ms Minchin’s pregnancy.”

“Has there been an accident?”

“In a sense yes, sir,” replied the paramedic. “But as I say it’s not life-threatening.”

The rest of Mark’s journey was even more stressful than it had already been. The train eventually arrived at Northwick Park where the hospital was located just round the corner. Inevitably, the satellite navigation was better at finding the overall location of the hospital than that of the reception desk and by the time he arrived he was drenched by the torrential rain that even now wouldn’t let up.

The cause of the emergency was, of course, a miscarriage.

Molly had fainted on the spot where she’d been standing on the tube, but as she was so tightly wedged in she didn’t fall to the floor. She was only identified as having lost consciousness when the train reached its terminus at Harrow & Wealdstone. It was only when everyone had disembarked that she was finally free to drop to the ground. It

was then that somebody decided to call an ambulance and she was taken to the nearest hospital.

“There wasn’t anything we could do, sir,” said one of the nurses as Mark squeezed the hand of his still sedated partner. “The miscarriage happened before she was found. In fact we judge that it may well have happened while she was still standing up in the carriage. It’s not very amenable for a pregnant woman.”

“Indeed not,” said Mark who lost most of his normally unbreakable optimism for the future as he regarded poor Molly as she lay on the bed with a tube trailing out of her nostril. “When will she better?”

“Fairly soon,” said the nurse. “But we don’t advise her to return to work for at least a week.”

How would G & M UK accept even a single day of staff shortage given Molly’s massive workflow? How sympathetic would an American company be?

“I’m sure that’s for the best,” Mark replied.



## **XII**

### **Molly & Mark**

### **2071**

There was no denying it. Molly had taken the death of her unborn child very badly. The shock of the loss sent her into a downward spiral of despondency and then depression. The inevitable result was that she lost her job. Her impressive academic qualifications notwithstanding, she was now no more useful to humanity than a housewife. And although if anyone should ask she'd insist that it was her free choice to spend more time with little Monica, she was clearly not at all suited to the role. And now Monica was at primary school there was no real advantage to Molly being available throughout the day.

Furthermore, it was difficult for the couple to get by on only one income. The savings the couple had stashed away was now being eaten up by the monthly interest on their mortgage. After paying for that, the monthly season ticket and the basic cost of living, there was nothing much left over. As the debts continued to rise and a steadily growing proportion of Mark's salary was committed to interest payments on existing debt, Molly stretched out as best she could the available budget for food and clothing. But although the charity shops in the Greenfields shopping precinct might provide good quality clothes for a child of five years old, they were less useful for buying the clothes Mark had to wear for work. Molly resorted to the cheaper supermarkets and the weekly market stalls as a means of cutting costs, but these were all an hour's walk away in Rickmansworth.

There was little now to cheer Mark up when he arrived home in the evening,

more tired from his commute than from his long hours in the office. And there wasn't any cheer in the news that he'd read on his tablet on the way home. England's negotiations for re-admittance to the Northern European Union were fraught. France and the Netherlands still resented the English government for its role in causing the once much larger and wealthier European Union to split into two halves over the issue of ratifying the membership of Turkey and Armenia. Scotland and Wales still held a grudge against England for its role in the dissolution of the United Kingdom together. And there was little at all encouraging to be found from a casual scan through the news. All-out war in the Middle East seemed increasingly inevitable and the United States was far too preoccupied with its own worries about secession and civil war to do anything about it. Flood barriers were going up all round London, just as most of the Southern English coast was similarly enclosed by an ever-heightening wall to guard against rising sea levels. And to cap it all, Princess Rachel had broken off her engagement. Bruce Banner was now a man who'd travelled the distance from being England's most celebrated bachelor to being the most despised.

Mark had little enough opportunity in the evening to squeeze in quality time with Molly before he slumped down by his wife in their conjugal bed. As much as Mark enjoyed the wholesome vegetarian meals Molly was now cooking, he was far too exhausted to demonstrate his appreciation in the way that had invigorated the couple's early years together. And Mark was too tired to be much use at the weekend even on those occasions when he wasn't required to go to work for a marketing campaign or a business conference.

On Sundays, the couple would shop together in the dilapidated Park Road Mall

where the cheap but not especially cheerful shops were clustered. It was a depressing parade of pawn shops, instant loan stores, charity shops and second-hand clothes stores, interspersed at regular intervals by the boarded-up facade of one of Rickmansworth's former shopping delights.

And in amongst it all were youth from the suburb's rundown estates who dressed in clothes that expressed only too well their relative poverty. The clothes advertised desperation rather than high fashion. These young men and women weren't the ones dressed in the colourful psychedelic fabrics and artistically arranged hair that adorned the young people who were jiggling provocatively on the flat wall screens in the shops. Rather they wore a jumble of whatever they could find in the charity shops. Many young people, whether male or female, avoided even the need to visit the hairdresser by shaving off their hair. However much he preferred to keep a discreet distance from them, Mark was aware that today's youth could hardly be blamed for their poverty. Unemployment, especially amongst the young, was shockingly high. As Molly could confirm, well-paid jobs had become harder and harder to find even for the well-qualified. If a young man or woman continued to study beyond the current school leaving age the path to higher education was beset by crippling loans and fierce competition for college places.

"I kept some of the best fruit aside for you, Molly love," said the burly shaven-headed stall-holder in the vegetable market with a friendly pat on her back. "Organic, it is. None of your GM or synthetic stuff. Grown in proper orchards, it is."

"Do you know him?" Mark wondered, as he and Molly strolled over to the dairy stall where the eggs and dairy came directly from farms in Hertfordshire and were sold

at prices that were even more competitive than those in WalMart-Tesco.

“Of course,” said Molly. “I know all the stall-holders here.”

Molly wasn't exaggerating. She knew Wayne the stall-holder very well just as she'd also got to know Alan, Mickey and Garry.

Her idle time out of work hadn't gone entirely to waste.

Molly found conversations with Mark had become ever more depressing and monotonous. Their discussions were always about the same things these days and Molly just wanted to get away from it. The couple's debts were piling up. It looked likely that they would have to default on the mortgage now that interest rates had risen yet another percentage point. It was unlikely that Monica would be accepted at the Rickmansworth school they'd applied for her and she might end up in an overcrowded one in Watford. There was no likelihood of Mark getting a pay rise. In fact, with the continuing slump in international car sales there might even be redundancies on the horizon.

And when you turned on the TV it was always the same old stuff. War. Famine. Plague. Floods. Failing businesses.

Even Princess Rachel had failed the nation.

What could Molly do in those hours from nine o'clock when Monica was packed off to school and three o'clock when she had to be picked up again? She could trudge back to their tiny apartment in Bluebell Grove and sit mesmerised by chat shows and twentieth-century movies interspersed by debt relief adverts. Or she could aimlessly wander the streets of Greenfields. Or she could stroll over to Rickmansworth where she'd got to know some of the town's other citizens who also had to idle away

each empty day.

For the small amount of cash that she might otherwise have used towards the bus fare into town she could buy skunk, meth, coke or even smack. Illegal drugs were very cheap these days. The devastation resulting from the Stan Wars and the current unrest in the Middle East had dramatically increased their illicit supply. More unemployment had likewise enlarged the size of the target market and the number of those willing to risk arrest and imprisonment to maintain the flow and availability of the product. After all, the cost of a hit from crack or H was rather less than that of a single cigarette and there were almost exactly as many places to sit down and enjoy it.

Molly knew of many reasons for the easy availability, cheapness and demand for narcotics. One reason highlighted in the news was the impotence of law enforcement agencies throughout the world, particularly in the disintegrating United States and the Kingdom of England. Police forces had more important matters to deal with than the drug trade, such as organised crime and civil disorder.

Wayne didn't supply drugs, but he liked to share a puff of crack after a long morning on the stall. Alan didn't supply drugs either, but he often had a spare wrap or two of skunk. Mickey and Garry worked as a team, but they were very low down the pecking order and never handled quantities larger than a kilo. Molly was, of course, yet lower down still the supply chain, but she was already sufficiently knowledgeable about drugs etiquette from her relatively wild youth to get accepted amongst her new friends. She knew how to prepare a bong; how to heat stuff in tin foil; how much to use and how long to wait till she got a hit. And she had the enviable ability of being able to hang around in the company of her new friends for only a few hours a day without ever

overdoing it. When she appeared outside Greenfields Primary School to take her daughter home, no one would ever suspect that she might be stoned out of her mind.

Which she often was.

Molly also knew how to get a little extra for free. This was another skill she'd learnt before she'd met Mark and settled down to a life of office work and commuting in London. Wayne was one of the lucky few who Molly would allow the privilege of a free fuck. She'd secretly always liked a bit of rough. Mickey and Garry had to pay in kind for the rewards she was scarcely generous in doling out. Unlike women who relied on the proceeds of selling their bodies to pay for drugs (and there were many prostitutes lining the kerbsides of Rectory Lane and Nightingale Road), Molly insisted on using a condom. Like drugs these were also very cheap and easy to get hold of.

Molly wasn't a drug addict. She'd never been an addictive personality. She liked the hit she got from the wide choice of drugs that were readily available, but she never allowed it to distract her from the responsibilities of parenthood and of being a partner. She was no more addicted to drugs than she was to sex, but both brought danger, excitement and genuine physical thrills that somehow compensated for the boredom of not working and despair at life's apparent futility.

In any case, Molly didn't want Mark's prick to be the only one she'd get to know for the rest of her life. Wayne's was thick and chunky: a bit like the man himself. When he ejaculated inside the condom it pushed out the nipple like a tiny balloon. Mickey had a long thin penis which wasn't what you'd imagine for a man whose stomach drooped over his waist. He had very good staying power which enabled Molly to come several times in a single session. Garry was probably the most disappointing

of the men Molly had got to know in this intimate way, but he was also the man most pathetically grateful. He was strangely shy and retiring for someone who made a living by hustling and selling drugs to strangers.

Furthermore, Molly never forgot her class loyalties. She made certain that there was no overlap between her daytime vices and what her neighbours in Bluebell Grove would ever get to know. Molly was practical, sensible and well-prepared for most eventualities.

Nevertheless, the bad news when it arrived did so with a sense of inevitability.

Molly's first indication that her suburban dream life in Greenfields wouldn't last much longer was when Mark gave an account of what Tata Benz executives had been telling their employees about past sales figures and future projections.

The thrust of the presentation was about the ever worsening state of the automobile market and Tata Benz's success in diversifying away from its historical core business. All the same, the bottom line was that the mass market for cars was no longer as profitable as it once had been and that the company's offices in the more minor international centres would soon have to be closed. One of the more peripheral centres for the Indian-German company was the Kingdom of England, where future sales projections didn't offer much of a source of confidence.

Mark continued his commute for several more months as the company struggled to present its declining fortunes in as good a light as it could to financiers, stockholders and the general public. He was assured that he would receive a reasonable but not fantastically generous redundancy payment. What Molly knew for sure was that there would soon be two people spending their days in enforced idleness in the cramped space

of Apt. 4, 3 Bluebell Grove.

However, even that disheartening scenario wasn't to be.

"It's either eviction and homelessness or this," Mark announced to Molly after explaining the options. "I know it's not as nice as Greenfields, but this studio apartment in Dagenham is about all we can afford until either you or I get another job."

"It's a rented flat," wailed Molly. "What about the deposit we paid? Can't we use that to buy another place?"

"The deposit just about covers the outstanding debt on the mortgage payments," said Mark.

"Dagenham's all slums and sink estates," Molly complained. "What sort of school will Monica go to? What about the crime in the area? You've seen the stories about gangland killings."

"It's a shorter commute to London," Mark remarked. "It's almost close enough to Docklands for us to be able to walk to work."

"The only reason it's cheap in Dagenham is because it's first in line when the flood barriers break," said Molly who'd done her research. "The last time the barriers broke, Creekmouth were under more than a metre of sewerage and mud. Newlands Park was marshland for months afterwards. They even had to close the A13."

"Well, that's one good reason for us to rent and not to buy property in the area," said Mark with a grim smile.



### **XIII**

## **Alex**

## **2024**

Never before had Alex felt as much like he was playing a walk-on part in the story of someone else's life. He was like a minor character in a soap opera who'd somehow been allowed to stay on for more than one episode. Even though he'd been seeing Gabby for nearly a year now, there was no doubt which one of the couple was calling the shots in their relationship and it wasn't Alex.

To make matters worse, Gabby made no pretence whatsoever that Alex wasn't just one of several men with whom she regularly fucked. He shared her with lovers whose presence in Gabby's life rarely survived more than a single night. This wasn't the stuff to boost a man's ego, especially one whose score rate was so wretched in comparison.

It was mostly because Alex had achieved a small level of success with the women he'd met through internet dating sites that Gabby continued her relationship with him. Alex didn't want to elaborate too much on encounters which only occasionally resulted in him enjoying the sex that he and—presumably—the woman he was dating had been anticipating. For a start, his dates shamelessly lied about their age. Few women in their forties, let alone their fifties, had looks to match Alex's chosen target age range of 20-35. Alex would have chosen a younger age bracket if he hadn't been aware that few women in their teens would genuinely seek the affection of a man approaching his thirtieth birthday. And those women who did were unlikely to have a romantic reason for such a choice.

In exchange for the tales of sexual conquest she wheedled out of him, Gabby

recounted her own exploits which, unlike Alex's, needed no gloss or elaboration. Alex didn't want to elaborate too much on his dating disappointments with women who in one way or another rather deserved to remain single. It wasn't their looks alone that persuaded him to make this assessment, however important this was to Alex. There were other important considerations like neuroticism, body odour and sometimes hostility towards men like Alex who weren't acceptably clued-up on the issues of the day.

"Well, there isn't much you're sure about, is there?" Gabby asserted while she pumped his penis. They were sitting in his tiny living room with the television in the background tuned to Fox News UK. Zak Goldsmith was ranting about a Green conspiracy that was somehow certain to wreck the economy. "Although I'm no great fan of the Greens, even I can see that this is just paranoid conspiracy bullshit. Why do you watch it?"

"I like to get the other side."

"The other side of what?" wondered Gabby. She lowered her tongue towards Alex's lap to lick the tip of his glans while she kept her eyes fixed on his. "This is nothing more than news porn. It's not real opinion. It's propaganda. You just watch it to see how far it'll go. It's like those porn movies where you wonder whether there'll be DP, piss or scat. And, believe you me, those are better options than what I'd like see happen to turncoat fascists like Goldsmith."

"We'll watch something else," said Alex who switched the TV to an internet porn channel that was showing at least two of the sexual activities Gabby had mentioned.

Gabby turned her face towards the screen. “At least it’s not farmyard porn,” she remarked while continuing to pump Alex’s prick. “You wouldn’t believe the number of times at school and university the guys got me to watch that kind of crap. ‘Ever wanted to make out with Dobbin?’ ‘Are the sheepdogs on your farm as good at fucking as they are at herding sheep?’ ‘Ever sucked a horse’s cock?’”

“You haven’t, have you?” wondered Alex who’d occasionally succumbed to that fantasy.

“Of course I fucking haven’t. I’d have to be fucking demented to do something like that. And you have to be fucking demented to even suggest it.”

However much Alex felt like a bit-player, he had to admit that the best sex in his life so far was definitely that which he had at least once a week with Gabby. It was always her who’d initiate it and she rarely gave Alex the chance to choose otherwise.

“Get ready,” she’d say on the phone. “I’ll be over in half an hour.”

“Are you sure?” said Alex who might be watching a movie he’d just downloaded.

“Why? Who’re you with?”

“No one.”

“Don’t be fucking soft, then. Just put some cans of beer in the fridge.”

The text messages, e-mails and even surprise calls that Alex received from Gabby never followed a predictable pattern. About the only valid excuse he could offer for not being able to see her was that he was with another woman. On other occasions, he’d have to apologise to colleagues for having to return home early rather than joining them for a pint after work. He’d have to scurry home as fast as he could if he was on a

lonely prowl in the streets of Rickmansworth. If he was working late, he might arrange to meet Gabby in a city centre pub and then go out for a meal afterwards. This was a relatively rare treat for her and one she probably enjoyed at least as much as the sex they'd soon be having on Alex's couch or on his well broken-in double bed.

Despite his nocturnal fantasies or the more graphic ones he watched on the porn channels, Alex's taste in sex wasn't remotely adventurous. Sex involving animals, urination, fisting and transsexuals were strictly off limits in real life.

So when Gabby suggested a threesome, Alex wasn't enthusiastic at all.

"With a woman?" he asked hopefully.

"Is that what you want, Alex?" she asked as she held him against her bosom, his penis still deep inside her.

"If that's what you want."

"Well, I don't," she said firmly. "I'm not a dyke."

"And I'm not queer."

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I'm not asking you to have your arse violated," laughed Gabby who was clearly quite excited by the idea. "That is, unless that's what you want?"

"Fuck no!" gasped a genuinely terrified Alex.

This was one *ménage* Alex didn't look forward to. Besides his entirely genuine worries about anal violation, he was anxious about how well he would perform when exposed naked and erect in front of another man.

He tried to escape into Virtual Reality where he could sample a kind of simulated sexual threesome, but since he was the one determining the terms of

engagement it wasn't especially realistic. Alex wondered just what sort of perverse rules Gabby might come up with. Perhaps he ought to break the whole thing off. But then the thought of having to rely on nothing more than women who pretended to be younger than they were and frequently made unreasonable demands on his virility persuaded Alex that maybe what Gabby wanted wasn't so bad really.

Most of the time he spent in Virtual Reality—toggled up in bizarre equipment that simulated muscular movement and presented a 360 degrees vista of an imagined world in front of his eyes—wasn't so much for sex or entertainment but for work. And most of that was to scan the latest news and information generated by an ever-growing community of online users in the many Virtual Reality worlds. After he'd captured enough screenshots, Alex could then return to the real world by terminating his connection and tugging off the equipment. Then he returned to his desk, which was in a different room from where he did his research, to write his daily column. Most of this was nothing more than a verbatim account of what he'd seen and it was in that sense that he offered the world a kind of news amalgamation service.

However, he had to do more than simply that to earn his salary. Reuters-Fox wouldn't be very pleased if that was all he ever wrote about in the column he submitted every day to their news services' internet pages. He had to do a bit of private research, which entailed surveying weird VR sites that promised a lot but were the sole preserve of fans of Tolkien, Star Wars and Harry Potter who were probably many decades older than their avatars suggested, and where the principal activity was to engage in tedious debates that Alex never featured in his column.

Virtual Reality was his corner in the newsroom, but Alex felt restless. He would

rather be doing something more interesting. He was weary of the online community's endless arguments about the significance of plot lines from now defunct television shows.

Alex also had fears about his job security. Would VR one day fizzle out and fade away, however inconceivable this now seemed since Microsoft and Google had merged? Would it continue to grow? And would he have to share his workload with someone else? Alex was sufficiently self-critical to recognise that some of his colleagues in the Online Media newsroom were rather better than him in the quality of their research and reporting. That could make his job substantially more difficult.

“Next Friday.” Gabby texted him.

Her text didn't elaborate further, but Alex knew exactly what she meant. He even knew who the other partner in this *ménage a trois* was going to be. It was one of Gabby's more frequent lovers: a guy called Ghazi. She'd met him when she was a student when they'd both been studying Business Communications as part of their degrees, although her final degree was in Agriculture and his in Business Studies.

Alex didn't consider himself to be a racist. After all, several of his colleagues were black or Asian. And he'd several times made love with women of exotic ethnic origins, including a tubby Chinese woman called Kim of whom Alex had been very fond. But it was quite a different thing to be sharing a woman with an Asian man. It was bad enough that he was a man at all. When Alex reviewed his anxieties he wondered why an Asian man, who'd after all never visited the Indian subcontinent, should be any different to a white man. Perhaps a white man was actually worse. Alex was in contortions that he guessed were actually less to do with Ghazi's ethnic profile

and a great deal more to do with his own floundering about for an excuse, any excuse, that he could use to avoid this sexual encounter and yet still remain with Gabby.

Worse still, the entire thing would be taking place in Alex's flat on Alex's bed. What would the neighbours think? They must have seen Gabby turn up at his flat at all times of night and day with a cigarette dangling from her outstretched fingers. They would have seen her Four By Four parked nearby and effectively making the already narrow roads even narrower. Not that Alex actually knew any of his neighbours. He wasn't home long enough to pass more than the odd word with them.

Friday came around and the doorbell rang while Alex was trying to lessen his anxiety by watching a documentary on the melting glaciers and consequent flooding in the Himalayas.

"Ghazi, isn't it?" said Alex shaking his guest's hand.

"And you must be Alex," said the tall, classically handsome Punjabi. "Gabby hasn't told me much about you, but I'm sure we'll get along fine."

There was no hint of anything other than a well-educated Home Countries accent in his voice.

"And where in India..." asked Alex for the sake of conversation.

"... Does my family come from?" Ghazi said. "Somewhere in the North West. I don't really know. It was a long time ago."

There really weren't enough beers or a long enough time to wriggle out of what Alex was dreading before Gabby announced that since the two were now sufficiently well acquainted, maybe they all ought to get on with it.

"Why the hurry?" wondered the host.

“Fuck’s sake, Alex,” said Gabby, barely restraining the frustration in the tone of her voice. “Best strike while the iron’s hot.”

It must have been hot for Gabby whose vagina was dripping uncontrollably when she pulled off her clothes and lay down on the bed. And judging from the huge erection that met Alex’s eyes Ghazi was also very enthused. Alex shuddered. This was by far the largest and most erect penis he’d ever seen in the flesh. Indeed, it was the only one he’d ever seen in real life other than his own.

“Have you ever done this before?” asked Alex of Ghazi while taking his time to remove his clothes.

“Yeah, of course,” said Ghazi. “Several times. And not always with Gabby. How about you?”

“Never.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll soon get the hang of it.”

Alex doubted that. Indeed if he’d not taken the precaution of dropping a little blue pill, he’d probably have been so intimidated by Ghazi’s presence that he wouldn’t have been able to do anything at all.

The evening with Ghazi and Gabby was an event that resonated more in the memory and with more eroticism than it did at the time. Yes, he and Ghazi were active in all those sexual activities with a single woman that Alex was familiar with from having spent so much of his adult life watching porn. Sometimes Gabby sucked Ghazi’s erect penis while Alex thrust away in Gabby’s gushing, moist and even squelchy vagina. Sometimes it was Alex’s penis that was sucked while Gabby was being fucked by Ghazi who betrayed a definite preference for fucking her in the arse. And then,



inevitably, the two of them fucked her together, with Ghazi's penis in her anus and Alex's in the other hole.

What Gabby most wanted and what she'd so often said she most wanted to try was something that both Ghazi and he were less eager to do and that was to be fucked in the vagina by both men simultaneously. "I've always thought there's more than enough space for two," she said as justification.

Indeed, she was absolutely right. Her vagina easily accommodated both Alex and Ghazi.

The main reason Alex was reluctant to do this was that he would have to brush his penis against Ghazi's. This was something he'd managed to avoid doing until then. In fact, he just about managed to avoid touching Ghazi's skin altogether.

Ghazi's reason for being less keen was that he was reluctant to pull his penis out of Gabby's anus. Alex speculated that this was because the man liked a tight hole. He could see the virtue in that. It was disconcerting to see his penis slip out of Gabby's capacious vagina in the throes of passion.

But when Ghazi placed his hands over Alex's buttocks from behind while he was still fucking Gabby, Alex began to suspect that this anal enthusiasm wasn't reserved for women alone. And when he felt the rubbery sensation of Ghazi's tongue inside the crack of his arse, this was not so much suspicion but proof.

"*Don't!*" said Gabby quietly but firmly when she noticed what her Punjabi lover was doing.

"There are plenty more arses out there in the world," Ghazi said reluctantly. "It's just that there's only two in this room."

“Just be content with the one,” said Gabby firmly. “I’m sure we can do this again some other time with someone a little more adventurous.”

Alex was too preoccupied in the business of fucking Gabby to make a comment.

He was aware though that, despite his reluctance, the thought of being violated by Ghazi had excited him enough that he would soon, at last, be relieved of the pent-up pressure in his balls.

“Shall we do it again?” asked Gabby afterwards, but she must have known from the febleness of Alex’s response that this was unlikely.

Either on that night or, indeed, any other night in the future.

## **XIV**

### **Diane**

### **2042**

Reverend Diane Dawkins wept while she watched the television news film of the dead and dying of Rawalpindi. If the wretched souls hadn't already died from the intense heat and blast of the nuclear explosions, they would surely do so from radiation poisoning. Perhaps those who were dead were the lucky ones. Cancerous growths and the birth of deformed children were all that most of the survivors had to look forward to.

Her usual response to such international crises was to dedicate a section of her weekly sermon to the matter and place a collection box for the relevant charity at the church door. Somehow, this didn't seem adequate for the scale of the current disaster. What should Diane, as a minister of the Church of England, do to help the tens of millions of people who'd suffered and the maybe hundreds of millions who might suffer in the future in a subcontinent sandwiched between astonishing economic growth and the famine, disease and devastation that resulted from the world's first real nuclear war, limited though it thankfully had been.

Diane's first response was to pick up the telephone and call Doris to get her advice. Who else could be first choice? The phone rang and after trilling for a short while Doris' sweet voice replied.

“What is it, sweetheart? I'm still in the office.”

“Are you working late?”

“Again,” Diane's lover replied.

Doris' position as senior project manager at Accenture IBM often entailed long hours as meetings overran, schedules were missed, and the customer requirements were once more changed. On the other hand, she was senior enough to be able to choose which projects to work on. Or, rather, which ones not to. She avoided projects for defence contractors, tobacco companies and others whose trade she believed to be unethical. Diane wasn't sure whether it was Doris' strict moral code of conduct or her body that made her love her so. As a Vicar of Christ, Diane was grateful that it wasn't for Doris' beauty alone. What would the good Lord say if that were so?

"It's nothing, darling," said Diane. "We can talk about it later."

"At your place or mine?"

Although Doris and Diane had been lovers for over four years, they still maintained separate homes. It wasn't because Doris was especially mindful of any disapproval from her congregation. The vicar had been open about her sexuality from the first day that she discovered that she loved women as much as, maybe even more than, she did men. It was more because the two women treasured their separate space. They'd both lived alone for so many years and neither of them was in the first bloom of youth. Perhaps, it was a step too far that they should share more than a bed on a permanent basis.

"Should we get married?" Doris once asked Diane.

"Although the Church of England is comparatively liberal on gay relationships and believes in the sanctity of marriage," the vicar answered, "I'm not sure that even this far into the twenty-first century the church has progressed quite as far as to unreservedly welcome same-sex marriage for its ministers. It's still an issue for many

in the Anglican community: especially in Africa and the Southern states of America. My first duty as a vicar is to my flock and if there are people in my congregation who're uncomfortable with the idea of their vicar marrying another woman then I believe I should respect their opinion."

"Very diplomatic," said Doris. "But my offer remains open all the same."

It was nearly ten o'clock when the vicarage doorbell rang and Doris arrived. She was a slender woman whose hair was flecked with grey. Her hair perfectly complemented by her silver-grey eyes. She was wearing a business suit and the stern high heels that made a woman of quite average height appear quite tall. Diane knew her lover would soon be divested of her uncomfortable, restrictive work clothes and that as always the couple would reclined together naked on the sofa in the living room in front of the television set.

Diane in the nude was much as one would expect. She was not a slim woman. In fact, she was moderately plump but not unattractively so. Her bosom was just as generous uncovered as it promised to be from what could be seen in the contours of her cassock.

The two lovers wound their arms about each other and relished the sensation of each other's flesh.

"Why did you call me at work, sweetheart?" asked Doris as she idly twirled her fingers around the huge aureoles of her lover's nipples.

"I didn't know you were still at work," said Diane. "I thought you might have been home. Or perhaps on the train back from London."

"While the project is in its present mess," said Doris, "there's going to be

nothing but problem after problem. The legal department haven't quite worked out the international legal implications yet..."

"International legal implications?"

"Any project that aims to simplify security and passport controls at airports is bound to have countless international legal issues. The Chinese are the reference market, of course, and most European and Asian countries are in line with China. The United States, as usual, is dragging its feet and raising all sorts of objections."

"Why's that?"

"It's just what they do. The different states can't even agree between themselves whether black is black or doesn't happen to also be white. If they can't agree amongst themselves how can they be expected to agree *anything* with anyone else? I despair. It can't be long now until the nation splits down the middle. It just can't cope with no longer being the world's richest or most powerful nation. All it can do is huddle in the corner and sulk. That is, when it's not quarrelling about eye retina recognition and DNA identification."

"It sounds like a real headache," said Diane. "But what I called you about was disaster relief for the radiation victims of the Indo-Pakistani War. I was just wondering if you had any suggestions for what a Vicar of Christ should be doing."

"I'm not really the best person to talk to about charity," said Doris. "It *is* charity you're talking about, I hope? You're not suggesting we leave Surrey and fly over to the irradiated zones in the republics of Kashmir, India and Pakistan? It's not quite me, I think."

"It's not me, either," said Diane. "I don't think I'm cut out for that kind of work."

Being a missionary was never one of my childhood ambitions. In any case, the charities already have plenty of much better qualified people in India and Pakistan. They don't need the help of a couple of middle-aged English women..."

"Middle-aged!" laughed Doris. "I think I've got a few more years left till I'll call myself that."

"They probably wouldn't need us whatever age we were," said Diane. "But we've got to do something. It's our moral duty."

"Are you saying that because you're a vicar?"

"It's our moral duty to do something for the tens of millions in dire need and the hundreds of millions who are displaced whether we work for the church or for an international computer consultancy or for the local supermarket. This is the worst international crisis of our lives. It's the first time for nearly a century that nuclear weapons have been used in anger. It is our moral imperative to give whatever help we possibly can."

"Point taken, sweetheart," said Doris as she tenderly kissed Diane's stomach.

"What I don't know and why I called you," Diane continued, "is exactly *what* we should be doing?"

"I don't know either, sweetheart," said Doris. "And you know that. I take it you want to do more than just arrange a collection from your parishioners and to give a sermon on behalf of the millions of radioactive refugees, but you also don't want to fly out to the nuclear wastelands. You'll just have to contact agencies like Red Cross or Oxfam or Action Aid and ask them for advice."

"I've got to offer them something more than the usual charity collection

money,” said Diane. “I’ve got to do something a great deal more.”

“About the only thing these poor souls want besides food and drink is shelter,” said Doris. “Are you suggesting that we shelter them in the Church grounds?”

“It’s an idea,” said Diane, her face lighting up.

“But not a very good one,” countered Doris. “I don’t exactly see the good citizens of Reigate welcoming a plane-load of refugees in their midst.”

“This is a wealthy parish,” said Diane. “Many good Christian souls live here. Most of those in the firebombed ruins have nowhere else to stay.”

“You can suggest it,” said Doris. “You might even be able to find space for a hundred or so wretches, though they would have to be orphaned or terminally ill to be granted compassionate asylum in the United Kingdom. You can possibly raise funds from the few dozen people who regularly attend church and the many more who use it for weddings and funerals. You might even get a few lines of praise in the Guardian and possibly the Church Times. But I don’t see it being popular with the people of Reigate. The mere hint of surrendering sovereignty to Brussels will have them up in arms. The slightest suggestion that the government might go soft on immigration has protestors outside the town hall. I can’t see too many people in the district celebrating the prospect of having to house Indians and Pakistanis in their community.”

“It need only be a temporary measure until the refugees can return home,” said Diane.

“And when would that be?”

“Radiation eventually goes away. It’s got a half life.”

“What happened in Rawalpindi and Lahore and Srinagar wasn’t like Hiroshima



or Nagasaki. It was ten, twenty, maybe a hundred times worse. The radiation will take generations to disperse.”

“All the more reason for good Christians to offer help.”

“And not many of these unfortunates are Christian. Most are Muslim. You’ve seen how much prejudice there is against Muslims. And those who aren’t followers of Islam are Hindus or Sikhs. Will your parishioners really want to give aid and assistance to heathens?”

“God loves all His children,” said Diane.

“I dare say He does,” said Doris with a defeated sigh. “However, on a lighter matter... Do you want to see my latest creation?”

Diane grinned with almost childish enthusiasm. “Yes, I would.”

Doris lifted her naked body off the sofa where she’d been lying beside Diane and rummaged in her handbag until she found the memory stick she was looking for. She plugged it into Diane’s system and fiddled with the remote so she could display it on the screen.

Doris might be a project manager nowadays, but many years before she’d started her career in a more humble position as a Computer Science graduate and she still enjoyed playing around with computer graphics. She’d scanned three-dimensional models of the reverend and herself into her computer and used it to generate some disturbingly realistic images of the couple in fantastical situations.

“Here are some stills I generated,” said Doris, as she flicked through a slide-show of half a dozen such images. There was one of Diane and Doris together on Mars holding up a rock covered with Martian bacteria. There was one of the couple visiting

a Buddhist temple in Cambodia. There was one of Diane posed like a mediaeval saint with a halo above her head and her hands clasped in prayer.

“I’m not sure I’m worthy of that one,” laughed Diane. “There’s a great deal more I have to do to be beatified.”

“You will, sweetheart, I’m sure,” said Doris, kissing her lover on the lips. “And here is what you’ve really been looking forward to seeing...”

Doris activated a movie that she’d generated using the images of the two lovers and animated by pornographic software that overlaid their bodies on the images of porn stars having sex. It was a seamless and deceptively realistic movie of Diane and Doris making passionate love. It suffered only by being rather more perfect than the real thing. The folds on Diane’s stomach were less pronounced. Doris’ vagina was less ragged. And the setting was a landscape in the English countryside where it was highly unlikely that two middle-aged women would be allowed to cavort so openly.

“It’s beautiful, darling,” said Diane in grateful amazement. “It must have taken you *ages*.”

“If it works then every moment will have been worth it,” said Doris placing a hand between Diane’s thighs. “Are you feeling hot?”

Diane leaned over to kiss Doris on her lips—a prelude they both knew of greater passion to come—while keeping an eye focused on the television screen.

“I couldn’t be more in love with you if I tried, darling,” she said.

## **XV**

### **Eric Esterhazy MP**

### **2044**

After the applause had died down, Reverend Dawkins once again addressed the televised audience seated ahead of her in the town hall. She had a hard fight ahead of her. Only the barest minority were sympathetic to her. Most of the applause was reserved for Eric Esterhazy, the Minister for Housing and MP for Redhill & Surrey, who had just spoken.

“I don’t accept that the shelter we provide for refugees from the nuclear wastelands of India and Pakistan can in any way be described as a ‘conduit for immigration’”, she said steadily and evenly. “Our mission is to extend compassion to our fellow human beings. The refuge cannot be described as a ‘gateway for refugees’.”

“Do you intend to deport the people you shelter back to where they come from when they’re fit and able to return?” asked Emily Littlejohn, the Fox News UK anchor who was hosting the discussion.

“I think ‘deport’ is putting it rather strongly,” said the vicar.

“Deport them is exactly what you should do,” said Eric Esterhazy MP. “The British Isles are overcrowded. We can’t cope with yet more immigrants, refugees or whatever you want to call them. If we want to provide a reasonable level of housing, education and medical care to our British citizens, then immigration policy must be vigorously enforced.”

“Is it government policy to deport immigrants?” asked the host.

“It *is* when they’ve entered the country illegally,” said the Minister. “In fact, it’s

the same policy in all countries in the European Union. It's the policy of most states in the USA. It is the right policy. Otherwise, it's unfair on British citizens who're looking for employment in these straitened times. The country is overcrowded. Jobs are hard to find. We have to be realistic."

"And how do you respond to that, reverend?" asked the host.

"I think you're putting too much focus on the question of immigration and not enough on our moral responsibility," said Diane. "Christians have a moral duty to help those in need. There are hundreds of millions of people throughout the Indian subcontinent who are in desperate need of help."

"I don't think Her Majesty's Government can allow this country to accommodate an extra hundred million British citizens," said Eric Esterhazy MP without waiting to be invited to reply by the host and whose remark was rewarded by thunderous applause from the audience.

Eric observed the reverend as she spluttered a response to the host's follow-up questions, but he knew that she'd never really had a chance. Fox News UK was a good friend of the Conservative Party, particularly in the relatively affluent South East. As the BBC continued to decline as a media presence, Fox News UK was now Britain's most influential and powerful news outlet. He never had reason to fear an invitation to appear on a Fox News program, especially on home turf, whereas he would only appear on the BBC when instructed to do so by Conservative Central Office.

Reverend Diane Dawkins was the token liberal on a panel of four guests in which Eric held the fulcrum position as the voice of moderation. The other two guests were Karen Mackenzie, an author of books which claimed to expose the extent by

which the liberal minority routinely distorted scientific evidence to serve its interests, and Horace Cutler, the token black guest whose strident views opposing immigration were somewhat less moderate than the Housing Minister's.

Eric was quite content to watch Horace launch a vitriolic attack on the reverend. He patronisingly questioned the kind of Christianity she represented, disparaged the workshy immigrants from Rawalpindi, and emphasised that the United Kingdom should tighten immigration controls along with the rest of the European Union, an institution he normally had no time for.

"It's not racist to want tighter immigration control," said Horace, aware that his skin colour independently affirmed that. "The world is a crowded place. There is famine, war and plague on every continent. The UK's interests are best served by keeping such problems as far out of reach as possible."

"The troubles of any one of God's creation is a matter for us all," said the reverend.

"I admire your well-meaning compassion," said Eric, acting in his self-appointed role as the panel's moderate, "but misguided liberal benevolence is precisely why the world is in the mess it is today. If the less developed nations acted more in their self-interest rather than choosing to rely on the charity of wealthier governments, there wouldn't be so many people unable to rely on their own governments for help."

"Surely the plight of the millions displaced by nuclear war deserves our compassion," pleaded the reverend.

"It is not in the interests of the UK to correct the mistakes made by other nations," said Karen Mackenzie who was utterly unsentimental with regards to such

matters. “If two nations should bomb each other that is their choice. The British taxpayer shouldn’t have to pick up the tab for their monumental folly. Surely it’s bad enough that we have to suffer from the nuclear waste that was thrown into the sky.”

However much satisfaction Eric was getting from this mismatched debate, he had to acknowledge that there were still too many obstacles in the way of successfully implementing a sensible immigration policy. The electoral reform that took place so many years ago had made British politics indecisive and vacillating. Coalition government followed coalition government. The Conservatives might be the chief party in the coalition, but they had to compromise with the Liberals, the Democrats and the rest on the left of the coalition. Although Eric was a Tory through and through, his sympathies were more with those in the British Independence Party and the UK National Party on the coalition’s right.

Immigration wasn’t the only issue that troubled Eric, of course. Taxes were too high. Ten percent income tax was just robbery. VAT at thirty-five percent, although less of a worry, was similarly too high. Too much money was being squandered on failed government schemes to build flood defences, develop alternative energy, house undeserving and drug-addicted wastrels, educate young hooligans, and provide medical treatment for the wilfully obese. And all the while, England and the rest of the UK were going to the dogs. It now ranked as only the fourth richest country in Europe. A nation no longer qualified to be a member of the G10 on the basis of GDP. A once proud nation whose pitiful military capability relied too heavily on buying arms from China and Russia. The streets of Redhill and Reigate were overflowing with unemployed jobs who indulged in drug binges at the taxpayers’ expense. Things were not the way they

should be and without a firm hand they were only going to get worse.

When the recording of the television discussion was finished, Eric shook hands with the host and the other three guests, taking care to be especially polite with Reverend Diane Dawkins. She was, after all, one of his constituents as well as being one of those most likely to blog, tweet or otherwise publicise her differences of opinion from those of the Minister of Housing.

He then strode over to shake hands with Dick Tebbit, the producer of *Town Hall Live*.

“Good show as always, Eric,” said Dick. “You showed the pinko where to get off.”

“Don’t think it’ll make any difference, Dick,” Eric said sadly. “She’ll carry on harbouring refugee scum and there’s not a bloody thing anyone can do to stop her.”

“Nothing will change while the coalition government gives cabinet seats to pinkos,” said Dick. “The Immigration Minister is particularly weak. Davison might just as well fling the doors wide open and say ‘Come on! Come in! Everyone’s welcome to a free meal on us.’”

“It’s broad-based coalition, Dick.”

“Broad enough to have queers, greens and pinkos obviously, Eric. The Tories need reforming. Get rid of the TINAs.”

“TINAs?”

“Tories In Name Alone. It’s a labelling tactic that worked in the States. Look how well unadulterated conservatism is doing over there.”

“Not well enough,” said the Minister. “I just don’t know how long the States

are going to remain United. Those Northern and Western States are getting increasingly resentful about the Republicans' grip on government."

"That's their problem, not ours," said Dick. "Look, I've got an post-shoot party at the Reigate Regency. We've booked a three-bedroom suite. There's someone there I'm sure you'd like to meet."

"Is she anything like the last one," laughed Eric. "She had massive tits and a big fat arse."

"She was good though, wasn't she?"

"Bloody good!" Eric said with a chuckle as he recalled her amorous jigging between his legs. "What time shall I turn up?"

Eric's time was constrained by the need to attend his constituency surgery for which he was always late and which he conducted as rarely as he could get away with. He was an important Government Minister after all. After this, he phoned his wife to tell her that he had important government business and ordered a taxi to take him to the stately Reigate Regency. This was a hotel which if it didn't now provide a discreet and expensive service for the well-heeled would long ago have gone the way of most hotels in a country where tourism had mostly collapsed due to the exorbitant cost of travel.

Eric wasn't disappointed by the girls on offer. Fox News UK had an extensive entertainments budget which easily extended to cover the cost of hiring good quality whores. The minister observed with satisfaction how much the class of women who took up prostitution as a career had improved, despite the exacting penalties Eric's government had introduced for making that choice. A high proportion almost certainly belonged to the very population of illegal immigrants Eric was most eager to deport.



Not that this was an observation that troubled Eric too much. Principles are only principles after all. And it gave the minister a certain wicked satisfaction to know that if these women were deported back to whichever famine-stricken, radioactive or deforested shit-hole they'd escaped from he'd have fucked them twice: once literally (and usually up the arse) and once again figuratively but with rather more sustained ill effect.

On this occasion he was able to enjoy the company of Dune and Emerald which names he was certain neither had been originally christened with. In fact, as one girl quite clearly came from one of the quarrelling Stans to the south of Russia and north of Tibet and the other was almost certainly from either India or Pakistan, they wouldn't have been 'christened' at all in the Christian sense of the word. Their English wasn't that bad, although Dune, the Uzbekistani or Turkmenistani, had some difficulty with pronunciation. But Eric wasn't there for conversation and the girls didn't have to say much as he fucked the one in the arse, as he preferred, and let the other push her tongue inside the hairy recesses of his buttocks.

Eric was a harsh lover—not that his wife was especially aware of this—and the girls were soon covered in bruises and slaps which would soon settle down and not unduly trouble their next patron. When he left them—sobbing slightly, as he preferred, the mascara dripping down their cheeks and a small trickle of blood coming from Emerald's anus—Eric was in a thoroughly good mood. This had been enhanced, of course, by the lines of coke that accompanied his energetic lovemaking.

“Good girls, aren't they?” said Dick when Eric returned to the main room of the party. Most guests were gathered around a holo-screen that showed nothing more

shocking than Fox News UK's headline roundup and the usual pictures of Islamic terrorists being rounded up in the Southern United States as part of the new zero tolerance policies.

"Bloody good!" agreed Eric.

He looked around him. As usual, there was a public display of sex on the sofa. Emily Littlejohn was probably the only one amongst the naked men and women who wasn't being paid to perform. Most of the guests were like Eric and preferred to enjoy sex where they couldn't be watched and appraised. Judging by the company with which she was so intimately engaged, Emily obviously liked her cock and cunt to be black or brown.

"I told you I had someone here I thought you ought to meet, Eric," said Dick who guided the Minister towards Sir David Coulson, Chief Executive for Fox News UK, whose expensively suited back was ahead of him.

"Oh, hello Eric," said the honoured news executive as he shook Eric's hand. "We have a lot to talk about, you and me. There's much that I'd like to do for the country and common decency, and I believe that you may be the man to help me. However, you will need to excuse me momentarily."

He nodded downwards at the Asian woman whose mouth was pumping up and down on his erect penis.

"Certainly, Sir David," said Eric who knew better than to expect one of the most powerful people in the country to drop everything for him. "I'll wait by the drinks cabinet with Dick."

"Good man," said the executive who slapped his erect penis onto the woman's

cheeks and let a drool of spit fall from his mouth and onto her eyes.

He was obviously enjoying this encounter rather more than she was.

## **XVI**

### **Lindiwe**

### **2066**

It was the first time since Lindiwe was a child that she could remember ever being happy. Was this what she'd been looking for since she'd left Lesotho? In fact, so low had her measurement of luxury fallen that just to sleep on a mattress she didn't have to share and to survive without needing to sell her body were enough now to make every day seem worth living.

Lindiwe was totally baffled how Reverend Diane Dawkins had managed to keep the Reigate Refugee Centre open through the years of the English National Unity government, but the reverend was more than willing to answer Lindiwe's questions on one of her regular visits to the centre.

"The centre survived because it was designated as a Refugee Processing Centre," the stout elderly woman explained. "The government needed holding stations to house refugees before they were deported, but ours was a centre that made no attempt to hasten bureaucracy's exasperatingly slow processing."

The centre had been used as a refuge for illegal immigrants since the Indo-Pakistani Nuclear War and continued to serve a similar function through the Stan Wars and the Wars of Secession in what had once been known as the United States.

"Nowadays the majority of refugees come from Africa and the Middle East," said the reverend. "In your case, of course, it's because the economy's collapsed. In the Middle East, it's because of political repression and war. From Egypt to Iraq, from Morocco to South Africa, there seems to be no let up in the flow of refugees."

Although the reverend was sympathetic, she was adamant that the centre should never be perceived as a facilitator of immigration. “You can’t believe the problems I’ve had. The local MP was especially unsupportive when the English National Unity government was in power. In any case, it’s not appropriate for the Church of England to have a political view on the immigration issue. Our concerns are entirely compassionate. It is immoral to allow people to starve or die from radioactive poisoning when we can do something to help.”

Although Lindiwe wondered whether the reverend was being disingenuous in her protestations she had to acknowledge the simple arithmetic that wouldn’t and couldn’t go away. The international status of the Kingdom of England may have suffered ruinous decline. Its relation with its immediate neighbours, the Republic of Wales and the United Kingdom of Scotland and Northern Ireland, could now be best described as frosty. It was currently in the humiliating process of petitioning to rejoin the Northern European Union it had left with so much bravado. But despite all that, the quality of life in the kingdom was still immeasurably better than it was in most of Africa. There was no famine. There was no armed militia roaming the streets. There was a working economy. There was electricity, gas, running water and public transport. And there was no lingering radioactivity as there was in the Stans and on the borders of India and Pakistan. Literally billions of people were clamouring to get into the Kingdom of England just as they were into all the relatively prosperous nations of Europe, East Asia and North America.

As far as Lindiwe was concerned, the greatest benefit of being able to live at the Reigate Refugee Centre was that she no longer had to sell her body. Whether openly or

more discretely, it had been almost the only way in Ashton Lovelock she could earn a living where immigration status wasn't an obstacle. When Lindiwe confessed to her friend Aparu how far she'd sunk on the day she returned to her squat with a bag of pills to treat the gonorrhoea she'd contracted, she was shocked to find that her friend was transacting much the same kind of business just to be able to continue working at KFC-McDonalds.

Lindiwe had to get away. She didn't really know where, but it definitely had to be somewhere else. It was a trail that took her hitchhiking along the M4 motorway and was only made possible by continuing to offer the same sexual services she hoped never to have to do again. After passing through several other small towns Lindiwe eventually arrived at Reigate, Surrey, where by taking advantage of the good reverend's compassion she at last found a place to stay where her vagina could take a well-deserved rest. It wasn't that her new job of sweeping Reigate's streets attracted especially attractive wages—a pitiful piece rate was the best she could expect—but at last, with a secure bed and freedom from the protection rackets that preyed on illegal immigrants, Lindiwe could begin to think in terms of improving her lot.

As part of her rent, Lindiwe also helped in the refugee centre's administration. Her doctorate in biotechnology was evidence of significantly more advanced arithmetic skills than those she needed to maintain the centre's accounts. The creaky old computer might not have the horsepower to handle the rendering requirements of modern VR or to seamlessly stream terabit data, but it was more than adequate for the task of adding figures together. The flow of income from fund-raising and charitable donations was always just about exactly the same as the outgoings and bore witness to the fact that

Reverend Dawkins received no income at all from the enterprise.

Lindiwe helped in other tasks that were even further adrift of her postgraduate qualifications. She helped make the beds, scrub the floors, and even take care of refugees who were suffering from the final excruciating stages of radiation poisoning. Lindiwe's heart brimmed over with agony as she watched the health of victims, often younger than her, steadily deteriorate from cancers that lacerated the flesh and devoured the internal organs.

"Would you like to work full time?" asked the reverend after only four months. "I've seen how much you do around the place. We need people who are capable and willing and, of course, who speak such excellent English."

"What about my street-cleaning?" Lindiwe wondered.

"I'm sure there's someone else who'll be more than eager to take on that responsibility," said the reverend. "You have skills and talents that are being wasted while you wander the streets of Reigate with a broom and plastic bag."

There was of course no shortage of work required to administer the centre. This was partly because the dismemberment of the United Kingdom into three separate nations had been hasty and uncoordinated, leaving English accounting practices in a labyrinthine mess. Even so barely a tenth of Lindiwe's time was spent maintaining the accounts. Her time was mostly dedicated to general caretaking jobs alongside a resident taskforce of willing but mostly terminally ill refugees. Amongst her duties was the care of the same refugees when their infirmity finally brought them down.

"How could those generals and politicians allow the bombing of Ashkhabad, Amritsar and Duachanbe?" commented Dr Abdullah, who was a refugee from

Uzbekistan. “What was going through their minds when they condemned so many millions of people to a life of such misery?”

“They probably thought of the victims as corpses rather than survivors,” bitterly remarked Daniel, an Ethiopian doctor who nowadays most often worked as a nurse. “If a soldier earns a medal from killing just one enemy, think how many medals a general gets from killing millions with just a single bomb.”

“They knew the value of life, though,” said the doctor sarcastically. “Barely one single rouble. More than half the bombs used in both nuclear wars were neutron bombs. They killed people but left property standing. All the better for the looters once the background radiation had dissipated.”

As a Refugee Centre employee, Lindiwe was even invited to have dinner with the reverend and other favoured employees. The reverend shared the vicarage with Doris who was about the same age as her partner. She was employed by an international company that along with most such companies based in the City of London had radically scaled down its activities in the British Isles when the English National Unity government honoured its electoral pledge to leave the Northern European Union. She claimed that she was just working out her final years until retirement, although she also complained that her pension wasn't going to be adequate.

“The Stock Exchange has had too many crises, shocks and falls for it to be worth much anymore,” she said while eating the vegetarian curry prepared by the centre's cook. He was a refugee from Amritsar and a living witness to the ravages that persisted a quarter of a century after the city was engulfed by the century's most famous mushroom cloud. His face was covered more by scar tissue than skin.



“It’s not all gloom and doom,” the reverend said cheerfully. “Things have improved a lot in this country in the last four years. They’ve at last started repairing the flood defences in East Anglia. They might even drain the swamps round Norwich and people will be able to get about without getting their feet wet. And they’re doing wonders with renewable energy.”

“There’s been too much damage done already to make any appreciable difference,” disagreed Doctor Abdullah who was also invited over for dinner. “You can’t reverse a four degree rise in global temperatures as easily as that.”

“You have to start somewhere,” said the reverend. “Now things are settling down in America, the Northern United States and the Western Union are doing something practical at last...”

“... while the Republic of North America still burns up what’s left of the world’s petroleum at heavily subsidised prices,” Doris disagreed.

“It’s something, nonetheless,” said the reverend. “Look at the strides that the world’s two leading economies, Japan and China, have made. They’ve taken up the slack in the space program after the former United States had to duck out. They’ve produced so many amazing scientific miracles. Robots that seem almost human. Advances in biotechnology. The research into nuclear fusion. They might even find a cure for cancer.”

“It all sounds good,” admitted the doctor, “but that’s not enough to address the real problems of the world.”

“And what are they?” asked the reverend.

“You know as well as I do,” said the doctor. “The environment is in crisis. Too

many people and not enough resources. And where there is enough to go around, like in China, Japan and some parts of Europe, there isn't the will or the wisdom to share it fairly."

"He's right, Diane," said Doris. "It's not looking good. And it's the rich countries that are most at fault."

The reverend smiled. "We can't change the world alone, but I don't believe that the Lord Jesus Christ would ever abandon His creation. I still hold firm that through the Love of Jesus Christ Our Lord, we will all be saved."

"Amen," said Doris.

Lindiwe wasn't sure whether the reverend's partner was being sincere, but her heart echoed the sentiment. Her own faith had been sorely tried by the journey from Lesotho and Reigate. Her body had been battered and fucked and bugged time and time again. Her genitals had been ravished by abuse and venereal disease. At last here in the refugee centre run by the good Reverend Diane Dawkins, Lindiwe's faith in her God and the goodness of other people was once more restored.

## XVII Tamara 2093

Tamara studied the framed picture on the wall. It showed the image of a slightly tubby middle-aged woman which had been made to resemble a mediaeval Christian saint. She even had a halo around her forehead.

“Who’s this?” Tamara asked.

“It’s Saint Diane,” said Dahab. “She was the founder of the Reigate centre.”

“Is she a saint?” wondered Tamara. “The picture doesn’t look genuine.”

“It’s a picture that was composed on a computer,” Dahab explained. “We call her Saint Diane. I’m not a Christian so I don’t know if she’s been made a saint, but we call her one here.”

“I’m not a Christian, either,” said Tamara. “I don’t even know whether there are any Christians staying here. But I think there’s a quite convoluted process involved in becoming a saint. I don’t even know whether the Church of England has saints.”

“This is the church of St Mary Magdalene,” said Dahab. “It’s an Anglican church so I guess the Church of England *does* have saints.”

Although the Reigate Centre was just as packed out as the Broad Oak Refugee Camp, it was much better managed and the staff who worked there significantly more sympathetic to the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. Tamara was impressed by the difference a more efficient administration could make, especially since it was managed by people who’d originally arrived in England as refugees themselves.

Tamara was determined to make a positive contribution right from the start.

That was partly because it was obvious that there were jobs that needed to be done that she could help do, but mostly it was because she desperately needed the distraction.

Tamara was more grief-stricken than she'd imagined possible when her mother died and her body was taken away for a proper Jewish funeral. This had to be in London as it was one of the few English cities where there was still a working synagogue. The fragile threads that had held Tamara's family together during those months of travel across Europe finally snapped the moment her mother was buried. Her two brothers took the opportunity of the London excursion to slip away from the lax supervision and surrender their fortunes to the huge sprawling city. Those family members with which Tamara was left were only distantly relatives and quite capable of managing without her. For a while she believed she owed them an obligation but when she realised that they were eligible for more food and resources if they continued to claim for her two missing brothers and dead mother, Tamara decided that she could make a better contribution to their welfare if she also absconded.

Her family shed more tears for the departure of Tamara's mother than they would for her. Perhaps they knew about her relationship with Bilal who, in any case, had been transferred to a refugee camp in the North of England where there was an urgent requirement for cheap labour to help shore up the collapsing flood defences. Tamara was now alone, wretched and grieving in South London, but at least she no longer had to share a mattress with two brothers, a distant cousin from what had once been Tel Aviv and an uncle who farted most of the night.

For the first few nights, Tamara wasn't so sure that her decision to leave was such a good one. Her only possessions were the clothes she wore, a backpack full of

underwear and the all-important documentation that included a passport to a no longer functioning nation. She mingled with the countless unfortunates begging on Croydon's cratered streets. She ate soup that was doled out by makeshift soup kitchens and slept in the doorways of boarded-up shops. By chance, she heard of another refugee centre in Reigate that might be able to help her if she was willing to work there for no pay. Tamara's main concerns were food and sleep rather than money, so she walked the twenty kilometres or more across the suburban sprawl and decaying slums to Reigate.

South London had suffered badly from generations of neglect. The wealthy lived in gated communities or along well-appointed avenues guarded at both ends by private security guards. The less privileged lived in overcrowded and rotting houses. Many were refugees who'd migrated not from distant war-torn or famine-struck foreign countries but from the hinterland of the River Thames that had finally been overwhelmed by the rising tide. The traffic in South London's congested roads was a miscellaneous assortment of electric cars and buses, bicycle-driven vehicles and even make-shift carts pulled by donkeys and mules.

Reigate was beyond a ridge of hills and thus relatively safe from flooding. It wasn't so secure from London's suburban sprawl that stretched unbroken along the A23. Why, wondered Tamara, would the Reigate Centre give her shelter when it was denied by so many other places?

"We just don't like turning people away," said Mehmed when she asked why she'd been so lucky. "In any case, it would seem especially heartless to turn away a person who's just lost her mother and is sleeping on the streets. There's also the fact that you're Jewish and a woman."

“What difference does that make?”

“There’s a great deal of prejudice against Jews these days,” said Mehmed, “particularly in my community.”

“Your community?”

“The Muslim community. It can be very vicious. Many blame Israel for all the misery that’s blighted the Middle East. And many don’t distinguish between the government of Israel and its citizens.”

“And also for being a woman? Can’t I look after myself as well as a man?”

“I don’t mean to appear sexist,” said Mehmed. “One of the few professions flourishing at the moment is prostitution. Women like you, especially young and pretty ones, are immediate candidates for exploitation. It mightn’t be too long until you became just another one of the wretched souls on Bell Street and Reigate Road.”

Tamara wasn’t going to complain too much about receiving preferential treatment, but she guessed that it was because Mehmed was a father of two teenage girls that he showed such compassion.

She also wondered whether Mehmed would be so sympathetic if he knew that she’d already succumbed to the temptation of selling her body, even though it was more to get favour than a steady source of income. It was true that she’d rather never have to do so again but Tamara was aware that it was an option still available to her.

Many of the refugees in the Reigate Centre were radiation and burns victims from the Middle East War even after the two decades since it had happened. There were more Muslims than Jews, but that just reflected the proportion of victims. Inevitably, Tamara’s sympathy was directed mostly towards her fellow Jews, however much she

tried to be impartial.

“I’d be dead if it wasn’t for this centre,” said Daniella, a middle-aged woman whose skin was still blackened and sore after all the intervening years. “When the bomb dropped in Tel Aviv everything that I’d lived for, saved for and believed in came to an end. My children. My husband. My parents. If I’d been standing on the other side of the municipal offices I’d have been incinerated along with everyone else.”

“It’s a long way from Tel Aviv to Reigate,” Tamara remarked.

“Aid agencies and governments were more helpful in those days,” said Daniella. “There were fewer problems in the world, so resources went a lot further.”

Tamara helped the nurses take Daniella’s bandages off and put new ones on. She grimaced in sympathy with her patient when she winced from the pain on skin that was tender and still not healed.

“The radiation doesn’t help,” said Fatima, a nurse who also worked for no pay at the centre. “She’s got melanomas speckled amongst the scars. I guess it’s just a matter of time.”

“What happened to most of the victims?” Tamara wondered.

“You mean the original victims of war, as opposed to the displaced like you? Most are dead of course. And most of those died within a week or so of arriving here. An ambulance would arrive at the front entrance and a hearse would leave from the back. We thought Daniella would be one of those, but she’s made from stronger stuff than most.”

“Do you still keep the faith, dear?” asked Daniella when her bandages were replaced and she was able to sit up on her bed.

“Well, yes,” said Tamara. “I don’t go to the synagogue because the nearest one is too far away, but I try to observe the Sabbath. It’s difficult to be dutiful in this country.”

“I’m sure it is, dear,” agreed Daniella. “I think I’ve lost my faith.”

“Lost it?”

“I don’t think I believe any longer,” she elaborated. “Not in a Jewish god. Not in a Christian god. And most certainly not a Muslim or Hindu god. If there was a God of the Jews then why has he forsaken us?”

“He hasn’t forsaken us,” said Tamara. “He has a contract with His people that will never be broken.”

“Except by nuclear fission,” suggested Daniella. “The Jewish people have suffered like no other. Time and again we’ve been banished from the Holy Land. Our people have been exiled to Egypt and to Babylon. Our temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed by Roman sword and Iranian missile. Our people have been scattered throughout Europe and North Africa first because of our ancestors’ admirable refusal to convert to other religions and now through the foolishness of the leaders we chose for ourselves. Indeed, through the stupidity of Likud: the party my family and I loyally supported for generations. And where is Likud now? What value is a settlement policy in a land of radioactivity and ruin? Only the truly mad would choose to settle on lands that will be scarred for a thousand years.”

“Israel isn’t a place,” said Tamara. “It beats in the heart of every living Jew. And we are not forsaken. We must learn from the sufferings of Job...”

“I admire your faith, dear,” said Daniella. “But where has it brought us? Job’s



sufferings were not one iota of that suffered by the Jews in the Nazi concentration camps. Job never suffered from radiation poisoning and incurable cancer. In any case, most of Job's suffering was endured by his family. What are the few boils he was cursed with compared to what I have to put up with. Do you really believe the answer is to shave our head and strip ourselves of our clothes?"

Tamara was troubled by Daniella's rejection of faith, but there was no rabbi within twenty kilometres she could turn to for advice. She could refer to the internet, of course, but only during those hours of the day when the power was on. Most of the advice given by the online rabbis was either bland or hysterical. There were few Jews in the new Diaspora who didn't blame their predicament on a combination of Islamic malice and Western indifference.

She wondered whether she could talk to the vicar who was now serving the Church of St Mary Magdalene, but he split the time he spent in the parish with many other churches scattered about Surrey and took very little interest in the Reigate Centre. In fact, he was rather embarrassed about it. If it hadn't been associated with a trust in the names of Diane and Doris Dawkins, it would have been closed down when its founders died.

In any case, how could a Christian give advice on matters of the Jewish faith?

"It's the Americans fault," said Menachem, another refugee. He had lost the sight of both his eyes along with all his hair and much of his nose in the catastrophic blast over Haifa. "If their nation hadn't fallen apart they would have protected us from the Islamic infidel. They were bold with rhetoric, especially in the fundamentalist Southern States, but weren't ready to back their words with muscle."

“They were worried that there might be another Civil War in the United States,” said Tamara in America’s defence. “If nuclear weapons had got involved then...”

“I don’t care what the quarrelsome American states do to one another,” said Menachem. “They’re probably better off as they are anyway. And would the world really be that much worse off if the Yankees had been wiped off the face of the Earth? But what happened to Jerusalem is unforgivable!”

## **XVIII**

### **Alex**

### **2025**

It was a long train ride from Rickmansworth to Reigate, but for Alex it was worth the effort. In any case, the travel time had been reduced to rather less than an hour since the new railway line from his Docklands office has been opened. He could work late, which for form's sake was increasingly often since he'd been promoted to management, and still arrive at Diane's one bedroom flat before dark.

Diane provided probably the best fun Alex had ever had with an internet date. She was amusing. She was good conversation. She was sexy. And she was wonderfully passionate between the sheets.

But there was a reason why she'd advertised her availability on the internet even though she was still in her twenties and four years younger than Alex. And that, despite a regime of several diets and regular exercise, was because she was undeniably plump.

Now she was discussing her plans about changing career. Marketing was no longer the vocation for her she once thought it was.

But a career in the church?

"Relax," said Diane as she pecked Alex affectionately on the cheek. "We can still have sex."

"But with a vicar?" said Alex. "That can't be right."

"It's the Church of England, silly," Diane laughed. "I'm not going to be a nun."

"Can vicars have sex?"

"Why not?" said Diane. "It's not illegal, is it?"

Nevertheless, Alex wouldn't let the subtleties of religious doctrine interfere with a good story. He was happy to announce on his fourth pint in the Archbishop Williams that he was fucking a nun.

"A nun!" exclaimed Dave, who worked in accounts. "That's fucking insane, man. Nuns don't fuck."

"Well, she's not a nun exactly," Alex clarified. "She's applying to be a vicar."

"That's the same thing, innit?" suggested Eddie, a big bearded guy with a management role in HR. "Vicars. Nuns."

"Vicars can fuck," assured Terry. "It's just that most vicars aren't chicks."

"Don't be so sure about that," said Dave. "I've heard that's not true any longer. More women than men work as vicars these days. We'll have a fucking woman archbishop next..."

"Then the pope'll be a chick too," said Eddie. "Only popes can never fuck. Not legally, anyway."

"We need Larry from Religious Affairs to sort us out on all this," Alex joked.

"Don't be a twat," said Eddie. "He's some kind of Muslim or Sikh or something. Anyway, he never drinks. Whatever religion he belongs to, it's against drinking. But still, Alex, your vicar girlfriend sounds better than the last one. She was a fucking farmer's daughter..."

"She's probably gone back to sucking donkey's dicks," sniggered Dave. "Does this nun of yours pray before she fucks?"

"Vicar," corrected Alex. "No, I don't think so."

"Perhaps she'll dump you, so she can stick a crucifix up her twat," suggested

Eddie.

“You’ve seen too many perv pornos, man,” said Terry.

“How do you know what they show?” wondered Eddie. “Anyway, it’s fucking common knowledge. It’s all that sexual frustration, innit?”

Alex enjoyed a good laugh with his mates after work. These days, he had no anxiety about getting a phone call from Gabby demanding his immediate presence. Diane wasn’t as experienced or as sexually adventurous, but she compensated for it by the extent of her devotion. Alex wasn’t sure he could ever confess to his workmates that he’d met her through a dating website or that she was somewhat overweight. Well, she wasn’t obese as such. She didn’t have those horrible saggy folds that some women had. And, anyway, more and more women—and men—were overweight these days. Alex sometimes worried about the stomach bulge over his own belt. Being overweight wasn’t such a big deal. After all, Diane wasn’t as bad as Eddie’s wife. She was so obese that Alex wondered about the physical obstacles the couple had to overcome to have sex. Online porn gave helpful advice on this aspect of sex as it did so many other critical questions of the human condition, but it still didn’t tempt Alex to seek out Eddie’s wife and give it a try himself.

Alex was well suited to life in middle management. He knew he was never going to become a great journalist, even of something as lightweight as VR. He struggled so hard to say anything interesting or enlightening about the virtual world. It was considerably more trivial than television and its content was becoming ever more narrow as the online community ossified around what it was already comfortable with. Even VR porn, on which he was an entirely unacknowledged expert, had become ever

less interesting. Perhaps there would be a day when VR rendering was less blocky, when the exasperating jerkiness didn't interfere with rapid scene changes, and when VR entertainment wasn't so slavishly derivative of things that had come before, such as porno movies, gaming, blogs and social network sites. When that day came, transistors would be using graphene rather than silicon, quantum computing would be used for other things than performing calculations on remote servers, and the gear he'd have to clamber into would be more comfortable than the stuff he had to use these days.

The path to being a successful manager at Reuters-Fox was mostly about anticipating the right impression to make to the right people. As long as business affairs were kept in some kind of order and the right numbers were entered into the spreadsheets, Alex's job was mostly measured by his ability to be witty and unthreatening at meetings, to be willing to do stupid overtime even when it wasn't needed, and to be good company in the pub. You didn't get anywhere in Reuters-Fox if you weren't a team-player and didn't have the right attitude.

"You ever thought of moving on from website management?" wondered his line manager, Dick, one day as they stood by the water cooler.

Alex wondered whether this was a trap. If he showed anything less than one hundred and ten percent commitment to the website division, this might be evidence that a more dedicated man or woman should take his place. Perhaps someone like that bitch Fatima whose choice of skirt and blouse was disarmingly revealing. On the other hand, Alex didn't want to be perceived as a man without ambition.

"Only if the right opportunity comes up and I'm the right man for the job," said Alex. "Why? Is there something in the offing?"

“I don’t know about that,” said Dick. “ITN’s not been doing so well recently. A merger of the news operations might be on the cards. It’s only talk, mind you.”

“Reuters-Fox-ITN?” Alex speculated.

“I doubt it,” said Dick. “We’ll cherry-pick the best and flog the rest. Take out the opposition and strip them of their assets. But there’ll be some growth opportunities for us, I guess. Then there’d be only the pinko BBC to worry about.”

Alex noticed no evidence of merger activity after this brief chat, though he now kept a closer eye on news stories about the venerable Independent Television News organisation. Advertising revenue was declining and aggregated news was very much the trend. Any organisation that employed foreign correspondents and featured original news content was at a disadvantage when the most important asset was timely, glossy and instant news coverage. It was a race between news companies in which the winners was the one whose cameras were first at a riot, whose spokespersons were the first to stand knee-deep in flood waters, whose correspondent was first parachuted down into a war zone, and whose paparazzi got the most explicit footage of a film star’s love life.

“I’m not sure I like how the news media is so much more focussed on attracting advertising revenue than it is on providing objective news,” mused Diane in her bed, on which were strewn pillows, fluffy toys and her own smooth bulging body.

Alex continued to stroke her buttocks while she reciprocated by pecking him gently around the crotch.

“*Fair and Balanced* is Reuters-Fox’s watchword,” he said.

“Not *Truthful and Objective* I note,” Diane responded. “When I go to a news website I want to find out what’s going on in the world. I don’t want to be distracted by

news stories about the latest pop star scandal.”

“It’s what the public wants.”

“That’s not good enough,” said Diane with a frown. “The media should be more ethical than that. There are too many major stories hidden behind dross. And it’s not just your employers, of course, though they must be amongst the worst. Where are the headlines about the droughts in Africa? What about the dispute over water resources in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh? What about the flooding on the Pacific islands? You hardly hear a thing about the wars in Senegal, Mozambique, Colombia or Nepal.”

“We’d be out of business if we didn’t give people what they wanted.”

“That’s just turning the argument upside down. Surely being informed is what people want when they go to a news website.”

“I’m not sure it is,” Alex admitted.

“And you think that’s how it should be?”

“Not really. It’s just how it is.”

Diane sighed. She rolled her body round and let Alex slip an arm behind her shoulders. “I often think you’re too accepting of how things are,” she told him. “What’s important is not that, but what we should do to make things better.”

“Is that why you want to be a vicar?” wondered Alex.

“That’s a motivation for sure but if that was the only thing then I’d do better to work for a charity. Or, at a pinch, a political party. There are other things vicars do besides campaign to help starving people in Africa and Asia. There’s the matter of believing in God and choosing to work as a shepherd to His flock. You and I, we never talk about religion, I know, but it’s a pretty important thing for me.”



“Well, I know you go to church every Sunday,” said Alex, who’d never much enjoyed this disruption to the weekend when he stayed over at Diane’s studio bedsit.

“So, what do *you* do that makes the world a better place?” wondered Diane with what Alex felt was more than a hint of accusation.

“Not as much as you,” Alex replied diplomatically.

“You don’t do anything at all,” said Diane rather more firmly. “I honestly wonder why we even have a relationship at all.”

Alex could see this threat to his comfortable status quo was one that he had to address, but it was also one that he was already aware of. He sometimes felt uncomfortable with her just as he once used to be with Betty and never once with his workmates. Why should he ever need to justify himself? It wasn’t as if he ever did anything bad. He wasn’t the one pumping oil and methane up from the ocean floor. He wasn’t the one exploiting the poor and downtrodden of the world. He wasn’t the one digging in his feet with regards to policies to implement low carbon options in energy and transport. Why should he get the blame? After all, the worst he ever did was vote Conservative at the general elections and that was more because he was fed up with paying so much of his income as tax than from any desire to support the rich and trample down the poor.

“The reason we have a relationship, sweetheart,” said Alex as he stroked his finger over Diane’s still moist labia, “is this.”

“I guess you’re right,” said Diane with an indulgent smile.

## **XIX**

### **Eric Esterhazy MP**

### **2045**

Eric was infuriated. The Prime Minister had just humiliated him in front of the whole Cabinet. What kind of a woman was she? An out and out bitch, that's what.

Moreover, it wasn't as if he could defend himself by claiming that he'd been misquoted since his words had been broadcast live on national television. On Fox News UK, naturally.

"I got a little carried away," Eric told the Prime Minister. "Of course, I didn't mean to say that Muslims from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan should migrate to Mecca if the situation got much worse. I was merely trying to suggest that the Islamic community already have a good system for handling the refugee problem should the war get much worse."

"It's a very delicate matter, Eric," said Dominic, the Foreign Secretary. "There's a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons in the region. The Iranians, the Russians, the Ukrainians and some of the Stans themselves: it's a tinderbox. The last thing we want is for the Minister for Housing and Urban Regeneration to make any ill-advised remarks. Thankfully, only the pinko newspapers and the BBC have picked up on it. With luck, it'll just fizzle out. But this isn't the time to exacerbate a tense situation."

"I agree with the Prime Minister," said Ivan Eisenegger, the Minister for Education and Welfare. "It's not only international opinion we have to handle with care. British Muslims of all ethnic origins expect constructive and sensitive diplomacy from the government with regards to our dealings with the belligerent nations. As far as the

British government is concerned, the conflict isn't about religion. Nor even about culture. If anything, it has far more to do with water and oil.”

When did Ivan ever disagree with the Prime Minister? And yet in private Ivan's views were, if anything, rather more robust than Eric's although he was noticeably reluctant about voicing them on Fox News UK. If Ivan had chosen to say in front of the television camera half of what he said to Eric in private then he'd fit right in. But Ivan's ambitions seemed set on a more distant goal than the Housing Minister's.

Eric, on the other hand, was the member of the Cabinet who appeared most often on television. Fox News UK knew he could always be relied on to express what the network considered to be the moderate side on any matter of national debate. Yes, the issue of immigration was becoming ever more worrying but there should be no discrimination against UK citizens of any complexion. Yes, there was evidence of climate change, despite the recent cold winter, but Eric wasn't convinced that the blame could be entirely attributed to the aviation and automobile industries. Yes, flood defences were ineffective and the catastrophic flooding of East Anglia and Southend and the number of lives lost was tragic, but we must remember the high cost of dealing with the problem and the fact that there are other more pressing issues. Yes, military defence was an ever-increasing burden on the UK's shrinking GNP and the arms were mostly bought from China and Russia, but a strong nation needed strong defence. Yes, Eric was speechless with disgust at the recent revelations regarding the crimes committed by paedophile and prostitution rings operating in the Southern Counties. Eric Esterhazy was the man Fox News UK liked to parade on the screen when an unerringly conservative opinion needed to be phrased with both reassuring sympathy

and apparent authority.

Eric did very well out of this arrangement. The fees for appearing on television were undeniably generous. There were also the proceeds from the newspaper articles that he dashed off for the affiliated newspapers and websites. He was now one of the country's most well-known politicians and his wife and family were very proud of him. Even his constituents were starstruck by the Surrey MP who was more often seen on television than he ever was in Reigate.

"I'm worried, Eddie," Eric confessed to the Director of News and Opinion when he was next at the Fox News UK studio. "The Prime Minister called me out in front of the whole Cabinet regarding my unguarded remarks about the 'Stani ragheads. I think I might be treading on thin ice."

"The bitch!" said Eddie as he patted his good friend on the back. "After all you've done. What do you suggest we do?"

"What do you think the boss would say?"

Eddie mused about that. "I could ring America and find out, but I don't think he'd appreciate that. My guess is that he'd recommended you cool it. You're our man in the Cabinet. We can lean on the Prime Minister, but she has to kowtow to the pinkos in the coalition. You're a reliable man, but there's not a lot that a Minister of slums and slum clearance can do. Your path to promotion is off-limits unless we can get some shit to stick to that liberal pinko in Number Eleven. We'll keep you well away from discussions relating to immigration and foreign policy. That way you won't put your foot in it again."

"It was a simple mistake, Eddie."

“We don’t mind ex-ministers, bloggers and talk show hosts coming on a bit strong, but a Cabinet Minister has got to be much more wishy-washy. We don’t want the coalition to collapse. And most of all we don’t want to let the red scum and their slimy green allies into government. That would be a fucking disaster. I’ll have to think about it, but in the meantime what we’ll try and do is position you more as an expert on business and the economy. Do you know much about that kind of stuff?”

“My degree’s in Classical History,” said Eric.

“And you didn’t even get a first, you wanker,” laughed Eddie. “Too busy chasing skirt I guess.”

“I was active in the National Union of Students.”

“Yeah. That was when there was such a thing. You did well enough to get to be Union President or something, didn’t you? But at the moment, it’s Economics I reckon you should be boning up on. I take it you’re numerate?”

“Numerate, Eddie?” said Eric, affronted. “Yes, I can do arithmetic.”

“As long as you don’t make the same bloopers that other politicians do when they calculate compound interest or when they misunderstand statistics and probability then we can get you on a few business discussion programs. I also take it you’re fully cognisant of your government’s rather feeble economic policies, Eric?”

“They’ve not changed for over half a century, have they?” said Eric. “Lower taxes. Cuts in Public Spending. Incentives for Business. Target the workshy and encourage the wealthmakers.”

“Well, yes, Eric. The policies remain the same, but the words we use to express conservative economic theory have to change with the times. If it sounds like a broken

record then there are plenty of liberal media twats who'll jump on what a minister says and point out where this or that economic theory hasn't worked in the past. You need to sound bold, adventurous and modern. I think we can get our business guys to ply you with a few links to websites that can give you the concepts and the jargon you need. The conservative agenda will never go forward if it sounds like it's standing still or even going back. It's a step by step process. Look at the success we've had in America."

"I just hope those pinko Northern and Western States don't fuck it up."

"There's no way the GOP will ever relinquish its grip on the White House and both houses on the Hill," said Eddie. "It's locked in place. The conservative agenda is fully on track. And there's still a way to go. The tax burden is still unfairly distributed. The blue-collar scum should have to pay for the services they get from out of their own pocket. It's not the responsibility of those who've worked hard to get to the top to subsidise the skivers, the dropouts and the Mexican immigrants. There's too much laxity shown towards troublemakers like the eco-warriors, the multiculturalists and the socialists who want to reintroduce healthcare."

"You don't think the rebel states will carry out their threats?"

"What? Rerun the American Civil War in reverse? Have the Northern Pinko states and the Western Green ones secede from the Strictly Red ones that make up the majority of the United States? Believe me, it's different these days. The power isn't with the tree-huggers and the bleeding hearts. It's an alliance of Wall Street, the hicks and God All Mighty. Or at least the God who hates abortionists and smites all those who are insufficiently patriotic."

"And how's the conservative agenda going to advance in the UK, Eddie?"

wondered Eric.

“I don’t know. I’m not a fucking strategist. It’s going to be through a combination of fear, greed and the ballot box, I guess. As always. Voters never want to give up on a tax-break. Voters don’t want foreigners to take their jobs. They don’t want to be told what kind of car to buy or what to eat. When it comes to the General Election the electorate always vote according to what it believes is its self-interest. It’s up to us and you in particular, Eric, to convince the couch-potatoes that their self-interest is best served by the Conservative Agenda.”

“And is it?”

“Of course it fucking is. You’re a Conservative. What’s good for the United Kingdom and the world is what’s good for business and the patriotic Englishman.”

“Englishman?”

“Scotsman. Welshman. Brit. You know.”

Eric returned by taxi to his plush London apartment in Mayfair that had been bestowed on him through the generosity of Fox News UK and its parent corporation. He only occasionally returned to his constituency and then mostly to reassure his wife that he still cared for her and his two daughters. Eric knew that the two greatest threats to his ascendancy was an image that was less than squeaky-clean and a performance as government minister that was less than merely competent. The success of his career as a minister was generally achieved by delegating as much responsibility as he could to civil servants who implemented what was, in actual fact, a relatively liberal housing policy in the face of ever stringent government cuts. His image was kept clean by the traditional means of maintaining absolute discretion and of making frequent phone calls

to the wife.

Part of that discretion, of course, was the result of him owning two London apartments. One of these was rather modest and located in Clapham. This was an apartment he only ever visited for the benefit of cameramen who wanted to photograph him going to and returning from his ministerial office. The one in Mayfair was where he could do whatever he liked. No one knew he lived there apart from the Fox News UK Accounts Department.

What he decided he would like to do tonight was savour the amorous company of Edwina, a short large-breasted black woman whose real name sounded nothing like the name she used and who once confessed that she'd been a qualified architect in whatever godforsaken African slum she'd originally come from.

Eric loved to squirt his semen into her mouth and slap his penis back and forth, up and down, on her thick-lipped face while mascara slipped down her cheeks and her nostrils snorted out bubbles of viscous pale fluid. He loved to hold the uncelebrated architect down on the bed while he thrust into the tight anal orifice between her huge buttocks. He loved to hear her cries for mercy (how fabricated Eric neither knew nor cared) when he slapped her with a cane on the buttocks which for him was the real source of her attraction.

It wasn't her sparkling intelligence or ready wit which she demonstrated so well when they slumped naked on the bed with the television on, more often tuned to the BBC Parliament channel than anything else. Nor her slightly accented speech from which came substantially more eloquence than anything that emerged from his daughters' lips when they discussed whatever shit pop group or teen flick that was



currently attracting their attention. Nor anything about her other than her talent at being fucked, taking it in the arse and begging for more. And all paid for by private accounts hidden from both parliamentary scrutiny and the tax man.

God Bless Fox News UK, said Eric to himself, as he fucked Edwina deep down her throat so that she would choke up not just saliva but often whatever she'd been eating earlier that day.

Perhaps Eric did value the fact that this black woman who could fuck so well was also so well educated. It appealed to him that he could exercise the power he relentlessly pursued in a fashion that would so literally humiliate the real life target of his verbal attacks on illegal immigration and women's rights.

If only he could do to the Prime Minister what he was now doing to Edwina. That would show the bitch. The Prime Minister was nowhere near as buxom, of course. In any case the cow was probably twice the black whore's age. But that wouldn't lessen the pleasure he'd get from pissing on the Premier and allowing the urine to trickle into her mouth, onto her prissy silk blouse and over her flat chest.

But would Eric ever get an opportunity to fulfil his ambition to befoul the leader of the Conservative Party? This could only be achieved if he followed the wishes of his boss in America and became an expert on the Conservative Economic Agenda. And then the trickle that would come down on the masses would be as smelly and yellow as that which he normally splattered over Edwina just when she thought that this time she might be spared that particular ordeal.

## XX

# Psychlone

## 2106

*“Eric Esterhazy is a cunt.”*

Psychlone, or Simon as he was still known to his mother or Psy as his friends called him, liked the lyric’s essential message, but it raised a host of obvious issues. If he incorporated the phrase into his next release, would anyone even know who Eric Esterhazy was? If it hadn’t been for his Second Class degree in Political History, Psychlone probably wouldn’t have known either.

It was only five years since he’d been an undergraduate at the University of Extern when he was equally well known as either Simon or Pothead. The nickname was a reference to two facts about him at the time of which one was that his surname was Potter. So, despite being screwed every month since graduation for interest repayment on his student fees, his three years at university couldn’t be totally wasted if he could use the name of an obscure mid-century politician in a lyric. All listeners needed to know was that Eric Esterhazy was one of that shady group of wankers who’d formed the English National Unity government and in the process fucked up the country and what little was left of its international reputation.

The single line left Psychlone with another rather more intractable problem. What word rhymed with ‘cunt’? He couldn’t use ‘National Front’ although that was the first rhyme that sprung to Psychlone’s mind. Associating the National Front’ with Eric Esterhazy and the mid-twentieth century Conservative Party would be both inaccurate and unnecessarily obscure. Who knew enough about the history of English politics to understand the reference? There was probably a better rhyme to use. Something pithy.

Something witty. Or perhaps he should use a different word to describe the former Chancellor of the Exchequer? Then again, ‘cunt’, unlike ‘bastard’, ‘motherfucker’ or ‘arsehole’, possessed exactly the degree of contempt that Psychlone wished to express.

When his lyric was conveyed from his laptop along with the software-generated symphonic orchestration to his hundreds of millions of downloaders, he knew that a little word like that could propel it into the international chart of the top one hundred tunes for that particular week. And the more downloads the greater the trickle of revenue into his credit account. A million hits translated into a million English pounds. And that would be enough to just about cover a week’s rent for his crappy squalid studio apartment in Exeter with a bit left over for a take-away pizza or curry. He needed a few hundred million downloads a month just to finance his repayment on student loans and his dope habit.

Despite having gained an Upper Second in Political History, Psychlone still wasn’t entirely sure where his political allegiance lay. That complicated matters for him. Most people held a one-dimensional view of politics, just as they held a one-dimensional view of religion, the environment or nuclear warfare. It was easy to say, for instance, that the continued mining for oil in the Antarctic was bad because it would accelerate the already alarming collapse of the glaciers that covered the continent. It was easy to say that the increased expenditure on nuclear warheads by the various belligerent nations was a bad idea. But when looked at it other angles, the same issues seemed much more multifaceted and far more intractable to resolve. Although petroleum was now an impossibly expensive fuel, it was still required by the plastics industry. What could people afford to sit on if there wasn’t plastic furniture given that

the cost of wooden furniture was beyond the reach of most people's pockets? And when a nation such as England and its allies in India, the Republic of North America and the Mediterranean Economic Union were confronted with nuclear weapons on their borders with Northern Europe, China and the Northern United States, what good was it to be neutral like Russia and the United States of South Africa? What was the right thing to do when a gun is pressed against your forehead?

And so too with politics...

It was easy to say that Eric Esterhazy and Ivan Eisenegger and the rest of the Government for National Unity were reactionary shits whose longest lasting contribution to the United Kingdom was to pull it apart. Their actions were understandable given the tension of the times and the overweening power of the right-wing news media. It might seem quaint today now that the media had become essentially impotent and the right-wing resurgence of the early twenty-first century had collapsed into a miasma of its own making, but at the time it was a message with genuine electoral appeal. Many people genuinely believed the nonsense spewed out by the media. It was just a shame that what would be merely diversionary to the general thrust of change—like fascism in the twentieth century and the counter-reformation in the sixteenth century—had a greater impact when its actual result was to cripple the necessary political will to tackle the real problems in the world just as the window of opportunity of doing so effectively was steadily slipping away.

But you can't get all that in a five minute dance number.

Psychlone was one of the top hundred or so dance producers in the world. His music was rocking the decks from Lhasa to Reykjavik, from Pyongyang to Sao Paolo,

and from Exeter where it was produced to Beijing where his revenue stream was calculated, subdivided and redistributed. It might be pitifully small but at least Psychlone was able to make a living from his art. It was all conceived and generated on his laptop where only thirty years before the sounds he created would have taken the resources of the world's best recording studios (when such things existed). These same compositions were distributed to the usual outlets from which they were downloaded and eventually caned on the world's best dance floors.

Psychlone was often asked about his musical influences in the frequent web interviews he had to give. It was a crap question because after two centuries of recorded music and a century and a half of electronic dance music there were so many of them. Was it dubstep, techno, reggae, bongo or epsilon that influenced him the most? Psychlone soon learnt that the best responses weren't the truthful or reflective ones that addressed the complex legacy but those that best pandered to current fashions. The real man behind the Psychlone pseudonym had to feed the electricity meter and keep his laptop running on batteries during the frequent power cuts. At the moment the fashion was for a soulful, bass-heavy beat with multiple cut-ups and a disorienting dance step so he could claim that his primary source was fractured dubstep, although Psychlone also listened to Shostakovich, Ligeti and Reich.

"You think too fucking much, Psy," said Ellen, Psychlone's long-suffering girlfriend. "What does it fucking matter what your influences are?"

She was sitting on the battered mattress the couple had bought second-hand from the market despite the presence of a prominent brown stain. She was skinning up a spliff stuffed with sawdust since cigarette tobacco was many times more expensive

than its chief ingredient. Psychlone had only moments before finished his online interview with a Los Angeles DJ from the Western Union who'd been enthusiastically dropping the latest Psychlone number. This was a mellow tune influenced by the music of Joe Zawinul and Flying Lotus.

"I dunno," said Psychlone. "I'm an influence myself, you know. I kinda feel responsible. There are guys all over the planet that listen to me on webcasts. I mean, it's fucking LA today. They're the good guys. They play the good stuff and they've got the world's best fucking weed. And then I might give an interview to some schmuck from Houston or a DJ from Casablanca, you know, in the fucking Mediterranean Economic Union. And they're like the bad guys. They're the ones whose governments put a ban on every fucking thing except stuff like dance music and quiz shows, Shouldn't I be doing a bit more than saying I dig these hundred year old MP3s from Croydon? Shouldn't I be doing a bit more?"

"Fuck, Psy," said Ellen passing over the spliff. "Just take a toke and fucking shut up, man."

Psychlone took a hit or two and handed it back. He let the fumes fill his lungs and listlessly watched the bluish smoke billow out from his nostrils.

"It's fucking tense, you know," said Psychlone. "It's more fucking tense than it's been since the cold war."

"Cold war?" wondered Ellen. "What the fuck's that? Some kind of ice cream franchise quarrel."

"Cold war. Late twentieth century. The whole world was split between the Soviet Union and the United States of America. They had missiles pointing at each

other. It could have been curtains.”

“Yeah,” admitted Ellen. “I heard something about that. Didn’t come to fuckall in the end. The Soviet Union disintegrated because no one believed in it any more. The United States disintegrated because the states in the North and West got pissed off with how the wingnuts in the Republican states were fucking them over. Though the nuclear warheads didn’t go away.”

“Yeah,” said Psychlone. “They’re still around. They’re just pointing in different directions.”

“So what you working on at the moment, Psy?” Ellen wondered to steer the conversation to a different direction.

“It’s something political,” said Psychlone. “It’s to do with the English National Unity Government.”

“What the fuck?” Ellen said in despair. “Don’t you ever give up? Who fucking cares what happened half a century ago? It was a fuck up from beginning to end. People want to dance to your music. They don’t want to be preached to.”

“Yeah. But where’s the stuff that does the preaching these days?”

“Fuck knows. Wherever it is, no one’s actually listening to it.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

Psychlone put his headphones back on and continued working on his number. Perhaps the lyric would have to go. Maybe he could dispense with lyrics altogether. They were always a drag and Ellen was dead right when she said that people didn’t really listen to them. On the other hand, if he could just put together some words that captured the anger and frustration he felt then he was sure his music would grab the

attention of a few more people, get more downloads and then maybe help pay off a bit more of his student loans. Perhaps he should try something that related to events in people's actual lives.

“What about if I put down some lyrics about power cuts or the battery shops being fresh out of juice or the broadband transmitters getting fucked up?” he asked Ellen.

“You what?”

“You know: if I put in lyrics about stuff that really pisses people off.”

“Is that what pisses you off most?” wondered Ellen who passed the spliff to Psychlone so he could take a few more tokes. “Not when there's a dope famine or something like that?”

“When's that ever happened?”

“Not in my lifetime,” admitted Ellen. “But it could, couldn't it?”

“Yeah, but I want a lyric that's something people can relate to. You know something like: *'My battery's flat. Lord knows, but my battery's gone flat.'* It could be called something like *My Battery Blues...*”

“It could be, but you'd need a wicked beat for it not to sound real naff. Something that doesn't make it sound like you're just whining.”

“What's wrong with whining? It's not like I can write about being blown up by a nuclear warhead. Or left starving in the streets. Or being drowned. But people do get pissed off and whining is exactly what they do.”

“Fuck, Psy. You wanna do something political then *do* something political. Just don't expect me to have an opinion. When I go dancing it's to get away from all the



shit. I don't wanna be wallowing in it. Lighten up."

"I dunno," said Psychlone. "I was just trying to put something together. The last tune went down real well. It got some real good reviews on the blogs and there was a real buzz. I just want to capitalise on it."

"What you need is a blowjob, you sad fuck."

"You think so?"

"Just a moment," said Ellen who breathed in a lungful off her spliff that burnt the paper right down to the roach. She shook her head as the smoke wafted round her lungs and stubbed out what was left in the ashtray.

She then pulled off the tee-shirt which had covered her small perky breasts and swaggered over to Psychlone wearing nothing more than a pair of white panties and plastic sandals. She threw the tee-shirt to one side with the logo advertising Pepsi-Coke Fizzy Cola prominently displayed on the back of the chair where it fell.

"Out with your dick, DJ Psychlone!" she commanded as she knelt in front of her boyfriend's bulging crotch. "I know just what you need to cheer you up."

## **XXI**

### **Iris**

### **2053**

Iris wasn't a girl who'd normally be described as someone with a nuanced understanding of politics even by those who she lived with. Her opinions on almost everything closely conformed to those of her friends and colleagues, and if she would ever join a debate regarding the limits of political freedom, the nature of democracy or what provided a government with legitimacy she would soon get very bored.

But even Iris was glued to the television as the extraordinary events unfolded from one day to the next. Only a week ago it seemed that the United Kingdom would stumble on as it always had despite the civil unrest that had become so familiar. Food riots. Petrol pump riots. Demonstrations against immigration. Demonstrations against racism. The United Kingdom was in a state of perpetual crisis. And it looked like that was just the way it would always be.

Things changed forever from the moment when the Coalition Prime Minister, Ivan Eisenegger, made his Special Announcement to the national news media. He declared a State of Emergency to resolve the strife that had caused such immeasurable damage to the British economy and the UK's international reputation. It was a natural response to the general desire for law and order in the country. The Prime Minister stood flanked by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Eric Esterhazy, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Olaf Smith, as he announced a series of measures which he admitted were draconian but which he also assured the nation were absolutely necessary to get the rioters off the street, to get the looters out of shops, to protect the ordinary law-

abiding citizen, and to restore Britain's pride in itself.

This was going to be, the Prime Minister announced, a Government of National Unity.

"Don't you ever get bored with watching this stuff on TV?" asked Iris' boyfriend, Giorgio. "I mean it's not like much has happened since the first day they declared a State of Emergency."

"That's just not fucking true," said Ember, who along with her lover, Ernie, and their daughter, Primrose, shared another room in the large house where Iris and Giorgio lived. "The Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish governments are all colossally pissed off about having a State of Emergency imposed on them from London. It looks like the new government wants to leave the Northern European Union. And there's talk that the BBC might lose its independence."

"Don't talk bollocks," said Ellie, who lived by herself in the smallest of the three bedrooms in the house. She was skinning up a spliff on a glossy fashion magazine with her bare legs stretched out across the threadbare carpet. "That would never happen."

"You don't know with these cunts, Ellie" said Ember. "You've heard the shit that arsehole Esterhazy's been spouting on Fox News UK all these years. I can well believe that he'd be more than willing to tell the BBC to toe the line. Not that the broadcaster anything like it used to be. All those budget cuts have left its television channels looking like one of those crappy ones you see on satellite from places like Nicaragua and Cambodia. No one really watches it now except for news."

"Well, if that bastard Esterhazy has his way, no one would want to watch it even for that," agreed Iris.

“Fuck’s sake,” said Giorgio, the only man in a room otherwise populated by three adult women and a child. Primrose was three years old and playing with a small tablet computer on which brightly coloured animated characters were dancing around in a magical kingdom. “Just fucking cool it. I get real pissed off with this political shit. Can’t we just watch something that’s just fun? There are some good cartoons on Fox at the moment.”

Ember snorted. She was the only one in the room with any professed interest in politics although the only times she’d been on demonstrations was when her partner could be persuaded. And since their daughter was born, there were fewer and fewer such opportunities. Ellie’s primary diversions were of a hedonistic nature. Giorgio could hardly even be persuaded out of bed in the morning since he’d lost his job at the council and he spent most of the day either in front of the television or hunched over his laptop.

Iris’ interest in politics had only come about as a result of the current crisis. She sort of supported demonstrators when they demanded better pay and stuff like that but was a little worried when their demands became more vociferous and the demonstrations were tainted by violence. The riots of the last two years had even spread into suburbs like Uxbridge and Bromley. They couldn’t be described as inner city riots any more. But could this new Government of National Unity be trusted? And if it was about National Unity, why were there actually fewer non-Tories in the new government than there’d been in the old Coalition Government?

Even so, there wasn’t much protest when, having passed her lit spliff over to Ember, Ellie picked up the remote and began scrolling through the channels. She

eventually settled on a twenty year old action movie that starred giant grasshoppers and a large number of vicious ants. Primrose momentarily lifted her head from whatever game she was playing and lowered it again when she realised how dark and gloomy the film was.

“I must have seen this film a dozen times,” said Giorgio.

“Well, it must be good then,” said Ellie who was more interested in skimming through the fashion pages of the magazine on which she’d just been rolling the spliff.

The company settled around the television in a moderate state of inertia as the joint was passed from person to person. Although it was mid-afternoon on a Wednesday, Giorgio was the only one who didn’t have a job to go to. Ember balanced her childcare duties with her shifts as a nurse in a hospital halfway across the other side of London. She frequently had to leave Primrose to the care of the household when Ernie was working late at the office, which was on most days. Ellie was a home-worker most days of the week, but only the occasional phone call and the urgency of a looming deadline ever kept her away from the communal living room.

Iris was a fully qualified postgrad zoologist, but she’d not yet found a job that matched her impressive qualifications. Her job at the biotech labs in Southgate hardly stretched her at all. She was convinced it could be done by a machine and that it would be by a machine that she’d eventually be replaced. The hours were crap too. This evening when the rest of the household, except Ember and Primrose, were heading out to a nightclub on some courtesy tickets that Ellie had somehow organised through one of her many boyfriends, Iris would be at the lab watching the clock go by and sorting out DNA samples.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Giorgio who kissed Iris when she at last left for work. “You’ll be able to get in later, won’t you? What time do you finish, anyway?”

“Five in the morning,” said Iris.

“Fuck that,” said Giorgio. “The bastards are fucking slave-drivers. You can’t slip out early, can you?”

“Yeah, I can. And get sacked too.”

“Well, a job’s a job,” said Giorgio ruefully.

Iris looked back at her housemates. Ellie was in sparkling form with elegantly applied makeup and dressed in a revealing silk top and low-slung denim shorts, while one of her boyfriends was sitting nervously on the sofa clearly uncertain about what the evening might have in store. It wasn’t unknown for Ellie to go out in the evening with one guy and come back with someone totally different. And it wasn’t necessarily another guy. Giorgio and Ernie were sitting around idly watching an American sitcom where the canned laughter accompanied all but the most trivial gesture or verbal inflection.

It was pissing down outside, so Iris hoisted up the hood on her jacket and ran through the puddles to the nearest bus stop. Her journey consisted of two bus journeys and one stretch underground. She had to allow plenty of time for the journey. The traffic was dreadful. There might be fewer petrol-driven cars and more battery-powered ones, but they still occupied as much space on the roads. The allowance she made for any delay was so great that she normally arrived at the lab at least half an hour before she needed to, and on a fixed shift system she wasn’t paid for hanging around in the canteen.

“You see the news?” asked Khadija, one of the other lab assistants, as they sat

down together with their coffee mugs by the microwave.

“Yeah,” said Iris. “About what in particular?”

“What the new government says about immigration and stuff,” said Khadija. “The way they’re tightening it up. It was on the BBC. It didn’t sound so bad the way the minister expressed it, but when the political editor analysed it the whole thing sounded like Nazi Germany or something.”

“It can’t be as bad as that,” said Iris. “And, anyway, you’ve got nothing to worry about. Your family’s been living in London for generations.”

“Nearly fifty years,” said Khadija in her South London accent. “Ever since my grandfather came over from Iraq during the Gulf Wars. Not that there’s much left of Iraq now. But it’s all this Burden of Proof business. A lot of people who’ve been legal might now be reclassified and even deported. You know: retrospective tightening of the regulations.”

“I didn’t know that immigration was such a big issue, anyway,” said Iris. “It’s only because of Fox News UK and the newspapers you’d ever think so. I heard that loads more people are emigrating because of the shit state of the economy and all those riots...”

“Yeah. Civil unrest. Good excuse for a coup.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic. I’m sure it’s not that bad. And anyway they’re the same old faces. Eisenegger. Esterhazy. Sauterelle. The same ones who’ve been in government since I can ever remember. And let’s be honest, the riots left me shit-scared. Do you remember when the whole of Central London was paralysed that time? Some bastard threw a brick or stone in my direction when I was trying to get to the tube

station. Nearly hit me.”

“Yeah. I hope you’re right about there being nothing to worry about,” said Khadija. “How’s Giorgio? Got a job yet?”

“I don’t think he’s even trying,” said Iris. “But he’ll have to pull his finger out. In two months time he won’t be able to claim dole any more. His six months’ll be up. Then either he’ll get nothing and scrounge off me or he’ll have to go on the Voluntary Labour scheme.”

“What do you think the lazy sod’ll do?” wondered Khadija.

“I’ll fucking ditch him if he thinks he can get away sitting round the telly all day living off me. He’s going to have to dig ditches, mend roads, work in soup kitchens, and all that other stuff they have to do these days.”

“It doesn’t help create jobs if all the work’s that’s needed is done by the unemployed for a pittance.”

“I dunno,” said Iris. “I’m not an economist. Anyway, I guess it means that there are even fewer jobs available for those immigrants who manage to get into the country. That’d suit the government right down to the ground.”

“It’s time, ladies,” said Ollie, the gay shift supervisor, who appeared at the coffee lounge door. “Chop chop. To the workstations.”

“Okay. Okay,” said Iris as she made her way down the aisle to her desk. The monitoring equipment was waiting for her, although the session required her to log on before the start of her shift. There was still a buttock-shaped indentation in the chair where Duncan had been sitting. He was the rather fat guy whose shift had just finished and who left a trail of biscuit crumbs all over the desk.



Iris sat down and logged on to the system. The DNA samples she had to monitor today came from some kind of fruit fly and Iris had to match the mutations with the observable physical characteristics and behavioural modifications of the actual animals. It was tedious, mechanical work, but still considered too specialist to be done by machine alone.

Iris glanced at the clock. Twenty hundred hours. Only four hours till her lunch break which at just after midnight wasn't really going to be a meal she'd enjoy. She glanced around her. Khadija was already making some notes on the tablet she had in her hand. The other five or six people were also at their desks. Everyone was in, except, of course, Anthony who'd been designated as surplus to requirements about a week ago just before he was eligible for redundancy payments. Would Iris be in the same situation when she'd worked for one year and eleven months?

Iris banished such concerns as she rotated the holographic images of DNA helixes around on her workstation. She had another night's work to do.

## XXII

### Lindiwe

### 2067

There were some days that Lindiwe dreaded more than others. Most days were bad enough. She almost wished she'd never got used to the relative sanctuary of life at the Reigate Refugee Centre now she'd had to leave it behind. The crackdown on illegal immigration subsequent on the General Election resulted in Lindiwe and most other employees of the Reigate Refugee Centre being forced to resign and find employment elsewhere.

But what employment was there for a young African woman where her legal status wasn't an issue? It could only be a profession exactly like the one in which she was currently engaged.

Lindiwe stood outside the rear entrance of a grand old house in the securely guarded avenues of Reigate South Park. Only clients like the gentleman she was about to see had benefited at all from the lack of opportunities for more conventional employment whose inevitable result was less expensive and more widely available sexual services.

Sir Eric Esterhazy was a regular client of Empire Cleaning Services, Lindiwe's employer, and consequently one that she couldn't afford to disappoint. He was also the client that Lindiwe least enjoyed having to visit, even though he was one of her most frequent clients. He always requested her by her business name, *Ebony*, rather than the name with which she'd been christened. Lindiwe often contemplated exercising her option of refusing to go, but Empire Cleaning Services could easily find someone else

to replace her and it wasn't as if they could ignore the specific requests of a Knight of the Realm, even if he was now only a backbench MP. Lindiwe suspected that the reason Sir Eric was so insistent on her services rather than those of Laura, Ivory or Onyx was precisely because she so evidently hated both him and his sexual predilections.

Lindiwe was a busy woman. She might have to provide services to as many as a dozen clients in a single day. Fortunately, not all clients were as demanding as Sir Eric. Many simply required oral or manual relief. Although these services weren't especially enjoyable for Lindiwe, she could generally complete the job within a quarter of an hour. As a general rule Lindiwe preferred repeat custom. This wasn't because her existing clients were in any way better than the rest of humanity, but because they were all known quantities. She knew what to expect and normally there were very few surprises.

Prostitution was still illegal, of course. Successive governments had tightened legislation against the trade at exactly the same rate as economic circumstances compelled ever more women were to take it up. The result of this was that women like Lindiwe were even more vulnerable to the predations of clients who had no respect for her. Lindiwe was almost a prisoner of Empire Cleaning Services as a result of the draconian penalties imposed on illegal immigrants, although she was grateful that her employer's business practices were actually rather more ethical than many entirely legal enterprises. If she was working in one of the countless sweatshops in Central London, she'd have to work for very long hours and never get more remuneration than food to eat and a mattress to sleep on. It was ironic that the employment practices Lindiwe knew from Africa had migrated into the country along with much of the

continent's population.

Empire Cleaning Services advertised itself as a cleaning company. Its advertisements openly promoted the house-cleaning aspect of the services provided by its employees. If a client actually did want one of the women employed by the company to do nothing else than vacuum-clean, dust and polish, this was a service that would no doubt be provided with great relief. It would be a relatively expensive service, however, given that the minimum hourly rate for the advertised services was more than enough to cover the weekly wage of most cleaning maids.

The uniform Lindiwe wore was more appropriate for a maid than for a prostitute—or at least for those prostitutes that frequented Holmesdale Road and Bell Street. It might be noted that high-heels weren't especially practical for pushing a vacuum cleaner around the house and that stockings weren't very suitable for kneeling down on the kitchen floor with a scrubbing brush, but such detail was sufficiently subtle for Lindiwe to pursue her trade without fear of arrest. The dark green nylon outfit was almost utilitarian. She looked almost like a nurse, which was ironic given that Lindiwe wore no such uniform when she did work as one at the Reigate Refugee Centre.

Sir Eric was very old. If it hadn't been for the miracles of medicine and erectile enhancement drugs, the worst Lindiwe might have suffered would be a bathing in urine and possibly a severe spanking. Unfortunately for her, the knight was so well medicated that Lindiwe was fully occupied for the whole span of her two or three hour appointment. Before she left, she would need to shower and apply makeup to remove the traces of semen, spit and urine from her face and body. Such cleanliness was expected. It was as much in Sir Eric's interest as it was for Lindiwe's dignity. The

employees of a cleaning service company, even one as expensive as *Ebony*, wouldn't normally be expected to leave the client's home with semen dripping down her chin or have mascara smeared all over the face. And Sir Eric wouldn't want either his neighbours or his constituents to know what he did for amusement.

As a freshly divorced backbench MP, Sir Eric could now spend the hours not already dedicated to serving his constituencies or his Party Whip by doing exactly what he wanted.

And this currently involved buggering Lindiwe while concurrently complaining bitterly and long about being a Lib Con MP.

"I've been a Tory all my life," he said as his artificially guaranteed erection ploughed inside Lindiwe's arse (for the usual extra cost). "Now I'm a fucking Lib Con. Fucking con is right. It's a con that dilutes the electoral choice. No one can vote Conservative without also voting for the fucking Liberal pinkos."

All conversation with Sir Eric was one-sided. The knight did all the talking, which he did from the moment Lindiwe arrived until she left, while, in her role as *Ebony*, Lindiwe said very little at all. There was virtually no one that the former chancellor didn't blame for the ultimate failure of the English National Unity government apart from himself. The fucking Scots, the bastard Welsh, the Liberal pinko cunts, the arsehole Belgians, the vacillating Americans, the slit-eyed Chinks and Nips, the wops, the frogs, the krauts and, most of all, the conniving Prime Minister Ivan Eisenegger who'd let everything fall apart. What hatred Sir Eric didn't reserve for his political enemies was directed at every group of individual that wasn't white, wasn't wealthy, wasn't male and wasn't at least middle-aged.

Lindiwe knew exactly what her ranking was in Sir Eric's hierarchy of humanity. As a nigger bitch, as he so charmingly addressed her, she was basically hardly better than the four-legged animal that shared the same title. Only, as Sir Eric wasn't likely to fuck, bugger, piss on or otherwise gratify himself on a female dog, Lindiwe had to do.

Lindiwe got into the habit of watching the news before she visited Sir Eric. She had bought a tablet on which she could browse the latest news and surf the internet. Lindiwe knew she'd be in for a rough time if the news was of the kind likely to antagonise Sir Eric. The news wasn't quite as predictable a weather vane as Lindiwe would have liked, but she'd come to dread any intimation of success in the Kingdom of England's faltering attempts to rejoin the Northern European Union, any sign of tolerance towards immigrants or the socially disadvantaged, and any fresh revelations about the excesses associated with the English National Unity government. News stories about the Norfolk flooding, the melting Antarctic ice sheet, the desertification of Brazil or the famine in Egypt didn't generally trouble him much at all.

Although Sir Eric was quite happy to stick his tongue, penis and fist in the most private of Lindiwe's orifices, he couldn't raise himself to shake her hand or even acknowledge her departure beyond a cursory remark. "I guess it's time for you to scamper back to your grass hut," he might say. Or: "The cash is in the usual place. Don't spend it all on bananas." So, even at the very last, after Lindiwe had showered and dressed herself, the knight couldn't resist a gratuitous insult.

Was this what Lindiwe's expensive and hard-fought education had led her to?

"I was studying to be an eye-surgeon," said Jiao-Jie, Lindiwe's flatmate, when she posed the question. "Then the Zambian government decided to expel its Chinese

citizens. My family had lived in Zambia for three generations. The Democratic Republic of China wasn't letting back Zambian emigrants whatever their ethnicity and neither was anywhere else."

Lindiwe sighed. "It's a lottery. The stupidest and most ignorant Englishman gets a better life than we do."

"For the moment," said Jiao-Jie philosophically. "On the other hand, at the current rate at which the Kingdom's economy is declining it won't be long before it's on the same level as Portugal or Estonia. And look at the problems there. Riots. Famine. Even plague."

"Even the worst-off nation in Europe, whether in the North or the South, fares better than any country in Africa," said Lindiwe. "There was basically no government at all when I left Maseru. And the people who were supposed to govern were no better than Sir Eric Esterhazy. They screwed everyone and blamed the country's problems on foreigners and traitors."

"That's what's happening in Europe as well."

"It's still not as bad as Africa," protested Lindiwe. "There are no jobs. There's no food in the markets. Every year the harvests fail. The police are worse than the thieves they're supposed to be protecting us from. The government of the United States of South Africa only controls the larger cities and the borders."

Jiao-Jie wasn't going to be outdone by this one-upmanship of misery. "I don't even have a country to claim as my own. China doesn't want me. Zambia doesn't want me. And do you think I'd be working for Empire Cleaning Services if England wanted me?"

**XXIII**  
**Olive**  
**2082**

Emily was kneeling in front of the screen and staring intently at the high definition images which were her only escape from drab and dirty real life. The television was by far the most valuable of her mother's possessions. She touched the replay symbol on the touchpad which displayed an exact miniature copy of the image that was blazoned on a much larger scale on the screen.

Like any five year old, she'd much rather be watching cartoons, but the television was still stuck on a website that was screening an amateur film clip of the Lib Con Massacre. This film was showing the culmination of the siege on the Liberal Conservative Party headquarters by an angry, starving mob that was offloading its murderous frustrations just as it had done a day or so before at the Fox News England television studios. Specifically, what Emily was viewing in full graphic high-definition splendour was the wholesale massacre of a group of politicians and their supporters.

Emily had seen the film of the punching, stabbing and lynching so many times now that it no longer shocked her. There was a lot of blood. The cries for mercy and the screams of pain and agony were very frightening. The person who'd been filming the violence was very much on the side of the hate-filled rioters and narrated a commentary on the events as they happened with obvious relish.

"And now it's the turn of fucking Eric fucking Esterhazy," he yelled. "Die you fucking cunt! Just fucking die! Harr! Harr! His fucking nose is smashed. Kill the cunt!"

Emily wasn't too sure what half the words meant but they were still words she'd



heard many times before. Cunt. Shit. Pee-pee. Shut the fuck up. And every word or expression was usually prefixed by 'fucking' for emphasis.

"Fuck sake, Emily," shouted her mummy, Olive, who was holding a joint in her hand and wearing nothing but a pair of slippers. "What's this shit you're watching?"

"It's only what I was fucking watching a moment ago," said Emily's Daddy for today who Emily hadn't really got to know very well yet. She knew that her new Daddy wasn't her proper Daddy because unlike Emily and Olive whose skins were pale with a slightly bluish tinge, this Daddy had very dark skin. And Emily could see all of his skin including his stiff and twitching penis.

"And what the fuck is that?" asked Olive. "It's not what you'd call appropri... appropri... right for a little girl."

"It's just those riots yesterday, innit?" said Ed. "Watching the cunts getting a kicking. Look at that fucker. All his fucking teeth everywhere..."

Ed was referring to a scene where an elderly man was being kicked again and again in the mouth. Despite the high digital resolution, the image was wobbling about all over the place.

"Emily should be watching fucking cartoons," said Olive as she grabbed the touchpad out of her daughter's hands. "She shouldn't be watching this shit. What the fuck! Where's the fucking kiddie stuff?"

Ed laughed as the picture switched to some hardcore porn movie that showed explicit film of a woman's face being ejaculated on. "What kind of fucking kiddie stuff do you want?"

"Not fucking pervy stuff, you dirty-minded cunt," she said. "Here we are.

Cartoons. Fucking kiddie cartoons. Not fucking sick shit.”

Olive returned the touchpad remote control to her daughter. “Now you just watch this shit while me and Daddy have a cuddle on the mattress. No fucking peeking, right.”

“Yes, mummy,” said Emily who’d often peeked, of course, and didn’t much like what she saw at all. It was just the same as the porn stuff on the television screen but not as easy to see what was going on.

“Shouldn’t the kid be at fucking school or something?” wondered Ed while he stroked his penis in readiness for the action to come.

“School? Yeah, I guess so,” said Olive as she lay down on the mattress which was the only furniture on the room’s bare floor-boards other than the battered sofa and the kitchen chairs. They were all gathered in the living room because it was the only room in Olive’s apartment other than the shower/toilet and the tiny kitchenette. “When I find a school I don’t have to fight through fucking Afghanistan to get to, I’ll fucking take her there.”

“It ain’t as bad as all that,” said Ed.

“Yes it fucking is,” said Olive. “It’s a fucking war zone out there. Like your fucking Palestine or your fucking Pakistan. It’s all fucking guns, knives and drug dealers and shit.”

“You do a bit of dealing as well, you know...”

“A girl’s got to fucking survive, don’t she? But it ain’t good, you know. There mightn’t be fucking radiation or mushroom clouds or shit like that, but it ain’t nice out there. I don’t want my girl to get fucked by a perv or knifed by a gangster. And anyway

what fucking good is school anyway? There ain't no fucking jobs no more."

Emily didn't really understand very much of what Mummy was saying. And she hated it when Mummy and her new Daddy cuddled on the mattress. It was so noisy and it looked weird. On the other hand, it was better when they did it during the day, rather than at night when Emily was trying to sleep on the sofa with the coiled spring that had poked its way through the plastic cover and chafed against her calves. On those occasions, her Mummy's vocal lovemaking kept her awake and Emily got ever so tired. What she liked best was when her Mummy was staying out of the flat somewhere else, usually still within the bounds of the sprawling Housing Estate that covered almost the whole extent of Hackney Marshes. Then Emily was able to doze on the mattress accompanied only by cartoons burbling on in the background.

In fact, cartoons were about the only entertainment Emily had to enjoy when she was at home by herself. Emily preferred it when Mummy was out during the day and was thoughtful enough to dump her daughter on one of the neighbours. Then she was able to play with children from the other flats. Emily soon discovered that other people's flats were usually no better than her mother's. Sometimes there was a separate bedroom so that there was no risk of anyone else's Mummy and Daddy cuddling while the children played or, more often, stared at the flat thin screens that dominated most households. These were powered by the same kind of heavy battery that Mummy had to buy every now and then from the supermarket just over a kilometre away. That was an intimidating place that Emily enjoyed visiting where plate glass windows protected the cashiers from the all too frequent gun raids.

Other children's Mummies and Daddies were generally much the same as

Emily's. The Mummies would sit round the flat all day and usually the Daddies did much the same. This was especially so in winter when it was cold and the batteries ran down so quickly while burning up all their power on the little bar heaters that hardly kept anyone warm anyway.

Some homes had computer games which were fun to play although many were also very violent. Sometimes they were almost as bad as the film of the Lib Con Massacre, even if it was a lot easier to see what was going on.

A few children also went to school, although Olive was mostly right about the attendant risk. It was often quite dangerous just to walk along the open streets and some of the older children had scary stories to tell of the violent fights they'd witnessed. As a result, most children went to school in groups of five or more just for safety. And from what Emily had heard, even school didn't sound like it was especially safe or secure even though it was surrounded by thick metal gates and the windows were all barred.

Emily dreaded it when visitors called when she was at home alone with Mummy. The worst was the Rent Collector. He was a big man that Olive called the Fat Cunt when he wasn't there, but Mr. Obasanjo when he was visiting. He was indeed overweight and his skin was even darker than Ed's, but he was always polite to Emily. In fact, Emily sometimes wondered whether he wasn't a little *too* nice to her. Olive also dreaded his visits. She told her daughter that the Fat Cunt always carried a gun and a big metal stick and if Mummy didn't pay the rent he'd use one of them if he didn't use the other. Although the flats no longer officially belonged to anyone now that Hackney Borough Council had surrendered administrative control, it was men like Mr. Obasanjo

who ensured that they would never be exactly free for residents.

Olive wasn't let off when she didn't have the money to pay the week's rent. Not only would she have to pay the difference the following week with interest, but she'd have to suck Mr. Obasanjo's fat stubby penis to be granted even that much dispensation.

"This time swallow the shit," Mr. Obasanjo said when he spurted out his sperm into Olive's mouth. "You know I don't like it when it drips on your fucking tits."

"Yes, Mr. Ozzabanjo," said Olive as she wiped her lips and with a pained expression let the pale goo slip down her throat.

Mr. Obasanjo slapped Olive across her face that left her with a bruise that would swell up on her pale cheek in the hours after his departure. "Don't *ever* fucking call me that, bitch! Obasanjo. That's my name. Daniel Obasanjo."

"I didn't mean nothing."

"Well don't say nothing, then," he said. "Just have the readies next time. All of them. Otherwise you'll have to sleep in a cardboard box under the Eastway with those other homeless cunts."

Olive's other visitors were generally less hostile than the Rent Collector, but there were still often arguments. These were mostly about drugs and money which, Emily got to realise, were usually closely associated with each other. Olive's only other source of income was from the Unemployment Workshop which she attended on a fairly irregular basis. The work was demeaning and it didn't pay well, but it supplied Olive with food tokens and a small amount of cash which could be spent on rent, drugs and batteries.

Some days were worse than others. A good day was one when Emily got enough

sleep, when she got to play with her friends while Mummy was out somewhere, and when she didn't go hungry. Bad days were when there wasn't any food, when the water supply was cut off, when it was cold and there wasn't enough money to buy a battery to keep the electric heater running or to power the television.

And it was especially bad when her Mummy and the current new Daddy were arguing and shouting at each other.

This was always very frightening, especially since there was no other room for Emily to hide while Olive and the man sharing her mattress were throwing things at each other. These were the times when 'fucking' was a word used more often than any other and usually more than twice in each sentence.

"I want to go to school, Mummy," Emily said to Olive one morning after an argument which had culminated in the latest new Daddy slamming the door behind him as he left.

Her mother lay on the bed with a bruise over her face and caked blood just beneath her nose. "What, darling?" she said, feeling sorry for herself as she usually did after an altercation of this nature.

"I want to go to school, Mummy."

"It's fucking dangerous. You know what it's like out there. I don't want a girl of mine to get fucked up by some cunt."

"Mo goes to school. So does Fatty and Jack. And so does Cookie."

"Who're those cunts?"

"They're friends of mine. We play at Aunt Suzy's place when you leave me there."

“Oh, Suzy’s kids. I didn’t know they went to school.”

“They go in some kind of convoy,” said Emily.

“*Convoy*. What’s that?”

“It’s when lots of kids go together. Mo said I could go with them to school.”

“What school?”

“Just school.”

“I guess it’s fucking Gainsborough First School. The one that got flooded last time,” said Olive. She contemplated the idea for a moment. “You get free school dinners there, don’t you? And they keep you warm and shit when it’s cold, don’t they?”

“I think so,” said Emily who’d not previously been aware of the fringe benefits of schooling. She just wanted to be away from the flat and all the quarrelling. And she also wanted to spend more time with her friends.

“Yeah, if you can go with Suzy’s kids then go. Just don’t fucking wake me up before you leave.”

“Can I go tomorrow?”

“Course you fucking can. You don’t have to wear school uniform or anything, do you? Just don’t go in the nude.”

Clothes were a genuine problem, of course. All Emily’s clothes were the wrong size and most of them were threadbare and full of holes. And usually they were also rather dirty. Olive’s visits to the launderette were kept to the bare minimum. But Emily looked at her mother who as always was more or less wearing nothing at all. Emily didn’t want to look like that.

“I’ll tell Mo to wait for me tomorrow,” said Emily.

“Yeah. Whatever,” said Olive.



## **XXIV**

### **Lord Newbury**

#### **2077**

It was an uncomfortable fact that Lord Newbury's title was neither ancient nor especially honourable. But it was a title of which he was very proud although the only privileges it endowed on him were those of status and hereditary wealth. There was no political power associated with the hereditary title and there hadn't been for over seventy years. And now the bastards were threatening to dispose of what little value in the title still remained. Over a thousand years of glorious tradition was to be swept aside. A tradition older than England itself. And all because of the unfinished business of the dissolution of the United Kingdom.

It could have been so different if that idiot Princess Rachel hadn't made such a mess of her proposed marriage to that commoner. It was bad enough that centuries of precedent were amended to enable her to succeed to the throne. And then she broke yet more precedent by wanting to marry a mere low-life. But worst of all was for her to have subsequently made such a fuck-up of the whole affair...

It left a very unpleasant taste in the Right Honourable gentleman's mouth. He grimaced as he regarded the images displayed on his library computer screen.

"Excuse me, my lord," said the butler who had discreetly slipped into the room. "Sir Eric Esterhazy is waiting to see you."

"Is he, Edwards?" said the lord. He hurriedly shut down the browser window so that it showed no evidence of the rather undignified website he'd been visiting. "Show him in."

“Yes, my lord.”

Lord Newbury stationed himself in a stately position by the bookcase where he could pretend to consult a rather dull nineteenth century volume on fossil snails. It did at least have some passably interesting black-and-white plates.

Sir Eric entered the library and bowed decorously. He stood at a respectful distance and waited for Lord Newbury to address him.

“Good to see you again, Eric.”

“It’s good to see you also, my lord.”

“I guess you must be wondering why I asked you over here.”

“It’s always a pleasure, my lord.”

“I’m afraid it isn’t for pleasure this time. The reason I’ve asked you to visit is for your advice.”

“I’m honoured, my lord.”

“How long is it since you retired, Eric?”

“I didn’t retire as such, my lord.”

“No, I guess not. In what year did you last serve as Member of Parliament for Reigate, Eric?”

“The General Election of ’68.”

“That’s when they redrew the boundaries, wasn’t it? It’s become harder and harder for decent men to represent the country.”

“Much harder, my lord.”

“Who represents Reigate now, Eric?”

“An incompetent idiot from the Social and Liberal Democratic Party, my lord.”

“I can’t keep up with all these new political parties. Whatever happened to the old certainties, Eric?”

“The electorate is perverse, my lord. They would prefer to be represented by a rabble of pretty much identical pinko political parties rather than by a sensible choice between a strong Conservative government and a weak coalition of Greens and Socialists.”

“You were never one of those who liked it when the Tories merged with the Liberals, were you?”

“It only served to further compromise an already diluted brand, my lord.”

“My concern, however, is less to do with the dismal state of English politics, Eric, but the future no less of England’s venerable tradition of aristocracy. As you know, the present coalition government of lefties, greens, vegetarians and lesbians has plans to dispense with the very institution of nobility. If they have their way, the title I bear will be gone forever. I would no longer be known as Lord Newbury. I would be known only as Norman Francis Erickson. That’s a disgrace. Honourable traditions such as the aristocracy are what made England great.”

“England is no longer great, my lord.”

“Indeed,” agreed the lord. “The lunatic Left and the Greens have taken over. What justification does the coalition government have for wanting to make the Kingdom of England some kind of republic?”

“Pressure from abroad, my lord,” said Sir Eric. “The Kingdoms of Scotland and Northern Ireland have unilaterally declared themselves as the Scottish and Northern Irish Republics. Wales has already been a republic for a while. The Commonwealth has

totally disbanded. The Royal Family is no longer perceived as a national asset.”

Lord Newbury frowned. “You should never have relinquished power, Eric. See what’s happened in the last decade or so. This is a fight to the last breath. What hope has England got in its darkest hour?”

“I need to consult a sympathetic expert in constitutional matters, my lord,” said Sir Eric, “but I’m certain that overthrowing a Constitutional Monarch isn’t as straightforward as the coalition government seems to believe. It’s not just English postage stamps that would have to change. There is also the fact that the Armed Forces pledge allegiance to the crown and not to the government of the day.”

“How can the fortunes of the Royal Family be the same as those of the Peerage?” said Lord Newbury. “As far as I’m concerned, the wastrels at Buckingham Palace and Windsor deserve to lose their estates.”

“The Armed Forces do not pledge allegiance to barons, dukes or earls, my lord.”

“I see.”

“On the other hand, the Royal Family needs a stock of *bona fide* blue bloods, my lord. The fortunes of the King and Princess Rachel are very much one with the fortunes of the treacherously dispossessed peers.”

“What can be done, Eric?”

“There are legal processes that can be invoked, my lord,” said Sir Eric. “If these fail, then there is direct appeal to the electorate...”

“You saw what bloody good that did in Scotland,” said the lord. “The ungrateful bastards voted overwhelmingly to dump the monarchy.”

“I think there was an element of nationalism in the referendum vote, my lord.

The Royal Family was perceived to be English.”

“Well, of course they’re bloody English. They’ve not been Scots for nearly four hundred years.”

“The English electorate might warm to them in that respect, my lord.”

“I suppose so, Eric,” said Lord Newbury. “But if that fails, what’s left?”

“The military option, my lord.”

“Do we really want a second English Civil War?”

“If it defends what’s right, my lord.”

“Hmm,” said the lord. “Would the Scots and the Welsh get involved?”

“It’s an internal matter, my lord.”

“What about the bloody Sprouts?”

“Brussels won’t be involved, my lord. The Northern European Union has been decidedly reluctant to readmit the Kingdom of England.”

“It’s those bloody Scots again, isn’t it? Ungrateful bastards. It’s them we should declare war against.”

“That was my advice when I was last in the cabinet, my lord. Unofficially, of course.”

“You should have nuked the bastards,” said the lord bitterly.

“It was mostly because the Scots had access to nuclear weapons that my suggestion was overruled, my lord.”

“I guess it would’ve been a bit risky,” Lord Newbury admitted. “After all, the wind sometimes blows from the north. The Geordies wouldn’t have been very happy, would they?”

“Not at all, my lord.”

“How many right-thinking people can we rely on, Eric?”

“There are fewer than there used to be, my lord,” Sir Eric admitted. “But on the other hand, the stakes are higher. It’s do or die, my lord.”

“It most certainly bloody well is, Eric. But will they stand up and be counted?”

“The glory and pride of England is at risk, my lord.”

“Is there enough money?”

“Switzerland remains neutral, my lord. The bank vaults will hold firm against the prying noses of the Sprouts, the Yanks and the Arabs. And they’re too high above sea level to get submerged, my lord.”

“Unlike the rest of us,” said Lord Newbury. “Did you see the news last night?”

“It’s dreadful, my lord,” said Sir Eric. “The City of London and half of Westminster...”

“They should have piled the sandbags higher,” said the lord. “And why did they bother protecting the East End? Who cares if the degenerate scum and illegal immigrants sink under five foot of water?”

“Not me, my lord.”

“Anyway, I digress. Do you think we’ll be in a position to safeguard the essence of England against those who seek to bring it to its knees?”

“I have already been discussing potential courses of action with other sympathetic parties, my lord.”

“Like who?”

“Many, my lord. News media executives. Prominent internet companies. Loyal

military men. Fellow Liberal Conservatives...”

“Not the Liberal ones I hope...”

“Of course not, my lord. There are many well-informed, well-financed and well-intentioned parties who are willing to harmonise with our enterprise if need be.”

“As they did in ’53? Let’s hope they have the stomach for the fight this time.”

“It is ever more perilous, my lord.”

“It’s a funny old world altogether, Eric,” said the lord. “The Chinks and the Nips run the show. The Yanks, the Krauts and the Frogs are all in the second division. The Yanks have been a bloody disappointment, don’t you think?”

“I had high hopes for the Republic of North America, my lord.”

“They were just left with the crappy parts of the United States when it all fell apart. It’s the world’s most heavily defended breadbasket. Bristling with nukes it can’t use because the slightest disruption to agriculture would simply cripple the entire nation.”

“There are those who call it more a basket-case than a breadbasket, my lord.”

“Yes, Eric. President Beck is either senile or mad.”

“Or both, my lord.”

“I just don’t know where things have gone wrong, Eric. You don’t think all that global warming nonsense is to blame?”

“The Greens made the right predictions, my lord, but they got on the wrong side of the Business Sector. What’s the point of being right, if you can’t make money out of it?”

“Absolutely. The interests of English business are paramount, wouldn’t you say

Eric? Although I'll be damned if I can be sure there's actually much left of English business to be proud about."



**XXV**  
**Zoe**  
**2047**

“Where the fuck am I?” Zoe asked.

She raised her head from the down-filled cushion on the leather sofa and looked around her at the posters on the wall that depicted a random selection of teenage obsessions. About her feet was a scattering of discarded beer cans, cigarette papers and glossy magazines. A mirror lay flat on the table beside a half-empty glass of white wine.

“You’ve woken up, have you?” said Tom, who was sitting cross-legged in only his boxer shorts and thumbing with no apparent interest through the pages of a women’s fashion magazine. “We thought you’d be out for hours.”

“She has been,” said Eve, who was also wearing only a pair of boxer shorts that were probably not her own. “It’s been fucking forever since Zoe dropped off.”

“It’s the fucking dope,” said Zoe who lowered her feet off the sofa onto the floor. All she was wearing was a tee-shirt that had the Arsenal FC logo which she’d bought once when she was briefly into women’s football. But that was ages ago. “I’ll ask again. Where the fuck am I?”

“You’re at Al’s,” said Tom. “He got the munchies so he went off to get a pizza or something.”

“When’d he do that?”

“Fucking hours ago,” said Eve. “Or maybe it was ten minutes ago. I dunno.”

“Shit. I need some charlie or whizz or something to wake me up,” said Zoe.

“The E’s worn off and I feel like shit. Anyone got any coke?”

“Al’s got some smack,” volunteered Tom.

“That’ll do the trick,” said Zoe.

“Scarcely a pick-me-up,” said Eve.

“It’ll do.”

Zoe glanced down at her crotch which she noticed was still slightly sticky. She ran her fingers through the pubic hairs. “Have we been *fucking*?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Tom. “Don’t you remember?”

“Not at all,” Zoe admitted. “Did I fuck you as well, Eve?”

“Of course,” said Eve. “And Al fucked Tom right up the arse. It was fucking hilarious! Tom didn’t know if he liked it or hated it.”

“I fucking *hated* it!” said Tom indignantly.

“I dunno,” said Eve. “You looked like you were enjoying it. No one else was fucking your arse at the time.”

“I got a fucking strap-on fucking dildo thing at home,” said Zoe.

“Yeah,” said Eve. “But you didn’t bring it with you, did you?”

“Do you *seriously* not remember fucking?” asked Tom. “I mean you were really fucking into it: the fucking and everything.”

“Did you fuck me up the arse again?”

“No. Not after last time. All that shit was fucking awful. My prick smelt bad for days.”

“*That* was fucking hilarious!” said Eve. “That’ll teach you to bugger someone without asking them first.”

“You never seem to mind much.”

“Shut up, you cunt,” said Eve who threw a pillow at Tom which he only just about managed to dodge.

“I’m fucking bombed,” Zoe slurred. “What the fuck have I been taking?”

“Fucking everything,” said Tom. “There’s fucking *nothing* you’ve not had...”

“’Cept the smack that Al’s got coming,” said Eve. “We’re all fucking bombed, girl. I’m as fucked as the fucking ’Stanis.”

“Which fucking ’Stanis would that be, Eve?” asked Tom. “Would that be the Uzbekistanis, the Turkmenistanis or the Kazakhstanis?”

“Maybe the other ones,” said Eve. “I don’t fucking know, do I? They’re all the fucking same. Pakistan first...”

“...and India as well,” added Tom.

“Then it was every fucking country with Stan in its name. Kurdistan wasn’t even like six years old and it got fucked,” said Eve. “And I’m as fucked as all the fucking ’Stans. I’m one fucked bitch.”

“I know that for sure,” said Tom. “It’s just that Zoe can’t remember a fucking thing.”

“Did I fuck you, Eve?” wondered Zoe. “Are you sure I didn’t bring my strap-on thingy here?”

“Don’t worry, Zoe,” said Eve. “You did what you could without it.”

“You might be bombed,” said Zoe. “But I’m fucking nuked.”

“Nuked, eh?” said Al who came into the room carrying a stack of two large pizzas and an eight-pack of lagers. “Like fucking Afghanistan?”

“As nuked as Tashkent,” said Zoe.

“That’s not in fucking Afghanistan,” said Tom. “It’s in one of the other ones I think.”

“Who fucking cares?” said Al, who sat down and opened the boxes of pizza for everyone to dip into. “They’re all the same. At least they are now. One stinking heap of Islamic radioactive shit. No one would want to live there now.”

“Cept the people who just happened to be living there,” said Eve.

“People?” Tom laughed callously. “Fucking mutants. All that radiation shit. Eyes sliding down the face. Scabs and cancers and radioactive scars. Skin fused like plastic. You’ve seen the film footage.”

“You’ve no right to be so... to be so... fucking...” said Zoe incoherently. “Those Arabs or Turks or whatever the fuck they were... They were human beings like us. It’s not right to be so fucking...”

“You need a hit on this, girl,” said Eve passing over the joint she’d been holding onto for rather longer than Tom was happy with. “But you’re right. The ’Stanis didn’t deserve the shit they got.”

“They asked for it, though, didn’t they?” said Tom. “They didn’t have to nuke the shit out of each other. There’s no law that says that when the water runs dry, the crops fail and all you’ve got to live on is the poppy harvest, then you’ve got to nuke yourself to buggery.”

“Talking about poppies...” said Zoe.

Al took the hint. “I know what you want, Zoe,” he said. “I’ll bring the wraps in later. That’s one thing the war did. Price of fucking H dropped like the proverbial. So did quality resin.”

“You got any of that?” Zoe pleaded.

“I’ve got fucking everything,” said Al.

“Still, you’ve gotta feel for the buggers,” said Eve. “You’ve seen the films...”

“It was *beautiful!*” said Tom. “What a trip. Did you see the colours and everything on those mushroom clouds?”

“Don’t be a cunt, Tom,” said Al who held a pizza slice in one hand and a joint in the other. “Those were fucking people being blown up by those nukes.”

“Well, you can feel as fucking sorry as you like for those buggers,” said Tom. “They’re thousands of miles away and they don’t even speak English. What about the shit in this country?”

“What do you mean, Tom?” asked Zoe who was really really enjoying her pizza slice. “No one’s dropped any nukes on Clapham last time I looked.”

“The flooding’s a problem, isn’t it?” said Tom. “And you saw that shit on telly about people fucking starving, literally fucking starving, in this country. Food’s too expensive. Social Security’s virtually dead, thanks to all the cutbacks and disincentive programs. It’s all gone to fucking pot in this country.”

“Talking of which,” said Eve. “Toss us that plastic bag, Al?”

“Which one?”

“The one with the Afghani Black, you wally.”

“Yeah,” said Al who handed it over to her. “It’s good shit.”

“Did you fuck me, Al?” asked Zoe in a tone of vague interest.

Al had to think.

“Yeah, I think I might have done. I certainly remember fucking Eve and I can’t

forget fucking Tom.”

“You cunt!” said Tom bitterly. “You know I don’t like it!”

“Calm it, girls!” said Eve. “Who cares who fucked who?”

“I might if I get pregnant,” said Zoe.

“You take the pill, don’t you?” asked Tom, clearly alarmed.

“Or clap. Or Chlamydia. Or even fucking AIDS.”

“You can get a cure for AIDS on the NHS nowadays you know,” said Tom.

“Don’t be fucking soft,” said Eve. “When’s the last time the NHS ever gave anything away. It’s the fucking Twenty Forties. It’s because people like Zoe’s dad fucked up the NHS that nobody gets nothing from them now.”

“My dad?” wondered Zoe.

“He pumps money into all those right wing campaigns, doesn’t he?” said Eve.

“Kick out the immigrants. Cut taxes. Cut public spending. Get out of what’s left of the fucking EU...”

“It’s split into two now,” corrected Al.

“Whatever,” said Eve. “It’s your dad who’s fucking the poor and feeding the rich. A fucking Robin Hood in reverse.”

“He’s no fucking worse than your dad, Eve,” Al said calmly. “In fact, all our dads are shit. They’re all fucking up the world.”

“You’re all fucking dimwits,” said Tom. “It’s ’cause our parents are so fucking wealthy we can sit here and treat ourselves to as much shit as we like. And they wouldn’t be so fucking rich if it weren’t for low taxes and all that. And why do they do it? They do it for us. That’s what they say.”

“My dad fucking hates me,” sniffed Zoe.

“What’d you say?” asked Eve who wandered over to the couch where Zoe was lying with her newly rolled five-skinner between her forefingers.

“My fucking dad fucking hates me.”

“Poor diddums,” said Tom unsympathetically. “I don’t think my dad likes me much either. But he still gives me enough folding stuff to live in a shit hot flat out in St John’s Wood. And what about your pad, Zoe? You can’t sniff at Hampstead Heath, can you? If he didn’t like you just a little bit, why’s he been so fucking generous?”

“Don’t be so mean, Tom,” said Eve who lay Zoe’s head on her bare bosom. “You know Zoe’s dad’s a real cunt.”

“Come on, Eve. When it comes down to it, what about your dad?”

“Hey, Tom,” said Al. “This is getting a bit out of fucking hand, you know. Just cool it. Zoe’s coming out from a fuck of a heavy trip. The E’s making her feel real shitty. You don’t have to make her feel shittier.”

“I know. I know,” said Tom. “You’re right. Shit, shall I roll the next one?”

“I think this’ll be the last joint for a while, Tom,” said Al. “We wanna get into a different mood if we’re partying.”

“Partying?” asked Zoe, who’d hardly ever felt less like it in her life.

“You know. *At Age of Love*. They’ve got a good night tonight. Great DJs and a whole lot of other good stuff. I got tickets ages ago.”

“We don’t have to go, you know,” said Zoe.

“Course we fucking do,” said Al. “I’ve got some sulphate, some more E and some good quality H. If we get the mix right we’ll be up till fucking Thursday.”

“What day’s it today?” Zoe wondered.

“Tuesday,” said Eve glancing at the calendar.

Zoe pondered over this question. She took a long drag of the joint and looked longingly at the pile of wraps mixed amongst the plastic bags at Al’s feet.

“Yeah,” she said. “Why not? You’re on.”



**XXVI**  
**Eden**  
**2049**

“She’s *your* daughter, too,” Eden said into the phone pressed against his ear. “You got custody of her and you should bloody well come and take care of her.”

“I’m miles away,” Zara replied. “I can’t be expected to drop everything I’m doing just to pick up my wayward daughter.”

“I don’t see why not,” said Eden. “I can’t look after her. I’m due back in the Med tomorrow. I’ve got meetings to go to. I’ve got things to organise. It seems that every time I return to London, our junkie daughter imposes herself on me.”

“You’ve got responsibility for our daughter, too,” said Zara. “It’s not my fault she dumps herself on you. I guess you’re more lenient about her jacking up...”

“Don’t take the moral high ground with me. I know the exact extent of your ethics and propriety. Your escapades are well documented.”

“I don’t see that’s remotely relevant. The divorce was years ago. You settled. Your private investigators might have trawled up dirt that you’d have dished out if I’d held out for a better deal, but you can’t use that now.”

“It’s your bloody fault our daughter’s the way she is. You set the example.”

“And you haven’t?”

“Be reasonable,” said Eden with exasperation. “Your daughter’s OD’d again. The doctors have pumped out her stomach and she’s laid up sick in her childhood bedroom. She can’t stay here when I fly back to the Med. You’ve *got* to take responsibility.”

“No way,” said Zara. “Last time she stayed at my place, she pawned one of

those Liberian diamonds for heroin or cocaine or something. I'm not taking that risk again. She's a junkie. She can mainline in someone else's home not mine. You've got the money, you handle it. Why don't you just book her into rehab again?"

"It didn't do much good, did it?"

"Well, it's your problem this time," said Zara. "She's in one of your homes and I'm not prepared to take the risk of having the little bitch steal any more jewellery."

"I don't know why I thought you might have a more positive attitude."

"We're both her parents," said Zara. "She's with you now. Just deal with it."

With that, Eden heard her click off the phone.

"Fuck," said Eden. He put the phone back into the inside pocket of his jacket and gazed out of the window onto the leafy square below. He was in the top floor study of his Mayfair house and had a perfect view of the protest march that was wending its way through the plush streets. Undoubtedly it was concerned with something the bloody Americans had said or done to arouse the ire of the good-for-nothing layabouts. Was it something to do with petrol subsidies? Was it the nukes they'd sold to Kazakhstan? Was it the use of fire-arms to suppress protests in Detroit and Chicago? God knows. These greenies and lefties and bloody pooftahs just didn't know right from wrong.

Reluctantly, Eden strode out the study and descended a flight of stairs to Zoe's childhood bedroom. The decor hadn't changed for ten years and preserved a snapshot of his daughter's principal interests from a time before they'd transferred to boyfriends and drugs. There were teddy bears and dolls piled up on the shelves. The posters on the wall displayed fresh-faced boy bands many of whose fortunes had been propelled by

Eden's money although his interest in them had never stretched as far as to actually listen to their music. And in the middle of all this was Zoe's huge bed that was large enough for three adults to sleep in rather than just one young girl. Even now, Zoe was dwarfed by her bed.

There wasn't much of her to be seen. Her head and arms were exposed while the rest of her was just a bump under the duvet. A clear plastic tube trailed from one nostril and was connected at the other end to the complex machinery left behind by the doctors after they'd pumped out her stomach. She was awake but looked almost as much like a zombie now as when she'd arrived at Eden's principal London address a couple of days ago. And that was before she'd injected herself with what she must have known was a dangerously high dose.

Eden didn't have much sympathy for this or any other kind of hysterical melodrama. It was obvious that his slutty junkie daughter was crying for help. You don't come to your father's London home on one of the few occasions he's in town and then OD on him if you didn't envisage yourself playing the tragic role in a crappy soap opera. Eden might give his daughter money and medical attention, he might stretch to paying for rehab and methadone, but he'd be damned if he'd extend her much sympathy. She didn't have to become a drug addict. It was she who'd have to come round to seeing the error of her ways.

He then noticed that Zoe's eyes were open and following him as he paced back and forth across the room.

"You're awake, I see."

"Hello, Dad," said Zoe weakly.

“So you’ve disgraced us again,” said Zoe’s father. “Or should I say: yet again? Your mother and I give you everything you want and more, and what do you do in return? Can’t you do something with your money other than squander it on drugs?”

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

“You’re just saying that so I don’t cut you off,” said Eden as he stood by Zoe’s bed and chose not to sit on the chair that was beside him. “How would you like it if I did that, then? You’d have to make a living like the rest of the scum...”

“The ones who’re rioting and demanding higher wages?”

“Yes,” said Eden. “The great unwashed masses.”

“It’s only because they’re desperate,” said Zoe. “They don’t get a hearing in the media, at least not the media you own...”

“Part own,” Eden automatically corrected.

“...and the government doesn’t care for them, either.”

“You sound like a commie,” said Eden. “Anyway, the point isn’t about those troublemakers but you. And the trouble you make is right on my doorstep. In fact, it’s right here in this bedroom. What should I do with you?”

“Book me into rehab.”

“*Again?* Lot of bloody good that did. Cost a fortune.”

“I was clean for *ages* afterwards.”

“We want you off drugs for life. Not just for a few months. But I guess you’re right. There’s nothing else I can do for you.”

“Are you gonna sit with me, Dad?” Zoe pleaded.

“Sit with you?” Eden wondered as he glanced at the chair by the bedside.

“I don’t get to talk with you very often,” Zoe said. “You’re never at home. You’re always off to the Med or the Caribbean or Switzerland or something...”

“Can you blame me?” said Eden with irritation. “Why don’t you stay with your mother if you want company? And it’s not as if you don’t have a place of your own to stay. That apartment in St. John’s Wood cost a bloody fortune. I could’ve done a lot better with that money.”

“Mum’s always busy,” said Zoe. “She’s like you: always going places. And last time I tried to visit her she wouldn’t let me in...”

“I heard about that,” said Eden. “I’m with your mother on that one. You were clearly out of your mind. The police had to be called to restrain you.”

“It was the K,” said Zoe. “And the booze. And the coke. I’ve steered clear of stuff like that since.”

“So, what’s it now?” sneered Eden. “You’re still taking heroin, I see. The doctors found quite a mixture of stuff in your stomach, not to mention your veins.”

“It’s so cheap and easy to get hold of,” said Zoe. “Ever since the wars in the ’Stans, there’s been more opium and heroin and stuff than there’s ever been.”

“It’s not radioactive, is it?” wondered Eden who was suddenly alarmed at the prospect of his daughter spreading radioactive poison around his Mayfair home.

“I don’t know, Dad,” said Zoe. “Might be. The people who sell it don’t tell you. Might put people off buying it otherwise.”

“Do you think so?” asked Eden. That might be an angle one of his newspapers could use in their anti-drug campaigns. Maybe he could suggest it. Radioactive poppies. Radioactive people. There might be some mileage in that before the paper eventually

had to print the necessary but belated disclaimer.

“I don’t know anything about nuclear radiation, Dad.”

“Of course not,” said Eden. “The money we spent on your education has been as wasted as the money we’ve spent on everything else to do with you. I’d say it was all going on drugs if it wasn’t for the fact we’ve probably spent more on medical bills to repair the damage you’ve done to yourself than the drugs cost that caused the damage. You look a bloody mess. Your nose will never look the same again...”

Zoe was too weak to do more than snort through nostrils where an artificial septum separated one from the other.

“I don’t know what to do with you,” said Eden finally. “I’ll get Theo to organise the rehab and we’ll get you packed off there as soon as you’re in an acceptable state. But that’s not going to be the end of it, is it? You’ll be back here again, won’t you? Maybe this time you’ll be in a coma. Think how bloody embarrassing that’ll be for me.”

“The media never publishes anything about me, Dad,” said Zoe. “You’d sue them if they did...”

“...Or sack them if I’m able to,” said her father. “Look, I’ve wasted enough time on you. You’re a bloody lost cause. Next time I’m in this country, would it be possible for me to see you without an intravenous drip in your arm and a plaster over your nose? Would that be so difficult for you?”

“I didn’t mean to be a nuisance, Dad.”

Eden frowned. “I’m not sure about that,” he said. “Why couldn’t you dump yourself on your mother’s doorstep? Why mine? I’m a public figure. Your mother’s just another rich divorcee.”

“Mum’s never in, Dad,” said Zoe.

Eden uncharitably wondered where his ex-wife might be if that was the case. She didn’t gamble and she’d given up on drugs years ago after her own near fatal overdose which Eden had to fight hard and litigiously to keep out of the press. That was when his control on the media was rather less complete than it was today. Eden ruefully recalled that she claimed to prefer taller men. Perhaps she was buying their services in just the way Eden resorted to the arms of women who, as a result of his unofficial capital ventures, were also discreetly providing him with a slice of their action.

“Why not just stay in your Battersea apartment?” he suggested.

“It’s a tip, Dad.”

“That’s not my fault. I pay cleaners to keep your apartment in order.”

“I usually turn them away when they appear, Dad.”

“Why’s that?”

“You don’t always want people seeing what’s going on, Dad.”

“And what on earth could that be?” said Eden with contempt. “These cleaning companies are discreet. Even if you’d got a dismembered body in your bathroom, they’d say nothing. They’d just bill me the extra cost. Anyway, when you get back from rehab there’ll be no excuse. I’ll get Theo to get Empire Cleaning Services to do a thorough job.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Now, if you don’t mind I have pressing business to get on with,” said Eden, who with relief finally left his daughter’s room.

He descended the stairs to the reception area and sat down in one of his massive

leather armchairs. He took a cigar out from a box by the armrest, clipped the end and slowly puffed on it.

The distress of seeing his daughter lying prone on her bed drained him of energy. It was worrying that his domestic life shared none of the success of his business ventures. A divorced wife and a junkie daughter. It was a good thing he'd had no other children or wives. He didn't need another wife. He could get whatever women he liked and there was never a need to shower them with diamonds or allowances. And the children of his closest friends were as much a disappointment to them as Zoe was to him.

Eden picked up his mobile phone and dialled a number. He had to organise a few things before he could set off to his offices in the Docklands where he was due to discuss business with his executive directors.

"Theo," he said when the phone was answered. "My daughter's disgraced herself once more. You won't be surprised to learn that she's overdosed on the drugs again. There are a few things I need you to arrange for me."



## XXVII

### Tamara

### 2094

The old lady staggered across the floor of Costa Starbucks while also carrying a tray on which unsteadily wobbled a mug of cappuccino and a slice of rich chocolate cake. It was obvious to Tamara that she needed help. There was also the fact that the coffee shop had no free tables available.

“Can I help you?” Tamara asked as she stood up and approached the old lady who looked at Tamara with a startled expression on her face.

“Help me?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Tamara. “Can I help you carry your tray?”

“Of course you can, dear,” said the old lady as Tamara took the tray from her and guided her towards the other seat on the table where Tamara was sitting. She regarded Tamara’s uniform. “Are you a cleaning woman, dear?”

“Cleaning woman?” asked Tamara.

“The way you dress,” said the old lady. “It’s what cleaning women wear.” She squinted through her thick lenses at the name plate on Tamara’s bosom. “*Empire Cleaning Services?* I know them. I didn’t think they still existed.”

Tamara blushed. What *did* this old woman know? Ever since the Refugee Centre was burnt down in an anti-immigrant riot, she’d been living on a very slippery slope indeed and her descent towards starvation had been arrested only when she’d reluctantly resorted to work for a company that employed her to provide the kind of services that the now tarred, feathered and deceased Mehmed had hoped Tamara would

never need to do.

“How do you know Empire Cleaning Services?”

“They used to do work for my Dad. Years ago. Fifty years ago, I think. When I was a young girl. I use a different cleaning company now. They’re a lot cheaper. The girls are all immigrants. Arabs I think. I’m not sure. Once upon a time they all came from the Eastern Europe or Africa. What’s your name, dear?”

“Tamara.”

“Pretty name. Is that an Arab name?”

“It’s Jewish. It can be an Arabic name, but I’m Jewish.”

“Jews. Arabs. They’re all the same aren’t they? Is there much left of Israel now? I saw the news about it on the TV years ago. Tragic, isn’t it? My name’s Zoe. That’s a Jewish name too, isn’t it? But I’m not Jewish. I’m English. I’m thousands or millions of generations of English. My family was here before the Romans. Either that or they came over with the Normans. Whatever. Stinking rich my family. For bloody generations.”

Tamara was conscious that this woman was rambling. She probably had no idea what Empire Cleaning Services really was. Tamara wondered how much she truly understood about the world around her. But it was curious that for the first time in her life someone expressed the view to her that Jews and Arabs were the same. That certainly wasn’t an opinion shared by most people across the world.

Then the old woman spoke to her in a way that Tamara really didn’t associate with a person who was clearly well beyond what was still officially a retirement age even if the state so rarely provided old age pensions these days.

“I need some smack, dear,” she said confidentially. “Or coke. Even blow or E would be better than nothing. You don’t know where I can get some do you?”

“Those are illegal drugs,” said Tamara in a low voice. “You shouldn’t be taking illegal drugs.”

“Don’t talk shit,” said Zoe. “I’ve been without a decent dealer for months now. The Arabs and Africans who sell stuff on the street always try to rip me off because I’m old and they think I don’t know any better. But that’s rubbish. I know good gear from bad. You don’t know where I can buy some do you?”

Tamara had no idea of what to say.

“I’ll pay,” said the old woman. “I’ll make it worth your while. I almost don’t care what drugs they are. Being high is about the only good thing left for me now.”

Tamara reflected on the life she was now forced to lead. The blowjobs, the hand jobs, the fucking and the times when clients were tempted to pay for just a little bit more and Tamara suffered several days of blood-specked stools. Was there anything much worse than that? What escape routes were open to her?

“Yes,” said Tamara determinedly. “I know where you can get quality gear.”

“That’s a good girl,” said Zoe, feebly patting her on the wrist. “I could tell from the moment I first saw you that you were a good girl.”

In actual fact, Tamara’s knowledge of drugs, especially the illegal variety, was very sketchy indeed. She’d only ever smoked cannabis or dropped Ecstasy tablets at parties. She’d never thought to pay for drugs. But it was also true that she knew where to go. The refugees and immigrants with whom Tamara worked had all faced the same employment issues as she and they’d not all taken the route she’d chosen. A trade that

involved the purchase, preparation and sale of drugs was a natural choice for those who understood prescription drugs and were otherwise forbidden from taking legitimate employment. The alternatives, such as they were, weren't much better but for many refugees options such as prostitution and burglary were beyond contemplation.

Tamara was entrusted with a substantial sum of money to secure the drugs that Zoe wanted. At first she was tempted to take the money and spend it on other things, but that would be theft. Tamara wasn't a thief. She wouldn't take even from those who were undoubtedly able to afford the loss. Zoe was visibly wealthy. She might be scruffy but she was expensively so.

Zoe was very unspecific about what drugs she wanted beyond the fact that they should be of good quality. Tamara's most obvious contact was Mohammed who'd worked as a nurse at the Refugee Centre but was now more often found on Church Street by the charred remains of where they'd once all lived and worked. Nowadays rather than provide medical aid for the needy he provided those who could afford it a welcome source of distraction and a less welcome route to drug addiction.

"Man!" said Mohammed. "She must really trust you to give you that much dosh."

"I'm a trustworthy kind of girl," said Tamara.

"I guess you must be," said Mohammed. "And she was definitely not specific about what she wants?"

"Well, she mentioned the stuff I just mentioned," said Tamara. "I think it's quality she wants."

"You think she'll be a regular customer?"

“It’s in my interest that she is.”

“Well, I won’t short-change her then. I’ll sort out some wraps and a few pills. You’ll have to come back to my place for me to do that. You don’t mind, do you?”

“If it’s business only,” said Tamara.

“Well, it’s not the kind of business that Empire Cleaning Services employs you to provide,” said Mohammed. “Unless, that is, you *do* fancy cleaning up the place where I’m squatting.”

Zoe’s home couldn’t be more of a contrast to Mohammed’s. Even getting to the house was a real problem. It was nearly ten kilometres away in the Surrey countryside, relatively remote from London’s suburban overspill and at the end of a private road that was in considerably better repair than any road in Reigate or Redhill. It was enclosed by a looming security fence whose intent was made apparent by the plethora of electric wires and lethal spikes. Nevertheless, only one person was actually resident in a house that could easily accommodate very many more.

“Oh, it’s you dear,” said Zoe when Tamara buzzed the intercom. “Did you see the security guard when you came in?”

“Yes,” said Tamara, who had passed a uniformed man sitting in a small guard box at the entrance to the private road.

“He didn’t frisk you or anything, did he?” asked Zoe.

“No, he didn’t,” said Tamara.

“You can never be sure what these security guards might do, dear,” said Zoe. “I told him that a foreign looking woman might be coming. I’m glad you’re wearing your cleaning maid outfit because that’s what I said you’d be wearing. And you’ve brought

some good gear?"

"Yes, of course."

"Great!" Zoe said with obvious delight. "Come in. Come in."

The security gate slid open and Tamara walked into a small antechamber that was there to ensure that only one person could enter the house's grounds at a time. She was then permitted into Zoe's extensive garden and there, waiting for her at the open front door, was the old lady herself wearing a night-gown and smoking a cigarette.

Of course, as an employee of Empire Cleaning Services, Tamara had been admitted into houses in Surrey as large as this before. There'd also been the villa in Israel that she and her family had so tearfully abandoned. That had been at least as large as Zoe's, but blessed also by good sunshine and blessed with a glorious swimming pool. Her family home was now almost certainly overrun by Palestinians in a land where it was entirely inadvisable to be identified as an Israeli citizen. A hundred Arabs could cram into a villa that had once been occupied by only Tamara's immediate family.

It was also very different from not only Mohammed's filthy squat but the similarly decrepit single-room apartment that Tamara rented from the burly Armenian man who collected rent from the properties along Fairfax Avenue.

Zoe led Tamara into a vast living room dominated by a massive holoscreen television that was broadcasting a drama series set in an idealised corner of England where the streets weren't potholed, the police didn't accept bribes, and the villagers' chief concerns were their relationships with one another. The old woman pressed the touchpad remote and the image changed from a drama series to a surreal landscape designed to match the percussive rhythms it accompanied which unfamiliar music was

most probably the soundtrack of her teenage years.

“What’ve you got, dear?” asked Zoe eagerly when Tamara sat down on the huge leather sofa beside the similarly oversized one on which Zoe was sprawling.

“A mixture,” said Tamara. “I’m not sure what they all are.”

“Let’s have a look,” said Zoe who carefully opened the package with her crabbed fingers and examined the contents with what appeared to be an expert eye. She dipped her small finger into the powder and dabbed it on her tongue. “It doesn’t look bad. The skunk smells okay too. Of course, there’s only one sure way of finding out though. Do you fancy sharing, dear?”

“Erm...” said Tamara. “Not really. Anyway, I’ll have to go home soon.”

“Where do you live?” asked Zoe. “Somewhere nice?”

“No, not really.”

“It won’t be safe walking back in the dark, will it? I never wind down the windows of my car when I’m driving and it must be even more dangerous if you can’t drive away from trouble. You hear such stories. Of course, the security companies like it that way. It gives them jobs, especially since the police are so overstretched and undermanned.”

“I don’t have to work this evening,” admitted Tamara.

“I’d say not,” said Zoe. “Who’d want their house cleaned in the evening? Look, you don’t have to join me in sampling this stuff, but it’s nice to have company even if I’m not gonna be very chatty. Most of the friends I used to have sessions with are dead now.”

“Was it the drugs?” wondered Tamara.

“I don’t know. They’re just dead. Maybe it was drugs. Maybe it was other things like venereal diseases or stuff like cancer they would’ve got whatever they’d been doing. You never know. When people die, the coroner doesn’t normally specify what the ultimate cause might be. Anyway, I’m old. Fucking old. I’m in my seventies or something. It’s normal for people my age to die. And I’m proof that you can keep going however many times you’ve had your stomach pumped, your nose repaired, your blood transfused and your heart defibrillated. Anyhow, you *are* staying aren’t you? I’ve got plenty of spare beds you can sleep in.”

“Yes, I suppose I can,” said Tamara who hadn’t really looked forward to the possible hazards of a two hour walk in the dark.

“Good girl,” said Zoe. “I knew you were a good girl. And if this gear’s as kosher as you say and you don’t mind scoring some more for me, you can stay here for as long as you bloody well like.”



## **XXVIII**

### **Alex**

### **2026**

“Can I help you?” Alex asked the smartly dressed young woman he spotted striding through the office late in the evening. The fur coat and dress she wore was undeniably expensive, so she almost certainly wasn’t a member of staff. Even this late in the evening it was curious that she’d been able to get past security. The only other people still in the office were middle managers like Alex, a few systems administrators and the cleaning staff.

Alex had recently adopted the habit of working late in the office. It was the only time he could find to do the boring management work for which he was paid after a day mostly taken up by interminable meetings. Unpaid overtime was also quite obviously one of the best routes to promotion at Reuters-Fox. It had paid well for Alex in the last year where his ascent up the ranks had mostly resulted from having reputation as someone who worked long hours. In truth, it was sometimes quite difficult to find tasks to do to justify his obsessive overtime but there were plenty of websites to surf whose perusal might seem just about appropriate for a news company manager.

Paradoxically, it was also true that now he was a married man there was less incentive to get home in good time. After the first few months of blissful married life, there never seemed a better time to arrive home than after eight by which time his wife, Isobel, would have forgotten all the things that had been pissing her off during the day.

It wasn’t that Alex didn’t love Isobel. In many ways she was the ideal woman for him. She was steady and reliable and she loved him. Furthermore, she was a woman

who'd also brought with her a substantial inheritance. It wasn't a huge fortune, but it was enough to make Alex's life comfortable. What's more, Alex was sure that Isobel rather liked the idea of being married to a busy man. His apparent workaholicism balanced her own guilt that her life might otherwise have been a little too comfortable.

However, even Isobel had never been accustomed to the level of comfort enjoyed by this mysterious woman. "I'm looking for my husband," she said in a slightly unsteady voice. "I thought he might be here."

"Your husband?" wondered Alex, who hesitated about adding the word 'Ma'am' but decided that however wealthy this young woman was she probably wasn't a member of the Royal Family.

"Yes," said the woman with a slight slur that suggested that she'd been drinking. "Eden. Have you seen him?"

Eden St John-Easton had only recently bought significant shares in Reuters-Fox UK, which was something of a coup for a relatively young man, but he still wasn't a majority shareholder. Nevertheless, he'd already gained a reputation as a man who took an active interest in his media assets although his appearances at the office had been few and sporadic.

"I don't believe I have," said Alex.

"Eden always says he works late," said the young woman. "I thought he might be working late here. He often tells me about his ideas for the business."

"I'm afraid I haven't seen your husband," said Alex. "Is there anything I can do for you, Ma'am?"

Alex immediately cursed himself. He'd tried so hard to suppress an honorific

title that he knew was totally inappropriate, but the young woman giggled. She obviously didn't mind his mistake.

"Just call me Zara," she said. "Look, I don't want to waste your time but could we just check the offices to be sure he isn't here somewhere?"

"Erm..." said Alex who wasn't sure that this was such a good idea even if Mr St John-Easton was in the building. In fact, it would almost certainly be a huge mistake if he was. "Well, if he was here," Alex continued uncertainly, "he'd be meeting with the senior editors on the top floor."

"Let's go there then," said Zara.

Alex glanced nervously about him.

"Come on then," Zara insisted.

"OK," said Alex as he slipped on his jacket. He probably wouldn't be returning to his desk this evening, but the screen would lock up before anyone came into the office and could discover exactly which websites he'd been browsing.

He led Zara to the escalator and accompanied her as it rose to the top floor. He'd only ever been there before to attend meetings where he'd felt very much like an insignificant cog in a giant multinational wheel. Zara strode out of the lift while Alex dawdled behind and watched as the young woman pushed open every door that could be opened and looked through the windows of those that couldn't.

"He's not here," she said at last.

"No," said Alex with relief. "Perhaps he was never here in the first place."

"He always goes on about Reuters-Fox," said Zara. "I thought he might always be here."

“Mr St John-Easton has many other business concerns,” Alex remarked.

“He doesn’t go on about any them so much, though. He says he’s got plans for the company. Plans that will not only improve the business, but also improve the country.”

“The country?”

“Eden is very concerned about the country’s welfare,” said Zara. “He doesn’t like the direction it’s going. The unions are too strong. The environmental nutters are always proposing new taxes that’ll only throttle business. The European Union is forever sticking its nose in. It’s not right.”

“I see,” said Alex, who was sure that Reuters-Fox was exactly the kind of news organisation that would chime with opinions like that.

“Well, look,” said Zara. “I’m sorry to have troubled you. I’ll take you to the bar to compensate.”

“The bar?” wondered Alex.

“There *is* a bar round here, isn’t there? This is like a newspaper, isn’t it? There’s always booze where there are journalists.”

“There’s a wine bar across the road,” said Alex, who knew of an especially pricey and exclusive one nearby. What he didn’t know was whether it had a members-only policy.

“We’ll go there,” said Zara.

The Zenith was one of a new breed of wine bar that had emerged from the desire of senior management to dissociate itself from the scrum of middle managers who were competing for their attention. Its exclusivity was guaranteed by a very strict door policy

that Alex wouldn't normally qualify for and by selling drinks at extortionate prices. Even so, any fears Alex had about being allowed in were dispelled when Zara and he were greeted with a polite murmur from the be-suited door attendants.

"Have you been here before?" asked Alex, who was impressed by the ease with which they'd entered.

"No," said Zara. "They probably recognise me, though."

"Why's that?"

"I think Eden owns all the posh wine bars in Docklands. They turn a good profit and they provide discreet venues for business discussion."

"I see," said Alex.

What he also got to see was just how much Zara liked her drink. She had no qualms about ordering the most expensive cocktails, which were put onto her expenses account, though Zara confided that they probably wouldn't actually charge her for them. "You can imagine how that might look if Eden ever got to look at the accounts." She had even fewer qualms about knocking back the cocktails in rather less time than it took to make them, while Alex resisted temptation and maintained a very modest level of consumption from the bottle of ludicrously expensive red wine that Zara had ordered for him. It wouldn't do to get even slightly tipsy in front of an important shareholder's wife.

"Are you married, Alec?" asked Zara.

Alex didn't want to correct her. For this evening he was happy to be Alec, Alan or even Aled.

"Yes, I am," said Alex. "We've been married for about six months."

“I bet like most people these days you’d been living together for years.”

“Not really,” said Alex. “We met at a party, got on well and more or less got married less than six months later.”

“A whirlwind romance, Alan,” said Zara. “A whirlwind romance. Like mine with Eden, only it’s like being married to a fucking tornado, if you don’t mind my French.”

“Tornado?”

“Or typhoon. Well, Eden *is* a tycoon. Typhoon. Tycoon. Tornado. He’s always doing something and it’s impossible to keep up with him. I mean, we sleep together every night, although not always in a Biblical sense, and then he’s always off somewhere. He’s got a fair amount stashed away in the Caymans and Jersey and Lithuania and all those other places where taxes are low and property prices are through the roof. He’s even talked about buying a yacht.”

“A yacht?”

“Yes, Alec. A yacht. Somewhere to stay where no taxman need ever venture. Eden hates paying taxes. There are two things he really hates. Taxes. And my mother. Oh, and scroungers, unions, Euros, Brussels, homosexuals, Greens and a whole load of other stuff. I don’t know how much he gives to the Tories. A lot, I think.”

“Why doesn’t he become a politician?” suggested Alex.

“I dunno, Alan. I’ve asked him that myself. What better way to change things? Eden says that the House of Lords isn’t what it was and he wouldn’t want to take the risk of contesting a seat in a general election. Winning votes isn’t the same as buying them. Anyway, Eden says he can get other people to do all the politics stuff for him.

He's a professional businessman, not a politician."

Zara was in no hurry to leave the Zenith and even though Alex didn't have to actually pay for the expensive wine he was drinking, he had no wish to match Zara drink for drink. She increasingly slurred her words as the evening progressed, but she wasn't actually losing it. She was evidently someone who knew how to knock it back. But she did become steadily more indiscreet. She looked into Alex's eyes with open pupils and her focus was mostly on his face.

Then she placed her hand on his crotch. She did so firmly enough for her to tell whether his penis was erect and thereby ascertain his interest.

"Did you say you were married, Alan?" she asked.

"Yes. Six months."

"Does your wife mind you being out at night with strange women?"

Alex burst into a cold sweat. He knew exactly where this could lead and he didn't want to fuck it up. There was too much at stake. Isobel would naturally be suspicious and she might even detect another woman's scent on his body.

"I think she would," said Alex diplomatically. "As I say, we've not been married long."

Zara kept her hand on Alex's crotch. It was obvious that she enjoyed playing with him and was amused by the dilemma she'd put him in.

"What's your wife like, Alan?"

"She's slim and pretty and about the same age as me."

"Old then. Have you got children?"

"No."

“Do you want children?”

“I guess so.”

Zara removed her hand from Alex’s crotch and swivelled around on her seat. She decided to steer the conversation away from the dangerous direction in which it had been heading.

“We want children too, Alan,” she said. “At least I do. If only Eden would fuck his whores less often and fuck me more then we’d have had one by now.”

Alex realised this was a better direction in which to take the conversation. “I think it’s best to wait a few years till you have children,” he said.

“Fucking conventional wisdom,” Zara retorted fiercely. “That’s what Eden says. That’s what they all say. Have your fun now. Have your kids later. You obviously don’t know what it’s like to be married to a fabulously wealthy man. I can be dropped at a moment’s notice. Eden would probably find another wife within days if he wanted one. A wife needs a bit of insurance against the future. Especially when her husband’s a selfish bastard like Eden. And what better insurance policy is there than to have a child or two?”



## **XXIX**

### **Eden**

### **2050**

It was another bloody bastard journey back home to England, Eden reflected, as his chauffeur-driven car finally pulled into the drive of his Surrey estate. He increasingly despaired of the state of his home country every time he was troubled to pay it a visit. He'd had to wait two days in Milan while flights to Heathrow were held up. Even private charters such as his were grounded as a result of the unexpected heavy snow that London's runways still couldn't cope with. And then the drive from the airport across the snowy Surrey countryside was a nightmare. You'd have thought that global warming would have done away with bad winters. For nine months of the year, the talk was all about the sea level rising or droughts and then for three months of the year there was the inevitable bad weather. Usually it was floods and storms. This year, it was heavy snow.

"They just don't get the gritters out in time," Eden told Ivan Eisenegger, the Leader of the Opposition, who was waiting for him in his Surrey home. "What kind of rubbish road maintenance is that? Where do my bloody taxes go?"

"Local government taxes pay for that," said Ivan. "The councils are all capped and they make whatever cuts they can. It hasn't snowed for six years so they haven't prepared for it."

"Is that something you lot will tackle when you get back into power again?"

"We want to move away from exorbitant tax demands and profligate public sector expenditure," said Ivan. "We've still not completely worked out how to hand

road maintenance and repair over to the private sector without having to subsidise it. The public aren't sufficiently willing to shoulder the costs directly."

"There must be ways to keep the roads clear of snow and still reduce taxes," said Eden. "But you're right: the priority must be to keep taxes down. I trust that *is* what you intend to do after the next general election?"

"It's still a few months off and the result isn't yet in the bag."

"The polls are looking good. And you've got the whole media behind you..."

"The polls also say that it's more the unpopularity of the current Coalition than support for Conservative policies that will be critical to our success. We have to be careful what we say."

"I understand that," said Eden. "But when you *are* back in government, make sure that cutting taxes is your priority. Get the snouts of your interfering bureaucrats out of my business. That's all I ask. I've got discussions with my senior news editors tomorrow. What suggestions for news stories do you think I should make to them?"

Ivan looked around him at the two other opposition MPs who were also gathered together in Eden's smoking room. Eden was the only who was actually smoking and that was from a huge cigar imported from Cuba. The other MPs had sunk into the embrace of the huge leather armchairs and sipped from the wine that Theo, Eden's trusted servant, had poured out for them. At the same time, their fingers were tapping desultorily on the keyboards of their tablet computers.

"The Labour Coalition has been in power for a long time now," said Edmund Eaglecliffe MP. "A negative campaign that emphasises the mistakes and errors of the present government is surely the best approach."

“I rather like the tack taken by the Times when it attacks the menace of immigration,” said Thomas Eastwick MP. “We need to take a firmer stand against asylum seekers and economic migrants. The country’s swamped by them.”

“We have to be careful, Tom,” said Ivan. “Some voters might confuse an uncompromising immigration policy with racism or intolerance towards foreigners. The Times is right to highlight the burden on Britain’s scarce resources resulting from there being so many claimants and jobseekers, but we don’t want to frighten off nervous voters in ethnically diverse marginal constituencies.”

“What are voters most concerned about?” asked Eden. “Isn’t that what we should be focusing on?”

“It’s the usual confused picture,” said Edmund. “Sure, there are issues that appeal to core Conservative values such as a demand for lower taxes, fewer immigrants and disengagement from Brussels. However, there’s also concern about flood defences, low wages and the high cost of fuel...”

“We can do something about the last,” said Thomas. “It’s mostly tax anyway.”

“We can’t go as far as some of the American states by introducing a fuel subsidy,” said Edmund. “But we *will* have to present a coherent view on other issues, especially the environmental ones.”

“I’m all in favour of being green as long as it doesn’t cost a penny,” said Eden. “I don’t like the way these greens always find an argument to raise expenditure and revenue to combat climate change. It’s just another excuse for high taxation. Any changes to the tax rate should only ever go one way. It should never increase.”

“It’s not going to be easy to implement lower taxation,” said Ivan. “The national

debt is cripplingly high and tax rates are lower than they've ever been."

"The nation's prosperity relies on the prosperity of its businesses," said Eden uncompromisingly. "What's to keep companies like mine from investing in low-tax business-friendly countries like Libya, Korea and America? The only talk I want to hear is about how to reduce taxes."

"We have to say something about the floods in Southern England," said Edmund. "There are too many Tory constituencies in the southern counties for us to ignore it."

"Don't expect any media outlet that I have shares in to print stories that suggest taxes will have to rise to pay for flood-defences," said Eden firmly. "This climate change theory is nothing more than a con anyway. The scientists have got it wrong. The interests of business take a higher priority than any nonsense about global warming. I mean, look at the weather outside. What kind of global warming is that?"

"It's bloody cold," agreed Ivan. "But I know where you're coming from, Edmund. When you're being interviewed by the BBC or one of those pinko newspapers like the Guardian or the Independent, you have to find something to say about flood-defences."

"How many Conservative voters read those papers or watch the BBC?" wondered Thomas. "Have you seen the BBC recently? It's bloody rubbish. They rely so much on computer graphics to disguise how shoddy their studios are that it looks like a computer game."

"The BBC isn't what it used to be," said Edmund. "It's been no threat to anyone ever since we scrapped the license fee. But it's still watched and trusted by more people

than Fox News UK.”

“It’s your job to do something about that when you’re in government,” said Eden threateningly. “The BBC is a throwback to an age that should be dead and buried, along with independent trades unions, publicly funded education, and social security. I don’t pay millions to the Conservative party only for you to pursue anti-business policies when you’re in a position to do something about it.”

“That’s true, Eden,” said Ivan conciliatorily. “But my advice is that the media you control should be careful to distinguish between the policies you support and those of the Conservative party. The public perception of the party’s independence from undue influence needs to be maintained.”

“So, what do you suggest, Ivan?” said Eden, who didn’t like being told that he should be paying for anything other than the implementation of what he believed in. “Should we be printing stories about how tax-payers’ money should be squandered to elevate the East Anglian sea wall by another ten feet? Should we say that tax-payers’ money should be used to give public sector workers a pay-rise? Should we say that scrapping the Environmental Protection Agency, the Financial Services Agency and all those other quangos was a mistake?”

“As I say, Eden,” said Ivan, “what we do in government and what we say to get into government are two different things. The important thing for the moment is to appeal not solely to loyal Conservative voters by stressing only core Conservative values. What we also need to do is attract the votes of those who might otherwise vote Democrat, Liberal or one of the other pinko parties.”

The snow continued to pile high on the lawns of his Surrey home while Eden

and the three politicians gathered around the huge fire that dominated the smoking room. Eden didn't like it when Ivan disagreed with him regarding any policy detail, but he reasoned from his more private conversations that the Leader of the Opposition was a man who could be trusted. Eden was sure that Ivan could be relied on as Prime Minister to pursue the right policies whatever he had to say in public. Britain wasn't going to be restored to greatness unless a Conservative government took power. Fortunately, the subtle changes to constituency boundaries and the new rules on voter registration had swung the potential balance of power back towards the Natural Party of Government that the Tories so obviously were.

Eden was faced with the choice of sending Theo down to the cellar to fetch yet another bottle of wine or of wrapping up the meeting. "Well, gentlemen," he said, "I don't think any of you should risk the travel back home to your constituencies in these conditions." He nodded towards the drawn curtains where a spirited snowstorm was battering against the triple-glazed windows.

"This weather has been truly dreadful," said Thomas. "If it wasn't so bad, I'm sure Eric, Phil and even Anthony would have made it."

"Do you believe that you have a clear enough idea of how to present Conservative electoral policy to your editors, Eden?" asked Ivan cautiously.

"My media outlets aren't the propaganda division of the Tory Party," said Eden, "but the editorial policies of the right-thinking media and the interests of business can only be served by a Conservative Party victory. We shall do what we can to maintain a tone in the campaign that rallies core support without alienating the undecided. I'm sure my editors can be trusted to do whatever they can to facilitate an election victory."

“I think we can then say that our business is concluded, wouldn’t you say gentlemen?” commented Ivan.

“I think so,” said Thomas.

“In that case,” said Eden, “it only remains for me to introduce you to the extra company I’ve taken the trouble to invite.”

“Thank you, Eden,” said Ivan with categorical firmness. “But regrettably I shall have to extend my apologies. I’m afraid I *do* feel really rather tired. It’s been a very long day and I need to get a good night’s sleep. Is there somewhere I can rest my head for the night?”

“There are many such places, Ivan,” said Eden. “My entire house is at your disposal. I’ve already arranged that a guest room be made available for each of you. I’ll call Theo and he’ll be pleased to escort you to your room.” Eden smiled at Thomas and Edmund. “Is either of you two gentlemen also too tired or would you be willing to accompany me and my other guests for the rest of the evening?”

The two other Members of Parliament nodded that they would be prepared to stay.

After Ivan had finally left, Eden addressed the remaining company. “This isn’t the first time Ivan’s been reluctant to meet my other guests. Is there something about him that I should know?”

“I’m sorry, Eden,” said Edmund. “I’m not quite sure I catch your gist.”

“Don’t pretend to be so naive, Edmund,” said Thomas. “No, Eden. As far as we know Ivan isn’t homosexual. His relationship with his wife is perfectly normal. In fact, it’s perhaps a little too normal. My personal belief is that our Prime Minister-in-waiting

is so driven by the desire for high office that nothing—and I mean nothing—will be allowed to get in his way.”

“Surely he knows that he can rely on absolute discretion when he’s a guest of mine,” said Eden. “Nothing is permitted to go beyond the four walls of this room.”

“I don’t think Ivan wants to take a risk of any kind,” said Thomas. “History is littered with the sad tales of ambitious men who let a small slip-up blight their future. Ivan won’t let that happen to him.”

“Well, in that case,” said Eden, “I can now introduce you to the extra company I took the trouble of inviting. I do hope that none of your tastes *are* homosexual as I’ve made no allowances for that.”

“And if one of us were, Eden?” asked Edmund in good humour.

“*Are* you, Edmund?” asked Eden.

“Not necessarily,” said the MP. “Well, far from exclusively.”

“I’ll bear that in mind on future occasions,” said Eden good-naturedly. “Despite the impression given by the recent campaign in the Express & Mail, I don’t hold any personal prejudice against gentlemen of refined taste. It’s the fucking gay and lesbian community I despise.”

“I’m sure I’ll be more than content with the company you’ve invited,” said Edmund diplomatically.

“Well, I certainly hope so,” said Eden. “I expected rather more guests than you two. That has the benefit that the number of ladies I’ve invited will outnumber us rather more than I’d originally anticipated. I hope you’re both feeling fit and up for the challenge.”



“You never disappoint, do you Eden?” said Thomas as the six women of mostly Middle Eastern origin filed into the room scantily dressed and clearly ready to transact further business with Eden’s venerable guests. And as this intercourse was unlikely to involve much verbal discussion, the sorry state of the women’s grasp of English would be no handicap at all.

**XXX**  
**Tamara**  
**2095**

It didn't come as much of a surprise to Tamara when Zoe died. The mystery was rather that she'd managed to live so long given that she'd managed to maintain for so long a drug habit far in excess of what a woman of advanced years was designed to withstand.

All the same, it had been good while it lasted. She and Mohammed had done well out of keeping Zoe supplied with a regular supply of whatever drugs that were currently on the market. Mohammed profited from having a regular customer who paid promptly and in advance. Tamara profited from having a very nice house to live in and a wonderfully warm and clean bed in which to sleep. The only penalties were that she had to leave regularly to visit Mohammed, which she did in Zoe's car, and to sit with Zoe while she sunk into yet another of her mostly silent drug-induced trances.

"What was your relationship with the deceased?" the doctor asked Tamara after he'd examined Zoe's dead body.

Tamara had rehearsed her answer. "I was her lover," she said.

The doctor raised his eyebrows. "Well, Miss St. John-Easton was a strange one, that's for sure. And the toxins in her body... You *do* know what caused her death, don't you?"

"Drugs overdose?"

"Amongst other things," said the doctor. "However, we shall be discreet. And not just about her illegal drugs habit, of course. I hope she's left something for you in her will."

“I’ll just have to wait and find out,” said Tamara who hadn’t thought about that possibility before.

Of course, Zoe had died intestate. Naturally. When would she have found the time to sort matters out with her solicitors however often they might remind her of her duty to her family? And this of course bought Tamara a great deal of time in which she could remain resident in the house she’d made her home for so many months in her new assumed role as Zoe’s bereaved lover.

Tamara had everything she wanted except a line of credit. She had full access to Zoe’s home, her car, her possessions and everything within the estate’s secure walls. What she didn’t have was the money to replenish supplies as they ran out. Thankfully, everything continued to function much as before even though Zoe was no longer alive. Groceries were delivered. The cleaning staff arrived once a day to tidy up what was now a much less disorderly home. The electricity and water continued to be on supply. But Tamara knew that at some point all this would come to an end and that she hadn’t put aside nearly enough cash to cover all the costs.

All the same, Tamara could comfort herself with the notion that the direct debits and standing orders that had been set up were tapping into a well of funds that must be pretty much bottomless. And ultimately that source, as Tamara discovered from Zoe before she’d died and from her own research on the internet, was Zoe’s father who’d died nearly half a century earlier.

“He was rich,” Zoe told her. “Fucking rich. He almost owned the bloody government. If it wasn’t for him there’d probably never have been an English National Unity government.”

“But he died a couple of years before all that happened,” Tamara pointed out.

“During the London riots,” agreed Zoe. “Yeah, that was probably the catalyst that made it all happen, dear. Money spent on political influence. Chaos caused by joblessness and poverty. People weren’t used to it.”

“Things were better fifty years ago, weren’t they?” said Tamara.

“People didn’t think so at the time, dear. The nuclear wars over in Asia. The crop failures. The high price of fuel. Everyone thought it had just gone too far.”

“I don’t see why there were riots then when most people had enough to eat; when people thought plague and famine was banished forever; when ordinary people could drive cars and didn’t have to buy household electricity in portable batteries; when Norfolk still existed as a county and London wasn’t flooded half the time; when, for fuck’s sake, Israel was a land of plenty. What *were* people complaining about?”

“If people had complained a bit more,” said Zoe, “perhaps we wouldn’t be in the mess we’re in. Dad didn’t think the real problems were anything to do with the stuff you’ve just gone on about. He thought it was all to do with governments interfering in the interests of business. That was what he mostly thought, but he also believed that immigration, homosexuality, atheism, environmentalism, trades unions and a whole shitload of other stuff was to blame. A lot of people agreed with him. Especially the stuff about immigration.”

“That’s what the English National Unity government was most famous for, wasn’t it? Kicking out foreigners.”

“It got worse when England was forced to leave the Northern European Union. That was when the United Kingdom fell apart.”

Tamara got bored with conversations like that. The English felt so sorry for themselves. They, and also the Americans. The English annoyed everyone through their well-documented stupidity and arrogance. And soon they woke up to find that the United Kingdom was no longer united and no longer a kingdom. It wasn't even any longer part of the Northern European Union that it had whinged about for so long. The Americans were even worse. They let their most extreme political party take absolute control of the United States and then watched with growing horror as it dismantled the engines of government. All that was left was a progressively weaker nation that steadily squandered a reservoir of wealth that was far from boundless. Eventually, what a nineteenth century civil war had sewn together was dissolved through constitutional crises and economic collapse. At least this time it wasn't associated with the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives.

Even so, what were these misfortunes compared to those suffered by Israel. The nation of Tamara's birth existed now only in the abstract sense of having a paid representative in the United Nations' headquarters in Beijing and by the continued existence of millions of worthless passports. No sane person would actually choose to live in a nuclear wasteland where crops were mutated, cancer was everywhere, and the Palestinians doled out vicious vengeance on any Jew foolish enough to be identified as such. That wasn't what had seemed the most likely of possible futures when, after the initial barrage of nuclear weapons, the Israeli soldiers streamed out of the Promised Land to secure their victory. A rather hollow victory it now seemed when even a limited retaliatory response had destroyed Israel as a nation. And hollower still when it became obvious that wind direction and rain spread nuclear fallout and radiation as evenly on

the victors as the defeated and that an angry vengeful Arab population many times larger than the population of surviving Jews was not, after all, likely to retreat in cowed abjection.

“What did your father think of the Jews?” Tamara asked.

“Not much, dear,” said Zoe. “Well, not often anyway. Though I guess if he thought about them at all he probably didn’t like them. He didn’t like most foreigners. If they didn’t speak English as a first language and they were a different skin colour, then he almost certainly didn’t like them. And that was odd, of course, because his businesses were more active abroad than in England. He spent far more time outside the United Kingdom than he ever did on its shores. If there was money to be made out of the Israelis that was all right, I guess, but if an Arab was going to cut him a better deal my Dad would just dump the entire Jewish nation if that’s what it took to seal it. Anyway, it was American money that kept Israel going wasn’t it? When the United States dissolved that’s all it took for Israel to collapse.”

That wasn’t, of course, how Tamara understood it from what she’d been taught in the Promised Land. She was still sure it was never as simple as that, although surrounded as she was by evidence of the extraordinary wealth, power and influence that Zoe’s father had once possessed, she couldn’t help wondering whether the fate of Abraham’s tribe hadn’t, in the end, just all been down to money.

And nowadays money was exactly what Tamara most fretted about. She’d gathered together all the cash she could find in Zoe’s home, but it was obvious that the lines of credit that kept the estate functioning by default couldn’t forever continue to finance her lavish lifestyle. At some stage, the electricity would be cut off, the cleaners

would no longer arrive, the groceries would no longer be delivered and the lawyers representing Zoe's estate would ask her to leave. She couldn't remain where she was for evermore, could she?

On the other hand, as the days stretched into weeks and the weeks into months, Tamara began to wonder whether in some strange way the financial acumen of Eden St John-Easton might not benefit his daughter's proxy drug supplier for many more years to come. How would the diminutive billionaire view his heritage now if he knew that the last benefactor of the fortune that had shaped the opinions of millions was a stateless Jewish refugee who'd had to resort to prostitution and drug dealing to survive? Was this the legacy by which he'd like to be remembered?

Eventually, of course, the services that kept Tamara in luxury steadily came to an end. The first extravagance to be discontinued, of course, was the regular cleaning service. The day came when the house was not filled at ten in the morning by a busy rush of activity from Asian and Arabic women who'd once methodically removed every trace of Zoe's prodigious drug habits and now had much less need to be active. Tamara was actually more upset when the contract for media services expired and she now had to rely for news and entertainment on the terrestrial radio stations. Most of these were more or less identical commercial radio stations, but she could at least listen to the EBC News Service which was one of the last few remaining remnants of the once prestigious BBC.

Beyond the security walls of Zoe's estate there was a large and very frightening world. This was a world in which a plague was spreading across Wales and North West England; where there was a deadly border dispute between Mexico and the Republic of

North America (though much of that was indentured labour trying to escape to Mexico rather than economic migrants travelling north); where famine bred violence across the Middle East and put further pressure on the few remaining Jewish settlers besieged behind high walls and barbed wire; where the Netherlands was now mostly underwater; and where frightened nations were building up military alliances to defend what remained of their economic influence.

It was a much safer world behind the walls of Zoe's estate. When she looked through the window at the countless hectares of garden that had become ever more unkempt since the gardeners stopped arriving, Tamara could well believe that things weren't so bad. It was easy to shelter here in a world where the horrors of the outside world were as distant as they once seemed a quarter of a century ago when she was a child. It was reassuring to have access to so much space. She was tempted to invite her friends from her time at the Refugee Centre to share the bounty, but she recognised that this might present a problem with regards to the security guards. They were prone to pass a blind eye to the one by now familiar Jewish immigrant, but would be far less tolerant of twenty or so people that they didn't recognise.

The groceries finally stopped arriving one day. That was a blow, although the food was scarcely what Zoe would have chosen for herself. She was sure that it wasn't even partly kosher, but she'd abandoned the scruples of her religion a long time ago. There was enough in the freezers to keep her going for several months more, but only if the power supply continued. Thankfully, the wind generators and solar panels didn't rely on payment to the electricity suppliers.

Tamara's was now a lonely life. She had no company at all now the cleaners



didn't visit. Tamara was rather grateful that Zoe had never been very neighbourly. She was pretty sure that none of Zoe's very wealthy and rather snooty neighbours would be especially friendly towards her supposed lesbian lover. Tamara was secluded in an island of illusory plenty. She knew it wouldn't last forever and as the days passed by the dread of being thrown out into the harsh world beyond troubled her more and more.

Every news report of yet another immigrant being lynched made her shiver. And she trembled even more when the racial origin of the victim was identified and it was announced that it was yet another Jewish migrant.

**XXXI**  
**Alex**  
**2027**

It wasn't often that the chief shareholders of Reuters-Fox UK ever chose to address the senior staff, but the celebration following the landslide General Election victory for the Conservatives was a special occasion. It clearly deserved the attendance of those whose wealth financed the loss-making news media empire and whose influence and opinions guided its editorial policies.

Alex was probably the most junior of all the staff in attendance. Although his promotion through the ranks had been relatively rapid thanks to his tireless self-promotion and willingness to do unpaid overtime, he hadn't risen to the rarefied heights of management where he would normally expect to meet people like Eden St John-Easton. The young tycoon wasn't the only shareholder addressing the massed ranks, but although he was by far both the youngest and the shortest he was also the most prominent.

The meeting was called to congratulate the editorial staff of Reuters-Fox UK for their focused effort towards enabling a landmark victory that could only bode well for Britain and British business. It also highlighted the work that still needed to be done to broadcast the message that what was good for business was good for Britain and that low taxation inevitably led to improved international competitiveness. The only sour note raised was when one of the principal shareholders remarked that Reuters-Fox UK might also need to communicate its green credentials in an age where fuel prices were astronomically high and localised flooding was constantly in the news. "We need to be

seen to be green,” he asserted while other shareholders including Eden St. John-Easton almost visibly rolled their eyes, “but we also need to be genuine. Green is good for business as much as it is good for the environment. If we lower our costs on non-renewables and energy waste, we shall also improve our long term profitability.”

After the conference was over, Alex was rather taken aback when Ian Anderson, the London Senior Editor, took him to one side. “Look lively, son,” said his boss who was as much Alex’s senior in years as he was in status. “Mr St. John-Easton wants to talk to you. God knows what interests he has in online media, but make sure you check back with me with whatever he has to say.”

“Of course, Ian,” said Alex, who couldn’t help wondering whether this meeting had anything to do with his occasional late-night meetings with Zara. They were infrequent, unannounced and, thankfully, never resolved in a way that Isobel could use as evidence for divorce. As Alex’s face was the only one Zara recognised in the office, he was her natural point of call whenever she was in the area and wanted a drink.

Was Alex now for the chop?

“Alan is it?” said Eden while Alex did his best to disguise how much taller he was than the great man. “My wife has mentioned you to me.”

“She has, sir?” said Alex who wondered whether Eden’s rather bland smile was disguising rather more diabolical intentions.

“Not in a bad way, mind you,” continued Eden. “You’re an old friend of hers from way back, I believe?”

“Yes,” said Alex with almost visible relief. What had Zara said about him? “A long way back.”

“Well, I don’t need to know the details,” said Eden, “though you *are* somewhat older than my wife. She says that you have some good ideas on to how to extend the online news service. Is that so?”

Alex wondered what the hell Eden was talking about. During the few meetings he’d had with Zara there’d been virtually no mention of Alex’s job and certainly none about his non-existent good ideas. Was this part of an elaborate cover-up by Zara to disguise the fact that she’d been meeting him for nothing more than a drink in the Zenith? Would Eden suspect that Alex and she were having an affair? What was going on?

“Yes,” Alex lied as convincingly as he could. “I do believe that with the rapid growth of the virtual world, such as Virtual Reality, Social Networking and... erm... so on, there should be a much greater news presence. There’s a lot more money that can be made from advertising there.”

“Hmmm,” said Eden, who already looked bored. “Advertising revenue isn’t really a big deal, is it? I don’t expect to make much money out of Reuters-Fox anyway. Its costs are hardly covered by advertising revenue, but if you think there’s money to be made from advertising then have a word with Marketing. I’m sure they’ll be all ears. No, I was wondering more about influence rather than revenue. What influence do you think Reuters-Fox UK could have on the VR community? How do you think we can get a part of the action?”

Shit! What had Zara got Alex into? This was his one chance to impress the big man (or small one, in truth) and he had nothing to offer. How could he bluff his way out of this?

“I think we should have a visible presence in the Virtual world,” said Alex with as much conviction he could muster for his totally improvised thoughts. “There are plenty of models we can use as examples though they *are* focused on the needs of gamers and social networkers. We don’t need to be just a passive news outlet in the Virtual World. We can be much more active.”

“And if we were more active, could we then have more influence?” asked Eden.

This was clearly what Eden wanted to believe, so Alex decided to reinforce this view. “Yes, of course,” said Alex. “It’s a way of getting out the message that the interests of business and Britain are one and the same thing. It’s a way of ensuring that everyone sees the benefits of business-friendly government policy.”

“And how would we do that?” wondered Eden. “I don’t see too many people playing computer games whose purpose is to lower taxes. What would be the attraction of that? Would you feature a bunch of greens and pinkos as evil forces getting in the way of our online hero on his mission to reduce taxation?”

A joke, thought Alex with relief, as he laughed appreciatively in the way he’d been schooled in his years of interminable meetings. “There are more subtle ways of doing it than that,” he said with a grin. “But effectively it would be exactly what you suggest.”

“Really?” said Eden thoughtfully, who was probably more taken by his own attempt at humour than what Alex had to say. “Well, get on with it, Alan. I’ll make sure that Tom from Finance gives you the funding you need.”

With that he tapped Alex gently on the shoulder and left him standing by himself in a state of paralysed stupefaction. What hole had he just dug for himself?

This was the same question expressed to him later by Ian when he reported back an account of his conversation, only Ian was much less inclined to hold back on his use of expletives.

“Whose fucking idea was it anyway?” Ian asked.

Alex could see the wisdom in grasping the straw proffered to him by Eden with both hands. “In truth,” he said, “I can’t take *any* credit for it. It was Mr St. John-Easton who proposed a more active involvement in VR. However, I think it’s unlikely he’d want to expose himself to criticism if it should happen to fail.”

“Are you saying that our young tycoon suggested to you that he wanted a news agency involved in some unspecified way on the VR internet and he has no fucking idea of what that should be?”

“More or less, Ian.”

“What the fuck do you mean? Is it more? Or is it less? What *does* he want us to fucking do?”

“I guess a lot depends on how much money he wants to apportion to the project.”

“I’ll remind you that Mr St. John-Easton is no fucking Santa Claus. Any money we spend on some fuckwit project comes from profits made by Fox International. It will have to be approved by the fucking Executive. We’ve already wasted fucking billions on internet related enterprises that have sunk without a fucking trace. Not even so much sunk as plummeted leaving a pile of fucking shite for us to deal with.”

“I’m not sure we’re in a position to negotiate with what Mr St. John-Easton wants, Ian.”

The Senior Editor considered this. “Any ideas then of what we should do to keep our billionaire friend happy, Alex?”

Alex had an answer for that, which, of course, was no answer at all. “I think it would be very hasty for us to commit ourselves to anything specific before investigating it thoroughly, Ian.”

“That’s not much of a fucking proposal to put in front of the board.”

“I think we need to be seen to be doing something towards building up a more prominent presence in the VR space, Ian. It’s just got to look like it satisfies Mr St. John-Easton’s requirements.”

“What you’re saying is that you haven’t got a fucking clue, am I right?”

“We could buy something that’s already active on the VR scene, Ian,” said Alex. “Something that’s doing well but needs a bit of nurturing.”

“What do you suggest? Not one of those fucking virtual sex sites, I hope. I don’t want the Telegraph running stories about Fox International executives getting their cocks greased in all that weird VR paraphernalia.”

“They’ll run stories like that whatever we do, Ian,” said Alex. “That’s just one idea. It might even pay off, you never know.”

“I guess so,” said Ian more reflectively. “*You’re* the fucking expert. I don’t know anything about all this Virtual Reality stuff anyway.”

“I think Mr St. John-Easton doesn’t know even as much as you do, Ian.”

“You’re probably right there,” said Ian thoughtfully. “What do you suggest we do, then?”

“We build up a news department dedicated to the VR realm,” said Alex. “We

do a bit of investigation and work out what we can buy and what we can develop in-house. We increase its visibility so that Mr St. John-Easton and the whole board are aware of what's happening. We give it a bit of exposure on Fox News UK and try to get the BBC interested. Any success it has we credit to Mr St. John-Easton. Any failures we brush under the carpet."

"It's a plan of sorts," said Ian. "I guess it'll have to be handled by your department, won't it?"

*Yes!* thought Alex. *Yes! Yes!* An Executive Board presence and a potentially huge budget. If that wasn't effectively promotion, what could be?

"Someone has to take responsibility for the thing, Ian," said Alex.

"So, Alex," wondered Ian. "How is it that someone like Mr. St. John-Easton—international playboy, business goliath and would-be media tycoon—should happen to get to know about you? Or 'Alan' as he thinks you're called."

"I don't know, Ian," said Alex. "It's a mystery."

"A big fucking mystery. You're not a freemason or something like that, are you?"

"Of course not, Ian."

"You wouldn't say if you were, would you?" said Ian. "Look, I haven't got all day. Present me with a proposal of what you think needs to be done. Make sure that you don't make any reference to our diminu... dashing billionaire anywhere in your proposal. And don't refer to him in any e-mails either. Just keep him out of it."

"Yes, Ian."

"Well, get going then, Alex," said Ian dismissing him with a flick of his hand.



Alex left the Senior Editor's office in huge relief with not just a cloud lifted but the sun shining down on him more brilliantly than it had ever done.

Now what?

First of all, he'd have to get someone to write up a proposal for the Senior Editor. Maybe Igor. He could make a good fist of it once he was briefed. And then he'd have to celebrate. Perhaps he'd join the other managers in the Cat and Mouse after work. A few drinks would be just the right way to end the day.

Should he phone Isobel? That was a difficult call. She probably wouldn't understand the significance of what Alex had just achieved and might even suggest that instead of enjoying himself with his work colleagues he come home early and celebrate with her.

That would be boring.

Better to say nothing, really. She wasn't expecting him to come home early anyway.

**XXXII**  
**Theo**  
**2052**

Theo was a murderer. He knew that. He was as much a murderer as the man who'd actually killed his employer. He'd lied in court about his role in the slaughter, but he knew the truth. It was he, as much as anyone else, who had murdered Eden St. John-Easton. As expected, the circumstances that accompanied the murder excused him of any blame. Who could have known just how much out of hand the rioters would get? But whether premeditated or not, it was Theo who'd allowed it to happen.

The guilt plagued Theo more than he could ever have imagined. He'd thought it might subside after a year had passed by, but in a sense it only plagued him the more now that he had so successfully avoided being accused of the crime he knew he'd perpetrated.

When the rioters came streaming into Berkeley Square, there were many things Theo could have done that he didn't do. He could have bolted up the front door to the house. He could have turned off the lights to suggest that no one was in. He could have lied when the rioters appeared at the door with their crowbars, baseball bats and other improvised weapons. He knew full well that their intentions were malicious. He knew that the primary object of their rage was his employer, Sir Eden, who was upstairs trembling and terrified. He knew that there was little to stop the enraged rioters from killing his employer just as in the previous few days they'd slain several other wealthy businessmen and politicians associated with electoral victory by the Liberal Conservative coalition that was so deeply unpopular with the poor, the unemployed and

the many others who'd lost their right to vote as a result of the recent controversial electoral reforms.

No doubt the rioters had identified Eden's Mayfair home from recent news stories. Perhaps they'd spotted Eden in his upstairs study as he looked down at the mob that was menacingly stalking the streets. Their original destination had been elsewhere, but this course of action had been frustrated by armed police. It was the bloody Americans again who'd inflamed the current civil unrest. Ever since several dozen protestors had been shot outside the American Embassy a few weeks ago, anyone suspected of US citizenship or indeed anyone associated with the flavour of reactionary politics currently ascendant across the Atlantic Ocean was a natural target for the rioters' anger.

The Americans' recent trigger-happy stupidity gave them much to answer for, but it wasn't an isolated incident. In recent years the increasingly barmy and intolerant administrations that had gained power in America had fomented unrest all round the world and increasingly in many of its own States. As the international prestige of the United States continued to plummet in the face of economic challenges it was hopelessly unprepared for, so too did the nation's sense of justice, its civilised values and even, it seemed, the last few vestiges of American sanity. Perhaps it was with misguided patriotism that Theo held the view that Britain's similar decline in the twentieth century was accompanied with rather less manic despair than America's in the current century. America was flailing madly in the quicksand of its own making and hastening its absolute decline at an alarming rate.

What should Theo have done when the door to Eden's Mayfair home was prised

open and he was confronted by rioters baying for blood? Should he have claimed that Mr. St. John-Easton was somewhere else and therefore not in residence? Should he have made an attempt to fight off the rioters even as they spilled down the hallway smashing vases, furniture and hanging mirrors as they did so? What he almost certainly shouldn't have done was capitulate when asked by a wiry protestor brandishing a baseball bat where the master of the house was. He most certainly didn't have to admit that his boss was hiding in his study on the top floor.

There were ways in which Theo's actions could be justified. In fact, once the rioters knew where to go, they ignored him and crowded up the flights of stairs. They were no longer intent on smashing up furniture and priceless heirlooms. Who knows how many works of art were spared for posterity as a result? And when the rioters had finished their business, they filed out of the house almost apologetically, their baseball bats and other weapons now splattered with blood. They even tried to close the door behind them that they had earlier spent a full ten minutes forcing open. Theo was able to determine from the deep gouges and the damage to the lock that the door had suffered not just the onslaught of crowbars but also battering by rather larger and less obvious weapons such as a fire extinguisher and a railing post.

Theo remained downstairs terrified and shaking during the whole time that it had taken for Mr St. John-Easton to be murdered. He was in the company of three women and two men who were sufficiently angry with the master of the house to invade his property but perhaps not so much as to put him to death. They seemed almost as anxious and nervous by the violence as Theo was, although they were also clearly excited. They looked intently up the staircase where from above came the echoing

sounds of thumps and bangs and whimpers. Two of the women were smoking rolled-up cigarettes and were actually more trim and muscular than the men. They were all smeared with dirt, sweat and grease. The effort involved in rioting in Mayfair had clearly been strenuous. The already overstretched and scaled down police force had quite simply not been up to the job of containing the thousands of rioters rampaging through not only Mayfair but every inner city suburb and potential flashpoint in London and the other major cities in the United Kingdom.

When Theo woke up that morning and heard on the news broadcasts that rioters were once again amassing in the usual congregation points such as Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park Corner and Piccadilly Circus, he imagined that any rioting would be mostly confined to these places. The patently inadequate police force was fully mobilised and forced to neglect their duty to direct traffic, patrol neighbourhoods and prevent drugs abuse, while the government continued to debate whether it was yet time to mobilise the military. It didn't help their cause, of course, that military commitments in Africa and Asia had stretched that resource too far as well. Theo nervously watched the progress of the rioting protestors on television and was startled when the unreal world of online news coverage suddenly became a fact of real life and twenty or so rioters were now hammering at the door.

What was the chance that the master of the house should actually be in residence? Like all such coincidences, it was unlikely but true. For most days of every month, the Berkeley Square residence was empty of anyone except ancillary staff and workmen. There was far more chance of catching Mr St. John-Easton in the Mediterranean on his yacht, the *Buccaneer*, than in Mayfair. But the civil unrest that

was to bring about the death of the middle-aged billionaire was also the cause of his flight being delayed. Ironically the very reason Eden was staying in his Mayfair home in London was to congratulate the government on winning the General Election and it was the controversy associated with its disputed outcome that had spilled out onto the streets of the most expensive real estate in Britain.

It was only when the rioters had well and truly departed that Theo gathered the courage to climb the stairs to the study where Mr St. John-Easton had been hiding.

Theo hadn't been the only other person in the house. There were housemaids, kitchen staff, and a minder who'd been more active in organising an emergency chartered flight than in protecting his employer. Most of the servants huddled together in the basement and were too terrified to venture upstairs where the rioters had broken in. The minder had tried to do his duty when the rioters piled up the stairs but he was unable to protect his master against so many. It must have been the minder, however, who was responsible for the death of the young man who had a bullet through his chest, but this offensive was countered by several close-quarter swings from baseball bats. Although his skull was cracked, the minder did eventually manage to regain consciousness.

The minder's act of heroism probably only served to further incite the rage of the rioters which they let loose on Mr St. John-Easton who was shaking with terror under the table in his upstairs study. Or at least that was where the murder scene investigators said he'd been hiding. When Theo entered the study, it was just a bloody mess and difficult to make any sense of the chaos.

Theo had been a faithful servant for the Messrs St. John-Easton, father and son,

for forty years. That was almost a lifetime in itself. Most of that time was spent in watchful idleness. Neither father nor son ever spent much time in the United Kingdom however much they professed a deep love for the country they hardly knew and mostly despised. Nevertheless, when Mr St. John-Easton was on British soil, from the moment he arrived at the airport until the moment he departed, Theo was always by his side. There was no duty too demeaning for him. There were the prostitutes whose services he helped facilitate. There were the abortions he'd arranged for Eden's girlfriends. The rehab clinics he'd contacted to treat Eden's drug-addicted daughter. The mysterious parcels he'd had to escort with paranoid care and attention. And now there was no Mr St. John-Easton to whom he could continue to provide a service. Eden had left no male heirs and his daughter was too irresponsible to take over her father's estate.

What was left of Eden St. John-Easton was not a pretty sight. The rioters had quite clearly lost any trace of humanity when they discovered him cowering under the table. All the resentment that had built up over nearly thirty years towards the media tycoon who had such a huge hidden influence on British society exploded all at once. To the rioters, he was the man who had crippled the BBC and made Fox News UK the official voice of Great Britain. He was the man who'd reduced the status of British newspapers to the extent that only the foreign-owned Guardian remained anything remotely like the voice of government opposition. He was the man who cheered while the public sector shrunk to a mere shell of what it had once been so as to facilitate tax cuts that benefited very few people. He was the man who talked endlessly about bolstering British business and British enterprise, but was part of the very process that had relocated most enterprises funded by British money to the more prosperous

countries in the Far East or the slave wage economies of Africa.

Eden's head had been smashed again and again and again. There was very little recognisable in the bloody mess splattered across the carpet although there were several loose teeth which could be used to identify the deceased. He'd been battered elsewhere, judging by the crooked angle of his arms and legs, but the damage done to what had once been his head and face was what was most appalling.

When the police and the coroner and the news photographers arrived, Theo was the man who was most approximately the primary witness to the crime. He recounted again and again the story of how he'd been pushed helplessly to one side when the rioters broke in and how futile his attempts to protect his master had been. What he never did was explain exactly how it was that they even knew that Eden was in the building and what role Theo had in the murder.

In actual fact, Theo did quite well out of it all. He was awarded a handsome pension and the right to remain in the very well-appointed Mayfair apartment where he'd been living for the last thirty years. His wife and children were now able to see more of him as he no longer had to spread his duties between estates in Ashton Lovelock, Surrey and the rest of the British Isles. His family was even granted the status of distant inheritors of the St John-Easton estate because of a little-reported liaison between Eden's father and Theo's wife that had been a cause of shame and embarrassment to them for many years.

Nonetheless, Theo was still burdened with the weight of his guilt.

If it hadn't been for him then it was likely that Eden St John-Easton would yet be alive.



But Theo was able to temper the pang of his guilt by reflecting that the world could only be a rather better place without him.

### XXXIII

## Eden

### 2051

“I wouldn’t advise it, sir,” said Eden’s minder, Jason Irons, a dour but efficiently vicious scot. “You’ve seen the news reports. It’s been another day of riots. We’d be better off staying in the house until it blows over. That is, of course, unless you want to leave incognito.”

“*Incognito?*” asked Eden with outrage. “What the bloody hell does that mean?”

“Well, we could bundle you into a modest car that someone of your status wouldn’t normally be seen dead in and then we could drive you to your Surrey estate and well away from any rioters.”

“You’re right, Irons,” said Eden. “I wouldn’t be seen dead doing anything like that. We’ll stay here and let this nonsense pass by. I’ll go up to my study. You continue trying to organise that charter flight to the Med.”

“It’s difficult, sir, what with the airport staff strike and the protests against aeroplane fuel subsidies,” said Irons. “I mightn’t be able to arrange anything for a couple of days.”

“I don’t bloody care what it takes, Irons. What do I pay you for anyway? Just fucking do it.”

Irons scurried off to carry out his duty and left his boss alone in his study. Eden buzzed Theo on his phone who answered immediately. “Come up here please,” he said and left the call at that. Within a minute, Theo was in the study standing to attention and bowed his head to Eden in obsequious deference.

“Well, Theo, it looks like I’m going to be spending all of today and possibly most of tomorrow in this place.”

“You won’t be going to Surrey today then, sir?”

“No, I won’t,” said Eden. “And it’s very likely that I shan’t be going there at all. My present plan, if Irons can get it together, is to fly back to my yacht tomorrow. I’ve already had more than enough of this country.”

“I’ll tell the guys in the *Buccaneer* to expect you tomorrow, sir.”

“So, what *is* happening outside, Theo? You’d have thought there would be celebrations after the election. Not riots. It all seemed pretty conclusive after the polls closed.”

“There are a lot of people who don’t like the election results, sir.”

“So why did they vote for the Liberal Conservative Party then, Theo?”

“I think the ones complaining are those who didn’t vote for them, sir. I think a lot of them didn’t vote at all.”

“The modernisation of the electoral system was well overdue. You saw the chaos that resulted when every government was a coalition. In fact, the present government is *still* a coalition. *And* it’s a coalition with some political parties further to the right than Iverson’s lot that I’d probably support if I thought they ever had a chance of becoming the majority. It’s the voting system. It’s fair and square. The British people should just respect the election result and get on with being governed.”

“It’s not just the results, sir. I think most people accepted the change of government even if they didn’t like it.”

“You mean the US Embassy shooting, Theo? What were the Americans

supposed to do? Let the anarchists overrun the place? They did the right thing. They should act like that every time.”

“They generally do so nowadays whatever happens, sir. The Americans are not much liked anywhere in the world these days. They’re perceived to have become unnecessarily brutal with the suppression of rioters and the like.”

“And so they should be. What is this mob moaning about anyway? They pay less tax under a Liberal Conservative government. They have more and better opportunities to set up business free from government interference. They should be happy.”

“Many are complaining about unemployment and public service cuts, sir.”

“Unemployment, Theo? We’re doing what we can to keep immigrants and asylum seekers off our shores. They should be grateful. British jobs for British citizens.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I need some distraction this evening. I take it you’ll be able to organise something. Or will the escorts also be frightened to walk the streets of London?”

“I think that they’ll be here even if the River Thames floods and the waters reach as far as Mayfair, sir. I don’t think anything much could keep them away from providing you a service. If need be, sir, they’d even dress up like a rioter to get here.”

That amused Eden. “A hooker in a hoodie. Tarts with eco-terrorist tee-shirts and utility boots. Vegetarian whores. Well, they couldn’t be that, could they Theo? Eating meat is part of their job. Where would they be if they decided not to eat sausage when they’re asked to?”

“I don’t know, sir. Is there anything else you require?”

“Food. Drink. The usual. And if my deranged daughter turns up again, just tell her I’m not in. That is, of course, unless she wants to fight off the rioters. Do you think she sympathises with them, Theo?”

“I don’t think she has any opinions, sir, political or otherwise.”

“She’s a hopeless case. She’ll be dead long before I am. And then what will happen to the inheritance?”

“I don’t know, sir. Will that be all?”

“Yes, Theo. Don’t disturb me until lunch is prepared.”

“Of course not, sir.”

Eden stood by the window of his study. Berkeley Square seemed quiet. Perhaps a little too quiet. Many of the more exclusive Mayfair shops and salons had been shuttered up since the US Embassy incident. There weren’t enough police about for Eden’s liking. They were probably gathered in places like Trafalgar Square that had become almost second home for the rioting yobbos. If only it was possible to corral the lot of them and shoot them methodically. That would solve most of Britain’s problems in one go. And do wonders for the unemployment statistics.

Eden picked up the phone and punched in a number.

“Eden?” said the voice at the other end.

“Prime Minister,” he answered.

“How can I help you, Eden? I *am* very busy at the moment. I can’t really stop for a chat.”

“I just wanted an update on the situation.”

“It’s pretty grim, but we’re winning.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“The protestors are disorganised. Their demands are unfocused and uncoordinated. The media are unanimously against them, including, you’ll be pleased to know, the pinko Guardian and the BBC. There’s a head of steam but it’ll soon dissipate.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

“A day or so. At most a week. In the long run it’ll all be to our benefit.”

“How do you work that one out, Ivan?”

“It doesn’t do the causes of the greens, the trades unions, the pinkos or the lefties any good to be associated with civil unrest. The more they protest the better the argument to clamp down on them and push forward a modernising agenda.”

“And what might that be, Prime Minister?”

“There is virtually no difference, Eden, between what I want to achieve and what you’ve been advocating for years. This country will be transformed under my premiership. In a few years time it’ll hardly be recognisable.”

“Good to hear, Prime Minister.”

“Thank you, Eden. Now, if you don’t mind, I have an Emergency Cabinet Meeting in a few moments.”

The Prime Minister put down the phone and Eden stared at it for a few moments while he debated whether he to call the editors and senior executives of his UK media concerns. Finally, he decided that he could trust them to handle the situation by themselves. Eden looked out again through the window at the street below.

Shit! The street wasn't so quiet now. He could see hundreds of louts and layabouts streaming into Berkeley Square. They really did look like the cliché image of rioting mobs as portrayed by his newspapers and other media outlets. They'd armed themselves as well with makeshift weapons. Some were shouting and yelling. They appeared to be concentrating around the square's perimeter. What the fuck! This was England. Britain. The United Kingdom. This kind of thing didn't happen here and it most certainly didn't happen in Mayfair. Curse the bloody Americans!

Eden watched as the mob approached his house. They clearly knew it was his. Perhaps it was those magazine articles about great town houses that had featured one or other of his many British residencies. Perhaps it was all those BBC News stories where whenever there was a report on his business activities the journalist would always be filmed standing outside his Berkeley Square home. Well, that *was* about the nearest they'd ever get to actually meeting him. The only interviews he did in Britain these days were for Fox News UK.

And then the nightmare began in earnest.

Eden watched in horror as below his study, four floors down, the mob applied their concentrated force as one and began battering against his front door. He couldn't see exactly what they were doing, though he was sure the security cameras were getting a good view that could be used later to settle the ensuing insurance claims. They were using lethal equipment to pulverise his door that included spiked railings, crowbars and other improvised weapons which had undoubtedly been torn out of ransacked cars and service vehicles. The banging and thumping reverberated about the house. The bastards might even get in.

“Irons!” Eden cried out.

“Yes, sir,” said his minder who appeared promptly at the door.

“You know what’s happening, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It looks pretty bad.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Deal with it, will you?”

“Yes, sir,” said the minder. He cocked his combat pistol and strode off down the stairs.

The door eventually gave in to the incessant pounding and from above Eden watched the mob pile into the house. This was *not* supposed to happen. This was going to be the day when Eden was due to fly back to his yacht. He’d only booked this visit to England at the last minute anyway. But after such an historic General Election victory, he thought it was pretty much incumbent on him to show support. And now what was he to do?

All through the many years of his career, he was generally escorted by a well-armed security presence. He usually took extreme precautions especially when he visited countries like America or Russia where homicide was rife. It had been stupid not to do so here, but after having visited prosperous business-friendly countries like China and Japan and not needing such tight security, Eden naively thought the same applied to Great Britain.

He was obviously wrong.

His security staff usually had good advice for such dangerous situations and the



most important was to hide. He shouldn't try to defend himself. There were trained officers to do that. He shouldn't try to run away unless he knew exactly where he was running to. If he hid, there was a good chance that he might avoid being found. He should never do anything that might attract attention to his whereabouts.

The only place to hide that Eden could think of was under the huge table that dominated his study on which sat a massive computer screen and a pile of expensive first-edition books he'd never read that had been written by people he probably wouldn't like anyway.

The nightmare continued.

Eden could hear the mob from down the stairwell as they smashed furniture and priceless works of art and yelled incoherently. He couldn't quite make out the words though he fancied that he heard his name being repeated several times. So, they *did* know who lived in this house. Then there was the unmistakable sound of heavy feet getting ever louder as the mob ran up the stairs towards the fourth floor.

There was a pause in the running. There were some angry cries. There was Irons' booming army-trained Scottish voice yelling at the mob. This was another thing that Eden had been told by the security companies. Even mobs, blood-crazed and insane, were often cowed by a show of authority: especially when it was uncompromising and backed up by the clear threat of force.

Then there was another sound that couldn't be mistaken for any other. Irons had fired off his gun.

Eden shivered where he was. Surely that would do it. Surely this was the end of the horror. The mob would see that they were beaten. They would say "OK, mate. We

understand. We'll be on our way. No hard feelings.”

Unfortunately this wasn't at all what happened when the echoes of the gunshot faded away. Instead the sound of shouting and yelling from the mob got even louder and there was the unmistakable sound of more improvised weapons being applied on the costly household fittings. Then the thunderous sound of feet clambering up the stairs got steadily ever closer.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

There was another pause as the mob assembled on the landing and various doors were opened and shut. The shouting was still loud, but not much more coherent. Eden heard the handle to the study door being turned. At least he'd had the presence of mind to lock the door. Perhaps that would be good enough. A locked door. Too much effort.

But no! The next sound was of the door being jemmied off its hinges and then there was no barrier between Eden and the mob. They were in the same room as him and he could see their legs and feet from under the table where he was hiding.

“There's the cunt!” said one of the rioters.

Shit!

**XXXIV**  
**Tamara**  
**2096**

A woman in her mid-thirties strode about the grounds of Zoe's estate. She was wearing a smart suit of the kind only ever worn by female business executives. There was a rhythmic clicking of her high heeled stilettos on the paved stones as she walked along the path. Tamara cautiously opened the front door to the house. It would be foolish to pretend she wasn't in, even if it was to receive the eviction notice that she'd been anticipating for well over a year now.

The woman looked up from her tablet PC where she'd been making notes with her fingers and regarded Tamara who was standing in a tee-shirt and shorts at the top of the front door steps.

"You must be Tamara," she said.

"Yes."

"Zoe's lesbian lover?"

"Yes."

"You can't be more than a third her age. Was she *really* still interested in romance at her age?"

"I guess I must be proof of that."

"Well, indeed," said the woman who again consulted her tablet PC. She strode towards Tamara and outstretched her hand. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Theresa. I'm the executor for Miss St. John-Easton's estate."

Tamara shook hands with Theresa who scrutinised her rather more intently than

she was comfortable with.

“I assume you must be wondering what will happen next,” said Theresa. “You’ve been living here for quite a long time. Including the time when Zoe was still alive, it must be at least two years. I imagine you’d almost come to think that this was really your home.”

Tamara nodded.

“Shall we go inside?” suggested Theresa. “We can discuss matters in more comfort there.”

Tamara escorted Theresa to the living room where the television was burbling on about the outbreak of plague in Ireland and the suspicion expressed by Irish scientists had that it might be associated with a genetic engineering lab based in England. Tamara turned off the set and settled into the sofa while Theresa sat primly in the leather armchair opposite.

“As you probably know, Tamara,” said Theresa, “there was no will left by the deceased. That’s no surprise. The real surprise is that Zoe survived so long after all those years of sustained drug abuse. My mother was next in line to inherit the St. John-Easton estate and even that was hard to demonstrate in court. This was especially so since she died a few years ago. And that means the entire estate has been bequeathed to me.”

“Was your mother related to Zoe?” wondered Tamara.

“Only through her grandfather. And she was hardly at all acknowledged as such. She was the lovechild of Eden St. John-Easton’s father. The only reason that there is a verifiable trace to Zoe’s father is that my grandmother was the wife of his valet. My

grandfather man was also Zoe's grandfather. My mother was younger than Zoe when she died. It's ironic, isn't it? My mother who led a blameless life, bore a bastard and cared for by one of Eden St. John Easton's servants, died of cancer before Zoe whose lifestyle was so excessive that no one believed she could survive her twenties." Theresa bit her lip and raised her eyebrows. "My mother waited a long time for her inheritance and she missed her opportunity. Instead, it's been left to me."

"It must be a great deal of money."

"It most certainly is, Tamara," said Theresa. "But it's not as much as it once would have been. It's nothing like the fortune it was before Zoe's father died. Few of his prime investments had a long-term future: especially those in the news and media. And it's not as if Zoe had squandered it all. Her allowance was generous but she was never allowed full access to the St. John-Easton fortune. Her father knew that it would just end up in her veins."

"I'm sure she wouldn't have been *that* excessive."

"Are you really sure, Tamara? Or are you just saying that?"

"I don't know," Tamara admitted.

"The St. John-Easton business empire held a very wide portfolio. The investments weren't just in media, government contracts, arms and retail. There were many that were never declared to the English taxman and whose existence was known only to his private accountants. One such investment was Empire Cleaning Services. You may have heard of them."

Tamara didn't know what to say. She tried to look as nonchalant as she could.

"A cleaning company?"

“They *were* a private home cleaning agency once upon a time. When St. John-Easton acquired the business they were one of countless cleaning agencies that supplied employment to immigrants and asylum seekers, usually women, who were willing to make a living by cleaning the homes of the relatively prosperous. The business took advantage of the low wages such people were willing to accept and provided them with legitimate employment while legislation regarding immigrant workers became steadily tighter. After he acquired the company, it diversified into other areas where it soon became quite a lucrative earner for the St. John-Easton estate. In short, Tamara, Zoe was your employer in a way that neither of you was aware of when you came to be her lesbian lover.”

“She was?”

“You can’t deny that you worked for Empire Cleaning Services. I’ve seen their employment records. Was it as an employee that you came to be resident at Miss St. John-Easton’s estate? And if it was, I doubt very much that it was to actually keep the place clean. That was provided by Think Clean Ltd. They provide services at a quite reasonable rate, although their business actually *is* exclusively related to the aim of keeping their clients’ property clean. Admittedly, like Empire Cleaning Services, they can be relied upon to be discreet, but not in quite the same way.”

“I’m not sure what you’re suggesting.”

“Aren’t you, Tamara?” said Theresa who looked directly at her with a not especially friendly smile. “Are you sure you can’t guess what I’m suggesting?”

“No.”

“Okay,” said Theresa. “I’ll spell it out to you. Zoe was not a woman with much

of a history of committed relationships over her many years. It's obvious that she did have some relationships—her history of abortions is evidence of that—but at no stage did she ever maintain a stable relationship with anyone she was intimate with. In the last twenty or so years, the only sexual relations she'd had at all were ones she paid for and those were exclusively with men. There is a record of transactions with agencies whose principal business is to supply the services of what might charitably be called gigolos. There is no evidence to suggest that Zoe was likely to have a Sapphic relationship this late in her life.”

“But she obviously did,” Tamara continued to assert.

“*Did* she?” wondered Theresa with a bit of a frown. “All those years of substance abuse and principally heterosexual recreational sex; and then you walk into her life. One moment you're an employee of Empire Cleaning Services and the next you're her lover. There isn't much in your records that makes that plausible. You're an asylum seeker from the Middle East, I believe. Where from, in particular? Jordan? Syria? Which one of those nuclear wastelands?”

“Israel.”

“Israel, hmm,” said Theresa thoughtfully. “No wonder you don't want to return home. Your passport's not much use to you now, is it? Are you Jewish?”

“Yes.”

“Israel doesn't have many friends left, does it? The Second Diaspora they call it. Is that so? Are you part of that?”

“I am,” said Tamara with resignation.

Theresa pursed her lips. “A Jewish prostitute,” she said bluntly. “Not however

one who's shown much appetite for lesbianism. You had plenty of opportunity while employed at Empire Cleaning Services to work for female clients. This is an option often taken by employees with no previous history of Sapphic inclination simply because there's less risk of physical punishment. You were one of a minority who showed no inclination to even pretend to be a lesbian. And yet you claim to be the first female lover in Zoe's long life. Doesn't that seem strange to you?"

Tamara was defeated. "Yes, it does."

"I thought you might," said Theresa. She looked around the living room which had been vacuum-cleaned just a day or so before. "Well, Tamara, you've had access to my aunt's home for a good long time. I'm glad to see you haven't trashed it. The security guards told me that there have been no incidents of wild parties. No orgies. No drug binges. In fact, you've not invited even one of your friends or ex-colleagues to stay at all. Very commendable."

"Thank you," said Tamara sheepishly.

"However, as you probably know, you have no actual right to continue to reside in the property," continued Theresa. "There is no verifiable proof that you ever had a relationship with Zoe, intimate or not. There seems to be no good reason for you to have been here at all. The most charitable explanation is that you were here to keep her company while she was taking illegal drugs. A less charitable one is that you were the one who supplied her with such narcotics. I don't need to know what you did, but I do need to make it clear to you that there is no reason for me to let you stay in what is now *my* Surrey estate."

Tamara nodded her head. "I understand that."



“I’m a reasonable woman,” continued Theresa. “Whatever relationship you may have had with my aunt is neither here nor there, but I can understand why you might be reluctant to return to life outside the protection of the estate walls. I’ve seen the news stories about Jews being lynched by angry mobs. It sounds rather mediaeval, doesn’t it? Only this time the peasantry of England is mingled with the vocal encouragement of the Muslim community. It’s not a good time to be a Jew. Even those whose families have never been remotely near Israel for hundreds of years are at the raw end of the new age of intolerance. I take it you don’t want to be lynched?”

“No, not at all.”

“My grandfather was lynched. Of course, I wasn’t even born when that happened. Those were the great London Riots that precipitated martial law and the dissolution of the United Kingdom. They seem like a quiet day in the park compared with the bread riots, race riots and civil disorder that are daily occurrences these days. I don’t want to see you lynched even though I think you’ve been deceitful and thieving and duplicitous. You might be a drug-dealing Jewish whore, but you don’t deserve that.”

“No, I don’t.”

“There is no question that you will have to leave this estate. The decorators are moving in within the month and I need you to be out by then. You *do* understand that there is no choice in the matter, Tamara?”

“I do,” said Tamara nodding her head. She’d been expecting to be evicted for so long that now that it was happening it seemed to be following a pre-ordained course.

“There are two options I’d like you to consider,” said Theresa. “Well, there is a

third, of course, which is that you just walk out of the estate and take your chances on the streets of Surrey. I'm sure there are plenty of opportunities still for drug-dealing and prostitution. One of the two choices is that you return as an employee of Empire Cleaning Services which you will be pleased to know is an option that remains open to you despite the fact that you left their employment without serving your notice period. Is that an option for you?"

"It might be," admitted Tamara.

"The other is that you work for one of the many nursing homes owned by the St. John-Easton estate."

"Nursing homes?"

"A substantial number of nursing homes were built in the middle of the century just before my grandfather died. There was an aging population and many elderly people had the wealth and resources to afford to spend their twilight years in various kinds of care home. The retirement industry is less lucrative nowadays than it was then. Fewer people can save enough money to meet the expense of constant care and the state no longer takes up the slack. Only a very few can now afford to stay at such places. I don't know what happens to the rest. Perhaps they just die miserable deaths. My grandfather could see a growing business opportunity and so he invested in it. I'm offering you an option that might be well suited to a bright woman like you and that is to work as a care assistant in one of the many thousands of nursing homes I now happen to own. What do you think?"

Tamara frowned. This was a career choice that had never once occurred to her before.

“It *is* an option,” she said glumly.

**XXXV**  
**Alex**  
**2028**

Despite having spent a great deal of the millionaire's money on projects related to the online world of Virtual Reality, or perhaps because of that, Eden's request to meet him in his Mayfair house was filling Alex with dread. Although he'd worked hard at the hopeless task of making a success of his poorly specified role, he was acutely aware of who it was who would make the final assessment of the project's worth.

Eden's London home was very impressive. Berkeley Square was surely one of the most exclusive addresses in London, perhaps in the whole of the United Kingdom. It was a grand house in a grand square and everything adjacent to it, near it and what could be seen through the front door when it opened was also grand.

"You must be Alan," said the tall gentleman in a smart suit who opened the door. He was about Alex's age but dressed as if he belonged to a much older generation. "I'm afraid Mr St. John-Easton isn't in. However, I'm sure I can be of help. My name is Theo."

"Good afternoon, Theo," said Alex who was actually rather relieved that Eden wasn't at home. "Where is Mr St. John-Easton?"

"Not in the UK, sir," said Theo. "I daresay he's probably in Florida by now. Mr St. John-Easton is quite the globetrotter. However, please come in, Alan."

"Thank you," said Alex as he passed through the threshold into the hallway and passed by some paintings that he believed might have been painted by William Hogarth and were therefore priceless. However, as Alex wasn't especially knowledgeable on eighteenth century painters, the painter could well have been someone else and the

painting therefore not nearly as valuable.

“In the living room, sir,” said Theo as he directed Alex towards a room that was several times larger than it needed to be. It resembled more a room in a stately home managed by the National Trust than any room he’d ever been invited into before. Alex nervously sat down on the fresh new leather upholstery of a chair that was probably as old as the paintings. He looked around him. The centrepiece of the room was an imposing chimney place decorated by antique tiles. Portraits of grand dignitaries glared disapprovingly down on him. As they mostly seemed to have been painted within the last century they were probably all Eden’s ancestors. Paul noticed with interest that the men portrayed weren’t nearly as short in stature as the present master of the house.

“I’m confident that Mr St. John-Easton would convey his apologies to you for not being here,” said Theo, “but if it’s any consolation he very rarely keeps any appointment he’s made. More often than not I have to stand in for him as I am doing now. Do you know why he asked you here, Alan?”

“No. Not really,” said Alex nervously.

“Well, he did ask me to find out whether the work you’ve been doing on Virtual Reality is going well and that his ideas are being put into practice. I take it that I can reassure him on these concerns?”

“Yes, of course,” said Alex.

“That *is*, I take it, what you are engaged in at Reuters-Fox? Virtual Reality. The kind of thing that involves wearing headsets.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Have you any idea how that in any way materially furthers Mr St. John-

Easton's interests? He doesn't usually take much interest in computers or anything like that. It's quite unlike him to use a touch screen for anything but the simplest application. What could possibly have given him the idea that his business might be in any way served by investing in Virtual Reality?"

"It was him who asked me to get more involved," said Alex.

"I'm sure he did, Alan. And why might that be? Could it have anything to do with, for instance, his wife, Zara?"

Alex was shocked by the insinuation. What did this man know? "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I gather that you and Zara have been quite regular drinking partners at the Zenith for quite a while now. Don't worry about how I know this. Although Mr St. John-Easton takes very little notice of the information his security staff gather of activities that might affect his welfare, I've always maintained a very keen interest. It is imperative that I am better informed of such matters than anyone if I am to provide the quality of service Mr St. John-Easton expects."

"You do?"

"The ability to anticipate Mr St. John-Easton's needs requires a great deal of research. As you would expect, the welfare of his wife and her drinking habits are amongst the matters to which I pay considerable attention. I am also, of course, interested about any activity associated with Zara that might be useful to know should there ever be a time that her lawyers might threaten to make disagreeable allegations in a court of law. Mr St. John-Easton isn't aware of my curiosity in these matters, but he will very grateful for it if, for example, there should ever be divorce proceedings. On

the other hand, Alan, I think you can be consoled by the fact that the evidence suggests that you have been quite the gentleman. And this despite several instances of rather unsubtle coaxing. You're a married man, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Isobel, isn't it? And your wife is pregnant, I believe. A boy or a girl?"

"We chose not to find out."

"Very foolish, Alan. It means you have to think up about twice the number of names for your child than you might have done otherwise. You could go for Leslie or Sandy, I suppose. Useful for either sex."

"I'm sure it is," said Alex who was beginning to get irritated by this line of Theo's questioning.

"Although I have to look out for the welfare of both Mr St. John-Easton and his wife, you must be aware that it is the husband's interests that are of primary concern to me. It is he who pays my salary. I would say that your relationship with Zara is rather more as a drinking companion than as a fuck buddy. And as such you've had a longer and rather more successful relationship with her than the many other men whose details have been amassed. You've been very sensible not to push your luck. The vagueness and even vacuousness of this business with Virtual Reality is surely something that Zara would dream up than would a man like you who is steadily pulling himself up the slippery pole of middle management. Zara knows even less about computers than Mr St. John-Easton, but she knows how to press his buttons. I may not be a businessman but I can see that there is very little likelihood of a return on investment from any of the enterprises you're involved in. Does this trouble you at all, Alan?"

“I don’t quite know what you’re getting at.”

“My guess is that Mr St. John-Easton believes that there is some propaganda value in having a presence in the VR space. However, unlike my employer, I’ve done some independent research into this strange world. Porn, hobbits, twentieth century science-fiction movies, celebrities and trivia: none of these are likely to be much use to Mr St. John-Easton in his evangelical crusade to convert a nation of complacent fools to the promised land of low taxation and lucrative business opportunities. His investments elsewhere are likely to do rather better than this little niche. Wouldn’t you agree, Alan?”

“I guess so,” said Alex.

“However, my belief is that Mr St. John-Easton is more concerned to be seen to be doing something that can be perceived as forward-looking and dynamic than of turning around much of a profit or, indeed, of having a great deal of influence. I hope that your project will at least fulfil those criteria.”

“We have invested great talent into the enterprise.”

“Make sure that it is easy enough for someone like Zara to use and for Mr St. John-Easton to appreciate. It is in my interest to keep my employer contented—and in yours to keep your job—that your project is not perceived to be a total waste of money. Nevertheless, there must be several people at Reuters-Fox UK who’d be happy to see your endeavours fail: especially those in slightly more junior positions than you. There must be others who wonder how you’ve managed to be lavished with so many resources when other projects have been downgraded or axed. You’re in a precarious position, are you not, Alan?”



Alex nodded. Political infighting was what dominated most hours of every day and about which he spent most time agonising.

“What you might not be aware of is that Mr St. John-Easton is in the process of acquiring an internet content company: you know, one of those that provide the content for websites that deal with Virtual Reality, online gaming, news gathering, blogging, apps, and so on. This is a growing niche at the moment with plenty of job opportunities. I expect that once he’s acquired the company my employer will want to move his own people onto the management board. Anyone fortunate enough to secure such a position is likely to find it a rather less challenging role than your present one. The main objective would be to keep the company’s activities in line with what Mr St. John-Easton believes they should be. That would make such a role somewhat unpopular with the current board but it would be associated with very generous remuneration. I don’t know if you’ve ever considered a move away from news media, have you?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Alex, who wasn’t sure if he was hearing right. Was he being offered a lucrative job with virtually no responsibilities merely on the basis of his friendship with Zara?

“Obviously I am in no official position, Alan,” said Theo with a reassuring smile. “What happens is totally out of my hands. Even so, what I suggest you do is focus even more assiduously on your current VR projects. Mr St. John-Easton likes to be kept informed, but he never has the time to focus on details. The waffle you provide his office on a regular basis is exactly what he wants, though I suggest you put rather more emphasis on the project providing online content that can be sold to other businesses. I also suggest you take every opportunity, even more than you do at present,

to fan Mr St. John-Easton's passions. You know what he likes to see promoted, don't you?"

"Business. Britain. Low taxation. Roll back intrusive government. I think so."

"You don't have to actually believe what Mr St. John-Easton advocates. In fact, I think a healthy dose of scepticism would probably be more in order than any swivel-eyed evangelism. Just make sure that at least one of the bullet points in his agenda is covered in your reports. Clearly there's not much scope for promoting an anti-immigrant, anti-European Union or anti-layabout agenda. Especially not the last, as I suspect a very high proportion of the people who frequent VR websites are out of work, especially since last year's collapse of the banking system and the housing market. But you should have some success in promoting decentralisation from government and consolidation around already thriving multinational corporations. Keep a list handy of Mr St. John-Easton's principal business ventures and ensure that that you emphasis the benefits of cross-market synergy in your reports. That's something my employer has been particularly keen on since he bought all those collapsing banks in America like CitiGroup and JP Morgan."

"I see," said Alex who was still flabbergasted by this truly peculiar conversation. Was Theo being too candid or was he just being attentive to his employer's interests.

"Well, it's been good to see you, Alan," said Theo who stood up to signal that their interview was over. "I hope all is well with your wife and that you will soon be blessed with a bouncing boy or girl."

"Thank you," said Alex who was more or less hurrying towards the front door

where he might at last pause and gather together his thoughts.

“I’m sure Mr St. John-Easton has no objection to you accompanying his wife to the Zenith for the moment,” said Theo as they stood at the open door. “However, it is, as I’m sure you appreciate, a very delicate matter. I won’t be surprised if my employer’s tolerance towards his wife’s flirtations begins to strain in the next few months. At the moment, as you might be aware, Zara is expecting.”

“No, I didn’t know,” said Alex in surprise.

“Well, it *is* nearly a month since the two of you last met,” said Theo thoughtfully. “It might be well not to be around when Zara next comes to your office. Perhaps you should arrange your working hours so that you’re less likely to be there late in the evening. I’m sure Isobel would be very pleased to see more of her husband now that, like Zara, she too is expecting. In my experience, it’s a very hazardous time in a couple’s relationship when a new member of the family is born. There could be very serious repercussions if Zara’s child isn’t from the same genetic heritage as her husband. You want to be as far from the firing line as you possibly can. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” said Alex as he nodded his head. “Perfectly.”

**XXXVI**  
**Iris**  
**2054**

Iris had never participated in a demonstration before in her life. There'd never been anything in the twenty five years of her life that had stirred her up enough to do more than make the most passive protest. Normally, Iris wasn't very sure what she really believed in, especially when the object of protest was somehow remote from her daily life like nuclear weapons (even after the last nuclear war), climate change, education, health provision, trades union rights, and so on. And she'd always been scared off by the threat of public disorder. She didn't want to be in a peaceful demonstration that then became a full-fledged riot. That was bad not only because innocent people got killed and lynched, but also because it was a dangerous place to be.

On the other hand, things had got so bad since the Government of National Unity took power that even Iris could see the point of protesting. And now here she was at Hyde Park gathered together with tens, maybe hundreds, of thousands of people in a demonstration whose route would take them to Trafalgar Square via Whitehall and Victoria. Something like this was a forbidding prospect for Iris but at least she was with her friends. More of them had been bothered to come than Iris would have imagined and from all over London. Ember could be relied on, of course, but even Ellie had ventured out. There was Imre—Iris' boyfriend for nearly nine months—who was more concerned about the fate of second or third generation immigrants than the nature of the British constitution.

The circle of Iris' friends and acquaintances was completely swamped in a vast

crowd that had congregated in open defiance of the punitive penalties imposed by the State of Emergency. Nonetheless, what could the severely depleted police force possibly do about hundreds of thousands of peaceful protestors? And, furthermore, the demonstration was being filmed and recorded by the BBC, Fox News UK, Al Jazeera, CNN and countless other national and international news services.

The ostensible purpose for the demonstration was to protest against the deployment of British forces in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. For a long time now, the devolved governments had been getting progressively disgruntled with central government and they were firmly opposed to the imposition of a State of Emergency. In protest, the Scottish Parliament had voted overwhelmingly for full independence and there were calls for a similar vote to be taken by the Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies. The devolved governments stressed that what they wanted was government independent from Westminster and were quite content for King Henry IX to remain their monarch. Most English people, like Iris, didn't really care one way or another whether the other nations in the British Isles remained in the United Kingdom, but they did object to the use of military force to maintain its integrity. The defection to the Scottish government of the Royal Regiment of Scotland and the Scots Guards turned what was meant to be a show of strength by the British government into the first armed battle on British soil for several centuries.

Where did the Government of National Unity stand in all this? The Scots made it clear that they wanted to remain part of the Northern European Union, as did the Welsh and the Northern Irish. The British government was negotiating its exit, while at the same time all other Northern European nations, in particular France and Norway,

were objecting to its attempt to impose its will on the Scots and the Welsh. The Royal Welsh Fusiliers had already threatened to pledge allegiance to the Welsh Assembly rather than Westminster even though there'd not yet been a vote for independence. The British government was in crisis yet, instead of stepping back from the brink, it was stubbornly pushing itself over.

The demonstration was well organised even though no one single campaigning body was in sole control. It was marshalled by representatives from organisations that represented anti-war, pro-Northern European Union, pro-green and even religious opinion. There was political representation not just from the Scottish, Welsh and Irish governments, but also from opposition and even ex-coalition parties that objected to how government was dictated from Number Ten rather than by parliament.

It took ages for the Iris' march to actually begin, though the first demonstrators had shuffled off several hours earlier. There was a palpable sense of conspiratorial partying in the whole event that Iris and her friends felt as they browsed stalls selling Green and revolutionary literature. There was an illicit thrill in doing something illegal. And, unlike taking drugs or importing goods cheaply from outside the Northern European Union, it was illegal activity in the full glare of publicity and where there was a very real chance of being found out. All around the marshals in orange outfits were there to remind protestors that this was a peaceful demonstration and that any violence or civil disorder would be pounced on instantly by a government keen to justify its draconian imposition of the State of Emergency. Rumours were passing round that the marchers had been infiltrated by Tories and political parties even further to the right whose members were simply looking for an excuse to create trouble.

The march eventually wound out of Hyde Park and followed a route along the streets of London that would eventually take it past Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament: the two most potent symbols of British government. The march was intended to be seen as a direct challenge to the legitimacy of Ivan Eisenegger's government. Banners were waving and megaphones chanted catchy slogans that called for the British government to leave Scotland to the Scots and Wales to the Welsh.

Iris was rather enjoying herself, although she privately doubted that the demonstration would ever actually achieve anything. Could the British government really be persuaded to give up a hopeless fight and salvage what little face it could in the face of international condemnation? Would the Scots and the others be content with just political independence after so much blood had been spilt? What about the other issues that the protestors were agitating about? The Greens were upset that the government had reneged on its international commitments regarding environmental issues. The trades unions wanted to restore bargaining rights and, for many trades, just the right to free association. There were other protestors with more parochial concerns such as opposition to the closure of primary schools and the need for better flood-defences. There were even those whose main concern was the British government's connivance with the United States concerning Israel's shrill belligerence towards its Arab neighbours.

The march was painfully slow. Every now and then it ground to a total halt for several minutes at a time before it started up again. It was thrilling to march along roads normally congested by London's slow-moving traffic, but less exhilarating to be stuck on the corner of Lower Grosvenor Place for quarter of an hour while helicopters

hovered menacingly overhead and the crowd was hemmed in. Who'd expected that claustrophobia would be Iris' chief emotional response in an outdoor event on a sunny but chilly spring day?

The march eventually continued to process along Victoria Street. It followed a road that was probably too narrow for the press of demonstrators until it eventually opened out at Parliament Square. It was here that police security was at its tightest. The Houses of Parliament were defended as usual by impregnable barricades and armed officers. Either side of the road was patrolled by police and even soldiers.

It was difficult to tell when the demonstration changed in character from a cheerful good-natured march where children were lifted up on their parents' shoulders and where Greens in their rubber boots and organically woven clothes were singing rousing songs that must have been sung at demonstrations for well over half a century. But a change happened and it was at around the same time that the section of the crowd that included Iris and her friends was being directed towards Whitehall. The front of the march had probably already arrived at Trafalgar Square where there were to be the usual inspiring speeches and, of course, music provided by rock bands whose opinions were in conflict with the government. Top of the bill was the Wallaces: a Scottish rockabilly band of uncompromising nationalist fervour.

The first sign of approaching trouble that Iris was aware of came from the shriek of police loud-hailers that were calling for order and from a clamour of voices that echoed from further ahead in Whitehall. Then there was the sight of mounted police nervously clopping into the crowd that cautiously parted as they came through. All this might mean anything, of course. The march was due to pass by Downing Street where



there was certain to be a lot of anger expressed even though everyone knew that the Prime Minister was rarely in residence these days.

And then there was a press of people coming towards Parliament Square from ahead.

That wasn't what was expected. The march was supposed to head down Whitehall, not come out of it. Iris jumped up and down to catch a glimpse of what was happening. She wasn't a short woman, but all she could see ahead were just other heads bobbing up and down. Then she noticed that some marchers weren't so much marching backwards but were actually running out of Whitehall and hurrying over Westminster Bridge.

Iris' later memories of the Parliament Square Riot were just as confused as the actual events were at the time. The press of the crowd became ever more panicked as a growing number of people worried more about getting away from the crush than they were of continuing the demonstration. Clouds were billowing from Whitehall that Iris later learnt had come from tear gas canisters. The flow of public text messages she was receiving on her mobile phone were becoming increasingly hysterical.

"They're firing on protestors in Trafalgar Square," said Imre. "That's what it says here."

"It's not bullets, though," said Ellie. "They're using water cannon."

"That's not right," said Ember. "That's *not* fucking right. There are politicians, pop stars, comedians and camera crews there."

"It's bad enough here as it is!" said Iris as she held her mobile phone up in front of her face as she couldn't straighten out her arms to hold it anywhere else.

When the pressure from the crowd relaxed, it was as the demonstration was beginning to fall apart. It didn't happen all at once. The crowd just became progressively less organised. Then it fragmented sufficiently to allow Iris to see what was actually going on.

And what was that?

Parliament Square exactly resembled the television coverage Iris had seen of riots over the last few years, especially the ones that had spilt over into Mayfair. Soldiers and police were waving batons at fleeing protestors. One protestor was battered on the head and chest by a baton as he lay in a foetal crouch on the ground. Smoke was still billowing out of Whitehall and nothing could be seen through the engulfing whiteness other than the faint shadows of memorials and protestors. Escaping along with the smoke were protestors who held scarves, handkerchiefs and other types of cloth up against their mouths. Horses were trotting backwards and forwards with mounted police on their backs as they attempted to disperse the crowd.

It wasn't a one-sided battle, although Iris wondered what value was served to these protestors' cause by their show of defiant aggression. They were a minority of the demonstrators, but they were also the scruffiest and most desperate. And of course it was protests exactly like this that had given the government the excuse to suspend civil liberties. The rioters were throwing stones, bricks and railings at the police and soldiers and aggravated an already dangerous situation. Smoke continued to float over the crowd. Cars were overturned. Projectiles were thrown at the statues of Winston Churchill and Oliver Cromwell.

This didn't look good.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here!” shouted Ellie.

“Was that the sound of gunfire?” asked Imre who stood paralysed in indecision.

“I don’t know,” said Iris. “I’ve never heard guns go off before. Where’s it coming from? Wherever it is, that’s where we’re *not* going.”

“I don’t know,” said Imre. “Parliament I guess.”

“This way!” said Ember agitatedly as the crowd dispersed enough for them to see a direction to go. “The police are pushing people towards Millbank.”

“Millbank?” said Ellie. “Why the fuck are they doing that?”

“We can’t go forward,” said Ember. “We can’t go backward. We can’t go over the bridge. So, I guess that’s the only way we *can* go.”

“This is a fucking nightmare!” said Ellie.

“Can we trust the police?” asked Imre. “Are they going to arrest us and put us in cells and interrogate us? Are we going to be tortured?”

“Don’t be a fuckwit!” said Ember angrily. “This isn’t a police state yet.”

There were more sounds of gunfire and a sudden rush of mounted police: this time supported by soldiers wearing riot gear normally worn by police. Three or four helicopters were swooping over Parliament Square and one dropped a huge metal net catching a group of twenty or thirty protestors. Yet more clouds of white smoke flowed out from Whitehall.

“*Quick!*” screamed Ember. “Get moving. *Run!*”

Iris could see the wisdom of her friend’s words. She and the others ran in the direction that was prepared for them beyond Victoria Tower Gardens. Several times she turned back her head to look at the battlefield behind. Sharpened sticks and empty

beer cans were flying over the clouds of smoke. The crackling sound of firearms continued sporadically. The protestors gave off a roaring sound of yells and screams that wasn't nearly as well coordinated as Iris had heard from football crowds.

Then Iris looked ahead to see a column of armoured vehicles slowly roll down Millbank, dividing the panicked crowd as it did so, with armed soldiers just visible through the toughened glass. She was almost at Lambeth Bridge where more vehicles were arriving as they passed by.

“It's like a fucking war,” said Ember.

“They *did* warn us,” said Ellie.

“That doesn't make it right though,” said Ember.

**XXXVII**  
**Odile**  
**2109**

Every funeral is a mournful event. Although Odile had already been to more of them in her young life than she could properly remember, her grandmother's funeral was unexpectedly distressing. Granny Iris had lived for such a long time. She'd been alive before England became a republic; from a time in fact when England's almost warring neighbours actually belonged to the same nation. Things were so different when Granny Iris was a child. Imagine a time when the Scottish and French Republics weren't pointing nuclear missiles over the borders and the Republic of England wasn't directing its missiles in return.

Only a few people had been able to attend the funeral. It had been a hurried affair. However necessary it was to mark someone's death, it didn't have to take much time and in any case there were so many funerals these days. There was the plague in nearby Manchester. There was the famine that was decimating Lancashire's rural villages ever since potato blight wiped out the woefully unprepared GM Murphy that had been the main crop. Then there were the casualties of the war in North America where English soldiers were allied with those of the economically defunct Republic of North America in its never-ending conflict with the Western Union and the Mexican Republic.

It would have been nice if Granny Iris' daughter had attended the funeral, but Odile had no idea where her mother was or whether she was even alive. The last time she'd heard from her, she was leaving England for a new life in the Republic of

Scotland. It was anyone's guess whether she was still there or had left for somewhere else. If she was still in Scotland it would be unlikely that she'd be able to return to England through the barbed wire and minefields that graced the heavily armed Scottish border. Odile was sure that her mother was doing well and had almost certainly herself found a new husband. Although Granny Iris hadn't married even once, her daughter had managed to do so on three or four occasions.

Those who did attend the funeral consisted of just Odile, some elderly people from the nursing home and some middle-aged people who must have known her before she'd been taken into care. Although Odile missed her grandmother, she was sure that death was probably the best thing for her. The final years of her life were marked only by a steady deterioration in her health, where she'd been kept alive only thanks to health insurance policies she'd bought in a rather more affluent age. Her mental acuity had faded and it distressed Odile when the old lady even forgot who her granddaughter was and indeed almost everything that had happened more than five minutes earlier. The ever-present smell of urine was also rather offputting.

Who'd want to be alive these days anyway, whatever age you were? Every month the complex interaction between the military alliances of the countless bankrupt nuclear states resulted in yet another rollercoaster ride of fear and anxiety. Brazil or Russia or Australia or the Republic of North America might make a step towards nuclear escalation and then to everyone's relief step back from the brink. And when you weren't worried about nuclear devastation there were all the diseases that couldn't be treated any more, the famines and food shortages, and, of course, the haphazard climate that in the last few years had brought drought in summer and hurricane winds

and torrential rainstorms in winter.

The council employee who officiated the funeral did his best to hasten the event along. The memorial service wasn't religious, so there were no hymns or prayers. Granny Iris had requested some mid-century jazz that sounded very peculiar to Odile's ears. The music she listened to was entirely electronic. Real instruments were too expensive and there was nowhere for musicians to learn how to play them. It was fortunate that the crematorium had its own electricity supply so when the lights flickered during the service, the generator was switched on and the memorial music could still be piped through the antique speakers.

Odile wandered out of the crematorium not long after the coffin had slid away out of sight. As was standard procedure, its contents would now be recycled. Odile had to walk along the potholed A589 to the city of Lancaster where she lived. She didn't very often visit Morecambe, so she decided to have a look round before leaving.

It wasn't that Odile was in much of a hurry to return home. She didn't have a job to return to and her residence in Willow Lane was nothing more than a slum anyway. It was possible that Edith was back from work and waiting for her on the battered sweat-soaked mattress on their bedroom's bare floorboards, but it was more likely that she wasn't. Her job at the clothes factory might be demanding and poorly paid but it was a precious commodity in an age where paid employment of any kind was hard to find and easy to lose. Odile hadn't worked for nearly a year now and that was in a pub where she made extra cash by giving blowjobs to some of the more affluent customers. Not that she really minded that much. She liked Edith, she might even love her, but she liked cock as well. It made a change from licking pussy.

Odile walked down the Broadway to Morecambe bay. Not much could be seen of the sea until she got to Marine Road. The massive flood barrier that encircled the entire shoreline of England ensured that she had to get very close and climb up the steps to the top of the wall to look over the bay where the waters were lapping the top of what had once been the esplanade before the wall was built. Morecambe's survival depended on the wall, as did Lancaster's in a more indirect sense. Indeed, the whole of England relied on the coastal walls that were now as much a feature of the English countryside as wind turbines, quarantine zones around diseased GM crops, crumbled and unserviceable country roads, and the open but still illegal sale of drugs on virtually every village green.

A few fishing boats were out at sea, but it was unlikely they'd come back with very many fish. Those few fish still in the sea were only there as a by-product of the constant naval patrol across the Atlantic that had made off-shore fishing potentially lethal, but that was a rebound from dramatically depleted stock. There'd once been fish like cod, haddock, skate and salmon, but the fishing boats were unlikely to be returning with much that was at all appetising.

Odile sat on the sea wall and looked over the dark choppy waters across a bay that was completely circumscribed by wall. In the distance were decrepit leaking nuclear power stations. She could just about see a huge frigate that was patrolling the coast to deter any Scots or Irish that might want to invade England's green and pleasant land. As far as Odile was concerned, they were welcome to it. However, unlike her mother and her now deceased grandmother she couldn't decide for herself in which nation she could live. Free movement between nations had come to an end as a result



of the collapse of tourism and the paranoid anxiety about immigration. Odile had only ever once been abroad and that was to Wales during the brief period in her childhood when it seemed almost possible that England would once again join the other republics of the British Isles in the Northern European Union. Apart from the Welsh language spoken by some, Wales didn't seem much like what Odile thought a foreign country was supposed to be like. The climate was the same. The roads were just as bad. There was the same despondent atmosphere of poverty and bleak despair.

How had things got to be so bad?

Before Granny Iris lost her lucidity, she blamed the nation's decline on the English National Unity government in the 2050s but Odile knew that couldn't be the only reason. It was more than fifty years since those bastards were in government. What difference did it make now what happened so long ago? Odile didn't know much about history. She left school at fifteen when her mother could no longer afford to pay the fees. Odile's final history lessons didn't get beyond the 1960s. She knew about the Beatles and Carnaby Street and the BBC, but she didn't know what followed. How had a nation that had lost an empire but retained its cool become such a mess now? There was a time when English people thought of themselves as British. No one did that now. You were English, Scottish, Irish or Welsh and the word was now just a geographical term.

It couldn't have been just the English National Unity lot, however bad they were. They couldn't be blamed for the dissolution of the United States; the wars that left the Middle East and most of Central Asia as a nuclear wasteland inhabited by mutant camels; the floods that swamped Eastern England and most of Holland; and

why food prices were now so expensive that Odile often faced the choice between going without or not being able to afford the rent for the shitty one-bedroom apartment she shared with Edith.

Odile soon had enough of looking out over Morecambe Bay. She couldn't stay long anyway. If she were to stand too long in one place, someone or other would assume she was a prostitute looking for trade. Although Odile turned the odd trick, as you had to do when times were tough, she generally preferred not to. In any case, it was always a hassle to explain such things to Edith.

She wandered past the shops along the Broadway. There wasn't much she could afford despite the perpetual special offers. She'd be delighted to wear better clothes than the rags she wore. It had been a long time since she'd worn shoes in summer, for instance. Her one pair of boots was kept in the cupboard for the winter months. She'd love to own more than the one simple dress that she'd stitched up again and again whenever the seams fell apart or it became threadbare, but buying clothes was another luxury she couldn't afford. The only times she dressed well was when she borrowed Edith's best clothes for an interview and even then she had to return them in as best a condition as she could.

It was depressing to look at all the things she couldn't afford to buy. The shops mostly sold the basic household goods that Odile desperately needed, but there was evidence of a time when shops sold luxury items such as televisions, computers, washing machines and vacuum cleaners. How had people managed to find the money for all that? It must have been an age of unbelievable luxury. Okay, computers were common enough. A reasonable one was probably about the same price as a reasonable

dress, but she and Edith had to survive on just one income and there wasn't much left after rent, food and protection money.

Odile sometimes wondered how long Edith would continue to shelter her unemployed lover. She was painfully aware that she didn't contribute much towards the household bills, despite all those visits to factories and workshops where she might queue for hours in the hope of a day's work at piece rates. She was occasionally successful, but more often she returned home empty-handed. Perhaps Odile could do more. Edith deserved it. She could beg for a living, but the competition was intense and Odile wasn't disabled or physically incapacitated. She could sell herself on a more regular basis, but Edith wouldn't like that.

In truth, Odile knew she could always rely on Edith's love, just as much as Edith could rely on hers.

She eventually made her way back to the River Lune which was crowded with barges that carried most of the Republic's goods now that the roads were either dilapidated or prohibitively expensive. As usual, she had to squeeze through men at the quayside who assumed that all girls in Lancaster were eager for a quick lucrative fuck, especially a girl like Odile with grubby ankles and blackened soles dressed in a soiled threadbare dress. She walked along Cable Street and King Street, past the pubs, pawnshops, greengrocers and the new brothel that had opened on the site of an old playhouse. The sign outside the brothel read *Duke's* but as there were no dukes, duchesses or royalty any more it was entirely meaningless. Perhaps the customers were expected to be old enough to know the significance of such titles.

Odile continued past Lancaster Castle which was now used as a military fort

and then past the railway station where steam trains were waiting for the wealthy few who could afford to travel in such luxury. It was a long time since Odile had travelled by train. That was a journey to Manchester when she needed an abortion, but the expense of the journey was worth it. If she'd relied on a backstreet abortion in Lancaster, she'd probably now be dead.

“You're back,” said Edith sweetly when Odile pushed open the door of their small bedroom. She was sitting on the mattress under the patchwork duvet that covered her thighs but not her bare breasts. She was reading a second-hand paperback novel that judging from its battered appearance had been through at least a dozen previous owners.

“What was the funeral like?”

“Very sad,” said Odile. “Now I'm all alone. There's no one left in my family anymore.”

Edith kissed her lover on the lips when she'd removed her dress and lay down under the duvet beside her.

“Don't forget my dearest,” she said, “you'll never be alone while I'm here.”

**XXXVIII**  
**Tamara**  
**2097**

Not all the residents of the Elysian Nursing Home where Tamara worked were over eighty years old. Some were rather younger. In fact, some were barely seventy. It hardly seemed much of a reward for decades of scrimping and saving for retirement to have to live in a single room in a nursing home before you had much opportunity to enjoy your twilight years as a retired citizen. Iris was one such woman. It hadn't been very many months after she'd celebrated her seventieth birthday and therefore at last eligible to collect a pension that she was brought down by a stroke that brought her previously active life to a sudden abrupt end.

Still, there were worse places to spend your last few years than the Elysian Nursing Home located in the decaying seaside resort of Morecambe. There would even have been a view of the beach across the scrubland that had once been a Golf Club if it wasn't for the high wall that served to protect the town from the encroaching sea.

It was a long way from Surrey, but that suited Tamara. There was little likelihood of her meeting any of the clients she'd got to know from when she worked for Empire Cleaning Services and there was no one who'd need to know she was Jewish. It was dreadful for Tamara to admit that she preferred to hide her Israeli heritage of which she had once been so proud. She never imagined that she'd one day attempt to hide both her cultural identity and her most recent employment. But there were people for whom the fact that she was an Israeli citizen and had worked as a prostitute made her precisely the Jezebel that many now believed all Jewish women to be. This

was ridiculous, of course, because before the Arab-Israeli Nuclear War no Israeli citizen ever needed to debase herself in that way.

Although Iris had suffered a stroke that left her physically debilitated, her mind remained lively. She was blind in one eye and could no longer walk or even use her right hand, but she was as coherent as she'd ever been. She had few living relatives or friends. Most of her friends weren't able to visit her because they lived in far-away cities such as Manchester, Preston and even London. Her most frequent visitor was her daughter, Tracey, and that wasn't very often. Sometimes she arrived with her nine year old daughter, Odile, but most often with one or another of a succession of profoundly bored men.

"I don't know why my daughter ever bothers," said Iris. "I moved up here just a year ago when I retired and although we'd never been close she'd followed me and moved into my house. Did you see the last man she was with? What a dumbo!"

"Your granddaughter seems very sweet," said Tamara loyally.

"All nine year old girls look sweet. I don't know how long that's likely to last with a mother like Tracey. She was trouble when she was young and she's trouble now. Did you know we literally have *no* idea who Odile's father is?"

"No, I didn't."

"You'd have thought that one name might have stuck in Tracey's mind as to who the father might be," said Iris. "She can't have had intimate relations with *that* many men, could she? But no, she couldn't remember the names of the men she'd slept with in the critical month at all. She did say that if her child was black or brown, that would make it easier to work out. It's not as if my daughter was a prostitute. That's one

thing she's never resorted to, despite the lack of decent jobs these days. She just does it for fun. You could say she just gives it away."

"That's one way of putting it," said Tamara with a polite laugh.

Iris wasn't to know that her jocular remark had touched a tender spot. Tamara hadn't had sex with a man even once ever since she'd stopped working for Empire Cleaning Services. Sex quite simply no longer appealed to her. The last time she'd had an enjoyable sexual relationship was when she worked at the Reigate Refugee Centre and that was with a man who was neither a Muslim nor a Jew, but a non-religious Nigerian. Tamara no longer associated sex with pleasure. Sometimes it was the memory of physical abuse that troubled her, but bizarrely she was most often reminded of it on those occasions when the nursing care for which she was now employed most resembled her former sexual ministrations.

The men who most often had business with Empire Cleaning Services thought they knew exactly what they wanted. And generally that was to have a pretty woman arrive at their house who would let him fuck her and at the very least treat the customer to a blow job. What they often received instead after they'd ejaculated too soon or hadn't achieved an erection or were consumed by guilt from the shame of resorting to pay for sex was more of a counselling or even nursing service. And now when Tamara cared for a male patient, especially those with urinary problems, she was directly benefiting from her previous on-the-job training.

Tamara shared a dormitory about a kilometre away from the Elysian Nursing Home with other nurses and care assistants. They all worked in care homes owned by Twilight Care (a St. John-Easton company) that were scattered about Morecambe,

Lancaster and surrounding villages. A dormitory didn't afford much privacy, but it did provide the opportunity, if Tamara felt like it, to strike up a romantic relationship with one of the many male nurses and care assistants that also shared the dormitory. Although Tamara had to admit that many were rather nice looking, she wasn't sure she could be bothered to hunt for a quiet secluded spot in Morecambe where they could make love.

None of the other care assistants admitted to being asylum seekers or refugees, although Tamara suspected that many of them were. She took advantage of the fact that most English people couldn't tell a Jew apart from an Arab or indeed from almost any other nationality or race. She didn't announce that she was an Israeli citizen and as long as no one asked there was no reason to do so. What good would it do her except salve what little pride she had left to declare that she was one of the estimated hundred thousand or so Jews who'd settled in a country where they were only begrudgingly welcome? Although the care assistants were ethnically diverse, when they spoke it was obvious from the dialect that many of them had been born in England. Tamara's own spoken English was rather more precise and well enunciated than the others, but no one challenged her that the Republic of England might not be the land of her birth. Maybe they thought she was just very well educated.

"Are there many foreigners working here?" she asked Ingrid, a nurse from the Rainbow Nursing Home. This would once have been a very select care home situated on the esplanade but the patients' view across Morecambe Bay was now blocked by a dismal concrete wall defaced by racist graffiti. Tamara had wondered whether Ingrid was a foreigner herself, perhaps from Holland or Denmark, but she later discovered that



the origin of her peculiar accent was Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

“Foreigners?” said Ingrid. “What a question. Not that I know of. There was a Scottish girl who worked here once. You can imagine that caused a few problems after the incident in Berwick.”

“Berwick?”

“Berwick-on-Tweed,” said Ingrid. “When there was a pitched battle between Scottish and English soldiers. Nine killed. You must remember. It was only a few years ago.”

“Oh yes,” said Tamara, who reasoned that it must have happened before she’d moved to England. “Berwick.”

“I think she’d have got lynched if she’d stayed,” said Ingrid. “Her accent gave her away, of course. She couldn’t risk opening her mouth in case someone wanted to lynch her.”

“There’s an awful lot of lynching going on these days, isn’t there?” said Tamara. “I’m sure it’s not always been like this.”

“It always has all the time I’ve been alive, dear,” said Ingrid who was probably ten or fifteen years older than Tamara. “I’ve no idea when it all started. I’m told people used to be a lot more tolerant in the past. Now, even the Welsh are treated like shit. And the racial prejudice too. It’s dreadful! A lot of the other nurses have had a really bad time. Especially Tina.”

“Tina?”

“Tina. You know, the black girl. Lots of people think she’s a tart when she walks about town because she’s young and pretty, but she actually belongs to some kind of a

religion. Muslim or Roman Catholic or something, I don't know what. I'm sure things *were* better once upon a time, you know, before they built the sea wall on the front and when people could afford to go on holiday to places like Morecambe.”

Tamara was aware that a well-spoken and so obviously well-educated young woman like her would never really be fully accepted by the other nurses and care assistants. It wasn't that they were less bright than her. That was quite clearly not true, but the now defunct Republic of Israel had provided its citizens with a much higher standard of education than England had done for many generations. Reforms that had begun nearly a century before had so scaled down the English education system that most parents couldn't afford the fees to send their children to secondary school. A nation of poorly educated people that had been virtually ostracised by the rest of Europe and whose natural allies were nations like Russia and the Republic of North America could no longer hope to compete with the Republics of Scotland and Northern Ireland in terms of educational achievement.

Jobs of any kind were hard to find and Tamara was lucky to have one at all even if she couldn't afford to live anywhere more opulent than a dormitory. Everything she owned was kept locked in a bedside cabinet and little of that was of any real value. There was the photograph of her Bat Mitzvah more than fifteen years ago in a synagogue that had been rebuilt at a time when her family still believed that the Republic of Israel had a chance of surviving. Tamara recalled the occasion fondly and the hopes that had been invested in her, but she also remembered the Geiger counters and face-masks that accompanied her procession through the rubble towards the synagogue. Stones were thrown at her by the more bullish Palestinians that were

swarming in ever larger numbers into an Israel that had lost control of the *Geder HaHafrada* that had kept the Jewish nation secure and the Arabs at bay. Now that the wall was being dismantled it was more often known even by the surviving Israelis as the *jidar al-fasl al-'unsuri* since its only remaining function was to be a symbol of the Israeli nation's belief that the ethnic diversity of the region could be held at bay in exactly the same way as the walls along the Mediterranean coast were designed to keep the rising waters from flooding the shore.

Tamara had very little attachment now to the land of her childhood and she still hadn't found a new home to which she felt she belonged. Where else could she go? It was unlikely that she'd be any more welcome across the Scottish or Welsh borders than she was in England. She knew only too well how unwelcome she was in the rest of Europe, especially in a Mediterranean Economic Union now dominated by Turkey, Egypt and Algeria, rather than by Italy and Spain.

"Do you ever wonder whether there's anywhere you belong?" Tamara asked Iris one day after she'd removed the faeces that had got wedged between the old woman's buttocks.

"What a strange question," said Iris. "Why's that an issue? Hardly anyone lives in the same place all their life. I was born in London. I spent most of my twenties and thirties in one part of London or other. Then I moved to other places. I moved, for instance, to Lancaster. But I never really thought I didn't belong to London or even Lancaster."

"But you belong to England, don't you?"

"It wasn't the same country when I was born. It was something called the United

Kingdom. There was a king and there were three or four countries all joined together. Then everything changed in my twenties and now I'm a citizen of a country that never used to exist. If I'd been a Scot or a Welshwoman or something perhaps I'd kind of feel proud to be independent, but somehow as an Englishwoman it's more like the land I came from no longer exists. Is that what you feel, dear?"

"Something like that," said Tamara sadly.

**XXXIX**  
**Alex**  
**2029**

It was barely a week now since Isobel and Alex had become the proud parents of a daughter. Isobel gave birth not long after arriving at the hospital and an anxious Alex endured only a few hours of anxiety in the waiting room.

The whole process had been very efficient and well-organised from beginning to end, as was everything associated with Isobel. Even the decision regarding the baby's name had been made months earlier.

“Iris,” announced Isobel. “After her grandmother.”

“I thought your mother's name was Amanda,” said Alex.

“Amanda Iris,” Isobel corrected him.

“Well, it's better than Tracey,” said Alex, recalling his own mother's name.

The relationship between husband and wife became ever more intimate as the progress of Isobel's pregnancy steadily approached the point at which Alex had to fully accept that he would soon become a father. He didn't only have to look at Isobel's swollen belly to be reminded of his future paternity. His work colleagues took every opportunity to remind him of the paternity leave he was entitled to. Alex suspected the underlying motives for his colleagues' outwardly friendly concern, but he also knew that as his role at Ibex International wasn't at all demanding the company was unlikely to suffer much from his absence. One advantage in having a good excuse to take time off was that he would be at less risk of saying something that would betray his ignorance about the products that Ibex International manufactured and marketed.

“She’s a beautiful girl,” said Isobel as she cradled their wizened pallid daughter in her arms. “She has her father’s nose.”

“Really?” wondered Alex who could see no family resemblance at all.

Iris had a very limited repertoire. She cried, she gurgled, she burped and she repeatedly clutched her fingers around anything that could be clutched. When Iris wasn’t eating or drinking or demanding that she should be, she gazed around her with huge eyes that suggested volumes of understanding but which Alex was sure were nothing more than empty receptacles as yet unable to recognise anyone other than her mother. What she liked doing most and which Alex, despite himself, found disturbingly erotic was fasten her mouth on Isobel’s nipples and unselfconsciously gurgle away.

“How long will you be staying off work?” Isobel asked.

“As long as you want me to, sweetest,” said Alex.

“How long will they let you? I’ve heard that a lot of businesses are cutting back on benefits like paternity leave.”

“The government doesn’t mandate companies to provide it anymore,” said Alex. “It’s discretionary now. It’s just not available to most people. My contract allows me up to nine months paternity leave. I don’t have to use it all in one go, of course. I can spread it out over the next five years.”

“How is your new job? You don’t seem to have to work so many long hours these days. In fact, you haven’t worked late more than two nights a week for ages.”

“It’s more an executive rather than an administrative role,” said Alex. “I don’t need to monitor progress as closely as I used to.”

However, that was rarely the reason Alex ever stayed away from home in the

late evening. It was mostly for social reasons. When he was still at Reuters-Fox this entailed a drink or two in the pubs around his old office. In his new job, he not only had to get familiar with new drinking companions but also with new drinking holes.

His drinking companions no longer included Zara who Alex hadn't seen at all after his conversation with Theo, but otherwise they were quite akin to those at Reuters-Fox. They were mostly men. They were chiefly between the ages of thirty and fifty. And most of them had a long commute home after work where the stress of travel was rather less if the journey was delayed until well after the end of the rush hour. Nevertheless, in one critical way, his new companions were very different from those he used to know. Once it had been Alex who had to ingratiate himself with better positioned staff members. Now it was they who were trying to curry favour with him. This was a role reversal that Alex positively relished.

“Do you think I should return to work when I'm able?” Isobel asked.

Alex hadn't really considered this. In fact, he'd forgotten that Isobel even had a job. What was it again? Something to do with marketing. And where did Isobel work? Alex screwed up his face in the hope that it would make him look thoughtful and considerate while it primarily served to conceal his forgetfulness.

“It depends what you want to do, dear,” said Alex. “I earn enough these days that you don't have to work if you don't want to.”

“Of course I want to,” said Isobel through gritted teeth. “You know how much I've studied and worked hard to make a career for myself.”

“Of course,” said Alex who was now wondering how best he could salvage the situation. “How long a break do you think you'll be allowed to take?”

“It’s unpaid maternity leave,” said Isobel. “A charity like Amnesty International can’t afford to pay me for that any more. I can stay out of work for as long as I like, but they won’t hold onto my job forever.”

“No, I guess not,” said Alex. Now that he wasn’t working for a media company he’d lost touch with current events. The Tories hadn’t yet been in power for even two years but they’d already made many radical changes. Alex was one of those who voted Conservative, of course. It would have been hypocritical to work for Reuters-Fox and not do so. Isobel had also voted for them. She’d been a natural Tory ever since her childhood in a rural England of upwardly mobile middle class neighbours and a culture of public schools, riding lessons and village fêtes. Amongst the many changes implemented by the Conservative-led coalition were more spending cuts as well as tax reductions and increased defence expenditure, along with an increasingly shrill anti-European rhetoric. One aspect of state interference whose rolling back was much applauded at Reuters-Fox was the reduction in workers’ benefits such as maternity leave, social security and housing benefit. Alex guessed that Isobel must be a casualty of such necessary changes, but he didn’t normally care very much about state benefits. Alex had done well out of the change of government. The salary he’d awarded himself was more than enough to cover his wife’s loss of earnings. His income tax rate was only 15% and the threshold at which the 20% tax rate applied was set so high that almost no one actually paid it.

Alex was guiltily aware that he felt happier when he was able to leave his wife and daughter behind. He was sure that he should feel differently now he was a father, but a hospital wasn’t a place where he felt relaxed. He was never sure of the right things



to say to his wife. And, furthermore, he didn't yet have much of an emotional attachment for little Iris. Alex's paternal instincts weren't especially stirred by a baby that did nothing more than shit and piss out one end and cry and spew at the other. That much Alex remembered from the two parenting classes he'd managed to attend.

Alex felt restless when he returned to his five-bedroom detached house in Bromley. Thanks to his paternity leave he didn't need to get up early in the morning, so he unscrewed the top off a bottle of wine and sat in front of the television to watch a series of banal programs that he couldn't quite focus his mind on. He eventually despaired of trying to make much sense out of a situation comedy about a bunch of student radicals whose lives bore no relation to what he'd known when he'd attended university, so he switched the television over to Fox News UK.

It was another stream of paranoid ranting from Ken MacKenzie who was both praising the current Tory-led administration and attacking it for not being more true to what he considered to be core Conservative values. His panel of guests were all pretty much in agreement with everything the host had to say except for one that Alex identified as the token non-conservative. It was another ineffectual liberal who'd once strayed as far as nearly joining the Labour Party but still agreed with the general view regarding the need for further tax cuts and, of especial interest to Ken MacKenzie, for stemming the influx of illegal immigrants. Muslims were the worst kind, apparently, because their religion was all about terrorism and forcing women to wear the chador, although ever since the revolution in Saudi Arabia there weren't many nations other than Pakistan and Afghanistan that any longer actually imposed such customs.

Alex knew that professional pundits like Ken MacKenzie were paid to spew

nonsense but nonetheless it was nonsense that made him feel a lot better. When he caught a plane to the United States, filled his car with petrol, and accepted tax cuts that made him so much better off than he would be otherwise, he was comforted by the knowledge that the right to such privileges was being defended by pundits who'd assert that he'd not done anything wrong and might even be acting virtuously. Alex was contributing in his small way to the struggle to roll back the socialist menace and the do-gooder green agenda that had stifled business and fatally damaged international competitiveness.

Alex was somewhat tiddly as he made his way through a second bottle of red wine that he didn't really enjoy quite as much as his first. Whatever he tried to focus on seemed to slip away from his grasp in the way he was familiar with after so many late pub nights. That went as much for *Straight Talk with Ken MacKenzie* as it did for the supposedly unbiased news on the BBC.

That was the usual depressing stuff, of course. There must have been a time when there wasn't yet another crisis going on somewhere or other. On the home front, there were the never-ending demonstrations against spending cuts. These were clearly a waste of time. Government spending was continuing to shrink every year and no amount of demonstrations made the slightest difference. Abroad, there was the ominous sabre-rattling between the Chinese, the Indians and the increasingly unhinged Americans. As America's hold on its position as the world's largest economy became ever more precarious and its debts became increasingly unmanageable, the nation compensated for its diminishing prestige by bluster and appalling stupidity.

It was noteworthy indeed when even Ken MacKenzie doubted whether

President Ingraham was in full control of her mental faculties.

And when it wasn't war, it was famine and plague in countries Alex had never heard of and were probably only a few years old anyway; flooding or drought in random corners of the globe; riots in Eastern Asia; forest fires in South America; and nuclear fusion accidents in Canada. Even the light entertainment news was depressing. Alex cared very little about the boy bands and other teen sensations whose anodyne misadventures were related in excruciating detail. What had happened to the age when pop stars took drugs and got into trouble with the law?

The phone rang.

Shit! Who could it be? It was already past midnight.

Alex picked up the phone but he could already see from the call sign that it was Karen. She was the girl he'd picked up a few days ago after the drinks outing that marked his last day of work before his paternity leave began. His first moment of infidelity for several years. How could he have been so stupid? And he'd left his telephone number as well.

"Not a good idea phoning me at home," he slurred.

"Why not?" answered Karen. How old was she? At least ten years younger than him, that was for sure.

"You *do* know I'm married, don't you?"

There was a pause. Then there came the question: "Is your wife there?"

"No," said Alex. "She usually is. But not at the moment."

"Well, that's alright then," Karen said.

## **XL**

### **Karen**

### **2063**

It was with genuine affection that Karen gazed across the kitchen table at the hairs on Kevin's chest. She leaned forward and placed an open palm over them, entangling the tips of her fingers in its grey wiry forest. He was still damp from the shower they'd shared after making love together on the living room sofa. She rose up from the kitchen stool where she'd been sitting and pressed her lips on his while letting her other hand fall limply onto his penis which almost immediately sprung to life.

"We must meet again some time," Karen said. "That was good."

Kevin smiled and ran his fingers over the bald pate that he'd made more presentable by shaving his head. Clearly he used to have more hair when he was younger, but Kevin wasn't the only one whose body betrayed signs of the passing years. Karen's hair was dyed a reddish orange, but was grey at the roots and her pubes sprouted a coarse mix of brown and white hairs.

"I've seen you so often in the staff room," Kevin said. "I'd always fancied you, but I never thought you'd be *so* good."

"Are you up for more?" asked Karen as she affectionately squeezed his testicles. His penis stirred in response.

"I haven't finished my coffee yet."

"We've got all afternoon for that," said Karen seductively.

And then, just at the least convenient of moments, the intercom to the front door buzzed.

Karen gestured Kevin to hush with a finger. She picked up the intercom phone.

“Who is it?” she sang.

“It’s me,” said the crackly voice from the ground floor. “I’m here with Primrose. Won’t you let us in?”

“Of course, dear,” said Karen who pressed the entrance button and then sat back on her stool.

“We’re out of luck,” she said to Kevin. “It’s my daughter. You’ve got *plenty* of time to drink your coffee.”

“Your daughter?” said Kevin with alarm. “Shouldn’t I be...?”

“Your clothes?” said Karen. “My daughter won’t mind. Anyway, here she is...”

The door to Karen’s apartment opened and Kitty let herself in while she supported little Primrose who was strapped to her bosom. She was a tall thin woman in her early thirties wearing jeans and a college sweat-shirt.

“Hi, Mum!” she said as she entered the kitchen. She kissed her mother on both cheeks in turn and paid no attention as her mother’s splendid bosom brushed against Primrose’s face. The baby girl gurgled and extended a hand towards her grandmother’s aureate nipples.

Kitty looked over at Kevin who was nervously hiding an erection beneath the kitchen table. “You must be Mum’s friend,” she said extending a hand. “I’m Kitty. Kate really, but everyone calls me Kitty.”

“I’m Kevin. I teach Maths at your mother’s school.”

“Oh, another teacher,” said Kitty with a smile. “So, there are now *three* teachers in the room. I teach at a Primary School. I don’t specialise in anything. Not Maths and

not English either. Have you known Mum for long?"

Kevin relaxed, but he was obviously uncomfortable being seen naked in a room by a woman who was so much younger than him. He kept his legs crossed. "We've been colleagues for several years," he answered.

"Do you want a coffee, dear?" asked Karen who was standing by the kettle. From behind, her pendulous buttocks were just as mature and full as her bosom. "Or would you like something a bit stronger?"

"I'm not driving," said Kitty. "I came here by bus. I was in the area and I thought I'd pop by. See how're you doing."

"I'm doing fine, dear. What did you say you wanted? Would you like sherry?"

"That would be lovely, Mum."

"Kevin?"

"Coffee's plenty for me."

"Are you sure? I'll be having a glass of sherry as well."

"All right. OK. Just the one glass."

Karen brought over a tray with a bottle of Bristol Cream and placed it on the kitchen table. She then poured generous measures into three sherry glasses and replaced the cork.

"Should we be making a toast?" asked Kevin.

"I'm not sure," said Karen. "I don't know what for. I'm still celebrating the fall of the English National Unity government. Perhaps we should drink to its continued demise."

"I haven't known any other government the whole time I've been a teacher,"

said Kitty. “How do we know this interim government’s going to be any better?”

“It can’t be any worse, believe you me,” said her mother. “It’s a wonder there are still *any* schools standing after the savage spending cuts they authorised. And lowering the school leaving age to fourteen... Can you believe that?”

“It makes sense if all you want to do is cut spending,” said Kevin. “The state schools are languishing and the kids whose parents can afford it are all in private schools.”

“I’m tempted to work in a private school myself,” said Kitty. “The pay’s much better. Perhaps when I come off maternity leave that’s what I’ll do.”

“What about Primrose, dear?” wondered Karen. “Do private schools have crèches too?”

“I think so,” said Kitty. “Anyway, that toast. Any suggestions, Mum?”

“Best of luck to Prime Minister Keith Monbiot,” Karen suggested. “Let’s hope he can rescue the country from the shithole it’s dug for itself.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Kitty as she supped on a glass. “He’s only human, though. He can’t do everything he’d like to do. For instance, I don’t think the Scots or the Welsh want there to be a United Kingdom again. It’s a wonder the Scots are content to stay with the monarchy. And I can’t see the Northern European Union wanting us back after the way we fucked them about when we quit. There are a million things that need repairs and I don’t think Monbiot’s necessarily going to be able to pull it off.”

“Well, surely he’ll do something about education,” said Karen. “Wasn’t he Shadow Education Minister once?”

“That was a long time ago,” said Kevin. “Before the government put an end to

normal Parliamentary business.”

“...During the State of Emergency which the bastards introduced,” added Karen.

“Do you remember the riots, dear?”

“I was there,” said Kitty. “Of course I remember. A friend of mine ended up in hospital for a week.”

“Of course,” said Karen. “I should’ve remembered. Shall we go into the living room? The seats are more comfortable.”

The three adults walked out of the kitchen and across the corridor that divided Karen’s two-bedroom apartment. Kevin was pleased to see that his clothes and Karen’s were neatly piled up in a corner and that there was no obvious evidence of their recent lovemaking. While he’d been in the shower, Karen had tidied up the living room and sponged the trail of semen off the plastic sofa. Like most living rooms, the sofas and settees were arranged around a sixty-inch television screen that was hanging on the wall. Although the volume was muted, the television was still broadcasting the EBC 24 Hour News Service which had become required viewing over the past year.

Kitty sat down on a sofa with Primrose supported in her arms. Then without a word she slipped off her sweater to reveal small bare breasts against which she pressed her baby daughter who eagerly grasped at a nipple and on which she enthusiastically suckled. Kevin, meanwhile, kept his hands over his crotch to hide the evidence of a penis that just wouldn’t behave itself. He was conflicted between his desire to put his clothes back on and the imperative not to cause embarrassment by doing so.

Kitty looked around her with keenly observant eyes and then quietly smiled. Kevin guessed that she’d detected the odour of sex in the room, not that his current



nakedness wasn't evidence enough of that in itself. He sipped on his glass of sherry in the hope that by being so preoccupied this would provide some welcome distraction from his predicament.

"Have you seen Primrose's father recently, dear?" asked Karen.

"Not for a while, Mum," said Kitty. "He's agreed to pay Child Support, though I don't think his wife's that keen."

"I'm not surprised, dear," said Karen. "I guess he probably didn't want you to keep Primrose."

"I wasn't sure about it myself at first if you remember," said Kitty. "But I'm thirty-two next month. I might not have too many more chances in this life."

"Do you think Primrose's father will actually pay?" wondered Kevin, who speculated what he'd do if he was ever in a similar situation.

"Pete might be an adulterer," said Kitty, "but he's not a bastard. Anyway, he and his wife haven't had kids and I don't think they ever will. They're both in their forties. You probably shouldn't have children at that age whatever happens."

"Hmmm," said Kevin who wasn't sure what he ought to say. He looked around for help. He glanced at the television which was showing pictures of a desert and hungry children in evident distress. The tickertape ribbon that was announcing further falls on the Dow Jones index and news of another incident on the Welsh border gave no information about the images that filled the screen.

"It's dreadful, isn't it?" said Karen who noticed the direction of Kevin's gaze. "I just *had* to give some money to the Mexican Drought Appeal."

"It's not just Mexico," said Kitty. "There are problems in Arizona and Texas as

well. The government there won't admit it..."

"...or even allow anyone to report it," said Karen. "Every month there seems to be yet another big international appeal. You just can't ignore what's going on."

"Why not, Mum," said Kitty. "The last government managed to. I don't think the country's paid a penny towards foreign aid for years. Enlightened selfishness I think they called it."

"It didn't work very well," said Kevin. "Not for the poor countries in the world, anyway."

The three of them continued to chat for a further half an hour or so until Kitty noticed the time. She swallowed her last few drops of sherry and placed her glass down.

"I've got some shopping to do," she announced. "Children grow so fast you have to constantly refurbish their wardrobe."

"I'm sorry I threw away all the baby clothes I had, dear," said Karen.

"Don't worry, Mum," said Kitty as she pulled her sweat-shirt back over her shoulders. "You've been plenty generous in other ways."

Mother and daughter kissed each other on the cheeks and Karen escorted her daughter to the door. Primrose had fallen asleep and Kitty tucked her baby into the buggy she'd left in the corridor. Kevin sat in the living room watching the television with the sound turned down while mother and daughter chatted in the hallway.

Eventually the front door to the apartment opened and closed and Kitty was gone. Karen returned to the living room where there was a debate on television about the declining values of stocks and shares in the bickering fragments of the United States.

"Do you want the sound up, Kevin?" asked Karen who picked up the remote

control and pointed it at the television.

“I think there are better things to do than watch television,” said Kevin.

Karen turned her gaze away from the television towards the erection that was now on full display between Kevin’s legs.

“You’re absolutely right,” said Karen as she determinedly turned the television off.

## **XLI**

### **Alex**

### **2030**

“How is your daughter?” Karen asked.

Alex gazed dozily at the young woman who he’d only moments before been fucking and from which exertion he’d hardly yet recovered. Like most men, he wanted nothing more than to take it easy after such strenuous exercise but Karen was just as alert and alive now as she was when she’d dragged him onto her narrow single bed.

“Why do you want to know?” he asked.

“I *am* training as a teacher,” Karen said. “I guess I should show some interest in children and stuff.”

“My daughter’s doing fine,” said Alex. “Thank you for asking. She’s just coming up to her first birthday. But are you *really* interested? You’ve never met her.”

“And never likely to,” said Karen cheerfully. “And I don’t imagine you’ll ever tell your wife about me, would you?”

“That wouldn’t do my marriage much good. Does that trouble you?”

“Not much,” said Karen. “You’re too old for me anyway. You’re OK for this...” She squeezed Alex’s limp penis which was still sticky with her vaginal juices. “I don’t need to actually live with you.”

“Oh,” said Alex who was simultaneously relieved and disappointed.

The last year had been one of conflicting demands for Alex. He no longer needed to spend so much time in the office. His ill-defined but well-remunerated position gave him plenty of opportunity to look busy but hardly much of anything to

actually do. As long as he attended every meeting and reported back regularly to the company's most actively interested stakeholder, there wasn't much else to do apart from walk around with a tablet PC and host vacuous meetings in his office. He'd gained more of a grip as to how Ibex International actually made money, but that only made him nakedly aware how little real use he was ever likely to be.

Alex felt inadequate in quite a different way when he was at home. Isobel had taken to being a mother with great enthusiasm and there was now virtually no conversation that wasn't predicated on their daughter's current and future happiness. Alex hoped that the process of throwing money at private schools, prep schools, home tuition and nursemaids would absolve him of the onerous weight of responsibility. There was much about being a father that he didn't relish at all. He didn't enjoy changing his daughter's nappies. His conversation with the baby had hardly progressed beyond the monosyllabic. Night-time was sometime barely tolerable when little Iris chose the least appropriate time to bawl her head off to demand breast-feeding, nappy-changing or just attention.

"One would almost think you'd never wanted to be a father," Isobel accused Alex on more than one occasion.

And then there was Karen. How did Alex end up having a relationship with a young teacher who didn't even pretend to be faithful to him but nevertheless demanded so much of his time and attention? It was quite obviously not the ideal time in his life to be entangled in the arms of a woman like her. He was blessed with a well-paid career and burdened with having to maintain a marriage and a family. All these precious assets were threatened by the slim young girl with short blonde hair, pendulous breasts and a

voracious vagina that swallowed his erect penis almost as soon as they were alone together.

And together they were again. Another afternoon sneaked out of the office and a surreptitious trip across London to Karen's student digs in Wood Green. Fortunately, Karen didn't share her bedroom with a fellow student and none of them needed to know that the man in a suit and tie who regularly ascended the poorly maintained stairway wasn't there on official business. In any case, he didn't keep his suit and tie on for very long once he got to Karen's room. Nor anything much else in the way of clothes. Karen was at least as comfortable in her clothes as she was without, but when they were an obstacle to sex she discarded them as speedily as she could.

It was sex that Karen most enjoyed. There appeared to be no limits to what she would try with Alex and he guessed, though it was hardly ever mentioned, what she tried with other people. Alex knew for sure that he wasn't Karen's only lover. That she was insistent that they arrange their encounters in advance and actively discouraged him from turning up unannounced was evidence enough of that.

It disconcerted Alex as much as it pleased him that Karen was so attentive to not confusing her desire for his body with any other form of intimacy. She never told him that she loved him and Alex guessed that it would be very unwise to say that he loved her. It was difficult, though, after a year in which he'd had more regular sex with Karen than he'd ever had with Isobel not to feel some emotional attachment. In fact, the sex he had with Karen wasn't only more frequent, it was also more intense, more demanding and more addictive. Alex wondered which of Isobel and Karen he loved the most. Karen was a better lover, but it was Isobel to whom he'd pledged his eternal love.

“The education cuts really piss me off,” said Karen as she leaned forward across her bed. She picked a cigarette out of her packet and examined it. She couldn’t actually light it as smoking wasn’t allowed in her bedroom or indeed anywhere else in the building. As Alex had never actually seen Karen smoke he wondered where she went to indulge her antisocial habit. “Here I am thousands upon thousands of pounds in debt that I’ll probably be paying off until I’m in the grave and I don’t even know for sure that the tuition fees and living expenses all that debt is paying for will even result in me finding a job. They’re laying teachers off in some schools. Why would they want to take on a new teacher?”

“There have to be teachers,” said Alex. “Children have to be taught.”

“I might end up having to work at one of those private schools the government is so keen to promote,” said Karen, ignoring Alex’s comments. “State education is going to the dogs. The Tories hate anything that involves spending public money. You used to work for Reuters-Fox, didn’t you? Are they like Fox News UK? Always pushing all the right-wing shit that would rather we paid no taxes at all than give ordinary children a chance of a decent education.”

“I’m sure that’s not what the Conservative government believes,” said Alex loyally.

“No, of course not. Not that they’d admit it. So, Alex, did you vote for the Tories?”

Alex was wary about answering this. He knew that Karen hated the government in almost every way. If he said he’d voted Conservative, could this be the excuse she needed for dumping him? How much would he miss the company of such a reliable and

passionate lover? Evasion was the only principled way out.

“Just because I used to work for Reuters-Fox doesn’t mean that I agree with everything they promote. In fact I could very well not agree with one single thing.”

“Only a moron or a truly selfish rich bastard would do that,” Karen spat out with uncharacteristic vitriol. “I won’t be surprised if I’m unemployed when I’m no longer a student and can no longer apply for a loan at a favourable rate of interest. Now there’s virtually no social security system and I can’t claim unemployment benefit because I’ve not paid enough National Insurance, I’ll just have to sit on the pavement in the streets of London and beg. What other choice will I have?”

“There’ll be jobs, I’m sure,” said Alex. “The current slump can’t go on forever. The market will pick up. It always does.”

“Does it?” wondered Karen thoughtfully. “Mightn’t there be a time when it doesn’t recover? What makes a recovery happen anyway?”

“It’s all cyclical.”

“Can’t cycles just come to an abrupt end? If you choke off expenditure like the current government does, what’s going to generate growth?”

“I’m not an economist,” said Alex. “But recessions always come to an end at some point or other.”

“Economists hardly ever get it right. They didn’t predict how much fuel prices would spiral out of control. Their predictions about food prices were far too optimistic. And right up until the Stock Market collapsed and put the Tories back into power, they were going on about how the good times would last forever. Why should I put faith in them?”



Alex didn't like this kind of conversation at all. He much preferred those he had with his colleagues after work where they mostly boasted about how their property investments or company shares had paid off so well. He almost preferred his conversations with Isobel who automatically assumed that what was good for the upper middle classes, and especially for her friends, would naturally be good for everyone. There was no doubt in her mind that her interests were well served by the current government. Alex didn't enjoy feeling guilty for simply voting in what was undeniably his own self-interest.

He put an arm around Karen's shoulders. "Do you have any seminars or lectures this afternoon?" he asked to both change the subject and suggest what else they could do.

Karen gazed lasciviously at him and ran her fingers down his chest to the bush of hair where his penis was already stirring in anticipation.

"I do, as a matter of fact," Karen said. "It's Classroom Skills. That's the lesson where they teach you how to write large letters on the whiteboard and how to make your presentation clearer. The sort of stuff you business types do in slide-show presentations I guess."

"Do you also learn how to instil discipline?" Alex wondered.

"That sounds positively kinky," Karen said with a wicked grin. "I haven't time for a full fuck. Would a blowjob do?"

"Yes," said Alex who blanched as she said that. The last person who asked him whether a blowjob was sufficient was someone whose services he'd paid for the pleasure. That was an experience he wasn't sure he ever wanted to repeat, but increasing

age and declining opportunity might well make this something he'd one day have to get used to. At least he had no difficulty in affording it nowadays.

Karen lowered her head, put her forefingers around the shaft of his penis and ran her tongue up and down its length. This was something she was skilled at and her ministrations had the desired effect. Alex's penis hardened, stiffened and after a few moments released a small quantity of clear liquid that Karen chose not to swallow or paste over her face, unlike the porn actresses from which Alex had learnt so much. Instead she used a tissue to wipe the semen off Alex's thighs and tossed it into a bin where several others were already crumpled up. Alex couldn't help wondering whether any of them were stained with the semen of Karen's other lovers.

"Are you going back to the office now?" Karen asked when Alex eased back into his suit and knotted up his tie.

"Not today," said Alex who'd told his colleagues that he was attending a meeting which was true in a sense but not in quite the way they assumed.

"So, you'll be going back to your lovely wife and daughter," said Karen. "You don't seem very eager. Is everything going well at home?"

"Of course, of course," said Alex who also wondered how pertinent Karen's question might be. When he was with Karen he relished every moment. When he was with Isobel he was almost always rehearsing his next excuse to be somewhere else. It wasn't Isobel's fault, but now the sex had become less frequent what was left of their relationship wasn't quite as much fun as Alex had once hoped it would be.

"I'd wish your daughter my love," laughed Karen after he'd kissed her goodbye, "except I don't think her mother would appreciate it."

## XLII

### Primrose

### 2086

“Have you told your mother?” asked the voice at the other end of the phone line.

“Of course not, Gran,” replied Primrose. “What do you think she’d say?”

“She wouldn’t be pleased,” said Karen to her granddaughter. “But such an innocent name: *Empire Cleaning Services*. Who would have thought?”

“It’s a career,” said Primrose.

“What’s wrong with teaching, dear? Your mum’s a teacher. I was a teacher. Isn’t that a career?”

Primrose cast her eyes around Trafalgar Square where she was sitting on a bench. Lord Nelson was gazing down on her. Chinese and Vietnamese tourists were snapping photographs of the grand historic sites. Surrounding the square were bicycle rickshaws and a few hydrogen powered buses. She’d had this conversation with her grandmother so many times before.

“There aren’t many opportunities any more, Gran,” she said. “No one can afford to send their children to school these days. The fees and everything are too high.”

“Whatever happened to free compulsory education?” her grandmother wondered. “What’s this country coming to?”

“There aren’t the jobs anymore,” said Primrose. “There’s hardly anything that can’t be done by robots or computers. Most office jobs have disappeared. For what jobs there are you don’t need a degree to do them.”

“Like your job,” said Primrose’s grandmother bitterly. “All that education your

mother's paid for. Do you think you'll *ever* be able to pay off your student loans?"

"I will now, Gran," said Primrose. "It's good money. And there are some management opportunities as well."

"It just doesn't seem right."

"You never had any objection to having sex with whoever you wanted," said Primrose.

"No one's ever paid me for it, dear. And I'm too old now to have more than the one man in my life. If it wasn't for the wonders of modern medicine, I wouldn't be able to have sex at all any longer. I'd just be an old spinster watching TV all day."

"You don't do doing badly, Gran," said Primrose. "You're not going to tell Mum, are you?"

"I don't betray confidences, dear. Why is it you can tell me all this and not your mother?"

"I guess *because* she's my Mum."

"Fair enough."

Primrose continued her chat while she also enjoyed the warmth from the spring sun on her bare arms and watched a gang of town pigeons that were pecking the ground about her feet. Rats and mice scurried about amongst the crumbs that tourists had scattered to feed the pigeons. They were much bolder than Primrose remembered them being when she was a child, but nowadays there was a lot more rubbish blowing about the streets since the council could no longer afford to employ street-cleaners. Most of Central London was filthy and shabby and only the attractions that wealthy tourists frequented were in anything resembling a good condition. In any case, such places were

far too expensive for people like Primrose. Only tourists and the wealthy could afford to visit museums, art galleries and the privatised London parks, which were ringed in by barbed wire, surveillance cameras and scurrying security robots.

Primrose bid her grandmother goodbye and scrolled through the display on her tablet. She idly perused her list of engagements for the rest of the day. She felt better for having spoken to her grandmother about her job. She didn't expect to be commended for it and it wasn't what she'd have chosen if there'd been much choice, but Empire Cleaning Services did offer reasonable prospects for a well-educated, presentable woman with an attractive body and an appetite for sexual adventure. There might be some clients whose needs and requirements Primrose had no intention of ever satisfying, but she didn't worry about them. The type of women who would agree to address such clients' expectations tended to be illegal immigrants and asylum seekers of which there was absolutely no shortage these days. She also had little intention of pursuing this career for very long. This was a young person's occupation, but it was one which would enable her to pay off her loans and help gather together the capital to invest in other more respectable business ventures.

It was a month now since Primrose began working for Empire Cleaning Services. It was one of a number of similar businesses throughout England, though she was told that her employer was at the service of the more prestigious and exclusive client. She'd been lucky to get through to the second interview. Such was the competition for available positions that a university education was almost essential. This was a contrast to even a decade or so earlier when such a business would more or less have to employ whoever it could find. Lesser candidates would have to work for

rather less estimable escort agencies.

The interview required Primrose to demonstrate her suitability for the work she was expected to do and not surprisingly this was what she'd been most nervous about. It wasn't exactly something she could revise for. She understood from the friends who'd recommended her the company that prostitution was something you either had a talent for or didn't. Primrose had had a good number of lovers over the years for which, like her grandmother, she had not once expected to be remunerated, but she was sure that her sexual boldness would put her in good stead. She'd had a wide range of lovers of both sexes in several combinations at the same time and all her orifices had been tested many times.

No, she was able to say in her interview, she wasn't troubled by the fact that the majority of clients were middle-aged or older. Yes, she would be willing to work with one or more other employees if that was what the client requested. No, she didn't object to mild spanking, choking or bondage. Yes, she would consider satisfying some of the clients' more peculiar fetishes. And yes, there were limits to how rough and how abusive a client could be with her. Was that a problem?

"Not at all," said Katrina Haussmann, the German woman on the interviewing panel who'd introduced herself as a dominatrix. "There are several employees willing to go the extra mile, but few are quite as good-looking and well-educated as you."

Primrose now knew that for sure, though she could hardly be described as a veteran after having only worked in her new job for just over a fortnight. Several women employed by Empire Cleaning Services were obviously not employed for their youth or good looks. Most of these were immigrants of one kind or another who feared

the very real threat of deportation. Many now came from the Holy Land from which there still came a steady stream of evacuees. There were many Arabs, several Indians, a few Africans and many from the irradiated Republic of Israel.

Although Primrose was anxious about giving a demonstration of her professional skills to the interview panel, it didn't turn out to be as bad as she'd dreaded. She wasn't required to have sexual intercourse, although her vagina and anus were closely examined for any potential problem that might hinder her ability to provide the services she was expected to perform. A handjob and blowjob were all she needed to demonstrate while the interview panel took notes, including the middle-aged gentleman to whom she was ministering,. As was explained to her, only a minority of customers really wanted a fuck and she wasn't normally expected to consent to this unless she felt comfortable.

“You may find that skills you'd never expected to use in this profession become rather more useful than just your receptiveness to vaginal penetration,” said the dominatrix. “For instance, I was previously employed as a teacher in Physical Education. I notice you've trained to be an English and Drama teacher. You might find this expertise useful with clients who enjoy role-playing.”

Primrose idly regarded Trafalgar Square. She had another hour or so until she needed to catch the tube to Maida Vale where she had an appointment with a client whose preference was exactly what Katrina the dominatrix had suggested. This would be her first appointment with the man identified as Percy although most probably that was not his real name. If he was anything like her other clients who'd specified a role-playing activity then this engagement would indeed be very much like the drama

exercises she'd trained for at Teacher Training College. In this case, Percy was excited by the opportunity to play an infant to Primrose's mother. Although Primrose knew nothing about motherhood and she was in no doubt that masturbation wasn't normally associated with a maternal role, this was the kind of assignment she most enjoyed.

Not all assignments were especially pleasant. Some were quite distressing. But, as she'd learnt from her colleagues, this was something which given time and more assignments she'd soon take entirely in her stride.

"You've done it up the arse before, haven't you?" asked Kelly, a girl who probably came from Thailand or Cambodia.

"Yes," said Primrose. "But I'd been expecting it."

"And he used a condom, I hope?"

"Yes. I put it on him. Just the way we're told to."

"Next time you have a new client, make sure you have lube on hand," Kelly advised her. "Apply it before you do anything at all, just in case. It's a risk you take. Most clients don't fuck you about like that. They don't often overstep the mark. But if they do, make sure you reprimand them afterwards. Preferably after you've been paid. You've got to protect the other girls."

The gap between assignments was the best part of the job. It was like the spells in the school staff room that Primrose had once thought would be integral to her professional life. She could relax as she was doing now, suck a strong mint to disguise the sour taste of semen, and watch the world around her. This was glorious on a nice day though when it rained she had to kill time in a coffee shop or wine bar. She couldn't help notice that her absurdly prim but curiously impractical maid's costume attracted



attention. How many maids wore such high heels and such sheer black stockings? Perhaps the people who so often stared at her knew exactly what services Empire Cleaning Services provided for its clients.

“There’s a possibility you might actually be expected to do some cleaning,” said Mrs. Haussmann. “It doesn’t happen very often, but when a client has unexpected visitors this is a useful ruse if he doesn’t want the real reason for your presence to be identified. Don’t worry. You won’t be expected to do a very good job and you’ll get paid exactly the same amount.”

Primrose had killed enough time and had to head off to her next appointment. She strode across Trafalgar Square past the stone lions at the foot of Nelson’s Column and down the steps to the underground. It was almost as bad travelling by tube as it was to do the work for which she was paid. The decrepit trains were always crowded and broke down rather too frequently. She’d several times had to abandon a journey when the train got stuck in a tunnel and she’d had to improvise the rest of her journey by a series of rickshaws and even, in an emergency, a hydrogen-fuel taxi.

Her current destination was a part of London she’d never been to before. There was a possibility that it might be relatively interesting but it was more likely to be rather depressing. Primrose relied heavily on the satellite navigation app on her mobile phone to find the client’s address and this invariably led her past decaying homes, dilapidated housing estates and the shanty towns that were sprouting up all over the more rundown parts of London. Her clients never lived in such places of course. They weren’t the ones sitting on the kerb of the pavement trying to sell shoe repairs, battery charging or illicit drugs. They weren’t the ones whose clothes were greasy, unwashed and patched up.

Where the clients lived there was always a reliable source of electricity, water flowed from the taps and rooms were temperature-controlled.

Nevertheless, there was a price to pay for this affluence as Primrose noticed when she arrived at the security gate of the type she always needed to pass through to get to a client's home. Surrounding the property was the inevitable elaborate security. There were high walls, electric fences and face-recognition cameras all around the estate.

Her clients were isolated from the poor and downtrodden not only by virtue of their relative wealth, but even more so by fear and disgust.

**XLIII**  
**Primrose**  
**2087**

The man who opened the apartment door most resembled one of Primrose's clients. His hair was thin, his hands gnarled and he had a slight stoop. He looked at her in the same slightly apologetic way such clients almost always did if they were aware that there was little likelihood that they could give her any genuine pleasure.

However, this wasn't a client. It was her grandmother's latest boyfriend.

"You must be Karen's granddaughter," he said. "Don't worry about me. I'm just about to leave."

"Is that Primrose?" called her grandmother from within the living room. "Come in. Come in. I've been expecting you, but you'll have to excuse the mess."

Primrose walked down the hallway to the living room where her grandmother was sitting cross-legged on the floor surrounded by photo albums. In front of her was a laptop where she'd been looking at yet more photographs. Primrose was relieved to see that her grandmother was wearing clothes. Although she'd often seen her naked over the years, she didn't feel as comfortable with it as an adult as she had when she was a child. Perhaps it was the nagging reminder of the cruel ravages that time visited an elderly woman's body. Or perhaps in some ways Primrose was actually rather less liberal than her grandmother.

"I'm leaving now," called the old man who had squeezed on a pair of sensible shoes that he'd left in the hallway.

"Don't forget to call," cooed Primrose's grandmother just before the door

slammed behind him.

“Your latest?” asked Primrose.

“Isn’t he sweet?” said her grandmother. “A widower. You meet more and more of those as you get older. We were comparing photos. His wife was quite the lady when she was alive.”

“I’m sure she was,” said Primrose. “Shall I make us a coffee?”

“Yes, do,” said her grandmother who awkwardly staggered to her feet and tidied away the photo albums. “That’s a nice tablet you’ve got. Is it new?”

“Yes,” said Primrose. “Thinner, faster and more powerful. I use it for work, but I’ve got earplugs so I can watch movies on the train. When I get a seat, that is.”

“What was the journey like from East London?” asked Karen who stood at the door of the small kitchenette while Primrose doled out teaspoonfuls of coffee into two empty mugs.

“That’s not where I came from, Gran,” said Primrose. “I came from Ruislip. It was a long journey, but I did get a seat.”

“Ruislip?”

“A client.”

“Oh. You’re still working as an escort, then?”

“What else can I do? I get paid holidays and there’s even a pension plan. It’s all legit.”

“I thought prostitution was still illegal in this country.”

“Who’s going to enforce a law that’s universally ignored, Gran?” said Primrose.

“One lump or two?”

“I don’t take sugar, dear. It’s only there for guests. Do you have a sweet tooth?”

“No, Gran,” said Primrose who wondered whether her grandmother was making a discreet enquiry about her daughter’s drug habits. There was little that got past her and a newly acquired liking for saccharine would be a tell-tale sign of an energy deficit caused by drugs such as heroin.

“Have you told your mother yet?”

“Yes, Gran,” said Primrose with a faint hint of exasperation. “Surely she’s said something to you about it. She was bloody pissed off with me about it. She said the last thing she’d ever wanted to be was mother to a whore. She was close to reporting me to the police in the hope that it would get me to stop.”

“But she didn’t?”

“As I say, what good would it do?”

Primrose put the two mugs on a tray and laid out a handful of shortbread biscuits imported from the Republic of Scotland. She followed her grandmother back to the living room.

“You’ve got a lovely apartment, Gran,” she said. “But what was wrong with the old one? You’d lived there all my life.

“I had to move because of the stairs, dear,” said Primrose’s grandmother who carefully eased herself into a leather armchair. “The frequent power cuts mean that the lift often doesn’t work. Ten flights of stairs are far more than a woman of my age can cope with.”

“But you’re not actually on the ground floor, Gran.”

“I can manage one flight of stairs. And anyway I don’t want to get caught in the

floods.”

“There hasn’t been a flood this far from the river, Gran.”

“You’d think not, but the river’s not *that* far away. The last time there was a flood the waters almost reached Clapham Common. There’s not a lot to stop London getting flooded out of existence just like East Anglia.”

“I guess not,” said Primrose thoughtfully as she contemplated the safety of the studio apartment she was renting in Barking. Although she mostly only ever arrived there late at night she saw it as her sanctuary. It was, after all, the only place in which there was a bed where she actually slept and didn’t have sex. She’d had no boyfriends since she’d started working at Empire Cleaning Services although she’d enjoyed very intimate relations with several colleagues. Now that Primrose mostly thought of sex with men as business rather than pleasure, it satisfied her need for uncomplicated love. But she hadn’t yet taken a girlfriend back to her Barking apartment.

“So, tell me, dear,” asked Karen as she raised the cup of coffee to her lips. “How did you leave it with your mother? I take it she didn’t actually dissuade you from pursuing your career as a sex worker.”

“Not at all, Gran,” said Primrose. This was a weird conversation to have with your own flesh and blood. “I can’t say I enjoy the job exactly, but it’s no worse than being a teacher. At least compared to what it was like when I did my teacher training at Eastbury Comprehensive. I was more likely to get beaten up by my pupils there than I am now by my clients.”

“I suppose so, dear. But none of your pupils were fucking you, were they? There’s quite a difference between teaching and fucking, you know.”

“Only insofar as no one normally teaches for fun whereas that’s why people mostly have sex,” said Primrose. “What you don’t like is that I’m being intimate with men for money rather than pleasure.”

“Well yes, dear,” said Karen. “That’s *exactly* what I don’t like. But I’m also not going to tell you to stop. What about your mother though? Do you still see her?”

“Yes, Gran,” said Primrose. “We just don’t talk about it, that’s all. It’s something we’re both aware of but we skirt around it. It’s normal to chat with people about how things are at work and when you can’t do that it leaves a strange hole in the middle of our conversation. That’s probably why I don’t see Mum as much as I used to.”

“Well, your mother does have a new boyfriend, doesn’t she? What’s he like?”

“He’s OK,” said Primrose noncommittally. “He’s another teacher. It all seems to be teachers in my family. What about *your* boyfriend, Gran? Is he a teacher?”

“No dear,” said Karen. “He’s someone I met off the internet. He’s a retired civil servant of some kind. You don’t talk much about work when you’re my age you know, dear. It’s always about the past and that gets in the way of the present.”

Primrose continued to chat with her grandmother for an hour or so and even looked at the photographs of her life from over the last fifty or sixty years. The pictures on her laptop were as fresh as when they were taken and showed her grandmother from her early days as a teacher before her mother was born and grew steadily in number through the early years before precipitously declining as the years accumulated. There was a long series of boyfriends and partners that usually changed several times in the same year, but on occasion lasted for much longer.

“Who’s this one?” asked Primrose, pointing at a picture from her grandmother’s student years in which she was standing by a man in his mid-thirties wearing an expensive suit and an incipient paunch.

“He worked for an internet application company,” said Karen. “He actually got separated, maybe even divorced, all for me. Waste of time that was for *him*, dear.”

“Were there many married men in your life, Gran?”

“Quite a few. And several divorcees as well. Men are *so* foolish.”

When Primrose finally left, she reflected on this fact about her family. Men were always there from her earliest years, but invariably as lovers, boyfriends or one-night stands. They were never there as husbands or fathers. In fact, Primrose had only ever met her father once and he was still married to the same woman he’d been married to before Primrose was born. He was a disappointment really. He showed no affection towards his daughter and was evidently rather embarrassed that she happened to exist at all.

Primrose would have been quite ready to ascribe her choice of career to having been born to a relatively dysfunctional family if she hadn’t got to know her colleagues at Empire Cleaning Services so well. Perhaps in an age when there were more jobs there would have been more of a pattern, but in these days of high unemployment and vanishing opportunity it increasingly seemed to be nothing more than a natural career choice.

Perhaps people had a more open attitude towards sex nowadays than they did in earlier generations. After all, hardcore sex was widely available on television, squeezed between television channels for news, religion, music and children’s



entertainment. Primrose had starred in several pornographic movies before she decided on her present career, but she'd considered it as nothing more than an easy way to earn a few extra pennies. It would have been a major effort to become a proper porn actress. The expected standard for acting ability, sexual athleticism and physical beauty was rather exacting. It was almost easier to make a living as a normal actress rather than in porn. It wasn't just the entertainment industry that had become increasingly sexualised. Everywhere you looked there was sex, sex and more sex. And it was more than often uncomfortably explicit.

There were hardcore porn advertisements for beauty products and household furniture. Magazines that had nothing to do with sex were filled with articles and photographs that focused on just the one thing. The range of what was considered normal was so great that it was sometimes difficult in Primrose's career for her to be sure of what should be classed as abnormal. Sex with children and animals certainly fell in that category, although it didn't take much sleuthing for Primrose to discover extremely disturbing images of such activity on the internet. But those clients who wanted to fuck her up the arse, who requested that they be anally penetrated by a strapon, who wanted her to stick her fist up their anus or who wanted her to spank them: were their demands at all abnormal? Quite a few of her boyfriends had wanted exactly the same sport and she'd never considered them at all perverse. It was as if sex for the purpose of having children or to cement a loving relationship was now the exception rather than the rule.

Nevertheless, there was a critical difference between the sex Primrose once enjoyed for pleasure and what she did now or when she appeared in *Barking Bangers*

*Vol. 4 or Amateur Arselickers Vol. 6.*

And essentially it was that she now made a living from it.

And this was surely the same basic fact that characterised her profession as the world's oldest.

## **XLIV**

### **Alex**

### **2031**

“So, this is your new apartment,” Karen remarked when Alex had pushed open the door.

“It’s small but it’s better than what I’ve got. Nice location, too.”

Alex nodded. It was a very much smaller than the house whose mortgage he was continuing to pay that was now in Isobel’s exclusive possession and where his daughter was free to scream and bawl all night long with no risk of disturbing him. There might be benefits in living alone, but one most definitely was not the size of accommodation he could afford to buy at such short notice.

“What does your wife think?” asked Karen as she waltzed past Alex to survey the kitchen, bathroom, living room and finally the bedroom of the freshly painted apartment. “She *is* still your wife, isn’t she?”

“We’ve separated,” said Alex. “Not divorced.”

“And all because of little old me,” said Karen with an irrepressible giggle in her voice as she bent forward to kiss her older lover. “I feel flattered. Really I do.”

“But it doesn’t change anything for you, does it?” Alex wondered sadly.

“Of course not, silly,” said Karen. “You’re *far* too old for me. And besides, I’ve got other boyfriends. It’s one thing to share lovers when you live alone. It’s another thing altogether if I were to move in. How would you like it if you found me having sex with someone else when you came home? How would you feel if another man wanted to stay overnight? And I don’t think I fancy a *ménage a trois* either. A threesome now and then is good fun. But every night...”

“I know. I know.”

“Still, it’s a great little flat you’ve got, Alex,” said Karen with enthusiasm. “So I guess I’ll be visiting you now rather than the other way round. I can’t imagine you’d appreciate me just turning up at any old time though; just in case you’ve got another woman sharing your bed.”

“There’s only you, Karen,” said Alex sadly.

“And then there was only one...” said Karen. “You’ve got greedy, you know. You won’t be satisfied with only me coming round a couple of times a week. You’ll want someone else. In fact, I insist on it. I don’t want to think of you being all alone when I’m having sex with Karl.”

“Is Karl your boyfriend?”

“Does it matter, Alex? He’s a guy I know. And Pete, Aaron, Ollie, and others. I know a lot of guys. Some are friends. Some are fucks. Some are both. Just don’t worry about it and we’ll be fine.” Karen placed the palm of her hand on Alex’s crotch. “You feel fine already. In the bedroom?”

“Yes,” said Alex while Karen pushed open the door that was already slightly ajar. Like everything else in the apartment, the bedroom was hurriedly and freshly decorated. The furniture, fittings and all the pictures on the wall were bought as a single item from John Lewis at Brent Cross. It already had the feel of a bachelor pad with yesterday’s underwear overflowing the laundry basket and pyjamas strewn over the pillow.

Karen picked up the pyjama trousers and held them between her thumb and forefingers as if they were contaminated. “You’re clearly *not* getting enough sex,” she

said disdainfully. “Come on, Alex. Take off your clothes. We’re not going to fuck with you still wearing those designer jeans. And what’s with the fucking tee-shirt. Just what or who is *Oasis*?”

“It was a popular rock group when I was younger,” said Alex.

“Never heard of them,” said Karen who disposed of her own clothes with much more alacrity than Alex. She always seemed most comfortable when in the nude. Alex had asked her whether she was a naturist or the child of naturists, but she’d said she couldn’t see the point of such nonsense. As far as she was concerned, whether to wear clothes or not wasn’t an issue to ever get hung up about.

The two lovers lay on Alex’s bed with the duvet pushed onto the floor while, as always, Karen took the sexual lead. Alex’s penis was pumped, sucked, chewed and finally pushed deep inside a vagina that swallowed it whole within its warm liquid embrace. Alex had the feeling that he’d finally returned home after several weeks of denial during which he’d moved out of a larger home and hurried into his new apartment. There’d been no one to keep him company at the Holiday Inn where he’d stayed between leaving one home and moving into the next.

“How did your wife find out about me?” asked Karen when, still perspiring, Alex slumped back onto his back. Why did she always ask questions like that when he was least able to formulate a rational reply?

“Isobel hired a private investigator,” said Alex. “It was done very professionally. Ultimately paid for, of course, by me.”

“Ironic that.”

“That’s what marriage is all about. Shared bank accounts. What’s mine is yours.

That sort of stuff.”

“You weren’t thinking of sharing me with your wife were you, Alex?”

“Sorry?”

“*What’s mine is yours.*”

“No, never crossed my mind. Would it have been a good idea?”

“I don’t think so. I might like a lot of things, but I’m pretty straight on the whole.

And I don’t think your wife would have appreciated it.”

“She wouldn’t have appreciated it at all,” Alex echoed remorsefully.

“What did she have to say?”

“She didn’t have to say anything. That was handled by the private detective agency. As I said, they were very professional.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They called me at work and told me they had something very urgent to discuss. When I told them that my wife was expecting me home that evening by, they informed me that in actual fact, no, I wasn’t. They arranged to see me at a coffee shop near the office.”

“They?”

“Two of them: a man and a woman. When I asked how I’d recognise them, I was told not to worry. They’d recognise me.”

“So, what happened?”

“They showed me the photographs and assured me there was much more to see if I wanted, including film footage. They laughed in good humour when I asked if it would get on the internet. All the evidence they’d gathered belonged to Isobel and she

could do with it what she wanted.”

“I’m intrigued, Alex. What were the pictures of? Any of us fucking?”

“Yes. Sort of,” said Alex. “They must have used a zoom lens from somewhere. You *never* draw the curtains in your flat, do you?”

“I’ve never thought to worry about things like that. Fuck! I hope I looked good in the pictures. Did they get my best side?”

“It was pretty explicit. I’d never seen a photo of me in the nude before.”

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t,” said Karen who clearly found this hilarious. “There’s a whole portfolio of me. I could show it to you one day if you like.”

Alex didn’t feel like laughing. “It wasn’t nice. I felt kind of violated. It was like standing in public with my trousers down by my ankles. But, as I say, they were very professional. They let me look at the pictures and made no comment while I was doing so. Then the man spoke. The woman said hardly anything, but I guess it must be good practice to have both a man and a woman together. Makes it more difficult for the person they’re dealing with to make a scene. He told me that my wife wasn’t expecting me to return home that evening and that she would arrange a time when it would be convenient for me to remove my possessions. He said that my wife wasn’t at this stage pushing for a divorce but that a separation was required. If I were to attempt to see my wife without prior agreement it might result in a legal separation order, but if I was cooperative that would not be necessary. Thoughtfully, they’d already arranged a hotel room for me to stay for the night which, of course, was the Holiday Inn at Brent Cross. And all the services arranged for me were, of course, paid by me.”

“I bet that hurt most of all, Alex,” said Karen with a wry smile.

“It’s not nice to have your life turned upside down.”

“It’s not as if you were the innocent partner.”

“I expected you to be a little more sympathetic.”

“I guess I should be, Alex, but I’m not the one who’s been deceitful. I don’t hide my amorous activities from anyone except, of course, for reasons of tact and diplomacy. I mean, I don’t think you really do want to know how many other guys I’ve ever fucked that weren’t you. But you’ve been a very naughty boy. You’ve been fucking me regularly for nearly two years and fucking your wife at the same time. And you’d never thought to tell her.”

“It isn’t something she’s likely to understand.”

“Well, I’m not surprised, Alex,” said Karen. She leaned over again and affectionately kissed Alex’s limp penis. She rested a hand on it and kissed him more conventionally on the mouth. “What made her suspicious?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t tell me.”

“I don’t suppose they’d even know. Why should they? Their job was to gather evidence once there was suspicion. I wonder if they ever trail anyone only to find that the wife’s suspicions are unfounded. Do they give you a refund when that happens?”

“I don’t know,” said Alex who was feeling very sorry for himself. “How *could* I have been so stupid?”

“Oh come on, Alex,” said Karen. “It’s not been all bad. Look, I’ll give you a blowjob to cheer you up and then we can watch some telly in your new living room.”

“A blowjob?” asked Alex incredulously.

“I’m just not up to more than two fucks in an hour,” said Karen. “And, any case,



in the new spirit of candour that I guess we're going to have to get used to, I'm seeing someone else this evening."

"Who?"

"It really doesn't matter," said Karen. "Come here, sweetheart."

She bent her head down between Alex's thighs, took his penis in her mouth and once more brought it to life.

As the couple sat together watching a television news story about a demo against education cuts, there was much for Alex to reflect on. It wasn't just his relationship with Isobel that had changed. It wasn't even just the embarrassment of having to explain changed circumstances to friends and family. Nor was it the rather more complex arrangements that would accompany Alex's relatively infrequent visits to his daughter. There was also a change in his relationship with Karen.

For so long, it had been predicated on the very fact of non-commitment that suited Alex so well when he was living with Isobel. Could their relationship survive now that Alex could no longer be described as unfaithful? He wondered whether he could continue a relationship for much longer with someone who not only didn't want commitment from him but openly flaunted her lack of fidelity.

Even with Karen's naked body beside him on the sofa and a glass of wine in one hand, Alex was feeling very miserable indeed. What did his ambitions amount to now?

**XLV**  
**Lindiwe**  
**2068**

Even when she had to do something as simple as making a phone call, Lindiwe was nowadays reduced to having to trade her body for the privilege. At least, Larry wasn't a client as such—those days were behind her—but neither was he exactly her lover. He was actually rather more considerate than most of her clients had been, though he didn't give her the kind of respect that she'd expect from a real lover. Lindiwe hadn't had one of those since the days she'd been working at the Reigate Refugee Centre. In fact, she felt so compromised by her year or so of working as a prostitute that she wondered whether she could ever again enjoy something as uncomplicated as a love affair.

“You know how to use the internet phone?” Larry asked after he'd switched on his computer and loaded the right application.

Did the man think she was a total idiot?

“I think so,” said Lindiwe. “I just hope my Mum's in.”

“Your mother's got a computer?” said Larry with slight surprise.

“Nan has,” said Lindiwe. “My grandmother. Granny Lakeisha. She works for a foreign agency as a doctor. Not everyone in Lesotho is starving and poor.”

“I don't know about that,” said Larry. “What you see on television makes you think everyone in Africa is as a poor as shit. It's just all wars, famine, plague, all that shit. No wonder you wanted to get out.”

“That may be so, Larry,” said Lindiwe as she nodded meaningfully at the computer screen. “But if you don't mind...”

“Oh, of course, Linda,” Larry said, as he walked out of his study and discreetly closed the door behind him.

Lindiwe composed herself. At least she was wearing a relatively smart blouse and had brushed her hair. She'd even had a shower, even though modern technology hadn't yet advanced to the extent that she could be smelt as well as seen. On the other hand, Lindiwe wanted to remove every last trace of Larry's body odours before she got dressed again. He was a gentler lover than most, but Lindiwe could never describe what they had as a loving relationship. For a start, Larry was some twenty years older than her. Furthermore, it was unlikely that any of his neighbours would welcome a black girl into the neighbourhood if he were ever to ask her to live with him. The few years of the Government of National Unity and the many more years of strict immigration control had wiped clean any pretence England might once have had of being a harmonious multicultural society.

Lindiwe would much rather be living in Larry's nondescript semi-detached house than the rundown squat in Redhill where she shared a room with three other women who were also illegal immigrants from Africa. She'd much rather have the benefits of central heating, wall-to-wall carpets, electricity, running water and well-sprung beds than have to sleep on bare boards and share a duvet with her roommates. In fact, she would much rather enjoy the luxury of the studio flat she'd once rented with Jiao-Jie, but this was something she could no longer afford after she'd worked her notice for Empire Cleaning Services. More to the point, she didn't want to be constantly reminded of her former life by the constant presence of a flatmate who was still employed by the same company. It was better for her to make a total break, even if she

did now have to live in unspeakable squalor.

Lindiwe settled in the office chair, adjusted the desk lamp so that it didn't shine directly into her eyes and waited for the dialling tone. Then there was the agonising wait while the phone rang at the other end. Surely her mother would be there. Lindiwe tried to arrange her phone calls home on a regular basis although it was difficult for her to keep her appointment. To do so invariably involved having to agree to have sex with Larry or Mark or Derek or any of the other older men that Lindiwe had got to know on a casual basis. She hoped that her mother wouldn't draw too many conclusions from the variety of different backgrounds that accompanied her daughter's calls.

There was always an element of tension in these conversations. Her mother had never been happy when Lindiwe had escaped Lesotho's misery by running all the way to England. She'd be even less happy if she knew what Lindiwe had had to do to make a living so far north. She never told her mother that she'd worked for Empire Cleaning Services. She was evasive about what she'd been doing since she'd been forced out of the Reigate Refugee Centre. And she couldn't really say much about the squalid hand-to-mouth day-by-day existence she now had to live as a result of not being able to find a reliable source of employment since she'd handed in her notice.

Was this her reward for her principles? But then again they weren't so much principles as an accumulation of disgust.

Lindiwe glanced back at the door. It was still closed. Larry had probably retreated to the living room to watch television although there would be no problem if he happened to be eavesdropping. Larry didn't speak Sesotho.

"Hello, Nan," said Lindiwe when she'd made a connection and her

grandmother's face was displayed on the screen. "Is my mother there?"

"That's Lindiwe, isn't it?" replied her grandmother. "No, she isn't. She's not been feeling very well."

"Oh dear, what is it? Not the plague, I hope."

"Your mother's got some kind of illness of the liver, dear. It might be one of those new strains of Hepatitis. Her doctor doesn't think it's especially serious. But enough of that. How are *you*, dear? How *is* England? Where are you living now?"

"I'm living just outside London. It's a town called Redhill."

"*Really* dear," said Lindiwe's grandmother. "I know Redhill. I used to live in Reigate once upon a time, you know."

"Did you?" said Lindiwe in genuine surprise. She'd forgotten that her grandmother had once lived in England. In fact, she'd lived there over ten years before Lindiwe was even born. She was reminded that the prospect of following in her grandmother's footsteps had been a factor that had originally attracted her to England.

"I remember Reigate very well," her grandmother continued. "That was between the two nuclear wars. It was a very affluent Surrey town."

"It's changed a lot, Nan. Everything's changed since you lived here. Reigate's affluent, but all the rich people live in gated communities and on private roads. It's more like it is in Maseru. The wealthy live totally apart from the poor."

"They always did, dear. I suppose it's just more obvious nowadays."

"Where else did you live when you were in England, Nan?"

Her grandmother smiled on the internet link as she thought back to her youth. "All over the place, dear. Mostly in London. Though I was also in the Midlands for a

while. In a town called Ashton Lovelock. You've probably never heard of it."

Lindiwe returned her smile in utter amazement. "I have, Nan."

"You have?"

"It's where I stayed with my friend, Aparara. It was the first place in England I lived."

"It's a fairly small town from what I remember. I wasn't there for very long. Somewhere like that soon seems incredibly small after you've lived in London. So... we've *both* lived in Surrey and Ashton Lovelock. What a coincidence! I mostly enjoyed my time in England. That was when it was part of the United Kingdom. Who'd have believed that Great Britain would disintegrate the way it did."

"Why did you leave England, Nan?"

"Well, it wasn't because I missed Lesotho. Lisa, your mother, was at university in Jo'burg then so she didn't need me as much as she did during all the years I was working in England. I wanted to make a life for myself in Britain and I'd hoped that your mother could join me out there; not the other way round. But things were getting increasingly difficult for foreigners in England. Each successive government pledged to get ever tougher on immigration at the same time as people in Africa and Asia were getting more desperate. The fallout from the India-Pakistan war was a factor—and I don't just mean the radiation. The British government was terrified that the country would be flooded by Indians and Pakistanis and that they'd bring their conflict along with them. It seemed only natural after all the Muslim-Hindu riots on British streets."

"Lesotho isn't Lahore, Nan," Lindiwe reminded her grandmother.

"No, but it all used to be the British Empire once upon a time, dear. So the

government made it a lot harder for me. I still hadn't got a British passport and it looked like I'd never be allowed to stay even though I'd lived in the country for nearly fifteen years and had never worked anywhere else. It got to the extent that I wasn't allowed to work in England even though I was a doctor. I had to return to Lesotho and my darling daughter whose education had been paid with what I'd earned in England."

"And grandfather?"

"He was a total waste of space," said Lindiwe's grandmother. "It's only because he's got to feel so guilty after a lifetime of whoring and drinking that you've ever got to know him at all. The last I heard from him he was living in Soweto. Plenty of whores and booze there."

"And typhoid, cholera and other things, Nan."

"Who knows if he's even still alive, dear. What are you doing now?"

"This and that, Nan."

"Oh. And are you going to get married soon? Your mother seems to think that you've found a nice man."

"There's no man in my life, Nan."

Lindiwe wondered where her mother had got that impression from. Perhaps it was when she'd called her mother and Derek was hovering about in the background. If that was the case then her mother must be expecting a future son-in-law who was much older than her and considerably more stout.

"Well, good for you dear. Men are nothing but trouble. Stay clear of them. Are you living in a nice house? It looks nice from here."

"I'm at a friend's house, Nan," said Lindiwe. "He's just letting me use his

computer to get in touch with Mum. The place I live in isn't nearly as nice."

"Weren't you staying with some Chinese girl, dear? Didn't that work out?"

Lindiwe was uncomfortable with her grandmother's probing. "I've moved in with some other friends, Nan. They're all African. Two of them come from Uganda and one comes from Eritrea."

"They must all be illegal immigrants like you, dear. You'd better be careful. Things were bad enough when I was living in England. It must be much worse now after that horrible National Unity Government."

"They're not in power any more, Nan."

"They'll have poisoned the atmosphere, dear. England wasn't especially tolerant when I lived there, even though it thought it was. It can't be any better these days. And now that England's isolated itself from its neighbours and the rest of Europe it must be really insular. Do you think you'll stay there much longer, dear?"

"It's not as if I've got much of a future in Lesotho, Nan," Lindiwe said miserably.

"You've got a point, dear," her grandmother said.

When Lindiwe had finished her call, she sat in the chair for as long as she could dare. She knew that Larry would want to reclaim his study, but Lindiwe wanted to enjoy the sensation of staying in a nice warm house for as long as she could.

Outside, through the windows, was another of England's typically damp days which made her shiver even when it wasn't particularly cold. Although every year was marked by yet another record temperature in an inexorable upward trend, English weather was still nowhere near as benign as that of Southern Africa. Lindiwe was



dreading the walk home across Reigate and Redhill through the persistent rain and drizzle. And it wasn't as if the hard wooden floor of her squat was ever likely to be welcoming even when she and her three roommates huddled together in the encroaching damp.

"How did it go, Linda?" asked Larry who couldn't wait any longer to reclaim his study and had quietly eased open the door.

At least he didn't call her *Ebony*, even though he'd probably never be able to pronounce Lindiwe's real name.

"It was very nice. Thank you, Larry. Could I have some toast or a cup of coffee before I leave?"

"Of course you can, Linda," said Larry obligingly, although Lindiwe was sure that he'd never have offered it to her if she'd not asked. "Let's go to the kitchen."

**XLVI**  
**Alex**  
**2032**

“I have a daughter as well,” said Lakeisha while sprawled beside Alex on the double bed that dominated the bedroom of his small apartment. “She’s older than Iris, your daughter. Her name’s Lisa.”

“Does she live at home?” Alex wondered.

“You could say that,” Lakeisha replied. “She lives with my mother, her grandmother, in Maseru. In Lesotho.”

“Lesotho?”

“It’s a small country in Southern Africa. That’s where I come from, Alex.”

“Oh,” said Alex. They’d made love—several times now—but Alex had never thought to ask. He’d guessed from Lakeisha’s accent that she probably hadn’t been born in West London, but he’d not done much thinking beyond that. “She doesn’t live in London?”

“I’m a student, Alex. A medical student. I live in a crappy dormitory to save money because the fees are so bloody exorbitant. There’s no space for an eleven year old daughter.”

“Eleven years old!”

“I was a teenager when my bastard of a husband made me pregnant. If it wasn’t for him I’d have gone to medical school when I was a lot younger.”

“How old *are* you?” asked Alex. He’d thought that because she was a student, Lakeisha would also probably be about the same age as Karen. Typical, though, for his

love life to pass from one student to another. And now his separation was about to become a divorce. It was a good thing that his salary was more than enough for him to cover the expense.

“You don’t ask a lady questions like that,” said Lakeisha peevishly, but she squeezed Alex’s limp penis in tapering black fingers tipped by viciously long purple fingernails.

“I just thought you were a lot younger.”

“That’s nice, Alex. And I *am* pretty young. A lot younger than you, that’s for sure.”

“Even though your daughter’s eleven years old...”

“You had Iris late. I had Lisa early. That’s all the difference there is.”

Alex was already at the age when he could no longer make an accurate estimate of the relative age of women in their twenties. Mid-twenties. Late twenties. Early twenties. It was all much the same. Lakeisha was probably mid to late twenties, but in her case Alex’s powers of discrimination were even further compromised. It was the first time in his life he’d ever had a black girlfriend. She was tall, slim and most undeniably black. Her hair was braided. There were stretch marks on her belly that were probably an outcome of pregnancy. And when she wasn’t naked in bed she wore stylish frameless glasses.

The variety of lovers that Alex had known in his life was certainly ticking a lot of boxes, but more by chance than design. He was still rather nervous about mentioning, let alone introducing, his new girlfriend to friends and work colleagues. He knew there was nothing he should fear but he somehow felt that despite protestations to the contrary

many of his male colleagues weren't as comfortable as they claimed to be about mixed-race relationships. Indeed, Alex wondered himself what people thought when they saw him in the park hand-in-hand with a black woman who was probably ten years younger than him. Did they think he was a lucky bastard? Or were they wondering how much he paid for her services? It wasn't so much Lakeisha's ethnicity that troubled Alex as the hostile assumptions of strangers.

Alex had met Lakeisha in the most natural and normal of circumstances. Unlike the other women he'd met since he separated from Isobel, there was no internet dating involved.

Alex's new washing machine had broken down and his supply of clean underwear and shirts had run out. It would be a day or so until the store could replace the washing machine which, as it was less than a year old, was most definitely still covered by warranty. So for the first time since he was a student, Alex had to find a launderette in which to wash his clothes. Such amenities were hard to find but he located one on his mobile phone's search facility that wasn't too far from his Hendon apartment, although he still had to drive there.

It was at the launderette that Alex met Lakeisha, but he'd not gone there with any expectation of meeting women. In fact, he actually tried to avoid attracting attention. Here he was, a man with a well-paid executive job and expensive clothes, dragging a black plastic bin-bag full of underwear, shirts, socks and jeans into a launderette where he was by far the most affluent person. The other people were of the sort Alex very rarely encountered. There were young women with their snotty noisy children. There was a middle-aged man dressed in baggy trousers with a baseball cap

positioned at a peculiar angle on his head. There were two frighteningly obese women who were folding and unfolding sheets in a mysterious never-ending ritual that Alex couldn't hope to understand. And there was Lakeisha sitting by herself, legs crossed, a shoulder bag beside her while reading a thick dull-looking text book.

What puzzled Alex the most was the complexity of the washing machines. Where did he even begin? Fortunately most machines accepted debit cards so he didn't need to use coins, which was a worry that had tormented him from the time he'd parked his car and walked toward the launderette. Where would he find several pounds worth of change at this time in the evening? The instructions associated with the washing machines were confusing, even though they mostly employed diagrams rather than text. At home he normally just threw everything in the washing machine at the same temperature setting that was suggested by the men who'd installed it in the first place. Now the choices were frightening and intimidating.

"Can I help you?" asked Lakeisha when she saw how helpless Alex was.

"Errm..." said Alex who wasn't sure he wanted to admit his ignorance. "If you could..."

The progression from a fairly gauche conversation about Lakeisha's studies at Middlesex University and how long she'd lived in London to Alex asking her out on a date was not straightforward. Several times through their chat Alex was convinced that Lakeisha had lost interest in her and he was ready to pretend to be enthralled by the sight of his laundry tumbling around in the washing machine, but then conversation returned to track. It was possible that she actually quite liked Alex's lack of conversational polish. She seemed genuinely interested in Ibox International and

actually knew rather more about the company's products than he did. At one stage he speculated with her that she should work for the company but she was adamant that she wanted to finish her medical studies and qualify as a doctor.

"It's what my parents are paying my fees for, so I don't want to disappoint them," she said.

Alex and Lakeisha began a very tentative relationship. It took rather longer for sex to become part of the relationship than Alex was normally used to. Mind you, this was a natural consequence when you didn't meet a woman through an internet site where a mutual interest in sex was already predicated. It was actually Lakeisha rather than Alex who eventually took the initiative and this after he'd first taken her to his small apartment where the washing machine was by now in full working order and he'd finally put his vacuum cleaner to use to make the flat halfway presentable.

Alex wasn't disappointed in the sex they enjoyed together. His new girlfriend was different in so many ways from his previous lovers. She was less matter-of-fact than either Karen or Gabby. She was much more passionate than Isobel. She also smelt quite differently. Her bum was much more of a handful. She was more eager than any previous lover to position herself above him in a cowgirl pose and piston her body up and down on his penis. She was happy to give Alex both oral and manual stimulation, but extremely averse to any penetration that wasn't in her vagina and properly sheathed.

Lakeisha said relatively little about her own life and was more interested in hearing about Alex's. It was a while until Alex discovered that Lakeisha was married and that only after he'd confessed that he was. This was something he'd been anxious about. He was sure that the right thing to do was declare this early on and not after the

relationship had stretched through several restaurant meals, many wine bars, four movies and a jazz concert. On the other hand, Lakeisha didn't seem at all surprised by his revelation. It made sense that a man of his age and relative affluence wouldn't be living in a relatively small apartment unless he'd lost a fair proportion of his accrued wealth in a costly separation or divorce.

Alex had now become belatedly aware there were yet more points of similarity between them with regards to marital separation which was that they both had daughters, although Lakeisha was reluctant to elaborate.

"Do you even like your daughter?" wondered Alex when the conversation about Lisa abruptly turned elsewhere.

Lakeisha looked at Alex with a flash of anger in her eyes, but when she saw that he was expressing the question more for information rather than as an accusation she nestled beside him on the sofa where they were sitting, still naked but with no expectation of sex.

"You misunderstand me, Alex," she said. "I love my daughter. I truly do. I talk to her every day by phone or internet. It's just that it hurts me to talk about her. I feel so guilty that I've abandoned her while I'm in London studying. She's old enough now to feel genuinely aggrieved at my absence, but I *have* to do something. I've tried to make up for the years of lost education that came from having an early pregnancy and being married to a bastard of a husband. It's been hard work. If I want my daughter to have the best, I have to be able to afford to give it to her."

"Why study in England rather than in South Africa where you could be living near your daughter?" asked Alex.

“And also be near my bastard husband...” said Lakeisha bitterly. “I don’t think so.”

“Is he *that* bad?”

“How bad does he need to be?”

“I’m not sure. You tell me.”

“He drinks heavily. He whores. He beats me up when he has the chance. He’s a bastard. I hate him.”

“And your daughter...”

“He’s her father. She doesn’t quite see it the way I do. And anyway he’s as sweet as a puppy whenever he’s with her. Butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth.”

“You obviously don’t like him,” said Alex.

“In fact,” admitted Lakeisha. “I don’t think I’ve liked men at all for a long time.”

Alex pondered this.

“But you like me,” he said.

“You’re the first man I’ve had sex with for a long time.”

Alex felt sure he should be flattered, but he had sufficient self-awareness to question this.

“What’s so good about me?” he wondered.

“I don’t think you’re going to be as bad as my husband. You don’t look like the sort who’d whore, drink heavily, or beat me up.”

Alex knew this assessment was very nearly absolutely true, at least as far as the last point was concerned. He most certainly wouldn’t hit anyone. However, in the year or so of his separation he *had* stooped more than once to the advertised services of



women on the internet who most certainly weren't looking for a steady relationship.

“What's wrong with other students?”

“They're just children, Alex,” said Lakeisha snuggling up close to him. “I want a real man.”

“A real man?” wondered Alex who'd been called many things in his life before but not that.

“Someone more mature,” Lakeisha clarified. “And someone who can pay his way.”

**XLVII**  
**Molly & Mark**  
**2072**

It had taken a long time for Mark and Molly to get used to living in Dagenham. It was a definite climbdown from North West London and it still wasn't a change in circumstances they were comfortable with. However, at least they'd both found jobs: not particularly good ones compared to what they had before but the compensation was they didn't have to squeeze themselves together all day long into the cramped space of a studio flat. The novelty and delight of spending every moment of their waking life together would most definitely have palled by now.

Mark was working in a second-hand car emporium where his experience at Tata Benz came in very useful not so much in the day-to-day business of selling rusty old cars but in getting the job in the first place. The price of second-hand cars was continuing to fall as the cost of fuel became increasingly prohibitive. Many old cars were now having their engines refitted for chemical batteries or hydrogen power.

Molly was now working evenings and sometimes nights in a synthetic fish bar, where her vegetarian tendencies were partly assuaged by the knowledge that the fish fillets she was frying had never once been part of an animal that had swum the open seas. Or ever swum anywhere at all.

Both Mark and Molly were close enough to where they worked to walk there which probably took them less time than if they chose to use one of London's rusting buses that weaved through the congestion of cycle rickshaws and horse-drawn carriages.

The difficulties of getting to work on a normal day were nothing compared to what it was like when London flooded. And this was something that was happening increasingly often. What was once described as a once-in-a-lifetime event had become just another routine hazard of urban life. Dagenham's flood defences weren't as resilient or as elevated as those in Docklands, Westminster or the City. It didn't take much rainfall to sink the borough beneath half a metre or so of water. On one memorable occasion it was almost waist-height, which made it impossible for either Molly or Mark to get to work. Fortunately, as it was similarly bad for everyone else in East London, it was only their wages they lost rather than their jobs.

When this memorable occasion was repeated, what before had been almost exciting was now greeted with world-weary resignation. The roads and pavements were sunk below dark muddy water that had risen steadily over the day and through the night. Heavy rain in the West of England combined with another surge in sea level resulted in yet another once-in-a-lifetime deluge.

Fortunately, Mark and Molly lived two floors up in what had once been a grand block of flats so, although the water caused an interruption to their water and electricity supplies, it didn't flood the apartment. The couple were high and dry although neither they nor little Monica could venture out onto the flooded streets below.

There was some compensation in the novelty of being able to look out the window at a familiar environment now radically transformed. There were rivers and streams where traffic normally flowed. Those vehicles that hadn't taken heed of the flood warnings were submerged in murky water on which floated dead rats, the detritus of household waste, and a traffic bollard. Not only was the water wet, it was filthy and

disease-ridden.

Small boats and inflatable dinghies floated by, but as Mark overheard from the yelled conversation their task was only to ferry emergency workers such as nurses and doctors. They were not for other people unless they were seriously ill or dying. They were most certainly not provided for the benefit of those who just wanted to get to work. In any case, the barriers that enclosed the financial districts would keep all foreign transport from entering West London. The entrances to underground stations would be sealed to keep water from flooding into the tunnels below.

Mark and Molly had resigned themselves to having to settle down to a day besieged by the sluggish waters in the company of a wind-up computer, when there came a sharp rapping on the apartment door.

“Who is it, Mummy?” asked Monica.

“I don’t know, dear,” said Molly.

“Should I find out how who it is?” volunteered Mark.

“Do we *really* want to?” wondered Molly.

“I’ll check through the eyehole,” said Mark. “Keep quiet just in case they’re crack dealers or muggers. I don’t know whether there are any police about.”

“Almost certainly even fewer than usual,” said Molly. “What with the floods, they’ll have more than enough on their hands today.”

Mark tiptoed into the small hallway and peeked through the eyehole just as the rapping was renewed. He tiptoed back to the bedroom/lounge.

“It’s that black girl from downstairs,” he said. “The one who looks ill and is always coughing.”

“Downstairs is a squat,” said Molly. “It can’t be rented out because of the damp and the disconnected mains supplies. No downstairs flats are habitable in East London anymore.”

“So she’s a squatter...”

“Evidently,” said Molly. “She lives in a squat. She must be a squatter.”

“Why’s she so ill?”

“Wouldn’t you be if you lived somewhere as damp as that?” said Molly. “She’s probably an illegal. She’s not English. She’s got a foreign accent. Probably African. Illegals often carry diseases and things.”

“Why’s that, Mummy?” asked Monica.

“Probably because if they went to hospital for treatment although they might get cured of whatever they’re suffering from they’d also get deported back to where they came from,” said Molly, hardly caring whether her daughter could really understand her.

“Are we going to let her in, Mummy?” asked Monica when the rapping at the door began again.

“I think we should,” said Mark. “She can’t very well sleep in her squat.”

“Why did she have to come to *our* flat?” Molly asked irritably.

“I guess she’d seen us coming and going and worked out that we’re not gangsters or rapists or drug addicts.”

“I don’t know whether we should...” said Molly cautiously.

“I think we ought to,” said Mark.

He went back to the door and peeked through the eyehole again. He then

laboriously unlatched and unclasped the many bolts and locks that secured the door against intruders. He tugged open the door and hurriedly signalled to the black woman outside that she should come in.

“Thank you. Thank you,” said the woman as she rushed in. “I had nowhere else to go. It’s the second time...”

Their grateful guest was clearly very poor. Her clothes were torn and stitched and already appeared to be soiled by the muddy water even though they were dry and probably clean. She had shaved her head and was carrying a bundle that had once been a relatively robust travelling bag but was now strapped together by cords of leather and string. One of her eyes was dull and lifeless. She had something of a stoop and one arm was limp.

“My name’s Mark and this is my wife, Molly, and our daughter, Monica. What’s your name?”

“Lindiwe,” she said. “You can call me Linda.”

“Sit down, Linda,” said Mark kindly.

Even though there were plenty of chairs for Lindiwe to sit on, she chose to perch on a stool. She let her precious bag drop to the floor between her legs and smiled timidly at the company around her.

“You’re from downstairs, aren’t you Linda?” remarked Molly.

“Yes,” said Lindiwe.

“Why are you living in Dagenham?” wondered Mark. Then, correcting himself automatically, he added: “Not that I think you shouldn’t be, of course. Living in Dagenham, that is. Or England for that matter.”

“I’ve lived in England for about seven years,” said Lindiwe. “I’ve lived in the Midlands and in Surrey. I moved to central London because of the immigration police. They’re especially vigilant in Redhill where I used to live.”

“England’s not as friendly a place as you thought it might be,” remarked Molly who was still annoyed at this woman’s invasion of her family’s tiny modicum of privacy. She still nurtured the hope that Linda might decide to go somewhere else though until the flood waters receded there would be no place for her to go.

“It’s not all bad,” said Lindiwe. “But it has got steadily worse since I first arrived. And it wasn’t *that* good to begin with.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, Linda,” asked Mark, pushing at the outer limits of his skills of diplomacy, “why did you come to England in the first place? It’s not the country it used to be. It’s still a great country, but it’s definitely got a lot worse.”

“A lot smaller, certainly,” said Molly bitterly. “Kingdom of England. It’s smaller than France, Italy, Spain and almost all the other European countries. No wonder they don’t want us back in the Northern European Union. We’re just another small country like Belgium or Lithuania.”

“It’s been my home for years,” repeated Lindiwe. “I wasn’t born here, but home in Lesotho isn’t what it was when I was a child either. I sometimes think no one any longer lives in the country where they were born. They’ve either left it or the country they live in is no longer what it used to be.”

“Like the Americans?” Mark wondered. “Who’d have believed the United States would collapse the way it has? What’s going to happen over there? Do you think they’ll have to cut the Stars and Stripes into little bits?”

“I don’t know,” said Lindiwe. “Thank you again for helping me. It’s cold and dangerous sleeping on the stairs at night. The people on the seventh floor...”

“You mean those lads who play their stereo so loud at night?”

“Yes, them,” said Lindiwe. “I don’t trust them. They’re always smoking crack and meth and they leave needles on the stairwell. If they saw me sleeping rough and there was no one about...”

“Would they actually do that?” wondered Mark incredulously.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they did, Mark,” said Molly. “They don’t look like nice people to me either. In that, Linda and I very much see eye to eye. That’s why we’ve got all those bloody locks on the door.”

Mark studied Lindiwe carefully while Molly was talking. She was shivering although her brow was dampened by perspiration. A persistent tear dripped from the corner of her lifeless eye.

“You look very poorly, Linda,” Mark remarked. “Shouldn’t you be in a hospital or something?”

“I’ll be all right,” said Lindiwe. “It’s only the cold and damp from downstairs. All I need is somewhere warm to sleep.”

“You can stay here until the waters subside,” said Molly. “But then you’ll have to leave. There’s not enough room here.”

“I know that,” said Lindiwe. “You’ve already been too kind.”

“Where will you go when you leave?” asked Mark.

“Back downstairs,” said Lindiwe. “It’s better than sleeping in the streets.”

“Why don’t you just return home to Africa?” said Molly. “Surely it can’t be as



bad as here.”

“Is here *so* bad?” asked Lindiwe.

“It could scarcely get much worse,” said Molly.

Lindiwe shook her head. “There aren’t armed gangs in the streets. Water runs from the taps when you turn them. Electricity flows to every home more or less. The diseases that have spread round the world are relatively contained in England. There’s enough for everyone to eat and drink. In Africa, however...”

“Perhaps the way things are going,” said Mark pessimistically, “when Monica is your age, there won’t be much difference between life in Africa and life in England.”

“I can’t believe that,” said Lindiwe. “You just don’t know how much worse it can get.”

**XLVIII**  
**Betty**  
**2038**

“I don’t see what’s wrong with living in a squat,” Betty insisted. “It’s as good a way to live as any other.”

“It’s squalid and unhygienic,” Lakeisha countered.

“Why do you live here then?”

“You know why I do,” said Lakeisha as she kissed Betty adoringly on the lips as they lay entangled on the mattress in their shared room. “And if it wasn’t you alone, well blame the restrictions your government has imposed on immigrants. Without the right paperwork I’m not allowed to rent anywhere. And if I don’t have a legitimate address, I can’t get the right paperwork.”

“I know,” said Betty while stroking her lover’s bare dark skin. “The government are such fucking bastards. I don’t understand borders and nationality anyway. Why *can’t* people live exactly where they want on this planet? It just seems wrong.”

Betty looked around the bedroom that had been so dramatically transformed more or less from the moment Lakeisha began sharing it with her. The older woman had made it much more homely. Her resourcefulness, not to mention her salary as a relief doctor at the Ashton Lovelock Medical Centre, had made a truly squalid room into one that might even be considered bourgeois if Lakeisha’s taste in decor had been any less authentically African.

Having a relationship with Lakeisha wasn’t that easy for Betty. It wasn’t just that her black lover was older than her other friends. It was also that her cultural

attitudes were so very different. Lakeisha wasn't the sort of person that Betty might normally meet. For a start, she had a job. They first met at the Medical Centre where Betty had made an appointment to deal with an exotic strain of Chlamydia. At first Betty thought Lakeisha was just another patient and chatted very openly about where she lived and the sort of company she kept. She noticed the woman's eyes widen when she mentioned that she didn't know how she'd got infected since she hardly ever had sex with men these days.

"I'm almost exclusively lesbian," Betty boasted.

"Have you got a girlfriend at the moment?" Lakeisha asked.

"No, not at all. I split up with Alicia *ages* ago."

"But you see other women, don't you?"

"Of course."

"In that case, shall we meet up for a coffee? I finish at three today. Early shift," said Lakeisha.

Betty almost blushed. This woman was a fast worker. "Yes," she said. "Of course. I'm not doing anything."

"Costa Nero at three thirty. Agreed?"

It was inevitable that after the coffee and then a beer at the Ox & Dragon, Betty would take Lakeisha back to the squat that was her home into which the older woman more or less immediately moved in. Betty was overwhelmed by the pace of change, but there were many ways in which Lakeisha was ideal for her despite the ten year age difference. She was also homeless, although this wasn't at all obvious given her income and generally smart appearance. She'd been living in one of the cheap and rundown

lodgings that had proliferated since the housing market last collapsed. It wasn't very clean and it was expensive for what it was so, in comparison, Betty's squat wasn't as bad as all that.

"Have you always been a lesbian?" Betty asked when Lakeisha first placed her hand on hers and suggested that they spend the night together.

"Not at all. I'm not sure I'm really a lesbian now. I'm also a mother and a wife, so I can't always have been a lesbian."

"You got married? How weird. How old's your daughter?"

"Lisa? She finishes secondary school next year."

"Was it a mistake, having a baby and all?"

"You could say that," said Lakeisha. "I feel really bad about coming to the UK without her as well. I'm not as close to my daughter as I ought to be, but it was a way to escape from my drunken idiot of a husband. *He* was the real mistake. Not Lisa."

"Was it because he was like that you developed a taste for women?"

"What an odd question. Do *you* like women because of some man in your life, Betty? Were *you* traumatised?"

"Of course not," said Betty who was shocked by the notion. "I've always liked women. I like boys as well, so it's no big deal."

"It's the same with me," said Lakeisha. "Although if fewer men were bastards I'd probably not bother so much with women. They've let me down so often."

"Me too," said Betty in automatic agreement, although in her life the share of being let down was distributed fairly evenly not just between the men and women in her life, but between herself and her lovers.

Lakeisha was a woman who knew what she wanted and knew how to get hold of it. She'd known very few gaps between successive relationships in the years since her last heterosexual affair, although she'd never had the need to frequent lesbian bars or resort to internet dating. If she saw a woman she liked and the woman was amenable, it was Lakeisha who made all the moves. But she wasn't quite the liberated woman that Betty thought she might be. She didn't like it when Betty had sex with other men and she most definitely didn't appreciate it when Betty had sex with another woman.

"Aren't I enough, Betty?" she asked when she discovered that her lover had spent the afternoon in Tanya's arms.

"We didn't *really* have sex," said Betty. "I didn't have an orgasm or anything. We just kissed and cuddled."

"On *our* bed!"

"It wasn't anything we planned."

Although Lakeisha didn't make a scene on this occasion or on the others, she made her disapproval very clear. She also didn't like it when Betty wandered round the house in the nude, but her concern related more to questions of practicality and hygiene rather than decency.

"Don't you think people might object to sitting where you'd just sat and where you might have been leaking?" she remarked.

"*Leaking?*"

"You know. Leakage can take place for several hours afterwards."

"It works both ways though, Laki," said Betty. "I could be sitting where someone else has *leaked*. I could be getting a man's semen stuck to my bum. It could

even make me pregnant.”

“As your doctor,” said Lakeisha with a tolerant smile, “I would advise you to be more careful in future.”

Despite her countercultural tendencies, Betty became generally more mindful of Lakeisha’s opinion. She appreciated that her lover never had sex with any of the other men or women in the household although it could scarcely be more easy for her if she’d wanted to. And she was aware that there was something a little odd about wandering about naked when her lover never did. As a compromise, Betty got into the habit of covering her body in a bath gown or a large baggy tee-shirt when she was with Lakeisha, although she stripped it off when her lover was at work at the Medical Centre. And this could be at any time of the day from early morning to late at night.

The greatest differences between Betty and Lakeisha were of a cultural nature. It wasn’t Lakeisha’s African identity that was the issue. In fact, this made it effectively impossible for anyone in the household to criticise her in any way. Nor was it a generational difference. Green politics hadn’t changed much at all since the century began. It was just that Lakeisha didn’t really subscribe to the commune’s ragbag of radical ideologies.

“I don’t think it’s right for you to disparage someone from Africa for not being environmentally conscious and conservation-minded,” said Lakeisha when Lenny suggested that she didn’t really fully understand the imperatives of Green politics. “I just think there’s more to the world than recycling and not using an aeroplane. And I also don’t see how living in squalor is in any way preferable to having a nice home.”

“You just *don’t* get it, do you?” said Lenny who was a bit stoned and probably

a bit pissed off that Lakeisha had made it abundantly clear that she didn't want to have sex with him even when he'd pressed his fully uncovered semi-erect penis against her denim-covered buttocks. "The environment is *all* there is. There *isn't* anything else. If the environment goes down the toilet then we *all* go down."

"I don't quite get the connection between choosing to live in squalor and wanting to save the planet. I don't think living in filth is ever going to help halt the decline of the environment."

"If you're talking about the state of the house then just remember that you don't have to live here."

"That's where you're wrong, Lenny. I may not have to live at Number 2 Broad Oak Grove, but I *do* have to live somewhere. The government you so rightly detest has made it so hard for me that I don't have a huge choice of where I live. You, however, can choose to get a job and live somewhere much nicer. And, more to the point, I would wager that you and most of the other people in the Broad Oak Grove commune will do precisely that by the time you're my age."

"You wish!" said Lenny as if that clinched the argument but he clearly didn't enjoy Lakeisha's characterisation of him.

"You shouldn't be so harsh on Lenny," said Betty as the couple lay together naked in each other's arms under the warm duvet that Lakeisha had purchased for their bed. "He means well."

"You all mean well, dear," said Lakeisha. "None of you are bad people. And most of what you say and believe in is true. How can it be otherwise? You only have to look at the many many examples in Africa to see how bad things can get if you're

not careful. The whole continent is one vast ecological catastrophe. But it's not only environmental degradation that blights Africa. There are so many other things. Poverty. Disease. War. Drought. Floods. Every possible disaster. What you and your friends want to do is right. You have to do something to stop the worst happening. But you're not going to get anywhere if the alternative you offer to a life of conspicuous consumption is squalid, unwholesome and decadent."

"It's a way of life, Laki," said Betty. "And it *is* what I believe in. It's what my mother believes in. It's what my children, if I ever have any, will believe in."

"A kind of mid-twenty first century hippy lifestyle?" asked Lakeisha.

"If need be, that's what it'll be," said Betty. "You say Lenny has a choice. He probably has. His father is a senior executive in a multinational bank. He doesn't need to live in the Broad Oak Commune. I'm not sure that I have such a choice. This sort of life is all I've ever known. Something like this is probably where I'll always be."

Lakeisha held Betty's face in her hands and placed her lips against her. Their tongues sparred in a passionate kiss. She eased back Betty's face and regarded her with an amused smile.

"I love you Betty," she said. "You are the most sincere and beautiful person, man or woman, I've ever made love to. But I don't think I could ever lead this kind of life forever. Not by choice, of course."

"What do you mean? Not by choice?"

"If I ever return to Africa and things get much worse there than it already is, then this may very well no longer seem so squalid to me," said Lakeisha. "But then that could equally well apply to the whole of England in the future."



**XLIX**  
**Diane**  
**2043**

“It doesn’t matter however much I enjoy making love with you,” said Diane, “it still feels wrong.”

“Because we’re both women?” wondered Lakeisha who was spread out on the sheets beside the vicar.

“Because I’m in love with Doris,” Diane replied.

“It’s not as if you’re living together, is it?” said Lakeisha. “Didn’t you enjoy making love it just now? The moistness between your thighs tells me you did.”

“Doris and I are lovers,” said Diane. “We’ve even talked about getting married.”

“I thought you told me that Doris is also seeing another woman,” said Lakeisha. “You told me that you’d discussed it together and came to some kind of agreement.”

“Infidelity by consent is still infidelity,” said Diane. “How can I, as a woman of the cloth, be party to such behaviour?”

“Doris doesn’t mind you making love with me. You’ve accepted in turn that Doris can make love with this other woman...”

“Lucy.”

“...With Lucy. You still make love with each other regularly. So what’s the problem? Both of you have at least two lovers. Surely, the one who should feel most aggrieved is me. The only woman I make love with is you.”

“I don’t think Lucy has any other lovers,” said Diane. “She didn’t even know she was attracted to women before Doris and she... you know... at the Accenture IBM

conference... in the hotel..."

"Don't worry about Lucy," said Lakeisha. "You should worry about me. You should worry about whether I'm satisfied."

"And *are* you?"

"I think I would appreciate more attention from your tongue," said Lakeisha with a wry smile, pointing at the thicket of curly black hair between her thighs.

"I shouldn't be so selfish," said Diane with a reciprocal smile as she parted Lakeisha's black thighs with her ivory-pale hands and applied her slightly sore tongue to the region in most urgent need.

Diane was acutely conflicted and not just because she now had two lovers. That was problem enough. She was lucky at her age to have a lover who was still in her mid-thirties and so beautiful as well. Although she was sure that Doris was the real love of her life and with whom she would eventually return to a conventional monogamous relationship, there was no denying that she was very fortunate to be blessed with a relationship with Lakeisha.

She was also conflicted because Lakeisha was her employee. Was it right for her to make love with a woman whose wages she was responsible for paying?

A woman like Lakeisha wouldn't normally be employed in the menial role of medical advisor and senior doctor for Diane's new charitable venture, but current legislation had automatically made almost anyone without a British passport an illegal alien. She'd lost her job at a medical centre in the Midlands because of her uncertain immigration status and was just one of several outrageously overqualified candidates for the position the vicar had advertised.

Diane wasn't sure why she'd recruited Lakeisha ahead of the other candidates. Every candidate in the final shortlist was equally well-suited and equally inconvenienced by current legislation. Most organisations that employed doctors or medical staff were mindful of the penalties for harbouring an illegal immigrant and understandably chose to avoid the risk. The employment legislation was so vaguely worded that there was no certainty that even someone like Lakeisha, who'd been in the country for over ten years and had never claimed state benefit, might not be unceremoniously deported and her employer fined and censured.

Could the same thing happen at the Reigate Refugee Centre? There were so many ways that Diane's enterprise was utterly contrary to the modern mean-minded spirit of immigration policy that it was a wonder she'd been allowed to get away with it. The local MP was one of those most opposed to the centre and she'd had to explain her employment policies in great detail to officials from the British Homeland Security Services. It was this newly instituted quango that now took responsibility for the policing of foreign terrorists, illegal immigrants and seasonal foreign labour.

"You are fully aware of your responsibilities and duties in running such a sensitive operation?" wondered Inspector David Lamb. "These apply not only to the people in your care, but also to your staff."

"Yes, of course," said Diane who was dressed all in black apart from the white collar that conferred unquestionable moral and spiritual authority on her. She was flanked by Doris who contributed very little to Diane's project but whose presence bestowed additional gravitas to these kinds of meetings. She was also accompanied by a representative from Oxfam with whom she was coordinating her charitable efforts.

“The unfortunates you’re caring for don’t have any official immigration status,” continued the inspector. “They are here in the same capacity as a foreign individual who might, for instance, be attending a health spa or having cosmetic surgery. In a sense they are in the country as tourists even though, as you’ve stressed, many if not most of them will most likely die while in your care.”

“The vast majority of cases we shall assign to Reverend Dawkins’ care will be terminal patients,” said Paul Mideska, the Oxfam representative. “If you were to meet any one of them then you’d be more than certain of the truth of that. There are millions of Indians and Pakistanis who deserve a few months of dignity before they die.”

“I’ve watched the news stories,” said the inspector with a touch of exasperation in his voice. “I’m not here to judge on the value of your work to the many unfortunate victims of the Indo-Pakistan war. The *Walking Dead* I think they call the survivors. I am here to advise you on the legal issues associated with your project. There are many residents in Reigate who’d think very poorly of us if we didn’t perform our duty in that regard.”

“I’m aware of that,” said Diane.

The local newspaper and the local MP had already voiced their disapproval. If Diane hadn’t been a Vicar of Christ, the campaign against her charitable foundation would have been much less even-tempered. As it was, she was receiving many hate letters, mostly to her e-mail account but even on the doormat, which made apparent just how opposed to the Refugee Centre many local residents were.

“The license you’ve been given to permit non-European citizens into the country doesn’t extend to your staff,” said the inspector. “We shall take a very dim view

indeed if the people you employ do not have the legal rights for employment in the UK.”

“Surely that’s true of any organisation that operates in any capacity at all in this country, inspector,” said Doris. “I don’t see how as an employer this charity can be treated any differently.”

“Exactly what I was about to say,” said the inspector with relief. “Be mindful of that and I am sure we will have a long and fruitful relationship.”

In practise, the Reigate Refugee Centre employed somewhat more latitude than the inspector would have liked. This was principally because a charitable organisation that existed to help the terminally ill was unable to offer the lucrative salaries that would attract most qualified doctors. And this was why Diane was relatively unconcerned about Lakeisha’s strict legal status. Her black lover was already fully aware of the precariousness of her situation.

“It seems strange, though,” said Lakeisha as the couple sat together naked in the kitchen each nursing a mug of freshly brewed coffee. “My status was completely legal when I first started working in this country. If anything, my status should have improved rather than have got worse now that I’ve lived here for so many years during which time I’ve paid so much income tax and social security. Instead it’s got progressively worse. Instead of having more rights I actually now have rather fewer.”

“People are fearful,” said Diane. “They see news stories about the troubles in the outside world. They read about the millions of refugees displaced in India and Pakistan. They hear about the famines, plagues and wars in Africa. They see the sea levels rise, the glaciers melt, and summers of drought and flood all in one season. They

just want to retreat from the world's problems and escape from those who're suffering."

"So they decide to make the plight of those who suffer just a little bit worse."

"It's only human nature," said Diane. "That's why we should abide by God's guidance. That's why we should be compassionate and kind. The natural response when we see someone who's suffered—like a radiation burns victim or a beggar on the street or someone with a disfigurement—is to look away. We pretend they're not there. We stride off. It's always someone else's problem. We should be more like the Good Samaritan and give to those who are most in need."

"It seems that people are behaving less and less like the Good Samaritan and have become much more selfish," said Lakeisha. "The British are becoming ever more intolerant. When I first lived in England, I suffered from very little racist abuse. I was only aware of racism at all because I read about it in the news. Now hardly a day goes by when someone doesn't say something offensive to me. I blame it on the anti-immigration policies promoted by Fox News UK and in the newspapers."

"It's not as simple as that, Laki," said Diane. "People wouldn't watch Fox News or buy those newspapers if they didn't already agree with them. I'm sure you're right to say that they make a bad situation worse, but there has to be fertile ground for these opinions in the first place."

"Humph," said Lakeisha, who was unconvinced. "Anyway, in the end it's people like me who'll be the losers. I don't think I'll be able to work in the Refugee Centre for much longer. There'll be further restrictions that'll make it even more difficult for me. Although I've been applying for British citizenship for years, the likelihood of success gets increasingly elusive. Ten years of continuous gainful

employment is no longer enough. And the obstacles stacked against me if I don't have a British passport get ever greater. It's become so that an immigrant can only stay in this country if they've got a job but that they can't get a job if they're an immigrant. The next stage will be that they'll actually deport anyone who the authorities don't think are British enough. Just like they're already doing in some of the States of America."

"I don't think things will ever get that bad in England," said Diane with a reassuring smile.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that."

**L**  
**Alex**  
**2033**

Although Alex had no doubt that he'd deserved it many times before in his life, this was the first time that he'd actually been slapped across the face.

And fuck! It really stung.

"You're a bastard!" said Lakeisha vehemently. "You're as bad as my fucking husband."

Alex pressed his fingers against his cheek and hoped that he wouldn't actually release the tears that were an automatic response to this punishment. It was bad enough to be in the wrong. It would be worse still to be seen to cry like a baby.

"It was only the one time," said Alex, knowing full well that this excuse was highly unlikely to assuage his guilt.

"That's just what my husband would say. And he was always whoring. Isn't one woman enough for you? You have to fuck some slut as well."

"She was an ex-lover of mine..."

"Clearly she's not an ex-lover any more. You cheat on your wife and now you cheat on me. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Nothing," said Alex who genuinely couldn't think of a fitting rejoinder. Lakeisha was right. He'd cheated on her just as he'd cheated on Isobel. And with the same woman. "I just hope you can forgive me for having slipped up so badly just this one time."

"I don't believe you, Alex," said Lakeisha whose eyes were drier than Alex's.



In fact, they flamed with a fiery passion that he recognised from their lovemaking but this time the flame was lit by anger rather than lust. “I wouldn’t be surprised to discover that you and this student floozy have been fucking together the whole time we’ve been together. I just don’t trust either of you.”

Lakeisha was right not to trust Karen. She was the sort of woman who’d pay no more notice of the sanctity of a relationship whether it was formalised by law or simply by custom. It was also Alex’s fault for thinking that no one would be harmed if he succumbed to Karen’s open attitudes on those occasions she’d texted or e-mailed him with an invitation to meet. And with Karen, every encounter involved sex. Alex had simply got careless. He should have been more thorough when he tried to tidy up after Karen’s last visit, but he’d not noticed the lipstick marks on the rim of a cup, the indentations on the sofa and the unmistakable aroma of sex on the sheets. There was also, of course, a record of recent phone calls on his carelessly discarded mobile phone. All this left a trail that Lakeisha was able to follow with absolutely no difficulty.

“*Karen*,” she announced when Alex returned from work to the flat where she’d been waiting for him. “Who the fuck is *Karen*? And how long have you been fucking her?”

Alex hadn’t expected Lakeisha to return quite so promptly from her visit to Leicester, so he was surprised not only to see his beloved waiting for him but also to discover that she would probably not be his beloved for very much longer.

“Isn’t there a way we can sort this out amicably?” asked Alex as he watched Lakeisha pile her clothes and possessions into a suitcase.

“It’s a good thing I can stay with my friend Laura,” said Lakeisha, “or I’d have

to stay in a hotel for the night.”

“You could just stay here,” said Alex. “I’m sure we can work it out.”

“Again just like my husband,” said Lakeisha who didn’t pause at all in sorting out her possessions. “There is *no* possible way we can work it out. You’ve fucked up, Alex. You’ve fucked up good and proper. I should have known that a man who’d got divorced because of his infidelity wasn’t going to stay faithful for long. All men are bastards and you’re no exception. I don’t think I want anything to do with men ever again in my life.”

“You can’t mean that,” pleaded Alex. “I’m sure we can get past this.”

“I’m not like your English sluts, Alex. I have standards. I’m not going to tolerate you picking and choosing who you’re going to fuck at your own convenience. All I’ve ever asked from you is to be someone I could trust. I was foolish, of course. You *can* be trusted. Like all men you can be *absolutely* trusted. You can be trusted, that is, to be a complete and utter bastard.” Lakeisha looked at the suitcase she’d thrown onto the bed. “Have I got everything?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I’ll keep the key in case I need to come back and collect anything I’ve forgotten.”

Alex then made a mental note to himself to change the lock in case what she decided to do was to come back and trash the place. The hostility and fury in her eyes didn’t bode well for restraint.

“*Please* don’t go,” pleaded Alex as Lakeisha stormed out of the door.

She didn’t bother to reply.

Shit!

Normally, Alex would have helped Lakeisha carry the two suitcases she dragged behind her and the laptop slung across her bosom. Or at the very least he would have called a taxi. However, it was fairly obvious from her haste and evident anger that anything that would delay her departure was not going to be welcome.

Alex watched Lakeisha walk out the entrance to the block of flats from the bedroom window in the vague hope that she would turn her head round as she left and possibly give him a reassuring smile. However, she gave him no such satisfaction. If she did show regret about leaving the apartment where she'd lived for so many months she wasn't going to do it where Alex could see. She was soon round the street corner and gone.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

So he'd done it again. He'd fucked it up with his wife. He'd fucked it up with his partner. Was there nothing he touched that he wouldn't fuck up?

Alex looked around the bedroom.

Lakeisha had done a comprehensive job of extracting her clothes and other belongings from the cupboards and wardrobes, not that she'd had much in the way of possessions to begin with. These were mostly books, clothes and a few miscellaneous items of personal significance. And now all of that was gone and Alex was left with only his own clutter to be bothered with.

He sat on the side of the bed and nursed a cheek that even now was stinging from Lakeisha's slap. In a sense, he'd done well not to have got worse than that. Unlike Isobel, Lakeisha had no recourse to the law for compensation. This was one blessing

resulting from her immigration status. She wouldn't do anything in the current intolerant atmosphere that would alert her presence to the authorities. The worst she could do was take revenge by non-legal means.

Alex would definitely have to contact the locksmith in the morning. It was a risk not worth taking. If Lakeisha *had* left anything behind—and he was sure she hadn't—she'd have to arrange to come round when he was there.

What could he do now?

Well, he couldn't leave the flat. What would happen if Lakeisha *did* return? It would be suicide if she returned in her current rage and found the apartment empty. So, Alex's initial inclination which was to walk to the nearest pub for a drink to ruminate on his sudden and unanticipated change of relationship status was not at all advisable. He'd have to see what beer he had in the fridge and sit with it in front of the television. This was the only way he knew of by which he might try and settle his chaotic thoughts. Perhaps doing so would also arrest the pounding in his chest and the occasional rush of perspiration on his brow every time his thoughts focused too vividly on recent events.

Alex pulled open the ring-pull on a can of Czech beer and switched on the television. As always it was tuned to Fox News UK which was currently broadcasting a debate about immigration. Typical! It would be that. Just when a light and frothy story about the Royal Family or some pop group he'd never heard of before would have been much more welcome.

It was the usual sort of debate that before he'd had a relationship with Lakeisha he'd probably have been nodding to in solemn agreement. There was an obvious equation. There were only so many jobs available and those who ought to be filling

those jobs should be British citizens. Immigration provided cheap labour that lowered the rates of pay for British professionals and other workers. No one could blame immigrants for wanting to come and live in England's green and pleasant land, but it was the duty of the government to protect the interests of British citizens first. It should never let a flood of foreigners come in, lower the wages of honest British workers, generate unemployment and dilute British identity.

It was the last of these evils that most aggravated the panel of experts on the Amanda Littlejohn show, although the principal justification for their arguments was always a set of simple economic facts. Alex was no longer so sure about all this after having lived so long with Lakeisha. She was an immigrant but one who was paying her way. In pure economic terms she represented a net gain for Britain's wealth. She was paying for her education with African money and when she graduated she had no intention of working for anything less than a British doctor would earn. And anyway it was so difficult these days for immigrants to enter the country and find legal employment that only the truly desperate would ever try to do so.

On the other hand, there was much cause for desperation. The wars and famines in Africa were showing no sign of abatement, any more than did the rate of population growth. How many people *were* there in the world? Was it eight or nine billion people? If there hadn't been enough for the five or six billion people who shared the planet when Alex was at school, how could there be enough for the extra billion or two that there were now? It didn't take too much of a grasp of basic arithmetic to identify a problem that could only get worse.

Amanda Littlejohn had no doubt at all about where the Conservative

government's duties lay and how much they were hampered from the execution of their necessary duties by the plague of political correctness and a lack of political will. Unless stern uncompromising measures were taken soon there would only be disaster. The salary of the British working man and woman would be further reduced. The British way of life would come to its inexorable end. There would be rivers of blood through the cities of London, Lincoln and Leeds.

Alex switched channels.

The woefully underfunded BBC News was showing some feature about growing racial intolerance which was the sort of programme that Fox News UK would never show. Alex only had half an ear to the programme, but he wasn't sure whether he agreed. So many of his colleagues at work were Black, Asian or Indian. What was the problem? Where was the prejudice?

Mind you, right to the very end, Alex had been reluctant to introduce Lakeisha to his colleagues. Was it because she was younger than him and that made it seem like he was only interested in her for sex? Or was it because she was black? And if it was the latter, was it his work-colleagues' attitude to miscegenation that bothered him?

Alex wasn't sure. He was convinced that he wasn't racist. He'd loved Lakeisha at least as much as he had any of his other girlfriends and probably more than he ever had the ex-wife who was now bleeding him dry. It was only his uncertainty about what other people thought about such a relationship that had inhibited him.

But it was over now. A change in the door lock and a new message on the answer phone and Alex could carry on with his life as before. He would be newly single and he'd have to start prowling the internet dating sites again; but he'd survive.

So what could he do now?

Well, he could stop watching the BBC News and the financially strapped quality of its news coverage. He flicked through the satellite channels until he found a documentary channel that was showing a film about one of London's railway stations. The general theme was how trains were becoming ever more important as fuel prices continued to rise. As Alex was also a rail commuter, he allowed this programme wash over him while, despite his best intentions, his mind continued to flicker back to the disastrous circumstances of his latest separation and the series of foolish mistakes that had precipitated it.

Could he really be certain that he'd never be so stupid again?

## **LI**

# **Molly & Mark**

## **2073**

At long last the good times had returned.

The economy was booming and there were more jobs, more money and more international confidence. And if it wasn't an economic boom for the whole Kingdom of England, it was undoubtedly a boom for those employed in the Docklands and the City of London. Although England's financial capital could no longer be ranked with New York or Tokyo, it was a comfort that something remained of the Square Mile's historic significance in the new world order. Frankfurt might dominate Europe as Beijing dominated Asia. And despite competition from Toronto, New York still dominated the Americas. But among the lesser financial centres, London could still punch above the nation's weight.

Life was much better for Mark and Molly now. Mark was working as a researcher on automobiles and alternative fuels for a Korean investment fund. Molly was employed as a legal secretary for an international law firm whose workload had increased as a result of the complications associated with the repatriation of foreign assets: an unexpected side-effect of recent anti-immigration legislation. The couple now had enough set aside to enable them to exchange their depressing one-bedroom flat in the run-down Dagenham tower block for a much nicer apartment in Islington. Unfortunately, they still weren't in a position to buy their home. The improvement in London's economy was also associated with a fresh scarcity in affordable housing. The time when neither of them had well-paid jobs was also the time when house-prices were



low enough that they might have been able to afford to return to the housing market with their current income. Now they were once again in proper salaried employment the elusive goal of home ownership receded once more. But at least there was little chance of the flood waters seeping along Balls Pond Road.

Monica was transferred from her school in East London where she'd belonged to an oppressed minority by virtue of being both middle-class and white. Although white children were in a minority at her school, no other single ethnic group was in the majority either. She was now a pupil at a much nicer middle-class school in Islington that also demanded exorbitant annual fees. Even so, Molly and Mark couldn't deny their daughter a decent education. What hope would there otherwise be for their flesh and blood?

Although Molly no longer needed to travel to work by tube, it wasn't yet four years since her unfortunate miscarriage on the Bakerloo Line and she was still nervous about travelling underground. There weren't many stops between Essex Road and Moorgate where her City law firm was based, but she still dreaded the overcrowding and delays. Not only had these got no better in the intervening years, they'd become substantially worse since the economy had begun to pick up again. Thankfully, Molly was able to travel by bus almost directly to her office, so even though she often had to stand all the way at least she wasn't trapped in a claustrophobic subterranean metal tube.

Mark had invested in a bicycle which was not only appropriate for a man who made a living from research into alternative fuels, but also meant that he arrived at his Docklands office nearly quarter of an hour sooner than Molly even though his journey

was more than twice as long. It was a daily commute in which he had to dodge more rickshaws and pony-traps than cars. London's streets were dominated more by buses, taxis and vans than by privately owned motor cars. Only the most ostentatious were able to afford such luxury items. It gave the message that the driver was both wealthy enough to afford an expensive vehicle and able to meet the prohibitive expense of motor insurance, fuel and London's parking fees.

The love between Mark and Molly blossomed with their improved financial security. It was almost as if they were newlyweds once more rather than a couple who'd lived together—married and otherwise—for more than twelve years.

"It's been a *very* long time," said Mark as he lay on his back when the two had made love in the bedroom they no longer had to share with their seven year old daughter. "Who'd have believed we'd last so long?"

"Whatever made you think we wouldn't?" laughed Molly who hoped that her tone would disguise any anxiety that accompanied her words. What did Mark know that he'd never let on before? Or was he a less virtuous husband than she thought?

"Oh, I don't know," said Mark. "You know: unemployment, shitty jobs, and all that sort of stuff. You must have got bored out of your skull when you were unemployed in Greenfields. I've heard that plenty of relationships fall apart through far less."

"We're made of sterner stuff," said Molly.

"I know," said Mark appreciatively.

Good, thought Molly. Her husband really *didn't* suspect a thing. Of course he needn't have had any doubts when they lived in Dagenham. What opportunities were there between work shifts and child care? In any case, the oafish youths and depressed

adults in the apartment block didn't present a very tempting choice to Molly's wandering eyes. And these days...?

Well, her sex life with Mark was better than Molly had any right to expect. He might no longer be as slim or handsome as he was over a decade before when they'd got married, but Molly had also aged. She'd probably have preserved her complexion better if she'd not spent a year behind a frying basket of synthetic fish with fancy names like Krispy Kod, Whitegrain Haddock and Creamed Bream. To the punters they were just white meat of a uniform consistency in fried batter. Molly chose never to speculate on what these things looked like when they were alive, if they could ever have been described as such.

Not only were the couple enjoying a second spring between the bedsheets they were at last able to enjoy the benefits of living so close to Central London and all the pubs, restaurants, theatres, night clubs, parks and the glamour of what had once been one of the great cities of the world. Even now there was the legacy of greatness although the word 'British' had been banished and a red cross on a white background had none of the resonant glory of the Union Flag. On the other hand, there was still the Royal Family. Although the Kingdom was no longer United under the same government, the disparate states of the British Isles were still United under one Crown. Indeed, the Commonwealth, shorn now of its original epithet, still had the King of England at its head. Or the King of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as was now his official title.

It was good to pace Oxford Street, Charing Cross Road, Regent Street and Piccadilly and to feel part of London's long proud history. Although it was no longer

one of the biggest, most populous nor even wealthiest cities in the world, neither were Rome, Istanbul or New York. Like London, those cities had also known days of glory and were still able to attract what few tourists were still left in a world of prohibitively expensive international travel.

Mark and Molly were scarcely rich, although they were far better off than they had been a year before. They could now afford to eat out in cheap restaurants. They could afford to take their daughter to the museums and the parks.

“Should we borrow money for a deposit on a mortgage?” wondered Molly as the couple walked past the windows of estate agents on Upper Street and longingly regarded the advertised houses and flats.

“We can’t afford to buy in Islington,” said Mark sadly. “We’d be hard pushed even in those parts of Dagenham that are above the flood-line. The outer suburbs are the most we can afford and then we’d have the horrible commute again.”

“Perhaps we should just push ourselves to the limit,” said Molly. “House prices are just going up and up. If we don’t buy now we may never be able to do so again.”

“Not yet,” said Mark cautiously. “We won’t be able to put down enough for a deposit for a long time and no bank will lend us money so soon after we defaulted on our home in Greenfields. Maybe prices will drop again and then we can buy.”

Molly nodded although after their recent rough experience she still feared that this new prosperity might vanish as quickly and suddenly as it had before. Just how firm were the foundations of the current economic boom? Molly was no economist, but since economists always got it so spectacularly wrong she wasn’t sure they could be trusted either. However, she did know that the Kingdom of England had lost so much

international credit in the last few years as a result of the Disunification and relied so heavily on the export of services rather than manufacturing that it was hard to believe that the economy's foundations weren't so feeble that it wouldn't just collapse on a whim of traders in the Beijing or Frankfurt Stock Exchanges. What did they care about the hopes and prayers of people like Mark and Molly in far distant London?

It was pleasant for the couple to stroll hand in hand with little Monica on the Thames Embankment although these days you could only see the river at all if you took the precipitous walk along the top of the high wall by the bank. This was a barrier that was elevated ever higher after every fresh flood. The wall was now twelve metres high in parts of the City and Docklands, although it wasn't quite so high in Westminster. The pavements adjacent to the Thames were in constant shadow as were the ground floors of the neighbouring buildings. This was the greatest change to London's cityscape since the couple's childhood, but they were comforted by the knowledge that similar river defences were being built in almost every great city in the world, especially New York where the island of Manhattan was now wholly enclosed by concrete.

As they walked along they could glimpse the Houses of Parliament behind the barricades that the Government of English National Unity had erected in its defence. This was ironic because their period of tenure was the time that parliament had been suspended for the longest time since the seventeenth century. The couple could also see the Millennium Wheel. It was a reminder that they were nearly three quarters the way through the first century of the new millennium: a time which so far had seen so much wasted promise, unstoppable climate change and two nuclear wars.

Molly considered this as the couple sat on the wall and looked at the impressive

symbol of the third millennium that no longer turned and cast a shadow over the hotels and apartments that occupied the site of what had once been London's County Hall.

"Do you think there'll be another nuclear war?" she asked her husband.

"Why should there be?" Mark wondered. "Wasn't the last one bad enough?"

"That was nearly thirty years ago. Perhaps we're due for another one."

"I certainly hope not. Where do you think it might happen? It's very unstable in what used to be known as the United States."

"I can't imagine that the Confederates or whatever they call themselves will want to lob missiles at their close neighbours. Radiation doesn't respect national borders."

"That didn't stop the war between India and Pakistan over ownership of the Kashmir," said Mark. "Not that anyone would choose to live in the Kashmir these days."

"Or in Tashkent," said Molly. "Perhaps it'll be in that corner of the world again. The Israelis have been getting bolshie recently. You saw how they bombed Damascus. What would stop them going just one step further?"

"Hasn't the Middle East suffered enough?" wondered Mark. "Let's hope you're wrong. Let's just celebrate the present. Things are looking up at the moment. Let's enjoy it while it lasts."

"Let's hope it lasts forever," said Molly as she squeezed her husband's hand and planted an affectionate kiss on his lips. "We have so much to make up for after the last two *horrible* years."

## LII

### Eugenie

### 2099

It had been a long and arduous trek to London from her distant home in a plague-ridden village in rural East Midlands, but Eugenie was determined to get as far as she could from all that she'd used to know and all the memories associated with it.

Although Eugenie had lived all her young life in one of the English Republic's most deprived regions her memories weren't all bad. Nevertheless, it wasn't surprising that so many villages in the East Midlands had succumbed to and been devastated by the latest strain of bubonic plague that had swept across the nation. Her whole family and everyone she'd ever known in her village were now dead. And there was nothing she could have done about it.

On the day her home village was quarantined, Eugenie had been enjoying an evening out with friends in the nearby village of Harston. She knew that a plague was spreading across Central England, of course. Who couldn't know? The latest wave of antibiotic-resistant plagues had already cut a wide swathe across the counties of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, so it was only a matter of time until the remote village of Woolsthorpe would also fall victim.

It wasn't just the arrival of the plague that made this night so memorable. After all these months, Mickey had at last persuaded Eugenie to let him fuck her, although it actually happened to be a rather disappointing experience. The pleasure of the occasion was badly compromised by Marlene's indignation when she discovered her brother fucking her best friend. However, the night was pleasantly warm. It would have been a

shame not to take advantage of it. For Eugenie, it was the natural climax of an evening she and her friends had enjoyed in an open field under the stars with their inhibitions lowered by home-brewed cider and home-grown grass.

Although she'd heard the warnings on the radio the day before, Eugenie didn't expect that the following morning would be the day that she'd learn that she would never again return to her home village.

The first sign she had was when she was walking home to Woolsthorpe in the early morning and discovered that a ring of barbed wire was now encircling the village. Tall boards had been erected on the roads leading into the village which announced that the village was now under quarantine and that nobody was permitted to enter, including those whose homes were in the village. Of course, this also meant that anyone unfortunate enough to be enclosed by the ring of barbed wire was forbidden from leaving, irrespective of whether they actually lived there.

Eugenie had no other realistic option. She would have to return to the village of Harston and hope that she could stay with her friends.

And this was just the beginning of a series of calamities that changed Eugenie's previously settled life forever.

The village of Harston was also smitten by plague. Eugenie was told that almost every village in Lincolnshire was similarly blighted. She could contact her family and friends by phone but as each day passed by the news only became worse and worse. The plague killed each and every one it came in contact with. Not a single person in her household survived. Every man, woman and child in the village died. She was alone and homeless. There was no going back to Woolsthorpe as it would remain under



quarantine for many more months to come. And even when it was possible to return, she wasn't sure she'd want to live again in the tied cottage her family shared with two lodgers that was the only home she'd ever known.

The next few weeks were desperate for Eugenie. To begin with, she slept in the shelter of the woods near her village and then, when it began to rain, in whatever shelter she could find in the nearest town. Unfortunately, Grantham was very jittery about the outbreak of plague and Eugenie's presence could hardly have been less welcome. There were no facilities to help her and nowhere for her to stay. When it rained, she got wet. When it was cold, she shivered. When it was warm, she sweltered. Her only means of making a living was to beg, but there were so many other similarly displaced beggars on the streets that she had to resort to scavenging through the dustbins.

The clothes she wore were simply those she'd been wearing on the evening she'd spent in the open air with her friends and they had become increasingly ragged. She remedied this as best she could by rummaging through the clothes boxes laid out by charities for vagrants like her. There was no underwear, but then Eugenie only ever wore such luxury items on special occasions. She found a threadbare rucksack in amongst the unwanted items supplied by a charity shop and stuffed it with a selection of faded dresses, shorts and printed tee-shirts. She also came across an old denim jacket that was cut off at the waist which could help keep her warm at night. Footwear was more of a problem. She could wear any oversized dress or tee-shirt, but the wrong size of shoes would blister her feet. Eventually she found a pair of old rubber-soled boots that were only one size too large for her but which she made more comfortable by stuffing them full with torn rags.

If her only source of money was to beg, Eugenie decided she would rather do so in London. It wasn't a place she'd ever been to before. The biggest city she'd ever visited was Nottingham when her father took his family to market on the back of their pony cart. All Eugenie knew of London was that it was a place of opportunity where she might find her fortune. In any case, she had no wish to follow her father's footsteps and work as a farm-labourer. She'd already suffered more days of her life than she cared to remember bent over in the fields picking root vegetables and berries. There were much more rewarding careers in London. She might be able to work in a shop. Perhaps she could serve in a coffee shop. Maybe she could even work in an office. Such things were surely not beyond the reaches of possibility.

The journey to London was long and tiring. The only means of travel she could afford were hitch-hiking and walking. At night she slept in bus shelters or under bushes.

It might have taken Eugenie less time to get to London if she'd been less careful. She turned down several suggestions made by lorry drivers and private car-drivers that she should provide sexual services in exchange for the expense of her journey. Eugenie didn't want to sacrifice her health and future happiness to one of the deadly new endemic strains of venereal disease. Most of her journey south was on the back of pony-drawn traps and bicycle-drawn carriages. Only one stretch of her journey was by motor vehicle and that was along a stretch of private motorway between Milton Keynes and Hemel Hempstead. This was exhilarating for Eugenie whose only previous experience of motorised transport was when she'd ridden the bus between Melton Mowbray and Grantham. The motorway vehicles that sped at upwards of fifty kilometres an hour were for the exclusive use of commercial goods vehicles or the private cars of the rich and

privileged.

London wasn't at all what she'd hoped for when Eugenie finally arrived in the capital city. Her first impression was that London was unbelievably squalid. The mule-drawn carriage that had carried her all twenty kilometres from Borehamwood towards Central London dropped her off at Archway. If it had travelled further the driver would have to pay the London Congestion Charge. He explained to her that this was a tax on travel in the inner city intended to address the growing problem of horse manure that polluted the capital's streets.

But at last Eugenie was in London. Or at least in the London Borough of Islington. And she soon saw evidence that the Bubonic Plague that had swept all before it in the East Midlands had made an impact even here in London. Almost as soon as she clambered out of the carriage she saw the familiar posters that warned against plague. There were hastily printed signs plastered on the crumbling walls that directed traffic and pedestrians away from Holloway where the plague was at its worst.

One thing London most definitely wasn't paved with was gold. The road surface was a mosaic of tar and grit that barely patched the many pot-holes. The shops and houses were in an advanced state of disrepair. The kerbside was lined with traders, ragged children and menacing youths. The streets were mostly paved with horse manure. Eugenie was truly grateful that she'd acquired a good pair of boots.

"Do you know where I can find somewhere to sleep the night?" Eugenie asked one of the traders by the kerb: a middle-aged woman disabled by one of the new variants of Polio and who made a living by patching worn or threadbare clothes.

"You're not from these parts, are you?" said the woman with a pronounced

London accent which reminded Eugenie how distinctive her East Midlands must seem so far south. “If you want to find somewhere to stay the night then the best thing you can do is squat in the plague zone. There are gonna be a lot of empty rooms down there, love.”

“Won’t the plague zone be sealed off?”

“Yeah of course, love,” said the woman. “There’ll be barbed wire all round it, but the worst of the plague is over now. They’ve dragged out all the bodies. That means there’s no risk no more. There’ll be gaps in the barbed wire that squatters have pushed aside so people can get back in. The police won’t shoot you like they would have done when the plague was at its worst.”

“How do you know all this?”

“’Cos that’s where I live, love,” admitted the woman. “That’s what we all do hereabouts after there’s been an outbreak of plague. We wait for the last of the bodies to be incinerated and then while the authorities try and work out what to do next we move in. It’s the only way you can get a decent place to live in London.”

Eugenie took the woman’s advice and followed the signs that warned her away to the Holloway plague zone. Just as she’d been told, there were no armed police guarding the zone. Eugenie traced the barbed wire surrounding the zone for several blocks until, in the wilderness that had once been someone’s private garden, she located a breach in the wire that had been snipped apart by razor-cutters. She slipped through, careful to not rip her skin or clothes, while lifting above her head her precious rucksack and her last few possessions. She was then in the eerily desolate and empty streets of Holloway.

She walked along the strangely silent Parkhurst Road where she could see evidence of the horse-drawn carriages that had wheeled through to collect the dead bodies. Eugenie could see the charred remains of a large bonfire on the corner of Chambers Road where she was quite disturbed by the sight of charred bones. This was all that was left of the diseased corpses that had been incinerated in the flames.

The only people likely to be wandering around in a plague zone would be other squatters and the police. And since there was no evidence of police, that would leave only squatters. Anyone who'd lived in the zone during the plague and had survived would now be kept in isolation at quarantine camps far away from the city. Eugenie had heard that these camps were truly disgusting. They were overcrowded and prone to fresh outbreaks of disease, but they did help to contain the further spread of the deadly pandemics.

Eugenie wasn't in Holloway as a sightseer. She was looking for somewhere to sleep and preferably before it became dark. A lone woman on the unlit streets of London, even in the plague zone, was surely as much at risk of robbery and rape as she was in Nottingham, Lincoln or any other East Midland town.

It was in Bardolph Road that Eugenie at last saw something that seemed promising. It was the doorway to an old terraced house that had been subdivided and sub-tenanted into several smaller apartments. There was a white cross painted on the front door which indicated that the residents had all been accounted for. This could mean that they were now in a quarantine camp, but more likely, given the virulence of the most recent strain of Bubonic Plague, that they were all now dead. The doors that didn't have crosses painted over them suggested that the residents hadn't yet been

traced. That could mean that like Eugenie they just hadn't been in the vicinity when the plague swept through their neighbourhood.

Eugenie jemmied open a window with a length of iron railing she found lying about on the road and jumped through into the house when the hinge finally snapped. She then carefully pushed the window back into place and wedged it shut with the leg of a chair that she'd smashed to pieces. It wasn't prudent to allow access to other potential squatters.

She scanned the empty room she'd broken into. It was drab and poorly decorated, but at least it was empty. Eugenie then wandered into the hallway and up the stairs to the first and then the second floor. It was safer to take residence in a room well above ground level. Anyone could be wandering about the London streets. There was even the threat of rabid feral dogs although they were more likely to have been shot in a city like London than they would in the countryside.

At the top of the house, Eugenie levered open a door using the same length of iron railing and was pleased to find that it wasn't padlocked from the inside. The last thing she wanted to discover were the residents' rotting bodies. The only reason the door had been secured at all was because the lock had automatically slammed shut when the Contagion Police had secured the property.

So, this was to be her home for the foreseeable future, thought Eugenie. It was relatively homely, that was for sure. The police had fully fumigated the room and the bedsheets had been removed for incineration, but otherwise it was more or less as it was when its residents had lived and presumably died there. Eugenie hoped that their deaths had been short and painless, but from what she'd heard about the last few days

of her parents' lives this seemed quite unlikely. It had been almost certainly been both awfully painful and extremely distressing. Bubonic Plague in its modern airborne form was a horrible disease. Once it took hold, the victims' normal fate was an agonising death. The survival rate was very low.

Eugenie studied the memorabilia left behind by the people who'd lived in the room. The photographs sellotaped to the wall showed a middle-aged couple who'd been old enough to know the United Kingdom before it had fallen apart. They were sitting side by side in a picture together with a woman at least ten years older than Eugenie who was probably their daughter.

How sad!

They weren't badly dressed so perhaps they'd had jobs in a shop, maybe even in an office. They probably didn't know what it was like to work in the open air and plough fields.

Now their home effectively belonged to Eugenie and would continue to be so until the police or a teenage gang or the homeless of London came by to evict her as surely they eventually would.

Who were the couple whose smiling faces were repeated again and again in the photographs stuck to the walls and held in plastic frames all around the apartment?

Eugenie picked up an envelope that had been addressed to them but had since been used for as a pad on which to scribble notes.

*Mark McEwen & Molly Minchin*, it read.

So that was the couple to whom she should be grateful for the creature comforts that were now at her exclusive disposal.

### LIII

## Lord Newbury

### 2078

The whole thing had been a bloody fiasco. In fact, it had been a disaster from beginning to end. Instead of rallying the whole nation to the defence of the beleaguered nobility, the actions that Lord Newbury had foolishly allowed himself to be associated with had rather hastened its decline. On this very day, one and a half thousand years of history would be swept aside to placate the bloody-minded Scots. So much for a constitutional coup. It was more like a constitutional cock-up. And the worst thing was that the lord had nobody else to blame but himself.

Would the lord now be known simply as Mr. Norman Francis Erickson? Possibly he could still be left with a honorary title. Something with a less noble sound such as ‘Sir’. Sir Norman was better than nothing, although it could never compare to Lord Newbury. That was a proper title. But if they could scrap the Royal Family, mightn’t they also scrap the Honours System. Titles such as the Order or Commander of the British Empire had been anachronistic honorifics for well over a century and with no Britain, let alone a British Empire, they’d become even more anachronistic. But maybe they’d preserve the honorary title of ‘Sir’.

Sir Norman.

Could he get used to that?

The question of how he would be addressed should be the least of his worries, but there had been little time to adjust to the change. When everything began to unravel it did so with indecent haste. What one day had been a conspiracy of growing



significance that had yet to actually move into action suddenly became a major news story, a political scandal and a total calamity. Even now, Lord Newbury had no idea of who it was who'd been the despicable traitor. Somewhere within the lord's wide set of affluent or well-connected confidantes was a man or possibly a woman who'd betrayed the confidence with which they had been entrusted and sold the news story of a proposed reassertion of order to foreign newspapers. And once it was published in the Scottish press and reported in gruesome detail on SBC and WBC, it was only a matter of time until the generally compliant English newspapers joined ranks with the usual pinko suspects to print the gruesome details. The poorly funded EBC and the reliably reticent Sky News UK were amongst the last to make the public aware of what Lord Newbury and his accomplices had planned.

It was natural that the most loyal English media would be reluctant to break the news. Lord Newbury knew only too well how much it was implicated in the conspiracy. But the lord had now come to know who his real friends were. They most certainly didn't include the press barons, whether resident in England or abroad, who'd previously been so eager to conserve the legacy of nobility and status. After all, the likes of Lords Desmond, MacKenzie and Morgan weren't going to abandon their honorary titles without a fight. In fact, they were once the champions of the cause whose assurances of support seemed most rock-solid.

"We'll be behind you one hundred and one percent," said Lord MacKenzie. "We mustn't capitulate to the bloody Scots. They've already got independence. Why do they have to fuck up the rest of the established order? They'll never be satisfied until their bloody blue and white flag is flying over Westminster."

“I’ve got estates in Scotland,” said Lord Morgan. “You have as well, haven’t you, Norman? I know what the Jimmies are like. They’re ungrateful buggers. We’re well rid of them. But what do they do now but sanction a flood of workshy immigrants through the tartan border into the country. All those bloody Africans and South Americans! They can’t use nuclear war as an excuse for inundating our noble land and taking jobs from good honest Englishmen.”

Nevertheless once the news was out, the press barons were no more principled than anyone else. Not one of Lord Newbury and the other lords, knights and dignitaries whose names had been uncovered by the foreign press was spared the onslaught of intrusive press coverage, unsavoury speculation, and unmannerly paparazzi at the doorstep. The only thing that distinguished the conservative media from the pinkos was that those who Lord Newbury thought were his most natural allies were the ones who focused most on whatever snippet of tittle-tattle that could be found about the sex lives and peccadilloes of the privileged. Questions were asked about why Lord Newbury had never married, for instance.

Was there no matter of privacy left?

“What about the libel laws?” Lord Newbury asked his advisors, which included his solicitor, his press officer and Sir Wayne Yelland, a close associate of Lord Desmond whose presence was conditional on it never being made public knowledge. “Can’t I use the libel laws to halt proceedings?”

“It’s a bit late now, my lord,” said the press officer. “Using that tactic will only make it seem like you’ve got something to hide.”

“Why are your newspapers printing all that salacious speculation about me and

Prince Brian?” demanded Lord Newbury. “What has that got to do with the constitution, Sir Nigel?”

“Nothing, my lord,” admitted the knight and once senior editor of the *Sun on Sunday*. “But we need to do everything we can to focus the news on what is already known to the public. The more stories on those like you whose involvement is already public knowledge then the less attention will be paid on others whose involvement must be kept outside of the public domain.”

“So why print that story of my holiday with Prince Brian?” wondered Lord Newbury. “Where is the public interest is that?”

“It had already been printed in *Le Monde*, my lord,” said the press officer. “The English media couldn’t ignore it.”

“You aren’t the only victim, my lord,” said Sir Nigel, as if this made any difference. “Sir Eric Esterhazy, for instance, has definitely received worse.”

“Do you want to destroy the reputation of every last decent man in this country?” pleaded Lord Newbury.

However there were bigger fish to fry than just the dozen or so people of great importance whose private lives and loves were now public knowledge and whose involvement in the crisis had generated so much acreage of newsprint. The long editorials in the *Telegraph*, *Times* and the *Mail* that condemned the generals, barons, politicians and sports personalities who’d been embroiled in the crisis claimed to do so to uphold the constitution and the paramount power of the elected government, but Lord Newbury was now discovering the extent of the media barons’ hypocrisy.

Although the lord knew the names of those whose identities had yet to be

exposed, he was also aware how constrained he was from deflecting the story away from himself and towards the others.

“It would be suicidal, my lord,” said the solicitor. “What you know about them that isn’t already known to the world’s media can be matched by what they know about you that still hasn’t been reported.”

“Furthermore, my lord,” said Sir Nigel. “Once the heat has died down, your former friends are certain to fulfil their promise to protect you from worse scandals in the future.”

“*Worse scandals?* What could be worse than the filth that the media has already smeared me with?”

“I wouldn’t use the word ‘smear’ to describe the stories about you and Prince Brian, my lord,” said Sir Nigel. “Nor, indeed, the stories about you and the male prostitutes in Paris. Nor, for that matter, the account of the lavish parties you hosted in Abu Dhabi. Technically, a smear is a falsehood, whereas the evidence in all these stories is very strong. And at this stage, you cannot use the argument that they represent an invasion of privacy and are not in the public interest.”

“Where will it end?” pleaded Lord Newbury.

“When the foreign media is unable to find anything more to print, my lord,” said the press officer.

“When the public gets bored with the story, my lord,” said the solicitor.

“When the story becomes more about resignations and public confessions, my lord,” suggested Sir Nigel. “Believe you me, there is no one at New Transnational who doesn’t want to move on from this story. Already many of the issues about which the

*Times*, the *Sun* and the *Independent* have campaigned for so many years are essentially settled, but they not at all as we'd have liked. The Royal Family will soon be no more than a distant memory. The last vestiges of a venerable tradition that dates back to Alfred the Great will be consigned to history. This great nation of ours will become one more Republic amongst many others in the North Western corner of a continent of Republics. This isn't what any of us would have ever wanted to see."

"Indeed not, Sir Nigel," said Lord Newbury.

So, what could his lordship do now? He'd been abandoned by all those he'd once believed were his friends. He was a man alone. All he could cling to for comfort was his wealth and privilege. His reputation was in shatters. His friends had deserted him. He was the last man standing in the battle to defend tradition and the essence of being English. A warrior surrounded by the corpses of those who had also fallen. Moreover, Lord Newbury also recognised that this romantic image was a metaphor too far. Rather than a warrior, he was already nothing more than one of the corpses. There was no last man standing. The bastions of honour and tradition had either already fallen or been abandoned the field of battle. And not only had those who'd abandoned the field given up the struggle, they denied that they'd ever been party to it and pretended that all along their allegiance had been elsewhere.

All around him was nothing but treachery, deceit and disaster.

"What shall I do, Nick?" Lord Newbury asked Lord MacKenzie in a desperate phone call after the *Telegraph* had printed a story that exposed his participation in a sordid sex party in Mallorca that involved a teenage boy band and a minor film star.

"One thing you must do above all, Norman," said the lord, "is never call me

again. It is an enormous hassle to have to purge the records of telephone calls like this. My phone-line may be encrypted, but the risk is too great.”

Lord Newbury was annoyed. Was he now supposed to apologise to a man who'd earned his title not by birth but by the sordid business of selling newspapers and advertising? “Don't worry, Nick,” he said. “I shan't phone again. All the same, have you any advice to give me?”

“Take a flight on the next plane to the Congo, Norman,” said Lord MacKenzie. “I know how much you like the little black boys. Cover your tracks well and stay low for a year or so. And if you're a good boy, we won't tell anyone where you are or what you're up to.”

*Fuck you, Nick!* was the thought most prominent in Lord Newbury's mind after hearing this not so very sympathetic advice.

“I'm sorry for having troubled you, Nick,” said Lord Newbury instead. “Let's hope this all blows over soon.”

“I hope so too. Goodbye, Norman. Best of luck.”

Lord Newbury pondered his fellow lord's recommendation. How did Lord MacKenzie know about his villa in Kinshasa? And more to the point how was Lord Newbury going to get there without attracting attention?

The answer was obvious, of course. He still had the American passport he'd bought on the black market in the name of Newton Nash, American businessman. One of the advantages of the collapse of the United States of America was the sudden glut in the market of old US passports while new passports were being issued for the new nation states that had emerged from the ruins of what had once been a great country.

As long as nobody was able to trace his actions from withdrawals from his Swiss bank accounts he could remain in the Congo for a long time.

And one thing Lord MacKenzie was definitely right about, though Lord Newbury could never admit it, was the lord's attraction to tight black arses. He could hardly wait to fuck as many little piccaninnies as he was able.

That would help to keep his mind off the loss of his historic title.

## LIV

### Eugenie

### 2100

The secret of surviving in London was entirely about making new friends and acquaintances. It just wasn't possible to manage it by yourself. On the one hand, Eugenie had to keep well away from those who might cause her harm. On the other, she had to make herself known to those who might be able to help her.

Other people were squatting in the Holloway wastelands. Some were undoubtedly the very people Eugenie most needed to avoid, such as the many well-armed teenage gangs that wandered the burnt-out streets armed with clubs and knives. Although there were many in London who would happily take advantage of a lone girl who'd much rather be at school if free education still existed, the teenage gangs were those least likely to be satisfied by mere rape. Eugenie had heard stories of their sadism and inhuman brutality. However, it was also teenagers of about the same age as her that she needed to make contact with.

"Yeah," said the boy with the disfiguring acne and shaven head. "I live round here. What of it?"

Had Eugenie misread the situation? The boy didn't look like a gang member. He had none of the swagger that was the most obvious sign of potential trouble. He wasn't carrying any weapon with him beyond what was needed to deter feral dogs.

"My name's Eugenie," she said. "I live here too. I'm just looking for some tips, you know. Where to find food and stuff. That kind of thing."

"You don't come from London, do you?" said the boy suspiciously.



“I’m from the East Midlands. Near Nottingham. What’s your name?”

“My name?” said the boy. “It’s Ned. If you want me to help you, you’re gonna have to let me fuck you. Is that a deal?”

Eugenie had sort of expected exactly that kind of transaction. What other currency did she have? Then again, it wasn’t like she was going to be a prostitute. That would be a dozen or so fucks a night and she was sure that whatever pleasure she’d get from the first fuck would have totally vanished by the time of the last one.

Ned wasn’t that bad a fuck. He wasn’t the best Eugenie had enjoyed, but he didn’t take too long about it and he didn’t slap her about. She deliberately didn’t draw Ned’s attention to where she was living in Bardolph Road because if things went badly with him she’d still want somewhere to escape to. He lived in a flat in nearby Bakers Field with a bunch of other teenagers. There were slightly more women than men which alerted Eugenie to a potential threat from jealous girlfriends, but she soon discovered that Ned was hopelessly in love with Natalie who was at the same time in a relationship with Youth, the only black guy in the group. This was the kind of complicated relationship that Eugenie was well familiar with.

“Can I move in?” asked Eugenie after they’d done fucking and Ned was lying on the stained mattress in the dimly lit room where they were resting.

“Fuck! You don’t waste your time, do you?” said Ned.

“I’m desperate,” said Eugenie with only a touch of exaggeration.

“I’ll have to ask the others,” said Ned. “But we’re not gonna be staying here for much longer anyhow.”

“Why’s that?”

“This zone’s gonna be opened soon,” Ned explained. “Leo saw this sign that said it had been certified plague-free. All hell will break loose once the barbed wire’s pulled down. The Contagion Police will shoot anyone they find hanging about.”

“Shoot them!” Eugenie exclaimed. “Can they *do* that?”

“Since the plague last year the CP can do whatever the fuck they like,” said Ned. “Now life’s got so cheap, no one asks questions when a few extra bodies are added to the pyre.”

“Where are you gonna be going?”

“I dunno,” said Ned. “Youth said he knows somewhere in Hampstead that looks like it’s got potential. It’s an old mansion where no one’s lived for fucking years. There’s a load of security guards in the area so we’re gonna have to be careful. They tend to shoot first and ask questions later.”

It was only a few days after Eugenie had settled in Bakers Field with Ned that the decision to move on was made. It had been difficult for Eugenie to get properly accepted by her new friends in that short time. None of the others had spent much time outside of London so they found her East Midlands accent very peculiar. The whole notion of living in a village in the countryside was attractive to her new friends because it was exotic and peaceful, but also repulsive because it was alien and boring.

The cost of choosing to live with Ned and his friends was that Eugenie had to have regular sex with him. This was no big deal at first. He was reliable and he didn’t take long to finish. But it soon became a strain. Eugenie was never really attracted to him to start with, but she wasn’t sure at which stage could she safely move on from him and not get expelled from the Bakers Field squat?

The solution, of course, was to have sex with the other boys. But this had to be done with caution otherwise Eugenie would be kicked out straight away. Although Ned and his friends prided themselves on their open-minded sexual experimentation they weren't the sort to indulge in orgies or openly swap partners.

Each day was occupied by the necessity of scavenging in the streets of London whilst also keeping the Bakers Field squat secure from intruders. It was dangerous for anyone to leave, but food and provisions didn't grow on trees. Eugenie already had gained plenty of experience of scavenging as a result of having to take care of herself since the plague hit Woolsthorpe, but she learnt many more skills from her new friends. Natalie was an especially good teacher, mostly because she was also a girl. She knew how to persuade shopkeepers and restaurateurs to dole out food, alcohol and even clothes that might have otherwise gone elsewhere. Although her clothes came from the same kind of charity shop as did Eugenie's, she had an eye as to how to mix and match them so that they seemed relatively sexy and alluring.

After a couple of days of scavenging Eugenie decided to stay behind in the squat when she discovered that Ned was going out and that Leon was staying behind. It wasn't that Leon was unattached. He had a kind of on-off relationship with Yolanda, a tall half-Asian girl in the group who was never sure what she wanted but was certain that it wasn't what she already had. As soon as Eugenie was sure that she and Leon were alone, she put her arms round his neck and nibbled his ear.

"We can do more than just sit and read books," she said, referring to the e-book reader Leon always carried around with him but had to charge by keeping it exposed to the sun.

“What about Ned?” Leon asked not unreasonably.

“What about him?” Eugenie replied.

Her instincts were right. Leon was a much better sexual partner than Ned could ever be. Their lovemaking was prolonged, passionate and intense. Yolanda didn't know how lucky she was. Leon was even extraordinarily well endowed. Eugenie had seen pictures and even movies of penises of such monstrous proportions, but she somehow imagined that they weren't actually real or were solely the property of studs from the porn capitals of Los Angeles, Mumbai and Kiev. It was fortunate that Eugenie could accommodate so much cock inside her vagina. Leon naturally attributed Eugenie's skills to practice and experience, but she was reluctant to admit that she'd only known a handful of men in an intimate way in her young life.

For the moment, Eugenie had to share Leon's attentions with those from Ned. Leon had an absurd loyalty towards Yolanda, but Eugenie could see that their relationship wasn't likely to flourish for very much longer.

The distance from Holloway to Hampstead wasn't especially far. It was less than five kilometres, but mostly uphill. On the other hand, the difference in character between the two suburbs could hardly be greater. Most of Islington was dilapidated and run-down. The streets were filthy and badly weathered. The traffic was mostly pulled by bicycle or animal. The people wore rags and as they aged they became steadily more hunched and shuffled about rather than strode forwards. Hampstead was much better maintained, but most of it was also out of bounds. There were security guards at each end of almost all residential roads and stretches of the high street were similarly exclusive. There shops were the type that Eugenie had heard about since she was a child,

where designer clothes, expensive furs and fine luxury goods could be purchased. Nevertheless, not only the stores but even the pavement and road were for the exclusive use of the rich and wealthy.

Eugenie and Ned, Natalie and Youth, Leon and Yolanda, and the rest of their crew may have been many things but what they most definitely lacked was money. When Eugenie compared her ragtag collection of friends with the smartly dressed and well-coiffured men and women who were browsing the stores along Hampstead High Street from behind the high Perspex glass that guarded them from the London scum, it was obvious that there was a gulf between them that even money couldn't bridge.

However, the gang wasn't in Hampstead to shop although it was difficult not to be drawn to the sight of London's elite and their privileged lives. *They* didn't have to worry about treading in horse-shit. *They* didn't have to rummage for clothes in bins or patch their clothes as they became increasingly threadbare. *They* didn't have to thread string through the eyeholes of their boots because they couldn't afford laces. They knew the luxury of wearing underwear and socks and of having enough to eat on a daily basis. To them, Eugenie and her friends were basically invisible.

The path to the mansion Youth had located was fraught with deadly risks. It was on a road guarded by security personnel stationed at both ends and where each building was surrounded by high electrified walls. However, Youth had worked out a route that bypassed the actual road on which the mansion was located and could be entered through a tunnel that went under the mansion and surfaced in an adjacent now-derelict property. It had probably been designed to enable guests to enter and leave without being seen from the street. Unlike most Hampstead properties, the security apparatus

amounted to little more than a few easily spotted cameras and very high walls. Once Eugenie and her friends had scabbled through the rusting muddy tunnel into the mansion's back garden, they were effectively as well hidden from the security guards as the guests who once visited the mansion would have been from the intrusive gaze of the paparazzi.

Everything of value had been cleared out of the mansion. It was obvious that no one had lived there for at least twenty years. There was some beds and heavy furniture that hadn't been moved, but nothing else. The mansion was enormous. There were about a dozen or so people in Eugenie's new gang and enough space for them to have at least one room each. As long as they didn't attract the attention of the security guards patrolling the road outside there was nothing to stop them staying. And Hampstead promised rich pickings for scavengers that Islington could never match.

"Who used to live here?" Ned asked Youth. "Was it a film star or businessman?"

"You won't believe this," said Youth, who despite his name was by far the oldest person in the company and had a thick beard that emphasised rather than disguised his age difference. "It used to belong to a lord."

"A lord?" said Natalie. "I thought lords only existed in fairy tales and things. You know, like princesses and goblins and kings and the like."

"It's only a couple of decades since all that crap was abolished," said Youth. "This nobleman was known as Lord Newbury apparently."

"Lord Newbury," repeated Natalie who liked the sound of the word. "He sounds like a *very* grand sort of lord. Like a duke or a baron or all those other things they used to have."

“There used to be a duke and duchess who lived near my village,” said Eugenie.

“What, *really?*” said Ned, who was genuinely impressed. “They can’t have lived anywhere that was as grand as this mansion.”

“They did,” said Eugenie. “They lived in a place called Beaver Castle. It’s a kind of immigrant processing centre now. It’s really ancient. It goes back to William the Conqueror. In fact, my village used to be called Woolsthorpe-by-Belvoir before I was born.”

“So there’s more to the countryside than just muddy fields and pigs,” said Leon, who was also impressed. “Who’d have thought? And now we’re living in a real lord’s mansion. *Aren’t* we grand!”

And despite resembling more a merry band of roguish poachers than a lord in his manor, at that moment Eugenie and her new friends felt that was exactly what they were.

**LV**  
**Xiùlán**  
**2081**

Xavier pushed by and sidled past the other dancers to eventually reach Xiùlán who was swaying spasmodically from side to side to the pulsating rhythm. Like Xiùlán, his eyes were glazed over and his skin pasted with perspiration. He squeezed through the sweaty crowd to Xiùlán, took her waist between his hairy-backed hands, placed his mouth directly over her ear and yelled into it.

“I need a shag, Shoe,” he shouted. “I’m desperate!”

Xiùlán placed her hand over Xavier’s crotch and felt the contours of his cock through the satin of his trousers. “What are you on, Hav?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” said Xavier. “E. Coke. Booze. I guess I must just love you, Shoe.”

“Yeah, whatever,” said Xiùlán, who was tickled by the idea. As if who you fucked and who you loved was ever the same person. “Where shall we go, Hav?”

“The Royal Closet I think. Where else?”

And what better place was there in the nightclub than the Royal Closet? It wasn’t designed as a shag room, especially not by its original proprietors, but time and convention had made it the room to go to for a recreational shag and at the same time flaunt to the world just who was currently fucking who.

Although Xiùlán had lived almost all her life in England she still didn’t own an English passport. And why should she? She was proud to be a citizen of the Republic of China. Why would she ever want to compromise it by adopting the citizenship of a



crappy little country like England? And anyway if she *had* been born in London rather than Shanghai, she'd now be on her third passport. What was the country called nowadays? It had once been the United Kingdom, then the Kingdom of England and now the Republic of England. These people couldn't make their fucking minds up.

Although she was proud to be Chinese, Xiùlán didn't speak her native language at all well. She knew enough to pronounce her name although she never quite got the intonations. "It's like Shoe Lan," she'd tell people. She knew it meant something, but after every time she found out she then promptly forgot. Fluency in languages wasn't Xiùlán's greatest talent. In fact, she didn't excel in anything of an academic nature. But then again why bother? She lived a privileged life as a Chinese girl in modern England. She was a first-class citizen in a country where the English were the ones struggling to get by. It astonished her that the English Republic had let things slide so far. Sure, there were huge problems back in China. There were plagues, floods, desertification, industrial pollution and a whole host of modern ills. But all this was academic for those in the privileged elite such as Xiùlán's family. Neither in China nor in England, where she was accorded even greater respect than she'd ever know in Shanghai, did Xiùlán need to be troubled by such things.

What Xiùlán did excel in was shopping, dancing and fucking. Her parents knew about the first and they didn't mind at all. Trade between the Republics of China and England was flourishing, especially since England had failed its every attempt to return to the Northern European Union. The very fact it had become so desperate simply underscored the folly of the nation's original decision to withdraw. But where there was profit to be made, the capitalist forces of China and, to a lesser extent, Russia could be

relied to fill the vacuum. Since England no longer manufactured anything of value and its service industries had all migrated to foreign shores, what little wealth the country still possessed was mostly spent on purchasing Chinese-manufactured goods.

Xiùlán's parents also knew about the dancing, although she was as discreet as she could be about the fucking. They would want their daughter to be a good wife for a man of means: most likely someone from China, but perhaps even from Russia, Brazil or even, if the pedigree was right, from England. Nonetheless, her reputation amongst her friends as an enthusiastic and adventurous fuck did nothing to elevate her chances in the target market.

And it was in dancing that Xiùlán was currently engaged. She was in the huge and exclusive Buckingham Palace Nightclub where the hosts this night were the Deviation Gatekeepers of Sound. They knew how to put on a good party that fully utilised the acoustic potential of the spacious halls that had once been the London address of the English Royal Family. When England became a republic, there had been great hopes that the legacy of the nation's long history might be treated with respect but the highest bids for the huge palace in Central London were nightclub owners who recognised it as the perfect venue for the rich and famous. There wasn't enough money in the national coffers to bequeath monuments such as this to posterity.

The rhythms were certainly banging. There was a century's worth of good electronic dance sounds and with the right equipment powered by London's own Nuclear Power Station at nearby Battersea the beats pounded out across Pall Mall and over the Royal Parks. Even Lord Nelson on his column shook to the heavy bass rhythm as it traced a long sinuous sound wave alongside Horse Guards Parade where horses

were now employed for the unglamorous tasks of carrying goods around the London's shit-strewn streets and beyond the pay booths that generated the income to maintain the Royal Parks (as they were still quaintly known) and kept out the countless vagrants that littered the city's pavements.

But what did Xiùlán care? She was in the midst of flashing lights, banging sounds, a monstrous bass and all her friends. It was always a good night at Buckingham Palace. The queue for the venue trailed all round the parade grounds where soldiers used to change the guard wearing hilarious bear-skin rugs on their heads and down Constitution Hill which was sprayed with graffiti every night and then scraped off the following day by the countless ragged plebs on the nightclub's payroll.

Xiùlán knew the beats she liked and they did the business every time, although their effect was enhanced by the little pills she could buy from the stalls set up for the purpose in the Throne Room. It was amazing how easily the nightclub owners had managed to circumvent the law. Outside Buckingham Palace drugs were still illegal, however much they were widely and cheaply available. Inside you could buy them with credit as easily as you could a new pair of Prada shoes, a Gucci handbag or a Stella McCartney tee-shirt. There were stalls selling all those things as well as downloads of the very same sounds being caned by the DJs.

Xiùlán didn't know the names of the artists or of the tunes they played. She wasn't even sure what type of dance music it might be, although her general preference was for the deepest bass, the most eerie samples, the phattest beats and that occasional build-up that took you higher and higher and higher while the coke or smack or E did its magic and you didn't give a fuck anymore. Anyway, what did the names mean after

a century or so? Dub. Techno. Trance. Funk. Beat. It was all a mix of the same old words thrown together with adjectives like Big, New, Hard, Speed and Dope.

The dance arena was known as the Quadrangle. This could be opened up to the sky on hot summer days like today where the cool breeze helped to assuage the odour of sweaty bodies. When it was cold or wet, the Quadrangle was sheltered by a vast roof that stretched over an area where lords, ladies, kings and queens had no doubt once paraded in their horse-drawn carriages. These days the only horse-drawn carriages were those that brought in the goods that were for sale in the Throne Room, the alcohol poured in the Drawing Room Bar, and the food ladled out by the fast-food bars and restaurants on the upper floors. The Quadrangle was a huge space with a DJ booth at one end and packed with dancers flaunting their wealth. Even being at the Buck was ostentatious enough. Most London plebs didn't earn in a year what it cost to gain entrance through the door. But amongst the wealthy there were further gradations measured by designer labels, the preferred drug, the weight of body-piercing and the aesthetic quality of the tattoos.

These last were other areas where Xiùlán excelled. It had to be done discreetly of course. It was her crotch, her nipples and her navel where she sported her most expensive body jewellery. She had an elegant design etched on her left thigh and over her shoulder. You didn't want body ornamentation to be where they could be easily seen. Only plebs had facial piercings or tattoos on the forearms or face. Discretion was key. The trick was to reveal what you had only at intimate occasions and in front of the right kind of friend. To display it to all and sundry was a definite no-no.

And fucking was what Xiùlán was now engaged in. She and Xavier had

negotiated their way through the crowds of dancing, jumping and swaying bodies. There were woman now stripped down to nothing but their tats and piercings, and several men with their cocks out, but before you got out of the Quadrangle the only fucking was relatively circumspect.

There was no modesty here in the Royal Closet and not a great deal of restraint. In fact, with so many men and women having sex with one another in so many multiple combinations there was a competition to demonstrate just how little restraint there needed to be. It was almost an orgy. Whether such abandoned bacchanalia was the original intention of the club proprietors was now academic. The piles of condoms at the door and the wall-to-wall mattresses couldn't be there for any other purpose. There was an area to dump clothes and shoes which was guarded by a girl dressed only in a thong and patches on her nipples.

"You're not gonna fuck me bareback," Xiùlán warned Xavier as she held up a condom. "Put one of these on first."

"You're no fucking fun, Shoe," said Xavier.

"I don't wanna catch the latest strain of syph. If you've got any sense you'll do the same. It's a fucking killer."

"You got a point, Shoe," agreed Xavier, but his reluctance made Xiùlán reflect just how close to disaster she was routinely exposing herself. Money was no guarantee against disease, although it facilitated the best medical attention. Some of the more recent strains of venereal disease were slicing through the nightclubs and the partying community with indecent relish. It didn't matter whether the parties you went to were the plebeian cheap open air variety or the big expensive ones: when it came to pox, gon

or chlem, there was no respect for social status.

Xavier had a hard-on of legendary proportions. Xiùlán always enjoyed fucking him, though he'd be crap as a loyal boyfriend. Anyway, Xiùlán's parents much preferred it that the boys she introduced to them were Chinese. The couple lay down on the mattress between three men who were enthusiastically bugging one another and a more reticent couple who were having very listless sex as if they were embarrassed to do it in such a public space.

But if you didn't want to be seen, why do it in the Royal Closet? This was where the party-goers and hedonists of London declared their current affections and advertised their predilections. This was the way to announce to the world that you were open to literally any kind of social occasion to which you might be invited.

It was hot. It was sticky. And it was incredibly loud. The thunderous bass and the percussive repetitive beats thumped through the room, shook the floor and mattresses and coordinated the lovemaking to the same metronomic rhythm.

Music appreciation was far from Xiùlán's mind as with the assistance of another little pill she let Xavier fuck her while she just as energetically pressed her crotch into his. Her small bosom pressed against his hairy chest. Her fingers threaded through the tangled hair on his shoulders. His cock pushed up and up and up, staying erect for far longer than nature alone had intended, but then Xiùlán was also enjoying the enhanced pleasures of modern pharmacology.

This was what life was all about. To be young, wealthy, sorted, fucked and well and truly wasted.

**LVI**  
**Iris**  
**2055**

Iris knew the risk she was taking, of course, as did all her friends. Who didn't? The terms of the State of Emergency imposed on the citizens of the Kingdom of England were spelt out clearly and unambiguously. All public gatherings of a hundred or more people were banned without special dispensation and this included events of the sort Iris was now at.

London's night clubs had been shut down by command of the law for several months now, so the venue at which she and her friends were dancing couldn't really be called a night club. In any case, when such venues were legal, would anyone have honoured a decrepit warehouse in the desolate wilderness of East London with the title of a Night Club? There was no bar. There were no bouncers at the door. The dance floor was hard concrete with no flashing lights arcing above and there were most definitely no foam baths.

There were, however, plenty of drugs, booming dance sounds and hundreds of dancers. There were far more than the few dozen people that Iris had vaguely expected for a clandestine rave at such a remote address. There were many times the number of people allowed by law to assemble at any one place and all of them were going wild for it as the sound systems echoed across the cavernous spaces of a building that had once been used for assembling car parts and had been deserted for decades. Such was the hunger for a good night out and the opportunity to get down to the electronic rhythm of what had once been a normal accompaniment of nocturnal English life now mostly

only available on foreign websites. Iris could at last share her passion for the deep bass rhythms and the wonky treble of the beats that came from the dance capitals of the world such as Chongqing, Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai and even Glasgow in the neighbouring Kingdom of Scotland.

It was obvious that Iris' group of her friends weren't the only ones with a passion for the latest sounds. English radio, especially not the EBC, no longer broadcast a selection of music for the young that wasn't either just saccharine mush or more than ten years old. All the same, not even the Government of National Unity could legislate against music from liberal and progressive nations such as Malaysia, India and Scotland. These days, only President Bill Hannity's increasingly unhinged government of the United States could compete with the English government for its enthusiasm for curtailing the freedom of the young, the poor and the ethnically compromised. Against this background, the long awaited gig at Stratford, in a derelict warehouse built on the site of the London Olympic Games just forty years earlier, was bound to pull in the crowds.

"This is fucking great!" said Malcolm, Iris' boyfriend, as the two of them shimmied, bumped and twisted to the fractured rhythms of twenty-first century Sichuan. "I knew this beat was gonna be sick, but I didn't know just how sick."

"On decent speakers that bass is fucking *dope!*" Ember exclaimed.

Iris knew only too well how much difference a good sound system made. That was the essence of dance music in a live setting. When she was younger and clubbing was something she took for granted she'd not given it much thought. You expected the gut-shaking, floor-trembling, but still so crystal-clear sounds of a nightclub to do better



service to the tracks you'd downloaded off the internet than your stereo system at home. Whatever the manufacturers of sound cards and speakers claimed, nothing could compare with the real deal: especially at the hundred decibel mark. There was also nothing that any amount of technology could do to match the buzz of an E or two, enhanced by a line of sulphate, a sniff of coke and the distant memory of a preparatory spliff. Who needed a fucking bar anyway?

Not so long ago this would have been a normal Friday night and Saturday morning. However, the dance floor would have had more bounce, the music wouldn't have suffered from the echo that came from hosting the event in a venue that had never been designed for its acoustic properties, and the booth where the DJ sat wouldn't have been shrouded in shadows in a corner where the lighting had no resonance at all with the music. In Iris' early years of clubbing a DJ like Xanthippus Middleton would have been a superstar surrounded by groupies, hangers-on and minders. He'd have had the wealth to afford to fly to foreign countries whereas few people nowadays could afford to travel even by train or coach. He probably still had an international reputation big enough to fill stadiums in Russia, Argentina and Canada, but he was one of the few who'd chosen not to desert England in its hour of need when most DJs, rock stars and jazz musicians had moved elsewhere. And most of those who'd stayed behind played music bland enough to be acceptable to the arbiters of impoverished taste in Prime Minister Eisenegger's cabinet.

Perhaps Xanthippus Middleton was still a frequent flyer. He'd certainly been able to get hold of not only the sounds Iris and Malcolm and the others had heard on internet radio interspersed between words in Hindi, Spanish or Mandarin broadcast over

nanotube cables, but plenty of other sounds from the cutting edge night clubs of Shanghai, Auckland and Pyongyang that were both unfamiliar and exactly what Iris now knew was what she'd always been missing for all these years.

Iris had only been dancing for an hour or so but she no longer had the energy she'd once used to have. She wasn't a teenager anymore. And, in any case, it was a long time since she'd last been to a night club. Defeated, she and Malcolm walked hand-in-hand off the dance floor still sufficiently E'd up to appreciate each other's body even more than usual. Malcolm was normally rather a quiet guy and most happy reading a book or hacking together app interface code, but he could loosen up on occasion. However, there weren't many opportunities these days for him to relax and this wasn't just because the government had closed down the night clubs and imposed restrictive licences on entertainment venues. The relaxation on the laws that had protected victims of racism combined with the vigorous government campaign against illegal immigration had made life much harder for anyone like Malcolm who, even though his family had lived in England for nearly a century, just happened to have black skin. Malcolm was no stranger to racist abuse, but it now happened much more often.

"You got any speed?" Ellie asked. "I'm coming down hard. I need a pick-me-up."

Iris shook her head. "I've got a few lines of coke, if that'll do," she said.

Ellie considered this for a moment. "I'm not sure I wanna mix things so much," she said. "Anyway, are you sure you can afford it?"

"It's about the only thing I can afford these days," said Iris. "Go on. It's not hard to get more stuff."

Ellie nodded and walked off with a small corner of folded cardboard. Iris wasn't lying. Although she was still working long hours at the lab with little likelihood of promotion or pay rise, the only thing that wasn't getting any more expensive were recreational drugs. The fall-out from the last war in the Middle East had made such commodities even cheaper and much more widely available.

Despite this, drugs were still very much illegal. The only policy that Ivan Eisenegger's government would contemplate for dealing with the growing national problem of drug addiction was to tighten the penalties for drug possession and to rant ever more fervently about the danger of drug abuse. Predictably, this policy had made no appreciable impact whatsoever. The police were too poorly paid and thin on the ground to enforce the draconian laws, while the large numbers of unemployed both increased the size of the potential market for drugs and the numbers of those willing to sell them.

However, when the police pushed their way into the warehouse Iris was sufficiently alarmed to pull out of her battered cloth bag all the pills and powders she'd stuffed into it and toss them away onto the dark concrete dance floor. It just wasn't worth the risk of being found guilty of possession. In any case, it cost less to replenish her stash than to pay the fare for the night bus home. Iris wasn't the only one who'd disposed of stash in this way. The floor was littered with enough powder, pills and weed to make it worth someone's while to pick it all up and sell it on, as would almost certainly happen once the police raid was over.

This wasn't the first police raid Iris had witnessed. It was an unavoidable hazard of going out to a gig these days. If it wasn't clubbing that attracted police attention, it

would be live music or even unlicensed theatre. The imperative that united the government was the need to make anything that was fun illegal while ensuring that legal forms of entertainment were now too expensive for most people. Without jobs or money or the prospect of finding either, it was no surprise that most people no longer cared about what was legal and what wasn't when they sought a way to fill the empty hours of enforced idleness.

The police were dressed in heavy padded jackets and carried large batons which they showed no reluctance to use on anyone who was judged to be getting in the way. Iris could see there was going to be trouble, so she and Malcolm swarmed with the crowd heading for the exit in the hope that they'd escape unscathed. It wasn't as if there was anything much now to stay for. The music had stopped abruptly mid-beat and Xanthippus Middleton was nowhere to be seen. The only evidence he'd even been there were the stacks of speakers and a chair that had tumbled over on one side.

This time, however, Iris and Malcolm weren't so lucky.

"Not so fast jungle boy," said a shaven-headed policeman wielding a baton and with the visor of his riot uniform tilted upwards. "You can't just break the law and walk scot free."

Iris was determined not to be caught so easily. "What's the fine, officer?" she said and ostentatiously opened her bag to pull out her wallet.

The policeman hesitated for a moment and then looked around him. There was a general air of chaos. The partygoers were funnelling towards the exits where the police were both directing them and picking them off as they went. Iris couldn't help noticing that the majority of those taken to one side for interrogation were black or

Asian. The police were clearly hoping to haul in some illegal immigrants. A few busts for drugs were just not worth the effort and cost of such a large police operation.

“A monkey would cover it,” said the policeman.

Fuck! Five hundred quid. Even with inflation, this copper was a greedy bastard. That was enough to fill a car with petrol or pay for a train ride to Birmingham. Fortunately, Iris had cash on her. “I’ve only got 400,” she said as she spread out the four notes in her hand.

“That’ll do,” said the policeman as he grabbed the notes from her hand. “Now fuck off. And don’t do it again.”

“Don’t do what, officer?” Malcolm asked cheekily.

The policeman glared at him aggressively. “Break the law, sunshine. Don’t fucking tempt me... You know you shouldn’t be dancing to that fucking ghetto shit. The law’s the law. Fucking piss off or I’ll give you a taste of the long arm of the law.”

He slapped the baton into his palm and Malcolm took the hint.

There were no more incidents between the warehouse and the night-bus stop, but Iris and Malcolm were careful to avoid walking along the main roads just in case there were other police around. Unfortunately, the side roads were badly lit and would normally be unacceptably dangerous, but with so many others streaming away from the warehouse, Iris reckoned she was safe.

“I’m going to have to touch you for the fare home,” Iris said when she and Malcolm finally found the night bus stop and saw that they had less than half an hour to wait till the next bus arrived. “I’ve been cleaned out.”

“I’ll pay back half of what you paid that pig,” said Malcolm. “It’s only fair. It

was me he was after anyway.”

Iris was half inclined to brush off Malcolm’s offer, but times were tough and there were several more days until she next got paid. “Yeah, that’d be good,” she said gratefully. “Look at me. Skint and stashless. The perfect end to the day.”

“It was good while it lasted,” said Malcolm.

“Yeah,” Iris admitted. “It was. We must do it again sometime.”

**LVII**  
**Olive**  
**2083**

This wasn't how it was supposed to be, thought Olive. It was supposed to have been a quick transaction. She'd pay the cash, get a discount by offering a blowjob as collateral and then take the packets of brown crystal back to Oz who'd pay her double what she paid for the stuff. And maybe after that she'd treat her daughter Emily to a burger and fries after school.

Instead, she was writhing around in a filthy back alley outside the decrepit slum where she'd just been robbed, raped and discarded.

There was nothing she could do, of course. You couldn't expect help from the fuzz. They were no fucking use and never there when you might need them. All they were good for was offering protection for as long as you paid them a cut of the action.

If only she'd been able to get help from the police on this occasion. Then the cunts wouldn't have taken advantage of her. They wouldn't have ripped off her clothes and fucked her serially, violently and repeatedly. They wouldn't have stolen the few hundred pound notes she'd borrowed from Oz to do business and they wouldn't have thrown her into the alley when they'd spunked all over her.

Olive now doubted whether there'd been any brown to begin with. They wouldn't have given it to her even if there was any. Was Oz in on this? Was it his idea? He was a real fucking cunt however good a fuck he was.

And now she was lying bruised, battered and, from between her legs, bleeding. And it wasn't just from her abused vagina that the blood was seeping out. Her nose was

pressed against the kerb. Her hair was pasted over her bare shoulders and flecked with coal dust and rubbish. Her limbs were splayed out awkwardly. Her clothes were filthy and ripped and had been tossed over her naked body, but Olive was still too bruised and shocked to tidy herself up.

It took a while for her body to recover from the immediate pain. But recover she always did. This wasn't the first time she'd been raped. Nor was it the first time she'd been robbed. But the timing could hardly be worse. The Fat Cunt Ozzibanjo would be coming round any day now for his dosh and Olive already owed two weeks' rent. Would a blowjob be enough to hold him off this time? Would she have to let him fuck her? Last time she let him he'd rammed his fat cock up her arse and that fucking hurt. Then there was Emily whining about how all her clothes didn't fit her any more. Well, she was a growing child so what would you expect, but even Olive could see that in her ill-fitting clothes her daughter resembled some kind of fucking Turkmenistani in a Russian refugee camp. Olive, on the other hand, probably looked more like one of those nuclear fall-out victims in Jordan or Palestine. Only her wounds didn't come from some fucking big mushroom cloud.

Olive lifted herself up onto her knees and felt the start of a bruise growing across her cheek. Her face had only just lost the blue traces of its last encounter with a fist where Mick had punched her during an argument over a crack pipe. He'd fucked her well and proper and still kept the fucking pipe. Bastard! He wouldn't be getting a Christmas card from her. Not that Olive ever gave anyone Christmas cards anyway.

There wasn't just the Fat Cunt landlord. There was also Oz who'd want either the smack he was expecting or his grand back. Olive had no illusions about Oz's



charitable inclinations or, in truth, his total absence of them. He might be a good fuck but he'd probably still fuck her over.

Olive sat up on the alleyway kerb and was for the first time aware that she wasn't alone. There were the usual bags of rubbish, but these were all torn open by urchins and urban foxes who'd been scavenging for what the better-off could afford to discard. There were broken bottles, the remnants of a bicycle that had been pulled apart and some ancient electrical devices that had been disembowelled for any part of potential value. There was also a tramp sitting several metres away who hadn't noticed Olive and probably still wouldn't register she was there if she'd hit him with a brick. He was almost certainly out of it on crack or smack or maybe just alcohol (although the last was by far the most expensive). At the other end of the alleyway were three young children, probably not much older than Emily. Nevertheless, Olive wasn't to be fooled. Children were often the worst. She'd heard of people being knifed or having their throats slashed just for a sandwich or a battered old computer tablet. Street urchins had no morals or principles. Just as they also had no homes or parents.

What was now apparent to Olive was that it wasn't safe for her to stay here.

Although she'd not even begun recovering from her ordeal, Olive struggled to her feet and squeezed her pale blue-bruised frame into her torn tee-shirt and denim shorts and retrieved the battered old cheap plastic handbag that the fuckers had so considerately left with her. It still had all the stuff that a woman always needed that no man had any use for, like lipstick, tampons and condoms. However, it no longer held her purse, her private stash or the keys to her flat. But, fuck, the lock hadn't been working properly for months and any cunt could just push his way in anyway.

Olive had to think a bit. There were several ways in which she was fucked. Not just a bit fucked, but royally so. She was more fucked than a whore with a broom-handle shoved up her cunt. She staggered out of the alleyway past the tramp and his personal pool of vomit that had stained his threadbare jeans and was still spreading out between his knees. She ventured into the hustle and bustle of the high street where she was safer than she would be anywhere else in the world.

There wasn't just Oz and the Fat Cunt, was there? There were the other creditors after her. Could she forever continue to dodge Igor as he went from flat to flat on the estate, smashing down doors with his baseball bat and grabbing stuff off the shelves? He was a man who frequently took his enthusiasm for administering violence beyond just the doors and windows. As a kid, he'd had several stints in borstal for GBH when the police were organised enough to do something about the young thugs in the manor. Olive should never have borrowed that tenner off Igor when she so badly needed to score. It was probably thousands she owed now. And then there was Kev whose face was criss-crossed by knife scars with a clear imprint of a bottle across his glass eye. He was after the hundred quid Olive had borrowed when the Fat Cunt was being especially obnoxious.

Olive straightened herself and glanced at her reflection in a shop window. As she did so, she also spotted the reflection of a small boy standing beside her.

“Oi!” Olive yelled. “What the fuck are you looking at?”

Of course, there was no real need to ask. Olive looked truly wretched. She was bruised and beaten and her nipples could hardly be hidden through her tee-shirt's torn cloth. If sartorial standards hadn't slid so dramatically in recent years, Olive would have

been arrested for vagrancy and indecency. Instead, there were few places these days where she'd look out of place.

As Olive staggered onwards in no particular direction she reflected on how much of a shitty mess her life was. It resembled nothing more than the sight of festering turds in a toilet that refused to flush. Her life was definitely not in a place where she'd like it to be. She had creditors who'd be happy to kill her if she didn't make good on her debts. She had a daughter who lived in the same squalor and filth as her mother. She was serially fucked by her serial boyfriends, when she wasn't being concurrently fucked at parties or, as had happened just now, in the pursuit of business. She lived in a shit hole in Hackney: itself the arsehole of London. There was nothing that was good in her life. Even the drugs she took to make life more bearable were just contributing to the same spiral of failure. When would she graduate from an occasional smoker to a full-fledged user with fucking hypodermic needles and the whole palaver of terminal drug abuse? Was this what her daughter, Emily, deserved in her short life: a mother who was well on the way to become a junkie, a whore and a vagrant?

But what could Olive do about it?

Without money there was no point in even thinking about catching a bus. You couldn't even get on without a ticket, let alone try and dodge paying the fare and risk a fine. But here she was in fucking West Ham fucking miles from home. And she didn't even have a phone with an online map to guide her back.

So she was fucked. Not just raped and robbed, but comprehensively fucked.

The best way she could think of getting home was to find a bus route that led back to Hackney and follow it bus-stop by bus-stop until she eventually saw something

she recognised. There was nothing familiar to her round here, although West Ham was just another shithole like Hackney Marshes. Although slightly better appointed, it couldn't be called prosperous. Beggars lined the roadside alongside street-merchants who cobbled shoes, stitched clothes, and sold dubiously obtained second-hand goods. Amongst the pawn-shops, charity stores and discount outlets, there were one or two traditional shops. There was a shop that sold batteries and reconditioned electrical goods. There was a cut-price supermarket with the traditional iron bars to protect it from armed intruders. There was even a newsagent that sold editions of the few remaining newspapers and magazines still available in hard copy. This wasn't the West End of London where the stores were manned by security guards who frisked you as you left, but it wasn't a bombed-out Tel Aviv slum either.

It took a long time for Olive to return home to Hackney. It was dark by the time she got back and her clothes were still saturated from having walked through a rain shower which had at least washed off some of the filth that had adhered to her skin. The walk hadn't been easy and she was sure there was a much better route than the way she'd come, but she'd stuck to the main roads where she was less likely to come to grief in an encounter with a violent teenage gang. Once you were outside your manor, you were fair game for any cunt who took a fancy to you. And there was fucking no one who'd protect you: most certainly not the fuzz who when they were in evidence at all were on their bicycles or guarding important buildings. The only time you'd ever seek the services of the police was when you knew it was as much to their advantage as yours.

Emily wasn't at home when Olive got back, but Oz was. He was sitting on the

sofa and flicking through the television channels.

“Where’s Emily?” Olive asked.

“Why the fuck should I know?” said Oz as he took a swig from the can of lager he had in his hand.

“Hasn’t my daughter been home at all while you’ve been here?”

“You mean your brat?” said Oz. “Thought you’d meant some other bint. She came back but left with her friend when she saw me. Some Arab kid... But never mind that. You got my stash?”

Olive shook her head. “I was robbed,” she said. “The fuckers robbed me.”

“You fucking liar!” said Oz angrily as he cracked his palm across Olive’s face.

“You scarpered with my dosh more like. Where’s my fucking stash?”

As Olive lay on the floor nursing a fresh bruise and a small bead of blood that was dripping from her nose, she could see that this was going to be a very long night.

**LVIII**  
**Molly & Mark**  
**2074**

Was the long-hoped-for economic boom now faltering? Molly wasn't sure, although everyone she knew was terribly nervous that it might be. Mark was still working, thank God. The economy of Korea and all the other countries in the Far East never seemed to suffer as much as those in Europe and certainly not as much as that of the Kingdom of England. All the same, Molly wasn't as lucky as her husband. The demand for her secretarial skills had faded once all the assets of the reluctant emigrants had been repatriated. She now had to make a living as a social housing rent collector in the London Borough of Hackney.

In an ideal world, this would never have been the kind of job Molly would choose voluntarily. It might pay better than frying Krispy Kod or Happy Haddock, but there wasn't a day when she didn't have to endure a torrent of abuse from at least one of the tenants. She was plagued by the constant and very real fear of being mugged for the cash she had to carry. Fortunately, she didn't have to enter the council estates unaccompanied. Hackney Borough Council had no wish to see its employees mugged or murdered. Molly's companion on her rent rounds was a stout man of Nigerian origin who was more than able to handle dangerous situations. If his imposing presence and physical strength weren't enough, he was provided with several official issue weapons that would stun rather than kill and which seemed to be nothing more than toys in the palms of his huge hands.

Daniel Obasanjo had never been to Nigeria. In fact, he confessed to Molly, as

the two of them toked on the quality grass that he brought with him and which they'd skinned up before entering the estates, the nearest he'd experienced to travelling abroad was a day-trip to Cardiff when he was a kid. And in those days the Welsh capital wasn't even in a foreign country. Daniel was in his element in the streets of Hackney, most specifically from Dalston Junction to London Fields. He seemed to know everyone even though there were very few he had a good word for. Molly at first assumed that it was his job as a rent collector for Hackney Borough Council that enabled him to get to know so many people, but she soon discovered that he had other jobs as well although he insisted they were just to make ends meet.

"I've got a wife *and* a girlfriend," he said as if it was just something he was burdened with. "Two women to feed and four kids. It's bloody hard work to keep them all fed and housed."

"Four children?" said Molly, who found just the one daughter enough of a handful.

"Well, four I've got to look after," Daniel admitted. "One's my girlfriend's, two are mine with my wife's and the last's a kid she'd had before I met her."

"So, you've got three children of your own," said Molly after she did the arithmetic.

"Not quite," said Daniel. "Those are just the ones I'm kind of obliged to take care of."

"Are there other children?"

"You don't want to know, darling."

Daniel was generally good-natured and his laugh was quite simply the loudest

Molly had ever heard. It was as outsized as his hands and belly. But Molly was sufficiently to see that Daniel had a mean streak. Sometimes he was stern to the point of being aggressive, especially when Molly made comments that he considered to be just a bit too close to the edge.

“So, you work as a bouncer as well...” said Molly after Daniel described a fracas at a nightclub he’d had to deal with.

“What of it?” said Daniel whose eyes narrowed to caution Molly from enquiring further. It was one thing to admit that he did extra work. It was another to elaborate on exactly what it entailed. His other jobs appeared to involve travelling round London and delivering parcels, as well as frequenting night clubs and other possibly more shady establishments.

“I have to warn you about the next lady,” said Daniel as they clambered up the stairwell to the fifteenth floor of the George Galloway Tower in the Mabley Green Estate. “She’s nothing but trouble. She’s always got an excuse for not paying her rent, but if you look inside her flat you can see she’s got the readies.”

“You can?”

“You don’t get a TV like she’s got without having some wedge. She says that all she’s got is what she earns at the Work Experience Centre but that’d never pay enough to afford a telly like that.”

“So how *does* she manage to afford it?”

“Don’t ask.”

“Why not?”

“You don’t want to know,” said Daniel, although at that moment this was



precisely what Molly wanted.

She glanced at the piece of paper in her hand. The next person's name was Olga Ogden. Daniel was right about one thing. This tenant was now six months in arrears. It was good for her that the borough council didn't increase the penalty for non-payment by much more than the rate of inflation. If she'd had a private sector landlord she'd now be faced with a massive and unaffordable debt.

Daniel knocked on the door.

There was no answer.

Daniel pushed open the letter box and looked inside.

"Someone's in," he said. "I'm sure of it. There's no junk mail piled up by the door."

Molly sighed. She knew by now what Daniel's routine would be. For the next ten minutes he continued to bash on the door, ring the doorbell (which probably wasn't working), and yell through the letter box. The hope was that the resident would eventually relent and open the door, especially when Daniel's threats of repossession became ever more specific and his promises of Mrs Minchin giving the tenant a fair hearing became ever more tempting.

The door opened, but the person who opened it wasn't Ms Ogden. It was a girl of about fifteen or so years old whose jeans were cut-off at the knee. She wore a skimpy tee-shirt with a picture of an eagle and the word *Osterreich* in Gothic print. Her eyes were sleep-swollen and she was bare-foot.

"Who're you?" Daniel asked as the girl held the door ajar and peered through the gap.

“Olive,” the girl answered.

Daniel glanced at the notes on his tablet that displayed Ms Ogden’s family details. “Is your mother in?”

“No,” said the girl. “At least I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so?”

“I dunno,” Olive continued. “You made so much noise she’d have woken up if she was in and I’ve not seen her.”

“Would you like to check, love?” said Molly reasonably. “It might be she’s still in bed even though it’s nearly eleven. We’ll stay here, don’t worry.”

“You’re from the Council, ain’t you?”

“Yes we are, dear.”

“Mum’s got nothing against the Council. It’s the other cunts she doesn’t like,” said the girl who seemed blissfully unaware that she’d uttered an obscenity. “I’ll see if she’s in bed, but don’t hold your breath. Even Mum can’t sleep through all the racket you just made.”

Daniel and Molly waited at the door while the teenage girl wandered about the flat yelling for her mother. Within a few moments she returned to the door.

“She’s not in,” the girl announced.

“That’s alright dear,” said Molly, who was the more diplomatic of the two rent collectors. “When she comes home, could you leave her this note?”

She handed Olive an envelope that had been printed out before Daniel and she had left the housing office.

“What’s this?” said the girl.

“It’s for your mother to read,” said Molly. “Please tell her that all she’s got to do is contact us at the office and we’ll help her sort things out.”

“Sort out what?” said the girl aggressively. “I thought you were from the Council. You’re not fucking Social Services are you? Or the Bill?”

“No, dear,” said Molly. “We’re just collecting rent for the flat and your mother’s not paid for a very long time.”

Olive looked alarmed. “You’re not gonna fucking kick us out, are you? You *cunts!* What have we ever done to bother you?”

Before Molly could continue to reassure Olive that she needn’t worry and that all would be well if her mother showed some inclination to pay back some of the rent she owed, Daniel, who’d been standing beside her and seemed rather impatient, interceded.

“It’s your mum’s final notice,” he said. “But you’ll see that when you open it after we’ve gone. When your mum gets home, you better tell her that we’ve been here and that she’d better pay up.”

“Or what?” said Olive insolently. “What then?”

“Then you’re fucked!” said Daniel.

Molly was alarmed. This wasn’t the sort of language she’d expect from a fellow council employee in the pursuit of his duty.

“Fucked?” Olive echoed meekly.

“You’ll be out on the street and it won’t just be your mum who’ll need to turn tricks. Then you’ll both get slapped by your daddy. Don’t think we’re shitting you. We mean business.”

“You’re just bluffing, man.”

“Don’t fucking tempt me, sweetheart,” said Daniel who turned round to signal that the conversation was over. He left Olive by the door with a stunned expression on her face.

Molly chased after her fellow rent collector. She didn’t feel confident enough to criticise him, but she was sure he’d overstepped some line or other with regards to acceptable behaviour towards tenants.

“What was that about?” she asked as ingenuously as she could.

“That’s the way to get the bloody tenants to pay rent,” said Daniel in a reasonable voice. “It’s just wasted effort otherwise. Unless Miss Ogden recognises the seriousness of her situation she won’t do anything to pay the money she owes. Hopefully her daughter will now make that very clear to her.”

“Won’t she just complain to the council that you’ve been swearing to her daughter?”

“Believe me, that kind of layabout scum swear so much they don’t even know they’re doing it.”

“But if she did...”

“Then nothing,” Daniel assured her. “No one would believe her anyway. But let’s be honest, you saw inside her flat didn’t you? There’s plenty of stuff she could pawn if she needs the cash. What’s the alternative? If we don’t make it clear to her, then she *will* be evicted and the streets of Hackney ain’t exactly the best place to be.”

“I guess not,” said Molly, who couldn’t help reflecting that this was also true of the council estates.

“Don’t get upset,” said Daniel with a comforting grin. “Look. D’you wanna toke? That’ll calm things for you.”

Molly looked at the ready-rolled spliff that Daniel was pulling out of one of the countless pockets of his expensive leather jacket.

“That might be just exactly what I need,” she admitted.

## **LIX**

### **Iris**

### **2056**

Although there was a sense that Iris had been lucky, it had to happen of course. For more than four years she'd managed to keep the same job at Omiota Biotech, but all it took was a business reorganisation by the company's new owners in Phnom Penh for her job to be made redundant. However much the rich Cambodian shareholders benefited from England's flexible and business friendly policies, especially the Kingdom's competitive tax rates for foreign companies based in the Far East, they also appreciated the ease with which they could sack the entire North London workforce and not be a single Riel out of pocket.

The consequence of such flexible employment policies was rather less welcome to Iris. She was unemployed and she had no severance pay. There was also no longer such a thing as Unemployment Benefit or Social Security these days. National Insurance was only there to provide a state pension when she retired, although if you believed what government ministers and the national press had to say you'd think that the state had never been so generous to those citizens who'd found a way to claim benefits. Iris envied such wealthy scroungers, but she'd never met one. If she had then maybe they could have told her how she could scrounge even a penny off the state. If there was just one of the Government of National Unity's proud boasts that was undeniably true it was how far the welfare state had been rolled back.

Iris' salary had never been high enough to put much aside when she was earning and now she belonged to the one in five who were officially unemployed she had to

find a way to provide for herself until she found her next job. So, along with the other supposedly workshy millions, Iris was now serving on a government-sponsored Work Experience Programme. She doubted whether this was experience that would ever help her find a proper job. Even though the remuneration was paltry and far less than what she used to earn, even this privilege was doled out only reluctantly. Not everyone could enrol on a Work Experience Scheme. Immigrants were especially unwelcome and it was unlikely that many would apply anyway given the daily risk of being picked out of the crowd and deported. As the posters proclaimed: *Illegal Immigrants had no rights*. And it was dreadfully easy for an immigrant's status to slip into illegality. All it took was to be sacked.

"It's fucking hard to keep a job once you've got one," said Oxana, another girl also privileged to attend the Work Experience Centre. "There's nothing that resembles job security these days. If my hubby wasn't so obviously English, I probably wouldn't be allowed to work here."

"Why's that?" wondered Iris as she tugged apart a copper coil from its plastic container so that the valuable metal could be recycled. "You're not a criminal or anything are you?"

"You didn't notice my name?" said Oxana with some scepticism. "My family's Russian. Or at least they were originally. Neither my mum or dad has ever been further east than Margate, but they still gave me a Russian name. The bastards!"

"Isn't your daughter's name also Russian?" Iris remarked as she tossed the copper into the designated bucket and started to tear apart the plastic cover that sealed the defunct electrical components. "At least I think Olga's a Russian name."

“When she was younger it didn’t seem such a big deal,” said Oxana. “And her dad was a proper Russian. He was born in Ostrovnoy, which is somewhere *fucking* cold near Finland. He came over to find work in the City of London, which is ironic since nowadays more people go to Moscow for jobs than would ever dream of coming here.”

“So where’s he now?” wondered Iris.

Oxana picked up an old television from the conveyor belt and worked her knife into the seam between the screen and its frame. “I dunno,” she admitted. “We never got married anyway. He dumped Olga on me and then fucked off. He probably had a wife back in Russia. He’d never have told me if he had. Anyway, if he was still living in England he’d have been picked up by now and bundled off in a van. The only people with foreign names that don’t get treated like shit are those from China and Taiwan and those other Far Eastern places.”

“And your husband? He’s OK, isn’t he?”

“Don’t keep asking me questions,” said Oxana aggressively. “I don’t fucking know. He ran off years ago. He’s probably gone back North where he came from. And if he’s got any sense he’ll have stayed on the train and crossed the border to Scotland. They don’t have so many unemployed up there, do they?”

“There are probably fewer Scots than there are unemployed people in England,” Iris admitted.

The day was long, but at the end of it Iris and Oxana and the others all got paid cash. Although it was scarcely the kind of work Iris would have chosen, in truth it was no more boring than her work at the biotech lab. There was a sense of satisfaction in pulling apart the electronic goods that rolled past on the conveyor belt and dropping its



constituent parts into separate buckets and passing on what she couldn't get at to those who had the tools for more difficult resource extraction. In an age where minerals and metals were getting ever more expensive, the value of what could be salvaged was now well worth the effort of labour-intensive extraction. Iris was grateful that she was working in a factory and that the goods she was handling had only recently been thrown away. Some Work Experience Centres were based at landfills where the valuable metals and plastics were thoroughly contaminated with the overwhelming stench of rotting foodstuff. Some of the landfill waste was over a century old and Iris had heard that very good bonuses were awarded to anyone who found anything of archaeological significance like a 1980s computer or an intact and readable paperback novel.

Iris waved goodbye to Oxana at the exit to the Work Experience Centre where her sullen gawky daughter was waiting for her. Although Oxana wasn't much older than Iris, her daughter was already almost old enough to have left school. In fact, since the government had lowered the age of compulsory education in the interests of promoting a flexible economy, perhaps Olga had already left school.

Iris wandered home in the February dusk, thankful that it was dry and that she didn't need to blow cash on the bus fare home. It was less than an hour's walk to the house she shared with Ellie along with Ollie and Austin: a gay couple who were forever fondling one another and kept Iris awake at night with their incessant fucking. How could two men make so much noise together? In their case it was grunting, thumping and the occasional yell rather than the full-throated screams Iris associated with Ember who used to share the apartment before she moved up north.

Iris noticed her neighbours' noise rather more ever since she'd split up from her

boyfriend. Malcolm had become quite a recluse and much less fun to be around. He'd become increasingly exasperated by the frequent ID checks he often had to submit to when he travelled on public transport. Officers from the regular police force and the recently instituted Migrants and Aliens Control Bureau had plenty of incentives to hunt out illegals as the bonus they'd earn was worth as much as their salary. Malcolm dreaded what might happen to him if one day he ever forgot to carry his ID. At best, he'd have to spend a day or so in a detention centre. Even if they didn't rough him up a bit, as was very likely, there was a fair chance that just missing a single day at the office where he worked as a support engineer would be enough for him to lose his job. Especially so if his employer discovered that he'd spent his unauthorised day off in police custody.

It wasn't easy for a girl to find a boyfriend these days and Iris was determined not to use the internet to do so. She wasn't *that* desperate. Most of the old channels for meeting people were being banned by the bastard government. And since Prime Minister Eisenegger had announced that the General Election would be postponed until the ongoing State of Emergency was declared to be over, this was a situation that was unlikely to change any time soon. There were no nightclubs. Pubs enforced a door policy that effectively banned all groups of more than five people. And ever since Hollywood went bankrupt as a result of the continuing crisis in the United States and President Hannity's new directives on obscenity and incitement to insurrection, the cinemas never showed anything that Iris would actually pay to see. Even if things hadn't got so bad in the traditional home of cinema, the English government would have banned all films that weren't just harmless family entertainment.

Thank God they couldn't fuck up the internet.

At least not yet.

Only Ollie and Austin were in the living room when Iris got home. They were watching a light entertainment talent competition show that had the couple hooting with excitement and which, even without the two men's excited commentary, would have annoyed the shit out of Iris.

"Where's Ellie?" she asked. Her best friend was normally back from her undemanding clerical job at Croydon Borough Council by now.

"Didn't you know?" said Austin. "She's moved out."

Iris dropped her bag to the ground. Why hadn't Ellie told her?

"Moved out?" she asked with alarm.

Was she doomed to share the house by herself with two men who when they weren't fucking one another commandeered the living room in order to watch crap television programs and listen to the kind of dance music that gave the genre a bad name?

"Yeah," said Ollie. "She's gone to live with her boyfriend, Youssef. Didn't she tell you yesterday?"

"I wasn't here, was I?" said Iris. She'd been visiting her mother in Surrey and had chosen to sleep on the maternal couch rather than face the perils of the last train back to Central London. "She could have phoned to tell me."

Iris was very upset. This wasn't what close friends did. What was going on?

After many attempts at calling Ellie on her mobile from her lonely bedroom, she eventually got through to her friend. Although Iris was so upset that she was on the

verge of tears, she choked back her voice. In the quiet of the bedroom, she could hear Austin's loud whooping laugh from the living room and the more muffled sound of a yodelling sheep.

"What's happened, Ellie?" she asked. "Why did you leave?"

"It's because of Youssef," said her friend. "I tried to call you but every time I tried the network was down."

This was more than likely. Phone networks were nowhere near as reliable as they used to be. It was quite normal for phone and internet communications to be paralysed for several hours or even days at a time.

"So, what's the deal with Youssef?" said Iris. "It's not like you've known him long. And you were screwing with that Australian guy last week..."

"Don't *ever* tell Youssef that," said Ellie. "Anyway it's different with him. And it's not true about Youssef. We've been together for months."

Iris had to accept that even a week was a long time for Ellie given her extensive history of sexual relations, so three or four months must seem like a lifetime to her.

"Even so," said Iris. "That's not a reason to suddenly leave the flat and abandon me to Ollie, Austin and fucking retro disco heaven. What's happened and why'd you leave so suddenly?" She added rather spitefully, despite herself: "And you've still got next month's rent to pay..."

"Yeah, I know," said Ellie. "But I had no choice. It was the fucking M & A lot, you know: Migrants and Aliens. Youssef turned up late for work because the buses were all cancelled after that freak snowstorm last week and they sacked him straight away. But that wasn't all. Because employers have to report anyone who they've

employed who's no longer working for them, the fucking authorities smelt easy pickings and within a couple of days they were round his place and threatening to kick him out the country right away. They even slapped him about a bit. They're fucking bastards..."

"Yeah," said Iris whose sympathy was rather strained at the moment. "I feel sorry for Youssef and all. It's not nice I'm sure. But what's his misfortune got to do with you?"

"The only way they weren't going to repatriate Youssef back to Morocco, where there's been a war for years between the Berbers and the Arabs and the Monarchists and the Islamists and fucking everyone else... the only way they weren't going to do that was if he was married to someone... and it's not as if he's even lived in Morocco for something like fifteen years... so, you know..."

"You and Youssef got married?"

"Yeah."

"So he could stay in the country?"

"That's right."

"And you had to do it quickly or he'd be on the next train across the channel back to North Africa."

"Yeah. We had to have a shotgun wedding in a registrar in Peckham. It was only me and Youssef and a couple of guys off the street we paid to act as witnesses. People do that for a living now, you know. They stand around outside registry offices in the hope they'll be needed as witnesses."

"You did all that without telling me?"

“I desperately tried to get hold of you, Iris. I did. I just didn’t know which Work Experience Centre you’d be at.”

“Was it just to tell me that I’d be stranded in a house with the disco divas?”

“It was more than that, Iris. I wanted to ask you to be my bridesmaid.”

“Oh,” said Iris, who couldn’t be angry with Ellie any more.

Even though she had no intention to ever get married herself, this was quite different. And rather touching.

**LX**  
**Karen**  
**2064**

This wasn't Karen's first time, but she wasn't sure the same could be said for Olga. The young woman seemed rather nervous however obviously she was someone whose sexual experiences already extended well beyond the vanilla. Karen also had doubts about the nature of Olga's relationship with Oscar. Karen and Kevin had been an item for well over a year now, but it was hard to imagine Olga being the kind of woman Oscar would normally associate with.

Karen disposed of her clothes almost as soon as she'd arrived at Oscar's West London apartment. So while Olga was still struggling out of her cheap tacky outfit in the living room, she sidled up to her host who was fussing around with a crate of whiskey bottles in the kitchen. He was still wearing his boxer shorts.

"She's a bit young, isn't she?" said Karen.

Oscar leaned to one side and kissed her on the lips. Karen was gratified to see that lecherous anticipation had already stiffened his cock. "*You* don't have to fuck her, you know," he said. "I know you're not the type to munch the rug even when, as in Olga's case, there's no hair between her legs."

"That's even worse, Oscar," said Karen good-humouredly. "I don't want to be known as a cradle-snatcher. She isn't your girlfriend, is she? I can't see a company director like you going arm-in-arm with a girl like Olga..."

"And what's a girl like Olga like then?"

Karen struggled to find the right words to describe the woman, but decided that

since she was with a good friend and one who'd fucked her many times before she could safely use the word that was at the tip of her tongue. "She's a bit *common*, don't you think? I don't think she's been to university or any kind of further education. Is she a prostitute?"

"Is that what you think she is?" said Oscar with a teasing smile. "Have you got anything against prostitution?"

"Not *per se*," Karen replied. "But if we're having sex together, the four of us, I'm not sure I was expecting to have to share you with a prostitute."

"Relax," said Oscar. "Olga's not a prostitute."

"So, is she your girlfriend?"

"Sort of," said Oscar. "But she's not the only one. And I suspect that she's not after me for my looks alone..."

Karen nodded. Oscar had a bit of a paunch. It wasn't enormous but it was slightly off-putting. And, like Kevin, it was a long time since he'd sported a full head of hair. Just a glance around the apartment revealed enough reason for why Olga might be attracted to him. The Vietnamese biotech company for which he was London director made sure he was well remunerated.

"Kevin will like his pussy to be a bit fresher for a change," Karen admitted.

"It'll do him no end of good," said Oscar. He nodded towards a series of chopped-up lines of white powder on the kitchen table by a freshly uncorked bottle of red wine. "Fancy a hit?"

"Not quite my scene, Oscar."

"Well, it most certainly is Olga's," said Oscar. "I don't think she even comes to



life until her nose is well and truly stuffed with chalk.” He poked his head round the corner of the door to the living room. “I’ve got some choice Columbian, sweetheart.”

“I was wondering when you’d offer any,” said Olga ungraciously. She leapt out of her seat and scampered into the kitchen. She was a thin woman, although not exactly malnourished. She bowed her head over the kitchen table and used the crisp fifty dollar bill that was rolled up like a straw to Hoover up a line. The almost worthless US currency was typical of Oscar’s ironic sense of humour.

Karen noticed the tell-tale signs of recent motherhood on Olga’s hips and bosom. “Do you have any children, dear?” she asked sympathetically.

“So fucking what if I have,” said Olga aggressively. “What business is it of yours?”

Karen was rather put out by Olga’s response. Most mothers loved to talk about their children. All she’d wanted to do was find an area of mutual interest. How should she respond? “I’m a teacher,” she said at last. “I’m always interested in children.”

“Well you won’t have seen Olive much at school,” said Olga. “She can’t be fucked to go and I can’t be fucked to make her. She’s a lazy cunt.”

“So your daughter’s called Olive,” said Karen who was already regretting the turn this conversation was taking. “How old is she?”

“I’ll be fucked if I know,” said Olga. “Guess she must be four or five or something. She’s already a fucking tearaway. It’s all I can do to keep her out of my hair.”

Karen reflected that at such a young age the child was also too young to make rational or informed decisions about the need for education. She took an immediate

dislike to a mother with such an irresponsible attitude, but charitable as always, she guessed she should also make allowances for Olga's consumption of coke and whatever else she might use.

At the same pace as Oscar strolled towards Olga and grasped her bare buttock in his large palm and tenderly peppered her face with cheeks, Karen withdrew from the kitchen with the bottle of red wine. She returned to the living room where Kevin was sitting on the sofa, also in his boxer shorts, while watching a television news story about failed cities in the southern United States. Karen poured Kevin a glass of red wine and handed it to him.

"Here y'are," she said.

"What do you think about Olga?" said Kevin, who'd clearly been thinking about other things than the plight of Mexican immigrants.

Karen poured herself a glass and discreetly placed the bottle on the living room table just beside Oscar's e-book reader which was still bookmarked on the business pages of the Financial Times.

"I'm sure she'll be the perfect fuck," she said diplomatically.

"Do you think that's the only thing that matters?" Kevin asked.

"In a sense and for tonight only, yes I do. I can't see her as a lifelong friend but if she's like what I think she is she'll be one of the best women you'll ever have had sex with in your life..."

"Better than you?"

"I'm getting on a bit now, Kevin, in case you hadn't noticed."

"You're not the only one," said Kevin sadly.

“Do you need some medical assistance?” asked Karen who directed her eyes towards her handbag and the little blue pills they both knew she kept there.

“Let’s hope not,” said Kevin. “Anyway, if I can’t fix it up with Olga, I’m sure you’ll be able to do your usual magic on the old boy.”

“Well, let’s see your cock then,” Karen commanded. “You let me and Olga walk round in the nude but you guys keep your assets hidden. There’ll be no fun at all tonight unless they get some fresh air.”

Kevin nodded and obediently pulled down his boxers to show a penis that was still somewhat shrivelled.

“Fuck!” said Karen with genuine disappointment. “You’ve got to do better than that.”

She knelt down in front of her boyfriend and colleague so that his cock was at tongue-height. She knelt forward and took his penis between her lips and run her tongue up and down its length. She repeated this slowly and methodically and steadily brought it back to life. Karen sometimes thought this job was like pumping up an air pillow except that inflation wasn’t always guaranteed. This time, Kevin didn’t spring to life quite as rapidly as he sometimes did. Karen let Kevin’s cock slip out of her mouth.

“Let me have a go,” said Olga softly who proceeded to kneel beside the couple and take Kevin’s penis in her hand.

“Sure,” said Karen who leaned back but kept a reassuring hand on Kevin’s thigh. It was always instructive to see someone else at work.

One thing was for sure. Olga knew what she was doing. She’d obviously done this many times before. Even though Karen thought she was well experienced in the art

of making love, she recognised that there were others who were just born natural. They just had an innate understanding of what to do with a man's cock and they lacked any sense of inhibition. Olga was sloppy and energetic, but she did wonders to Kevin's cock which was soon bursting at the seams and ready to go.

Then Olga placed a finger firmly somewhere between his testicles and his anus. She glanced at Karen with a smile. "You or me?" she asked.

Karen nodded. "You've done the hard work," she said. "It's you who deserves it most."

"You know," said Olga whose smile broadened with anticipation, "I think you're fucking right."

Karen backed off as Olga took sole control of the situation and became aware that Oscar had entered the living room now totally naked and with his cock twitching madly. She strode over to him, while also watching Olga slowly impale herself on her boyfriend's cock.

"Do you wanna fuck?" she asked Oscar affectionately.

"In a moment," said Oscar as his arm embraced Karen's waist. "Let's first watch Olga in action."

"She's like a porn star," said Karen approvingly as she observed Olga pump herself up and down on Kevin's penis while she supported her body on his thighs and coaxed yet more life out of it whilst also judging exactly the right time to press firmly on the sweet spot she knew so well would forestall premature ejaculation.

"I think she's dabbled in it," said Oscar. "I don't think it would ever be the sex that would be the problem for her. I think it's the acting she couldn't handle."

“*Acting?*” wondered Karen who’d never watched enough of any one porno movie to appreciate the stars’ acting skills.

“Everyone wants to get into porn these days,” said Oscar. “Being able to fuck without embarrassment just isn’t enough these days.”

“So what do you want me to do?” wondered Karen who stroked Oscar’s penis while Kevin was pistoning back and forth into Olga. The girl had spread her legs apart and helped Kevin’s thrusts with occasional nudges from behind his arse with her entwined heels. “Should I join my boyfriend or should you and I get busy?”

“Don’t be in such a hurry, sweetheart,” said Oscar. “We’ve got all evening.”

“Just a quick poke,” pleaded Karen who was feeling that her needs were being rather neglected as she watched Kevin’s cock thrust in and out of Olga’s mouth who meanwhile had thrust several fingers into his surprisingly pliable anus.

“All right, sweetheart,” said Oscar whose cock was clearly more than ready and which, as Karen guessed, would retain its vigour for rather longer during the hours to come than nature had ever intended. “Just lie back and relax.”

**LXI**  
**Roland**  
**2089**

“Is it true that you were once a gardener?” asked the affluent woman whose conscience had been sufficiently pricked to shove a few sizeable notes into the collection box chained to the counter.

“Not only a gardener,” Roland admitted. “I’ve also been a teacher and a hospital nurse, but I guess this was the kind of work I was always destined to do.”

“You’re like a modern-day St. Theresa of Calcutta,” the woman continued. “I don’t know how many times I’ve passed by your relief centre and never thought of stopping and making a donation. Are you sure my car is safe here?” She nodded towards her ostentatious battery-driven vehicle beside which her chauffeur was standing.

“Absolutely,” Roland said. “I also have a form here if you wish to make future donations. Any donation you make is totally tax-free. It’s the only assistance we get from the government.”

“I don’t think I need to bother with that,” said the woman who nevertheless took the proffered form. “Taxes are so low these days that it’s basically not worth the effort to fill in a form. But tell me, why did you choose to leave the quiet contemplative life of gardening to work with the vagabonds and scum of London?”

“I haven’t totally given up gardening,” said Roland with a beatific smile as he gestured towards a flower bed just outside the relief centre that was somewhat incongruous on the dust-blown, pot-holed streets of East London. “And anyway, not all the poor wretches who come here for food, shelter and medical attention are either scum

or vagabonds.”

“Well, I guess there are some diamonds in the rough,” said the woman as a parting comment as she walked back to her plush Indian-manufactured car.

“They don’t make cars like that in England anymore,” commented one of the men who regularly took advantage of Roland’s centre. He wasn’t just old, he was riddled with scars from the recent smallpox epidemic. “We used to make cars in England, you know. A long time ago. Before I was even born that was.”

“Country’s gone to the fucking dogs,” said an equally old woman who had no teeth and wore ragged clothes that were several sizes too large and hung off her spindly frame. “Britain used to be Great. It’s not Great anymore.”

“It’s not even called Britain anymore if you haven’t been paying attention,” said another man whose sagging skin was evidence that he’d once been plump or even obese. He now resembled a deflated balloon. “When’s the soup coming?”

“It’ll be here soon,” said Roland. “There’s a stew today as well. All vegetarian, I’m afraid. Meat’s far too expensive.”

“It’s not proper meat anyway,” said a thin woman who was probably in her fifties, but whose grey hair was already falling out in clumps from a combination of malnutrition and the ravages of a life spent evading life’s little problems through drugs. “You wouldn’t want to eat what they call meat these days. It’s fucking diseased. It’s like Frankenstein food.”

“It’s still food,” said Roland diplomatically. “When there’s not much of it around we have to be grateful for what we get. Now, if you’ll excuse me I’ve got other things to do.”

Roland walked through the door at the back of the reception area which, when it was a supermarket in more prosperous times, had been where shelves of goods heaved under the weight of affordable provisions. Now the public space of the abandoned shop was put aside to provide shelter for the most needy of the many hundreds of poor and homeless who relied on the relief centre for sustenance. The sad thing was that there was no genuine choice any longer, except starvation or death. There were no jobs. There were no government handouts. There was nothing. When you hit bottom, there was literally nowhere to go except ever deeper into the mire.

“We need some advice,” said Osama, a male nurse whose dedication to the drop-in centre over the years was almost as great as Roland’s. “We’ve got a case that we can’t really tell whether it’s genuine.”

“We should give succour to everyone in need,” said Roland not so much as advice but as a reminder to himself of the ideals that had persuaded him to leave his relatively secure job as an English teacher for an uncertain future of doling out soup, medicine and shelter to the desperate people he’d walked past every day on his way to the poorly-funded high school where he used to work.

“We’ve also got to prioritise,” said Osama.

“What’s the problem? Are you seriously considering turning someone away?”

“This woman is just dreadful. She swears constantly. She’s rude to everyone. And when she’s not abusing other people she’s forever looking for ways to abuse herself. She’s already stolen some morphine and found a vein to inject the stuff in. But she’s also desperately ill. I’m not sure but I think she should be hospitalised.”

“I take it she’s got no health insurance,” said Roland who was as aware as



anyone that there was no free health provision without an insurance policy. Few people could afford to pay the cost of medical care unless they were properly insured.

“I’d be surprised if she’s ever worked a single day in her life.”

Roland followed Osama into the makeshift ward upstairs which would have once been a store-room. There were two rows of metal-frame beds where between tattered foam mattresses and polyester duvets were nestled patients who, if they’d been able to afford the expense, should really have been in a hospital. None of the patients were in a condition to care about the quality of either the mattress or the duvet. The most distressing aspect of the work Roland had chosen for himself was the need to dispose of dead bodies when there were no friends or family to take on the responsibility.

It was easy to tell which the troublesome patient was. It was in bed 15, marked *Olive*: which may or may not have been the woman’s real name. She was still less than thirty years old, but drugs and other forms of bodily abuse, not to mention years of sleeping rough, had added many extra years to her apparent life. Her cheeks were drawn in. Several teeth, especially at the front, were now missing. One of her eyes was half-closed and was persistently weeping. Her frame was emaciated. Needle-marks scarred her arms and legs. Much of her thin hair was splitting apart and falling out. Once upon a time Olive might well have been a pretty woman, but now she would attract very few punters if she tried to make a living by selling her body. Roland suspected from the health problems that beset her that this was something she’d relied on rather too often.

“AIDS?” asked Roland.

“HIV Positive, but not AIDS,” said Osama. “She’s suffered from gonorrhoea

and syphilis in the recent past, and she's got Chlamydia. She's also got a heroin addiction which is aggravated by some other past addictions for which heroin was a kind of remedy."

"Shall I speak to her?" asked Roland.

"You're welcome to try."

"Olive," said Roland as he bent down. "How do you feel?"

The woman glared up at with a frighteningly malevolent glare. "What the fuck is it to you how I feel," she said.

"This is a relief centre," continued Roland. "We give care and attention to the needy. These are people who are in such desperate straits that even sleeping rough is no longer a choice."

"Yeah, so what?" said Olive. "It's a dumping hole for the fucked and shat on. I know all that."

"If you're not in genuine need I'm going to have to ask you to leave, Olive," said Roland. "There are many others who require help and assistance, and you're taking up precious space."

"Are you gonna kick me out, you cunt?"

"As I said there are many others who'd very much like the benefit of a warm bed for the night..."

"You're a cunt," said Olive whose repertoire of expletives was far from exhausted. "A *fucking* cunt. You can't do that!"

"I'm afraid I can," said Roland. "So I'll ask again. How are you feeling?"

"I feel like shit," she said and just to demonstrate the truth of her words she

broke into a coughing fit which brought up some blood-specked phlegm.

“I see,” said Roland who was now convinced of the truth of her words. “Well, I’d advise you to rest. Don’t stir yourself. Just close your eyes and try and sleep.”

“It’s not easy without fucking morphine.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Roland.

He wandered back to Osama. “I might have been a nurse once,” he said, “but I was never a doctor. What do you think?”

“Difficult to tell,” Osama said. “Those who’ve developed a kind of immunity to illicit drugs are often so used to suffering that it’s hard to tell what they’re really feeling. But she’s distressing the other patients. What should I do?”

“Move her into my bedroom,” said Roland. “Move anything out of the way that she might wreck or that she might use to damage herself.”

“Where will *you* sleep?” asked Osama who was rather more concerned for his colleague’s welfare than Olive’s.

“I’ll find somewhere,” said Roland. “I could stay with Maggie, my girlfriend, if she’ll let me. But you saw Olive. She’s an absolute mess. Do you think she’ll even survive the night?”

“She’s got enough energy and spite in her to live forever, wouldn’t you think?” said Osama. “I’ve heard enough bad language in my life, but she’s probably doubled it. If she’s got the energy to swear, you think she’d be all right.”

“I’m not sure,” said Roland. “I think she’s kind of on autopilot. Her reflexes are so conditioned that swearing is just natural to her. And in fact what I *do* think, besides the fact that I should put those in dire need ahead of my personal comfort, is that she

might very well not be troubling our relief centre for very much longer. And we have a sworn duty of care for those most in need.”

“What do you mean?”

“You saw the blood she spat up. You can see how dreadful she looks. I think it’ll be a miracle if she’s even alive tomorrow morning.”

**LXII**  
**Olive**  
**2084**

Olive was dreaming about her daughter. It wasn't the sort of dream she often had. It was a dream not so much about the mother she was, but the mother she'd liked to have been. And that was a mother who would sacrifice everything for her child and ensure she was blessed with the best education that money could buy. A mother who stood by Emily's side through thick and thin. One who cared more for her daughter's welfare than her own.

It wasn't a dream about a mother who'd dumped her daughter with Emily's great-grandmother, Babushka Oxana, and sped off before Gran could turn down the dubious honour of taking care of the child.

On the other hand, Gran didn't seem especially surprised by this turn of events. "I suppose it's just got too much for you, dear," she said beaming a warm smile at the little girl. Emily had always liked Babushka Oxana: possibly more than any of her other relatives. "But what about your mum? Wouldn't she be just as good as me?"

"You must be fucking joking, Gran," said Olive. "She's a fucking waste of space. All Mum ever does is mainline and turn tricks for arseholes."

"Not like you, of course," said Babushka Oxana sardonically, despite knowing that any hint of reproof would be totally lost on her wayward granddaughter.

"Fuck no," said Olive affronted. "My mum's a fucking pin-cushion. I'd never stick needles in my arm and I'm not a fucking whore."

But now, just two weeks later, Olive wasn't sure about the truth of either

assertion. Survival would be well nigh impossible if she wasn't willing to exchange blowjobs for cash and she wasn't sure whether she might not make just one small step further down the road of addiction since smack wasn't doing quite the same business for her now that it once did.

Life was tough. Fucking tough. And she didn't have much choice. Either she would remain homeless or end up dead. Olive wasn't gonna give satisfaction to the fuckers who were after her for the debts she could never pay. She wasn't gonna be one of those who'd be found rotting under a pile of garbage in a skip. Or tossed into a canal to float with the turds and ancient rusted shopping trolleys. Or thrown out of the top-floor window of a tower block.

She was a survivor.

But survival in South London so far from her manor was no picnic when she had nowhere to stay. The only cash she had was what she got from giving blowjobs and by trading what she'd managed to salvage from bins or nick from shops.

It took Olive a few moments to work out where she was when she'd opened her eyes after her sweet dreams of maternal responsibility. And that was despite the fact that this wasn't the first night that she'd slept under a bush in the park. And as this was a park she'd had to pay to enter, she was less likely to get fucked over than on any other open area of grass.

Olive wasn't the only one who'd been forced to sleep in the park, but the authorities were generally inclined to pass a blind eye to this abuse of municipal facilities. Such dereliction of duty was a rather more remunerative policy than to try and enforce the borough's by-laws.

South Croydon was no paradise, but Olive was relatively safe here. She couldn't see Fat Cunt Ozzibanjo wander this far south from Dalston Junction. Nor would Oz go somewhere that wasn't either walkable or on a familiar bus route. But for the foreseeable future Olive would have to keep a wary eye out for Igor, Kev and that psycho cunt Hombre. And knowing what these fuckers would be like once they discovered that she'd defaulted on her debts that future would be pretty much for the rest of her life.

Today was yet another day for Olive to get through. Already the life she'd once led in Hackney now seemed comparatively golden. The few times she'd spent with Emily when the child wasn't grizzling or being sullen or just keeping out of the way of whichever bloke Olive had brought back for a fuck: those were precious moments. It wasn't all just wiping snot from her nose, cleaning shit from her arse-cheeks or locking her in the bathroom to keep her out of the way. For instance, there was that time she took Emily to the zoo with the proceeds of a drug transaction that had gone totally without a hitch. That was a happy day. Emily loved the meerkats and the giraffes, but most of all the goats in the children's zoo. Would Olive ever know moments like that with her daughter ever again?

Olive had to take care of her appearance. It was more important now she was sleeping rough than when she'd had her own home. She couldn't wander around in the buff now. If she had any hope of attracting the sort of john that wouldn't fuck her over, she had to keep herself clean and tidy. She squeezed her sleeping bag into her rucksack and applied lipstick while she regarded her reflection in a cracked make-up mirror. She could use the loo in a shopping mall or department store, but she had to be careful. If

she used the same ones too often, she risked being kicked out forever. But those were the best places to go for a wash and to clean her teeth. Olive had to be more organised than she'd ever been before, but what she needed, especially before autumn set in, was to find somewhere to stay that was more comfortable than under a bush in a park.

The first thing she had to do was get some cash. Anywhere was fine if you kept a good look out for business, although the streets with the best prospects were also where there was the most competition from the regular working girls, some of whom were at least as desperate as her.

"You looking for something?" Olive asked a sun-tanned man wearing a suede jacket and chinos who was walking past the spot she'd claimed for herself on the Selsdon Road.

The man looked startled. He probably hadn't expected a young woman like Olive to address him. He wore wire-framed spectacles, his hair was specked with grey and he was dragging a suitcase on wheels behind him.

"You're very perceptive," he said in a weird Northern England accent. "I *am* looking for something. I wonder if you could help me."

What the fuck was this? Was this cunt a fucking mong? Of course she could fucking help him. As long as it didn't involve her being poked up the arse. At least, not without a good strong condom.

"I'm sure I can," said Olive. "What do you want?"

"Well, I'm new here," he said. "I'm looking for Park Hill Road. I'm renting a place down there."

Hold on, thought Olive. This was too much fucking information all at once.



What was this fucking punter trying to say? Did he want a blowjob at the place he was renting in Park Hill Road?

“Yeah, I know the road,” she said. “It’s just round the corner from here.”

“Where is it?” he asked. “Can you show me?”

“I’ll take you there if you like,” said Olive. And then we can find somewhere private, she thought to herself.

“That’s very kind of you,” the man said. “I come from Otley, near Leeds, and I haven’t been in London very long. It’s all very new to me.”

“What’s it like up there?” wondered Olive who’d never been further north than Wood Green. “Is it like it is down here? All rubbish?”

“Things have got tough up there, of course. But it’s the same everywhere, of course. That’s why I’ve come down here. I found a job in Croydon and my employer’s organised somewhere for me to rent. I’ve not seen it yet. I hope it’s all right.”

“Well, here’s Park Hill Road,” said Olive as she pointed at a street sign. “Which one’s your doss?” The bloke showed her an address he’d written on a post-it note. “That’s right at the other end of the road.”

“Well, thanks for your help and everything,” said the bloke who put the note back in his pocket. “I don’t want to trouble you any longer.”

You don’t get away that easy, you cunt.

“I’ll walk with you to your new home,” said Olive. “Is it a flat or are you renting a whole house?”

“It’s a house,” said the bloke. “It’s probably too large for me. The company’s paying so I can’t complain. But you really shouldn’t put yourself out.”

What kind of div was this bloke? “It’s no trouble at all,” said Olive.

She walked along with her new companion as he chatted freely and amiably with her. He was called Omar, so Olive reasoned that with a name like that he’d probably not got his complexion from a sun-bed or a foreign holiday. Although Omar wasn’t your usual London moniker, Olive couldn’t place the name with any particular location. Perhaps all men were called that up in Leeds.

The critical issue though was to determine what Omar wanted. It was a bit tiresome him playing like he was hard to get. That was something that would have to be factored into whatever she got him to pay. Still, the general rule was that the longer a john kept you dangling the more you could squeeze out of him.

“Well, here we are,” said Omar when they walked up to the gate of an aging twentieth century house surrounding by a high metal wall to keep out burglars and squatters. “Thanks for your help, er...”

“Olive.”

“Yes, Olive,” he said. “I’ll just see if the key fits...”

Fuck! This was tedious. When was he going to ask her in? Olive became worried he might not and that she’d have wasted nearly fifteen minutes on a fucking Arab or Indian jerk from up north somewhere.

“What I wouldn’t do for a cup of tea,” she said, as if that was all she’d be happy with.

“Tea?” said Omar naively. “You might just be in luck. I’ve got some tea bags. Let’s just hope the landlady’s left me a kettle.”

“I’m sure she has,” said Olive who frankly didn’t give a fuck whether she had

or not. How long was this bloke gonna keep teasing her? The dread was beginning to grow in her mind that perhaps he was genuinely green, that he really didn't know what the deal was. That would be more of a challenge.

After sorting through several keys and locks and opening two or three sets of doors, Omar finally let himself and his tea-hungry friend in. However, when Olive saw the domestic bliss inside a new plan began to form in her head. It was a very long time since she'd last been inside a house that was so well-appointed. There were sofas, cushions and tables all in good condition with a new television screen on the wall that was nearly twice the size of the one she used to own before Igor took it away with him in lieu of his debts. There were pictures on the wall with frames around them and even some flowers in a vase. Everything smelt fresh and clean.

"It's very basic," said Omar with a slight tone of disappointment in his voice.

"It's very nice," said Olive with a choke in her voice.

"How about that tea?" Omar asked as he opened his suitcase and pulled out a packet of tea. It wasn't a brand Olive had ever heard of before. It wasn't Lidl, WalMart or CostCo, but something called Darjeeling. It must be a fucking northern supermarket chain.

"Actually I feel a bit faint," said Olive who now saw her chance to get a place that she'd like to sleep in for the next night or so where Igor, Kev and Hombre could never find her. "You don't mind if I just rest on the sofa."

"Not at all," said the unsuspecting Omar. "You just lie down. I see there's both a kettle and a tea pot here. I'll brew us both a cup of tea. Would you like that?"

"There's nothing I'd like more in the whole world," said Olive.

And this time she most definitely wasn't lying.

## **LXIII**

### **Sir Norman**

### **2079**

There was so much to adjust to now he'd returned to England. The list was long and mostly rather distressing. For a start, this wasn't the same country as the one he'd escaped from just over a year before. At that time it had been a Kingdom. Now there was no longer even a Royal Family. He was now a citizen of the Republic of England. What next? Would the English provinces also demand political independence and leave only the Home Counties under Westminster's sway.

The worst was that he was no longer a man with a title. Lord Newbury was no more. He could use the title, of course, but it was reduced to a meaningless honorific. Perversely, as a concession to demands from the press barons who'd shafted him more completely than did any Congolese male prostitute, the government of the Republic of England had elected to allow nobles to retain their knighthoods. This was justified on the basis that the title was associated with desert rather than heredity. But without a monarch to whom one could bend the knee and be dubbed a knight, Sir Norman would now be one of the last free-born Englishmen to hold the title.

Sir Norman's view was that the loss of royal status diminished the essence of the nation whose traditions he'd worked so hard to defend. Nobody had much respect for a National Constitution as opposed to a Constitutional Monarch. This much was obvious from the hurriedly redesigned airport signs and the parliamentary insignia that substituted a thoroughly uninspiring image of a threadbare lion for the grand crest that once denoted a great nation. It was almost as bad as the crappy red cross on a white

background that Sir Norman still didn't properly associate with the country of his birth. Spin it by forty-five degrees and it resembled the symbol for a charitable organisation whose services across the globe had stretched beyond breaking point. And who'd want a nation of shopkeepers to be reduced to the status of a high street charity shop?

Still, however shitty modern England was, it could never be worse than the Congo. Although Sir Norman had been mostly insulated from the world beyond the compound walls, from both its oppressive heat and its unsightly poverty, the Congo had a way of making its presence felt. He had the pick of the best black arses in the land and his wealth, already considerable, was much greater in comparison in a country where lives were cheap and everyone's anus was for the shafting. Nevertheless nothing could forever hold back the rough justice of civil war and the subsequent collapse of the Congolese government. So, before the time arrived when he would be strung up and disembowelled like so many other notable foreign residents, Sir Norman decided to take the lesser risk of returning to England, via Wales' porous border, with his American passport and the identity of Newton Nash from Oklahoma.

"So what have you arranged to celebrate arrival of the homecoming knight and his entourage?" Sir Norman asked Oscar, his old friend and one-time business associate.

"I've got some brown arse, some white arse and, knowing your preference, some black arse," said Oscar as he pulled aside the curtain that divided Sir Norman and his close friends from the hired services he'd outsourced for the evening.

"And some white cunt, as well," Sir Norman sniffed as he pointed at the few women that interspersed the line of naked men.

“That’s mostly for my personal pleasure, my lord,” said Oscar who knew how much his friend liked to still be addressed by the honorific that had been taken from him. “Although, as you know, I’m tempted by a puckered hairy anus after a line or two, men aren’t generally my first preference.”

“I’ve seen better women,” Sir Norman remarked. “Was there a discount offer at the brothel?”

“None of the women are professionals,” said Oscar who kept his voice low enough that Sir Norman’s female guests couldn’t hear him. They were talking among themselves and wholly unabashed by their state of nakedness. “They think they’re just at a different kind of party. Although they’ll get something for their effort, none of it will go to an agency or pimp. There’s no third party to take a slice of the action.”

“You don’t mind having to fuck mere amateurs?” remarked Sir Norman incredulously.

“I’ve always retained a taste for the real deal, my lord,” said Oscar. “Professionals are better at going through the motions, but I prefer an unfaked orgasm from the woman I fuck. In any case, there’s a sentimental reason for the selection of women you see here.”

“There is?”

“That one there, the blonde, I used to fuck her mother years ago. Now I get to fuck the daughter. What could be more delicious?”

“I don’t know,” said Sir Norman, who was decidedly unimpressed. He was too jaded by excess to be excited by such details as family ties. “Fucking a father and son at the same time?”

“That’s difficult to arrange in the Republic of England, my lord,” admitted Oscar.

He beckoned the blonde woman to step forward. Sir Norman could now appreciate that despite her unhealthy pallor and insolent posture, the girl wasn’t at all bad looking for those who might want a choice of hole to poke. She had a full bosom and the faint evidence of stretch marks that suggested a relatively recent pregnancy. She showed absolutely no shame or awkwardness about being naked.

“Are you the one who’s gonna fuck me up the arse?” the woman asked.

Oscar squeezed her arm. “Address him as ‘my lord’, Olive,” he said.

“Are you gonna fuck me up the arse, *my lord*?” the woman asked with enough hint of disrespect for Sir Norman to resolve that he discipline her in some way later in the evening.

“If you’re lucky, my dear,” said Sir Norman.

“Show your gape to the gentleman, Olive,” instructed Oscar.

“Certainly, my lord,” said Olive, clearly rather amused by the title. She bent over and pulled apart her fleshy cheeks to show an anus that had been so widened by frequent exercise that it was almost as cavernous as a well-lubricated man’s. Although a woman’s arse didn’t appeal to Sir Norman as much as one with a curtain of hair or a thick black cock up the anus, he might still be prepared to take the plunge.

“Can we see what she can do with her assets?” wondered Sir Norman, who wanted to see the floozy punished. It wasn’t that he’d taken umbrage at the woman’s impertinence. He’d long ago formed the opinion that what women thought or said was of really no import whatsoever. It was rather because he wanted to see her suffer.



“Which of these studs has the biggest cock?”

Sir Norman addressed the question in a relatively low voice, but Oscar repeated the question.

“Which of you gentlemen is the most well endowed?” he asked.

There was some jostling amongst the naked men, but one was pushed forward to the front. Sir Norman was slightly disappointed to see that his skin was brown rather than black. He was a man whose racial origins has been so blurred over the generations that you simply couldn't tell what his ancestry might be. But what he did have was a big cock. It wasn't the biggest cock that Sir Norman had ever seen, even given that it wasn't yet fully erect and the man was still pumping it to life in his fist. But it was a cock that Sir Norman hoped to have a good taste of later in the evening.

“What's your name, boy?” Sir Norman brusquely enquired.

“Olaf,” said the man and then, as an afterthought: “My lord.”

Another disappointment. Not even a proper wog name. No wonder the Government of National Unity had fucked up so much. If you couldn't identify the illegal immigrants by their name, what was left? DNA tests? Blood samples? Why didn't they just turf out everyone with a dusky complexion?

“Olaf,” Sir Norman repeated as if he'd never heard a name like that before. “I'd like to see your cock in this young lady's arse.”

“Doesn't she need some preparation?” Olaf asked. “My lord.”

“Nonsense,” said Oscar who was more concerned about Olaf's hesitance in his use of Sir Norman's honorific title. “All Olive needs is a bit of spit. Isn't that right?”

“Erm,” said Olive who was evidently less convinced. “I usually like to have my

pussy poked first. My lord.”

“Never mind that,” said Sir Norman who had no inclination for that. “There’ll be time for that later. Oscar will be more than willing to screw you in any way you wish. Isn’t that so?”

“Er, yes, my lord,” said Oscar who was reluctant to reveal the nature of his relationship with the girl. “Come on, Olive. Bend over for his lordship. Show everyone what kind of gape you’ve got.”

This whole charade bored Sir Norman, especially when Olaf drew no blood from the girl’s unlubricated anus and she didn’t appear to mind the penetration nearly as much as Sir Norman had hoped. In the Congo, he’d have made damned sure that the girl would have regretted her lippiness, but there was no such license allowed in the Republic of England. There was a real risk that one of the men and women hired for the night would blab if the knight went too far.

Nevertheless, Sir Norman soon forgot the girl’s insolence, although he had plenty of opportunity to watch her get well and truly fucked by Oscar. She showed every sign of having genuinely enjoyed it. Perhaps Oscar had a point. Sir Norman had fucked more men than the peasants of England had eaten hot dinners, but his most rewarding encounters were with social equals rather than male prostitutes. Although no prince, baron or business leader he’d fucked or been fucked by had a penis to compare with Olaf’s, there’d been a much more mutual meeting of mind and body.

Sir Norman made sure that Olaf received every last inch of his lordship’s cock inside his surprisingly tight anus, while insisting at the same time that Olaf should fuck another chap, a tall bearded man who vaguely resembled the deposed press baron, Lord

MacKenzie. Sir Norman always enjoyed a chain of fuckers. An arse while being penetrated would squeeze like a glove if the recipient was also fucking someone else. It was as if Sir Norman was fucking two men at once, which in a way was preferable to having two men fuck him. It sometimes took days for his arse to recover from such punishment.

“So, what’s it like to be back in England, my lord?” Oscar asked several hours later when the company could relax with a good cigar and a well-deserved bottle of brandy.

“Dreadful, Oscar,” said Sir Norman. “But at the same time I have been missing the old country. Would you say the country’s been missing me?”

Oscar hesitated for a moment and took the moment to scratch his hairy testicles. “Have you been watching the news while you’ve been away, my lord?”

“Only occasionally. There were so many bloody lies and slander put out by the media that I generally kept away from it.”

“Wise advice, my lord. And an even wiser policy while you’re in England. The scandal has got rather worse while you’ve been away. Many English ministers have had to resign and even the media magnates have had a roasting. I blame it on the fucking Scots and Welsh. Any dirt they find they chuck over the border for the English news-hounds to pick up.”

“I take it you’d recommend that I keep a fairly low profile then?”

“I would say so, my lord,” said Oscar. “In fact, while you’re here it might be advisable to adopt the identity of that American chap whose passport you got a hold of. It’s a lot safer.”

Sir Norman nodded. It was exactly what he'd expected.

He'd never met Newton Nash. Maybe he'd got shot in the riots that had turned what had once been a United States into a disunited chaos. Maybe he'd ended up on the wrong side of the border when the wall went up between Missouri and Illinois and countless thousands tried to flee the repressive regime of the Republic of North America.

But for the moment, Newton Nash was alive and well and living at Sir Norman's Hampstead address in London.

**LXIV**  
**Primrose**  
**2088**

“I’m sure it’ll be no surprise to you at all as to why I’ve asked you to come and see me, Primrose,” said Polly who was sitting in a plush armchair on the other side of a huge oak desk with one stockinged leg crossed over the other.

There weren’t many company directors who dressed like Polly, especially those who were women in their forties. The blouse she wore revealed the full magnificence of her bosom. Silk stockings accentuated the splendour of her legs almost up to the garter. Such an outfit would be wholly inappropriate in most professions, but not so for a director of Empire Cleaning Services.

Primrose was naturally wary whenever she had occasion to speak with senior management. She mistrusted Polly’s effusive amiability. Perhaps a client had complained about her. She knew how very fickle they could be. It was so easy to misjudge intentions or misread the subtle signs of what a client really wanted. And if it wasn’t to be upbraided for a fancied or real offense, what else might her employer require her to do? She’d participated in many orgies and knew for sure that some clients’ refined and perverse tastes were well beyond her comfort zone. Would she be called on to help out where she really rather wouldn’t?

“You’ve been exemplary in the last few years you’ve been working for us, Primrose,” the director continued. “You’re popular with the clients, you get on well with the other staff, and you show genuine professionalism. I’ve watched you at work many times and I’ve been impressed by how well you conduct your business and how

much you appear to enjoy it. Of course, it's not necessary that you should enjoy having sex with strangers, but I have a notion that you don't often have to make much effort to give a positive impression. Am I right?"

Primrose nodded. "It's not always good," she agreed, "but I sometimes get more out of it than I expected."

"You're a real natural," said Polly with a broad indulgent grin. "I'm not sure I was as proficient as you when I was your age, but standards weren't so exacting then. Clients were usually less demanding. But the law regarding prostitution was *very* harsh around the time of the Government of National Unity and we had to operate very discreetly. However, things are more liberal now and likely to get more so."

"Is that so?" asked Primrose who was rather hoping that Polly would get to the point. Although she'd made love with Polly many times and knew her to be a passionate and considerate lover, she was very much aware that she was a company director. If Primrose was about to be sacked, it would be after precisely such a preamble as this.

"I'm not sure how much we would initially profit from full legality," said Polly. "As a cleaning agency we pay rather less tax than we would if we chose to declare the real nature of our business. But we have authoritative advice that the professional services we provide are about to be made fully legal. That means that agencies such as ours will no longer have to operate in a clandestine manner."

"How does that affect me?" wondered Primrose who could already anticipate both the opportunities and problems that might arise.

"As I say, Primrose," continued Polly, "we've been very impressed by your professional skills and not only by your talent at addressing your clients' requirements.

We think that you are exactly the kind of woman who'd be ideal as the public face of our company—at least as far as our London operations are concerned.”

“Am I going to be promoted?” Primrose asked. She wondered whether an increased salary would actually be worthwhile given what she made in tips, overtime and expenses.

“Yes, indeed,” said Polly whose smile broadened yet further. “If you want to, that is. You can still serve clients if you so wish, but it would only be whenever and with whomever you choose. Although you may want to maintain a close relationship with your clients for the sake of your professional skills, the proposed package should be quite generous enough for you.”

“What exactly is the role you're talking about? Am I going to be taking someone else's job?”

“That won't be necessary,” said Polly whose smile didn't change at all. “You're right to be concerned about your continued relationship with your colleagues, but we run a very profitable business at Empire Cleaning Services. It will be a totally new role.”

“What would I be expected to do?”

“As I say, Primrose, you would be the public face of Empire Cleaning Services, London.”

“Isn't it something that someone like you would be better qualified for? You've worked here for far longer than me. And you know the business better.”

Polly frowned slightly. “The reason you would be a better choice than I might be,” she said slowly and emphasising each word, “is precisely because of the things that

you are and I am not.”

“What do you mean?” asked Primrose, aware of a change in Polly’s tone.

“You’re a well-educated young woman,” Polly continued. “You are modestly dressed, well-spoken and impeccably middle-class. Our business is profitable now and will continue to be so in the future. What differentiates Empire Cleaning Service from the competition is our level of discretion, the class of our clientele and the standard of service we provide. We need to demonstrate to potential clients that we shall continue to be just as discreet in the future as we have been in the past. We need to persuade officers of the law that we shall fully comply with our legal obligations. And we need to notify potential clients that we provide a service that is second-to-none. Of all the women on our payroll, you’re the one who could best promote the business. You won’t make foolish mistakes that might alarm well-connected clients who want their use of our services to remain confidential. There is a risk in the new legal environment that the distinguished Empire Cleaning Services brand will become compromised and our client base will move their custom elsewhere.”

“What do you think the future of ECS is likely to be?”

“It’s very rosy. Our shareholders get a very good return from their investment and should expect to do so in the future. You may have noticed that while there are more and more people willing to take advantage of our services, there is also an increase in the number of women—and some men—who want to take up the profession. The more professionals there are, the more selective we can be and the better the quality of service we can provide the customer.”

“Where will all the potential employees come from?”



“You know the answer to that as well as I do, Primrose. Businesses like ours have always attracted men and women when they experience hard times and who see their body as a useful commodity to resolve their financial issues. This will continue while the economy suffers and while there's no let up in the inflow of desperate immigrants from all over the world, but especially from overpopulated Africa and the ravaged Middle East. These are good times for our business and I can't see that ever ending.”

There was much more for Primrose to listen to and digest, but she was whisked away into such a torrent of distraction that she couldn't properly evaluate her changed situation until almost the time she was due to take up her new position. Although her title as Director of External Communication was vague to the point of meaninglessness, Polly did at least outline the kind of duties she'd be expected to perform. These were as hazy as her title allowed, but were specific in the sense that Primrose knew when she'd be called on. And that was when an attractive but modestly apparelled woman with an unthreatening middle-class accent was required to represent the company. She'd be expected to learn her brief well enough and to think sufficiently fast to handle representatives of the law, of government and, most worryingly of all, of the media.

Polly ensured that Primrose was kept so preoccupied that she had little time for reflection. Polly excused her young ward of the need to attend to even her most regular clients and took her on a whirlwind excursion of drinks, drugs, sex and good quality restaurants. Of all the men and women who made love with Primrose in the days that followed, the one who was most attentive and with whom she enjoyed the most ecstatic orgasms was Polly. Her skill at sexual seduction and carnal pleasuring well suited her

to her chosen profession.

It was only after several days that Primrose was at last allowed the opportunity to return to her own bed. Polly had judged that her young lover had enjoyed enough nights in her luxury Pimlico apartment and could now retreat to her nondescript flat in Peckham where she lived with Peredeslava, her occasional lover and full-time colleague. Primrose even felt flush enough to pay for a bicycle rickshaw ride across London. This gave her an instructive view of the city's extremes of poverty and wealth. There was a necessary diversion around the flood-waters of Lambeth which took Primrose past the army of beggars that lined the road to Southwark Cathedral, but generally the journey was fairly uneventful.

"So, you'll be my boss," said Peredeslava with a palpable lack of enthusiasm in her voice. "It'll be so different from now on."

"I suppose it will be," Primrose admitted.

"You won't want to share a one-bedroom flat in Peckham anymore, will you?"

"Maybe not," said Primrose. "But I won't move out till you find someone else. I wouldn't want you to have to pay the rent all by yourself."

But as she reflected on her changed circumstance, Primrose felt a weight lift off her chest. No longer would she have to fuck her elderly, unprepossessing and unlovable clients. No longer would she have to hurry home as fast as she could to avoid the attentions of the street-gangs that prowled Peckham's poorly lit streets. No longer would she have to make all these long journeys across London by its hazardous roads or the unreliable underground to see clients whose desires upon her were often quite disgusting.

“Whatever happens,” said Peredeslava. “I hope we’ll still be able to see each other.”

Primrose warmly agreed, but she knew as well as her lover that this was extremely unlikely.

Unless, of course, there were good persuasive business reasons to do so.

**LXV**  
**Iris**  
**2057**

The pay was better. The uniform was smarter. The hours of work were more flexible. But despite the fact that in the current job market it was never as easy to find a job as Iris hoped, there was little about her new choice of career that she liked.

“It’s a weird kind of front, isn’t it?” Ember commented when they met up for a chat at a wine bar in Purley. “A cleaning agency of all things. Why so underhand?”

“It’s not always been a front,” said Iris. “I was told it used to be a bona fide cleaning agency for years, but since the Government of National Unity took power there hasn’t been much profit to be made from sending cleaning maids round to people’s homes. And since the laws on prostitution have been tightened up so much, despite the increased demand, it was a business decision to switch operations to something more lucrative.”

“It’s the weirdest fucking cleaning maid costume I’ve ever seen,” said Ember. “It’s like some internet fantasy of what a maid should look like. All fucking silk stockings, low cut blouse and maid’s cap.”

“At least I’ve got my own name tag,” said Iris, tilting the plastic card upward.

“*Poppy*,” said Ember reading the name. “Did you choose that?”

“It was better than *Tinkerbelle* or *Honeypot*.”

“You’re fucking kidding, right?”

“No.”

“And who’s gonna be fooled by a prostitute pretending to be a maid dressed up

like a prostitute?"

"I might get stares from the public, but I never get any hassle from the police."

"And why's that?"

"Because most of them are clients of Empire Cleaning Services."

"Do you like your job?" asked Ember with concern. "You know, having to get fucked by nonces, pervs and the socially inadequate."

"It's not always as bad as all that," said Iris whose visible discomfort signalled that she'd rather talk about something else.

Iris wasn't sure how honest she'd been. When it came down to it, Ember was right. Iris now was having regular sex with exactly the sort of person she'd normally have steered well clear of. Although in many cases the sex amounted to nothing more than a handjob or a blowjob, she still had to endure being fucked several times a day. That might still be about half a dozen times. It left her crotch perpetually sore and she'd never before been as grateful as she was these days for the use of a shower.

Most of her clients were benefiting from the current government's policies. They were all amongst the lucky few able to flourish in an otherwise ever worsening economic climate. Iris generally spent rather more time listening to such men rant or ramble than she did having sex.

"You don't feel even a little bit guilty about acquiring for nothing a business nurtured by someone else?" Iris commented to one rather large man, with a correspondingly tiny penis, who was so full of his own glory that he didn't notice the veiled criticism.

"The bastard was an illegal," he said, while he puffed on an imported cigar and

stroked the penis hidden under the folds of his stomach. "He had it coming. He didn't have to stay in the country and do work that should be done by a true blue Englishmen. He'll be fine back in Lebanon or Syria or wherever he came from. At least, that is, until the yids blast the ay-rabs to fucking kingdom come as they keep threatening."

Many of Iris' clients despised Iris with exactly the same fervour as they enjoyed fucking her. Some justified it to themselves by voicing the belief that she was an illegal immigrant and therefore deserved only to be fucked. Iris couldn't be bothered to tell them that as far as she knew, not one of her ancestors had been anything other than English. Perhaps there was some Welsh and Scottish blood in her, but she was sure that wouldn't make her any less English in the eyes of clients who still believed that Britain and England were synonymous.

"Although I'm a Scot," said one client whose name like the rest of his identity was never revealed to Iris, "I'd rather live in England than fucking Socialist Scotland. The Scottish fuckers are still in Europe. What cunts! Who wants the eurocratic buggers in Brussels or Stockholm telling you what to think or do?"

"We're better off without the jocks and the taffs and the other cunts," said another client, whose medically energised and still embarrassingly erect penis was poking against Iris' thigh. "They're nothing but trouble. They can take all our wops, spics and niggers as well if they like. We don't want them."

"Aren't the Welsh and Scots still united under the same crown?" remarked Iris to another rather less obnoxious client who'd been fulsomely apologetic about his inability to rise to the occasion.

"It's all that's left of the Commonwealth," he said. "The India-Pakistan Nuclear

War scared off most of the members and the current government has deported so many people back to countries that used to be in the British Commonwealth that there are precious few members left.”

“Do you support the government?” Iris wondered. Her clients’ attitudes were so much at odds with what her friends believed that she sometimes doubted her own hatred for Ivan Eisenegger’s administration.

“We need strong government at a time of crisis,” he said.

It was a persuasive argument in a sense but, despite its posturing, Iris wasn’t convinced that the Government of National Unity could truly be described as strong, resolute or tough. Every year was marked by just another humiliating climbdown by a Kingdom whose friends now were those nations that most other nations despised. Did the English really want to be associated with dictatorships and crackpots? And what was so resolute about a nation that was now surrounded by increasingly hostile neighbours? What was so good about overseeing an economy that was failing to recover? Where was the prosperity now in a London teeming with beggars and petty criminals?

“It’s not just England,” said another client who confessed to being less than enthralled by the government. “It’s everywhere in the world. The French, the Germans, even the Japanese and the Russians: it’s the same wherever you go. And I get to travel to a lot of places, I can tell you.”

“You can afford to fly!” said Iris who was duly impressed.

“Well, I can’t, but my company can,” he said. “Everywhere it’s the same. Food, fuel and raw materials are more and more expensive. Floods, droughts, heat waves and

tornadoes in places that never used to know them. Lots of mouths to feed and not enough to go around.”

There weren't many clients to whom Iris could speak so openly. Any hint of dissatisfaction with the government could so easily be construed as at best a lack of patriotism and at worst pure treason.

“Those cunts deserved to be fucked,” remarked one client during a rambling diatribe about the recent deportation of several hundred squatters from Brixton. “Don't you agree?”

“Umm...” said Iris nervously. “I guess so.”

“I'm not sure you do,” said the client unsympathetically. He was still undressed, but he was so hairy and blubbery that it was difficult to positively locate his penis even though it was fully erect. “You're not a fucking pinko, are you? You look a bit like a yid or a spic. You're not an illegal, are you?”

“No, of course not,” said Iris who was alarmed by this sudden turn to the conversation.

“A lot of you whores are illegals, aren't you?” he continued. “I had a spade here once. She was all neat and tidy and prim, just like you. Her tits were bigger though and so was her arse. I took her right up her back passage. I showed her. Fucking chocolate bunny. Do you take it up the arse, sweetie? I heard the wops are particularly keen to suck on a shit lollipop after a poke between the cheeks.”

“Did he bugger you, then?” asked Paula, one of the girls with whom Iris shared a three-bedroom flat in Penge.

“He could have, if he wanted to,” Iris admitted, “He was a big guy and he'd



have had no difficulty pinning me down on the bed. But thankfully he didn't. One good thing about Empire Cleaning Services, which they make a big deal about, is that they cross people off their client list if they overstep the line. All I had to do was tell the guy that sodomy wasn't one of the services I was prepared to offer and remind him that there were other women who'd be more than pleased to satisfy him in that department. And then he backed off."

"Couldn't he just have buggered you and kicked you out?" said Peter, Paula's boyfriend, who had probably seen too many Brazilian thrillers.

"Then he'd have to find another agency," said Iris.

"He could have acted like a real bastard," continued Peter. "He could have reported your escort agency to the police and then they'd close it down. The government are real hot on vice, aren't they? They're always going on about reclaiming the streets for decent English people."

"There are too many policemen and politicians who are clients of Empire Cleaning Services for that to happen," said Iris. "For all I know this guy might have been a policeman."

"Would you know if he was?" asked Paula.

"Sometimes you can guess what the clients are," said Iris. "They have photographs of themselves on show. Some are doctors, some work in Immigration and some are ex-military. But mostly you don't know and they don't usually tell you. All you know is that they've got money."

"And these days: if you've got money you must be crooked," said Peter as if that clinched the argument.



## LXVI

### Roland

### 2090

“*Stop that!*” Roland shouted. “Stop that right now.”

Osama regarded Roland with an admiration that was very much compromised by the very real fear for his own safety and a sincere wish that his friend could sometimes put prudence above charity.

The suit worn by the large unshaven man who Roland addressed were much smarter and more costly than those anyone normally wore in this part of London, but he was oblivious to the fact that it was now splattered with blood from the already critically ill man whose face he’d slapped several times with a pistol. There might once have been a time when his victim could have taken command of the situation, but no patient in the care of Roland’s relief centre was ever in a state to offer resistance. The patient was even less able to do so now. His nose was smashed flat and several teeth had been punched out of his mouth.

“Are you telling me what to do?” the unshaven man challenged Roland. “You’ve got some fucking nerve.”

“This man’s already dying. You don’t have to make it worse for him.”

“The fucker owes me,” the assailant said, as he held his victim up above the ground by his throat. “I’ve been looking for this cunt for years. The fucker’s only getting what he always had coming.”

“It’s not right. Put him down. Let him die in peace.”

“Don’t fucking tell me what to do, you cunt,” said Roland’s unwelcome guest.

He slammed his victim's face several times against the wall. A pitiful whine accompanied the first few impacts. He was then dropped onto the floor and kicked repeatedly in the face and ribs.

Roland continued to stand firm when the man in the designer suit had tired of kicking his victim and strode over to him. "Just how many fucking greaseballs and grasses have you got stashed here, fuckface?"

"None at all that I know of," said Roland. "This is a Relief Centre. We provide help for the poor and needy. You can see that we don't mean you any harm."

"Don't make me do something I'll regret, you cheeky fucker," said the man sarcastically. Without further provocation he punched Roland in the chest so hard that he doubled up and fell backwards. "I don't want any more of your lip. You've fucking crossed the line. You don't let cunts like Reg Reid into the manor. From now on, you either pay tribute or you and all these dopey fuckwit junkies and clapped-out whores are gonna be incinerated." He gestured towards the other beds where those patients who were sufficiently conscious were trembling with fear.

"I already pay rent to Harry Rogers," said Roland.

"Next time that fucker comes round, you tell him you're paying rent to Oban Rushmore. That's me, if you didn't fucking know already. Tell him that if he doesn't fuck off, I'll stick my fist down his fucking throat and pull out his fucking kidney. I've tolerated you cunts for long enough. Either pay up or dig a hole in the ground where we can bury you."

With these parting words, the man walked off still unconcerned about the bloodstains splattered over his suit. He made no attempt to hide his gun from curious

onlookers in the street. He had no fear of the police and didn't care who knew what he'd just been doing.

"He's dead," said Osama who'd run to the assistance of the victim. "Reg is dead. I think that, towards the end, that thug was just kicking a corpse."

Roland bit his lip. He'd had no idea that this patient was in any way different from the countless other diseased, starved and destitute that he'd taken into his shelter. Would he have acted differently if he'd known? And hadn't the well-dressed gangster just claimed that the Relief Centre was now his property?

"We better dispose of the body," said Roland. "I don't think anyone else will volunteer to do so, judging from what we've just seen."

It was only a day or so later that Harry Rogers walked into the Relief Centre. He was wearing his trademark tracksuit which was conspicuously less expensive than Oban Rushmore's suit. This suggestion of physical fitness was totally out of place on a man with such a grotesquely obtuse stomach. However, it wasn't his fists that he relied on to win a scrap, but rather the pistol and flick-knife that he brandished ostentatiously.

"Oban, eh?" said Harry as he counted the notes that Roland handed over to him for what both parties euphemistically called rent. "That fucker's been muscling in all over the manor. Why'd he come here?"

"One of our patients was someone he was after," said Roland.

"Yeah. That figures," said Harry. "Oban never forgives a slight. What'd he say, then?"

"He told me that we'd have to pay rent to him rather than to you."

"He did, the cunt. And what d'you expect *me* to do about it?"

“I rather thought that the money we paid you would give us some protection from thugs like Rushmore.”

Harry considered this momentarily as he shoved the wad of notes into his back-pocket. “You thought wrong there, Roland. It looks like you’ve got to pay rent to two landlords from now on. I’ll still expect my wedge.”

“But we’ve got nothing left to pay Rushmore now that we’ve paid you.”

“Tough,” said Harry. “Why not flog off some of those drugs you’ve got in the medicine cabinet? They might get a few quid on the streets.”

“They’re for the patients,” said Roland.

“Well, that’s not my problem,” said Harry as he walked past an old woman who was gnawing on a crust of stale bread and cringed noticeably as he swaggered by.

It was only the following day that Roland got the visit he was now dreading. It was one of Oban’s henchmen: a scrawny brown-skinned boy, who was also wearing an expensive and well-cut suit. His face was badly scarred and he flaunted his aggression by pushing the lapel of his jacket aside to reveal the gun-holster strapped to his chest.

“I’ve been told you’ve got something for me,” said the boy.

“Who sent you?” Roland asked cautiously. He was as worried for his own welfare as he was for the several people in his care slumped around the room and anxiously watching the unfolding drama.

“My man Oban,” said the boy proudly. “But you already knew that, you cunt. Where are the readies?”

Roland had been expecting this moment, but he didn’t know whether there was something more that he should do. He shoved his hand into his jeans pocket and pulled

out some notes. They came from his own private savings rather than from the money he'd set aside for managing the Relief Centre.

"Is that all?" asked the boy incredulously. "Is that fucking *all*? My man Oban's gonna be fucking mad if I only give him this much. Ain't you got nothing more?"

"Nothing," said Roland. "This is a charity. All the money we've got comes from donations and street collections and all of that goes on running the centre. We spend every last penny we have on providing food and rest to the poor and needy."

"To the fucking scum, you mean," said the boy. "Oban's not gonna like this one fucking bit. Give us more or I'll have to take something."

"We haven't got anything more," said Roland.

"I dunno about that," said the boy who looked around the room, presumably for something worth purloining in lieu of cash. After a moment or so, he relented. "You're right. There's fucking nothing here. What a dead loss. Don't you worry though. I'll be back."

He kicked an elderly man who was crouched on the floor and sent him sprawling onto his face. He then walked off while counting the notes and muttering obscenities as he did so.

"What do we do now?" asked Osama when Roland had told him what happened.

"I don't know," Roland admitted. "We can't afford to pay off two sets of mobsters."

"Can't we just pay off one lot," said Osama. "After all, that Rushmore thug did suggest that he'd hospitalise Harry if he got in the way."

"We can't play one group of villains against another," said Roland. "You can't

trust them in any way whatsoever. And furthermore, we shouldn't do anything that causes harm to another person—even Harry.”

Osama nodded, but he didn't seem convinced.

The next visit by Harry was rather sooner than the weekly cycle to which Roland had become accustomed. He was still wearing his tracksuit, but it was splattered with bloodstains and his face was covered with bruises. One eye could barely open from the swelling of his eyelid. When he opened his mouth, there was a fresh gap where once his front teeth had been.

He glared at Roland before he could express any sympathy for the man's obvious distress.

“Was it *you* who fucking spoke to one of Oban's boys and set him after me?” Harry asked.

“No, of course not,” said Roland honestly, though he immediately suspected Osama. Roland had been rattling a collection tin along the plush thoroughfares of Regent Street and Oxford Circus all the previous day while Osama was working at the Relief Centre by himself. If the boy had returned for more money, would Osama have passed on what Rushmore had said to him about Harry?

“I don't fucking believe you,” said Harry. “I'd know one of Oban's boys a mile off in their fucking West End suits. Why'd he want to rough me up then? Why'd he tell me to keep my nose out of his business? What was that all about then, eh?”

“I don't know,” said Roland. “All I know is that Rushmore told me that I was to pay rent to him from now on.”

“Well, of course he fucking would,” said Harry. “But why'd he beat me up? He



didn't need to know you were paying me too, did he? Did you grass on me? I should fucking kill you, you fucker."

Roland was getting quite confused by this. He was now expected to pay two sets of thugs for the privilege of providing charitable relief in East London. And given that he couldn't afford to do this, he was now being threatened with violence for being remiss.

"What should we do, Harry?" Roland asked, not unreasonably.

"Just fucking pay up," he said. "That's what. Fucking pay up. I don't care where you get your wedge. I don't think Oban does either. We're not fucking econ... econom... fucking experts. If you wanna continue to operate in this part of town you follow the rules. And if you don't, you're fucked."

Roland discussed this dilemma with Osama next time he saw him.

"What do we do?" he said. "We can't pay both Harry and Rushmore. And by trying to do so we've got no money to be able to stay open. What's the answer?"

Osama considered this carefully. "I think we've reached the end of the line," he said. "We can't go on. We'll just have to close the centre."

"And the patients?" wondered Roland.

"We don't take any more on," Osama said. "We close the soup kitchen. And within a week all the patients we've got will be dead."

Roland looked distressed by this. "Is that it?" he asked. "Is that *all* we can do? Has everything we've done been wasted?"

"Of course, it hasn't," said Osama. "There are many people whose lives we've saved. But let's be frank. We can't carry on. Not here anyway. Just by taking care of

the patients we've already got puts us at risk from heavies who'll continue to come round and demand money from us. We can't offer relief to the destitute if we can't even offer them protection from violence. You saw how Oban treated Reg. You saw how one of his boys beat up Harry. The next people they'll attack will either be one of us or the volunteer workers. Or they might even turn on those we're here to help."

"So, it's hopeless," said Roland despairingly.

"It *is* here," said Osama. "But we can always open up another relief centre elsewhere. There are people in need all over the Republic."

Roland's face lit up. "You're right," he said. "From out of the ashes, the phoenix arises. I take it you'll come with me."

Osama nodded.

"What else can I do?"

## **LXVII**

### **Odile**

### **2110**

The remuneration for a day's work was meagre. It amounted to nothing more than the use of a second-hand blanket and a meal that was double the size of what Odile normally had to eat. That was all. But it was something.

Edith was helping to boil a pot of stew on a stove, while Odile doled it out into wooden bowls that were greedily snatched from her by desperate supplicants in the long queue that stretched ahead of her. This queue had started to form well before dawn and many of the hungry and needy had been waiting for hours.

"How's it going?" asked Roland cheerfully. He was the old man who'd organised the soup kitchen in Lancaster after thugs had burnt down a similar enterprise in London. This was an inferno in which dozens of helpless patients were incinerated. As Roland frequently reminded Odile and the others who occasionally worked for him, things might be bad in Lancaster but they were much worse in London. Odile wondered whether Roland was just saying that to comfort people who usually saw a capital city on television that still had expensive shops, art galleries and public monuments. Was it really so bad in England's distant far south? Odile wasn't sure. She'd never even been as far south as Manchester.

There was a television pinned to the soup kitchen wall tuned to a news channel despite the many complaints from those queuing. They'd rather watch a quiz show or a situation comedy that showed a life of indescribable luxury led by middle-class families affluent enough to live in a gated community. What made matters worse was

that Roland insisted on screening news from the EBC which was a television company that currently attracted only a small percentage of the national audience. And this was for good reason. The EBC News had few of the exciting graphics and pulsating music that enlivened the news on Sky England. There were too many depressing news items about famine and drought, often happening in countries no one had ever heard of, and not enough about celebrities and television talent shows. Indeed, at the same time as Odile was ladling out soup, the newscaster was droning on about the recent conflict in Virginia between England's ally, the Republic of North America, and their mutual enemy, the rump USA known officially as the Northern Unites States.

"Do you think it'll be the big one?" asked a man with as good as no teeth at all and an overcoat that consisted of more threadbare patches than any of its original mohair.

"The big one?" wondered Odile.

"You know: when the bombs go up and we all die," he said.

"That'll never happen," said Roland cheerfully as he hovered behind Odile. "No one could be so stupid as to bring the whole of human civilisation to an end. It's taken us tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of years to get here. Who'd want to wipe it all out in a single day of utter madness?"

"That's what they said about Israel," said an elderly woman who'd already got her soup and was dipping a large chunk of freshly baked bread into it. "Look what happened to Jerusalem. Not to mention Damascus and Bethlehem. It's still glowing from radiation after nearly forty years. And I bet that's what they said in India, Kyrgyzstan and the Ukraine before that."

“It’s different this time,” said another man who was standing several people behind in the queue. “The Americans have got more missiles than the rest of the world put together. It’s the one thing the yanks were good at building. Now they’re pointing them at each other instead of at the Russkies or the Chinese or the Iranians.”

“Let’s hope some of them are pointed at the fucking Scots,” said another man in the queue. “I don’t trust the Scots not to start another bloody war. They’re always sneaking people into England, but they don’t let any immigrant scum out.”

“Let’s not get into an argument,” said Roland hastily, who knew only too well how much more impassioned the discussion could get. “We all know that the Scots wouldn’t want to bomb England however much our government antagonises them. Radiation clouds can blow north as much as they can south.”

“Well, I’m glad we kept our fucking nukes,” the last man said. “Perhaps if we’d used them already, the Scots and the Irish and the rest wouldn’t keep humiliating us.”

“We’ve got a wider choice on the menu,” said Roland raising his voice over the conversation. “We’ve got two soups now. There’s Leek and Potato Soup. And there’s Vegetable.”

“No meat though,” said someone in the queue. “I ain’t had no meat for ages.”

“There’s no real meat anywhere anyway anymore,” said another. “It’s all GM crap. When’s the last time anyone here could ever afford real meat?”

Odile wasn’t sure. But each discontented voice quietened down after she’d ladled out the soup and the supplicant shuffled to one side to gulp it down under the canvas shelter outside the battered old cafe that housed Roland’s soup kitchen. All the while above Odile’s head the newsreaders gave a litany of yet more depressing news

about the world's woes. Was it any wonder that the people queuing up for food would rather watch a cartoon of the ever-popular Rodney Rat or the top-rated show *Who Wants to be a Billionaire?* where contestants competed with each other to win enough to afford, for instance, a trip of a lifetime to the Scilly Isles.

"This isn't going to be enough," said Edith, when Odile joined her girlfriend many hours later after the last drop of soup had been ladled out and the volunteer workers could tuck into more than two thousand calories of much-needed nutrition. "The blankets help, but how're we gonna pay our rent?"

"You know the answer to that," said Odile who mimed a huge cock being shoved down her throat.

"Ruben can only have so many blowjobs a day," said Edith. "We're not the only girls he's got as tenants and a lot of the others are just as desperate as us."

"We look better and give better head," said Odile.

Nevertheless, she had to admit that her lover had a point. What had once been a special treat for the landlord when the girls were skint had become a rather regular offering. How much longer could Odile trade her cock-sucking skills for a crappy mattress in a draughty room without even a hearth to light a fire? And where would they go if they had to leave?

"You can stay here at the soup kitchen," said Roland with a cheeky smile. "And you won't have to fellate me either."

"What's that word mean?" wondered Odile, while Edith nudged her.

"What *would* we have to do?" Edith asked more diplomatically.

"Just sleep here and make sure that no one breaks into the kitchen at night," said

Roland. “We’ve had several break-ins already. They’ve not amounted to much really. A stolen mattress. A medical kit. A basket of fruit. But we operate on a very low margin. All the money we get through donations goes to keeping the place open.”

“What would we do if someone broke in?” Odile asked.

“I dunno,” said Roland. “Scream. Shout. Throw things at them. It doesn’t matter. No thief would break in here if they wanted something valuable. They’d break into the big houses on the hill where the old University used to be. Just having someone here is sufficient deterrent for most thieves.”

“We’re a bit behind in the rent,” said Edith thoughtfully. “We could move in straightaway. Do we have to bring our own mattress?”

“Not unless you’re particularly fond of it,” said Roland. “We’ve got several mattresses here. As long as you don’t mind the fact that the last people to sleep on them also died on them, they should be fine.”

The girls agreed, although the space available to them on the soup kitchen floor was actually less than that in their old apartment and they’d have to be out of bed on those hours when the soup kitchen was open. There’d no longer be an opportunity to make love together in the afternoon and they’d have to be very wary about inviting over friends to share their company, but it compared well to being kicked out by Ruben and forced to sleep on the street.

“I don’t like what’s happening in Virginia,” said Edith during the night after the couple had expended their bonus calories in carnal pleasure.

“Fuck! You’re not still bothered about that shit,” said Odile with exasperation. “America’s thousands of kilometres away. It’d take days to get there by ship.”

“Or seconds by nuclear warhead...”

“Always the cheerful one, aren’t you?” said Odile. “The Republicans might be our allies, but they’re just posturing arseholes. They’re just trying to get extra aid from the Northern United States for the famine that devastated Arizona.”

“That’s on the border of the Western Union, sweetie,” said Edith. “You’d expect them to invade California or Mexico if they wanted aid for Arizona. Anyway, they’ve got all the brothels and casinos out there so they don’t want to lose foreign tourists even if they only speak Spanish.”

“Well, I dunno,” said Odile whose sense of geography was always rather vague. “But it’d take a lot for the Northern States to rise to the bait. And the Canadians would have a thing or two to say if their impoverished southern neighbours started lobbing missiles at each other. Imagine what it would do to the Canadian wheat-fields.”

“I’m surprised you even know where Canada is,” said Edith who was nonetheless impressed by her lover’s show of erudition. “But I *am* worried. It’s not just the Americans. There are the Chinese and our allies: the Russians and Indonesians. Then there’s us, of course. The English. We’re surrounded by our enemies, like the Scots, the French and the Irish. All our allies in Europe are in the Mediterranean Union, which is more North African and Muslim than European and Christian. It’s a mess. The whole world’s like a crazy quilt with nuclear warheads all along the seams and every time there’s another plague or famine or drought or earthquake you wonder whether someone’s just going to let rip.”

“You worry too much, Edith,” said Odile. She kissed her girlfriend tenderly on the lips. “Let’s just enjoy our last night on this mattress together. We won’t have to be



bothered any more about that rusty spring that pokes into your arse.”

“And you won’t have to suck Ruben’s cock anymore,” Edith reminded her.

“That as well,” said Odile. “So fuck, Honeypot. Spread your legs. I just can’t get enough of you. Even after all these years.”

**LXVIII**  
**Sally**  
**2091**

Sally had a great deal to be satisfied about even though she wasn't the kind of person to take good fortune for granted. She was blessed with relatively affluent parents who loved and cherished her. She was similarly blessed with the intellectual ability to secure a place on a postgraduate course at Oxford, one of England's two greatest universities and one which still ranked moderately highly in the world. She was a talented sportswoman, a girl with an extensive social network and, as she was often reminded, attractive and beautiful.

How could she have been born so lucky?

Sally was aware that each one of her good fortunes reinforced the others. A beautiful woman without brains and money was unlikely to be able to achieve very much in the modern world if she didn't marry well or trade her looks for money. A beautiful woman with brains alone could only succeed if she slept with the right men or women. But a beautiful woman with both intelligence and a generous allowance could gain the academic qualifications necessary to succeed in one of the shrinking number of well-remunerated professions. Sally genuinely enjoyed studying for her doctorate. Who would have known a generation ago just how exciting the growing synthesis between robotics and biochemistry would become? And as someone already ahead in an area of academic research that was attracting Chinese and Brazilian investment, maybe she could one day study abroad. Perhaps she could become a fellow at a university in a prosperous city like Beijing, Pyongyang or Buenos Aires.

Still, Oxford was a pleasant enough city on the edge of the Cotswolds. It was almost the very last corner of Old England. The colleges and most of the city were walled in to keep out the proles and peasants that were a nagging and uncomfortable reminder of how far it was possible to fall. Sally had no understanding or sympathy for England's great unwashed. All she knew about them came from the few moments of prole television she occasionally stumbled upon. They were a dreadfully uncouth bunch unhealthily obsessed with quiz shows and vulgar situation comedies. They were often appallingly racist and homophobic. You certainly wouldn't expect to have much of an intelligent conversation with any one of them.

There was a sense that Sally and her friends were surrounded by an ocean of the less well-off. Labour was so cheap these days that almost everyone could afford to employ a servant or two. Sally had two maids whose names she could never remember who slept in the communal servants' quarters just outside Oxford's city walls and whose task was to ensure that Sally was properly cared for while she stayed in her room in the student halls. Servants were best when they were just there when you needed them but at the same time kept themselves discreetly out of the way when you didn't. Sally expected them to be on hand even when she took a young man or woman back to her room for the sexual exercise that she practiced as enthusiastically as her daily jogs along the city centre river.

Sally was a woman of routine. It was the best way to get ahead in life. Up at six; an early morning jog; breakfast prepared by one of her maids who stood attentively by while she shared her muesli and yoghurt with the lover with whom she'd enjoyed the night; and then a day of study and research. It was only after she'd eaten in the halls

that she would choose to socialise with her wide circle of friends during which she would invariably imbibe a glass of wine and even some coke or hash. And finally she'd go to a bed either in her own room or in the room of one of her lovers to keep toned those muscles that more formal exercise could never properly address.

“Do you want to stand as president of the MCR?” Simon asked one evening as they lay together in Sally's bed.

“MCR?” asked Sally, who for a moment wondered whether Simon was talking about a biotech company. “Oh, the Middle Common Room. I'm not sure. It could be a lot of work.”

“It isn't at all,” said Simon. “I've been doing it for the past year and I think you'd be ideal to take over the role. It'd look perfect on your CV. Employers care about that kind of shit. It shows maturity and leadership and a respect for tradition.”

“Tradition,” repeated Sally with a slightly mocking edge to her voice. What did she care about tradition? She was a thoroughly modern woman who had no time for outdated fripperies at all: even though she lived in a city that was steeped in a thousand years of academic history. All around her were buildings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and some even older than that. She frowned and then beckoned towards the maid on duty. It was the black one with the skinny legs. “Pour the both of us another glass of sherry, will you?” she ordered. She was totally indifferent to the fact that both she and Simon were naked. And she was similarly untroubled that they'd just been openly fucking while the maid was in attendance.

What the maid thought about this was really of no concern to her at all.

“How much will it cost to be president?” was the question uppermost in Sally's

mind.

“It’s got a lot more expensive over the years,” said Simon. “You might need to clear the outgoing with your parents. It’s all about outspending the opposition. But I don’t think it’d be more than the cost of a year’s fees.”

“How guaranteed am I that I’d even win?”

“The first week of the campaign should see off the most talented competition. They’re generally the ones who got into university by the skin of their teeth. You know: by academic excellence alone. They’re the guys with scholarships from charitable foundations and internet companies. You should outspend them by the end of the second week. Then what you’ll mostly have to deal with are the talentless no-hopers with a tonne of dosh. Be careful. Money definitely makes a difference. That’s when you’ll have to spend your money wisely. I’ll be able to tell you who to bribe and whose public support you need.”

“The campaigning sounds as if it’s more hard work than the job.”

“Well, that’s democracy for you,” said Simon. “It’s all about buying votes and knowing how to get the job rather than knowing what to do with it once you’ve got it. Employers know that. Someone who can run a good campaign would be well set up for a life in modern corporate business. I take it your parents can spare the cash.”

“It won’t take long to persuade them. I just need to convince them that it’ll be money well spent.”

“I don’t think there’s anyone who’s got the money who’d be able to put up a good fight against you.”

“You’re such a sweetie, Simon,” said Sally affectionately. “What I need now,”

she continued while she twiddled with her crotch, “is for you to show just how much you love me and not with words. But your cock’s shrivelled somewhat.”

“Your maid’s got pretty hot lips,” said Simon with a wicked smile.

“She has?” said Sally who hadn’t really noticed. She glanced over at the maid who was standing by the sherry decanter in a flimsy skirt and cheap plastic sandals. “Come here and get my friend properly prepared,” she ordered.

“Yes’m,” said the maid who shuffled over towards the couple. She knelt down between Simon’s knees and took his penis between her hands and thick lips.

“Show a bit more enthusiasm,” Sally ordered. “We haven’t got all day.”

“She’s not doing too badly,” said Simon as his penis began to swell.

“It’s for *my* benefit not hers,” said Sally dismissively. “I want your cock in my snatch not tickling her tonsils.”

She also didn’t want her maid to actually enjoy herself with her boyfriend. Although maids were cheap and plentiful, it wasn’t unknown for people like Simon to get a little too attached to them. If this maid showed any signs of pleasure from having Simon’s cock up her throat, Sally would have no choice but to dismiss her.

“Fucking get on with it,” she said to the maid as she pressed her hand firmly on her short-haired pate. “Show some enthusiasm!”

The following morning, however, it was Sally who was assessing her own enthusiasm. Simon wouldn’t have suggested that she stand for president of the MCR unless there was a very good chance that she’d win the position, but every hour of every one of her days was already taken. And Sally also wondered just how easy it would be for her to persuade her parents to bankroll her candidature. They’d often complained

about the burden of financing their daughter's expensive education and there were also Sally's two younger siblings who had to be considered. On the other hand, Simon was undoubtedly right. Most employers would be as impressed by Sally's experience as an MCR president as they would be by her academic qualifications. Perhaps she could get on the fast track for a place on the board of directors and soon earn a generous salary (supplemented by bonuses). And Sally already had pedigree. She'd been head girl at public school which had been the result of a costly election campaign also paid for by her parents.

Sally was jogging along the banks of the River Thames with her mind focused on such elevated matters when she happened to notice that there was a body floating face downwards on the river surface. She abruptly stopped in her tracks and watched it bob by. One leg had lodged against a floating log and this caused the body to spin slowly around so that Sally could get a more leisurely view.

The body belonged to someone who was far too badly dressed to have been a student or lecturer. In that sense there wasn't much for her to worry about. The death of a prole wasn't a serious matter, although Sally knew she'd still have to make a phone call to the university authorities about it. Proles were always dying from something or other in the wasteland beyond the city walls. If it wasn't from natural causes such as starvation or disease, it would be from murder. Even though it was strictly speaking a police matter, it would be pointless to call them. They'd be too busy patrolling the outer suburbs to have time to spare. Such deaths were routine police business, but it would be treated with far more alacrity by the university authorities.

Sally called the University of Oxford Security Services and described what she

could see from the river bank. While she spoke the leg became dislodged and the body continued to drift with the river towards an ancient bridge. The questions she had to answer were all to the point. It was obviously not such an unusual occurrence that the security services didn't know how to handle it. Their main concern was that the body might be a vector for one of the unpleasant plagues that beset the proles who weren't quarantined behind high walls and didn't benefit from regular health checks.

When the call was over, Sally clicked off her mobile phone and sat on a bench that had been donated to the city of Oxford by Sigma Cybernetics plc. She watched the corpse float towards a bend in the river. How had it managed to drift so far into the city? Had it been carried through the tunnels under the imposingly high Oxford City walls? Had someone somehow thrown the corpse over the top? However it had got there, Security Services would soon drag it out of the river and then incinerate it and that would be the end of the matter. Unless someone came asking for it, no one would even be bothered to determine the prole's identity.

What could Sally learn from this? It wasn't something she often thought much about, but it reminded her that if she should somehow lose a grip on her good fortune there was a precipitous fall towards the absolute poverty that most English people suffered. This wasn't a fate she'd welcome at all. The unfortunate truth was that the trend in the Republic was for the proportion of those who were relatively affluent to steadily drop and part of that tendency was caused by bankruptcy and business failure. Although everything seemed perfect for Sally now, at any moment her fortunes could dramatically decline and there would be no safety net to catch her as she fell.

If being president of the MCR would in some way help to bolster Sally's future



prospects, then the ridiculous expense of campaigning for the position would be well worth it. Sally had no intention of ever being let loose amongst the hyenas and vultures of the wicked world beyond and she was resolved to do whatever was necessary to ensure that this would never happen.

**LXIX**  
**Iris**  
**2058**

Iris had never lived anywhere other than London before in her life, but now here she was: renting a room in an ancient sprawling house in the suburbs of Oxford. Although she'd had to make new friends, was now earning somewhat less money than she'd used to and had to sleep on a disgusting mattress that should have been replaced years ago, Iris was happier than she'd been for years. The year in which she'd made a living as a prostitute now seemed like nothing more than a nightmare from which she'd at last awoken.

Her current job at the Biotech lab for Sigma Cybernetics plc was one for which she was ridiculously over-qualified and which only two years ago she'd never have contemplated ever applying for. And the fact that she'd had to re-locate to Oxfordshire, some seventy or eighty kilometres from London, would have placed a job opportunity like this right at the bottom of the list. But now when she went to sleep she no longer had the odour of aging men adhering to her body and no residual memory of their repulsive cocks between her thighs that no amount of scrubbing could remove.

Although the same river ran through Oxford as it did London, there were none of the elaborate flood barriers that were being built throughout the capital city just as they were on the English beaches. Nonetheless, Oxford wasn't without walls and those weren't only the ancient mediaeval walls that attracted the few tourists who'd ventured so far from London. The student riots of the last few years had embarrassed a government whose legitimacy had been secured by a promise to banish the chaos and

anarchy of public disorder. The city council was determined to demonstrate its commitment to the government's effort to restore civility and order to the Kingdom and, like other tourist cities in England such as York, Bath and Norwich, the City of Oxford had constructed a wall around the town centre that had at least provided employment to privately resourced security staff and building maintenance workers.

In practical terms the wall was just a bloody nuisance for Iris. Every morning she had to stand in line until she could flash her work permit and the shiny new Government Issue ID that verified that she was eligible to work in the city centre and therefore wasn't an illegal immigrant. It didn't normally take her long to get through the security checks, but other people in the same queue were often delayed for much longer, especially those that looked slightly foreign or were dressed in a fashion that bothered the security staff. It wasn't just a person's skin colour or accent (especially Scottish or Welsh) that might earn special attention. There were other characteristics such as hair that was too long or too short, too many tattoos or body-piercings, or clothes deemed to be too eccentric.

There was a clear difference between the world inside the city walls and that outside. It was almost as if Oxford was one big gated community. Outside the walls were derelict and aging properties where the unemployed, the poorly-paid and the criminal underclass had to live, work and most likely die. Inside the walls, the streets were clean, the buildings properly maintained and the shops well-stocked. But, most of all, the people inside the city walls were better dressed, better spoken and better fed. In actual fact, a higher proportion of those confined within the walls were of foreign origin than those outside. Many were tourists from China, Korea and Brazil, but most of the

others were students at the venerable University of Oxford. Although they mostly came from the same wealthy countries as the tourists, some even came from Africa and the Middle East. There were no Americans, of course. Few of them could afford to travel so far abroad these days. And there weren't many from Europe now that the Kingdom of England had such hostile relations with almost all its immediate neighbours, especially those with which it had so recently been constitutionally bound.

The main consolation Iris had from her boring work was her daily stroll through the city centre. This was sometimes along the grassy banks of the River Thames where she might pass the occasional punt and even a few ducks. This was a privilege that would have been denied her if she hadn't happened to be employed within the city walls. Passes into the city centre were usually only issued to students and tourists.

The contrast to the peaceful and elegant streets of central Oxford couldn't be greater than with the suburb where Iris rented a room in a large sprawling house. It was nearly an hour's walk home along roads where most street-lamps no longer functioned and where prostitutes lurked in the shadows. It was always a relief to get home and through the front door even though now, in midwinter, it was scarcely much warmer indoors than outside. The only room that was heated was the living room where she and the other residents, mostly young people like Iris, would gather around the television and share the warmth emanating from the coal-burning stove.

Deciding what to watch on television was always a compromise and inevitably the news channels were the ones about which there was least dispute. The choice was principally between the various affiliates of Fox UK and the rather diminished service provided by the EBC. Ever since the government abolished the license fee system, the

EBC had struggled to provide an impartial service and even this was still censured for its supposed liberal bias by the government and the majority of the privately owned media. If the other spin-offs from the venerable BBC based in Scotland and Wales weren't so parochial, Iris would have relied on them for news, but instead, like everyone else, she settled for either the sparkle and glitter of Fox News UK or the static images on EBC News 24.

“What does this *England First* policy really mean?” asked Sue who was sitting beside Iris on the sofa dressed in a thick jumper, scarf and woollen mittens. “How's it gonna be any different from what the government's been doing anyway for the last few years?”

“It's just a slogan,” said Steve, another housemate. “It probably doesn't mean anything at all.”

“I don't like the government posters,” said Sudesh who was rolling a spliff on the back of an old magazine.

“What's wrong with them?” asked Iris.

He smoothed out the tube of cigarette paper and twisted one end. “I dunno,” he said. “They're a bit sinister. All those white faces, English flags and village greens. It's nostalgia for an England that never existed and it's scarcely what you could call inclusive.”

“And how's all that patriotic jingoism going to create jobs?” wondered Steve. “*That's* what we want. Not warm ale, pork scratching and cricket pavilions. It's jobs.”

Iris might well have wondered, but it soon became obvious that what the slogan meant wasn't so much about creating more jobs, but to ensure that what jobs were

available would be allocated first to those people whose origins were indisputably English. And it was Sue who was to be the first victim in the house.

“What the fuck!” she exclaimed as she sat cross-legged in the living room when Iris returned from work on a particularly chilly evening. She’d just opened a manila envelope that had been addressed to her. “I just can’t fucking believe it. I’m gonna be deported.”

“Deported?” wondered Iris who could only assume that Sue was joking. Of all the people she knew, Iris seemed the least likely to attract the attention of the English Homeland Security Services. “You’re not American, Australian or anything are you?”

“Of course I’m not,” said Sue. “I’m Scottish.”

Iris had never noticed this before. Sue didn’t have a pronounced accent and although it clearly didn’t come from London it wasn’t one that was easy to place.

“I still don’t understand,” she said.

“Scotland’s not part of the same country as England these days,” said Sue. “And since England left the Northern European Union, all those old treaties that let people in the Union work wherever they wanted have been torn up. Scots can work in Sweden and Poland, just as Swedes and Poles can work in Scotland, but none of us, it seems, can work in the Kingdom of England.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Steve. “I thought you’d spent all your childhood in Durham.”

“I did, but I was born in Scotland,” Sue said. “When the old British passports were scrapped, I was issued a Scottish passport. I didn’t think anything more of it and I’d never thought of applying for an English passport. I mean, who wants one of those

anymore? The only places they're good for are places you don't want to live. That is, unless you want to carry on living in England."

"They can't do that!" said Steve unconvincingly.

"They fucking well can," said Sue. "And they fucking well have. I've got to leave voluntarily before the end of the month or I'll lose the right to make my own arrangements. It's just like what's been happening over in the Republic of North America where all the Mexicans and other Hispanics have been rounded up and driven across the border, no questions asked."

"Won't you be better off in Scotland?" said Iris. "They're not doing so badly across the tartan border, are they?"

"There's still not much in the way of jobs," said Sue. "And anyway I've got a job. It might not be much and it's a fucking waste of a Master of Arts from Trinity College, but it's better than nothing. And I don't know anyone in Scotland. My parents emigrated from England to Canada fucking years ago before the fall of the United States. It's a fucking nightmare!"

Sue wasn't the only person to fall foul of the *England First* policy, but Iris had to admit the policy did help the government fulfil its promise to provide more jobs for English citizens. As more and more people were deported for not possessing the right kind of passport, the jobs they used to have became instantly available to properly certified English subjects. Iris thought that enough blood had already been squeezed from the stone over the last few years. She'd witnessed the departure of almost everyone she'd known who hadn't been born in the UK and, most significantly, whose skin-colour and complexion was dark, dusky or black. Only those who could show

indisputable proof of birth within the English counties seemed to be safe. But the range of unwanted people was now extended to include any non-national unless, of course, they came from a relatively prosperous country like China or Brazil. People like Sue who'd believed they were safe because they began working in England when the country was part of the Northern European Union were now receiving manila envelopes that enclosed their deportation orders.

Iris noticed that many of her colleagues would suddenly not appear at the office one day and no explanation was ever forthcoming for their non-appearance. Nobody in permanent employment would ever put at risk what reputation they had to the risk of being labelled a troublemaker.

One thing that troubled Iris was how little news coverage was available on the deportation of what must surely be hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Scots, Welsh and Irish. Predictably neither the national newspapers nor Fox News UK made any reference about the fate of the many deportees, although they showered constant praise on the government for its resolute courage in pursuing the absolutely necessary *England First* policy.

“About time,” said Stewart Platell on *Good Morning England* on Fox News UK. “There’s a good reason why there’s been high unemployment in this proud nation and it’s not because English men and women are not willing to work.”

“England should always come first,” said Amanda Hislop on Telegraph TV. “We’ve let ourselves accept second-class status to our French and German neighbours for far too long.”

The EBC was less forthright but by virtue of being meticulously non-partisan



in a country where the opposition was mostly silent it had to tread carefully. The mild criticism voiced by the people it chose to interview in the pursuit of balance was elsewhere either dismissed as naive and impractical or damned as unpatriotic. The only news agencies that expressed an openly negative opinion came from abroad, but their coverage mostly featured cheerful Scottish and Welsh passport holders who were returning home from what was characterised as exile in the land of weak tea and muffins. This gave the impression that it wasn't so much that such nationals had been deported, but rather that they'd at last seen the error of their ways and were happy to return to the land of their birth (despite the fact that Wales, Scotland and Ireland had no more jobs and a not much better social security system than did England).

“And then there were two,” said Iris to Steve when the house they shared was now empty of all the other people who'd once lived there. After Sue had left, it was only a matter of time until Sudesh, Gerhard, Mohammed and Alexei should also leave.

“I take it that your ID is OK,” said Steve.

“Yes,” said Iris. “And yours?”

“I just hope that the fact my grandmother was Irish isn't held against me,” he said nervously. “But you just don't know, do you? Just how far can these bastards go till they're satisfied?”

**LXX**  
**Gabrielle**  
**2040**

There was a demonstration going on in Oxford's city centre. Normally, Gabrielle wouldn't be worried by something like that, but the taxi she was in would have to pass through it and she was concerned for the safety of Ajit, her Chief Farm Manager. Would they notice that he was Pakistani?

"Relax," said Ghazi who was also accompanying her. "Things might be getting heated over there in the Kashmir, but these guys aren't about to be lynching anyone. Look at them. They're a mixture of Muslims and Hindus. It's the war they're complaining about: not one side of the other."

Gabrielle looked more closely at the banners on display. There was a reassuring lack of factionalism. There was an apparent even-handedness about the complaints, but it was surely rare in the heated atmosphere of the last few months to find someone whose origin was in the Indian subcontinent who didn't side with either Pakistan or India. Indeed, there were plenty of good reasons to attack both parties. Neither democratically elected government had been exactly blameless, though Gabrielle suspected that in many ways they were just enacting what their respective electorates wanted them to do. The carnage in Kashmir was enough to upset anyone. Then there were the terrorist bomb attacks in Delhi, Mumbai and Lahore. And every day there was yet another story of an atrocity of one kind or another committed by Muslim, Hindu and Sikh extremists. It was sometimes difficult enough for Gabrielle to maintain the stance that it was the war rather than the warring nations that was most to blame.

Gabrielle enjoyed her business trips out of London and there were few cities as delightful as Oxford. She was looking forward to staying with Ghazi for a few days at the hotel. She just hoped the rooms were properly sound-proofed as she'd become a much more voluble lover as the years passed. Ajit was staying in his own hotel room. Gabrielle had thought about what it would be like to make love with him, but that was just never going to happen. Even if he wasn't already married with children, he'd be reluctant to compromise his working relationship with his boss. Furthermore, he probably wouldn't appreciate sex without some kind of emotional tie.

What a drag!

Gabrielle saw plenty of evidence of a more partisan attitude towards the India-Pakistan War after they'd got out of the taxi and entered the grounds of Jared Diamond House. This was where she was due to attend a set of seminars regarding some of the latest agricultural and biotechnological products. There were many posters on the office walls that publicised talks and discussions on the war. Some of the accompanying graphic images were extremely distressing, but then there was no shortage of distasteful photographs arising from the conflict. There were images of Muslim children being burnt alive, Hindu mothers being disembowelled, and naked cadavers being excavated from trenches that had been dug high up in the mountains. It was inevitable that there would be strong emotions in such a large population of British people whose origins were either India or Pakistan: especially here in Oxford. British Asians were, of course, disproportionately represented in the world of academia. No other ethnic community in the United Kingdom had invested so much effort to get ahead. And, naturally, this academic and material success attracted the wrath and envy of another community that

was less well represented in university circles, but Gabrielle knew to exist in Oxford from viewing the hate graffiti sprayed on the walls alongside the railway line. *Pakis Out! Death to Ragheads! Fuck Off Back to Neelum Valley!* The last was an unusually well-spelled reference to the infamous biochemical atrocity that had become a byword for the excesses of modern warfare.

“I’m delighted you could make it,” said Samirah, the promotional manager for Jared Diamond House’s Biotech seminars. “I’m sure you’ll agree that we’ve got some star speakers and plenty of exciting new ideas. Here are your passes.”

She handed Gabrielle the name tags that they’d have to dangle over their breasts for the evening. She hesitated slightly when she saw the names associated with Gabrielle’s companions.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking,” Samirah said in a relatively low voice. “Are your companions Indian or Pakistani? Not necessarily, of course, by birth, I hope you understand, but by...er...allegiance. I’ve been instructed to keep Indian and Pakistani nationals apart. There’s been *ever* so much trouble in recent months.”

Gabrielle understood Samirah’s concern but she also knew that her response wasn’t going to be very helpful. “One’s Indian and the other’s Pakistani,” she said. “I think they would prefer not to sit apart.”

“I understand,” said Samirah thoughtfully while she consulted her notes. “I’ll see what we can do.”

Fortunately, neither Ghazi nor Ajit dressed in a way that announced their allegiance or religion and most attendees wouldn’t care one way or another. There were a few other Asians, even though their presence in the agricultural profession had only

begun to be widespread in recent years since agriculture once more became a prosperous industry and was attracting those who in an earlier generation might have been attracted to a career in financial services. Like Ghazi, most dressed no differently to any other British citizen irrespective of ethnicity, but there were some who openly paraded their sympathies. A group of Asian men and women with a prominent tilaka on their forehead sat on one side of the lecture theatre while on the other side were bearded men adorned in loose traditional clothing. They sat as far from each other as was possible.

Gabrielle was grateful during the seminar that she'd studied Chemistry and Biology as part of her degree in Agriculture and Farm Management. She might not be as comfortable as Ajit with the polysyllabic names and she was sure that without the aid of the photographs and slides she would have lost the thread of the discussion, but she was equally sure that many of the others were totally blinded by science. The bullet points that most visibly awakened their attention were phrased in terms of profit, investment opportunities and the bottom line. They may have been less concerned than Gabrielle and certainly Ajit about the less prominently highlighted caveats regarding mutation, disease-resistance and unproven side-effects.

Ghazi was obviously bored by the seminars and Gabrielle could see his eyes wander about the room. He was clearly attracted to Samirah who, despite her Islamic name, was certainly not Pakistani and was so pale-skinned that she may well have had no connection whatsoever to North Africa or the Middle East. He also had his eyes on an Asian man on the Pakistani side of the room who was surrounded by farmers of a more traditional English aspect that were so obese that even Ghazi would have hesitated

to fuck them. Gabrielle knew that Ghazi had a true connoisseur's nose for those men most likely to find him attractive and who'd be game for a fuck. Gabrielle wondered whether this young Asian would be sharing their hotel room tonight.

However, this wasn't what happened although there were several times during the rest of the day when Ghazi was absent. That was hardly unexpected. There was little likelihood that he'd really get much joy from the seminars though, as a private investor with many lucrative sidelines, it was almost certain that he'd find some money-making opportunity from either the information given by the professorial lecturers or, more likely, from the contacts he'd make during the coffee breaks. What was rather less to be expected was that the Pakistani man towards whom Ghazi's eyes had wandered was also not there.

Gabrielle wasn't put out that much during the evening when she lazed about in her hotel suite watching an ancient Hollywood blockbuster while dressed only in a dressing gown. She'd probably have been rather more surprised if Ghazi hadn't found a man or woman with whom to spend his time, but her long-time lover was always reliable in one respect. She was more or less guaranteed that she would eventually be fucked long and hard by him and if he picked up a third party... well, that could be an extra treat. In any case, Gabrielle was rather enjoying the preposterous superhero nonsense that had once been such standard fare in Hollywood when movie budgets were extravagant enough to afford real human actors. These days only the excellence of computer graphics disguised the reduced expenditure on special effects, although nothing could be done to disguise the poor quality of the script-writing.

When Ghazi did arrive, well before midnight, he had the unmistakable odour of

sex on his body, but as the man or woman with whom he'd so obviously been sharing his body wasn't there Gabrielle was grateful that her lover showered off the aroma before joining her on their double bed. She guessed that it had been a woman he'd had sex with, simply because he'd not brought anyone back with her. Gabrielle wasn't even slightly attracted to women, but thankfully most men, even those who enjoyed having sex with other men, were generally attracted to her.

It wasn't Samirah, that was for sure. When Ghazi and Gabrielle attended the seminar the following day, where Ajit was patiently waiting, Samirah betrayed none of the tell-tale signs with which Gabrielle was so familiar when her wayward lover had made a conquest. It could have been anyone. The hotel bar had been full of women the night before, though it was anyone's guess how many were guests and how many were plying for trade.

It wasn't until much later in the day, after lunch in fact, that Gabrielle discovered who it was that Ghazi had had sex with.

She was chatting with Ajit about some of the products that were on display in the foyer. The new brands of GM wheat were particularly impressive, although Ajit was troubled by the fact that the wheat was sterile. They disagreed about the new breeds of goat that were being cloned. Gabrielle was impressed by the milk-yield and the quality of the lean meat, whilst Ajit was troubled by the fact that the goat's legs were so short the animal could barely lift its stomach off the ground.

It was then that they heard the sounds of shouting and furniture being kicked over that had them both wondering whether it was better to run towards the source of the commotion to identify the cause or to run away for safety. There had been many

terrorist incidents in the last few weeks related to the war in India and Pakistan: generally directed towards British Asians rather than any other ethnic or social group. Mosques had been set alight. A Gurdwara in Manchester had been fire-bombed. A dormitory that was housing migrant workers from Bangladesh (which nation had stayed resolutely neutral in the conflict) had been the victim of a suicide bomb. Could this be another terrorist attack?

Ajit led the way back to the lecture theatre with the more cautious Gabrielle trailing behind. It was clear that no bombs or guns had been used but the cause of the fracas wasn't immediately obvious. A group of people was gathered around the part of the room from which came the unmistakable sound of violence, but it was only when Gabrielle got closer that she discovered what was happening. It was a fight, but scarcely one that was evenly matched. Ghazi was lying prostrate and whimpering on the floor while three or four bearded, hooded men were kicking him repeatedly in the face, the chest and the groin.

And then before the security guards could arrive, they ran off.

The attackers weren't attendees of the seminar, because all the people who'd been there the day before were still in attendance with the exception of the Asian man who'd attracted Ghazi's eye. All the Muslim and Hindu visitors were there. No one from either group had been amongst those who'd run away and now hidden in Oxford's crowds of tourists. The Muslim Asians who dressed in traditional dress had been so far from the scene of the incident that it was obvious that none of them had been active participants.

Ghazi was in a very bad state. Gabrielle and Ajit sat with him in an adjacent



room while they waited for the paramedics to arrive. His nose was broken and several teeth had been kicked out. He had difficulty breathing and he clutched his chest where it was likely that a rib had been broken. Blood was trickling out of his nose and his mouth. A bloody gash was open across his forehead. One eye was badly swollen.

“Why did they attack him?” Gabrielle asked Ajit. “Was it just because they thought he was a Hindu and they didn’t like Hindus?”

Ajit shook his head. “I don’t think that’s why,” he said sadly. “I don’t think religion or nationality had anything to do with it. In any case, since Ghazi sat next to me and most people guessed that I might be Pakistani, they might well have thought he was one as well. Or at least a third- or fourth-generation migrant. No, it wasn’t that at all.”

“What was it?”

“I speak Urdu mostly, but I also know Sindhi,” said Ajit. “I overheard some of the conversation between those with the long beards: you know the ones in traditional clothes. What they objected to wasn’t Ghazi’s religion. It was what he seems to have been up to with one of the other Muslim men who were there yesterday but who I gather from what I heard might also be in hospital.”

“You think it might be Ghazi’s sexual behaviour that they objected to?”

“I don’t know your boyfriend very well,” said Ajit very carefully. “He doesn’t confide in me about personal matters and most especially not about his sexual activity. Nevertheless, I know that he did something yesterday that some people clearly didn’t like. And I guess he’s been punished for it.”

“He most certainly has,” said Gabrielle as she continued to attempt to staunch

the flow of blood from Ghazi's bloody mouth.

**LXXI**  
**Mark & Molly**  
**2075**

There was much that was making Mark feel guilty. Here he was—a married man with a devoted wife with whom he'd lived for fourteen years and a delightful nine-year old daughter—now living every day of the week in Oxford: a two hour train journey from Islington. And this was all because his employer, Sig Mu Inc., Korea, needed a representative in the university town and Mark was aware that he'd been considered to be the best man for the job. He also knew that if he showed any reluctance, his employer would soon conclude that he was no longer the best man for the job he currently held in Central London.

Not only did Mark feel guilt that he was abandoning his familial duties for reasons of economic necessity but, worse, that he'd allowed himself to succumb to sexual temptation. And this was something he'd sworn never to do. He was weak and fallible and terrified that his wife might find out about it. Mark didn't deserve Molly. He'd failed her. And he continued to fail her every moment that he spent with Salma.

It wasn't that Mark had gone out of his way to be unfaithful. Indeed, nothing could have been further from his mind. Salma was just the woman who worked next door to SM Incorporated's skeleton office of two men and one young secretary. The company that employed her had something vaguely to do with the manufacture of nanocarbon polymers. Salma was a scientist by profession with qualifications from Harvard and Shanghai and she was working in Oxford for reasons rather more of necessity than choice.

“My home in Damascus was a place where one of the Israeli missiles struck. My parents, my grandparents, my aunts, my young son: they all died that day. Damascus still hasn’t recovered. Syria continues to suffer from the Israeli invasion and the puppet dictator they put on the throne. My country was once one of the most democratic and liberal republics in the Arab world and now it’s nothing more than a vassal to the Jewish state.”

Mark knew very little about Middle Eastern politics. It was all very confusing. He knew there were countries in that part of the world that were now nothing more than a nuclear wasteland such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkmenistan, although he wasn’t sure whether they were strictly speaking even in the Middle East.

“They *are* mostly Muslim,” Salma told him. “But if you come from Syria or any of its neighbours you don’t think of yourself as *Middle East*. That’s a sort of Western view of the world. But Israel, Jordan and Lebanon, like Syria, are definitely what you might call Middle East.”

“And Arabia, Yemen, Iraq and all those others?”

“I guess anywhere within easy reach of Israeli missiles is in the Middle East.”

“It’s certainly hotting up over there, isn’t it?” Mark remarked.

“It’s always been bad,” said Salma. “There’s been a hundred and thirty years of Israeli threat, but now since all that’s left of American support for Israel is rhetoric and evangelical volunteers rather than hard cash, there’s a chance that the balance of power might swing elsewhere. It’s not the only nation with nuclear weapons. Abu Dhabi, Kuwait and the Democratic Republics of Arabia could pack a punch if needed. Not to mention Turkey, Iran and Iraq.”

“You don’t think there *will* be another nuclear war, do you? Surely the last two were bad enough.”

“They say things always come in threes,” said Salma reflectively. “But I hope not. What hope would there be for Syria under the missile flight paths? My hope is that democracy will return to Israel and that the Israeli people will vote for peace.”

“Is that likely?”

“There’s not been a proper democracy in Israel for over fifty years,” said Salma. “But stranger things have happened. Remember North Korea. Or for that matter, how things turned out in the Congo.”

Mark nodded sagely. Things quite often didn’t happen the way people expected, however much it sometimes seemed that history was playing itself out in a sort of pre-ordained way. The Anglo-Saxon economies were in disarray. The climate was getting steadily more unstable. And every day more and more things that were once affordable were becoming prohibitively expensive.

And that included accommodation.

Mark was now a tenant in two properties. He was paying rent for the two-bedroom flat near Holloway that he shared with his wife and daughter. That wasn’t cheap, though Molly’s job with Hackney Borough Council did help pay the bills. His other home where he slept five nights a week was a single room in a large house that he shared with a mixture of mostly young people who kept nothing like the same hours as he did. They never did the washing up and left the kitchen in a shocking state. The bathroom constantly stank as a result of the antique plumbing. And Mark didn’t feel comfortable when he sat in the living room with the other housemates while they

smoked dope, snorted lines and watched moronic quiz shows. After having lived as a husband and father for so long, he hated having to share a house. The only retreat his bedroom afforded him was when he pushed his ear-plugs as deep into his ears as he could and pulled a duvet over his shoulders to keep out the draught that whistled through the poorly-fitting windows.

Mark soon found that Salma's small bedsit was much more comfortable than either his Oxford or his Islington home. Her ex-husband had left her a regular stipend that was enough to supplement her income and to allow her to live relatively comfortably. Although her bedsit wasn't situated in the best part of Oxford, it was near enough to the city centre that she could walk to work and not have to squeeze into the crowded buses. Her neighbours were quiet, the flat was tastefully decorated and the bed was gloriously inviting.

Mark stood by the window of her apartment through which he could glimpse the city walls that kept gown and town apart. After all these months in Oxford, he'd not once ventured within the walls but he could see from Salma's window that there was much that would be worth visiting if he should purchase a tourist pass for the day. Perhaps that was something he could do together with Molly and Monica if they ever came to spend the weekend in Oxford.

Thinking of his wife brought a fresh spasm of guilt to Mark. He glanced back at Salma. She and Molly were both women in their thirties, although Salma was somewhat closer to the end of that decade than Molly. She was also a larger woman. Although not exactly fat or obese, she could best be described as chunky. She was taller, rounder and, in places, rather flabbier. But she was also, Mark had to shamefacedly

admit, a rather more passionate lover than Molly who often seemed distracted during their lovemaking.

Especially in recent months.

“We shouldn’t,” said Mark ineffectually as Salma dragged him down to lie beside her on the luxurious bed in a room that had none of the icy chill that permeated Mark’s own room. “It’s not right. What would my wife think?”

“Shut up about your wife already,” said Salma in a voice that sometimes betrayed the Jewish influence of one half of her complex lines of ancestry. “You’re with me now. Or would you rather be somewhere else?”

Mark had to admit he’d much rather not.

And after a lovemaking where Mark’s face was sometimes pressed to Salma’s voluptuous bosom and where his penis was lodged deep inside her vagina’s warm liquid grip, the couple lay beside each other gasping from the exhaustion that was inevitable for two people who never did nearly enough exercise: especially not Mark since he’d had to abandon his bicycle in London.

“You’ll stay the night won’t you?” asked Salma.

“Of course,” said Mark who didn’t want to face the perilous journey back home after dark to the outer suburbs of Oxford. He was also more than happy to stay where he was on the firm mattress under a warm duvet pressed against a cuddly woman in a draught-free bedroom. It was bliss of a kind that he’d come to appreciate ever more every time when he returned to his noisy, chilly flat where he had to roll around the mattress to avoid a loose spring pronging into his arse.

However, when he settled back into Salma’s arms under her all-embracing

duvet he was suddenly awoken by a loud commotion from the street below that was still audible through the windows' double glazing. It was the sound of shouts and yells, accompanied by rather unsettling thuds. Salma immediately jumped out of bed and rushed to the window.

“What is it?” asked Mark who expected Salma to blame it on drunks returning from the many pubs outside Oxford city's walls where the prostitutes and drug-peddlers who were banned from within could ply their trade more freely.

“I don't know,” said Salma. “There seems to be a kind of attack on the house opposite.”

“An attack?”

“Well, it's difficult to tell from here. But it looks like people breaking and entering the house and there seems to have been some looting.”

“Shall I call the police?” asked Mark who rolled over the bed to the small cabinet where his mobile phone was lying with his glasses and wristwatch.

Salma nodded. “It's number 16,” she said. “Tell them to come quickly.”

It was actually over half an hour until the police finally arrived and then it was just two of them on their bicycles. They were fully armed and they immediately ran into the house, but they were too late. The people who'd broken into the house had left a long time before and had shown no sign of haste as they did so. They carried the more portable loot away with them such as television screens and computers, but as they were also carrying baseball bats and other improvised weapons neither Mark nor anyone else were inclined to offer them any resistance.

“House robbery,” said Mark, as if it summed it all up. “That's not very nice.



And right under our noses.”

“It might be a little more than that,” said Salma thoughtfully. “Oxford’s got a sizeable Muslim population and a lot of them are Arabs. I guess their parents or grandparents came to the country when there was plenty of oil money sloshing around the Arabian Peninsula. And I sort of know the people opposite. They were an old Jewish couple who were active in Oxford’s Jewish community. The man always wore a skull-cap. His wife wore one of those weird wigs. They weren’t exactly circumspect about their religion. Not that they’d ever felt the need to be.”

“You think that them being Jewish and there being so many Muslims in Oxford is why their house was attacked?”

“It does seem a reasonable hypothesis, doesn’t it?” said Salma. “Every time the Israelis perpetrate an atrocity of one kind or another in their undeclared war against their neighbours there’s some kind of retaliation by steamed-up Arabs somewhere else. You saw on the news the other day about what happened in Petra, didn’t you? Thousands of years of history went up in smoke along with those cowering Palestinian guerrilla fighters.”

Mark didn’t really have an opinion on the matter and he was more eager to burrow under the duvet than discuss the robbery. Several more police arrived on their bicycles, all well-armed and fully protected. Half an hour later, an ambulance leisurely pulled up into the road and paramedics ran into the house. It was only when stretchers were brought out with sheets covering the faces that Mark felt he could at last return to bed without appearing to be insufficiently concerned about the welfare of Salma’s neighbours.

“Do you think they were murdered?” Mark wondered.

“I don’t think we’ll ever know,” said Salma. “The news media doesn’t bother itself with incidents like that anymore.”

Mark remained troubled the following morning when he and Salma left for work. His pleasure at not having had to catch a bus and having rested in bed an extra hour was compromised when the couple crossed the road to see what had happened the night before.

Most of the windows were smashed and through the shattered glass Mark could see a degree of reckless vandalism that was far beyond what was necessary. The door to the house had been pulled off its hinges with a metal bar. And through the open doorway Mark could see peculiar symbols spray-painted over the hallway walls.

“Is that Arabic?” Mark asked Salma whom he’d reckoned would know.

She nodded. “I can’t read it all from here,” she said. “But it’s not a quotation from the Koran.”

“What does it say?”

“It doesn’t appear to be especially complimentary towards Israel,” she commented.

**LXXII**  
**Alex**  
**2034**

It was several weeks since Alex had last travelled outside of London. As always the exorbitant cost was covered by business expenses, although this time there was no flight across the Atlantic or toward the Far East. A train ride north from Paddington to the University City of Oxford, even first class, wasn't quite the work junket that Alex had now got used to. But he hoped there'd be plenty of good quality wine and perhaps a few class lines to compensate him for the trouble.

Alex still wasn't really sure what it was that the company on whose executive board he served was actually in the business of manufacturing, but usually that wasn't much of a handicap. Most of what was discussed in board meetings was pretty much interchangeable between one business and another. But this particular excursion to attend a seminar hosted by Professor Sigrid Smith, the universally acclaimed expert in the discipline, was a risky one. Alex didn't dare expose his ignorance by questioning his need to attend.

All the same, Alex was gratified to see that Sue from Marketing was also attending. This pleased him in two ways. One was that she would almost certainly be as ignorant as he was about whatever it was that Professor Smith would be talking about. Alex wouldn't be the only who'd have to blag his way through the day. The other reason was that she was eminently fuckable and Alex had a notion that he stood a rather better chance than his colleagues in discovering the truth of this supposition.

She was an ambitious young woman of oriental origin whose ascent from a

minor marketing role to the status of one of the Marketing Team's rising stars in less than a year was almost certainly assisted by some irregular persuasion. She showed no reluctance in showing off her assets to their best advantage, although in truth there was more suggestion than substance to them. She was very thin, which in an age of generally overweight women wasn't a bad thing, and she advertised her beauty by propping up her bra and keeping open the top few buttons of her blouse. As a senior member of the Executive Board who was divorced and quite clearly available, Alex was aware that he would be the perfect target for a predatory woman on the prowl.

"South Korea," Sue said in response to Alex's almost inevitable question. "Not that I've ever been there. I've lived in London all my life."

Alex could have guessed this from her liberal use of glottal stops.

"I've never been there, either," Alex said. "So that makes two of us."

The fact that his incredibly weak attempt at humour was received so warmly suggested to Alex just how sound his instincts were on the matter of Sue's availability. He'd learned in the last several years that progress in management was actually hindered rather than helped by an intelligent sense of humour or the ability to crack genuinely amusing jokes. Anything that resembled genuine wit was immediately suspect.

"I wouldn't bother," said Sue, in what was possibly an ill-judged attempt to show that she wasn't simply the bimbo Alex hoped she was. "Life in Korea isn't so good these days now that the North keeps lobbing bombs over the border."

"Well, you wouldn't want to live in a country like North Korea, would you?" said Alex who was now wondering how to move the conversation on without exposing

his ignorance about international affairs. Alex looked ahead of him while the taxi weaved through the traffic. He didn't want to give the impression that he was flirting as Sue wasn't the only one with whom he was sharing the cab. There were also two male colleagues who were genuinely looking forward to Professor Smith's seminar. "Famine. Oppression. Even plague. It's almost mediaeval. Just like Oxford itself. There can't be many cities in the world with as much mediaeval stuff in it as Oxford."

"I've never been to the city before," said Sue. "I hope the seminar isn't going to be *too* technical. I'm not sure I could stay awake."

Sue was saying all the right things, but Alex could scarcely admit to his own very similar fears. Maybe she guessed how little the Senior Executive knew and was showing solidarity, but Alex had to be cautious about admitting this.

"I'll explain anything that you need to know," he lied.

"When will there be an opportunity for that?" Sue asked.

Steady on, thought Alex. Not so fast. And definitely not so obvious.

"I'm sure there'll be a break in our busy schedule," he said.

The seminar was at least as boring and confusing as Alex feared. The more confusing it was, the more difficult it was for Alex to stay awake. He periodically glanced over to Sue who, like him, was near the back of the lecture theatre and evidently more accomplished than him in appearing to be alert. Occasionally his glance met hers and Alex was sure that there was a flicker of a smile on her lips.

"I think I just about understood some of that," she said to Alex when he and the many other experts and executives gathered together around the sandwiches and coffee that was laid out for them in the corridor outside the lecture theatre.

Alex had to be careful in declaring what he understood. “I’ll need to study my notes in more depth until I come to a considered decision,” he said. “But it was certainly fascinating.”

He was in an awkward position. He couldn’t be seen to be spending too much time with Sue, but he really *didn’t* want to talk to any of his other colleagues. The risk that he might betray his ignorance to them was much greater than it was with Sue. It was an awkward dilemma best resolved by wandering off to the loo, even though he wasn’t really in very much need.

It was while returning from a lavatory that was nearly five minutes’ walk away that he again met Sue. He didn’t believe that it was a genuine coincidence.

“Goodness,” he said. “We shouldn’t keep meeting like this.”

This was another weak joke and a very old cliché, but precisely right for the occasion. Sue laughed appreciatively. “Are we likely to be bumping into each other at the Holiday Inn?” she asked disingenuously.

So that’s where everyone else is staying, thought Alex. At least, he wasn’t one of those who’d have to slum it. “I shouldn’t think so,” he said with a soft laugh. “I’m staying at the Sphinx. Unless you’re there to sample what the bar has to offer after dinner at eight I very much doubt it.”

Sue nodded and then discreetly switched the subject of conversation. “I hope the next hour or so of Professor Smith’s seminar is as interesting as the first,” she said enthusiastically.

“Indeed,” said Alex.

In actual fact, it was considerably more bewildering. The graphics the professor

exhibited on the screen might have clarified his thesis for the other attendees but for Alex they might as well have been abstract expressionist paintings. He passed the time by speculating whether he would meet Sue in the lounge bar of the Sphinx Hotel that evening. When that topic was exhausted he tried to find as many anagrams as he could from the words printed on the screen. He'd have been happier surfing the internet or doing a crossword on his laptop, but that would merely reveal the extent of his boredom.

Alex was aware that although his increasing years hadn't been kind to him, his attraction to women like Sue had actually increased over time. His enhanced appeal was almost certainly better correlated with his status as a Senior Executive than it was with any aesthetic consideration. It was reassuring that as long as he didn't fall out with anyone in the organisation more senior than him—and there weren't many of those now—his remuneration would continue to rise at a rate entirely unrelated to his effort or effectiveness. The less he did, the more he could take credit for not interfering with the achievements of his manifestly more gifted and rather less well remunerated professional staff. Senior management was more about never doing anything stupid than about doing anything clever. In fact, there was so much potential hazard in trying to be clever that the best policy was never to do anything at all.

“Fancy meeting you here,” said Alex when after his satisfying four course meal and a half-bottle of wine he wandered into the lounge bar and, as expected, discovered Sue sitting on a high stool by the bar where she was sipping on a soft drink through a straw.

“I was bored,” said Sue. “I remembered that you said that the bar at the Sphinx was worth visiting.”

“Did I?” said Alex who in truth would never have recommended the bar to anyone. “The drinks are a bit expensive though. Would you like to share a bottle of wine?”

Sue nodded.

“Red or white?” Alex asked.

“You choose.”

It was obvious what Sue really wanted. It was all part of the deal. She wanted the preferment that someone like Alex could provide that would bypass the obstacles and hazards that normally stood in the way of a talented young woman in a meritocratic organisation. On the other hand, what Alex wanted, of course, was sex. The art of the exercise was to pretend otherwise.

It was also necessary that Alex should moderate his alcohol intake. This was partly so that he wouldn't say something to this ambitious young woman that could later be used against him, but also so that he'd be able to perform adequately later on without the help of either prescribed medication or the coke that he'd stashed away in his suitcase. Unfortunately for Alex, Sue was a woman experienced at the same game. She sipped her red wine very slowly and constantly tried to pass the conversation back to Alex rather than for him to let her to do the talking. Although both parties knew what the outcome of this encounter would be, the process of getting there could prove to be fraught.

Alex couldn't discuss his chequered history with women as this would compromise his position. He most certainly couldn't discuss anything related to his job as he needed to maintain the mystique associated with his considerable salary. And he



certainly couldn't take the risk of discussing the seminar.

Fortunately, there was a television in the lounge bar permanently tuned to Fox News UK with helpful subtitles displayed across the bottom of the screen.

"It's certainly hotting up in your ancestral home," Alex remarked to ensure that conversation kept away from any danger zones.

"My ancestral home?" wondered Sue, with a slightly alarmed expression.

"Korea."

"Hotting up?"

"It's just an expression," said Alex who was now regretting his remark. "You can see it on the news. The North Koreans have just launched a whole load of missiles into Seoul."

"Missiles?"

Alex was really regretting that he'd not chosen a different subject. "Conventional ones, I'm sure," he elaborated.

For the next quarter of an hour or so there was no conversation between the two of them while Sue focused her attention on the screen. Alex could see that matters were serious in Seoul, although the film footage was no different than that shown for any of the other countless conflicts across the world. From the Middle East to West Africa, from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego, from Lithuania to China, it was always the same kind of news. Some catastrophe, either human or natural, that caused buildings to collapse. People running in panic. Emergency vehicles gathered around bloodied bodies. Shaky videos recorded on bystanders' mobile phones. One disaster was much the same as another.

“Do you have family in Seoul?” Alex asked sympathetically, when the news switched to a football story about Stoke becoming champions in the Premier League.

Sue nodded.

“Close family?”

“You could say that,” she answered sorrowfully.

Shit! Was this whole evening going to be wasted?

“You seem to be rather upset by it all. Would you like to rest somewhere more relaxing?” Alex asked sympathetically. His hotel suite with its en-suite living room and luxury Jacuzzi was perfect for receiving visitors.

Sue nodded.

Alex inwardly cheered. He was going to get the fuck he’d been longing for the whole day after all.

“I’ll bring the wine with us,” he said as he stood up and pulled the bottle out of its ice bucket. “Mustn’t let it go to waste.”

Sue still looked troubled, but Alex knew that she no more wanted to waste her time than he did.

“Show me the way,” she said.

**LXXIII**  
**Tamara**  
**2098**

Whatever it was that had defined Tamara's Jewish identity over the years, it wasn't her religious faith. Nor had it been her need to belong to the Jewish community. Her identity was more intangible. It was the sense of a shared tradition and what had been until recently a shared nationality. She'd never troubled herself about her Jewish heritage when she'd actually lived in Israel. It was only after she'd abandoned the nation of her birth to radioactive dust and vengeful Palestinians that she'd become concerned about what it meant to be Jewish.

So what was she now doing, travelling south to the outskirts of London on a dilapidated horse-drawn coach with eighteen other Jews, most of whom devoutly religious, to a kibbutz that had only recently been founded? What had persuaded her to seek refuge within her national and ethnic identity?

Tamara had made a genuine effort to settle down to life as a care worker in Morecambe, but it could never be something she'd really want to do for the rest of her life. Tamara didn't need reminding that it *was* a job and that for a refugee from the Middle East such a thing wasn't easy to find, but she was too easily disgusted by the needs of the elderly and incontinent to feel at ease in the nursing profession. Surely there was more to life than this?

And then Tamara heard that there was.

Many of the exiled Israeli citizens scattered throughout the Republic of England had concluded that there was no future for them in the refugee camps that the English

government had grudgingly set up to shelter the unfortunate victims of foreign wars. The English had more than enough to worry about without the additional burden of thousands of stateless Israelis, radioactive Palestinians and famished Jordanians. The only possible course of action was for the tribes of Israel settled amongst the dark satanic mills to build a new Jerusalem in England's grey and drizzly land.

And one such place was Epping Forest. Once upon a time it had been a London park, but the law no longer had the power or authority to protect common land from settlement. The police force was overwhelmed by the rather more immediate problems of famine, plague, fire and civil disorder. The rule of law was no more respected or observed than the institutions of government that still debated great matters within Westminster City's reinforced concrete walls.

Tamara had made her northward journey from Surrey to Lancaster in far less time than it would now take her to return south, but that earlier journey had been paid for by the St. John-Easton estate. In comparison to her current travelling conditions, the journey by maglev train from London to Manchester and then by steam train to the faded seaside town of Morecambe had been one of unparalleled luxury. Tamara felt more grand than she'd ever felt before in the company of those so wealthy that they had no difficulty in affording such an expensive mode of transport. The journey south, however, was by a makeshift wagon that had once been a diesel-powered coach now to be pulled all the way by four sturdy farm horses whose real worth would be proven when set to ploughing the fields at the kibbutz towards which the travellers were headed. The roads on which they would travel were mostly pot-holed and sometimes barely roads at all, but at least this route along England's decaying road network was

cost-free. It was far too expensive to use the motorways that were generally for the exclusive use of commercial transport and the relatively wealthy. And even if cost was no obstacle, a vehicle such as the one in which Tamara was travelling would never have been permitted through a tollbooth.

The other travellers on the coach came from all around Lancaster and the Lake District. Like Tamara, they'd heard about the expedition from Tobias who was the driver currently sat on the coach roof and urging the horses on. He'd travelled all the way from Epping Forest to the far North West of England on a mission to find suitable new recruits to the kibbutz. In fact, everyone was suitable as long as they were also Jewish.

Tamara walked from Morecambe to Lancaster on her first free day after she'd heard about Tobias' expedition from a co-worker. It was there that the man in whom she would later place her trust was camped out along with the horses that he'd bought from a local farmer and the coach that he'd requisitioned and re-engineered. Although she'd always been sceptical about living and working in a kibbutz, Tamara recognised that she now felt a real need to reassert her national identity. And after so long in the wilderness, she also wanted to live amongst people of the same culture as herself.

"There's no religious aspect to it," said Tobias. "The only thing we have in common is that we are all Jewish and that we want to preserve our Jewish identity."

Tamara could see that although Tobias wore a skull cap, he sported none of the other symbols of an orthodox Jew. He didn't wear a black suit or a white shirt. Nor did he have long sidelocks.

"What about political affiliation?" Tamara wondered. She would rather

associate with goyim than spend time with Likud supporters who still blamed the misfortune that had befallen the Israeli state on anyone and everyone other than the Israeli people. Tamara had little patience for those who would happily blame Arabs, Americans and Europeans, but never questioned the conduct of the Israeli government over the preceding century.

“As I say, all we have in common is our Jewish heritage,” said Tobias. “There will always be a variety of opinion about the cause for the Second Diaspora, but unless we make an effort to respect our differences then as a people we’ll never recover from this setback.”

So Tamara was now gathered together with new companions whose characters were exactly as disparate as the greater scattered Jewish community. Some were men, some were women and some were children. Some were orthodox and conservative. Others had opinions rather closer to Tamara’s. But Tobias was right. All the travellers had in common with one another was their Jewish heritage.

Tamara had plenty of opportunity to get to know her companions as the coach trundled south along England’s wretched roads. Not one of her companions shared the same opinion on the fate and fortune of the Jewish people with anyone else. By all accounts, the last two decades following the nuclear war had been universally traumatic. Tamara’s experience was by no means unique, even though most of the others had lived in England for many more years than her. In fact, by virtue of having emigrated from the Promised Land within only the last decade Tamara had the distinction of being the person on the coach with the most recent connection with the land of their shared heritage.

“You still had to carry radiation masks after all those years?” commented Aaron whose parents had left Israel long before even the firebombing of Damascus.

“The main worry wasn’t radiation,” said Tamara. “We were more worried about the Palestinian gangs who’d shoot you as soon as they saw you, unless you were a woman. In that case, you’d be shot only after you were raped.”

“Gruesome! How did you cope?”

“We never went anywhere without a gun.”

“Rather like now,” said Aaron who nodded his head towards the armoury of rifles, baseball bats and pitchforks that Tobias had loaded onto the bus.

“Exactly.”

It was indisputable that Tobias’ precautions were necessary. Indeed, nobody would have agreed to accompany him on the arduous trek south unless they were well armed. England was a lawless country at the best of times, but the general population displayed so much naked resentment towards immigrants that a coachload of Jews would be easy prey to almost any kind of violent gang. The gangs to be most feared were those associated with the Muslim communities of big cities such as Manchester, Birmingham and Swindon. It was for that reason that the journey deliberately skirted the large conurbations and took a rather circuitous route.

The journey was an opportunity for Tamara to get a view of the English countryside that she’d never seen before. Her previous excursions across the Republic had been at a much faster pace, but now she was able to appreciate the fields and pastures of rural England where rustic labourers were busy tilling the soil. Horses much like the ones pulling the coach were dragging ploughs through the mud. Occasionally,

a dog or small child would run out from a village and chase after the coach but generally they were left alone. Sometimes stones would be thrown at the coach by idle youths who didn't have much else to do when they weren't working in the fields or hunting deer or feral cattle in the woods.

At night, Tobias would find a parking spot by the road that was already populated by other travellers' makeshift carriages and rickshaws. One of the men would take up guard duty. Tamara wasn't too upset when her half-hearted attempt at volunteering for duty was rebuffed. Although it was definitely sexist to assume that a man was better than a woman at scaring off would-be aggressors, the risk from armed gangs was absolutely genuine.

Although there was other traffic on the road, the roads were nothing like as busy as they'd been in an earlier age when people routinely drove to out-of-town shopping centres and sped constantly along the nation's highways and by-ways. Those were the days when fuel was cheaper, incomes were higher and the motorways hadn't yet all been privatised. Nowadays, the traffic was mostly animal- or bicycle-driven, though there sometimes passed the occasional gasoil and battery powered vehicle, mostly hastening as fast as it could from the motorway to a private gated community. On one occasion, a cavalcade of motorbikes and heavily armoured black vehicles came thundering by. At first Tamara wondered whether it was an army convoy of the kind that was so common in Israel when she was a child at the start of the nuclear war, but it was nothing more than a wealthy landlord or Chief Executive Officer returning from his office in a Business Park to a mansion somewhere in the Cheshire countryside. Such vehicles were designed for civilian use but were often accompanied by well-armed



motorcycle outriders. It wasn't at all unknown for an armed gang of highwaymen to seize a passing carriage and demand a ransom.

When the coach was flagged down as it passed by the outskirts of Stafford, Tamara naturally feared that it was by a gang of highway robbers. The men were clearly fully tooled up and it was obvious that the travellers wouldn't be able to put up much of a fight against them. Tobias removed his skull-cap and jumped off the coach to address the armed men. Tamara could see through the cracked windscreen glass that the men were mostly young. Only a minority were white-skinned. Some were black and some, Tamara noticed with a thud of dread at the back of her throat, wore head-dresses and sported thick beards. They were almost certainly Muslims, although at least one was a Sikh.

While Tobias was talking to the men his girlfriend, Uma, walked up and down the coach and talked to each passenger individually. She spoke urgently and in a low voice. Tamara noticed that Talman—a Hassidic Jew with a black hat and sidelocks—was especially agitated. Uma didn't engage in further discussion with him and strode swiftly along the bus to the next person.

“What's going on?” asked Tamara when Uma finally got to her.

“We don't think there's anything to worry about,” said Uma. “Especially not you, Tammy. There's been a local war between gang-members in Stafford and in Telford in neighbouring Shropshire. Several people have been murdered and these people are simply guarding the town against what they call the Tellies.”

“Tellies?”

“Apparently people in Telford watch a lot of television,” said Uma. “However,

we still have to be careful. You must have noticed that there are several Muslims in the gang. They're of Pakistani origin I think, so they won't have a specific grudge against Israel, but they're young and potentially hot-headed."

"So...?"

"I don't think I have to spell it out," said Uma. "Two or more of them will almost certainly board the bus to search for Tellies. They'll probably be rude and they might ask awkward questions. What you mustn't do, whatever happens, is make apparent to them that we're a coachload of Jews who're travelling south to a kibbutz. And we most certainly mustn't admit to being Israeli. It's all the excuse they need."

Tamara nodded. It was what she expected.

It was ironic that Tamara had joined this expedition in the hope that she would no longer need to deny her Jewish identity, but now found that this was something she still had to do.

**LXXIV**  
**Alex**  
**2035**

“My people will *never* be held ransom by its neighbours,” said Tabitha as she sprawled beside Alex on his roomy double bed.

Alex glanced towards the television that was burbling on in the background as it had been for the whole time that he and his fellow senior executive director were enjoying the pleasures of one another’s luxuriant flesh and stomach bulges that was the inevitable penalty of too many business lunches. The news story was about the stand-off in the Korean peninsula between the belligerent North and the ever conciliatory South.

“*Your people?*” asked Alex, who was somewhat puzzled by Tabitha’s statement. What had this to with the staff in the Strategy Division of which she was director?

“Israel,” said Tabitha.

“Israel?” wondered Alex. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Fuck sake, Alex,” said Tabitha with obvious irritation. “It’s got everything to do with almost everything you can think of.” She returned Alex’s bewildered expression with something that approximated to understanding pity. “You really *don’t* get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“Did you even know I was an Israeli citizen?” she asked.

“No, I didn’t,” said Alex who’d never once thought about it.

“Well, that figures,” said Tabitha. “You really don’t pay *any* attention, do you? I’d have thought it was obvious.”

“I never think about people’s nationalities,” said Alex. Although this wasn’t always absolutely true, it was certainly so with regards to Tabitha. In fact, until very recently Alex hadn’t thought much about Tabitha at all.

She was a relatively new member of Talpha Apps’ executive board and Alex was taken as much unawares as everyone else by her rapid rise in status in the organisation. Within a few months of not having achieved much of demonstrable value she now boasted a salary that wasn’t far short of Alex’s and had gained the respect of the rest of the board; although this was more for her decisiveness and energy than her professional expertise. She’d recognised that Alex as a potential kindred spirit and without doubt as a man who couldn’t resist the tempting offer of a fuck when it came his way.

Tabitha was almost certainly the oldest woman Alex had ever had sex with although, depressingly, she wasn’t actually very much older than him. Nonetheless, of the two of them she was the one who’d made the better job at concealing the ravages of the passing years. While Alex’s paunch was now too obvious to hide under a belt hoisted up high and the bald spot on his crown was too large to be hidden under a discreet comb-over, Tabitha had compensated for the increasing kilograms of flesh with expensive pedicures, sympathetic skin therapy and a subtle and intelligent use of make-up. She was now encouraging Alex to take that long-resisted step of taking advantage of his executive gym membership. After all, it cost the company a fortune just to keep renewing it for him.

“I was born an Israeli citizen,” said Tabitha. “I did my military service after graduating. I’m proud to hold an Israeli passport. And I can tell you that if we were

pushed around by the Syrians, the Jordanians, the Lebanese, or—God help us all—the Palestinians in anything like the way the North Koreans do their southern neighbours there'd be a smell of burning flesh from one end of the Middle East to the other. It's because Israel never compromises, never stands down, never shows weakness, that we remain strong and why we shall never be in the same sorry state as South Korea.”

Alex wasn't the sort of man who'd expend effort on an argument he knew he could never win. It was obvious that Tabitha would countenance no difference of opinion, although Alex had known many people, most of them women, who expressed rather more sympathy for the Palestinians whose houses were bulldozered and whose cities were bombed than for an Israel bristling with nukes. However, he couldn't resist mentioning how much the military support from the United States was critical to Israel's survival.

“*That* is a typical Anglo-Saxon opinion,” Tabitha almost spat out in defiance. “It's the opinion that the guilt and shame of allowing the Holocaust to happen was the sole reason for the foundation of the State of Israel. It's an opinion that belittles the achievements of a proud nation united by race and religion on the pretence that it's secured entirely by American money and American votes. Even when America falls, Israel will stand tall. It is our destiny. It can never be otherwise.”

Alex still wasn't sure how much or whether at all he would benefit from having a relationship with a work colleague, especially one as senior as Tabitha. It was less difficult to see how Tabitha might benefit from a relationship with him. It did her no harm at all to embed herself in a position with regards to the rest of the Executive Board from which it would be impossible to dislodge her. It would also benefit her if her

relationship resulted in marriage. It would double her disposable wealth more or less at a stroke. And it would be even more to her benefit if she later became the wronged partner in a subsequent divorce. But despite knowing this, Alex wasn't a man who could easily turn down an opportunity for sex even with a lover as formidable as Tabitha.

Alex was drawn to the very thing that also most troubled him about having a relationship with a woman who was his social equal on so many levels. His relationships in the last couple of years had been a series of short liaisons with much younger women who were totally unsuitable as long-term partners. In most cases these relationships were predicated pretty much on exchanging sex for money and status, so they weren't too unlike using the services of prostitutes that since Alex no longer had any difficulty in affording he was also more often tempted by. At least a relationship with Tabitha wasn't compromised by disparities of age and income that were too obvious.

"I'm not sure," said Alex a few days later when Tabitha remarked that they should formalise their relationship by making it public knowledge. "Isn't there something a bit wrong about someone who's not at all Jewish marrying someone who is? Aren't there restrictions on that sort of thing?"

"It would have to be a proper Jewish wedding," speculated Tabitha more to herself than anyone else. "If it got that far, of course. And you'd have to get circumcised."

"You're kidding right?" said an alarmed Alex.

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" asked Tabitha whose face betrayed no trace of humour whatsoever. She pulled at the foreskin of Alex's limp penis as it trailed over

his thigh. “This thing is *absolutely* disgusting! If we were to stay together, I’d have to insist you did something about it. And it’s not a religious thing, either. It’s just commonsense hygiene.”

“Is it?” asked Alex, who nevertheless wondered why, if that was so, that no one had ever mentioned it to him before.

Although Alex didn’t know it at the time, this exchange was to be the highpoint of his relationship with Tabitha. Over the subsequent weeks, he became increasingly aware that Tabitha’s attitude towards him had begun to cool. It was no longer Tabitha who would make arrangements for them to meet at a restaurant, wine bar or West End show, but Alex who would remind her that they should do so.

At the same time, Alex became aware that he was no longer the only man on the Executive Board who attracted Tabitha’s wandering gaze.

Tom wasn’t divorced, separated or single. As far as Alex could see, he’d been happily married for many years now. He was also no more Jewish than Alex. Furthermore, he was some ten years older than Alex and the years had taken a visible toll. He was almost entirely bald, his stomach strained at shirt buttons that were often too tight and the bags under his eyes had become a permanent feature. No one could say that Tom was a better physical catch than Alex, but Tabitha had quite clearly fixed her attention on him.

Alex could see why Tom might be an attractive proposition for Tabitha, despite being non-Jewish, middle-aged and already married. He’d been on the Executive Board for rather longer than anyone else and he actually knew something about the products that Talpha Apps sold to the world. He was one of the few executives whose opinion

the company's technical and professional staff paid any attention to, although he was visibly more at ease in the company of those who knew better how to regurgitate clichés and buzz words than express anything of insight or meaning. He was demonstrably more senior than Alex in status, competence and usefulness to the company although his salary was pretty much the same. Alex could see that if Tabitha could prise him away from his wife, he might well be a better stepping stone for her than Alex could ever be.

The inevitable break-up with Alex didn't come without pain. It was one of the facts of life to which Alex had become well accustomed over the years that the more someone drew away from you the more desperately you wanted things to stay much the same. Tabitha's visits to Alex's bed became less frequent whilst Alex was no longer invited back to Tabitha's Docklands apartment with its delightful view of the newly reinforced flood barriers. In contrast, the sex they had together was becoming more fervent and passionate. This was also a familiar pattern known to Alex.

"What about Mrs Turner?" asked Alex as if it mattered to Tabitha when she at last broke the news that her relationship with Tom had reached the stage where it was no longer appropriate that she should continue to have sex with Alex (not that her passion in the last hour or so had noticeably declined).

"It's Tom's decision what he does with his life," said Tabitha baldly. "If he wants to move on, that's his choice. His wife will just have to accept that society's movers and the shakers sometimes just have to move on to greener pastures. Tom isn't a man who's content to stand still. He has a passion to succeed and get ahead."

It was difficult for Alex to reconcile his image of Tom with Tabitha's depiction



of him as a dynamic manager. Alex knew him as a man who he'd only ever seen get agitated when a waiter in the restaurant was slow in serving him or when a taxi was late to arrive. Generally, he was avuncular, unhurried and imperturbable. His value in Executive Board meetings was mostly on those few occasions when it was necessary that someone who understood the business should venture an opinion. On such rare occasions, he manifestly enjoyed milking the other executives' anticipation while he slowly elaborated why something might or might not be a good decision (although he never once ruled against the expert opinion of his technical advisors).

And so Alex was left on the shelf. His relationship with Tabitha had never been made public knowledge, unlike hers with Tom. She soon consolidated her status as his new fiancée while also expecting and receiving the congratulations and good wishes of the other board members.

It was Alex who was now in the more junior position. His longer sojourn on the board counted for nothing in comparison with the charisma of a woman of drive and ambition. It was obvious she was now a very likely candidate for the position of Chief Executive Officer if the current one should move on.

Alex's main hope now was that his past relationship would remain an asset and never become a liability. But that could only happen if he maintained a very high level of discretion.

And so this was one relationship that neither he nor Tabitha could ever acknowledge had ever happened.

**LXXV**  
**Eugenie**  
**2101**

Not many were left in Eugenie's original posse after they'd been forcibly evicted from the mansion in which they'd been squatting in Hampstead. Ned had been shot in the back by the Security Officers while he was trying to escape by scrambling over the wall. Natalie had been bundled into the back of a van in which at the very least she'd be raped. Of the thirty or forty people who'd crammed into the Hampstead mansion after word about it had slipped out and others had settled in, only half a dozen of them were now in Eugenie's company. And it wasn't because she knew better than anyone else what to do. Ever since their eviction, they'd been wandering aimlessly beside the north periphery of the M11 motorway on which only the wealthy could travel and alongside which an electrified fence acted as a barrier to any invasion from rabid foxes and desperate plebs.

There was probably once a time when Epping Forest was a desirable part of North London in which to live, but there was nothing particularly special about it now. The plague and famine that ravaged London as much as it had the rest of England had been especially savage in the suburban sprawl between the railway stations of Theydon Bois and Coppersale Common. It was especially tragic given that this wooded district had earned a good reputation as a refuge to those who'd sought to live an alternative lifestyle set apart from the general poverty of modern England. Unfortunately, good intentions and utopian idealism had proved to be no protection at all against the ravages of the plague.

Alone amongst her companions, Eugenie felt almost at home in the fields and woodland of Epping; no longer trudging through Central London's dilapidated ruins. This was what she knew best. Plough-horses on open fields. Ragged beggars huddled by the roadside. Poachers who survived on the flesh of the rabbits, birds and feral dogs they'd caught in their traps. Improvised cottages where people who'd never before known the sweat and toil of a life on the soil now had to adjust through necessity to a life of bare subsistence.

"The countryside is real weird," said Tony. "It must be like home to you. All these fields and shit. How d'you find anything to eat round here?"

"We'll find a way," said Eugenie, who wasn't quite as sure of herself as her demeanour suggested.

"Perhaps we should go hunting for animals and stuff," said Tinkerbelle, who despite her name only resembled the Disney fairy because she was rather short and not at all by virtue of her Ethiopian ancestry. "I killed a cat once and ate it. It didn't taste good, but I was fucking hungry. It made *all* the fucking difference."

"I don't like the look of those boys over there," said Andy pointing at a gang of youths who were sauntering about in workmen's clothes and wielding improvised clubs. "We ought to get as far away from them as we possibly can."

Eugenie respected Andy's nose for trouble. He'd already saved several times their motley crew from calamity on the long trail from Hampstead through the ruins of Chigwell and the ganglands of Wanstead. As Eugenie was the only person in the company who'd ever lived in a country village outside of London, everyone looked towards her for guidance. The general view was that a childhood spent in the East

Midlands country was essential preparation for the wilds of London's outermost parks.

"We'll head for those trees over there," Eugenie announced as she gestured towards the forest edge. "If those guys make a run for us we can easily find somewhere to hide."

The most discrete way for six young people to slip out of sight almost certainly wasn't to walk across an open field towards the nearby woods while constantly checking behind them that they weren't being chased, but they weren't many other options. The other avenues of escape were blocked off and, in any case, Eugenie was already concerned about where they should all sleep for the night. Perhaps there'd be a bush or tree they could sleep under. It would be more comfortable and probably a lot safer than what they most often had to resort to.

Fortunately, there was no need to make haste. The youths might be swaggering in a way that suggested trouble, but it was a necessary show for such gangs to flaunt their aggression simply to ensure that they wouldn't be seen as vulnerable and thereby invite trouble from other gangs. Eugenie wondered whether she and her friends, armed as they were with their own makeshift clubs, spears and slingshots, might not make a similar impression on the poor people of Epping. As they strode into the woods following the yellow and blue marker trails that were once there for the benefit of recreational walkers, it was notable how many onlookers made a deliberate diversion to avoid having to come into contact with them.

Not everyone ran away or was able to. When Eugenie and her friends hunted through the foliage for a good patch on which to lay down their torn and soiled sleeping bags, they disturbed someone who was far too ill to run away. This was a woman in her

early thirties huddled into a tight curled ball under several threadbare blankets in the midst of an expansive ornamental bush that the deer hadn't yet nibbled away. She pulled her blanket tight to her throat and stared up with an expression of utter terror at Tony when he discovered her in the undergrowth.

"Don't worry, we're not gonna rape you," said Andy.

"You don't have to worry about us," said Amy who, although she was a girl, was also the largest person in the posse. Her style of dress was a deliberately incongruous mix of short cropped hair and a filthy lace-hemmed dress. "We're just looking for somewhere to sleep the night."

"You ain't got plague, have you?" Tinkerbelle asked with genuine alarm. "I thought this area was certified safe."

The woman shook her head and replied through encrusted lips and a hoarse throat. "I'm a survivor," she said. "Most people in the kibbutz caught it. So did I. The difference was that I survived. Most of those who got it didn't."

"So, what've you got, if it ain't plague?" asked Amy who instinctively raised a rag to her mouth.

"I dunno," the woman admitted. "It's not plague. I guess it must be a cold or something."

"I'm not taking chances," announced Eugenie. "I'm keeping back. There've been so many plagues and contagions these last few years you just can't be sure. Maybe it's a new thing going round. Now there aren't any cures anymore for the latest strains of flu, gon, cholera, typhoid or pox, almost anything can be the one that takes you out. Even measles or mumps might be a killer these days."

Nevertheless, Eugenie and her friends weren't going to just abandon such an obviously vulnerable woman. In any case, what she was suffering from had more to do with having to sleep on a damp blanket in the pouring rain rather than the plague. Her symptoms were totally different from what she'd have had if she'd had the plague. In any case, it was considered lucky to hang out with someone who'd survived a contagion.

The woman's name was Tamara and she'd been part of a settlement that had been established in the middle of the forest before it was ransacked and firebombed. The settlement had been a kind of commune rather like some of the better organised squats in North London, but it went by the weird name of a *kibbutz*.

"Why'd you call it that?" Amy wondered. "Was it something to do with someone called Kibbert?"

"No. There was no one with that name," said Tamara. "It's a Jewish word. It's a kind of self-reliant community that used to be pretty common in Israel."

"Are you a Jew?" Tinkerbelle asked innocently. "I didn't think there were any Jews left after all those nukes went off."

"It was your lot, the Jews, that started the war," said Tony with second-hand indignation. "I don't imagine you're at all popular with the Arabs and Pakis who live round here."

"I'm sure you're right," Tamara said, "but those of us in the kibbutz kept ourselves to ourselves and we didn't cause any trouble. Most of us weren't at all proud about our nation's role in the war, but that's just history now. There's been more than twenty-five years since then. I was only a child when it all happened and all I've ever

known of Israel is nuclear fallout and radiation poison.”

“So what happened to the kibbutz?” asked Eugenie. “Why’s it no longer going?”

“It was the plague that did it,” said Tamara. “We thought we might be safe when the latest outbreak began two or three years ago. We weren’t living in a big city centre and we did what we could to keep ourselves away from it all. But like everyone else we soon found that the antibiotics being sold in the shops were useless when it started again.”

Eugenie wasn’t the only one in her crew with unhappy memories of the plague. There were the quarantined zones; the armed guards with orders to shoot anyone straying where they shouldn’t; the hastily assembled signs that warned people away from infected areas; and, of course, the plague itself. Eugenie wasn’t the only one who’d lost everything to the ravages of a virus that knew no borders, was immune to all medicine and was fatal to almost everyone who fell victim to it. Tamara’s experience was almost worse than anyone since she’d actually been infected and at one time was sure that she’d soon be dead. At the same time as her, the others in the kibbutz, including Tobias and his girlfriend, also became infected and died within a day or so of exhibiting the first symptoms. Before it was over and Tamara was well enough to count herself as one of the rare lucky ones, the kibbutz was reduced to less than a third of its original number and was barely able to support itself. Those who’d survived were traumatised by the distress of having to bury and burn the bodies of the recently deceased and, until very recently, dearly beloved.

The story was a familiar one to Eugenie who’d come across many devastated

communities on her northward trek from Hampstead. First plague and then not long after: pillage, pestilence and penury. Nevertheless, there were tasks that Eugenie and her posse had to attend to so that they could survive and Tamara's value, above everything else, was that she was familiar with the local terrain. She'd be able to guide Eugenie's crew away from hostile gangs or places where the plague was still prevalent. It would be ironic that now, when the outbreak had almost petered out, Eugenie were to die from its very last gasps. A fire was assembled from the dead branches and rubbish lying around. Eugenie and her friends huddled with Tamara around the light of its flickering flames as the balmy autumn dusk drew in. Not everyone was gathered together as it was Amy's turn to act as look-out for hostile gangs that might be hunting for easy pickings in the dark shadows of the night.

“It wasn't long after the worst of the plague had passed that the Muslim gangs descended on the kibbutz,” said Tamara. “They call themselves *Jihadists* and I guess they believe that they're serving their faith by engaging in Holy War against the Jews. Of course, we'd joked about the jihadists when there were plenty of people in the kibbutz who could defend us. One joke was that our kibbutz was like a West Bank Settlement. This was meant ironically because it was precisely the defence of illegal settlements on land owned by another nation that was the trigger for the war that destroyed Israel. After the plague had done its worst, we were demoralised, miserable and easy prey.”

The attack on the kibbutz was intense and violent but undisciplined and chaotic. Tamara managed to escape from the fray with nothing worse than a scar on her shoulder from a jihadist flick-knife and exchanged her survival for the coat by which she was



grabbed and from which she managed to struggle free. She fled as quickly as she could: more concerned about her own survival than by the plight of her fellow kibbutzniks, but as she later discovered little mercy was shown to those she'd abandoned. The women were gang-raped with little regard for age and few were allowed to live. The men were spared the indignity of rape in most cases, but not spared either the terror or the torture that followed.

“Is it part of the Muslim religion to do that kind of stuff?” wondered Tinkerbelle.

“Of course not,” said Tony. “It’s just extremists. Anyway they’re still pretty pissed off by the millions of Muslims who’d died in the war.”

“I guess us Jews think we’d already suffered enough when living in what’s left of Israel without also having to face the same thing here in England,” said Tamara. “But you’re right. It’s not religion that makes people behave the way they did, any more than it was ever a Jewish commandment to bulldozer Palestinian apartments, fire missiles into foreign cities or launch Armageddon on the peoples of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine.”

“Any excuse for a fight, eh?” said Tinkerbelle sarcastically.

**LXXVI**  
**Eugenie**  
**2102**

For all her life until now and especially after having travelled south to London, Eugenie had lived in fear and dread of gangs and most especially gang members. Wasn't gang culture just one of the many reasons why everything was shit these days? Rape, violence, theft and murder: no one could pretend there was anything virtuous in the activities of England's many gangs whether they were based in Central London, Nottingham or here in the Outer London suburb of Uxbridge.

So why was Eugenie now a fully initiated member of one of the most notorious gangs in all London known by the almost ludicrously innocuous name of *The Youth Club*?

It wasn't that her membership was merely casual or superficial. The proof of this was the crude U-shaped tattoo etched across the blue stubble of her shaved forehead and pate. She was attired in a peculiarly feral uniform threaded through with feathers and furs that gave gang members an untamed appearance. She'd submitted to the excruciatingly long, undeniably messy and rather painful mass gang-bang that was the mandatory initiation rite for all female members of the Youth Club. She was rechristened with the gang name of *YouTube Chick*. This was a phrase whose ultimate meaning was lost on Eugenie but which she understood was extremely obscene. She'd become versed in phrases and symbols whose meaning and significance was deliberately obscure to anyone not already a member of the Youth Club and whose real purpose was to announce her allegiance to other gang members in awkward situations.

The one rule of conduct that bound members of the gang together was that no one

member should knowingly kill, rape or main another without the consent of other members of the gang. It was a security of sorts that Eugenie treasured in these lawless days.

This precarious protection against violence wasn't the only privilege of gang membership and it wasn't the principle reason that Eugenie had sought out membership when she'd stumbled into Uxbridge town centre. This came after a long hazardous journey around London's outermost perimeter along the electrified fences that fortified the M25 motorway. The fence wasn't there only to protect motorists from the unwanted attention of the mendicant poor and desperate. It also served as a firewall against the spread of plague across the Republic's town and countryside. Eugenie soon discovered how foolish it would be to was to approach the electrified fence. This only served to attract the attention of armed guards and their exceptionally vicious genetically-enhanced dogs. She'd come across the bodies of other travellers who'd ventured too close to the high fences that protected the privileged few from the unwashed and poorly fed majority.

It wasn't because Eugenie was especially drawn to the London suburb of Uxbridge that she'd made the journey from Epping Forest. In fact, she had no reason to expect that the London Borough of Hillingdon would be any better than her original home. Her trek wasn't one she'd have willingly chosen.

After more than four years, the plague that had forced Eugenie to leave her home in the East Midlands was still devastating England just as it was the rest of the world. Eugenie had heard that it was the nation's worst such pandemic since the Black Death, but as there had been several other such outbreaks in the last forty or so years that had

been compared to the infamous Mediaeval scourge the comparison had become increasingly stale. However, Eugenie knew for sure that it had devastated her life and those of everyone she knew. The only people safe from the virus were those wealthy enough to live in the fenced-in villages and suburbs that Eugenie could never enter. The wealthy might occasionally fall victim to the plague but they had access to hospital care, air-conditioned homes and plenty of food. All that must surely have helped them keep the worst of the contagion at bay.

The civil authorities generally ignored Eugenie and her companions. They were no more protected from violence or theft than they were persecuted for vagrancy. The English government's main concern was to address the anxieties of the ever-diminishing number of people still eligible to vote: a privilege wholly dependent on property-ownership. As long as Eugenie didn't trespass into streets and districts that had restricted access she was as invisible to the authorities in the Outer Suburbs as she'd been in Central London.

All the same, when a fresh incident of the plague was reported in the vicinity of Theydon Bois, it was the presence of people such as Eugenie that swiftly attracted the attention of the Contagion Control Police who'd been directed to the London Borough of Waltham Forest to round up and evict all vagrants and non-domiciled residents. There was a rumour that they would be transported to the plague-ridden city of Milton Keynes where a slow and painful death was almost certain.

There was no coordination or plan to their escape when Eugenie and her friends first spotted the armed police run over the fields towards the woods where they lived accompanied by their ferocious dogs. Those who ran the slowest, such as Tamara, were

left behind to the policemen's mercy. Eugenie, Tinkerbelle and Andy raced through the woods towards London's Metropolitan Border until their path was blocked by the electrified fence that ran alongside the M25 orbital.

For the next few weeks Eugenie and her friends followed the fence westwards as it circled North London. There was little to eat and the only places where they could shelter were in the overgrown woods and fields that now belonged to no one. They had to make the occasional diversion around obstacles to their path such as the turnings off the M25 and the private estates hidden behind armed defences that were even more insurmountable than those protecting the motorway. When Eugenie walked past the well-mown lawns, the roads free of potholes and the private shopping malls that were the preserve of only the privileged few, she felt both anger and envy that so much of England's wealth was concentrated in so few hands. Had it always been like this? Maybe the disparity in wealth was just somewhat more obvious nowadays after all the ravages of economic collapse, climate change, foreign war and, of course, plague. Eugenie had heard that there had once been a golden age in which ordinary people could afford to fly by aeroplane to foreign countries for nothing more than personal pleasure and when every household had reliable access to electricity and water.

Eugenie was alone by the time she'd reached Uxbridge. Andy was last seen running for his life from a huge, slobbering genetically-enhanced guard dog that would probably eat him if it had the opportunity. He'd been rather too optimistic when he ignored the warning sign outside an orchard and allowed his hunger to exceed his common sense.

Eugenie didn't know what had happened to Tinkerbelle after a night when

they'd slept on different floors of a disused watchtower on the perimeter of a now derelict farm. There was no sign of her friend when Eugenie woke up. It was quite likely that Tinkerbelle had been abducted even though there was no sign of struggle. Isolated communities that were short of women were known to go to extraordinary lengths to ameliorate the gender ratio. It was also possible that Tinkerbelle had left of her own accord. She'd become increasingly depressed ever since Andy had run away. The two of them had been very intimate.

So by the time Eugenie arrived in Uxbridge, she was desperately lonely as well as hungry and weary. Was it any wonder that when she saw Billy Bollocks—as he'd been christened by the Youth Club gang—that she would be drawn to him? It wasn't for his apparent charm or good looks so much—of which there was a complete absence—as it was for his possession of a bag of groceries that he'd stolen from a woman as she was leaving a heavily defended supermarket complex. Eugenie didn't know the details of how he'd acquired the groceries, but in any case she didn't really care one way or the other. She'd not eaten anything substantial since she'd trapped and skinned a rabbit several days earlier.

Billy Bollocks would have been a truly unexceptional looking young man if he wasn't so extravagantly tattooed: especially around his shaved head. His aggressive personality wasn't expressed in either his physical stature or his height, as he was actually rather shorter than Eugenie, but rather by his eccentric clothing. He was flamboyantly adorned in feathers, fur and slogans stitched into the leather and denim that affirmed his gang loyalty. He had an ugly scar across one cheek and over a left eye that was notably dull and expressionless.

“What I wouldn’t give for a bite of that,” said Eugenie boldly as she walked up to Billy in clothes that were as ragged and eccentric as his, but less from design than mishap. She pointed at a can of Heinz Alphabet Soup and a Ginster’s Cornish Pasty.

Billy glared at Eugenie with an expression that lightened his general expression of hostility with a touch of amusement. He held an army knife in one hand that he could easily use to ensure that Eugenie would surrender everything she had irrespective of whether there was a likelihood of reward. He smiled grimly.

“What are you suggesting then, you slut?” he asked.

“A bit of this,” said Eugenie who pulled up her skirt to reveal that she wasn’t wearing any knickers. “I’m a good fuck,” she added, in case that wasn’t enough of a hint.

“I’m sure you are,” said Billy, who contemplated the wild unkempt hair between Eugenie’s thighs with some interest. “But I bet you’ll only want to fuck if you get to eat first.”

“I’ll have more energy if I do,” Eugenie conceded. “Otherwise I’ll be too weak to give you as good a fuck as you deserve.”

Billy considered this. “Yeah,” he said. “That makes sense. All right. We’ll fuck after. Just don’t get any ideas about running away when you’ve eaten. This knife’s killed plenty in its time. See the notches. Each one marks a scalp. I can be a really mean fucker if you cross me, you slag.”

“A deal’s a deal,” said Eugenie who nestled down beside Billy and waited her turn while he took first shares of all the grocery items that he’d stolen.

Eugenie honoured her compact. Well, she’d be stupid not to, even though a fuck

was about the last thing she'd really wanted. She hoped that her faked moans and occasional reciprocal thrusts would further endear her to the aptly named Billy Bollocks.

It was obvious that he'd taken a shine to Eugenie however qualified her affection was towards him. He was an aggressive lover who fucked hard and snorted as he did so. He thrust his cock as deep into her cunt as he could and shoved his filthy oily fingers up her arse at the same time. He'd seen plenty of pornos, so he splattered his semen over her face and onto her chest although it really wasn't necessary and certainly wasn't something that Eugenie enjoyed.

She followed Billy back to where he lived with the rest of the Youth Club gang. The neighbourhood was spread over a number of suburban houses in a cul de sac at the end of a long street that had been chosen because it offered a good strategic view of any approaching hostile gang. Eugenie wasn't exactly welcomed by the other gang members and Billy didn't make it especially easy for her. She could see that the gang was a tight group of people, many related to one another, and that they were automatically suspicious of outsiders. But Eugenie was hungry. She'd not slept on a mattress for many months and she didn't care anymore who she had to fuck to get what she wanted.

At first, she only had sex with Billy, but Eugenie knew that she'd soon be kicked out of the relative comfort of the four bedroom house with en suite bathroom and conservatory if she didn't spread herself more widely amongst the company.

So she built up the trust of the Youth Club gang by being open with her body and sharing all the drugs that passed by. Of course, it would be stupid to be known only



as a slag, so she also helped the other girls do the housework and cooking that was expected of them when they weren't lying prostrate on a mattress with their legs in the air. As time passed she won enough trust that associate membership of the Youth Club gang became pretty much inevitable.

And now she was one of those who not so long ago she had feared and despised. She was one of the parasites on ordinary people who were unable to fend off the violence, theft and bullying that was doled out by the Youth Club, just as it was by the many other gangs in North West London. But as she chewed on the food that was stolen and got high on the drugs that were the subject of the most nearly legitimate commerce the gang was involved in, she knew that when she went to sleep it would be indoors, on a mattress, and out of the rain, the sleet and the wind. She mightn't be able to choose who she would have sex with and she might have difficulty reconciling her lifestyle with her conscience, but she now had a lot to be grateful for.

For all the aggravation, pain and humiliation of gang rape, non-anaesthetised piercing and home-made tattoos, it was all worth it when Eugenie considered the other alternatives that she'd got to know so well after having slept under bushes, huddling under the dark shadow of ancient overpasses and in abandoned barns. She had enough to eat, she had somewhere to sleep and she now had a loyal group of friends who would take huge delight in using their knives and cudgels to cripple or maim anyone foolish enough to assault her.

**LXXVII**  
**Psychlone**  
**2107**

If it hadn't been absolutely necessary, Psychlone would never have left Exeter. It was where he'd been to university and where most of his friends lived. But this was exactly what he'd been forced to do when an outbreak of Hen Flu closed down the entire city. His only other alternative was to suffer an indefinite period of effective house arrest in a city now designated as being in quarantine.

It was only because one of his mother's old boyfriends happened to own an apartment in Uxbridge that this was now Psychlone's new home. He'd rarely ever visited London in his life before, but this unremarkable dilapidated suburb near the M40 motorway and serviced by the Metropolitan Line was so far out from the more famous sights of London that it was almost no different from living in an outer suburb of Exeter. But at least it was safe from Hen Flu: a disease whose tortuous path from its origins in Uruguay or Uzbekistan (depending on who you spoke to) was most keenly felt in England's South Western counties.

Once upon a time, this would have been a model estate in the Borough of Hillingdon, but the area was now somewhat tatty and in places derelict. His neighbours were scarcely wealthy, but mostly they had jobs and their homes were well looked after. The area wasn't sufficiently wealthy enough for there to be security guards or an electrified fence, so most people protected their homes behind metal doors secured by countless locks and steel bars. Nevertheless, even these weren't a guaranteed deterrent from the most determined thief as was evident from a nearby house whose windows

had been smashed and the front door pulled off its hinges.

Although Psychlone was still wistful about his old haunts in Exeter, there were definite advantages for a professional musician to be living so close to Central London. After he'd fought his way past the beggars gathered about the entrance to the underground station, it took only an hour or two by steam train on the Metropolitan Line to get to the heart of London where he could go to a West End night club and put on live sets for the rich and privileged. He was able to get two or sometimes three bookings a week, mostly on the strength of the monster success of his *Eric Esterhazy* hit, but he was invariably shattered by the time he caught the early train home the following morning.

Psychlone wasn't the kind of guy who liked to annoy his neighbours so he preferred to wear headphones when he was making music in the evening or at night, but he liked to take them off when he could to allow his ears to recover. This was one such time. It was midday on a Wednesday when his neighbours were at work. As always, the couple who lived downstairs had left for work early dressed in the uniforms of their professions, which were, respectively, psychiatric nurse and supermarket security guard. The street was quiet. No motorised vehicle would venture down a suburban residential road where it was at risk of being car-jacked, so the only sounds anyone could hear other than the occasional clip-clop of a horse-drawn wagon was the stream of percussive electronic music emanating from the windows of Psychlone's small flat. So when the front door knocker was rudely hammered in the hallway below him, Psychlone could scarcely pretend that he wasn't home.

Before he unlatched and unbolted the front door he checked who might be

outside through its eyehole. He'd heard plenty of stories about the door being opened by the unwary only to permit a torrent of thieves and mobsters who'd trash the premises and maim anyone foolish enough to offer resistance. However, all Psychlone could see were two girls, one about the same age as him and the other somewhat younger. They were eccentrically dressed: all feathers, leather, rags and tattoos. Their heads were shaved and the younger girl had a gruesome scar across her nose and cheek. On the other hand, eccentric dress was no reliable guide to anything at all. Psychlone's own style of fashion with his long hair shaved short at the temples and a set of clothes assembled from second-hand clothes shops and market stalls in West London could also be considered eccentric. And many of the wealthy young men and women who crowded out the *Fat Pig* or the *Ursus Majoris* were also eccentrically dressed although the price tag for their fashionable clothing would bankrupt Psychlone.

"Yes?" he asked the two girls outside the door. "Who are you and what do you want?"

His initial thought was that the girls were collecting for one of the many worthwhile charities that filled the welfare gap no longer bridged by taxation. Although Psychlone paid taxes, the only benefit he was aware of getting was military defence against the potential threat from the neighbouring Republics of Scotland and Wales.

"We're insurance collectors," said the older girl with a curiously mocking smile.

"Insurance collectors?" asked Psychlone sceptically.

"Yeah," said the younger girl in a high-pitched voice that sounded even younger in years than she looked. "What YouTube said. We're insurance collectors."

"You don't look like insurance collectors."

“What are we supposed to look like, eh?” said the younger girl. “You fucking tell us. What makes you think we’re not what we say we are, you cunt?”

“Shut it, Sick Chick,” said the girl known as YouTube. “The gentleman has a right to harbour doubts. Haven’t you, sir? What with all the tricksters and thieves around... It’s a wonder anyone can trust anyone, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is,” said Psychlone who wished now that he’d not opened the door. What had possessed him to do such a thing? “What insurance company do you represent?”

“You what?” said Sick Chick. “What the fuck’s an *insurance company*? What the fuck do they do? You’re a cunt, you are.”

YouTube slapped Sick Chick smartly across the cheek. “Fucking shut it, Sick,” she said sternly. She then addressed Psychlone who was hesitating on the notion of slamming the door on the two uncouth girls. “You just want to know on whose authority we claim to be collecting insurance, don’t you?”

“Well yes. What sort of organisation do you belong to?”

“You mean where do we come from, you asshole?” piped up the irrepressible Sick as she nursed her cheek. “We’re Youth Club, we are. Don’t you forget it. That’s what we are. The fucking Youth Club.”

“I don’t understand,” said Psychlone who’d heard of youth organisations like the Scouts, the Cadets and the Pioneers. Perhaps the Youth Club was something like that.

“I’ll explain sir,” said YouTube. “As long as Sick Chick here doesn’t keep butting in. You’ll have to excuse her, sir. She’s had a rough life, she has. Most of her

childhood she was feral like a cat or a dog. She slept wherever she could and survived by stealing gear and running errands for the bad guys.”

“And you’re not the bad guys?”

YouTube ignored the question. “When we say we’re insurance collectors, we’re telling the truth. It’s what we do. And we don’t ask for much either, sir. For a guy like you, nothing more than a couple of grand...”

“Two thousand pounds!” said Psychlone, alarmed. That was nearly what he earned in a single gig. It was nearly what it cost to travel by train to Exeter and back. “What do I get for two thousand pounds?”

“Two grand a month, sir,” said YouTube. “It’s not extortionate. It gives you a sense of security. You can sleep soundly in your own bed knowing that both your property and your person are going to be safe from harm. It’s surely worth it.”

“And what happens if I don’t pay two thousand pounds?” Psychlone asked.

“We’re fair, sir,” said YouTube. “Some people pay rather lower premiums than others. The old people on the estate who’re living on their savings: they don’t pay so much. It’s only reasonable they should pay less. They’ve got less so they pay less. You’ve got a nice place here, sir. You’ve got a good audio system and you dress real smart. So, you’ll pay a bit more. That seems real right and proper, doesn’t it?”

“I guess so,” said Psychlone. “And what happens if I don’t pay anything?”

“Then you’ll be fucked,” shrieked Sick Chick. “You’ll be fucked like you’ve never been fucked before.”

“Don’t keep butting in, Sick,” said YouTube in a reasonable tone. “The gentleman is asking a perfectly legitimate question. What do you get for your two grand

a month? What does your non-negotiable monthly premium bring you? Well, as I say: peace of mind.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Have you ever noticed how many houses in this area have a symbol carved into their front door that looks a bit like a U with a vertical line through it?”

“Well, yes,” said Psychlone. “I just thought it was mindless vandalism...”

“It might be vandalism, sir,” YouTube admitted. “But it’s not mindless. That symbol signifies that the property benefits from the protection of the Youth Club. And for two grand a month we’ll carve a symbol like that on your door. Well, another symbol I should say, because I can see that the couple who live in the flat above you already pay their monthly premiums.”

“Do I have a choice?” asked Psychlone to whom it belatedly occurred that these two girls represented some kind of protection racket.

“The insurance premiums will protect you against robbery, theft, break-ins and mindless violence from the many gangs that wander the streets of North West London,” said YouTube. “You might have heard of the Eyeliners from Hillingdon. You can tell them by their prominent eye makeup: both men and women. They’re real bastards, sir. Only the other day they broke into a convent and raped every nun they could find. Then there are the Lords and Ladies of West Drayton...”

“They’re real fuckers,” said Sick Chick. “It was one of them that knifed me when I was raped a couple of years ago. Right fucking cunts they are.”

“There are gangs like the Ox Hands from Langley and the Nutters from Ickenham. They’re all ruthless and violent. Given the opportunity, they would ransack

and burn every single house on this estate but only after they'd slaughtered each and every one of the tenants. It would be mayhem."

"And the Youth Club?"

"For your very reasonable monthly premium, the Youth Club will not only not bother you in any way, they will guarantee that in the event of one of these vicious gangs entering the borough on a crazed murderous spree you will be defended to the best of our abilities."

"We'll tear the fuckers' eyes out of their heads and strew their guts across the street," elaborated Sick Chick. "I'll take a fucking steel rod and fucking ram it up the arse so they'll know what it's like to be raped before I crush their fucking heads with a fucking boulder."

"...But mostly we'll be acting as a deterrent," said YouTube.

"And if these gangs never venture this far into Uxbridge?"

"Then your safety can't be guaranteed, sir," said YouTube. "You might have noticed the house just a block away that was broken into the other day. The house was assaulted by a gang of youths that pulled off the front door and ran away with all the possessions inside. I can't say what happened to the people who lived there..."

"They were fucked double time," said Sick Chick enthusiastically. "Back and front. It was wicked! But they'll live though. They won't be so fucking late with the fucking insurance payments in future."

"As I say, sir," said YouTube who chose to ignore her companion's remarks. "There is a penalty incurred if you don't pay your premiums promptly."

"I see," said Psychlone thoughtfully.



“I take it that you’ll be registering for household insurance then, sir?”

“Registering?”

“That’s just figurative, sir. Have you got a couple of grand on you?”

“Not at the moment,” admitted Psychlone.

“We’re understanding people, sir,” said YouTube.

“But only so far, you tight-arsed cunt,” chimed in Sick Chick.

“We know that people don’t always carry much money on them,” YouTube continued. “When do you think you might be able to get the money? Tomorrow perhaps?”

“I think so,” said a defeated Psychlone.

“We’ll be around some time before it gets dark,” said YouTube. “We look forward to a long and happy relationship with you, sir.”

“But don’t think it means you can fuck me, you lech,” said Sick Chick aggressively. “I don’t let any cunt inside my twat. Not unless you’re gonna pay for it, that is.”

“Well thank you for being so understanding, sir,” said YouTube as she placed a firm hand on Sick Chick’s shoulder and turned about. “We’ll see you soon.”

“I’m sure you will,” said Psychlone who now felt humiliated and sick in the stomach.

So, this was what life in London was really like.

## **LXXVIII**

### **Iris**

### **2059**

Although Iris missed living in London while she was living in Oxford, she hadn't really felt ready to return there from so soon. However, the Biotech Lab was one of the first businesses to shut down when Sheep Fever struck the nation. And now she was effectively evicted from the city along with everyone else who didn't have an actual job in the city and didn't have the good fortune to have been born there. The authorities could only extend the charity of quarantine to a limited number of people.

Sheep Fever was such an innocent sounding name for the devastating pandemic whose progress across the world from the Republic of North America to Europe, Africa and Asia had been tracked with such anxiety by the English government and the world's media. The other name by which it was known—White Death—was a melodramatic echo of the ancient mediaeval plague that expressed rather better the dread and horror evoked by mention of the disease. It was an especially nasty disease that had very little to do with sheep beyond having originated in agricultural land where few humans lived but was still home to unfussy livestock such as sheep and goat. Amongst the symptoms were high temperatures, coughing fits, sickness and diarrhoea. The time in which it took to die was interminable. Despite the frantic efforts of pharmaceutical companies all over the globe, no cure for it had yet been found.

Although the English government was happy to dispense well-meaning but not especially helpful advice, it had no grand plan to avert the worst affects of the White Death as it spread across the Midlands and Home Counties. Like everyone else

nowadays, when Iris ventured outdoors she always wore a surgical mask around her mouth or held a handkerchief to her face. She wore gloves in public places and conspicuously avoided shaking hands. The most common means by which White Death was spread was by touching a surface on which someone had coughed or vomited.

The Government of National Unity was definitely in its element in discovering novel ways in which to restrict the freedom of movement of the populace. The Kingdom's border controls were tightened yet further. Tourists were only permitted into the country if they'd booked to stay at an approved hotel. Any lorry transporting goods into England was obliged to leave them at the dock or airport for English workers to carry onwards to their destination. The railway tunnel between England and France was now bricked up to prevent anyone bringing the disease in from the continent, even though it was actually more widespread in England than anywhere else in Northern Europe.

Draconian restrictions to free movement were imposed across the whole of England, although Greater London had somehow escaped the worst. This was mostly thanks to the improvised defences and barbed wire that had been raised around the inner circumference of the M25 motorway. As a resident of Uxbridge, Iris benefitted from this extra security. The London Borough of Hillingdon had effectively imposed martial law on its council tax payers. No one could walk far before being stopped by a quarantine officer and having their eyes scrutinised for the small white spots in the pupil that was the earliest sign of infection. There were several occasions when Iris witnessed the haste in which those suspected of infection were escorted away by nurses in white uniforms for further examination.

Iris' attitude towards such a stringent policy was mixed. There was a very high death rate from White Death. Barely one in twenty victims survived once infected. Although she had a great deal of sympathy towards the victims of the plague and, of course, their family and friends, she was secretly pleased to see them dragged off to a place where they were less likely to pass on the disease.

On the whole, it was actually rather boring to live in the midst of the White Death. Because they were forbidden from commuting, most people were unable to get to their usual place of work. Only essential vehicles were allowed to travel from one London borough to another. The exhaustive checks required when getting on or getting off public transport resulted in more time being dedicated to such business than was actually spent travelling. Nonetheless, getting to work was the least of Iris' concerns. She was unemployed and had to live off what was left of her savings. Even if she had a job in Central London, where most of the opportunities were, she'd never be able to get there to earn a salary. Iris initially relied on the basic food and provisions made available as emergency aid, but as the weeks became months and the White Death kept its grip on the country such generosity became more than either the London Borough of Hillingdon or the English government could any longer afford.

"It makes sense though, doesn't it?" said Iris's housemate, Eustace, as they queued outside the labour exchange. "There are jobs to be done and we're able to do them. The roads aren't gonna get cleaned by themselves."

"Or the bodies burnt in the incinerators," gloomily remarked Yolanda, who'd been dossing down on the sofa in the shared house ever since she'd been evicted from Leyton Buzzard. "Or the barbed wire fences guarded. Or the sick and dying sorted from

those who're gonna live.”

“That’s all true,” Eustace agreed. “It’s all gotta be done. And, anyway, what else would we be doing now? I mean, what I ought to be doing is working at my desk in Holborn, but with so many businesses suspended during the crisis, what else can I do? And we get to do our bit to help our country in its time of need.”

Iris felt a bit weary as she listened to her housemate echo the propaganda being broadcast on Fox News UK and, with noticeably less enthusiasm, the EBC. It wasn’t that she disagreed with the essential message that the best way to get through the White Death was for people to work together for the common good. What troubled her more was how the government had somehow made the crisis fit its xenophobic, business-friendly, insular agenda. Not only had the barriers between nations been strengthened, but every possible way to monitor, interfere and marshal the population was being applied. And ultimately to what end? And to what extent was it simply to keep Sheep Fever at bay?

Those already protected from the vagaries of the greater world by their wealth—sheltered in gated communities and escorted in chauffeur-driven cars—suffered far less than most of the population. Those suffering the most lived in districts once noted for their ethnic diversity, such as Brixton, Bradford and Southall. These were the most rigidly quarantined districts and where there was most opportunity to deport people to distant nations that many didn’t know even existed. Iris was lucky not to live in such a borough just as she was to be white, middle class and university-educated, but she was also aware that there was a small minority for whom this crisis was little more than an inconvenience. And it was to uphold the rights of this privileged minority that the

government was at its most active.

The jobs that the Labour Exchange assigned to Iris were really no worse than those she'd been given when she worked on the Work Experience Programme in East London. She was far more fortunate than those allotted the decidedly more risky jobs. Iris' most frequent assignment was to organise the distribution of fruit and vegetables from the borough's borders to the supermarkets and grocery stores that sold them to people who, like Iris, had earned sufficient work credits to be exchanged for food, clothing and other necessities. Eustace and Yolanda were most often assigned to distribute batteries to those who had no privately installed source of electrical power.

Most people needed to earn a living by whatever means they could during the crisis. Only a few of those who lived in Uxbridge had places of work within walking distance of their homes, so they mostly had to exchange their labour for work credits. Whether consciously or not, it was apparent that the local government was discriminating against some and showed preference to others. Those who were black or brown or had difficult-to-pronounce names were those most likely to be allocated jobs which Iris, despite her burgeoning social conscience, was pleased to have been excused from.

The White Death was no joke. Those who had the closest contact with the people and places where it had struck were inevitably those most at risk of contracting it and then becoming part of the statistical 95% whose fate was to die in a crowded hospital ward after several agonising weeks of suffering. And it was precisely to such places as hospitals, crematoria, border defences and quarantine zones that people like Juanita Mendez, Tammy Zenawi and Bobby Nidal were assigned. No statistics were

issued of the relative proportion of those so assigned who subsequently fell victim to White Death.

The countless public service announcements issued by the government emphasised a very curious kind of Englishness that was as alien to Iris as it was to the majority of Uxbridge's residents. The bulldog spirit invoked to confront the crisis was resplendent with references to the music of Edgar Elgar, cream teas, warm beer, cricket pitches and old-fashioned tea-shops. The implied message was that an alternative England that might include dance music, mosques and skateboard parks was no longer wanted.

All the same, the White Death's tight grip on England's throat couldn't last forever. Nevertheless, despite the many assurances from the government and the many apparent breakthroughs, no cure was ever found for the disease. Sheep Fever remained incurable to the end. It was still a disease from which only one in twenty people were likely to survive. The news stories became less about the search for the killer cure and more an account of how science and medicine, even in China and Russia, but most certainly in England and America, had at last met its match.

Iris was no disinterested observer with regard to this particular news story. Her study at university and her research in biotechnology had given her experience and expertise in the rather older disciplines that three centuries earlier had resulted in the first ever inoculations against smallpox in England. The microscopic entities that infected every human being on the planet had ever since been evolving at a rate that now surpassed human ingenuity in finding a cure. Before the advent of the White Death, every bacterial or viral mutation had been countered, usually at great expense, by an

antidote that subjugated the menace to little more than a few hundred unfortunate deaths and yet another government-backed investment in the pharmaceutical industry.

The pace of evolution had now overtaken human science and human material resources. The ultimate defeat of the Sheep Fever pandemic resulted more from the ancient policy of separating the infected from those not yet infected and of allowing the virus die with its host. From Ipswich to Penzance, from Carlisle to the Isle of Wight, and from Shanghai via Nashville to Stockholm, this was a plague whose demise simply illustrated the prosaic fact that no parasite that kills its hosts can continue to spread when there are no new hosts to which it can spread.

It was several more weeks after the White Death pandemic had subsided that the Metropolitan Line could reopen and the makeshift crematoria alongside the Uxbridge canals could at last close down. It was also a time of fresh employment opportunity though not necessarily of the type for which Iris was best suited. There was much that needed to be done and there was a shortage of people able to do it. In London, as in all the world's great cities that had suffered the most from White Death, such as New York, Paris and Johannesburg, there was the inevitable sharp bounce back from the poverty and fear that had been associated with the plague.

Like most of her friends, Iris wondered whether a government that had profited so much during a crisis where small minds and small horizons could flourish was really best suited to engage with a period of new hope, new expectations and new opportunities. But for now she was just pleased that she could at last travel by underground train into the city centre to work in an office or restaurant and that she no longer had to walk around all day with a strip of cloth strapped over her mouth.



**LXXIX**  
**Lindiwe**  
**2069**

Although this was by no means the first time in her life that Lindiwe had been ill, she'd never before felt as desperately sick as she was now. Her luck had run out. The Buffalo Pox that had spread across England as it had the rest of Europe, Africa and Asia had finally chased her down. The horrible boils of pus on her face and chest could never be symptoms of anything else. And here she was, still living in the same Redhill squat which had been her home for almost a year with only hard floorboards on which to sleep.

As a result of the fever and pain from which she suffered, all Lindiwe could do was shiver and sweat in the corner of the room swaddled in a blanket with her consciousness lapsing periodically into blessed oblivion. She needed food and drink, but didn't have the energy to leave the small spot in the room that she'd claimed as her own and venture out to beg on the mean streets of North Surrey. In any case, she wasn't sure she even had the ability to hold anything in her stomach once she'd let it slip down her throat.

It was obvious that Lindiwe was sick. She sat huddled against the mildewed wall displaying the typical symptoms of Buffalo Pox such as horrible festering sores and postulating boils. This was reason enough for anyone to keep their distance. Any contact with Lindiwe or with anything she touched could easily spread further a plague that had already claimed so many lives across the world

Lindiwe was sure that there had once been a time when pandemics of this kind

were countered with an antidote that would later be released to the public. Such days were gone and these days many new strains of cholera, diphtheria, typhoid, hepatitis and leprosy had taken a fresh hold on those least well prepared to defend themselves against it. The limits to a pandemic's range wasn't determined only by the spread of poverty and access to medicine. It was spreading much further as scientific progress was no longer keeping ahead of the pathogens' rapid mutation. This was England's second great epidemic in just over ten years, but the first Lindiwe had known since she'd arrived in the Kingdom. It was ironic that although she'd managed to avoid the many truly horrible diseases that had ravaged Lesotho and neighbouring South Africa it was in England that Lindiwe was finally laid low.

The English had almost certainly learnt lessons from the last plague, still known as the White Death, but that knowledge was compromised by the fact that it had happened during the period of the Government of National Unity whose one redeeming feature was its natural instinct for prompt authoritarian action. The government could be congratulated for having put into place a truly radical response: in which England's borders were hermetically sealed, internal movement regulated and vast areas of Southern England, the Midlands and the Home Counties quarantined, but such praise was compromised by the fact that such policies were the knee-jerk response of an insular, almost racist, government very much in the pocket of big business. Nothing was considered more precious or sacrosanct than the welfare of those least likely to suffer, so the hundreds of thousands of deaths directly or indirectly attributable to Sheep Fever were overwhelmingly concentrated amongst the already poor and vulnerable. No loss, the government probably thought. Such people would never vote for them even if

they had the opportunity to do so.

Buffalo Pox's spread across England followed a different pattern to that of the White Death. This may have been because the current coalition government of Labour, Green and other left-of-centre parties made a huge effort to differentiate itself from its discredited predecessor. Nevertheless, although the contagion was distributed more evenly across the socio-economic classes and ethnic groups, there were still many tens of thousands who'd died and many more who were likely to die in the future.

And Lindiwe was convinced that she would soon be one of them.

Like everyone else, Lindiwe had followed the disease's progress with alarm as it emerged from the recently re-opened Channel Tunnel and the southern ports; then spread through the counties of Sussex and Kent; and now to the very edge of London. Why was this contagion known as Buffalo Pox? Why not smallpox or even cowpox? Its flimsy connection with buffalos was more to do with Water Buffalo rather than the species of Bison locally known as Buffalo by the citizens of North America's fragmented nations. The disease's origin was more the kind of place where such buffalo wallowed rather than the animals themselves.

Such concerns were of little comfort to Lindiwe now; although her thoughts were so fragmentary and unconnected that anything so abstract was a kind of comfort to her. She was also sometimes aware of the presence of the two other African women who shared her bedroom and with whom, until she became ill, she'd huddle together for warmth and company under the threadbare blankets.

There was Uzoma: a large woman now unnaturally diminished by hunger and from whose bosom and buttocks protruded more bone than flesh. Her fluency of

English was poor and her knowledge of any other language that Lindiwe understood was non-existent, so she mostly communicated by hand-signals and a severely limited repertoire of words. Lindiwe still didn't know from which African country Uzoma was a refugee.

There was also Yewande whose original home was Serrekunda in the Gambia, now a province of Senegal. Her English was excellent as was the quality of her education, but there were few job opportunities for a Historian in Comparative Linguistics. She now made a living in one of the many sweatshops that lined the London-Brighton Road. She was by far the best dressed woman in the house—resplendent in the tee-shirts and football sweaters that her employers sold—but she was also generous in helping to stock the place with household provisions.

Although her two room-mates kept a prudent distance from her, it was only because of them that Lindiwe was still alive. They slept as far from her as they could on the other side of the room, their fully clothed bodies wrapped round each other for warmth. When either woman ventured in her vicinity, she would keep her mouth covered as protection from air-borne viruses. Neither woman was expert in medicine, but both knew enough not to touch Lindiwe or anything that she'd worn, touched or coughed on. And it was they who ensured that Lindiwe was provided with the food and water that she was physically incapable of fetching for herself.

The outcome of Lindiwe's battle against near death was by no means certain. The days were long and feverish and Lindiwe was almost always surprised when after she'd fallen asleep she would awaken the following day. Was she getting better? She wasn't sure at first. The moments when she thought she might be recovering, when a

boil had retreated or the phlegm she coughed up was less viscous or tasted less revolting, was often followed by a fresh outbreak of debilitating fever whose affects couldn't be relieved by the water that Uzoma or Yewande had left in an old plastic bottle beside her.

All the same, Lindiwe was convinced that a corner had been turned when she was at last able to concentrate with more attention to Yewande's unbroken monologues on those few moments when she wasn't working or sleeping. (Uzoma's similar monologues served only to dull her senses to welcome sleep). The Buffalo Pox had cut a swath across the Kingdom and decimated farming communities as far afield as Cornwall, Cumbria and Suffolk. It was now retreating from its original strongholds in the South East of England and the capital had mostly escaped the worst of it.

"Good!" said Lindiwe bitterly. "So, I'm nothing but a freak statistic."

"Not just a statistic, Lindi sweetheart," said Yewande who was delighted and encouraged by Lindiwe's comments although they were scarcely cheerful. "You're alive, remember. And you might not become a statistic at all."

A day or so later, Lindiwe had recovered enough to be able to watch the television news on Yewande's laptop screen (or for as long as its battery power lasted). This was a privilege that Lindiwe truly appreciated. The cost of powering batteries was especially prohibitive in winter when there was so little solar energy. She watched the EBC News constantly on the small 25 centimetre screen as it continually recycled the same news stories hour on hour on a diminished budget and with most outside images provided on license by Sky News UK and foreign broadcasters from Scotland and Ireland. It was the same depressing cycle of famine, plague, warfare and economic

malaise, but more than anything else it helped distract and even cheer Lindiwe. It was comforting to know that however bad things were for her, it was many times worse elsewhere. The Buffalo Pox and the series of other plagues and contagions that had spread across the world had been so severe in some countries that global population growth, including in even Africa, was actually faltering in its otherwise inexorable climb. When the sources of disaster weren't the familiar four horsemen of the apocalypse, there were other ills to trouble the world. Earthquake. Crop failure. Drought. Flood. Aeroplane crashes. Border skirmishes between the fragments of what had once been the United States. Even some ominous sabre-rattling in the Middle East. It all put Lindiwe's near death from an international pandemic into some kind of perspective.

Soon Lindiwe was well enough that she could stand, walk, talk and even contemplate re-entering the land of the living. But was she now able to make a living? She didn't want to return to the life of a prostitute even if Empire Cleaning Services were to employ a woman so scarred by recent sickness. There wasn't much income to make from other more legal occupations such as begging. Lindiwe dreaded that she would have to resort to theft or some other form of crime to survive.

"Can you sew?" Yewande asked.

"Sew?" wondered Lindiwe who was now well enough to sit on the same side of the room as her friends. "Are you offering me a job in the place where you work? Would they take me on?"

"I'm sure you could do the work as well as I can," said Yewande. "It's monotonous but it's better than starvation. And although Union Republic Sportswear

isn't actually advertising at the moment they have plenty of vacancies."

"Vacancies? Is business improving at the moment?"

"No," said Yewande. "But you're not the only one who's contracted Buffalo Pox in the last few months. There are many sewing machines sitting idle at the factory at the moment and it's unlikely that many of those who once used to operate them will ever be returning to work."

**LXXX**  
**Olive**  
**2085**

The doctor must be shitting her. It wasn't right. Olive had already been infected before by gon, syph, NSU, chlam and every fucking thing but AIDS, but why was this syph so fucking different?

"A jab, a few days off work, and it'll be gone," said Olive pleadingly. "I've had syph before. It ain't no big deal."

"It's not as easy as that," the doctor of the charitable health centre said sadly. He peered with one eye at the clock: conscious of the queue of patients trailing around the block. "There are several different strains of syphilis and they constantly mutate. We've seen it happen with gonorrhoea, influenza, rabies, polio and now it's happened with syphilis. The viruses have mutated faster than the pharmaceutical companies can find an antidote for them."

"Well, fuck it," said Olive who wasn't sure she understood even a quarter of what the man was saying. "Just scribble something on a piece of paper and I'll take it to the chemists. If I have to, I'll even pay for it so's I can get back to work."

"I don't think I've made myself clear, have I?" said the doctor apologetically. "There *is* no antidote at present for the variant of syphilis that you've contracted. I can't offer you much at all in the way of a cure. All I can offer are palliatives. It won't cure you as such, but it'll help deal with the symptoms."

"Well, that's fucking better than nothing," said Olive. "Just give me some of those."



“Well, of course,” said the doctor.

He tapped away on the keyboard attached to his tablet and raised his head to watch a prescription sheet being dispensed from a laser printer on the far side of the surgery. After the single sheet was printed, a further few sheets followed. This was a health leaflet of the sort that only charities and foreign governments provided.

“What’s this other crap I’ve got to read, doctor?” Olive asked half in dread and half in scorn.

“It explains the symptoms of neo-pallidum syphilis and how to best deal with them. It includes the standard advice that you probably already know about such as avoiding sexual contact to restrict the further spread of the disease and what other symptoms you should look out for. What it will probably not make especially clear is that there is currently no known cure and that you may well have to live with the affects of this infection for the rest of your life. It also specifies your possible likelihood of mortality.”

“Likelihood of what? I wasn’t expecting to live forever anyway.”

“This strain will make that even less likely,” said the doctor glumly.

Well fuck that, thought Olive as she wandered out of the surgery past the winding queue. Like her, none of the other patients had the steady income required to pay insurance premiums for health care. Most were elderly, young or disabled. Few were employed, although even those lucky ones were unlikely to be able to afford medical attention that wasn’t provided by charity. And the state of their health wouldn’t be accepted as a reason for not being able to work. Employers were choosy about who they employed, so anyone who was prone to sickness or took a day or more off work

would soon return to the ranks of the even more destitute unemployed.

Olive was a self-employed woman, of course. Or at least that's how she'd characterise herself if there was ever another government census of the sort that used to happen once every ten years. In practice, it meant that she let men fuck her for money. She supplemented this core income by petty theft, drug-dealing and begging. And whether she had the clap or something more serious, as long as she could give her johns a blowjob or a handjob, she had no choice but to do so. Fuck the advice about holding back on the fanny. If a john wanted to fuck her and he had the readies: well, that was what she'd allow him to do, rubber or no rubber.

Even so, Olive resisted the temptation of dropping the freshly printed health advice into the nearest recycle bin. Even if she couldn't find a use for the paper to roll a spliff or through which to snort a line, there was some stuff on the kind of clap she'd got that she might want to read about. If nothing else, it'd give her an idea of what to expect if the doctor wasn't just spinning a line and she really was suffering from something incurable. But then there was once a time when they said that AIDS was incurable and, from what she'd last heard, that was still just no longer true. Perhaps they'd find a cure for all the new strains of clap just like they used to do when Olive was a kid and it was her mum who'd turn the occasional trick. Olive was determined to continue fucking even if her twat was weeping with sores, warts and pus. There was always some miracle wonder-cure that the drug companies could make a fucking bomb from. That sort of business never went insolvent, unlike all the others that had gone bust over the years.

Olive was true to her intentions. She found the time to turn a trick or two along

Streatham Hill near the railway station before she returned home to the dilapidated squat on Ullswater Road. In only a couple of hours she scored nearly a grand from three blowjobs and an alley-way fuck. That'd be enough to keep her in hamburgers, kebabs and crack for a day or so.

“So what’s the verdict?” asked Yana, her room-mate and occasional lover when Olive had persuaded her to unpadlock the bedroom door. “It weren’t nothing serious, was it?”

“It wasn’t Goat Flu or Rat Fever or shit like that,” said Olive, referring to the contagions attracting most attention from the media at the moment. “It was just the clap again.”

“Again!” echoed Yana. “That’s no big fucking deal, is it? It’s just goes with the job, don’t it? Nothing to get in a sweat about.”

“Well, fuck it,” said Olive who didn’t want to get anxious about what the doctor had said. “I’ve got some crystals. You got any shit?”

“Yeah, dope, snow and, best of all, some GHB.”

“I ain’t had that in a while.”

“I found a new source.”

“Cool.”

The one thing that Olive needed more than anything else was something that could take her mind off her fears. And sometimes these surfaced for long enough for her to get really depressed. But smack, coke, E and alcohol so easily banished such despondency. Drugs were cheaper than food these days. And why eat, when all you did was add calories? After a line, a tab or a toke you didn’t fucking care. You might be the

world's worst fucking mother who couldn't be bothered to speak to her daughter for well over a year now. You might be sucking cock and taking it up the arse from johns whose names you'd never know and whose faces you could never remember. You might be sharing a mattress in a squalid bedroom in a house full of psychos, smackheads and petty criminals. You might even be suffering from an incurable strain of venereal disease. But what the fuck! When you were high, you didn't *give* a fuck. And what was life about if not to enjoy yourself and fuck everything else.

In any case, without the drugs that were so easy to buy and no trouble to afford, what would life have been like for Olive, Yana and any one of the few people, all women, she considered to be her friends? She didn't fucking care if some john had fucked her in the arse and who, rather than pay what had been agreed, waved a knife around and told her to fuck off. She didn't give a flying fuck if she got beat up by security guards who saw her as fair game if she ever strayed down one of the private streets they patrolled. As long as each night ended on a high in the arms of either a paying customer or a close girlfriend, what fucking difference did it ever make?

"It's a fucking mess down there, girlfriend," said Yana with genuine revulsion. "I ain't gonna put my tongue there. It's fucking disgusting."

"What about your pussy?" Olive pleaded.

"What's your tongue like?"

"Good," said Olive, poking it out as far as she could.

"There's a reason you go to the clap clinic more often than I do, girlfriend," said Yana with more seriousness than her inebriation might suggest. "And that's 'cause I'm fucking careful with what goes in my twat and you're not. Look, O. I love you, I really

do. Not since that cunt of a boyfriend dumped me I ain't loved no one more than you.

But, honestly... It's fucking warfare between your thighs!"

"It ain't that bad!" said Olive.

"It fucking well is."

"You're fucking shitting me..."

"Have a look in the mirror."

"Not now."

"The only tongue you'll get on those lips, dearest, will be from one of your johns," said Yana sternly. "And fuck only knows what you'll be giving him in return for his cash. There are enough warts and weeping sores there to fucking coat the dick of every john in London."

"Well, if you ain't gonna lick my twat," said Olive, "at least let me have another line."

**LXXXI**  
**Sir Norman**  
**2080**

“What the fuck do you mean?” Sir Norman asked sharply. “There *must* be a cure. I don’t care what it costs. I’ll pay it whatever the expense. There’s always a cure.”

“Not this time, my lord,” said Dr. Urey, the Harley Street doctor to whose medical advice Sir Norman had privileged access. “I shall continue my investigation, but as you know I have many contacts in the pharmaceutical industry and what I’ve so far been given to understand doesn’t bode at all well. And then there are the complications as well...”

“Complications?”

“AIDS may not be the killer it once was, my lord, at least not in the Republic of England,” said the doctor, “but your natural defences have nonetheless been weakened as a result of your close encounter with HIV. Not to mention some of the more minor venereal diseases you contracted in the Congo and elsewhere...”

“It’s not your job to lecture me on how I should occupy my leisure time,” Sir Norman spat back. “Your job is to cure me.”

“Of course, my lord,” said the doctor with a slight hint of annoyance in his voice. He also had a knighthood and undoubtedly believed that he’d earned it for substantially more worthwhile reasons than had Sir Norman. “You’ll have the very best medical attention, but you also deserve an accurate diagnosis. This strain of the Typhoid bacillus is especially resistant to modern antibiotics. But you may be comforted by the knowledge that its rate of mortality should be in your favour.”

“It is?”

“Within the normal range of statistical variability, it is, my lord. More than seventy percent of cases recover after only a few weeks. But as I mentioned with regards to your condition, my lord, there *are* complications.”

“Just fucking sort it out,” said Sir Norman brusquely, assured that a doctor even with a knighthood and an international reputation would do whatever he was asked whether he was treated with respect or contempt. “I want to be out of bed as soon as I possibly can.”

“Naturally, my lord,” said Dr. Urey who left Sir Norman’s bedside with a deferential nod that he was unlikely to offer the majority of his wealthy patients. Blue blood still had its privileges even in a fucking Republic.

But shit! Sir Norman didn’t feel at all well. Fever, headache, coughs and a fucking insistent pain in what the doctor called his abdomen. He certainly hoped he wouldn’t have to suffer all this for very much longer.

It was obvious what had happened. The pharmaceutical companies had lost their way. Once they were able to stop any and every pandemic in its tracks almost as soon as it made its first appearance. Within days of a disease being reported in the international news media, a wonder-cure was found. Those with the wherewithal, like Sir Norman, made damned sure they’d get hold of it straightway. It was only after that it was made widely available to the general public at a substantial, but deserved, profit for the pharmaceutical companies and their prominent shareholders such as Sir Norman. But nowadays, all that entrepreneurism, research and development had become more of a cost than a profit centre. The value of Sir Norman’s shares in the

biochemical industries were in the same depressingly familiar decline as those he owned in almost every other industry.

How had Sir Norman been so foolish as to fall victim to one of the many plagues and contagions currently sweeping across the planet? He'd totally avoided the White Death when it played its part in the downfall of the Government of National Unity. Even though Sir Norman was now run aground in England, unable even to fly by private jet to his Scottish estates, he'd previously succeeded in avoiding all contact with even one of the various pandemics. As he flew back and forth across the globe to nations in Africa and Asia that had been devastated by plague (not to mention famine, war and climate change), he'd dodged everything that might bring him harm. It was probably in Scotland that he'd contracted the HIV mentioned by the doctor. The fucking jocks were just as retroviral as the fucking niggers, spics and ragheads. The assorted strains of venereal disease were nothing more than the collateral damage to be expected when a man spent his life in pursuit of the best anal passages on the planet.

The treacherous media would have a real field day if Sir Norman were to meet his death from this particular epidemic. A one-time lord felled by Typhoid: an illness once thought banished to the Middle Ages bringing down a knight whose ancestral legacy was from an age where class mattered and the peasants pretty much knew their place. How much mileage would the turncoats on Sky News UK make from the demise of a man so closely associated with the Kingdom of England's final last stand in the cause of decency and tradition? Did they want the world to collapse in the inevitable morass of squalor and degradation that would result when the privilege associated with affluence had spread so widely amongst the plebs and scum that it exhausted and



despoiled the resources of the entire planet? It was better by far that the opportunity and ability to indulge in excess was reserved only for those few whose tastes were sufficiently refined to appreciate the products of four and a half billion years of evolution (or six millennia since the Garden of Eden, if the moronic Americans were to be believed). Only those who truly appreciated the delights of fucking a black arse or shitting on the paps of a black bitch should be so privileged.

Nevertheless, for the next month or so Sir Norman was equally as wretched as any other citizen of the English Republic. The first week had been bad enough, but at least the one-time Lord of the Realm was able to articulate his rage. He could berate with both imagination and wit anyone, including his doctor, who came in contact with him. He even managed to gain something of an erection as a result of the energetic application of tender loving care from a male prostitute (black, of course) who he employed to tug at his penis. But as the week went by, Sir Norman's temperature continued to rise, his heart beat more slowly, his head pounded, his throat sore and his nose had begun to bleed periodically.

Dr. Urey could give Sir Norman no concrete reassurance although he was well able to recite such words as *leukopenia*, *eosinopenia* and *lymphocytosis* that his patient didn't understand and was rather grateful that he couldn't. The only practical relief the doctor could provide was the administration of painkilling drugs by syringe which brought the blessed relief of unconsciousness.

Sir Norman's fever further intensified after another week and he was now more often feverish than not. Sometimes these periods of delirium were almost ecstatic especially when ameliorated by morphine, but Sir Norman's most normal state of mind

nowadays was of panic as he slipped in and out of consciousness. On one such occasion he discovered to his alarm that there was a further distension of his already unseemly belly. His abdomen hadn't just inflated like a pus-filled balloon: it also hurt like fuck whenever the affect of the powerful painkillers began to wane. Even worse was the diarrhoea that messed up his exquisite silk bedsheets. That was truly disgusting. It had the odour, composition and colour of some kind of pea soup: itself a far cry indeed from the haute cuisine Sir Norman normally enjoyed. Although there was no time of the day when he was free from fever, the symptoms became steadily worse towards evening. It peaked at a time between the lunch and dinner his chef prepared with culinary skills that Sir Norman was no longer able to properly enjoy. This was mostly because he was now spoon-fed a rather unedifying selection of plain fruit and vegetables.

As the fever intensified and the pain and discomfort worsened, there were fewer and fewer moments of lucidity and those few were scarcely agreeable.

“My lord. My lord,” repeated an insistent voice on one such brief occasion.

When Sir Norman opened his eyes and saw his doctor standing by the bed with his solicitor, he had sufficient awareness to guess that this was no coincidence and that Dr. Urey had administered a palliative drug that gave him the temporary relief required for him to answer the solicitor's questions. Like Sir Norman's doctor, Mr Neville Underhill's services didn't come cheap, but if the lawyer needed something he made damned sure he got it.

“What do you want?” Sir Norman asked with as curt an inflection as he could manage, but even through the fog of fever he could tell that his voice croaked badly and that he must have sounded rather less than imposing.

“I’m sorry to have to trouble you, my lord,” said Mr Underhill. “But there are urgent matters that require your attention.”

“And what might these be?” asked Sir Norman again aware of the faltering authority of his speech.

The tentative hold that Sir Norman had on his consciousness was put under intense strain as his solicitor advised him of matters the thread of which he lost within a few moments. There were words such as ‘intestate’, ‘close relatives’ and ‘favourite charities’ that alerted him to the gist of meaning hidden beneath Underhill’s mealy-mouthed but loquacious monologue.

“I really couldn’t give a flying...” Sir Norman began, before faltering on the word that reminded him all too well of what he did once care deeply about. “What difference does it make?”

“It is imperative that in the event of an unfortunate outcome that the Newbury estate doesn’t become just a gift to the state,” said the solicitor. “You have successfully avoided paying almost a single penny to what was once Her Majesty’s government...”

“Fuck them!” Sir Norman hissed.

“...but is now the government of the people of England,” continued the solicitor. “There is no obvious beneficiary for your estate. You have no relatives or companions who should naturally inherit the estate and you haven’t written a will. Just who should inherit your fortune if the worst should happen and...?”

“Don’t you worry, Neville,” said Sir Norman. “I’m sure you’ll be well provided for.”

“That is scarcely the issue,” insisted the solicitor. “Is there any cause...?”

“Try the Red Cross,” said Sir Norman in a semi-delirious state. “They do good things. Or the Croissant Rouge. Keep the ragheads healthy. Why the fuck not? Everything else is fucked...”

“Croissant Rouge?” said the solicitor who appeared alarmed. “What about causes more dear to your heart? The Conservative Party? The Taxpayers’ Alliance? The Koch Foundation?”

“Fuck it!” shouted an agitated Sir Norman. “Give it all to the Croissant Rouge. Give the Arabs as many baguettes as they can eat.”

“Are you sure, my lord?”

“Or Greenpeace. They’re still going, aren’t they? The world’s such a shit-hole the Greens’ll find plenty to campaign against for years to come.”

“Is that really the message you want to leave as your legacy, my lord?”

“What’s that?”

“A deathbed conversion to exactly the causes you’ve most despised and excoriated all your life.”

Sir Norman paused for thought. What sort of legacy *did* he want to leave? Did he want hippies to praise him while they hugged trees and tried to save the world’s last living whale? Did he want ragheads, niggers or other kinds of brown-skinned scum to imagine that he was anything other than a robust believer in tradition and ethnic purity?

“Fuck it!” gasped Sir Norman. “Just give everything to the Tories. They can be guaranteed to preserve my legacy.”

“Indeed they can, my lord,” said Mr Neville Underhill with satisfaction. “Your legacy will be long remembered by the happy people of a prosperous nation.”

“I certainly hope so,” said Sir Norman as his consciousness dimmed for the very last time.

**LXXXII**  
**Phil**  
**2104**

It was an image of a kind Phil had often seen before, but what was horrifying about it was the simple fact that it wasn't being broadcast as part of a news story from a distant urban slum or a foreign country. In fact, it was being transmitted from a surveillance camera just outside his own home. And this image, live and direct and in gruesome detail, showed a man's body slide slowly downwards into the dark red reflective sheet of his own blood that had splattered onto the steel shutters that covered the windows of Phil's house. It was fortunate that Phil had recently had them installed on the persuasive urging of the Ashton Lovelock Neighbourhood Watch.

The image was truly grotesque. The man's head had exploded from the impact of the well-aimed rifle shots. A rich red puddle of blood was spreading outwards across the patio in the long shadows of the late evening summer sun.

However horrifying the image was, Phil's thoughts were also with those neighbours of his who'd not abided by the local Neighbourhood Watch's advice. Many homes were lacking the steel shutters and anti-personnel devices that were now almost standard. Who knew from what humiliation and torture such poorly defended neighbours were suffering from at the mercy of the plebs who'd broken into their property and who hadn't yet been eliminated by the security guards? Their worldly possessions would be ransacked. Their houses plundered. And the women (and maybe even the men) raped. And possibly murdered.

Phil's hope rested in the speed and efficiency that the security guards would

employ to defend his property. The manufacturers of his home security system had told him how many minutes the house was guaranteed safe against determined assault, but such information seemed so academic when he'd authorised the purchase of the advanced security system and had it installed.

The live feed from the cameras scattered around the lawns and residences of Ashton Lovelock were providing a continual and unsettling view of the violence that had descended on the gated community now that the plebs had overrun its streets and malls. Phil had the facility to switch the view from one camera to another simply by moving his hand. Many stores in the Gaia Mall had been totally thrashed, but they would have been the obvious target of the plebs' initial onslaught. They were after clothes and electrical goods as well as the food that they'd been pleading for. The extent of their avarice only demonstrated the extent of the hypocrisy in the claims made by the plebs' representatives in the media that having enough to eat was all they wanted. Some of Phil's neighbours' houses had been broken into. Phil felt especially sorry for the Stewarts, despite their decidedly Scottish surname, whose house was now engulfed in flame.

But, as the cameras also showed, the security guards were responding to the pleb invasion with overwhelming force.

It was only right—given the way they bled his wallet each month—that the security officers should respond to the invasion of Ashton Lovelock with so much force and determination. This was also only what was necessary given how many yobbish invaders they had to repel. Hundreds of the fucking plebs had streamed in through the breach in Ashton Lovelock's electric fence. And an entirely unappetising bunch they

were too. The men were unshaven. The women wore no makeup. Shabby cheap clothes: ill-fitting, unstylish and unprepossessing. The plebs were barely human. They deserved the bullets that tore their bodies apart. They deserved the savage beating they were getting from the security guards that left them barely alive. The most unlucky ones deserved to have their corpses left abandoned in bloody puddles by the kerbside. If Phil wasn't so worried about his safety he'd gladly have left his home to personally deliver the *coup de grâce* to the bastards himself.

There'd been warnings of a possible invasion for several months now not just in Ashton Lovelock but in every affluent village and suburban retreat up and down the Republic. The protests in the big cities had been getting increasingly violent as the unwashed and uneducated proles, plebs, peasants and vagrants remonstrated about their imagined grievances. It was nothing more than whingeing, of course. Did they *really* expect to get something for nothing? Where did they imagine the money would come from to address their ridiculously long list of unachievable demands? The universal provision of education, healthcare, security and well-paid jobs didn't come from nowhere. They had to be earned. And although the protestors had been treated with far more respect than they deserved, they continued to agitate for what they laughingly and unashamedly called their rights.

The government's extraordinary patience eventually ran out. This was a long time after it had for ordinary middle-class citizen such as Phil. The protestors would have to disperse. They'd illegally occupied parks in London, Birmingham and Manchester and refused to pay the daily entrance fee. They'd erected tents around public and private property to which they wouldn't normally be allowed access such as



cathedrals, banks and the shopping malls. They regaled innocent bystanders with demand for greater justice, equality and respect. Well, to get respect, a person has to earn it, and these people most certainly hadn't done that.

The private security staff and armed mercenaries employed by the English government and the mayors of England's great cities showed both enthusiasm and gusto in their struggle to force the plebeian scum off the roads. It was heartening to watch videos on the internet of their long-delayed retaliation. No mercy was shown with boot, stick, baton, rubber bullet and latterly, as the conflict worsened, with guns and other more lethal hardware. Despite the propaganda broadcast by what little was left of the liberal media, the retaliation was entirely proportionate to the nuisance caused by the plebs and their disruption to English commerce.

And now the bastards were invading Ashton Lovelock.

They must have come from miles away, though Phil wondered how they could have made the journey from the dilapidated urban wastelands of Warwick, Coventry or Bicester. The impoverished plebs couldn't afford to travel by car and they most certainly wouldn't have been welcome on the motorways. Perhaps they'd walked all the way or travelled on the back of donkeys. However they'd got there Phil could see the trouble brewing as he drove home every day and passed the steadily expanding encampment just outside Ashton Lovelock's perimeter. The signs they brandished were the usual ones about jobs, greed and human rights. There were even some relating to climate change, flooding and the other environmental problems that bedevilled the world. Didn't the plebs realise that the solutions to such problems were exactly what the company that employed Phil was working to resolve?

And now it had happened. The plebs had breached the defensive walls and fences. There was plenty of speculation about how this had happened among the messages buzzing about the internet as knowledge of the invasion spread across the online world. Wire-cutters. Tunnels. Electrical short-circuits. Even an inside job from sympathetic workers in the mall or from the residents' servants. Whatever! It was happening now, just as it had happened in other privileged communities all the way from Cornwall to the unflooded islands of Norfolk, from Windermere to Bishop's Avenue, and from Hay-on-Wye to Stratford-on-Avon.

Phil was relieved to see that the plebs had now moved away from his home and were congregating elsewhere. They'd clearly been deterred by the blaze of gunfire that had mowed down the protestors who'd struggled fruitlessly to get through the steel sheets that had slid up on the outside of his already toughened windows and reinforced the deceptively oaken appearance of his front door. The liberal media might gripe about the effectiveness of deterrence, but it was fairly obvious to Phil that it had clearly worked as he watched the plebs wander away from the gruesomely disfigured corpses on his lawn and driveway. His anxiety was now rather less about his life and property and rather more about whether his insurance premiums were sufficient to cover the cost of cleaning up the mess of dead bodies on his estate. There was even the possibility that—like warfare or Acts of God—this was something his expensive insurance policies just didn't cover.

From what Phil could see from his screens, the plebs were now in retreat. That was good, of course, but it would still leave a scar on the community of Ashton Lovelock that couldn't be brushed away so easily. It could be weeks, even as much as

a month, until the shops were re-opened. And the Stewarts... If they'd suffered as badly as the internet gossip suggested, there'd be funerals for several weeks to come. And if they'd survived, then Phil would have to find time to offer condolence for their losses. He hoped they were well enough insured that he wouldn't be expected to help provide them with charitable assistance in their hour of need. That would be regrettable; but neighbours had to stick together, especially after such a brutal onslaught.

There was another crackle of gunfire as the security guards located a group of plebs who'd been hiding in the back garden of a house just half a block away. The security cameras from all the surrounding houses swivelled round to focus on the bloodshed. There were just three plebs and two of them were women. They were clearly terrified as the security guards surrounded them with their automatic rifles in hand. They were such a pathetic bunch. Scrawny. Ill-fed. Clothes that were patched and re-patched again and again. The older of the woman had a mouth with few teeth and many gaps. It was a relief to watch them get scythed down by a spray of automatic gunfire.

Scum like that didn't deserve to live.

Phil continued to watch the carnage from the comfort of his lounge until well past his normal bed-time. He didn't need to worry about having to get to work the following day. Like other employees on the Warwick Business Park he'd been notified that special leave would be extended to anyone who had reasonable fear that they might be caught up in the protests spreading across the nation. Phil wasn't so naive as to believe that his employer was being generous merely for reasons of inherent goodness. The drop in profit resulting from the loss of skilled technical and executive staff who'd fallen victim to the angry mob just wasn't worth it. The cost would be even greater if

the employee became eligible for compassionate leave.

As the fear receded that Phil might fall to the same fate as the Stewarts, he continued to watch the live coverage of the security guards' clean-up. He wasn't quite as comfortable as he would ideally choose to be. The steel shutters were still securely up on all the doors and windows so he couldn't benefit at all from the natural light of the evening sun. And he probably wouldn't want to venture out of his home for several more days. He'd be doing all his shopping online until the mall returned to a good state of repair.

Look! There was another pleb hiding in the shadow of a recycling bin.

The bastard was still holding onto his spoils of plunder. In this instance it was a cheap laptop and a saveloy sausage. Fat use they'd be to him now as a security guard raised his rifle and pointed it towards the pleb's forehead. He looked understandably anxious. No doubt he was reflecting on the folly of his criminal trespass. Perhaps he'd be leaving a family without its main breadwinner.

The shot from the rifle was brief and not especially loud. The pleb collapsed to the ground. A circle of blood steadily grew on the forehead just above eyes from which all life was now extinguished.

That was a lesson the plebs should all remember.

As the evening shadows lengthened and the sun dipped below the horizon, there were fewer such eventful moments. Now that the mob had recognised that their invasion had been countered with far more force than they could possibly withstand they'd run off back to where they'd come from. The security guards were under no obligation to chase after them, of course. In fact, the terms and conditions of their

contract almost certainly prohibited them from doing so. Beyond the confines of Ashton Lovelock, the plebs could only be pursued by a police force so poorly funded and overstretched that it was effectively no force at all. They'd be at liberty to plunder, rob and murder one another with virtual impunity, but hopefully they'd now learnt the lesson that Ashton Lovelock was not the place for such lawlessness.

But the excitement wasn't completely over yet. As the security guards continued their patrol, followed behind by ancillary staff that would tidy up the mess, drag off the bodies and mop up the blood, there were yet more intruders to locate on the well-tended lawns and polished patios.

This would be a long night, thought Phil as he idly dipped his hand into a carton of popcorn and chomped on a huge beefburger.

## **LXXXIII**

### **Iris**

### **2060**

It would never have been Iris' ideal choice of career, but there weren't many choices still available to her. Though there'd been an evident expansion in employment opportunities as the White Death receded, this brief boom vanished at almost the same rate as the last bodies were being incinerating. The jobs that appeared to address the need to clean up after the pandemic vanished all too soon. The Government's policy of dissuading foreign influence had also destroyed any residual foreign appetite for inward investment and the Republic of England was now a place of even fewer opportunities and rather less hope.

As there were no openings for a career in Biotechnology even in London, Iris decided that having already stooped somewhat lower than she'd ever intended when she chose to work for Empire Cleaning Services, her pride was no longer an obstacle with regards to any decision she made to make money. As she'd already made a living by masquerading as a cleaning maid, perhaps now she should actually work as one. So Iris began to look more favourably at the many vacancies for domestic servants that were being posted on the internet. It was one of the few sectors in the Kingdom's economy where job opportunities were continuing to grow, but the job opportunities were all cloistered well away from what Iris viewed as the ordinary world. And that was the world where she believed she belonged. This other world where most domestic servants in London worked was secluded behind the electric fences and high gates of the affluent private estates. The relatively prosperous wanted to maintain a good

distance away from the ungrateful taxpayer, but they still needed people to mow their lawn, make their beds and do the ironing.

A few years earlier when Iris' source of income was also to provide services for the comfortably well-to-do, she'd very much been the centre of her employers' attentions (though perhaps not in a good way). Nowadays when she'd gained access into the homes of the fortunate few—having been vetted by security guards at the electric gates—she was entirely peripheral. As far as her employers were concerned, she was nothing more than an invisible presence. All they wanted from her was to ensure that the detritus of daily life was removed without fuss and with no trace. Toilet bowls cleaned. Shirts ironed. Beds made. Parquet floors polished and cleaned.

Iris was sure that even in just three years there'd been an appreciable hardening in the attitude expressed by the affluent towards those less fortunate. Her employers previously betrayed the occasional sign of embarrassment at being in possession of so much more wealth than those no less deserving than themselves. Now, after seven years of the Government of National Unity and a year of the White Death, there was nothing that could tarnish their innate sense of superiority.

Iris soon came to rather prefer the secluded, secure and tidy world of immaculate lawns behind the electric fences to the perils of her life outside. This was ironic because it was only outside that she was able to enjoy her free time. The world where she worked was a place where the roads were lit in the dark; where the electricity was always on and reliable; and where she was safe from harassment and arbitrary violence. The hedges that enclose the houses were as trim and tidy as the lawns. When she was inside the houses—shaking sheets, ironing denim jeans, dusting behind the

furniture—she became almost house-proud for the well-appointed homes whose corners and alcoves she'd got to know in more intimate detail than did the actual homeowners.

When she walked home at the end of the day, having cleaned, tidied and scrubbed in five or six homes for ten or more hours at a rate of pay that was barely more than she'd once used to receive at the Work Experience Centre, she had to pass through a cordon of security guards. Even though they all recognised her, because they were themselves monitored by security cameras, they had to behave as officiously now as on the first day that Iris first worked in the private housing estate. Any evidence of sloppiness would be noticed by the attendant software and their employment would be abruptly terminated.

And then through the barrier gates, into the dark streets where the only functioning street-lights were those few not yet vandalised and which were, in any case, only as bright as their solar batteries allowed. Iris would walk home in a group of other domestic servants in the hope that sheer numbers would provide the desperately needed security for the next several kilometres walk and subsequent bus-ride. When she at last settled down on the decrepit ancient bus with its smashed-up security camera and punched-open windows that let in the wind and rain, she watched the North West London streets on the journey to her house-share just by the periphery of Heathrow Airport.

Once upon a time, this had been a part of London with many jobs but also the constant disruption that came from being right under the flight-path of aeroplanes flying across the Atlantic or to parts of Europe. Although there were still many such flights,



they were rather fewer in number than Iris remembered from her childhood when she and her mother took holidays together in Spain and Florida. Even though her recollection of these holidays were marred by the accompanying memory of her mother's constant moaning about her feckless ex-husband and Iris' father, she still recalled the childhood pleasure of sitting by the aeroplane window and looking out at the clouds below. Rather fewer people could afford to fly these days and as fuel prices continued their inexorable rise, this was a number that could only continue to fall.

The people who owned the houses that Iris kept so spotlessly clean would have little trouble in affording the occasional plane flight. For them, the experience of flying would be quite different from what Iris remembered. There would be emptier airport lounges, smaller crowds and shorter queues at Passport Control. Not that Iris could be sure about this. Although news stories in the mostly sympathetic media emphasised how strict and rigorous immigration checks now were under the present government, Iris imagined that those few who could afford to fly were unlikely to be the ones whose freedom of movement the Prime Minister wanted to restrict. In fact: quite the opposite.

A plane thundered overhead as Iris turned the key in one of the three locks that secured the heavily reinforced front door. She looked upwards to the sky as cold autumn drizzle pasted her cheeks and could just about make out the livery of the Republic of North America. It was ironic that those of the original United States who'd previously been most enthusiastic about the benefits of unfettered capitalism were the same ones who were now nationalising almost every industry still based in the Southern states to prevent them re-locating to Mexico or the Western Union. And then, in through the door, with a final check that no one was following behind, and up the dimly lit staircase

to her bedroom.

There was much about Iris' life that was more indigent than she'd been used to nearly a decade earlier when politics was nothing more than an abstract term and social injustice was something she associated with foreign countries that were far away and often difficult to spell or pronounce. She was scarcely a radical, but seven years of the Government of National Unity had made her more militant and much less apathetic. She still didn't know in which direction she believed the nation should head, but she was bloody sure where she wanted to head away from.

She shared her bedroom with Phyllis who also worked as a domestic servant and was as ludicrously over-qualified as Iris for the position. Phyllis was fluent in several European languages—none of which were now of much use in a Kingdom that had disassociated itself from the Northern European Union—and had gained an MBA at just the time when most international corporations with offices in England made the strategic business decision to manage their affairs from aboard.

Iris strode up the worn faded stair carpet by what would once have been a living room but was now just another bedroom. She hardly knew the other people in the house at all except for those she occasionally encountered in the kitchen or bathroom. The other residents were almost always either out working or in their bedrooms asleep. The little social interaction she had was usually around breakfast and lunch-time, but despite the wealth of university degrees few of her fellow residents were employed in a profession. The only legal and legitimate jobs in abundance were those in domestic servitude. However as Iris was reminded as she opened the door to her shared bedroom, illegal commerce such as drug-dealing was also enjoying rather a boom under the

Government of National Unity. The government's hard-line policies that now prescribed deportation or prison as mandatory sentences for all but the most trivial drugs offences had led only to widespread disregard for the law when the supply of imported drugs was so considerable and alternative forms of employment so scarce.

"It's from the Kashmir," said Phyllis as she passed the spliff to Iris. "That guy from round the corner said it's the best shit to come from there since before the nukes went off. And since there's nothing but hemp growing on the mountains there's a lot of it and it's fucking cheap."

"How cheap?" Iris asked as she took a long draw on the proffered item.

"Fucking cheap. A gram is less than the price of a shot of whiskey. And you get higher on this hash than you'd ever get from a fucking bottle of spirits."

"It's good," said Iris as she felt the nerves on her face tingle. "That's just the tonic I need after a day of work."

"Good day?"

"S OK. Not great. Just OK."

"You still good for Saturday?"

Iris shook her head. "Not till the evening. I've got a couple more houses to clean. There's always work to do after the Friday night parties."

"Well, it's always a good time to pick up extra gear," said Phyllis conspiratorially. "Those rich shits always leave unsorted lines and discarded tabs about the place."

"You take them home with you?" Iris asked naively.

"Don't you?"

“Well...” admitted Iris who hadn’t realised that her surreptitious pocketing was such universal practice. “I wouldn’t want to get sacked. And when you get sacked from one home you’re effectively sacked from them all.”

“The more wasted the bastards are, the less they’ll ever notice,” said Phyllis. “And, anyway, what else are you supposed to do with all those lines? Flush them down the toilet. The shit’s too good for that.”

Iris nodded. “*This* most certainly *is* good shit,” she said as she passed the spliff back.

Phyllis cupped her palms around it and inhaled a deep lungful. “Well, Saturday’s still on,” she said. “We’ll wait up for you at the pub in the evening till you arrive. But I’ve got a favour to ask you.”

“A favour?”

“Yeah. You know. Freddy...”

Iris nodded. “When?”

“He wants to come over tomorrow night. You don’t mind?”

“Just don’t make too much noise.”

Although Iris tried to make out that she didn’t mind that much, the truth was that Phyllis’ nocturnal trysts with Freddy were a real source of annoyance for her. It wasn’t just that her room-mate was so vocal when she orgasmed, it was also that the fact that Phyllis got so much obvious pleasure from her lovemaking. It was just another reminder to Iris how little sex she was getting these days and, furthermore, how little she actually wanted it any more.

When opportunities occurred nowadays, and there were no fewer than there’d

ever been, Iris was never eager to follow them up. And when she did succumb to persuasion, if only to justify the continued expense on contraceptive pills and condoms, she felt so detached from the actual physical activity that it was something she was watching from a distance rather than experiencing herself. Her few months of employment as a prostitute had shattered her ability to properly enjoy sex any more. The psychological distance she'd adopted to cope with the emotional toll of having sex with strangers who were most often decidedly unattractive now made it difficult to enjoy sex with anyone.

“We’ll do our best to be quiet,” said Phyllis who planted a grateful kiss on Iris’ cheek. “But you know Freddy...”

Iris nodded.

She certainly did know Freddy. She knew more about him than she’d have liked to. And earplugs never seemed to make that much difference given that Iris’ bed was so close to the one where Phyllis and Freddy would be fucking. The only real solution to this inconvenience was to be so stoned that she couldn’t care.

Iris pointed at the plastic bag just by Phyllis’ elbow that held the Kashmir hash.

“You don’t think you could spare a few grams?” she asked.

**LXXXIV**  
**Chris**  
**2105**

No one could ever call Chris a shirker. He worked hard to pay off his debts to the distant City corporation to whom he was indentured and he might well have expected some kind of recompense for his loyalty and exertion. But the instructions received from distant Nanjing showed no appreciation of Chris' efforts at all. The shareholders scattered around the globe had approved the management board's recommendation that the company should consolidate its European agricultural assets. As Chris was as much a property of the Chi Chong Investment Bank as the ethanol trees, the meat vats and the asparagus collecting robots, he was now to be thrown onto the open market to the mercy of the highest bidder.

"How much more do you have to do to earn your freedom?" asked Chloe, Chris' wife and the mother of his five children. "Surely there can't be many more years of indenture. You've worked for Chi Chong for nine years now..."

"It's actually twenty-one years I've been indentured," said Chris. "I was just fourteen years old when I sold my labour to Chingford Christmas Trees. That was well before the company was bought up by the Chinese."

"It still can't be many years yet..."

"They cut my salary remember," said Chris. "That was a few years back. I don't think I'll ever earn enough to buy my freedom. As every year passes, there's always yet another obstacle on the way."

"Well, at least we get to keep a cottage in the village," said Chloe as she gazed

through the cracked glass of the antique late twentieth-century window at the wind-generator in the garden just beside the vegetable plots that were an essential supplement to the family's diet.

"That's not certain either," said Chris. "We don't know what the new farm owners will do. Chester Beeches' business used to be mostly Christmas trees and livestock when I first started working there. Over the years, they've tried every kind of agriculture there is. It's whatever makes the most profit at the time."

"And what's that at the moment?" Chloe wondered.

Chris shook his head. He'd worked long enough to realise that you couldn't make predictions about what the far distant shareholders and business executives might decide, whether they were based in London, Nanjing or Chester. But he'd find out soon enough.

What he probably didn't expect was that not only would he no longer be working for Chi Chong, but that he would no longer even keep his home. This was a real shock to a man who'd lived all his life in Christleton and when he ventured beyond the county borders it was only as far as the occasional agricultural show in the outskirts of Manchester's urban sprawl. Chris hoped that whatever else might happen, he wouldn't have to live amongst the crime and squalor of a big city.

"The new owners are replacing us with robots," said Chris, still in shock when he returned home after the announcement and not yet able to really believe what he'd heard. "*Robots!*"

"That can't be so," said Chloe. "It doesn't make economic sense. Surely human labour is still cheaper than an expensive thing like an agricultural robot."

“Labourers are cheaper than they used to be,” Chris admitted. “Especially since the banks decided to trade indenture for inherited mortgage and household debt. But robots have been getting cheaper and smarter and more capable all the time. They don’t look anything like humans and you can’t have much of a conversation with them, but if you see them in the fields—herding cattle, picking asparagus, ploughing fields, sorting out the produce—they’re as good as a man would ever be. They’re ten times more productive and their running costs are getting steadily lower.”

“So there’s no competition?” Chloe remarked bitterly.

“None,” said Chris. “All the lads are being replaced by robots. Not just me. Everyone. Christleton will just become a ghost town. The local supermarket will have to close as well. Robots don’t need groceries.”

“And what about us?” wondered Chloe desperately. “The boys are still in school and the girls aren’t at marrying age yet. What’s going to happen to them?”

“Well, unless the administrators find a buyer for me, we won’t be able to afford school fees for the boys,” said Chris. “The other lads and me: we’re all gonna be auctioned off with the other stock that the new buyers don’t want.”

“And who *are* the people who’re taking over Chester Beeches Farm?” asked Chloe. “They sound soulless and cruel. To sell their indentured labourers as if they were nothing more than old tractors or beaten up combine harvesters...”

“It’s a company I’ve never heard of before,” said Chris. “International Consolidated Capital Investment or some name like that. I’ve heard they buy assets, sell what they don’t want to the highest bidder, and make what’s left as profitable as they can.”



“And I take it that you and your mates are what they don’t want?”

“I guess so,” said Chris with hangdog resignation.

The day of the auction was rather sooner than Chris or his friends would have liked. The bad news had hardly sunk in that each and every one of them would soon be evicted from the cottages and terraced houses where most of them had lived all their lives and where, in most cases, so had their parents and grandparents all the way back to the days when fuel was cheap, jobs were more plentiful and town-folk would choose to escape from mundane suburbia to a house in the country. They had less than a week to prepare, while also having to work many times harder than usual to disassemble, dismantle and slaughter those assets that were deemed to have no significant resale value.

The labourers lined up along a makeshift stage and in front of each of them was displayed a printed brochure on which each of them was depicted in bland marketing prose. They were described mostly in terms of health, age and physical strength. There was also a detailed account of the numbers of years and months of likely continued indenture on a sliding scale of their anticipated value. Generally, the more menial the employment the longer the remaining period of indenture would be. For those like Charles and Stuart who were now old men in their early fifties, their age had so reduced their resale value that it was likely that they would die of old age within the next ten years well before they’d had a chance to pay off their debts.

The buyers at the auction wore expensive suits, almost certainly purchased in the swanky salons of Shanghai, Chongqing or Buenos Aires, and exuded an aura of wealth and pitiless calculation. They were mostly men, although there were a couple of

women amongst them: tight-lipped, sour-faced and with steel cold eyes. Although the finance behind International Consolidated Capital Investment was almost certainly from the Far East, none of the buyers were oriental. They were all European and a minority were even English. Chris choked a little when he overheard one of the men speak to a colleague with a Scottish accent. He'd always hated the Scots, as any true-blue Englishman might, and he hoped that he wouldn't become a vassal to England's historical foe and the nation that more than any other had brought about England's decline and fall.

The auction was as humiliating as it was tedious. For most of the time, Chris stood in line with his fellow labourers in neatly starched company uniforms, while he held up his chin and pulled in his chest in an attempt to bolster his saleability. God help any man sold below the reserve price. For such a man the future was truly bleak. The inherited debt would continue onto the next generation and beyond as compound interest piled high on a man's market value. The man who was sold at a good price, offset against accumulated debt, might well yet see that day when he could till his own field, buy and sell chickens, and maybe—if he worked hard and achieved the required statutory minimum income—even be eligible to vote in a General Election.

Chris watched with anxiety as the bidders walked by. Several stopped beside him and asked him to flex a muscle, stick out his tongue or turn around. One of these was the man with the Scottish accent. Chris hoped that he wouldn't be sold to the jocks. They were known for their hatred of the English and there were enough medium-range missiles on the tartan border pointing south to leave no doubt as to how willing the Scots were to avenge perceived past wrongs.

However, it was one of the women who successfully bid for Chris and several of his colleagues. The bidding wasn't especially fierce and the numbers mentioned in the bidding were somewhat abstract. The value of each indentured labourer was calculated in a complex way which took into account the number of outstanding years of indenture, the estimated years of productive labour, and an overall abstractly weighted quality rating. Chris was somewhat put out to realise that those with most marketable value were the younger labourers with the least experience and the highest level of debt. Nevertheless, like a beauty contest where the contestant had no opportunity to demonstrate his or her other qualities or, more accurately, like the sale of livestock at a cattle market, Chris' fate and that of his family was decided on the bidders' whims. The auctioneer's hammer came down decisively on Ms. Charrington, the English representative of Consolidated Minerals, Pyongyang. Chris was now no longer a Chinese asset but rather one that belonged to the Federal Republic of Korea.

"What use does Consolidated Minerals have for agricultural labourers?" wondered Chris' pal, Ian, who'd also been purchased by Ms. Charrington. "Do they have an agricultural division?"

"You just don't know what these corporations do," said Chas who'd been purchased by the Scotsman, who was actually a representative of an Ecuadorian company. "You'd think it was agriculture, but it might turn out to be biofuel, genetically enhanced fabrics or pharmaceuticals. Perhaps Consolidated Minerals has a connection with agribusiness that you'd just never imagine."

"Perhaps," said Chris, who was worried more than anything else by what he could say to Chloe. She'd rather placed her hope in the possibility that he'd be

purchased by Chrystal Planet, the only bidder that was in any sense a local concern, although Chris wondered what use he would be in a business that manufactured nanocarbon tubes for the communications industry.

“I’m going to be a coal miner, dear,” was what Chris finally had to announce to his wife.

“Coal miner? I thought mineral extraction was all done by robots these days.”

“There’s still a need for men to help fix machinery underground and to handle those situations that robots aren’t fully equipped to respond to.”

“You’re not a coal miner,” said Chloe. “You’ve never been underground. Why’d they choose you?”

“I’m as cheap as labour can possibly be,” said Chris with resignation.

“And what about me and the boys? Where will we live?”

“I don’t think it’s part of the package, dear,” said Chris who’d finally got to the part of his briefing that he’d most dreaded having to pass on to his wife.

“Not part of the package?”

“Family obligations aren’t factored in,” Chris said. “I’ve been told that we’ll all be assigned to a dormitory more than twenty meters beneath ground. There’s no space for families.”

“So what do we do?” asked Chloe.

“I’ve been told that it’s not any concern of Consolidated Minerals,” said Chris. “The agreement to provide family accommodation in the village became void when Chi Chong Investment Bank liquidated its assets. The only person in the family that Consolidated Minerals is interested in is our middle son, Chester.”

“Why only him?”

“He’s the designated inheritor of my indentured debt if I die in service,” said Chris. “Do you remember that peculiar document we had to sign several years back? The one that was described as Liability Insurance. The one that named Chester as the security on my continued employment.”

“And what’s going to happen to Chester?” wondered Chloe. “He’s only nine years old.”

“As an asset of Consolidated Minerals, he’ll be coming with me and he’ll also be indentured to them unless I can pay off my debts before his age of seniority.”

“And is that likely to happen?”

Chris shook his head sadly.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I can only hope.”

**LXXXV**  
**Iris**  
**2061**

When she was a child and even until quite recently, Iris cherished a very romantic vision of country life. Green fields. Village ponds. Forests. Lakes. Winding lanes with hedges on either side. Songbirds on the wing. And although much of the English countryside was still pretty much like that, now Iris was employed as conscript labour on England's green and pleasant land, what she mostly experienced of life outside the cities was nothing at all like what she'd hoped it would be.

As far as Iris was concerned the least romantic aspect of it all was the actual work she had to do. It wasn't as if she'd exactly volunteered for it. When one of the cleaning women on the estate where Iris used to work had stolen some jewellery and neglected to admit her guilt, every domestic servant employed within a few houses of the crime scene was dismissed. And it was Iris' bad luck that she happened to be out of work at the same time as the Government of National Unity was promoting its Home-Grown and English Food Initiative. The promotional material advertised a nostalgic England symbolised by cricket pitches, the healthy outdoors and a sunny sky. What Iris and the other reluctant urban farm labourers very soon discovered were agri-business compounds which were both smelly and unglamorous and where most work was done indoors and under shelter. The sunny sky and green fields were only what she might see on the walk to and from the dormitory and her place of work.

"I always thought there was like freedom to roam and get to know nature," said Cherry, one of Iris' fellow labourers, as they stood side by side at the conveyor belt and

separated substandard tomatoes from the rest. She tossed a decidedly green and slightly smaller tomato into the receptacle destined for prole supermarkets. “All the nature you’ve got round here are the same muddy fields and pot-holed roads you see every day on the way to work. It’s not as if you can go somewhere different at the weekend. The buses don’t come round very often and when they do it’s only to take you to the retail park.”

“To where?” shouted Iris over the racket of insistent rock music blaring out more for the benefit of the shift supervisors than the several hundred or so nominal volunteers who filled the warehouse’s cavernous space. “What did you say?”

“The bus is fucking useless,” Cherry shouted back through the hackneyed guitar solo that could have been assembled at any time in rock music’s century-long history. “It only takes you to the shops.”

“Well, it *is* a shop bus,” said Iris. “The only reason it comes to Church Norton at all is to take villagers to the Tesco-WalMart supermarket. Those that haven’t got a car that is...”

“Who can afford one of those these days?” wondered Cherry.

“I used to have a car,” said Charles who was working on the other side of the conveyor belt. He was at least forty years old, so it was perfectly possible that he was telling the truth. “It was a second-hand Chrysler Chipper. It even ran on petrol. You don’t get cars like that anymore, at least not those made in the last twenty years or so.”

“Petrol!” Cherry sniffed. “That’s not very green, is it? It’s worse than fucking diesel. And there aren’t many fuel stations where you can buy diesel nowadays.”

“It’s all change,” said Charles. “Almost everyone had a car when I was a kid.

Now only the really well-off can afford one..."

"It's all the fault of the fucking government!" snorted Chubby who, despite his name, was unusually skinny and whose other most prominent feature was the scattering of tattoos and piercings on his gaunt face.

"You blame *everything* on the government," said Cherry.

"That's 'cause almost everything *is* their fault," Chubby asserted. "They fucked it up with Europe and the United fucking Kingdom. They fucked it up with civil rights, the economy, the environment, race relations... You name it, they fucked it up. That fucking Ivan Eisenegger and Eric Esterhazy: they're cunts!"

He hissed the final 's' of his tirade and was clearly intending to follow through with more, but Charles spoke first.

"It's not the government's fault that the oil's all run out," he said. "At least not *this* government. It's been a long time coming. I guess no one expected it would ever *actually* happen."

"What? Like the floods and the droughts and the plagues and the famines and all the other shit?" said Chubby. "They all fucking knew everything was all going to shit but, instead of holding back, the cunts just pressed hard on the accelerator."

"What's going on over here?" asked one of the supervisors who was carrying a lethal cattle-prod he'd probably have used to discipline the workers if it was ever made legal. "You all fucking shut it. We've got quotas to meet."

Even Chubby didn't want to risk having his daily rate cut for showing lack of enthusiasm, although he made sure that everyone around him could see him mouth the word 'cunt' when the supervisor wasn't able to see. The object of this silent derision



wandered off down the line while singing along to the squalling cat-like shriek of the music. It was another one of those rock songs that was either an ode to adolescent sexual lust or some nonsense about hobbits.

The walk back to the dormitory was exactly as miserable as it ever was. There were two miles of muddy lanes and the rain was pissing down. This was what the countryside was mostly like, Iris decided: shit and piss. Or at least manure and slowly draining murky green puddles. There were no drains, no pavements, hardly any public transport and really very little to persuade Iris to renew her contract at the farm when it expired. She'd rather do any job in the big city than stay in this shit-filled arsecrack of the Kingdom of England. London might be grimy and grey, but at least there was always something to do and you could get about by bus, tube and, more often recently, rickshaw.

It was a welcome sight when Iris, Cherry and her new workmates came within sight of the dormitory block, but less because of what it was than for the shelter it offered from the rain. The building had once been secondary school in the late twentieth-century when education was free and universally available, but had become derelict as the numbers of families who could afford to buy their children a place at even the most humble school had steadily decreased. The room which housed Iris's bunk bed and that of her closest companions had originally been a chemistry lab, but all that was left of its previous role were tatty posters that showed the human body sectioned into some very peculiar angles and a line drawing of the nitrogen cycle.

Nevertheless there was still an educational role offered on the premises even if it was entirely vocational and utterly pointless. There was a nightly two-hour lecture on

agricultural matters as part of the government's initiative to encourage people to work in the countryside and go some way to compensate for the prohibition on migrant labour. Since Iris' only other distractions were drugs, drinks and whatever she downloaded onto her laptop, she decided to sit in on the sessions. After all, her degree in biotechnology actually made her more knowledgeable on matters relating to biology than those conducting the presentations.

It was obvious, however, that these lectures could only be described as educational to someone who didn't know the difference between a bacterium and a virus, who thought all animals were born in phials, and who were surprised to discover that potatoes grew in the ground and didn't hang from the branches. The content was mostly propagandistic, although the enthusiastic lecturers in their colourful sweat-shirts and baggy shorts couldn't completely disguise the fact that life in the countryside generally involved being dirty, getting cold and wet, and learning how to operate sophisticated agricultural machinery. From Iris' perspective, it was the last which was the most instructive. The scientists in Japan, China and Indonesia had pushed technology forward further than Iris realised. Some of the robots that herded cattle, picked beans or trimmed hedges were as multifaceted as anything Iris had ever seen cleaning windows, handling customer complaints or serving beer in the more modern tourist hotels.

As each year went by and the Government of National Unity uncovered yet more excuses to suspend parliament and postpone the General Election, like most English citizens Iris now suspected the worst of anything the government did. Nothing happened by accident and everything was for a reason. Why was the government so

enthusiastic to promote the countryside and encourage so many urban and suburban citizens to relocate to the villages and hamlets? There were the economic reasons, of course. The White Death and the government's trademark draconian immigration policy had drastically reduced the number of agricultural workers. But Iris had come to realise that such an answer, however much sense it made from a rational economic perspective, was unlikely to be the real reason. After all, agriculture was only one of the many industries that had suffered in the last eight years.

Iris had two theories which she happily discussed with Cherry and Chrystal, another fellow labourer, when they huddled around a few lines and one of Cherry's potent spliffs. The first hypothesis was that it was just a plot to relocate a bunch of urban malcontents out of the capital city where they could only cause trouble to places as far away and politically irrelevant as possible. The other was that it was a perfectly natural direction for a government of national chauvinism to be heading.

"I can see the first theory," said Chrystal as she brushed a few crumbs of white snow off her nose. "After all, what government wants a load of stropky protestors embarrassing them? If it got really bad it might even get a brief mention on Fox News. But what are you getting at with your second theory?"

"I dunno," said Iris. "It's just that there must be some kind of logic behind all this insular, anti-foreign, pro-business stuff. I don't mean that it makes logical sense in a rational way, but rather that the kind of people who believe all that shit must sort of think there's a direction it's sort of taking them."

"Yeah...?" said Cherry sceptically.

"Well, the ultimate end is that England should be totally isolated," continued

Iris. “It’s like the Kingdom has no trade or commerce with foreigners at all. It’d be like Mediaeval days. In fact, it’ll be worse than that since there used to be things like the Hanseatic League. So, if you’re going to be one hundred percent self-sufficient you’re gonna need to be able to grow all the food you need. And to do that you’re gonna need a load of people who know how to work the land.”

“I dunno,” said Chrystal. “That sounds too much like the cunts in government have a rat’s arse idea what they’re doing. I reckon they’re just pushing all this countryside shit ’cause they’ve run out of other ideas. They’re always pushing one popular initiative after another while they try to justify being in power. They’ve done anti-drugs, patriotism, foreign war, and, of course, immigrants. Now it’s the time of the countryside. That’s all it is. They’re a bunch of cunts with no idea of what to do with the power they managed to get through lies and deceit, so they have to come up with some kind of shit to justify still being there.”

“Sounds plausible,” Cherry agreed.

“If only we could get shot of the bastards,” echoed Iris.

**LXXXVI**  
**Psychlone**  
**2108**

No one could ever doubt it. This was by every possible measurement the biggest gig of Psychlone's professional life so far. It was the biggest blast he'd ever had, even including the first time he had sex. But Psychlone wasn't making a penny from it. Not even a measly grand or so. And the other acts giving it out were also all giving it for free. Although Psychlone knew enough from his university studies in Political History that there were fewer more hackneyed clichés in the history of alternative or underground culture, this whole thing was being done for the cause of World Peace.

But this time it was deadly serious. Peace in the world was at serious risk. Those missiles stationed on the tartan and taffy borders were more of a threat to peace and the survival even of the human species than any war there'd ever been in a distant foreign country, however much they served to keep the military preoccupied in other matters than that of beating up protestors.

This time it was fucking serious.

And one thing Psychlone knew, as did the other DJs and performers along with the tens of thousands of fans spread in front of him across the expanse of the illegally occupied Hyde Park, was that the bad guys in the current crisis weren't the Scots, the Welsh, the French or the Swedes. It might be true that those were the nations whose missiles were trained on English towns and villages, but the real villain of the potentially cataclysmic pantomime playing out across the planet was the Republic of England.

It wasn't quite as clear-cut as that of course. It wasn't the people of England who were the villains. This was made absolutely obvious by the very existence of this illegal rave and the huge demonstration of which it was a part. The English people had no real quarrel with the Irish, the Scots, the Chinese or the Canadians. Furthermore, in a sense it wasn't really the government of the Republic of England who were to blame either. They were bound by an alliance of convenience with other oppressive regimes across the globe, notably the Republic of North America, the United States of North Africa and the Muslim Republics of North India and Pakistan. Psychlone, ever the Political History graduate, was fully aware that the current arms race and the dangerous flirting with Mutual Assured Destruction, with the whole panoply of mostly antiquated Weapons of Mass Destruction, was driven less by a deep hatred of one set of people towards another but by conflicts of territory, resources and the relentless logic of military escalation.

On the other hand, that wasn't the kind of complicated message a man could preach to the thousands of mostly young people who were enjoying the first free gig of their lives. What they wanted were slogans and an easily digestible message. And the Plastic Ono Band from a century and a half ago, mashed up with Psychlone's own skronky beats and the insistent sampled growl of Captain Beefheart was sufficiently catchy and percussive to be both danceable and on point.

"All we are saying is..." Psychlone yelled into the mike.

"Give Peace a Chance," echoed the crowd, totally ignorant of the political context of the 1960s and the United States of America's futile war in Vietnam. This was just one of the many conflicts that had led to the nation's economic collapse and

eventual disintegration. And this was a nation—now split into three warring nations that were threatening to fragment even further—that once considered itself the world's policeman in an era when that notion seemed somehow plausible.

Crowd response! This was fucking fantastic.

Psychlone didn't want to milk it too much. The crowd wanted more than slogans to sing along to. They wanted beats to dance to. There were other tunes on his laptop from the far distant twentieth century he could mix and match with more familiar tunes from the turn of the twenty-second century. "War. What is it good for?" "There's a Hard Rain a Gonna Fall." "Eve of Destruction." But Psychlone wasn't here to drop tunes from the long dead Age of Rock and Roll. This wasn't the time to invoke the mostly forgotten ghosts of Gil Scott-Heron, Woody Guthrie or Country Joe and the Fish. This was the time to drop the midrange, pump up the bass and accelerate the beats per minute.

No one in the audience gave a fuck about the authorities. Any heavy-handed impulse to break up the gig would be defeated by the sheer weight of numbers and the unspoken fact that many within the political establishment were secretly pleased that they now had the excuse of popular dissent to put their feet on the brakes on the otherwise inexorable drive towards global destruction. In any case, the police would be impotent to break up a demonstration of such numbers. There weren't enough of them to make a difference and anyway they were so corrupt and compromised that they no longer commanded any respect. The military had the weapons to deal with social dissent, but they were of little use against a peaceful protest however many laws were being openly flouted.

Most of those laws were generally ignored anyway. Those regarding drugs were routinely disregarded. Successive campaigns over the centuries had been a totally unqualified failure. Drug abuse was more prevalent than it had ever been: openly practised and about the only way in which a substantial proportion of the population could make a living. It was such a profitable industry that almost everyone in the establishment was rumoured to have a finger in the huge pie. Regulating against drugs had become as senseless as regulating oxygen. The laws which gave cause for most concern were not those relating to illegal drugs, public sex or disorderly behaviour. The ones that emboldened most people to protest were those related to public assembly and private property. Very few of those dancing manically to Psychlone's beats had ever been inside one of London's parks before. The entrance fee was far too prohibitive. Few would ever have marched along roads like Whitehall, Piccadilly and Haymarket that were normally the exclusive domain of those with money and status. Psychlone had only ever been so privileged because he could flash his backdoor pass to the night clubs where he performed.

Here was London's largest park invaded by the unwashed masses—tens if not hundreds of thousands of them—all gathered to hear him drop beats that were circulated across the globe on the heavily policed internet. As Psychlone also knew, he was being seen and heard by many others on countless time zones through the same ubiquitous digital media. He would be heard in nations such as China, Canada and Vietnam who were the last remaining bastions of human rights and the freedom of speech in a world in which such values now seemed hopelessly unfashionable. Fewer people would be able to decrypt the video and audio signals in repressive regimes such as Morocco,



Venezuela and the breakaway Republic of Texas.

But all good things must come to an end.

This wasn't just Psychlone's gig. He was, in fact, one of dozens who'd risked arrest to perform in the heart of London within earshot of Mayfair: England's most exclusive and heavily guarded residential district. There were many wealthy Chinese, Brazilians and Malaysians in the Park Lane hotels overlooking the park who were able to witness a historic occasion of the sort that was once quite common but now happened very rarely.

One of the promoters was urgently whirling his arm round to signify that Psychlone should start winding down. Five minutes his spread out fingers indicated. Psychlone could see Bobby Tarkovsky of the monumentally popular Techno Skiffle band, the Quarrymen. He wouldn't remain very popular himself if he unduly delayed their appearance on the stage.

It was a cliché but it had to be done. The final beats came from Psychlone's insanely catchy and slightly subversive *Eric Esterhazy* which was an unusually apt selection for a gig like this. Most people had only ever heard of the man's name in relation to the universally despised Government of National Unity (which was actually no worse than the current government), but it gave them a focus for their pent-up anger. "What a fucking cunt!" they all shouted in unison as the chorus dived and swerved round the percussion and swirling chords. It was ironic that the man was now far more famous as the inspiration for a sarcastic and undoubtedly scurrilous dance tune than for what he'd ever done as a politician. That was one thing for which Psychlone and the ravers could be grateful.

“Right on, man,” said Steve Psonic, the drummer from the Quarrymen, as Psychlone made his way off stage and the compère made his way to the centre.

“Give it up large!” yelled MC Car Crash as he took the mike, before launching into an account of what was coming up later in his trademark rap delivery that was both hip and essential. As always, he wore traditional West African dress that seriously clashed with his choice of hats. Today he was wearing a Stetson. This must be a deliberately ironic reference to possibly the most despised nation in the whole world. Psychlone was sure that the rednecks and hillbillies of the Republic of North America didn’t really merit the derision and scorn directed towards them, but they did come from a nation that perhaps deserved to be allied with Muslim extremists. Like their allies, they still denied the truth of evolution even as they preached the merits of natural selection. Furthermore, they both promoted the sanctity of the life of the unborn child while also televising public executions and reviving lethal gladiatorial sports. The Republic represented an intolerant biblical fundamentalism totally at odds with their firm alliance with fundamental Muslims.

And these were the kinds of people that Psychlone was supposed to regard as his country’s natural allies in a time of war.

Although folk music, like skiffle, rock and reggae, wasn’t really to Psychlone’s taste, he could see that the Quarrymen were onto something. They had catchy tunes and inspired arrangements, that was for sure. They also had an extra spark revealed by their exuberant showmanship. With only a modicum of technology, they immediately grabbed the audience’s attention and got them to dance and even sing along to tunes that were a reminder of a far distant age when England, as the major partner of the

United Kingdom, produced music from the cities of Liverpool, London and Manchester that more or less conquered the world.

Despite the Quarrymen's obvious skill, it was difficult to believe that there should ever be such days again. Just like America—whose pre-eminence in popular music, cinema and industry had declined even faster than its economic and political fortunes—the Republic of England was a cultural desert compared to China, South America and West Africa.

But the day was yet young. It would be several more hours till the summer sun would set. And now that Psychlone had done his gig, he could chill out, take it easy, listen to the Quarrymen, toke a joint, snort a line, and be content that he had done his bit for World Peace.

And you never know. Maybe he *had* helped to keep those neutron missiles and mushroom clouds at bay for just a few years more.

That was surely something to celebrate.

## **LXXXVII**

### **Iris**

### **2062**

The demo wasn't originally going to be anything more than a protest. It was meant to be just one of the many other demonstrations that had grown steadily in number and frequency and extent over the last few weeks. The banners were unfurled. The paraphernalia of protest such as masks, tents and protective padding were all in place. But today the event Iris was taking part in wasn't a protest at all.

It was, at long last, a celebration.

The Government of National Unity had fallen. The most unpopular and universally despised government in English history, or at least since the rules of King James the Second or King John, was now no more. Ivan Eisenegger had offered his resignation to His Majesty the King of England, Scotland and a host of other places that were no longer either in the long defunct British Empire or the more recently dissolved United Kingdom. Nobody was at all surprised that King Edward the Ninth accepted the resignation. There would almost certainly have been a complete collapse of the very institution of monarchy if he'd shown any hesitation. There was already a widespread suspicion that the monarch had been complicit in keeping the Government of National Unity in power far beyond its statutory five year term and had even been sympathetic to its reactionary agenda. But, irrespective of whatever opinions the King privately held, he had to appear even-handed given that he was also the titular Head of State of the independent and almost openly hostile governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Iris had partied hard many times in her life. When she was younger partying hard was something she did pretty much on a weekly basis. These were what now seemed the happy days of innocence before what had at first looked like just another Tory-led coalition evolved into something rather more sinister. Nevertheless, as an undergraduate biotechnology student she had to temper an enthusiasm for drugs, drink, sex and excess with the need to get up in the morning and work in the lab. During the long years of Ivan Eisenegger's premiership and his government's virtual dictatorship, the opportunities for even an occasional debauch happened on occasions that were fewer and further between. So much had become illegal or actively discouraged, except for those with money and connections, that it was difficult to be sure which new law she was about to break. Night clubs were closed down. Nightly curfews became increasingly common. Any gathering of a dozen or so people instantly attracted the unwelcome attention of the police.

And now after all the dismal years of austerity, oppression and dreary mean-spiritedness Iris had the opportunity to party hard in a way that had been impossible for almost a decade: the best years of a young girl's life. Iris wasn't so young now. She was well into her thirties and she wondered just how well she could keep the promise she'd made to herself to dance, drink and blow out to the very limits of medical advisability. She was already flagging and it was still less than a day since the first tentative signs of change had been heralded by instant messages, bulletin boards and word-of-mouth.

It had been a huge effort to protest for so long, despite the generally mild spring sunshine and the cushioning mass of thousands upon thousands of fellow protestors. It

was Trafalgar Square that had been London's main focus for protest. Over the last few weeks it had more or less become Iris' home. It wasn't that she had much else to do, of course. She had no job to go to. But then who did these days? All the expenditure on her education had been wasted and the government's employment initiatives were fizzling out as the funds to provide something that approximated to worthwhile work was diverted to other more pressing concerns. And nowadays these were to prop up the mostly foreign-owned banks, cut corporation taxes yet further in the forlorn hope that this policy might yet stimulate a recovery, and bolster up the fractious and discontented armed forces.

However, as the extent of the protests grew there also came a mounting sense of inevitability about it all. At first, it seemed very unlikely that peaceful protest could ever bring down a government that was by no means reluctant to employ an extraordinary array of weapons to suppress revolt. Every day Iris expected the tanks to roll down Whitehall and the Strand and to crush her nylon tent along with all the hundreds of others camped outside the Church of St Martin's in the Fields. She felt almost embarrassed by it all. She wasn't a natural protestor. In truth, she didn't really believe passionately in anything very much. She had a general view that something should be done about the despoliation of the environment, the extreme weather conditions, the galloping inequality, and the crackdown on civil liberties, but she wasn't especially sure what that action should be and just how far it should go.

Then the massed voices of discontent became emboldened and either voiced sympathy for the protests or actually joined in. What was strange was the universal extent to which English people all of a sudden agreed that they wanted to see the demise

of Ivan Eisenegger's government. The opposition came not only from self-professed radicals, revolutionaries and malcontents. The number of protestors was swollen by vicars, priests and preachers. By judges, solicitors and barristers. By journalists, actors and musicians. By mechanics, engineers and middle managers. By professionals, executives and manual workers. From every class, every region and every socio-economic group. What was most peculiar was that many people who Iris had assumed were the natural friends and allies of the government became increasingly vocal in their complaints. It was these people that both attracted the most hope amongst the protestors and generated the most despair amongst the government's apologists.

Even the government's natural constituency—conservatives, nationalists and business leaders—had decided that enough was enough. Although many of Iris' old friends and by far the majority of her new friends living in the tents erected around Nelson's Column and outside the National Gallery were convinced that these turncoats were merely bending with the wind and had chosen to follow the prevailing trend, Iris wasn't so sure it was quite as simple as that. A better strategy for a hypocrite would surely be to stay quiet until *after* a change of government rather than voice their discontent before where there was still a possibility that they would be caught out of step with events. But even the conservative establishment had reason to complain. What *had* happened to traditional English values? What right *did* an English government have to irrevocably change the nation's principles of governance without submitting itself to the popular vote? Were the legislators of the realm somehow above the law? Shouldn't there have been at least one General Election by now?

Was there any way that a conservative or a nationalist could plausibly plead that

the Government of National Unity had been a success? The United Kingdom was no longer united. England had fewer international friends and allies than it had ever had in its long history. The economy was now in a much worse state than it had been a decade ago. The reach of the law no longer extended as far as the ordinary people. Not one of the government's targets had been achieved, with the sole exception of the draconian immigration policy that Fox News UK contended had still not gone far enough and which had contributed more than anything else to the extinction of the United Kingdom and the decline in the nation's economy.

The protests had worked.

Iris still had to pinch herself to believe it. The slogans which only yesterday were calls for the government to resign and for so many wrongs to be righted was now centred around the single sigh of relief and solid determination: 'Never Again!'

And *never again* was what Iris truly hoped for. Never again should a government tear up the consensual agreement that characterised the English alternative to a written constitution and replace it with a series of drastic reactionary measures whose appeal was primarily to the basest chauvinistic and nationalist sentiments, cheered on all the way by the majority of the media and supported by the bottomless pockets of billionaires whose patriotism never extended to actually paying English taxes or spending much time on English soil. Never again should so many people surrender with so little struggle to the loss of the basic human freedoms of speech, movement and expression.

Never again.

Of course it could never happen again. The nation that Iris once knew no longer



existed and she was now a citizen of the Kingdom of England whose image had been forged by the despised and now deposed government. Could life now return to how it was before?

The nightmare was now over. Iris stood in the crowd under the constant drizzle of brightly coloured paper streamers: a spliff in one hand, a bottle of red wine in the other and still higher than the paper kites that flew up above her with crude caricatures of Eisenegger, Esterhazy, Eaglecliffe and Eastwick. Every now and then she'd erupt in a cry of ecstasy as a wave of celebration rolled over the thousands upon thousands of protestors, well-wishers and celebrators who jammed up Central London from Piccadilly Circus to Aldwych and from Leicester Square to the Embankment.

Ensuring that the event was happening and keeping it live was the constant thump and rhythm of dance music that echoed from speakers positioned all around central London that was there to represent the multitudinous sound systems of the Kingdom. Occasionally the beat was interrupted by the cacophony of a rock group, the clatter of an alt-folk group or one of the many kinds of English music that had struggled to survive in a philistine culture where the most talented music-makers were the ones most likely to have been deported or imprisoned. This was the long-awaited liberation of the underground, alternative, independent music scenes, many of which had only become so because the prevailing culture was so utterly unsympathetic to anything whose beats, rhythms or messages were neither familiar nor reassuring. And fuck it! it was good to dance again knowing that no security guard or policeman would dampen down the excitement. No one would be smashing up the amps and trashing the sound systems. No one would be laying into the dancers with truncheons or tear gas. The DJ

was giving it large and no fucker was going to stop him until he'd dropped every last beat and smashed it to the max.

When the news broke that the Prime Minister had at last done the decent thing Iris was in her tent huddled up with Stuart, a guy she'd met on the protests and who'd now moved his sleeping bag into the comfy claustrophobic space of Iris' mountain tent.

*"Resignation!"* said Stuart with an arched eyebrow. "The bastard should have fallen on his sword."

"Metaphorically he has," said Iris.

She listened as the news spread across the squatted spaces of Trafalgar Square from tent to tent and from person to person. Iris heard the news on the EBC News which had become the only trusted voice in the Kingdom of England after all other independent voices had been suppressed and subsumed. The breaking news being broadcast across the bottom of the screen was what she now realised she'd been hoping and praying for almost every day of her adult life.

And now it had happened she wasn't sure what she should do.

"I guess we've got to celebrate," said Stu.

"We've got plenty of time to do that later," said Iris with a cheeky smile. "What I most want to do now is to fuck."

Stu was alarmed. The two had never fully consummated their friendship and he'd almost certainly come to believe that they never would.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

After the years in which Iris had only ever agreed to have sex reluctantly and with no real enthusiasm, the years in which all amorousness was compromised and

tarnished by her memories of having worked as a prostitute, the years in which she'd never been able to let herself truly go, she was now as sure as she'd ever be.

“Fuck it!” she said. “What better way is there to celebrate the good news?”

**LXXXVIII**  
**Odile**  
**2111**

There were several things that could have killed Odile. So much devastation was happening at more or less the same precise moment in time that there was an embarrassingly rich choice of lethal candidates. But whichever it was, it happened far too suddenly and with absolutely no warning for Odile to take evasive action, not that there was much she'd have been able to do anyway.

The intense blistering heat alone was more than enough to kill Odile even though the explosion's epicentre was over a kilometre away. But if it hadn't been that or the searing temperature, then the abrupt onrush of air into the suddenly opened vacuum would have dashed the life out of her as her charred body was smashed doll-like against the walls of houses that had suddenly buckled into ruins from the same unimaginable force.

It could have been the intense heat, sudden impact or even the lethal radiation that killed Odile. Like a marionette with strings cut, Odile and her freshly broken limbs were thrown back and forth against buildings and lamp-posts: a fresh spurt of blood breaking forth after each collision. If by some miracle there was still a breath of life in her this was surely extinguished when the walls of a house propelled across the street along which she'd a moment ago been walking crushed her shattered body against the walls of another and she was buried under several tons of rubble. Her skull was crushed and an arm visible through the rubble was bent into several impossible angles.

Odile didn't even see the mushroom cloud or hear the explosion. The searing

heat and radiant light that instantly burnt out her retinas reached her before any associated sound. Her lover Edith was somewhat further from the epicentre of the explosion which was detonated more by navigational error than design in Lancaster's outermost suburbs where it could have been of no conceivable strategic advantage to whichever of the Americans, Scots, French or Irish military command that had launched the nuclear-tipped device towards the by-now obliterated Republic of England. But Edith's further term of life was barely a moment longer than Odile's.

Her attention was instantly drawn towards the window of the room where she'd been sitting through which burst a blinding flash of light. There was also a weird whistling that wasn't quite what she might have believed would herald the end of everything in the world that either she or Odile had ever known. Edith's eyes were scorched but as she wasn't immediately blinded, she could glimpse the rising column of smoke and dust four or five kilometres away. For Edith her the heat was more painful than terminally lethal. Her flesh wasn't so much roasted as severely singed. But Edith's demise and that of everyone else in the Lancaster town centre happened when seconds later she was caught in a maelstrom of tumbling buildings and other unexpectedly mobile street furniture from which she couldn't possibly flee as the winds rushed inwards towards the source of the explosion and flung her repeatedly and mercilessly against whatever hard object there was until, like Odile, there was no life remaining in a body that was crushed, battered, bleeding, scalded and in severe shock.

Neither Edith nor Odile ever believed it would end this way.

Probably nobody did, including the military officers who'd unleashed humanity's nuclear arsenal in one final pyrotechnic display that lit up the surface of the

moon and was more than enough to bring a brightly-lit end to all that was left of human culture and civilisation. There were no doubt shelters in China, Siberia, New Zealand and the Pacific Ocean where the last remnants of the human species might survive a little while longer, but not necessarily for many more years.

It was without doubt the end for the Republic of England and for everything associated with it. There would be no more English art and culture. No more rural retreats. Those who survived were as equal as any other in their wretchedness with only ill-health and the prospect of slow death from radiation to look forward to. Their brief future history would be plagued with endless recrimination and mutual blame during which the last remnants of civilised values such as sexual and racial equality would be very much forgotten. There was no prospect of help and salvation from a scientific community that had unwittingly brought about its own destruction and that of everyone else. Perhaps survivors with a conscience such as Roland might strive to help the desperate millions, but with what resources? The future was a desperate one in which human dignity was lost forever and where the distribution of food, shelter and clothing, however compromised by disease and radiation, would be determined more by luck and bloody combat than any concept of desert or fairness.

It was strictly incorrect to say that the apocalypse had arrived without warning, although there had been a significant failure in the early-warning systems that were meant to sound moments before the weapons of mass destruction arrived. But what real use would they have been as thousands upon thousands of lethal missiles were launched all over the globe and, as an afterthought, over England? But as so few resources had been allocated to civil defence it was likely that the alarms would never have worked

anyway. So much of the government's limited resources had been set aside for war-readiness, famine-relief, quarantine against plague, blighted crops, rising sea-levels, violent weather events and the impossible-to-satiate demands of the rich and powerful.

In any case, whatever mistake it was that had triggered the international exchange of every ounce of thermonuclear destructiveness the world's governments had stored over the last century and a half was almost certainly not the conscious and deliberate choice of a political or military leader. The legacy of creaky software systems and over-complicated administrative procedures was just not able to cope with a modern world that was increasingly beleaguered by mediaeval blight and where most people now lived in pre-industrial ignorance. And those who might survive now faced a future that would resemble more a prehistoric than a mediaeval past. This was the return to an age in which the human being was only one of several species of animal struggling to survive by chewing carrion and dodging predators.

This desperate future was the ultimate outcome of the fantasies of those who held the belief that humanity was somehow uniquely blessed. Perhaps they had faith in the divine providence of an elevated being with a remarkable physical likeness to the hominid male with a grand plan so obscure that no one really understood it, least of all those who most unquestioningly believed in it.

In the days before the final end, Odile and Edith had watched the news broadcasts on the television screen at the soup kitchen with the same apprehension as everyone else. Nevertheless, even in these desperate early days of international war, most of those who filed in for their daily bowl of soup would much prefer to watch a quiz show, a situation comedy or a chat show. Such entertainment was still very much

available, along with the increasingly hysterical pleas for calm and restraint issued by public officials, until the arbitrary moment when the high-alert early warning system somewhere in the world—perhaps in the Republic of North America, but just as likely in Northumberland, Beijing or Aberdeen—reacted a little too presumptuously at the sight of a flock of geese or the distant echo of a small earthquake. Edith's final moments could just have easily have been as she watched the closing moments of a comedy quiz show where the laughter of the studio audience would just momentarily be punctuated by screams of panic and despair as London fell victim to a cluster of missiles directed towards it from all over the globe, of which only a few were likely to have come from England's traditional enemies: the Scots, the Welsh and the French.

Like most people, Odile had nursed the hope that all the anxiety of impending doom would soon blow over. The tense atmosphere couldn't last forever and normal life would eventually resume. Edith, however, reminded her lover that recent history didn't give much cause for optimism. The rhetoric was ratcheted up so high that it seemed increasingly unlikely that it would just fade away. How could the Scots ever forgive their southern neighbours for the insults thrown at them? Although the last few years had been characterised as the Second Cold War, the tension between the belligerent nations was becoming unpleasantly hot. At which stage would the international state of low-level aggression escalate into something much more bellicose?

The news programmes covered in interminable detail the various small-scale wars that the hostile nations of the world were conducting against each other. The Isle of Man was a particular hotspot. It was criss-crossed and scarred by deep trenches as



the English peeked over the parapets towards their Scottish and Irish foes. In North America, the border states of Virginia, Minnesota and New Mexico had long been host to widely reported atrocities and massacres. And far from the gradually shrinking influence of the English-speaking world, there was warfare, border disputes, undeclared invasions and isolated lethal incidents across all the continents, although the greatest concentration was in Africa, Europe and North America.

Despite the many signs of imminent crisis, Odile's last day began no differently to any other. She and Edith had struggled out of bed with the morning free of any need to go to work. Edith stayed at home above the soup kitchen, while Odile went for a walk across Lancaster to visit another friend of hers in a part of town that only a few hours later would become nothing more than a vast smouldering crater. There was no premonition that the tatty, derelict streets lined with beggars and drug addicts would soon become scorched by the fires of hell and that every last soul would be incinerated.

Even the weather was unexceptional. It was a typical April day. Not too hot. Not too cold. A little bit drizzly and moderately overcast. None of this would have been an obstacle to the missile which either by chance or design was headed towards North West England, more likely intended to level Manchester or Liverpool than the ancient city of Lancaster. Its guidance systems knew nothing about the elements. It was travelling at just the right speed, maintaining just the right ambient temperature and deflecting sufficient electromagnetic radiation, that it wasn't detected by England's antique anti-missile defences which, despite the years of neglect and the Just-In-Time philosophy that ensured that it was only one step away from collapsing in on itself, was still able to prevent the arrival of a significant proportion of the incoming missiles, but

not necessarily of their radioactivity, heat and long-term environmental legacy.

As it glided over England's hills and valleys, hugging close to the wooded hill-slopes and cleverly changing colour as it flew over England's lakes, motorways and fields of genetically modified foodstuff, it knew only the rough coordinates of its destination. But the decades since the missile was programmed and the many alterations made as the geopolitical systems shifted according to whim and political expediency, the actual target at which its journey came to an end was almost certainly not what was intended.

Neither the missile nor the nuclear warhead whose contact with Lancashire soil would leave a churned-up long-lasting legacy of heavy metals for many hundreds of thousands of years had any emotion of affection or malice towards its target. It was nothing more than a bullet shaped device with stabilisers, a guidance system and a very crude Artificial Intelligence system that took account of potential obstacles but had no means of changing its purpose or objective once in flight. It had no notion of the history or significance of any English town or city, any more than it would have of Houston, Moscow, Johannesburg, Buenos Aires or Edinburgh. But these cities and many much smaller were all to be devastated by similar weapons of mass destruction. Many were launched from submarines whose propellers churned up the last few corpses at the bottom of the jelly-fish infested oceans now long depleted of fish, whales and coral. Many flew from the sky. Some were launched from the robot-staffed military bases on the moon that brought the last vestiges of humanity's space adventure on missiles back towards the home planet and from whence the whirring automatons could observe humanity's demise with no risk to themselves. Many were launched from silos in

deserts, often where jungles and lakes once used to be, destined to leave the entire planet in a state of desertification as much like the Sahara, Arizona or the Gobi as it was possible to be.

Along with Lancaster Castle, the shopping centre, the historic monuments and a millennium of English history; along with Odile and Edith, their shared love and life together; along with the unpredictable and various hopes, fears and anxieties of the ragged undernourished people of Lancaster; the whole of England and English history arrived quite suddenly and abruptly to a very absolute and unmistakable full stop.

**LXXXIX**  
**Mark & Molly**  
**2076**

This wasn't the first time that Mark and Molly had sat together on the sofa transfixed by the vision of a huge slowly growing and self-enveloping luminescent cloud tumbling ever upwards into the sky into the now familiar shape of a mushroom. This wasn't even the first time that the couple had watched the image of exactly the same thermonuclear explosion, although there were so many others that could have been shown from either the last two nuclear wars or the current one. It might well be that there were other images that were somehow more dramatic, more evocatively posed or in some other way more striking. The most disturbing aspect of the image wasn't so much its cinematic or aesthetic qualities, but rather where it had taken place.

Somewhere beneath the billowing cloud of deadly radiation was the site of what had once been the world's most holy city. And now all that remained of the City of Jerusalem's three or four millennia of history was being lifted upwards above the atmosphere, towards the troposphere and even the stratosphere. The holiest of the Holy Shrines—the Wailing Wall, the Dome of the Rock and Mount Calvary—were now nothing more than radioactive ash being borne high into the heavens to rain down on the Middle East and, depending on the prevailing winds, over Europe, North Africa and Asia.

Unlike the many other cities that had been incinerated, annihilated, vaporised and irradiated, this was one whose name was known to everyone in the world, whose presence would be genuinely missed and for which many people had a genuine emotional attachment. For Molly it was more from her school day memories of having

sung the verses of William Blake's *Jerusalem*. This hymn was performed everywhere in the period of the Government for National Unity as it was just about the only decent patriotic tune that had any relevance to England rather than Great Britain. For Mark, Jerusalem's significance was more in the hazily remembered Easter story whose events took place around an ancient city long since covered by concrete whose foundations had now been uncovered in the most brutal and radical way imaginable.

And now Jerusalem was no more.

If it was ever to be re-inhabited, it would be only after many generations. By then almost everything about the city would be charred, annihilated and perhaps long-forgotten. The spirit of Jerusalem might outlive the city that was now as totally obliterated as Judaism's most sacred temple in the age of the Romans.

Where now in the world was there a place for veneration shared by all pilgrims of the Holy Scriptures, whether the Torah, the Bible or the Q'uran? Certainly not Mecca, Rome or Salt Lake City. Nor, since the many retaliatory missiles hit their primary target, the city of Tel Aviv.

"I can't believe it!" moaned Molly. "I just can't believe it."

"Doesn't the Bible predict that the world will end when Jerusalem falls?" Mark asked anxiously.

"What, in *Revelations*?" replied Molly. "That's just a load of hallucinogen-inspired bullshit. St John the Revelator was some kind of First Century smack-head. And, anyway, where was the number of the beast, Gog and Magog, and all the stuff about the Antichrist?"

"Maybe the Israeli Prime Minister was the Antichrist."

“Not a very impressive one, was he?”

“I don’t like this programme, Mummy,” pleaded Monica who was sprawled across her chair in the corner of the living room. “Can’t we watch something else? Aren’t there any cartoons?”

“Shush, dear,” said Molly. “This is history. You’ll remember this day for the rest of your life.”

“Why?” the young girl asked, unsure of whether she’d missed something important. “What’s so special about it?”

“You see these pictures on television,” said Mark. “Those are *real*. That is what’s *really* happening. It’s not a science fiction movie. It’s a real nuclear war. And it’s happening in Israel and Palestine and Lebanon and Turkey and all over the Middle East. Millions of people are dying. It’s really very *very* important.”

“It’s boring to watch the same pictures over and over and over again,” moaned Monica who wasn’t at all convinced by her father’s explanation.

The days leading to the launch of all-out nuclear war in the Middle East made the actual event seem strangely inevitable. The term ‘sleepwalking into apocalypse’ had been used again and again by media pundits as a description of how the logic of Israeli and Arab intransigence had driven them inexorably towards this defining moment. It was a cliché that described a real worry and didn’t fully express the complexities of a dispute that involved several nations, some—such as Turkey and Iran—who weren’t at all Arabic, and amongst which there had been various states of undeclared war for several years now.

The quarrels had become steadily more heated over the past few weeks and

months as both sides tried to bring their competing perceived interests to some kind of resolution. Everyone knew that the real catalyst of the conflict was the presidential election in the fragmented United States. The relatively wealthy North Eastern United States and the Western Union were edging towards electing a president who whether a Democrat, a Unity Democrat or a Reformed Republican, was unlikely to be supportive of the increasingly belligerent Republic of Israel. In contrast, the more populous and politically aberrant Republic of North America was becoming ever more gung-ho for the Jewish Cause, whilst manifestly lacking the financial or military muscle to back up its rhetoric. As Israel's sole backer in the world became progressively more impotent, there was a sense that now was the last chance for Israel to employ its formidable military assets before they became obsolescent and useless.

The unthinkable alternative was for the Republic of Israel and its neighbours to compromise and arrive at some kind of mutually advantageous accommodation.

"I should be going to work," said Mark who was now working on a very peculiar workshift to accommodate the time zones of his employers in the Far East. "I could be late."

"I bet there'll be no public transport," said Molly. "And there'll be no one in the office when you get there."

"Why would that be? Israel's thousands of miles away."

"There's a risk of fallout. Internet communication will be flaky at best. Most people will be watching the news at home."

"I know. I know," said Mark. "But I've got to make the effort. I'll have to walk to the office if necessary."

“Best of luck,” said Molly sardonically.

Mark nodded with resignation and sidled out of the cramped living room. As he walked towards the front door of the apartment he could hear Monica’s voice still whining: “Are you sure we can’t watch cartoons, Mummy?”

Having said that he’d walk to work if he had to, Mark was more or less obliged to do so when he walked to Holloway Road underground station and found it closed. A hastily scribbled note announced that normal services would be resumed as soon as possible, but gave no indication as to when that might be. Fortunately, it was a dry if somewhat windy day so Mark was able to walk the six or seven kilometres to the office without too much discomfort.

It was a bizarre experience nonetheless. London was eerily quiet. There were very few cars, bicycles or horses on the road and those who were sitting inside the few pubs that were open were viewing the same film footage of Jerusalem’s final moments that Mark had just been watching at home. Even so, Mark was careful to stay as visible as he could under the faltering streetlamps and as far from the shadows of the early autumn dusk as he could. There were those who wouldn’t care whether bombs were landing in London itself and would show no compunction in murdering a vulnerable pedestrian for something as petty as a mobile phone or an overcoat.

When Mark finally arrived at the offices of Sig Mu Inc. he was almost surprised to find that the doors were open and that the receptionist was sitting at her desk. But then it was likely that, like many ancillary workers in London’s offices these days, she couldn’t afford a home of her own and slept in a small dormitory in the office block’s basement.



“Many people in tonight, Ophelia?” Mark asked after he’d swiped his security card at the entrance and let the body scanners trace his contours to confirm that he wasn’t carrying any weapons.

“Not many,” said Ophelia. “It’s all what’s going on in the Middle East. Look, the Israelis launched a missile at Ankara but it’s been intercepted. Baghdad wasn’t so lucky.”

“Are there *any* cities left in Israel?” Mark asked, while looking at a map on the television screen which displayed a map of the Middle East with little mushroom clouds slowly pulsating over various points.

“I don’t think there’s been any more launched towards Israel for several hours,” said Ophelia. “Perhaps it’s all over.”

Mark strolled over to the escalator and punched in a code that allowed him access to Sig Mu’s offices on the twenty-fourth floor. Ophelia might well be right. If the last two nuclear wars were anything to go by, although the last happened when he was only very young, the pattern would be an abrupt exchange of nuclear warheads, followed by a few stray explosions and spasmodic retaliatory launches from hitherto unknown missiles silos or other launch pads, and then a kind of radio-silence as the nations who’d just destroyed themselves and one another came to comprehend the true horror of what they’d just done.

Mark was assured by the television commentators that the days, months and years to follow were certain to follow much the same pattern as that after the last two nuclear wars. No one could be really sure how things might turn out but there would be little value now in launching more nuclear weapons, even assuming that any were still

in reserve. As a deterrent to attack, the formidable nuclear arsenals of the Middle East had quite clearly been a total failure. As a method of cataclysmic destruction on a scale that the newscasters already claimed exceeded by several factors the first two nuclear wars, they'd unequivocally demonstrated the hell they were capable of unleashing.

As Mark sat at his desk, he studied his e-mails while also keeping an eye on the news broadcasts his fellow employees were also watching. Naturally, there was the tardy release of a notice from the company's Pyongyang head office which announced that due to the real risk of radioactive fallout on all European offices, especially those in the Mediterranean Union and the South, employees would be excused from attending work for the next week. Time taken off would be deducted from annual leave.

"What do you think this fallout will do?" wondered Olaf who normally worked in the secure office at the end of the corridor but was today wandering aimlessly around Mark's section. "Will it make my hair drop out?"

"Not much danger of that happening to me," joked Mike as he patted his bald pate. He was one of half dozen or so other people in an open plan office that normally accommodated several hundred.

"It's best to stay indoors, it says here," said Mark who indicated the health advisory leaflet attached to the company e-mail. "The main risk is cancer and radiation sickness. It also recommends filtered water and oxygen masks."

"Where the fuck are you supposed to buy an oxygen mask?" exclaimed Mike. "The last one must have been sold weeks ago."

"It's the nuclear winter we've got to worry about most," said Olaf.

"Nuclear winter?" said Mike. "What kind of shit is that?"

“Well, not nuclear winter so much as increased cloud cover,” Olaf corrected himself. “Nuclear winter is for the big one...”

“The big one?” Mike queried.

“You know, when the big nuclear powers, like China, Russia and Germany, let theirs off. You know like in the last century when it was between the Soviet Union and the United States...”

“Neither of those countries exists anymore,” Mark pointed out.

“The nukes still do,” said Olaf. “Anyway, it’s all the dust and debris and shit that the nuclear clouds put into the sky and block out the sun and make things fucking cold. That’s what a nuclear winter is. You’ve seen the news programmes. There’s been a fuck of a lot of bombs going off. It’s gonna be real crowded up there in the upper atmosphere. All the stuff that goes up has got to come down, but before it does it spreads across the sky and blocks out the sun...”

“That’ll be a change from all the global warming shit that causes all the droughts and floods and heat waves,” said Mike.

“Yeah, whatever,” said Olaf. “So, even though we’re fucking hundreds of kilometres away, we’re still going to suffer. Fucking radiation and freezing winters...”

“...And mutations, cancers and health warnings on everything imported from the Middle East,” chimed in Mike.

“Yeah, whatever,” conceded Olaf. “We’re gonna suffer for years to come!”

**XC**  
**Eric Esterhazy**  
**2046**

There were so many other things Eric would rather be doing. For instance, he could be doing something to address the scandalous rate of immigration from the war-ravaged regions of the world: scarred as they were all the way from India to Kazakhstan and from Tajikistan to Azerbaijan. He could be consolidating his position as Treasury Secretary by outlining innovative new tax cuts and further rationalisation of public expenditure. He could be actively promoting the causes for which his constituents elected him and in which he believed so passionately.

Rather than do all that, he was having to join the chorus of government ministers gathered around Prime Minister Olanthe O'Donnell as she wrung her hands and mouthed platitudes about how appalled and distressed she and her Cabinet were by this morning's horrific exchange of nuclear warheads and the consequent loss of countless innocent lives.

Now, instead of devising new ways to keep the quarrelsome ragheads out of Great Britain where they would yet further dilute the nation's cultural identity with Arabic chants and minarets, Eric Esterhazy would have to express in glutinous syrupy tones how much he and his colleagues would do whatever they could to help the millions of unfortunate refugees even to the extent of relaxing the Kingdom's already lax border controls. It would be months, even years, until he could once again suggest that the traffic should be much more in the other direction: away from rather than towards British shores.

Like his fellow ministers, Eric now had to learn to pronounce the names of far distant cities, towns and other places just at the moment when their annihilation bestowed on them the fame and immortality they'd never have earned otherwise. Who'd even heard of Dushanbe before and even guessed that it was a city in Tajikistan? And what about tongue-twisters such as Jalalabad, Chagcharan and Dzhebel? It was a curse that the part of the world where the second nuclear war in less than a decade should take place was where the names were on the wrong side of pronounceable. It would have been far more convenient if the war had happened somewhere civilised where the names were English rather than Turkish or Arabic.

It wasn't just that the combatants' names were tricky to say without stumbling and that it was difficult to find on a map the location of the now irradiated wastelands, the biggest predicament for a professional politician was that the whole conflict from beginning to end was utterly incomprehensible. Who, for instance, were the good guys and who the bad? What had triggered all these fractious quarrelling states to finally crack and launch at each other the lethal arsenal that had ended up in the hands of absolutely the wrong nations after the collapse of the Soviet Union? Surely the experience of such close proximity to Pakistan and India where the last nuclear war took place should have been some deterrent to the squabbling Stans, especially since these were precisely the nations who'd just had to cope with a flood of refugees from Pakistan when the country essentially ceased to function in any meaningful sense. Wouldn't they also be left with years or maybe decades of civil war, vigilante justice, local warlords, refugee camps, a permanent legacy of radioactivity and a displaced population? But perhaps the ragheads just couldn't see what they would let themselves

in for. After all, there was a reason why Great Britain was Great, the United States were United and the ragheads, wogs and spades of the world had to be dissuaded from landing on the shores of more civilised nations.

Eric Esterhazy was far too astute a politician to express such unfashionable opinions in public, however much he believed them to be true. It was all because of political correctness, of course, that the truth had to be suppressed. It was obvious that the different races of the world had to be kept apart under Anglo-Saxon stewardship (even when intermixed with Hungarian blood). But political correctness was still something that a politician whether Conservative or Liberal, especially a Cabinet Minister, had to be mindful of. Eric almost envied the Reds and the Greens. Political correctness came so naturally to them.

And now what was Eric to do other than spew out hollow platitudes? How could he distinguish himself from his colleagues when set against a bland wall of solidarity that abhorred the tragedy of a far distant apocalypse and pledged to help in every way possible?

“Don’t be a prick!” said Callum O’Leary, Fox News UK anchor, when Eric confided in his anxieties after he’d answered the scripted questions on live television with a soggy account of how British government aid would help the suffering millions in Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and the other republics the pronunciation of whose names Eric had been rehearsing over the last few hours. “News moves on. People will soon get as bored of watching mushroom clouds over Samarkand as they did the ones over Faisalabad. Pretty soon the news will focus on radioactive fallout, viral mutations and lawlessness amongst refugees. And where there’s chaos there’s

opportunity for the Conservative cause...”

“Meaning what?” said Eric who was weary of cryptic comments, although he enjoyed using them himself. Behind O’Leary’s head was fresh film footage of a mushroom cloud enveloping in and around itself above what had previously been the little-known city of Qurgonteppa.

“When people feel threatened,” Callum explained, “they unerringly seek comfort and succour in what they’re most familiar with. They don’t want to be confronted by the unknown and the unfamiliar. Not long from now, we’ll have the same radiation scares we had six years ago. Accompanying that, there’ll be an influx of strange-looking foreigners from all these gobbledegook republics in their turbans and sandals who won’t speak one word of English between them. There’ll be health scares about weird diseases and unhygienic toilet habits. Before you know it, the newspapers will be full of stories about the invasion of commie ragheads who couldn’t keep their fingers off the nuclear button. You won’t need to suffer too many weeks in mourning the death of the millions of unfortunate women and children who’ve just been incinerated in how-the-fuck-am-I-supposed-to-pronounce-istan...”

“A Conservative rally cry?” said Eric sceptically.

“Fear and suspicion are a Conservative’s best two friends,” said Callum. “Helped, of course, by plenty of cash. And you can be sure that Fox News UK’s shareholders will be willing to invest whatever it takes to ensure that news coverage on this crisis will suit your government, especially if you can get shot of that O’Donnell woman. What someone like her is doing as leader of the Conservative Party I don’t know. She might as well be Liberal or even Labour. There’s no spine to her.”

“My feelings exactly,” said Eric who warmed even more to his friend and frequent fellow guest to the sex parties organised by Fox News UK.

But although Callum’s remarks were reassuring, Eric still inwardly groaned at the prospect of the many more interviews to come. Few of them would be nearly as sympathetic as those with Fox News UK. On the other hand, Eric was grateful that his first interview in the necessary round was in the studios of the national news channel where he was most in his element, even though he’d had to suppress even a hint of his normal concerns. There was no way he could angle the interview towards an attack on alarmist Green activists, the creeping influence of socialism, or the steady loss of the nation’s moral backbone. He couldn’t find an obvious way in which he could argue for tax cuts, increased military expenditure, and rolling back the influence of the state as a solution to an apocalyptic catastrophe in these faraway lands. Instead he’d had to propose the very kind of political intervention and nanny-state interference that he was more disposed to opposed.

“Given the present state of the Exchequer, can we afford to be as generous as you suggest?” asked Eoin d’Auberge, the dusky-skinned interviewer on the pinko BBC where, for the first time in many years, Eric ventured into their cramped studios near Old Street.

Eric hated the BBC. Just as he did any media outlet that by virtue of not being conservative could only be part of the pinko liberal establishment that had sympathies for Greens, Reds, poofs and ragheads. If he had his way, what was left of the BBC would be left to wither away but, unfortunately, over half a century of starving the corporation of funds hadn’t completely destroyed the affection the general public still



retained for it.

However, now wasn't the time to go off-script. Although his instinct was to respond to the half-breed d'Auberge with an attack on him having asked such a loaded question which was so obviously a reference to his general view that the British government was already far too generous.

"These are extraordinary times that demand extraordinary measures," said Eric bestowing on his clichéd words as much gravitas as he could muster. "The British people have shown many times before just how deeply they are willing to dig into their pockets to help those much less fortunate than themselves, especially when the disaster has happened on such a tragic scale..."

"Are you suggesting that the charitable and private sector should be wholly responsible for providing practical assistance?"

"What? No, of course not," said Eric who could see where this might lead to, given his many pronouncements on how Foreign Aid should be entirely discretionary. "As you reported in your news headline, the British Government has made a pledge of unconditional aid and assistance that can only be described as generous. It is imperative on governments across the world to give as much as possible to the tens of millions of displaced and mortally wounded in Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan. This is an international crisis and it deserves a commensurate international response..."

"Can we be assured that the pledge will be matched by actual funds? Or will only a fraction of the pledged funds reach its intended recipients as happened, for instance, in the Indo-Pakistani Nuclear War?"

This was another trap. Christ! Eric hated these fucking pinko news reporters.

Why couldn't this d'Auberge cunt just display the same deference and respect he always got from Fox News UK and its affiliates? Eric had only a month before been pontificating on why it had been necessary to radically reduce Foreign Aid including, of course, all that earmarked for Pakistan. Now wasn't the time, of course, to tell the BBC News anchors and their loyal (but mostly non-Conservative) viewers that every penny spent on Pakistan had dropped down a bottomless pit of local corruption while the entirely predictable consequences of the self-induced trauma of all-out nuclear war remained as insurmountable as ever. Now wasn't the time to explain that he expected most of the Foreign Aid donated to the Stans to eventually be re-invested in the coffers of a handful of large corporations who'd already begun lobbying for funds to help further British commercial influence in that part of the world.

“We have learnt many lessons from the mistakes made by the previous government during the last nuclear war,” said Eric boldly. “You can be assured that we shall ensure that the interests of the suffering millions will be the highest of all priorities for the government in which I have the privilege to serve...”

Even if it was with that bitch O'Donnell, Eric thought, as he blustered his way through the remaining few minutes of his thankfully short interview in which he made sure that he emphasised again and again the bullet points with which he'd been briefed. And these were, of course, so far from what Eric would normally propound that he had to bite his tongue and almost recite his lines as if it were some kind of school assignment.

Occasionally, Eric considered the meaning of the words he was trotting out and would do so again for news organisations based both home and abroad. It helped, after

all, to be able to match his emotional responses to the words he was using. Yes, it was truly shocking and appalling that millions of men, women and children had been fatally consumed by the billowing clouds of burning radioactive dust. Yes, he could only feel pity for the suffering of those whose skin had peeled off in the intense heat and whose eyeballs had been burnt out by a glare brighter than the sun and whose bones had been shattered by the flying debris. And, yes, he felt anguish for the plight of the many who now had to suffer for the rest of their lives with the threat of cancer, if, that is, they managed to survive the plagues, famines and civil war which were the still persistent legacy of the last nuclear war.

On the whole, though, for Eric all this was just a distraction that he'd much rather do without. If only the ragheads had killed each other off in a less spectacular way, then perhaps no one would have noticed and almost certainly there'd be no fresh influx of wretched refugees into the United Kingdom.

## **XCI**

### **Gabrielle**

### **2041**

Like most men—even bisexual men—Ghazi wasn't someone who'd willingly display his true emotions, especially not those such as sorrow, misery and distress. This time, however, Gabrielle was in a position she'd never been in before and one for which she was not remotely suited and that was to provide comfort to a man who'd lost his emotional self-control.

“Amritsar. Jalandhar. Jaipur,” Ghazi moaned. “These are places I've known and visited. My sister lives—or rather lived—in Amritsar. And now they've gone. Incinerated. Annihilated. Nothing left but radioactive waste.”

And then he released yet more tears on a pillow already damp with proof of his grief and despair.

Gabrielle placed a comforting hand on his bare back, but recognised the need for restraint. Ghazi was no longer in the mood for sex that was his original excuse for seeking her company. What he wanted from her was nothing more than sympathetic companionship which somehow meant more to him when it came from a woman who wasn't Indian or Pakistani, who wasn't Muslim or Hindu, but who understood at least something about what such differences in culture and religion might mean.

It wouldn't do for Gabrielle to remind Ghazi that Ajit, her senior farm manager, was also in a state of abject despair although his concerns were more for the people of Rawalpindi, Gujranwala and Lahore. It wouldn't do to bring up the subject that her long-term policy of recruiting from the dispossessed of the Indian subcontinent had

now left her business functioning at rather less than half its normal capacity at a time of the year when harvests needed to be collected and mid-year tax accounts collated.

Gabrielle was as distressed as anyone by the news film that showed only too vividly what happened when nuclear warheads were used in anger rather than for show. Although she was awed by the magnificent beauty of the unfolding mushroom clouds as they rose above the cities of the Punjab, the Rajasthan and Kashmir, she was uncomfortably aware that the same awe-inspiring splendour consisted in part of the incinerated ruins of human lives, centuries of history and the hopes and dreams of the abruptly deceased.

Gabrielle had been so sure over the last few weeks that this was a catastrophe that would never happen. Surely, the very purpose of nuclear weapons was to make the prospect of all-out war inconceivable. Only the very stupid or the psychotically insane would contemplate actually unleashing such formidable weapons. The news pundits had been vying with one another to predict the moment of climb-down, capitulation and compromise. In the meantime, people who were unsure where Pakistan was in relation to India had now become familiar with the names of places and politicians they couldn't hope to spell correctly. Nobody had expected the nations of the relatively prosperous Indian subcontinent to wreck everything that had been achieved in nearly a century of independence.

One consequence of India's growing self-confidence was that the European, American or Oriental powers no longer had the influence to restrain the sparring nations. After all, India was a member of the Group of Five leading Economic Powers including China, America, Japan and the European Union. No one, including the

Permanent Members of the United Nations, had the means to persuade India to take a more temperate stance with regards to its equally obdurate neighbour.

As the crescendo of retaliation and counter-retaliation became inexorably more serious over the passing week, Gabrielle had already forgotten what it was that either India or Pakistan had originally been demanding of the other. The conflict had taken on its own remorseless logic and any kind of compromise had become ever more unlikely. The mood progressed from sound and fury that would eventually extinguish itself to alarm and resignation about the near-certainty of a suicidal exchange of nuclear warheads. The predictions became less about which nation would stand back first as to which one would be so foolish as to be first to press the red button.

There was an uneasy stand-off as each day went by and yet another prediction of imminent disaster was confounded by an absence of nuclear conflagration, while at the same time the bombardment by more conventional but still highly destructive weapons continued to rain on the cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Srinagar and Islamabad. Armies were gathered at the borders. Aircraft carriers were floating on the seas around Karachi and Ahmedabad. Armed drones were flying over the mountains, plains and forests. The rhetoric became ever more uncompromising.

And then—when Gabrielle got so used to the unfolding crisis that she'd forgotten what it was like to live in a time when imminent nuclear war was nothing more than a theoretical scenario—there came the first explosion of a nuclear device by one lethally armed nation on another in all human history. Those punters who'd taken the grim bet at the bookmakers that it would be India who'd be the more lunatic of the two belligerent nations were well-rewarded. The response as the city of Rawalpindi

dissolved into nuclear heat and radioactive dust was predictable. Pakistan's reply was cautious in terms of the republic's military capability but it was devastating to the citizens of Jaipur who might have assumed that their city's survival was guaranteed by its sublime beauty and historical significance. But all such considerations and many others became meaningless as the day went on and more and more of the subcontinent's magnificence was reduced to nuclear waste whose legacy was likely to last longer in terms of lethal half-lives than the histories of either Islam or Hinduism.

Normal life in Britain or, indeed, in every country in the world was suspended while every few minutes came rumours and later confirmation of another nuclear explosion and then yet another and not long after, still another. If the Second World War had been covered in such blow-by-blow detail, then it could scarcely have been more compelling television news. Gabrielle was unable to concentrate on any one thing for more than a moment until her attention was drawn towards the mobile feed on her phone or the high-definition images on the television. Although the news presentation, even on Fox News UK, was coherent and informative, Gabrielle couldn't retain more than a staccato pattern in her head as atrocity followed by catastrophe followed by humanitarian crisis. There was too much to assimilate. It was far too apocalyptic in its scale and implications for her to put it into any kind of context.

This was just too much news for one day.

All these ancient cities whose history was more venerable than most European civilisations; all those lives lost in the most appalling suffering; all those mushroom clouds sprouting over the Punjab, Gujarat and the Kashmir: all of this was far far too much for Gabrielle to take in. She preferred her life-defining epic international events

to happen at a more readily comprehensible pace. Barely had she grasped that Rawalpindi was now a city that more resembled the caldera of an active volcano than a home for millions of Pakistanis, than she had to assimilate the news that the desert surrounding Jaipur was now more hospitable than the city itself.

“This isn’t right,” Ghazi moaned. “It’s not right at all.”

Gabrielle could only agree, but what else could she do?

She was also aware that unlike most wars in the last century, she and other British citizens couldn’t just view a war between India and Pakistan as just another regrettable foreign conflict which, even if British soldiers were involved, was mostly just another televisual diversion.

This was a war whose radioactive pollution would be carried across the globe by the prevailing winds and where—although those neighbouring countries unfortunate enough to be in the path would be the ones to suffer the most from the fallout—very soon there would be nowhere on the planet that wouldn’t see a lethal increase in cancer and other radioactive ailments. And there was also scientific speculation that this would lead to an unusually cold winter as a result of all the Punjabi dust and Kashmiri soil ejected in tiny particles into the planet’s outer atmosphere and then smeared evenly over every single square kilometre of the planet.

Radiation and bad weather was indiscriminate and random. It was the chill wind of post-conflict readjustment that Gabrielle dreaded most. After all, her most loyal lover, her most senior managers and the greatest proportion of her employees all came from the blighted regions that would now for the rest of her life be associated with a single devastating event. No one from now on could contemplate Jaipur, Lahore or



Srinagar without reflecting on its demise, any more than they could Hiroshima, Dresden or the World Trade Center.

It was more than lives lost. It was a permanent scar on human history.

How would Gabrielle's agricultural business survive this crisis? Would her staff work harder given that they no longer had a home in the East to which they could return? Or would they be so despondent that nothing useful could be done? How long would it take Ghazi to recover from his despair? This was itself indicative of the intermittent depression he'd suffered from ever since the day he'd been badly beaten up in Oxford

"Do you want me to turn the TV off?" Gabrielle suggested as Ghazi's gaze was drawn to the image replayed over and over again as the dust and debris of the once little known city of Jalandhar ascended into the brilliant blue sky. "Isn't this all a bit too much, don't you think?"

"It's certainly too much," Ghazi admitted as his tear-stained face reluctantly dragged its gaze away from the huge flat screen that dominated the living room wall. "It's more than too much. It's a lifetime's worth of too much. But I fear that if I don't watch what's happening I'll miss something and that will be the something that I'll forever regret not seeing..."

"Like what?"

"Like the bombing of New Delhi," suggested Ghazi. "Like the end of Indian democracy. Like an atrocity that will somehow make even the destruction of Jaipur seem like a footnote. I don't know. This is history. And, what's worse, it's *my* history."

Gabrielle resisted the temptation of reminding Ghazi of how many generations

it had been since anyone in his family had lived in India or anywhere outside of Europe and America. But she couldn't just sit here and watch Ghazi weep over the unfolding tragedy, however naked he was,

"I'll phone Ajit," she said. "I'll find out how he is."

Ghazi nodded. "You do that," he said. "Tell him that I feel his pain, even if he *is* Pakistani."

"I appreciate your call," said Ajit when he picked up the phone. "My wife is overwhelmed by grief. The boys don't really understand what's going on, but they can't be dragged away from the television."

"Is there anything I can do?" Gabrielle asked.

"Nothing," said Ajit, and then thinking better of it: "My wife... She needs company. Many of her relatives in Pakistan, you understand. There may be funerals. I just don't know..."

Gabrielle inwardly groaned but she knew what she needed to say. "These are special circumstances. You can take as much time off work as you feel you need to..."

"But the farm..." Ajit protested half-heartedly.

"Don't worry about that," said Gabrielle. "We might just have to write off the harvest this year. Especially given the likelihood of radioactive dust..."

"It will affect all farmers in Britain equally," said Ajit.

Gabrielle appreciated Ajit's comforting words, but she knew as Ajit also did that with a workforce absent in mourning, radioactive dust falling from the sky and the likelihood of an unusually cold winter, the immediate commercial prospects could not be especially good.

“Whatever happens to me and my business is as nothing compared to what’s happened over in your home country,” she said diplomatically.

**XCII**  
**Alex**  
**2036**

Alex was now possessed of an opinion he once believed that he'd never hold. And that somewhat dispiriting opinion was that those women whose company he most enjoyed were those he could never rate as his social equals. A woman like the new Chief Executive Officer, for example, was a real balls-breaker whose greatest talent was to keep Alex and his fellow directors on their toes. Alex still wasn't sure whether their brief relationship together counted as a positive or a negative asset in his executive career. And he didn't really enjoy the company of women who were his intellectual equal. They so often made him feel that he was a fraud for earning so much but achieving so little.

The worst thing about women who were in any sense Alex's equal was that they were also generally much the same age as him. That, as Alex now had to admit, was not an age when women were at their most physically attractive. It also troubled him that just as women of his own age was now no longer his first choice, he'd now become the sort of man who was theirs. No wonder most men who'd got married preferred to stay that way.

So the solution to this dilemma, and an increasingly expensive one, was to rely on the company of women with whom there was no pretence or illusion, most especially regarding relative social or intellectual status, and, best of all, where there was no likelihood of any kind of commitment beyond that of actually paying for her services.

Alex was pretty certain that the naked woman lying beside him on his huge double-bed was never actually christened Opal, but that was the name by which she

introduced herself and by which she was listed on the escort agency's website. Alex could easily have chosen Mirabella, Goldie, Ember or Alicia, but today it was once again Opal's turn. She was attractive in a peculiarly non-specific way, although just on the cusp of being dumpy and short. Her main virtue was how reliable she was beneath the sheets and in holding a reassuringly non-threatening conversation on other occasions.

And today, of all days, one thing Alex really did not want was something that might further disturb his composure.

The last few days had been fraught and there was a very real possibility that they could be amongst his last. And not just for Alex, but pretty much for all humanity.

Events in Korea had taken a critical turn. The armed forces massed on North Korea's southern and northern borders were bristling with weaponry that was dramatically more devastating than that usually used in a distant foreign conflict. It wasn't only the two Koreas that had the thermonuclear capacity to reduce the peninsula to radioactive waste. The Americans and their close allies, the Russians, were on one side of the border. While on the other side was the world's wealthiest nation and its most heavily armed nuclear power: the Federal Republic of China.

This could end up being very nasty indeed.

Alex had faith that the warring parties would somehow come to a satisfactory face-saving resolution. After all, international business could suffer even in a stalemate. China had investments in America, Russia and even the UK. There was no country in the world, except perhaps the most unhinged, that had a good word for North Korea. It was a nation that had squandered every penny of its wealth on an preposterously well-

armed military and a thoroughly pampered political elite whose quality of life exceeded that of most billionaires even in neighbouring China. It was incredible and anachronistic that the people of North Korea should continue to live in ignorance of the world beyond their borders in an age where the internet was truly ubiquitous and the cheapest mobile phone could store a library of movies that would take a lifetime to view in their entirety.

“What do you think about what’s happening in Korea?” Alex asked Opal, expecting (and probably hoping) that she would respond with something crass and ignorant that would somehow justify his objectification of her as appetising sex meat.

“Shall we turn on the TV and find out?” she suggested as she rolled over and clicked on the remote control. She was betraying rather more interest in current affairs than one would normally expect. On a previous occasion she claimed not to know which of Tokyo or Beijing was the capital of Japan. Alex suspected then, and even more now as she listened intently to the academic discussion on Fox News UK, that her show of ignorance was nothing more than an act and that the real woman who Alex would never get to know was somewhat more abreast of international news than Opal the whore who liked to be fucked in the arse and was expert at the messiest kind of blowjob that Alex had ever enjoyed.

It was the on-screen tickertape that broadcast the news Alex was most worried about regarding the continued stand-off. Alex wondered just how long over five million men in arms and a planet’s worth of thermonuclear firepower could remain idle on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. It wouldn’t take much for the affair to escalate from a skirmish to all-out conflagration. Every report of an island bombed, a battalion defecting and an armed

scuffle on the borders made Alex either cheer or despair. And this same uneasiness was even apparent on the faces of the normally self-assured news anchors. And it was fairly apparent on Opal's face as well.

“How far do you think the Chinese will go to protect their ally?” Opal asked, flatteringly implying that this was something on which Alex might be an authority.

He was nothing of the sort of course, but after all the conversations and chats with colleagues and the blow-by-blow accounts provided by television and internet journalists, Alex felt that he'd dedicated enough of his life to have some kind of authoritative opinion. But whatever he might argue, his main concern was that he and everyone else on the planet should still be alive at the end of the week.

“I can't believe anyone in the world, not the Chinese and not even the North Koreans, would be so stupid as to start a World War,” he said.

It didn't seem right. The world wasn't ready for conflagration, although Alex wondered whether there would ever be a time when it would be. How ready was the world when the meteor hit Chicxulub 65 million years ago? How ready were the Minoans for their civilisation to be annihilated by a volcanic eruption? Did the people of Poland expect their country to be invaded from both the East and the West in 1945? Perhaps the most devastating events came when people were least ready for them.

It was a cliché of most movies and television programmes that whenever a big event happened there would be bold headlines everywhere with words like *War*, *Chaos* and *Catastrophe*. Everyone would excitedly discuss the news and associated with it there would be a palpable atmosphere of expectation. This was exactly what was happening, but buses and trains were still continuing to run, there was no break in the

transmission of situation comedies, soap operas and quiz shows on television, and sports fixtures still dominated the last few pages of the newspapers. The world may be due for extinction within the week, but Arsenal was still due to play against Sheffield Wednesday and a new superhero movie was due to have its premiere in Leicester Square.

Alex was genuinely worried. He'd even phoned up his ex-wife so that he could talk to his six-year old daughter. Even Iris had a vague idea of what was happening at the furthest end of the world, but she seemed to think that after everyone in the world was killed things would just magically get to be all right again. Several work colleagues were absent without leave and there was a real sense that no one any longer cared whether production figures were met or deadlines achieved given that all of that might soon be utterly irrelevant. Every announcement by the President of the United States, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom or, most of all, the President of the Federal Republic of China was listened to with rapt attention. The names of the Presidents of both Koreas were now more familiar to the world than at any time since the mid-twentieth century.

"There's a special announcement from Clooney," said Opal referring to the American President. "It looks like it'll be important. Shall we watch?"

Alex nodded, forgetting for the moment the real nature of the relationship that should exist between Opal and her client. It wasn't for the escort to dictate what the client should do, but Alex no more than Opal wanted to miss an important announcement. He wondered whether he should now be fleeing towards the nearest underground station if the president was just about to declare all-out nuclear war.



Although Alex was sure that there was nowhere truly safe from a thermonuclear device even of fairly modest mega-tonnage, there must surely be some level of security on the Northern or Metropolitan Lines. Unless, of course, overground explosions were to cause the tunnels to collapse.

The president's demeanour was stern and commanding. At least this president wasn't the kind of idiot that the Americans were increasingly prone to elect as it adjusted to its diminished relative status in the world with astonishingly poor grace. Alex wondered what kind of mess the standard issue president would leave the world. With their inability to string together coherent sentences and their tendency to make frighteningly inane and foolhardy statements of policy, American presidents had mostly become as much a poor joke in the world as their desperate assertions of America's divine mission became more obviously derisory and self-deluding. On the other hand, Alex wasn't sure that Britain's own rather dull Prime Ministers or the other elected heads of Europe were actually any better.

The president's address spun out the tension for several moments as he stressed the gravity of the international situation, emphasised the seriousness of the threat and praised the endeavours toward peace made by the allies, in particular the presidents of Russia and Brazil.

Come on, come on, thought Alex. Cut to the chase. Are we all going to die?

"I think it's going to be all right," said Opal with a tone of relief in her voice.

"How can you tell?"

"Body language," Opal explained.

"Body language?"

“I’m a Psychology Major,” said Opal who for the first time in their many carnal encounters confessed that she wasn’t just a fluffy sperm receptacle. “You can tell by the eyes, the breathing, the stress pattern in the sentences... It’s all there. He’s about to announce that it’s all been resolved.”

And indeed it was. The sentences rolled out as the president announced the terms by which North Korea had capitulated to the allies’ demands and how the Federal Republic of China had made bold steps towards bringing the crisis to a satisfactory conclusion. At the same time there were hints about the breakdown of civil order in North Korea, the substantial level of defections to the south and the brave rebellion by the starved and frightened who didn’t really want to serve as gun-fodder for their leaders’ manic ambitions. Alex suspected that the real story about North Korea’s abrupt and humiliating climbdown from the intransigent position it had taken earlier that morning was rather less to do with a sudden outbreak of sanity and reason and more to do with the final collapse of the world’s most insane country.

And so it was over.

World War Three had been averted.

*What a relief!*

And as he returned his attention to Opal in the hope that they could celebrate the good news together at a special discount rate, Alex reflected on the good news.

If the world could survive this crisis, it could *surely* survive anything.