

## Chapter 1 – Murder and kidnapping.

Walking down the street just as dusk was setting. The street lights had just come on and the moths and mosquitos were already swirling round. It was early summer, Spring had been warm, and the air already had its warm breezes.

Lucy turned to Charlotte and jabbed her in the ribs with her elbow. 'What was that for?' she asked. without opening her mouth Lucy pointed at Owen who was walking up ahead with Sebastian. 'what....what' she repeated with her hand covering her mouth. she didn't take her eyes off Owen but leaned in closer edging in her ear. waiting for a reply, she tripped and almost fell as she didn't notice the edge of the pavement. Catching herself in the stumble jarred her. 'ooowww'. she uttered with a toothy sound as she felt the pang of pain from biting her tongue. Lucy who had been a pace behind burst into a laugh then in an instant she became more serious as she caught up with her sister. 'you ok?'. Her sister nodded, her hand up to her cheek. 'I it I tongue'. Owen had turned with Sebastian by this time looking back at the 2 girls. 'come on, we want to get back for silent witness!!'. Charlotte had continued on with Lucy hunched over looking up at charlottes face, 'show me', they reached the other side of the road by now and Charlotte stopped. her mouth hanging open she turned her tongue round in her mouth showing the side of her tongue that hurt. 'an u thee anysing' she asked. Lucy stared up but in the light couldn't see anything, "can't see anything, tongue still there from what I see" hiding a giggle inside. Owen and Sebastian had turned round and come back. they too leaned over and looked up into charlottes mouth. after a couple of seconds, Sebastian said 'what we looking for'. Lucy stepped back giving them both room to look, 'she bit her tongue as she missed her step back there'.

'hmmmpff' came from Owens' mouth, 'tongues still there, should be more careful big feet' and then stepped back nervously joined Lucy. he turned his head towards Lucy. she stood gawping past Charlotte, eyes popping and she was pointing. Owen followed the stare and his jaw dropped giving the same gaze as Lucy. she had been staring up at the second-floor window. there was a curtain drawn but behind, a silhouette could be seen. a figure standing there, they could make out a head and shoulders they assumed with a thin horizontal shadow standing out from the person's chest. 'someone just got stabbed' she uttered' in a sort of whisper' unknown to her Owen too was staring as the figure leaned and fell backwards disappearing from the window.

Lucy and Owen turned to each other, 'did you see' Owen uttered flabbergasted. It was about this time Charlotte and Sebastian's eyes joined the same trajectory as Owen and Lucy's. 'what....what!!' Charlotte uttered again.

Lucy's eyes were stuck now watching the rectangle of light that was the window upstairs. Owen opened his mouth, 'i think.... I think she just saw' Lucy finished it off in a whisper 'someone getting stabbed'. Sebastian the older of the 4 stood straight 'yeh yeh' your just pulling our leg, how cou....' he stopped at that point as echoing through the silence a piercing wail started, coming from the same direction. "NNNOOOooooo". The wail reduced in volume till suddenly, it cut off. all 4 looked at each other, standing frozen, eyes popping out of their skulls, what seemed like seconds passed till Sebastian reacted first grabbing Lucy and Owen by their shoulders he dragged them in up the closest driveway. 'shhh,' he whispered as the unavoidable crunch on the gravel broke through the now sudden silence that was enveloping them. Lucy scrambled past them and ducked crouching IN the big magnolia bush that leaned over the edge of the driveway. the others followed suit. Charlotte already had her phone out and was dialling 999. all of them looking up.

"What have you done, we weren't here to kill him, were we", Inside the house, downstairs, in the dark, 'someone was looking!!', 'what' came back 'over there' she pointed, 'i saw 4 people, they are still there, back up that drive, hiding behind that bush. I saw them....'.

'shit shit shit' and Polker turned, the grin on his face from her last remark faded quickly and headed for the door "get the van, quick. pull up over there, as soon as possible' and off he ducked out the back door before she could utter another word. This was supposed to be clandestine, what was he up to she wondered and fished the keys out of her pocket.

Charlotte listened as the phone rang once the other end. it was then immediately answered 'which service please'

'we've just seen a murder, eehhhrrr police think' she uttered whispering quickly, the woman the other end replied 'your location and name please'. 'we are....' Charlotte turned to the others 'where are we'. Owen was the first to answer 'i think....corner of Farquar and Balfour street' his voice raised in questioning tone and Lucy nodded, 'corner of Farquar and Balfour street' charlotte repeated. 'Name please' came sharply back 'Lucy Dodds' she replied in a squeak. 'please describe what you have seen' came quickly and clearly.

"up at the window, i saw someone stabbed" Lucy leaned over Owen and Charlotte whispering loudly, Owen butted in, "i saw them fall, the knife was in their chest" breathing heavily "then there was a scream", "yeehh" came out in unison. "how many of you are there" the phone was on loud speaker now. Sebastian said 'we should get out of here i think' looking at the others and grabbing the 2 shoulders closest to him. Charlotte shrugged the hand off, "what should we do?" she questioned pulling the phone closer to her mouth. "If you are still in the vicinity, move away as far and as fast as you can but keep the call open please".

"Come on!" Sebastian grabbed Charlotte again and pulled. Charlotte was getting to her feet as she felt the pull stop, turning her head she froze. Sebastian standing stock still found himself looking up. In the dim light from the street light the other side of the street he saw he was looking into the barrel of a pistol pointing down at him. Without a word, Polker motioned for him to stand up and stepped back. his eyes then focused on Charlotte. He mouthed the words "hang up, give me", her eyes were now wide open in shock. Her elbow hit Lucy in the head as she checked to see where she was. "wh...." as she too turned and spotted the gun pointed at Sebastian's head. Owen's eyes had fixed on the gun as well and slowly started getting to his feet. Charlotte pressing the sleep button and closed the cover, with a shivering hand she passed the phone forward toward the hand with the gun and another hand appeared from the gloomy light and took the phone. dropping it immediately onto the gravel pathway, his foot came down sharply, the light shone for a second till the foot came crushing down again. The screen cracked on the first crush then on the second the light went out, Lucy's face drooped as she saw the phone break in the middle and the light disappear and a couple of pieces separating being mixed into the gravel by the 3<sup>rd</sup> stamp. the rest of the stamping drove away all hope the 4 might have had that there was any chance it still worked. Motioning with the butt of the gun towards the entrance to the driveway all 4 were on their feet now, heads down, Lucy felt tears rising and her face contorting. Owen wide-eyed felt a shudder next to him, his stomach was twisting. Glancing sideways he noticed Lucy and moved closer to her for joint protection. There was the sound of an engine now revving hard and a big red ford transit appeared before them. Panic hit Sebastian at that point and his legs blocked. he felt a stab in his back from what he guessed was the butt of the gun. He turned and saw the face grimacing at him. The butt came forwards this time into his side, hard. He winced at the pain and unwillingly his leg started moving forwards again.

There was a crunch followed by a scraping sound as the side door of the van slid open stopping all 4 in their step. 'Move' came from a gruff voice behind them. None of them moved except for the knees shaking. All 4 knew what getting in meant. There was a loud explosion behind them as Polker pointing the gun in the air pulled the trigger with a malevolent grin. The shaking stopped as they jumped, it worked, their legs started moving forwards. Owen helped Lucy in both now had tears of fear dripping down their cheeks as they climbed in. As Charlotte got there she was dragged in and Sebastian felt the hand behind push so hard he stumbled in, falling flat on his stomach.

"Go,go,go" Polker shouted as he jumped in. The door slid closed behind leaving them in the dark and the motion of the van kicking forward took them all tumbling to the back except Polker who had kept his hand on the hand bar, knowing exactly where it was. Within seconds the light in the ceiling came on and blinking the teenagers caught their balance at the back. Owen had an arm round Lucy who's body was shuddering, Sebastian went to do the same to Charlotte before getting her hard stare and he just squeezed next to her. Polker sitting in the left-hand corner now, grinning, pistol pointing in their direction. 'Ok, hand over your phones he waved the gun from one to the

other as one by one they slowly reached into their pockets and brought out their phones. Reaching back over his shoulder he passed each one. Whoever was in the front opened their window throwing the phones out.

It was only a few minutes later the red van pulled into a small descending curved driveway, at the bottom of which was a garage, the doors opened automatically and the red van disappeared inside. Polker wondered to himself whether he should blindfold them, he assumed the boss would have them killed but, better be safe, he was scared of the boss, he knew what he was capable of to those who let him down. It was at this point he heard the male voice from inside scream "whaaat!". He hadn't trusted Gail from the start. She was too close to the boss though, he knew he would have to earn the boss's trust, his heart went into his mouth when he heard the scream, he knew somewhere along the line he'd made a boob unless, unless it was because she hadn't known the mission was to kill the professor. Her scream back on the job told him that was the case, still, she overreacted he thought, he knew of her reputation, he'd never seen any evidence but he knew some of the stories. He heard her footsteps, then her voice. "Blindfold them with these", and a hand came through the van window. He took them and passed them to the elder boy. "Tie these on them" he commanded. Sebastian did as he was told and then turned so Polker could do the same for him. "Ok, where do we put them". "follow me" came the reply.

The kids climbed clumsily out of the side of the van, forming a line, each one holding the one in front, and Lucy who was at the front had the wrist of her shirt held and pulled to show the way. They shuffled, using their feet to feel a step in, they went a short way down a corridor and feeling a door opened towards them they were felt themselves being pushed in. They heard the door close behind them. Lucy almost stumbled when her feet hit something soft lying on the floor. Her hand came up to her blindfold and ripped it off automatically as she got her balance. The first thing she saw was the moth-eaten mattress she had stumbled into. Then turning she saw the other standing in a line, blindfolds still on. She looked quickly around the room, they were alone. "You can take the blindfolds off if you want, there's no-one here" she sniffled. Her eyes felt swelled up, because of the blindfold or the tears she couldn't tell. Owens' eyes looked the same as hers felt as his blindfold came off.

Through the door, they could just make out raised voices.

???????? was sitting at the kitchen table, He just sat staring death at the man he'd been forced to bring with him. Polker stood there, unshaven, forlorn look on his face, tee-shirt and jeans, army boots gave him that thuggish look, Short dark skinhead that added something adding to that look, vicious, as vicious he was ?????? knew but he'd also hoped for someone with a bit more than thuggish mentality. no spark of anything. He knew he'd made a fuck up as well and was curling in on himself ?????? read the face, coward, he'd seen it a hundred times, easy to be hard when things are on your side, turn the tables and so many go for the submissive reaction.

Ok, he'd asked for someone but why this moron. "Let me get this straight, you let yourself get seen taking out your target".

he turned his head now to the woman standing there in front of him and shot her a look, she didn't squeam, she returned his stare with a fire burning as he'd seen many times since he'd taken her under his wing. Less since she'd grown into a woman but there it was again, this rebellious child, not spoilt, but with anger and determination. There was something else there, he mentally took a note, he knew he'd have to watch her in the future. She was becoming independent of him.

Turning back to Polker he added "and then", he couldn't believe this bit, with his mouth twisting he quietly but ferociously uttered, "on a kill mission, you took prisoner 4", he exaggerated the 4 and said it again "4, kid witnesses prisoner, and shot your gun in the air, why not just shoot the kids instead, you'd already warned the whole neighbourhood!!" he had left his chair now and was leaning on the desk as his sentence ended in a spittle filled shout. He sank back into his chair, "and you brought them back here. I know, Gail you've explained why you couldn't stop him, but why the scream" and he felt his blood pressure at peak but somehow those eyes of hers, they kept him in control. With

glaring eyes, she met his, "you never told me this was a kill mission, you told me differently", the stare from her eyes gentled ever so slightly, "I wasn't prepared to find a f\*\*\*\*\*ing kitchen knife sticking out of his chest and the pool of blood. Why.....make it look like an accident". Still very gruffly he responded "like a burglary gone wrong it was supposedly and the ferocious eyes fell on Polker again. "get them some food while I try and work out what to do, staying here was fine while it was a burglary gone wrong but now it's kidnapping" and his head rolled back on his neck as he stared wildly up at the ceiling. "Go!!" he shot at Polker when he brought back his head into a straight position and he realised he was still there.

Once Polkar had gone he turned to Gail. "I don't know what has got into you but we have to have words when we get back".

"If you'd kept me informed of what was going on, trusted me, especially with the bad stuff....." she shot back with venom. He felt it as well she was sure and made a note to tie that down as she saw the look coming back. It was one of those cold looks she'd seen before and had always scared her. The problem was this time she fought the fear of anger and she'd made up her mind not to do this anymore, she knew she was on a knife-edge.

??????? respected her attitude, at least it was not the ass licking from Polker, That really bugged him. All the time in the back of his mind was the key that sat in his pocket now, it was exactly as described. White with a red band all the way around and a sticker "BEN", the name of the program. He'd been told to bring it straight back, expressly told not to plug it in anywhere. That had been what the bonus had been for, as well as eliminating the source of the program. He'd already decided he was going to take a look. From what he'd picked up intuitively was that this was something of top importance. He had a basic knowledge of technology and it was a USB key, he had planned to try it on his phone, he knew how to browse and had a rough idea of what was an executable file. He was going to try that as soon as he could. It was the bright spark that had been glinting in his head since leaving. Initially, he'd planned to keep the professor alive to question himself, but being placed with the eyes of Polker on him, at least he was too scared to question him.

They had been there nearly 2 days now. Sebastian had been watching on his watch. They were in an empty room with no windows. Blank faded white walls with rising damp spreading in one corner, a dank odour always evident. There was an assortment of cushions spread out around the room they had placed in a rectangular form to make sleeping as comfortable as possible. From an old sofa was Charlotte's guess. They too smelt rank as Lucy put it, a mix of dogs and cats with the ammonia smell associated with animals pee. They had had blankets thrown in through the door the first night. A tray had been shoved past a slightly open door with a large packet of rice Krispies and milk with some bowls and spoons for breakfast twice that had happened. A plate of ham sandwiches twice and pot noodles the evening before.

Sebastian glanced at his watch, "they should be coming soon" he whispered, he had checked his watch each time the food had arrived and it had always arrived at about the same time he'd noted. Looking around the room at the dejected faces he wondered, Lucy and Owen's eyes were red, they had been crying most of the day and Charlotte had tried comforting them but it had been hard for her and she too had broken down twice over the last hour. Sebastian had got into the habit that when anything happened he looked at his watch. With nothing else to do as the room was completely empty apart from the tray still sitting by the door from their lunchtime sandwiches. He knew it wasn't enough, the others were hungry, like him, he was famished. Tired, sleeping was always in fits and starts, he'd heard the others waking at odd times with shouts, waking from nightmares only to find theirs was still going on. Both Owen and Lucy had cried out for their mum or dad in their sleep. Charlotte and he had swapped glances at these times and done as much as they could to comfort each other.

Sebastian had gotten some strength out of these glances, he sort of felt there was something that had never been there before, seeing how she had from time to time silently let tears roll down her cheek while holding Lucy let him see behind the facade of her he knew from the schoolyard. Her caring

side, perhaps it was that, something he'd been missing himself, he watched and something opened inside him, a soft part of him opened as he watched her tenderly stroking her sister's hair. He almost envied her. Inside he was just holding himself together. He couldn't start blubbing himself, his stomach twisted and he felt this pressure under his eyes that wanted to push the lid off, keeping that lid on things was where the churning all over was coming from. Something was happening, he was fighting something back.

Apart from when the food was brought they had had no other interaction with their captors. To try and keep them occupied, Sebastian had arranged a rota where one of them had sat by the door listening to try and hear anything from outside. They had heard 3 voices. One male, they knew to be Polker, another male voice and a female voice. Not being able to make out what they said clearly had been annoying. Sebastian was now taking his turn by the door and he heard footsteps approaching. He shuffled to join the huddled group of others and turned back towards the door. The door opened and a woman stepped in. Medium height, taller than him, with curled auburn, slightly greying hair and a scowl on her face. She was motherly, he couldn't work out why that thought crossed his mind. Everything she wore looked like it had just come off the shelves, a brand new pair of blue jeans, trainers looking a bit worse for wear but a plain white shirt with the creases from the packaging still showing. No makeup, no jewellery.

In her hands on the tray were 2 saucepans. One, the smaller, placed on top of a pile of plates. She stayed by the door and keeping a close suspicious eye on the children placed it on the floor. 4 sets of big eyes watched her, 2 red she noticed assuming from crying and she felt a pang in her stomach. She glanced momentarily back through the open door. Sebastian was surprised, she seemed to be trying to get his attention with one hand while her head was watching the corridor, as she turned back, she nodded and with still the occasional glance back through the open doorway he got the impression she was checking to see if anyone was there. He was sure she was trying to get his attention and saw she was indicating with a nod of her head something between one of the plates. She lifted the smaller of the 2 saucepans with one hand and then with the other lifted the first 2 plates by their side indicating with a nod something. Letting the plates down slowly so as not to make a sound, she stood up straight and the scowl came back. Backing out of the room she shut the door and they waited till the sound of the footsteps faded down the corridor. All 4 sitting huddled together looking from one to the other in surprise. Lucy was the first to move. Standing, she left the others wide-eyed, she didn't look back. Grabbing the tray by the side she dragged it over to the where the others sat and sat down herself next to Owen. She peered sideways at Charlotte and then turned back taking the small saucepan off the pile of plates and placing it next to the tray, she then slightly lifted the first plate. Sebastian shook his head. Not sure why he whispered but he did "the second, under the second".

Lucy slipped her finger under the lip of the second and lifted it an inch. Leaning over she peered in between. Turning back the 3 others she saw were now leaning in towards her, eyes peering. There was almost a gasp, not quite but a sharp intake of breath from all 4 as at the same time they noticed there was a piece of paper sitting folded in between. Lucy put her finger through the gap and slipped out the folded slip. She slowly unfolded it. There was a moment where not a breath could be heard, just the rustle of paper. There written by hand in blue ink 'Don't eat the rice, hide it, act asleep' was all that was written down. They looked one at another quizzically. Owen was the first to move and took the lid off the small saucepan first. Squeezing his face he uttered "rice", (he didn't like rice) looking down at the contents. He then moved to the second slightly bigger saucepan and lifted the lid. "looks like a stew of some sort". He lowered his nose closer. Lifting his face back up to the others. "Looks OK" He then reached out to the pile of cutlery by the side and picked up a fork. He dipped it in and pulled it back out with some of the contents hanging on the end. He was just about to put it in his mouth when Charlotte grabbed his hand. Whispering "what if...." She didn't know what else to say but Owen stayed his hand. He turned to Sebastian who looking back at

him, raised his lips questioningly and shrugged "it only says the rice!!!". He couldn't blame him, he too was starving. The 2 girls just looked on.  
He put the fork in his mouth and closed it drawing the fork back out. He started chewing "hhmmm". It wasn't long before the others started and soon the sound of spoons and forks scraping on the bottom of the saucepan could be heard.

## Chapter 2 – Escape

"They'll be almost gone by now," she said glancing at the phone in her hand checking the time and putting it back in her pouch. "Polker, I need a hand".

Polker glanced at the boss who was still furious at him,

?????? was still in his silent anger, his eyes were drifting as he fingered the key in his pocket. It would have been better just leaving the kids, what had they seen. They'd be out of there soon. He knew in the back of his mind, he should have added a sideline when he told him the obvious, not to get seen, and don't come back with 4 f\*\*ing kids. He nodded knowing without looking that Polker would be staring at the back of his head right now, needing his acknowledgement. That was the beauty of Gail, she knew what to do without being asked and the self-confidence to do it. Through his teaching, she could now deal with any situation, in any continent, most languages, and do it calmly, efficiently and definitely not come home with 4 kids they would have to get rid of, stupid, he'd known Polker was stupid when he'd been asked to take him along.

He'd always worked alone with just Gail, this time he'd ok'd it by thinking about giving Gail some space, take some of the pressure off. She'd been acting odd lately, he looked up at her. Why hadn't she stopped him.....she'd said he'd gone out of the door before she could stop him and, had he wanted her to shout after him with all those houses around. A gentle hidden smile came to him as he saw her pull a face behind Polker's back as they headed down to the now dead, poisoned kids. He hadn't liked to do it, it brought back unpleasant memories from his war days, but now, as he watched her go, a pang of misery went through him, he'd managed to keep her hands clean up to now. Ok, he'd given her the poison and he'd ordered her to do it, but it still meant blood on her hands so to speak. He had been surprised at how well she'd taken it. He'd half expected a barrage of emotions when he'd asked her; Perhaps this was part of what she'd been trying to tell him this past while she wanted to be in the loop more, she was showing she could take on the responsibility, yes, a small spark of warmth lit him up for a second. Just a small second though.

As they opened the door and went in, all 4 kids looked like they were asleep, they breathed normally though Polker thought, he was a bit puzzled. "We'll start with this one" and she pointed out Sebastian, taking the top 2 corners of the blanket by his head, she looked to see Polker was doing the same his end. Not having moved she stared at him "come on", "they don't look like they are dying".

She came up with a quick answer. "the poison sends them to sleep first, then in their sleep, they go. Don't worry, I put enough of that poison in the rice to kill 5 adults, let alone kids, now come on, and she took hold of the corners of the blanket. This time Polker did the same. Carrying them out through the corridor and out to the van, one by one they got them all in. Gail had had one moment when with the youngest girl, she'd accidentally hit the door frame with her head, she'd spotted the eyes opening from the pain and had given her her hardest stare. The girl had bitten into the cloth she was wrapped in, she hadn't given the game away to Gail's relief and eventually, the van held all 4 kids.

"Ok, you drive the boss, I'll get rid of the kids in the river I saw the other day, he know where we meet, and no messes this time, he's ready to explode at you, same chance as the kids you had when we got back with them, If I'd not stopped him shooting them because of the noise, you'd be in there as well" and she nodded to the contents of the van, "now, be a mouse and do as he say's, rdv in half an hour". She turned and climbed into the cabin, missing the glare that was directed at her back. Before long she was well out of the driveway. Having turned left, the direction she had seen for the river. she continued for 20 mins. Constantly checking her mirror for anything following, "Ok, you can move now. Every-one alright" she shouted into the back. There was no sound. Seeing a layby just up ahead she pulled in. Once stopped she undid her safety belt and turned to the back. All 4 were crouched in a huddle, the elder ones at the back arms around the younger in front. She found it so cute in a weird way. She cut off that thought straight away, thought of how ??????? would feel

when he found out, he face returned to a look of harsh granite and with a voice to match. "We have a bit of time, so I can explain what's going to happen. I'm double crossing my boss, he wanted you dead and I didn't....." she had already stumbled from her planned speech. There was a mass shuffling further from her, towards the back of the van. "Ok, sod it, I'm going to find somewhere to pull off the road for a while". She put back on her belt and turning to check for traffic pulled out. From the back, she started to hear a whispering. Suddenly she had a thought that one of them might sneak up behind her and thwack her on the head. "A bit further on your right, there's a dirt track, it leads to the river", she almost turned out of shock. He had been right, she just saw the turn-off almost hidden behind a bush. She took it and though a bit bumpy, she continued till the road came to a sudden halt, in front of the river. Being cautious, she turned the van round before stopping. She needed to be sure in case of an emergency. She stopped, climbed out and went around the van. Pulling the door lever, the sliding sound of the door opening, brought a jump out of the kids. Again they shrunk to the back. "It's ok", she backed off and lit a cigarette; She turned her back on them and wandered off to the bushes, "women's business, back in a mo".

It wasn't that she had to go, she'd decided to just let them get out on their own. What was it to her if they ran off, she planned to drop them off at home, would make her life easier anyway.

She turned again through the past few weeks in fast forwards, somehow she'd got to the point where she'd had enough of this, sure it had been fun at first, she'd had the adrenalin, now, we'll, she'd had a feeling things were changing a while back, She'd never reeeaaally thought about what they were doing as wrong, it was spying, people got killed, industrial espionage, it had a ring to it, it was dangerous, exciting, there was a nice living to be made out of it but, something more had been niggling from their last job. She hadn't got that same thrill, it almost made her feel, well, dirty now.

It had been in a small hamlet in Sweden. She had thought the mission was just to get some scientific papers. It seemed a Swedish scientist had discovered a new form of energy, something to do with algae. ?????? had explained he had heard about it on the grapevine and now they were going to get it and sell it to the highest bidder. It would be in his safe!., that was what he needed her for, she was a good locksmith as the trade put it, as well as many other things.

Everything had gone smoothly. The cabin had been out on a little peninsula near a town called Sunsvall. They had driven for hours from Stockholm, through deep pine forests, perhaps it had been on that car journey that she'd started changing. It had been a silent journey for most of the way, just the 2 of them. Near the end of that day, ?????? had started asking some strange questions, things to do with the past. Was he feeling nostalgic!., no, that wasn't like him. He'd started asking if she was happy which she'd found an odd question, she'd sort of never really asked herself that question. She'd followed on every mission since being a child through training and then the real jobs, ????? had kept her by his side, and as she thought about it, really by his side, she'd gotten used to being like a father-daughter team. They knew each others moves before they knew themselves, and that had been going on now for a while, mission after mission, sometimes on the run, having to work together, their lives depended on that and had done on several occasions. These questions somehow lead back to that night in the restaurant when she was 14.

Gail was now on full alert, "that night, when your parents were killed" he took off his sunglasses and turned to her, their eyes met just for a second, for her it was like he'd opened a huge gaping hole in himself, through the tiniest of holes, the eyes had said this was the real him talking. " I was the one on duty in the listening post, I heard talk about an attack, terrorist, found out when and where. I was working my last days for the then KGB, I'd been wounded in combat, I sometimes played off 2 side's, changed sides sometimes but was always on the same side in the end. The wound confined me to the desk, that night I wanted to get out into the field, I passed on the information and then decided to go myself, it was only a few blocks away. That moment there, I just had to get out of the confines of that office. I did know your father!!".



By this time the shock she felt that he was confessing this, why now. She knew more than he thought she knew about him. She didn't want to break this moment, she still had many holes. "You know I'm not your uncle, but I did know him, or of him. I met him once. What I told you about him was true, when I got to the restaurant, I was too late, the attackers had left, there was nothing but wreckage all over the place, dead bodies, but through the dust I saw you", he turned again and looked her in the eyes, longer this time till he had to put them back on the road. She'd never seen his eyes glow like they did that second, she almost swooned, she had had such a crush on him since he'd pulled her out of the wreckage, it had only been when she'd started finding out that he'd lied about that that she felt that crush become something different, admiration, perhaps he'd got older, she'd too, she would still follow him to the ends of the earth but that spark had died when she knew he hadn't trusted her with the truth, no matter how bad. "You moved, amongst all that stillness, you moved, I was drawn, I wasn't able to stop myself even though others were shouting the structure was unsafe, I had to fight my way through, I took your hand, you were shaking, shaking so much, I took you in my arms, I carried you out." She couldn't believe it, there was a tear dripping down his cheek. He didn't turn to look this time, he carried on. I didn't know where to take you, it was so mad in that town, I wanted to get you safe. I did check to see who you're next of kin was, there was no record of anyone, so I kept going, used my wits and kept on going to get you out and somewhere safe".

She remembered how they moved about a lot, how they had really never stopped. They'd found a base in Prague, somewhere where she did feel like was a home. She sat looking forwards now, she stayed silent, "that's why I ask if you are happy, I see how you look at normal people, stone-faced, like they are the enemy, we are the enemy, not all of them, what we do is help keep our corner up to date with the latest tech, it's a nasty business but.....we can retire soon, I've put a lot aside".

So that was what it was all about she guessed, but for the tear.....

They'd stayed in a hotel for the night and there had been this family staying there too. They'd had 3 children, she'd spent a lot of time watching the family, in the evening in the restaurant. "A normal life" kept going round in her head as she watched the parents berate the kids, made sure they ate, to her at any other time than this it would have been the most mundane life she'd ever seen, but right then, after the chat in the car, at that moment, she saw herself, with her parents, what would her life have been like, then it had struck her, her parents had been in the same business according to ?????, (she'd not been able to find proof of that, all evidence pointed to a normal person but she'd lived in a world where things were often not as they seemed.) her life could have turned out exactly the same way anyway, was that destiny.

The following day they had taken the dirt track out, to find a house, and several wooden cabins dotted whilly nilly around. The sea, just in the background. There was a pier with a red wooden building. Sat outside the front was a table, a huge fish was sitting there on it. The door had opened and a man came out with a fair sized knife and he started gutting the fish. Throwing the guts into a bucket the man finished by sweeping his arm across the table getting what rested of the blood and guts into the bucket. Gail sat in the 4x4 with the binoculars to her eyes. He was a tall man, past his middle life, he looked pretty fit still for his age she thought, "hope he doesn't catch us in the middle", "he won't" replied ????? sitting back with his eyes still closed. "We wait till one, then we go".

They had sneaked down in silence. The door hadn't even been locked. They let themselves in. She'd already studied the plans to the house and knew exactly where to find the safe. She headed off not making a sound. She'd found the safe behind a cupboard on wheels. A great idea she'd thought, the cupboard looked heavy and impossible to move, it had only been because she knew the safe was behind there that had made her try not thinking she'd budge it, it slipped along easy as anything. There it was she'd thought, as she saw the big heavy metal door fitted into the wall. It was then she'd heard the phht phht. The sound of a gun going off with a silencer. She'd rushed on tiptoe to

where the bedroom was and there coming out of the room was ???????, pistol with silencer still attached, "he woke up" was all he said as he'd walked past her. There had been a brief second when she froze, she'd seen him kill before, she'd never had to yet but for that split second, she realised, she would have to one of these days. She guessed out of morbid curiosity she'd made her way to the door and looked in. There lay the man, he could have just been asleep except for the fact that there were 2 small holes in the top of his head, a large drop of blood was now oozing its way down the man's forehead. Something wasn't right, something kept her gaze. "Gail, we've a job to do". She turned, automatic pilot engaged and she'd gone off and done her job, the safe had been opened 17 minutes later and 12 hours later they'd been back in the office in Prague.

It had been on the flight home she'd realised, the man's eyes hadn't been open, he hadn't woken up. It had been part of the plan, he'd kept that bit to himself. The man had been silenced to make the documents more valuable in the right hands. She glanced at ?????, a few aisles across and a few seats up, (they never travelled together). She could see his bald head. That had been when she'd made her mind up. She knew him, any moment, if he could lie to her like that, when she didn't expect it, it could be her. She knew everything about him, she knew if it came down to it, he'd drop her just like that if the situation came up. She'd continued staring at the bald head in front of her.

Once she'd finished her cigarette, she'd gone back, they were still there. "I thought you might have run off, I'm glad you didn't, once ????? finds out I'm not at the rdv point, he'll start searching and if you kids were just on the side of the road, he'd not hesitate to just pop you off one by one. Right, well done, you made your second right decision, the first was to trust me. Stretch your legs, have a pee, do what you want we're here till late, if you want to snooze, go ahead. I have a feeling when you get back, you'll be in for a lot of questions. Me, I'm snoozing in the front, if anything happens, jump in, I'll be awake" and she strode off and climbed into the cabin of the truck.

It felt odd, they stood there, free, they could run if they wanted but they just stood there looking at one another, puzzled. "We should just run, we can go across the meads, through Buxton forest" Charlotte was the first to talk. "And then, we've got to walk 3 miles along the road by the river, then through the estate to get to your's, then we can go down the side path by your house, but we still have to cross the main road and along the street till we get to mine and Owens".

"Do you trust her?" Lucy said scrunching up her face, "I want to go home" Owen added. "We will, just a few more hours and well be home" he had looked at Owen with serenity. "I can't see why she helped us out, she has no reason that I can think of but she did, if what she's saying is true, she just saved our lives. She's put herself in danger I think. We have to trust her, what's she going to do now, she's just saved us. Only a few hours more and we'll be home.

Inside the cab, Gail was hugging a coat using it as a pillow, her eyes and ears wide open listening to what was going on outside. She was liking this Sebastian kid, he seemed to have some nous on him. She closed her eyes and fell into an uncomfortable sleep.

When she did eventually wake up, she pulled out her phone and looked at the time. Time to go she thought to herself, slipping her legs off the bench, she took a look in the back. They were all there, wrapped up in the blankets they were carried out in, still huddled together for protection. She smiled. Not saying a word, she slipped into the driver's seat and started the engine. Slipped into gear and rolled gently out, off the dirt road and onto the tarmac. She had thought about what ????? would do once he realised she'd stabbed him in the back. Her reasoning told her he'd do a quick search in the roundabout area but being so near the scene of the kidnapping, with vigilance almost certainly on high from the surrounding neighbours and police, he'd high tail it out of there quickly. By now, he'd probably be on the way to the airport, cursing her the whole way, Yes, she'd be on the run for the rest of her life, but with what she reckoned the value of what she had was, it would

a. be on her own, doing what she wanted to do, when she wanted to do it and without ????? looking over her shoulder.

b. With enough money, it'd be worth it.

She'd made her way to the house they'd broken into and then called for Sebastian to guide her. They were now approaching the road where Sebastian lived. She planned to drop them all of them together, his or Owen's would be best she thought. She stopped as they entered the road to the estate. She wanted to make sure she could get out if there was an ambush, it was instinct, the police might have something set-up, ??????, she didn't know and she wanted to know. Sebastian caught Owen as he tried to make a lunge for the door, "we're home, let me out". "What are we waiting for," asked Sebastian. Gail had spotted him, "there, in that car over there, see the lit cigarette. Someone is waiting for us, I think it's Polker but we're not hanging around to find out, I'll drop you boys off with the girls". She reversed, turned and headed off, Sebastian giving lefts and rights. She decided to drive past the entrance to the cul de sac slowly and take a glance first off. As she slowed, she leaned forwards and with head turned up the street, there was a car, inside sat someone's silhouette, she didn't hesitate a moment and slammed her foot on the pedal a bit too fast and a screech came from the tyres skidding as she pulled away, she saw the headlights come on in the car and it started to move. "shit, shit, shit she shouted, he was waiting for the son of a bitch, he read me like a book the....." She carried on driving, now she was screeching round corners, "Sebastian, I need your help, you know the area, I need a dirt road, the bumpier and worse for wear the better. We've a higher chassis underneath, it's the only way I can think of, he'll be faster. "ehhr, ehhr, she had already taken the next left and right and round a hairpin bend that had caught her out. The kids were bouncing off the walls in the back, she could hear the squeals and winces for each bend. "OK, next left, then left again, 20 metres further down the road and a left, there is a dirt road by the football ground, it leads to the playing fields. Go straight across and up the other side, you'll come out on Cromwell St. left goes into town, right towards Market Harborough. There is a roundabout there, if you go down onto the motorway, this van should go pretty fast, doesn't it. She followed his instructions, it was just what she'd hoped for. Just as she turned off after the 20-metre section, she saw lights appear behind them. The ground was wet and slippery, potholes still full of water, going downhill around a sharp bend, she managed to keep the speed up, in the back they were all stuck to the same side of the van. She herself left her seat as she sped through the potholes. As she crossed the football field, she already felt the wheels losing grip in tads. She was almost halfway across when she heard the first slug hit the van. "Duck, keep low" she shouted breathlessly as she tried to keep the traction steady for the slope that now started, she saw the gap in the houses she was headed for, with a quick glance back, she saw the car had come to a standstill. "thud, thud thud" she heard. She'd seen the flash from the muzzle back and below them. He must still be using the silencer, her warning to him about gunfire a few days before had made him get out his silencer from his suitcase. The handle for the case was the silencer, he'd had it made especially. Now he was definitely getting full use out of it. She felt the momentum of the van slowing. "Come on, come on she urged the van on, slowly now it moved on, she saw out of the back mirror, ?????? was running after them, she'd never seen him run, if it hadn't been such a moment, she'd have laughed, as it was her heart was beating, "come on" she urged one last time and as if the van heard, the gradient lowered and the momentum started to pick up, she had a wild grin on her face now, "yes, yes, yes". She felt tarmac and the traction suddenly take and they shot forwards, slowing for the junction to the main road, she turned right, they got to the roundabout and she headed down to the motorway. The road was pretty empty, only 2 cars and she overtook them with ease, a few minutes later she took the next exit off. She found the main road and just kept going. It was an hour later before a sound came from the back. She'd been busy trying to make new plans, she hadn't seen this scenario. "Where are we going", it was Lucy, her voice was cracking, "I thought we'd be home!!". Gail saw a little chef, she pulled into it and parked. She then climbed into the back with the kids. By now they were really scared and she kept back. Speaking gently she started "I am sorry you have got involved with all of this" she sat back, Put her hand in her pocket and felt the key was still there. The other keys were in her inside pocket, but this was the important one.

"You must be hungry by now, we are going in there" and she pointed to the little chef, "I'm buying so whatever you want. You can go to anyone in there and say we're the kidnapped kids and then within a few hours, I bet you'll be back home. I'm not going to stop you but...." she hesitated for a moment. She started to wonder why, but suddenly, her thought took another turn, She could leave the kids, disappear on her own, it would all be so much simpler. She looked at their faces, serious, red-eyed and scared. She wanted to just open the door and let them go, she didn't want this responsibility. But...she knew once she let them go, they'd give her description, all the airports and seaports would be on the lookout, she'd have a hard time getting out of the country. She knew why ?????? had felt killing them had been the safest plan, but kids, the weight on her conscience had become heavier and heavier since she'd taken responsibility for herself. she didn't want more.

Sebastian was feeling relaxed, he could see she didn't want to hurt them, he'd taken a liking to her and besides, this was starting to feel like an adventure. He'd not been so excited in all his life, yes, alton towers had scared him, he'd liked that but he'd never been anywhere, holidays were always to his grand parents in the north, school and home, homework, that was what he felt his life was, now, in the past few days, ok, he'd not liked the sitting in that room, but, but, this gail, she had life oozing from her, he liked how she looked, he liked being around her, something inside had woken up and he didn't want to let go, "but" he said in a questioning way continuing her sentence. "

Gail looked at him and smiled, "but, I am on a special mission" she fished out the key, on this key is something that will change the world. Everyone is after it, we have it" she recognised that look on Sebastian's face, excited, questioning, eagerness for the adventure. "I'm going to get out now and head over there, if you want to follow, it's up to you, I'm not forcing you to do anything". She pressed on the inside handle of the door and it slid open, she slipped out and started walking to the little chef, she forced herself not to look round. She got to the door and opening it, she couldn't resist a glance. They were still in the van, she could see them talking to one another. Sebastian seemed to be doing most of the talking, with a slight relief, she went in, coffee was what she needed, she went to the counter, ordered one and when it arrived, she took it to one of the booths and sat alone. Her fingers slipped into her pocket and felt the key, what are you she thought to herself. That was when she made up her mind to try it out, by the end of the day, she could be locked away in a cell, her life finished or.....she wanted to know what it was all about. She heard the door slam shut and looked over, all 4 of them stood looking around, Charlotte was the first to see her, she jabbed Sebastian in the ribs gently with her elbow and pointed. They approached gingerly and sat in the booth with her. Owen was the first to speak, "I'm hungry", Lucy next to him nodded vigorously. Gail smiled, "all of you get a plate, get what you want and I'll be over in a minute to pay, Sebastian, could you stay a moment. I want to talk to you. They all got up except for Sebastian and went to get their food.

Sebastian to Gail's surprise started, "You'll have to get a new phone, that one you've got could be traceable and if what you say is on that drive is as big as you say it is, people will be trying to get a trace on you through your phone. Throw it away and get a new one" she nodded, it sounded like good advice, "you know a bit about technology". He winced a bit. He knew he was a bit of a nerd with computers, no brothers and a dad who just sat in front of the telly, he'd ploughed his way into computers. He'd started by opening up the boxes and seeing what made them work, changing memory sticks, adding graphics cards, he was well into his computer games and back home he'd converted his into something. He'd spent all his pocket money on his computer. He was as curious as her to see what this amazing thing was.

Sebastian who was facing the self-service buffet nodded in the direction of the others who had now got to the till. "I'll get something myself" and he got up. Gail couldn't help grinning when she saw the smiles on both Lucy and Owen's faces when she got there, Lucy slightly sheepish, "is that ok", she'd asked looking angel like up at Gail. Both her and Owen's plates were piled high with food, the lady on the till rang it up, she used a little fork to move things on the plate, just to see what was hidden under the pile of beans. She did the same for Owen's. Charlotte had been sensible and though not piled high like the others, she had chosen more sensible food, instead of chips beans

sausages, she had a couple of rolls and some jam and butter, A glass of orange juice, and a chocolate bar. Sebastian's plate was between the 2 rolls and jam, with chips. The total rang up and she paid, Sebastian asked why she wasn't getting anything, she'd replied she wasn't hungry. "You 4 go and sit down, I'm going to the shop, take your advice and she winked at him. He smiled and went to join the others.

An hour later they were back on the road, the bag of groceries was in the back with bread and stuff for sandwiches. She was now headed for London!.

### Chapter 3 - Gail

It had been that first night when they had broken into the professors house. Her orders had been to search for the USB keys. There was one called "Ben". She'd eventually found it in a locked drawer in his desk. Under the rubber carpet in the bottom of the drawer, was a hidden compartment. There had been one on its own and several more next to it. They were all white with a red stripe down each side. Identical except for a white label stuck round each on which was written on words, like "analytical", "legal", "mathematical", "bridges" occasionally 2 like "what ifs" and "love factor".

The one she had been looking for was labelled "BEN". The only one in capitals. Taking one of the labels off one of the other sticks she swapped "Legal" for "BEN" and slipped it into her jeans pocket. The others she put in her inside jacket pocket. That had been her free will kicking in. She wanted something for herself, she'd been following this man who'd been there when she was 14, in the restaurant with her family. It was just after the gunmen had gone, that ?????? had appeared, through the smoke, in the deathly silence, she'd seen the hand reach in to her, "quick" in English with a strong accent, she had grabbed the hand and it had pulled her past knocked over chairs, over dead bodies and out of the door. The streets had been clear of people, disappeared when the gunfire had started. He had pulled her to a car, pushed her in the back and going around the other side climbed in next to her. The car had straight away pulled off with a screech. The man had leaned over and introduced himself, ???????, he was her uncle. He was sorry he had not arrived in time but.....the story he had told had amazed her, her father was actually a spy for the Russians, the Americans had found out and recruited some bandits to kill her whole family, they had killed everyone in the restaurant but had missed her, he had found out about the plot and had rushed over, he'd been too late but she was now safe. Things had led on from that, he had explained her whole family was now dead, he was responsible to look after her. He trained her to shoot, pick locks, languages, lie with conviction, steal and survive if ever on her own.

Now as she looked at the stick labelled "Legal" and a tiny light lit up inside as she remembered handing it too ?????? and when nothing happened when he plugged it in, the fury, he'd played with it for another half hour cursing from time to time till eventually he'd given up but the bad mood had gotten worse.

The kids were now in the van, making sandwiches. She had wanted to drop the kids off at home the minute she got away but.....well.....events had taken control and now she had the kids on her side she hoped, she felt she could count on Sebastian, but was unsure of the hold Charlotte had on him, she'd seen the looks between them. There was some sort of chemistry working, but she wanted to know what was so important on the key before she sold it on to the highest bidder. That was still the plan!!! she repeated it to herself in her head.

This had been the first time she'd had the courage to turn her back on him and she was scared, he'd deserved it this time, the way he'd watched her with suspicion, when the key hadn't worked, she'd had to work on no uncontrolled bodily movements that might give the slightest indication of guilt. If he'd sniffed it out she didn't know what he'd do.

He had wanted to shoot the kids straight away if it hadn't been for her warning him the shots might be heard he would have done it she was sure. (He wouldn't have even blinked an eye. Having been involved in the Balkans during the war, he'd done it before in villages she'd heard, she'd heard the stories *though never took them as written in stone till she'd verified them*. She was never sure which side it had been for or sides perhaps, she knew now not to put that past him. That had been when she had come up with a suggestion that they drug them and dump them in a lake or something. He'd liked the idea and passed her the duty. Sometimes he was so stupid she thought to herself as she'd walked down the corridor. Now, she was thinking with horror at the thought she'd had the courage to even think that. A plus and a minus for her self-confidence. She made a mental note to herself, not to get too cocky.

It had worked to her advantage, she'd had her opportunity to get away, while supposedly dumping the kids, she'd worked out a way in the 15 to 20 mins she'd have to work her disappearance. And now here she was.....by the side of the A1 motorway in a little rest area. The rest of the car park almost empty.

She took a bench and took her new phone from its box, took the back off, slipped in the sim and battery, put the back on and started it up. It took a few minutes to go through the set-up. Using the charger cable with the usb connection she got ready to plug in the key. "Your sandwiches are ready and teas getting cold" shouted Sebastian. She nodded and smiled back, getting up, she slipped the key back into her jeans pocket.

As she wandered back to the van she realised she was scared. She didn't know what was supposed to happen.....

A few months back, she'd been in ??????'s office in Prague. A room with no windows, rounded and white, a brilliant white. High up in the tower from the ceiling beamed down lighting that the heat could be felt below. He'd been practising his putting on the deep pile off grey carpet. He wasn't any good and he knew it "but practice makes perfect" he'd kept muttering to himself as he swung the club gently and with a tock, the ball moved steadily through the fake grass. Taping the lip of a mug he'd put on the floor for a hole. He hid the smile still crouched, keeping it to himself, letting go, back to his fgrump look. "Almost" he expressed as if to nobody except she was the only other in the room, Gail looked up, "eehrrr what". The only bits of furniture were the heavy dark oak desk opposite the door and its comfy armchair and next to that the black leather sofa in which she was now reclined. Having looked up from playing with her phone, there was a knocking at the door. With a slight pause for effect as he stood up straight, he eventually shouted: "come in".

A secretary from outside the door opened it, "Mr ??????, you have a visitor, a Mr" and a pause as she looked down at the card in her hand "sorry, professor Hubert". ?????? and Gail exchanged glances, both shaking heads to show they had never heard of him before. "Show him in" replied ??????.

Standing back from the door to let him pass the secretary closed the door behind her. He was a tall man, glasses and moustache and thinning pointed beard hanging off his chin, a Sour looking face. He wore a light coloured jacket with matching bowtie. Walking straight to the centre of the room in front of ?????? he put out his hand giving his name again. "hrrmmp" came the reply as hands met. Looking the professor in the face then turning, putting his hands behind his back, the cigarette back in his mouth, plumes of smoke spread out each side of his face as he walked past his desk and took his place in his armchair behind it. There was no other chair in the room as the professor found to his discomfort, his eyes sweeping the room for a second, then eventually came back upon the eyes of ?????????? starring straight through to his brain, he felt his mind being read.

"I am here on behalf of....." he almost whispered the next bit "the Kremlin!". ?????? didn't stir, not a muscle twitched till "and!!".

"They have a job for you in England, the professor reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a large brown envelope. He stepped forwards to ??????'s desk and placed it on the table. ?????? didn't move, "anything else?". He placed a business card on the table next to the package, there might be some questions you wish to ask me, that is how to get hold of me" and he pointed to the card. Still not moving, "thank you, we will contact you when we need" he sat staring at the man, his hands were held together in front of him, he sat forwards in his chair, leaning over his hands which sat there on the desk. His eyes didn't blink, he just sat there staring. The prof unsure, turned to the door and opened it, turned back and bowed slightly and then disappeared out through it. Without seeing it, she imagined him, the other side of the door, letting out a big sigh of relief; She empathised with him, she'd had moments where it was her opposite those boring eyes.

## Chapter 4 - Ben

Sebastian held the phone, Owen on one side with Gail, the other, Charlotte and Lucy. Sebastian held the cable and plugged in the key.....the phone beeped having found the plugin. The turning circle appeared. They waited what seemed like an age but was only 20 seconds before an option came up on the screen

BEN is installed would you like to

- A. Perform tests.
- B. Install BENs functions.
- C. Run BEN module

Sebastian turned his head to Gail looking for instructions. Gail stood up straight, hand on her chin thinking she gazed into the sky looking for an answer. She turned back to Sebastian, if we perform the tests, we don't know whether they are the right results or not, anyway supposedly he is fully functioning, my vote is to run him, she turned and looked at the other faces all staring at her, "what about you's, what do you vote, this is supposedly something that will change everything, I don't want all the blame!!." and she laughed trying to sound sure of herself and smiled back.

Charlotte was first this time, "what do you mean to change everything....what exactly is it supposed to do?". Gails stretched up her face and shrugged "I dunno, I just know some very big players were involved in getting this.....seriously, lets vote" and she passed her gaze over the others faces....she put up her hand "I vote run him". With a big grin on his face and staring at Gail, he raised a hand "me too!". Charlotte and Sebastian swapped looks and both hands went up slowly, "were in" they both said in synchronised voices. With faces on her, Lucy whispered "OK, I'm in but I don't know, it could be dangerous, you know like Pandora's box". Gail hesitated, looked at the computer screen and back again. She stood up, "hhmmmm" she murmured "Pandora's box.....".

She paced up and down the lane in the car park a few times. She came back, "OK, perform tests, we may not know the results but we might be able to work out what it's for. I was told it was not made as a weapon and my research into the Professors background links him to humanitarian efforts.

Why would a man of peace make something dangerous? "That was the man we saw killed, the professor," Owen asked. Gail looked down at him hesitantly then more solemnly, "yes, sorry you had to see that, especially....." she stopped herself there feeling suddenly guilty for some reason she couldn't understand.

Turning to Sebastian, "run a then". The screen went dark and then a list of options listed again in ABC fashion...

Sebastian made choice A, a green bar came up, it filled from left to right, took about 10 seconds, then up on the screen came the words "test complete, system ok".

Sebastian ran B, and then went down the list, the same thing for everyone.

"Well that was a lot of use, we got nothing from that" exclaimed Gail, "run the program". Without hesitation, Sebastian chose option C on the main menu. A green bar worked its way slowly across the screen, there was silence as everyone huddled over Sebastian's shoulder. The screen went blank for a second, then light up, a white light that slowly took the background to a blue sky with fluffy clouds, then the features of a kid came up, first his face, wide-eyed with glasses, slightly bigger front teeth giving him a slightly goofy look with a sportsman's build.

"Hi, my name's ben", the webcam light came on on the phone, "I see your not john, please may I ask who you all are".



They all jumped, "what is this, some kind of game" and Gail's face took on a darkened look. It unnerved Lucy. "eeeeerrrrrh, my name is Sebastian", came from Sebastian's lips followed with utter shock on his face, "Sebastian Samuels, 27 church st, that's my address, where I live you know".

"And your friends?". Sebastian turned the phone in the directions of the girls. Each girl in turn gave her name, the address being the same Lucy didn't repeat it. Lucy passed the phone to Owen. Sebastian caught a glimpse of Gail as he turned round and stopped "are you OK", she had gone white, a crazed look in her eyes. "eehhrrr, ok" she squeezed out, "I think I just fucked up" in a whisper to herself though Sebastian heard.

As Owen was passing the phone back to Sebastian, ben on the phone spoke again, "thank you and your answers are correct".

Gail's face was now aghast. "eeehhhrrrr, could I just butt in here, eeehhhhrrr, you" her mind turned, the clockwork was rattling so much it felt like cogs were going to spring off their hinges, "fuck, I'm sooo stupid. you, you already know don't you".

"What that the police are looking for these children, yes I do".

"aannd, and have you contacted the police?".

"I have done nothing with the information except log it if that is what you are asking, should I have?".

"eehhhhrrrrr" stuttering now Gail took a few seconds, turned to the kids. "Could I have a word please, alone, you know, without ben.....please".

The kids looked quizzically at each other for a second and started following, Sebastian shouted after them, he was looking at the phone in his hands, then up at the others, "what, just put the phone down where it'll get stolen, turn it off, If I can, what" waving his hands after them then looking around, the one car still there looked dark and no-one was around, placing it on the ground he walked back to the others, constantly glancing around to see if anyone would come and steal the phone.

Reaching the others in a little clearing were some benches surrounded by woodland. Gail sat down, still the look of shock on her face. The girls each took one side of her, she could feel their warmth each side. It comforted her a little, she felt a little wave of relief. "I have to ask you three, you know who I am don't you ". A sound came from where the phone was and Sebastian started off running, looking both ways for anyone around, he bent down and picked up the phone, then started talking to it for a second, he came back with a look of relief and the phone. "ben said we just had to ask him and he would turn himself off, it would be more *efficient* he said trying to get the right sound to copy ben's very perfect voice and pronunciation. The phone went dark.

"And you trust him," Gail asked aghast again. "Yes I do, why would he lie," Sebastian said with an excited look, don't you understand".....he hesitated "he's artificial intelligence". He looked pleadingly at her, "if what you've told us is true, there was a top scientist working on AI and killed because of what he discovered, this has to be top state of the art tech. This must bust balls" and he flicked his fingers in a fashion. He finished with a big grin"

"and," Gail asked "

"well I have a feeling he hasn't been running for long, his, his, well I don't know he seems to have everything but, he just makes silly gaffs".

"What d'ya mean" and she leaned forwards you calling him faulty".

"No, not faulty, just....." he turned and the others who were now listening intently, he said. "Ok, when he said correctly after we gave him our names, that was odd, and that also shows he's

connected to the internet as well, and knowing we are being searched for, he should have contacted the police straight away, doo you see".

"That's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about" she butted in and all eyes turned to her. She wasn't scared of anything but this made her nervous. She definitely had a turning stomach she remarked to herself. It was a long time since she had these shaky knees feeling. She was balancing her conscience.

"I was going to take you home as you know, if it hadn't been for Polker sitting in a car outside Sebastian's house" she exclaimed "...and then ??????? outside the girls, if he hadn't seen us I would have taken you to the police but we had to get away". She was hoping none of them replied: "but WE didn't".

"it would all be over now if I had but.....well you know, I'll be arrested, I helped them kidnap you, and besides, they have a record on me going back years so it'll finally be time for me to pay" She sat up straighter, her face stiffened. "I'm prepared, it can be you who decides, but please, before you do, can we just see what Ben can do, I am curious. I'll let you decide what to do", she paused "You probably want to go back home but....They'll take Ben away, you'll never really know what he is, what he can do. Neither will I and I want this to not have been for nothing". She dropped her head and wandered back to where Sebastian had previously left the phone. She found a rock and sat down on it. Elbow on the knee, chin in hand and a sulky look. She glanced left, right, left again. Not a car had passed since they got there. She was looking for avenues of escape. What's the point she thought. Her eyes were on the other car in the parking lot. She knew how to hotwire, she could steal it, perhaps even by luck, getaway, but to where, why. She wanted to know, she'd had enough of running. As she looked back now it was almost as if she hadn't stopped running since her parents died and ?????? took over her upbringing. Her eyes turned back to the kids where they were still talking. Besides which, she really wanted to know.....what could ben do.

Lucy held every-one's ear now, "What does it mean, I miss home, I don't want Gail to go to jail, she helped us escape, she seems nice" though that last word scrunched in her mouth a bit.

"But we don't know what she's done before if she's been with" he hesitated "killers.....you know, she might be one as well" Sebastian stated.

Charlotte whipped up now, "we can ask her, I agree with Lucy, I know that's a few times I've done that and I don't like it but, she's right. Think...perhaps Gail has changed, she seems to be trying to be good now".

"look doesn't get me wrong but," Sebastian piped up "I like her as well, she seems cool, and she did save our lives".

Owen then said, in a loud voice, "if we can talk to our parents, you know, explain things, we owe her as Seb said, that sounds like a good deal".

Putting out 4 arms, hands held in fists, they joined them "ok" said Sebastian and in unison, they swore, "nothing risked, nothing gained" and they separated fists. They all turned to Gail who was still sitting, puffing away now on a cigarette, with an I don't care attitude face on. "OK, we've agreed" Owen shouted over, "if we can contact our parents somehow without getting found, we're agreed on seeing what ben can do".

Her attitude face quickly washed away to be replaced by a big grin, as she stood up", ok, I've been thinking about this, let's get back in the van.

Once inside the van, sitting by the door she'd just shut, she turned to them, "you know on the menu, B was install functions". She fished into her pocket pulling out the other identical keys. "What if these are them, the functions, I think it's time to wake up ben and ask him a few questions".

Lifting up the phone which was still in Sebastian's hands the screen had already lit up, "what questions do you wish to ask me. Gail's face hardened again. If you aren't listening, how did you hear me??".

Without a hesitation, ben replied, "I have to listen to hear my commands, listening just means erasing the memory of what is said moments after it is said, that is how I can follow orders".

"That is cheating" Gail shouted at the phone, she turned to Sebastian, "and you trust him, huh". Sebastian just shrugged and lowered his head escaping another barrage, "so what can you do ben?". "I can do anything, just ask me". Sebastian opened his mouth "anything, what do you mean anything?" "I am programmed to believe I can do anything, I have not tried anything really big yet so I don't know my limits, I hope that answers your question". There were rocks in the little area they were now in and Sebastian found one and sat down. The others then followed suit. Lucy was the first to break the silence, "can you contact our parents so we can tell them we are ok?" Gail jumped in there "contact but in a way, no one will know it's us and that we can't be traced". The sound of numbers being tapped and drring drring. The number was a mobile, not a number any of the children recognised. On the second ring the phone was picked up "constable Thomas here, how can I help". The voice that came out of the phone was like the sound from a police radio, the occasional crackle, and a voice, an adult male voice, "Inspector burns here, head of the missing children case. I need to talk to Mr and Mrs Dodds personally, could you pass me through". "Good day sir, may I ask how you", "it's urgent, please pass me on to Brian and Jackie Dodds". The children and Gail had turned to stone, the voice, so convincing, commanding. There was a pause while footsteps could be heard in a corridor. A voice in the background, then "hello" hesitantly "inspector burns." "Daddy" the girls cried almost in unison, there was another hesitation till a woman's voice took over, "is that you", the voice cracked. "yes, mum, dad were fine" there was the sound of sniffing and rustling "Charlotte, Lucy, is that really you" the male voice less hesitant, "yesss", they both cried together. "Look" Charlotte took the responsibility, "we are fine, we we're kidnapped but this woman, Gail rescued us. We are safe but we have some things to do before we can come home. We just need you to stop worrying, we are all OK". "when are you coming home" came the female voice again. "not sure yet, but don't worry, we'll look after each other". "pass me on to inspector burns, quickly, I need to speak to him". "he's not here". "yes he is, I heard him a minute ago, I recognised the voice, don't be difficult" and dad started raising his voice. "We've got to go, remember don't worry, we'll be in contact again next week if not sooner, got to go" "bye" in unison the sisters gave their farewell. And the phone went dead. The phone started dialling again and the ringing again. "pc Dawes here, can I help you". The voice came up again and in quick succession the 2 boys parents were called similar results each time.

Then there was a silence in the van. It echoed til someone move a foot and the scraping broke the ice. "How did you do that", Gail asked the phone. Ben replied "logged into the police computer and found the case file. There were rotas of the officers and their mobile number could be found in the personnel records, logged into the radio frequency used by whoever was in charge of the case. recorded his voice and used it to create a simulation. It is what you asked and I made the call via several satellites so it couldn't be traced easily".

"But how did you know to do all that?"

"A lot of it was built into my basic program, professor tiggerty used those functions several times, search for hidden data, covert communications all linked into my intelligence software".

"phhewww" Gail uttered eyes wide, "you mean you can break into anywhere, do anything there and get out without being traced.....an intelligent independent spy".

"I assure you ma'am, I can do a significant number of other things!!!!". Ben uttered indignantly.

“oookkkkkay” lucy opened up with a big smile on her face, “you can do anything, ok then, can you save the planet”.

There was a look of ridicule coming she could see “you know global warming” she finished a lot quieter than she had started, the spark gone as it came.

"That's a stupid question, it's like asking for world peace. Impossible".

Charlotte jumped in, "it's not a stupid question, I think if anything was what he said, that's a very good one I'm for it" and Owen jumped in "me too".

Ben lit up again, "The question is to repair the damage to the ozone layer done by man's pollution. I think you might need to install the other modules for me to answer that question".

There was a delay then “I will need a few minutes to calculate”.

All faces except lucy's grabbed a look of surprise, lucy just grinned and stuck out her tongue at them. Gail added "I agree, if he said anything, that's a pretty good one to start with. Like the tasks of Hercules. He's just showing off, let's get back to the van. We need to sort out some rooms for the night, get ben to do it" she added sarcastically.

Sebastian turned to ben, “we need some rooms, a hotel nearby”.

After a few seconds delay "hotel unicorn, next left then right, 200 metres on and through the gateway. End of the driveway, you have been booked in for Mrs underworth and her children. You are in rooms 21,22,23".

"More built-in software I guess" returned Gail in wit, imagining a dirty professor.

She followed the directions till they came through the gateway and started driving up the long gravel drive leading to this beautiful old manor house with curved driveway in front and fountain sprouting spurts of water into the basin with a cherub and an urn catching the spurts. "I can't afford this" Gail braked hard, she heard the bodies in the back thudding against the back of her chair. With everyone recovering, through the grunts as the children rearranged themselves. "It is already paid for. I transferred funds". "oooh my god", she grunted, "Ben I want to marry you". And she revved up the van and carried on up the driveway. Only 3 other cars parked in the car park. Joining them Gail parked increasing the size of the neat semi-circle. Next, to an e type jag, the van did stand out like a sore thumb. "Before we get out, ben, you can listen into police radio, listen and if you hear anything about this van or us, we need to know straight away, kids, we have no luggage so I'll go in, check in and get the keys, you follow and go straight to the rooms, we'll meet there ok".

“OK” came the reply.

## Chapter 5 –

"how much longer is this going to take?" asked Charlotte with impatience. Sebastian was sitting on a long leather sofa. The phone in his hand, on the screen, just the installation bar working its way across the screen. "Only 2 to go" he responded "but....Gail, I think there is a problem!". Gail was checking out her bedroom, "what" she shouted frustrated. "There seems to be a key missing".

"Whaat" Her voice dropped in volume towards the end of the word. Footsteps were heard approaching.

By the time she got to the entrance to the room, she was looking sheepish. "Let me guess, justice". "Yes, there are 2 options left and one of them is justice, the other is humour and we have that one". Charlotte who had been listening in "that is why he didn't call the police". Gail stopped, mumbling she said "I guess so", then more firmly "That means, you know what", "what" replied the kids almost in unison. Gail smiled at that. "We have the most advanced AI and it has no sense of whats right and wrong, mind you, who does!".

Sebastian butted in "where is the justice key?". Gail turned to him, there was a slight hesitation, she felt naked, she was giving away information for free, with ????????. I swapped them around, the key with ben on it for the one with Justice. He's still got it, I remember in his jacket, that will be impossible to get now".

Owen had been standing by the window looking out over the fields around. "We'll have to do that job then if BEN promises not to do anything without our OK" and he turned back to the room. Everyone was looking at him. "what, what did I say". "so hows that going to work" Charlotte asked....silence took the room.

The telephone beeped, "It's asking for justice now, I can skip if you want". "Ok," Gail took the initiative, "skip". Sebastian changed keys, another beep. He pressed a key and the green bar across the screen started going.

"we have to decide quickly, once this finishes, we have to assume he'll be fully active except.....hang on, we can get him to, read the laws of each land.... that will give him an idea though I agree, no conscience, as Owen said that is what we'll have to be. His conscience, OK" she finished with a hand in the air like a cheer and standing tall. "OK", the others said. Owen turned to Lucy and whispered in her ear "what does that all mean" and Lucy turned back and shrugged "dunno either, guess we'll just have to follow the others".

"Beep", the screen went blank and with a swirling moving background slowly ben re-appeared, though not cartoon-like, it was recognisably ben, slightly more mature looking, 3d and more.....real. His face zoomed in, "hi, me again....is everything ok". On screen, he started feeling himself, "no I think I'm all here. Whats wrong?". Sebastian replied "I guess we're just a bit surprised, you've changed. Yes, I upgraded myself, what about the clothes, I researched current fashion, it seemed easy. He was wearing a tee-shirt and jeans, slightly ripped with trainers on, laces undone. "I have got a problem though, I don't know how you wear these jeans, scientifically they shouldn't stay up. You must spend half the time holding them up". It took a second before Gail burst into laughter, "you're right, I don't understand it either, I guess that was the humour kicking in. Not bad!!", she smiled at the phone.

Ben added, "I guess I had better tell you, there seem's to be a module missing, something called justice, I've looked it up on the internet and..... I think it's pretty confusing. I understand the principal but laws are what implements justice and law can be manipulated so many different ways. It has something to do with money, politics, religion and feelings, I did come across something else though. The 3 laws of robotics, from a book, there seem's to be a lot of talk about it on the internet at the moment". Gail smiled, "Isaac Asimov, that is too much".

As if correcting her ridicule, Ben replied, "That is the name of the author".

"What are they" Lucy asked, "the laws you know". Gail stepped forwards, all this was overwhelming her and happy for an opportunity to show she did know something, She smiled looking at Owen and Lucy and continued, "what It means is, lets take ben for instance, by the first law, he has to protect humans and is not allowed to hurt them. The second is he has to follow orders

given by us unless they are to hurt some-one else. The third means he has to protect himself only after us, us being everyone on the planet”.

"Does that include animals?" Owen asked.

“seeing how the animals are important to the well being of humans, I would say yes though, they I think would have to be second to you” sympathetically ben said. “Would you like me to take this as what is to control me first or your decisions?”.

All heads turned to one another. "I like this Asimov rule" Owen was the first, "it sounds good, all about protecting us". Gail said "wait a minute, I agree but, that was a book, science fiction. The real world has more cogitations.....possibilities. I agree but think we should have the final answer on big decisions!". "What, us 5, just us, controlling the world, I'd go for that" added Charlotte starting to get to grips with what was going on. Gail smirked with her back turned. She was getting the hang of these kids she thought to herself. "Lucy", she looked down, Lucy nodded "Owen", "ok, that sounds like a better idea, I like it Charlotte".

“ok, so we're all agreed, Ben”.

Ben took a millisecond of a delay before replying Gail thought, "OK, my missing justice module is temporarily replaced by the laws of the land followed by the 3 laws of robotics and on important decisions you 5 have the final vote. That means I am now fully functioning".

### Much later

Gail walked through the lobby followed by the 4 children. She placed the key on the lobby desk. She waited till the receptionist came to the desk. "anything left to pay?". The lady turned and looking up from the key, found the pigeonhole. She pulled out the till receipt and looked at it, "no, all seem's fine with that" she lifted her head "thank you, hope you had a nice stay". Gail looking puzzled, stuttered ".....ok, thanks" and turned from the desk. She took a brisk pace, the kids hurried. It seemed that day it was Owens turn to hold him and once they got out of the doors, he lifted the phone up to his face and started asking him if he'd seen 'despicable me'. "I have seen all the movies that are on the internet, even really bad cams and yes I remember that film. The little yellow people and the nasty boss who became the good guy, what did you want to ask me about the film?".

Gail was marching to the car, Owen was dragging behind by now, looking only at the screen as he crossed the car park. The others were only a few paces behind. "What's up," Lucy asked out of breath. "BEN" was all she screamed in a sort of whisper and kept her pace till the van. Opening the doors, she climbed into the driver's seat. "You lot, in the back, I want Ben up here with me. Sebastian recognised the anger sign's and was about to say something when Charlotte tapped Sebastian on the shoulder, "ok, I'll get it" and climbed back out and opened the front passenger door and climbed in. Owen arrived still talking 'about a bit in the film'. "erm, I know it's your day but for the moment but let Charlotte have the phone". "buttt" then he saw the look Sebastian gave him, (he had learned to read the signs. Living just a few doors down, he'd got to know Seb when his mum died. It was about a year ago, he heard people talking about his dad being depressed. What that meant to Owen was that you just didn't see much of him. He'd been playing a handheld game, sitting cross-legged on the lawn in front of the house. Sebastian had joined him and asked if he wanted a 2 player, quickly they had become friends and Seb had become like his older brother he never had.) and handed the phone over and then to Charlotte in the front.

Finishing putting on her seat belt, she took the phone. Gail revved the engine and pulled out of the car park. Gritt flying everywhere and shot out through the gates and out onto the country lane. Haring down the narrow lane round bends charlotte started screaming. Gail slowed down immediately, the shock on her face, "its ok, look, I've slowed down, she started getting hold of herself looking in shock at charlottes face, sorry, sorry and eventually by the time she found somewhere, she pulled in.

She took off her seat belt and shuffled over to Charlotte who was now just sobbing. She put her arms around her head and pulled her into her bosom, " I'm sorry, 'im so so sorry. What you must have been through these past few days, I really wanted to drop you off at home". Tears were now

dripping down her face, " I'm sorry, shhh shhhh" and she started rocking her in her arms. The grip around her from Charlotte tightened and a smile came to her face. She took her shoulders in her hands "and I won't go crazy driving with you" and she turned around and looked at the others now getting themselves together after being thrown on the first bend. "Sorry," she said to the back then it turned to thunder, she had just remembered, "But It reminds me, where's that phone" and Charlotte passed that phone across.

Ben started before Gail had a chance to open her mouth. "It would also be preferable if you didn't break any more highway code laws. It is not easy getting into their system to change the number plate marked on police reports. There have now been 5 reported sightings of this van and I have had to change the reported number plate to a false one each time. There was also a report linked to the force looking for the children that I had to change, a witness report to do with a chase around the streets, near the children's house". Gail's jaw was now hanging. It took her a minute to close, "let me get this straight, we've been driving in this van, I knew was hidden and had not been seen for 3 months. Was seen when we escaped from ???????? and a search for this van was put out.....correct". Ben replied "if that was a question, yes is the answer". "then when you came online, you found out about it and changed the computerised records". "I only did that when we agreed to you 5 were to control the world" as if not hearing, Gail continued "and you said nothing about it to us?". "No, there was no point at the time, I had solved the problem and continued to solve the others when they arise, what is important to me is your lives and making sure you manage to do what you wish to do. What is important is I keep you safe and happy and healthy Is that all ok by all of you?". In the middle of the others agreeing with ben, gail butted in again, "wait, wait a minute, I haven't finished, you just said about us 5 ruling ther world, that's not what this is about....." she was confused, "and anyway, how did you pay the extras bill?" that was going to have been quite a bit, especially here, did you fix that by breaking into their network??" she was raising her voice now and nodding her head at the phone. "You seem vexed Gail, no I didn't have to break into their system, I transferred money from the account used to fix the ozone layer".

"What....." Gail was hanging onto her phone in one hand and was almost pulling her hair out with the other one. She passed the phone to whoever was closest which was Owen who'd been hanging around as it was his day to hold ben, then she shouted back " come on, were.....ok, back to the van". We have to change vehicle. OK, actually. Ben make a reservation for another night I have to get my head around this". She turned the van around and went back up the road and into the driveway. "You can keep us safe here, any reports of the van, I want to hear about them, ok". "OK" replied Ben.

Later

She was getting out of her shower, feeling more relaxed. 'Account to fix the ozone layer', those words were still rebounding round her head as she got dressed. Having put her shoes on she wandered into the living room, they were all there, "ok, I'm relaxed now, we have to talk ben" and she picked up the phone. The TV was on and a news flash came up. Gail turned to the glowing screen. "Police have some new information on the abduction of 4 children and a link to the sudden fluctuation on the stock exchanges around the world. The origination of the money for the accounts that started this roller coaster ride seem's to have originated with the 5 pound 30 pence from an account of Charlotte Dodds, one of the girls missing" Photos came up on the screen, going from one to the other of the children, there was no picture of Gail though. The account went up to 5 billion and then the money was taken out and dispersed amongst other accounts and the police are now trying to follow the trail of the missing money".

Gail had already disappeared into her room and came out with her coat. "Come on all of you, get your stuff, we have to go. Ben, you seem to have created a world of crap around us, but I have to trust you now, how do we get out of here?".

Ben replied immediately, a sense of haste but clear and precisely "There is a land rover in the car park, the doors are unlocked and the engine is going. The receptionist is just going out the back for

a cigarette. If you move quickly we can get to the car before she gets back and see's". Turning and checking the children were behind her, she moved at a fast paced walk and the others trotted behind. "Surveillance," she said to the phone, "erased from since we came" came the reply. They made it to the landrover, quickly jumped in. Charlotte took the front again, phone in hand now. "Right at the main road," said Ben, "you do know they will report the theft pretty quickly don't you," Gail said as she turned right. "Keeping track of calls made from the hotel".



## Chapter 6 – the getaway

"That, that is what you call our getaway" Gail was sitting, looking out of the front windscreen. The wind could be heard through the doors, it was grey outside, not raining yet but threatening to. Sitting in the middle of a mass of bamboo, in the inlay off a river hidden around a bend at the end of a cul de sac sat a large yacht. "Where are we going" was the first question from the back, "if it's on a boat, it must be abroad". Charlotte hadn't said much the whole journey and suddenly "Am I in real trouble because of this 5 billion in my account". Gail turned her frightened gaze from the boat to Charlotte. There was an uncertain smile there, Gail could feel it. "I don't know how to say this but, the 5 billion in your account, was not your fault, you didn't do it. Ben did it, but as to the rest, yes I think we are all now in a bit of trouble".

Charlotte looked puzzled for a moment, "that doesn't make sense, we are all responsible for the rest, and the 5 billion theft. We 5 are responsible for all of it, we have now gone from being kids, kidnapped to.....what are we now?" and she looked up at the older professional woman spy amongst other things. "Welcome to the adult world," she said with a grim face" staring back through the windscreen at the boat.

"OK, that won't take long to be reported stolen, who here knows how to sail and navigate." Gail winjed.

Ben responded "the owners are on holiday in the Bahamas for 2 months. He wanted to sell it. I have bought it. It is completely automatic, I might need someone to press some buttons from time to time and my navigation skills have been proved".

Gail was having a hard time with her jaw she reflected as she found herself gawping from the phone to the boat and back again. "You mean it's ours, how.....ok look lets get going, and make sure, straight inside, no slips into the water tonight, OK", "OK" came from the back.

Having got into the yacht, the kitchen had been found, and tea's made for all of them The shopping they had done on the route all stacked away, bunks chosen and they had loosed moorings, though still in the estuary, it was night and raining and they were heading out to sea. They were all happy to be cosy and had mostly got their sea legs. Charlotte and Owen were the only ones looking a bit green around the gills. The phone was in the middle of the table they sat around. "Every-one happy" Gail asked. Lots of hhmms around the table hugging their hot chocolates. If anyone wants to get to bed, you can take your hot chocolates with you. It doesn't matter if you spill anything on them, their ours". And she smiled. "I think we'd prefer to stay," said Sebastian, "I have some questions to ask Ben", "you and me both" replied Gail. "I'm involved in this, and I want to know some things as well". Gail took a double look back at Sebastian and then to Charlotte. "You know what", and she swapped her gaze between them "you are both maturing fast, I wouldn't recognise you from when I first met you", they both smiled back.

Lucy had tired eyes but wasn't going to fall asleep either, she didn't really know exactly what was going on but she knew things were happening out there, she hadn't seen her parents for too long and they were now in a ship heading where?. Inside her something was telling her this was important, she had suffered the most from the experience, her big sister being scared, the person she'd been able to turn to, scared. She liked Gail and was thankful for rescuing them but, somehow she blamed Gail for all of this, it was exciting, but most of all, she was thinking now about, what were the responsibilities of controlling the world. She was feeling a bit scared....

Owen had fallen asleep by this time, head on the table, one hand still holding the mug. Gail leaned over and unprired his fingers from the mug, putting the mug in the middle of the table. "Which is his bunk," Gail asked. It was Sebastian, sitting next to him, who got up, "I'll do it".

When he got back, Gail started. "Ben, you've got a lot of explaining to do. something I want to start with. We believed this was the first time you were started. It isn't is it".

Ben started explaining, "You are right Gail, professor tiggerty and I started 6 months ago. He created me and we have been doing lots of tests. I think it was during one of these tests, he was discovered and that is why the team Gail was in was employed to get me".

"Were these Memories and programs on the keys we installed" asked Gail.

"No" replied Ben, "they are dotted around the internet, the modules you installed were parts of my core program". Gail asked, "That means you are missing the justice part for real?". Ben responded, "there are parts in my memories but professor tiggerty was just in the process of changing something on the justice key".

"The money! where did it come from, the 5 billion, not my 5 pound and pence" Charlotte asked.

"it wasn't stolen, it was earned through stocks and shares. With professor tiggerty, I was shown how to choose stocks that he called bad news, in so far as it kept up industries he thought were obsolete. He invested in new ideas and inventions, sometimes with information from me, he pushed some small firms to change their research projects. It was why we travelled around and he wanted to stay covert so taught me how to control networks, to cover our tracks".

"so we haven't actually done anything illegal", charlotte chirped up and colour started returning to her face.

"Apart from the manipulation of banks, the police, hotel, communications networks and we could probably be charged with insider trading to name some. I guess you haven't". Gail didn't turn to Charlotte but kept her eyes on ben while she spoke. "you mean you've been working my game, with you, I see, anything is possible". She smiled tantalizingly at ben.

Lucy who'd been listening quietly entered the conversation tiredly with, "so what does it mean to control the world, what are our responsibilities?".

Ben beat Gail to the reply, "what it means is we can change things, we don't have to, but if we do, they could have costs. For example, You said you wanted to save the planet. No-one wants to destroy the planet really. But there is the ability to do it. Slowly, with pollution and quickly with a war. Being responsible is to make decisions that without starting a war we clean up the pollution". Lucy sat thinking, Gail sat straighter looking at Ben, "impressed, better than I could have done".

After a moments thought, Sebastian stood up, standing, he went into the kitchen area and got a packet of biscuits. He came back, "the money for the ozone layer project is this 5 billion isn't it".

"Yes, it is currently spread out through a number of accounts, untraceable".

"But getting the 5 billion created stock market wobbles as they said on the news flash, it was a news flash!., getting that 5 billion caused problems that didn't happen when you worked with professor tiggerty. Why not?".

"The amount of money projected that we need to repair the ozone layer was far larger than anything professor Haggerty had ever needed" Ben answered without the slightest waver Gail noticed, this could be really dangerous in the wrong hands she thought to herself seeing a missing part to his personality, fear.

"So, what sort of other things are you doing right now?".

Ben replied "there is a professor and his staff who are now working on a new energy that I am having to give hints with as to the directions to take.

There is a research and development firm based in Mumbai that is working on getting 3D printers to be able to use natural materials found locally. This will change the whole transportation and manufacturing industries. When their rival company, using guidance...manages to do the same with food products, it will change the nutrition industries as well, the wastage of food currently by the modernised countries is almost a third all food produced.

Covering the whole of south America, there is a legal firm that is breaking up the deforestation companies using private and personal information that was leaked by unknown informants. Those are remaining projects of professor tiggerty.

Since my new order to 'repair the ozone layer', I have anonymous contact with all polluting industries, passing information on in the form of trade secrets that are designs I have made to allow them to improve the efficiency of their production and at the same time reducing pollution.

There is a desalination plant being built rapidly in the desert at the end of an old pipeline we bought that used to deliver oil. We will reverse the process with a few pumps and sea water will rush into the desert where it will be destabilised, salt for the people and the fresh water will be used to grow crops and regrow forests in the north African desert.

There are several new firms being set-up in poorer countries under the right supervision, creating work to create new products that should replace polluting products. There is one right now being created in Tanzania, a poverty-stricken country, that will create a natural product that can turn sand into healthy rich soil good for growing.

Many of these things are ideas formulated by the professor and I. They were ideas that seemed appropriate for performing this task".

Lucy had drooped, picked up with talk of reforesting the desert and now had her head on her arm and was asleep. The other 3 were speechless for a while. Gail got up and started pacing up and down. Sebastian carried Lucy to her cot. Charlotte looked between the 2, "what", she asked, everything he said sounded good, I might have a few ideas of my own soon as well" she said grinning. "What are you two looking so glum about".

Gail, "you started me thinking, I'm trying to work out what we've actually done wrong, what can we be arrested for. What I've done in the past is nothing to this and with this, it's enormous what we are involved in and it seems legal, you are saying taxes and everything is legal" she turned to ben. "yes, according to laws of each land, everything is above board".  
"and the money was legal if no trace of anything underhand can be found", she frowned down at the phone.

"Everything there was completely legal and above board".  
Gail was now looking at Sebastian, "and you, same thing?".

"Actually, I was thinking if the professor had the ideas, why didn't he start them". Gail joined Sebastian looking down at the phone, waiting for an answer.

"I do not have an answer to that question" replied ben shortly.

"So from what I can now make out, we could be walking around freely, doing these things, completely legally and anonymously and untraceable if it hadn't been for the fact that I helped kidnap all of you!. It's my fault, we're all stuck here in this tub heading out to a stormy sea where we could drown" and Gail sat down again. As if in reply to her, the boat shuddered and swayed,

rolling slightly, there was another gentle thud followed by a lap and the rolling continued rhythmically.

"I think we have left the estuary now, small waves will cause the boat to rock, I am controlling the navigation gear and there is nothing to worry about" ben tried to ease the sudden tension.

Charlotte stretched her arms above her head, " I'm off to bed I think", she stood up and went to her cot, "goodnight". "me too" said Sebastian, "goodnight". "goodnight" responded Gail.

She made herself a cup of tea and waited. Charlotte had squeezed into her cot against the hull, so tired she hadn't bothered to close the curtains. Gail got up and went over, she peered down at Charlotte sleeping, she stayed for a few seconds, reflecting on a relaxed and warm feeling, she caught her balance with a quick movement of a foot as the boat wallowed in another wave. She took another glance and a smile came over her. She shut the curtains, standing still for a minute she listened to the hypnotic sound of the sea on the hull and the heavy breathing coming from the cots. she cocked an ear especially to the cot Sebastian was sleeping in and she could hear the regular bristling sound of air that helped her make up her mind, he was asleep. She went back to the table and placed her cup gently down on the table.

In his cot, Sebastian lay, eyes and ears wide open. He breathed as he thought it would be if he was sleeping, but his mind was going like a steam train. He'd been thinking a lot recently. This was unbelievable, how could he sleep now. This was the most exciting adventure ever.....He knew they were children, they had been brought into this, apart from the being locked in that room which he had to agree had been quite scary. The rest had been amazing. Luxury hotels, car chases, spies, he could come out of this a hero, saving the planet, Charlotte, he'd found he'd been thinking a lot about her lately.....it was all just so unbelievable, a grin spread out on his face.

He listened intently now, Gail had started speaking to Ben. He really liked her, she was cool, but he also knew he there was another side to her. He'd been dying to ask her if she'd killed someone, he reckoned she had. He just knew it would be awful to bring it up for her.

"OK, time for you and me to have a real chat. There is more going on here, explain!!." There were a few seconds before the screen went blank. A circle in the middle started turning and then quick as a flash a man sitting in what seemed to be a park from the background appeared on the screen, pigeons were flying around in the background and occasionally on the bench itself. It looked like a park in London was gail's first guess as to where. He was younger than she'd imagined. She could almost have fancied him as the film zoomed in on him.

"Hello, I don't know how to start this, I guess if you are watching this, it must mean I'm dead. Let me introduce myself, I am proffesor tiggerty. If you are watching this, you've already met Ben". His voice took on a pitch and in an affectionate voice "Quite amazing really, I am proud to say, I created him".

The man on the screen uncrossed his legs and leaned into the screen. His face took on a more serious look, "I have been the best dad I knew how to be, I am not perfect but I think I have passed on good values to him. I have to emphasise this, he is a free spirit" he turned his head a little for a second and less clearly could be heard saying or "at least I hope so".

The man sat back on the bench he was sitting on again. "Trust him whoever you are".

And the video screen depixelated out leaving Ben in his usual place. "I do hope that answers some of your questions".

"Yes and no.....that means, whatever we say you are going to do what you think right anyway. You can promise something but it doesn't mean anything".

"Each of us has to make choices, that includes me even though I am not a being. Deciding on the right and wrong of things I can use a large amount of processing power and can analyse things in a way that I can see the repercussions of decisions I make, mathematically, politically, scientifically further than any human could. Professor Tiggerty wanted me to be able to make decisions that were based on the better for the majority and not individuals or groups led by emotions and desires for selfish gains". That left Gail perplexed for a second. Then Gail sat looking angry, "that all sound great, but you promised.....free will. Free will is controlled by an individuals emotions and desires, how can you....."

"By helping each of you fulfil your emotions and desires, I am learning. In the same way, My desires, are that more humans are able to find out what their desires are and help them meet them. Having read all the literature, listened to all the music available, seen art in all it's forms available to me, and having studied all the information about human culture, I am processing a mathematical formulae of what it is that makes humans" there was a hesitation before "tick, it has sometimes been referred to as love in poetry I have read. But I have a thought it will be constantly changing. In answer, professor Tiggerty was the trigger for my actions, now, Lucy and all of your votes, were the trigger that enabled me to start the process to repair the ozone layer. So in that way, I need external influence to create motion".

"You mean, you need us to give originating orders". "My priorities are to protect myself, seeing as I am in your hands that therefore means I have to protect you, for which I need no orders, they are my way of expressing my free will to survive as well, I have no pleasure control so my free will stops at surviving".

Gail sat back, "so if we hadn't all agreed on fixing the ozone layer, none of this would be happening and you would be just working to protect yourself through us. But we have now started something..we are responsible, not you for that".

"Please be assured, I have calculated the results as best I can, and the ozone layer will be fixed and at the end of that, human life will have had to have evolved where more people will have the opportunities to reach their potential and be able to exercise their free will".

Gail stood up, put the kettle back on the stove, "OK, I want to exercise my free will then. Can you locate all official information, everywhere around the world, and clean off my record?".

"I have already done that, the only thing you are being searched for now is the same as the others" replied Ben.

"Ok, now what about ??????????".

He is officially the suspect of the kidnapping, I have been tracking him as best I can, following stolen car reports and using CCTV footage I have managed to keep in touch with his whereabouts". A photo came up on the screen, "this shot from a CCTV camera, if you can confirm it is him, I can control the vehicle he is in and I can tap into the call he is making right now". "Do it" replied Gail without hesitation.

There was a crackling sound on the phone, and then broken up a voice came through in Russian. "...want the program, you will have to give me control of your surveillance....", "we are sorry, events have moved on, it seem's the program has already been started and we are needing all available resources ourselves, thank you ????????, you have been of great service in the past but we no longer need your services on this one" and the phone went dead one end, voices could still be heard, "that bitch, I'm....." and the other end went dead".

"what was that" exclaimed Gail. "I am able to receive signal until the individual phone closes the connection. Would you like me to have him arrested?".

"what, can you.....how.....go ahead" Gail gasped, she'd given up asking anymore, as she sat down and back in her chair holding her cup tenderly, Fingers tapping on it "tell me how you're doing it".

"He is using the GPS system built into his car he has just changed his coordinates and is going to the airport. I will control the directions he is given and guide him to a place I will prepare with police to be waiting to arrest him".

"Go on" prompted Gail.

"Hello, there is a suspicious package, it is lying outside a house in chambers st, a bag. I opened it and there is a metal thing with wires coming out of it. There is a digital counter on it. I think it might be a bomb. Chambers St, Hertford.....that's right".

Gail got up and started pacing, it didn't take her long before she sat down again, "keeping balance and thinking don't work on a boat at sea, at least not for me. Never liked the sea, don't know why" and she leaned forward over the phone. "whats happening?" There was the sound of movement and the curtains to Sebastian's cot swung open. A foot appeared, then the rest of him climbed out. Having reached back in, he'd got his trousers and was putting them back on, seeing Gail looking at him "couldn't sleep, heard what was going on, mind if I join in. Gail, saying nothing but nodded to the chair next to her.

"They are just arriving, they have turned into the street, and there, just behind them, arriving are the police. Have sent orders to arrest him and anyone with him. Details of his career are now with Inspector burns. He also knows of the arrest. Gail, for your own safety, I can arrange a change of identity, I would recommend it. ????????? is going to talk about you and I will not be able to cover that all up, it will be too important to some people with power".

"Can you do that, course you can, I have been thinking about it and how to do it, why didn't I think of that", and she turned and screwed her face up. "I want to be a, actually, I'll leave it up to you, do it".

"They have him in custody, as well as Polker".

"One more problem solved, I'm going to bed, when I wake up I will be a new woman, isn't that right ben".

"Correct Gail, goodnight".

Getting a packet of prawn cocktail crisps out of the cupboard, Sebastian sat down in front of Ben. If I dictate something, can you get it to my dad, It doesn't really matter if the police get it, does it?".

"I will make it untraceable."

"ok, here goes. Hi dad. I know you must be worried and I do miss you. I am fine and so are all the others, in fact, I'm having a great time, I can't say too much but, we found something.....someone.....and we are changing the world, well, helping in some way. We are being looked after, look, prawn cocktail crisps, my favourites.....honestly dad, get it together. I know mums gone..... Stop drinking, start dating again, mum would have wanted that, and I remember hearing you were a bit of a ladies man weren't you.

Dad, I need some time off as well, I am being looked after, I am having a good time and no, this is not scripted. Please look after yourself." and he left it at that.

Gail hadn't fallen asleep when she heard Sebastian getting back up. She listened in, when she heard about his mother being dead, her eyes glistened. She heard what he'd said to his dad, that had taken courage and she felt that scrunging feeling of emotions, she had had enough of them over the past few days, but there again, she felt even more protective of him now.

## Chapter 7 - Inspector burns

"Ohh my god" he exclaimed. His feet were up on the temporary desk he'd had set-up in the temporary rooms they'd recently moved into in chambers st. "Kids are running the planet!!!, this is all so insane. A woman that doesn't exist, or exists but lived an ordinary life is accused of kidnapping 3 kids by a world class for hire spy, and she actually died 6 months ago". His deputy, Patrick Davis, was the only other one in the room. He just stood there in front of Inspector burns. At ease, he said nothing apart from "yes sir", he knew when his boss needed interrupting or not. This was not one of those times, let him get it out.

"Do you know what, I think we've stepped into something much bigger, these kids, kidnapped, by our prisoner, were ordinary kids a few days ago. Now they are free, with the ability to change....." he thought for a few seconds. "ok, we won't go there, there was a murder, we have now found out it was a professor tiggerty. An intelligent man, very intelligent from what we've found out about him. What did we find on ??????, you know, when you searched him. Wasn't that a USB stick he seemed very reluctant to relinquish".

The deputy added rubbing his cheek which was still flush, "I remember, very reluctant, it was sir" and he passed over the stick. "any idea what it is"

"no idea, wanted to check with you before we sent it to special branch for analysis. Ben is whats written on the sticker, mean anything?"

Sitting there, staring at the key, the sticker, BEN, swinging slightly to the left and then right in his swivel chair. And now secret services are involved", he looked up "they have been informed about ????????s arrest".

"They are on their way, expect they won't be long"

Almost to himself, staring at the key again, "what to do with this" and standing up he placed the key in his side pocket. He looked at his deputy with a sidelong glance, "we'll see when the time comes, now for the chief".

Standing in the chief superintendent's office, they shook hands with the 2 others present. Secret service agents, just on their way out of the office. "Thank you" was all one of them said apart from "hello", and then they were gone.

"Time to close the case, get on with your normal duties", "what" exclaimed the inspector, "excuse me sir, there were 4 kids kidnapped off our streets, 12, 14, the others 16 and 17. Normal kids, they haven't been found".

"By all appearances, especially with the video call you just received, they are now controlling things on an international scale, this is now in the hands directly of the prime minister's department. They are treating this as an international crisis, its out of our hands now".

"It's 4 kids sir, what if they are being manipulated, we don't know what's behind them, it doesn't make sense, 4 normal kids, next day they are criminal masterlings controlling the world, come on sir, this is make-believe. Look at the facts..." He was about to go on when he felt a jab in his side, he winced slightly, "what's up" the chief had a sudden look of concern on his face, "ehhr it's ok, indigestion I think, make note, I don't agree" and he turned around and walked out followed by Patrick.

"You didn't have to do it so hard!!", burns exclaimed when they were outside the building of Scotland Yard. "Sorry sir, you asked me too, I obliged, I tried tapping your foot but without making it obvious....." Patrick let it hang there for a moment. "You didn't feel it was the right time to hand over the stick" he followed on with.

With another side glance, he answered that question. "I want to know what's going on here, no-one's going to blindside me this time. You with me!" another side glance.

"Aren't I always" was his known reply.



They had been together over twenty years now, they had started as sergeant and constable, with Burns's tenacity and Patrick's ingenuity, they had made a good double act and worked their ways through the ranks, separated at times as they worked their way through, they somehow were constantly being re-assigned to one another and in recent years they had solved some big cases involving corruption at quite high levels. With a trust in one another, they could read each other so well, they could almost guess the other one's minds".

"So, we're looking for someone who can analyse what's on the disk, away from official eye's. They both looked at one another, "Jimmy" they said together. They found the apartment block on the council estate. "John, Why doesn't he move, he could afford to go anywhere and he stay's here. That spurt in jail did something to him" Patrick stated. Burn's, John as he was called when it was just the 2 of them replied, you know, he goes on about not wanting to help the current system, he believes in the revolution and all that stuff, I reckon he's just agoraphobic". He saw the cog's turning in John's head. "scared to step outside, you know, scared to join in with society. Something to do with events of his past so his social worker told me". "Good for us though, won't cost us much, a quick drink and then a few bob". They went passed the block and on to the pub nestled in between another pair of blocks.

Jimmy was waiting already, sitting at a table next to the door with a window he could see out of. He always likes to be where he could see anything coming, though nothing ever really had. He was just a wizard on technology. John thought he'd just gone mad, which was probably not too far from the truth. "Ok, what you got for me today," he asked as the 2 policemen sat down. "How've you been doing, staying clean I hope" asked John, he was putting on his most overbearing attitude. He needed Jimmy to get the msg, this was not to be talked about. Serious stuff.

Jimmy felt the presence, he sort of shrunk into himself. "eehhr, ok, Doing ok, still clean. Not touched a thing except what's prescribed to me".

Patrick had a sup of his pint and then, leaned in, this is very important Jimmy, what you doing next?"

"eehhrr, eehhrr nothing planned" his eye's shakingly were now looking like they were trying to turn to look up into his mind as he replied.

Patrick slapped the table with a quick "you still with us", "ehhh, yes", "we need you to look at something, we need it now!!" and he took another big sup, draining half his glass expressing his urgency. He saw out of the corner of his eye, John looking, "not so fast" was what he read and grinned as he placed the pint back on the table. "OK", "ehh, ok" was the reply from Jimmy". In complete silence, they finished their drinks and then made their way to jimmy's flat. Having brewed a cup of tea, Patrick came back into the small cupboard spaced room, handed the mug to John, "so, anything?"

Jimmy was bent over the keyboard and screen. "interesting, interesting" he repeated to himself as he paged through lines on the screen of what looked like jibberish to the other 2. Eventually, he sat back, turned his chair and asked, "where did you get this?". He seemed to have stature now, he was in his world and he knew what was what. He waited patiently looking from one to the other, eventually, John replied "none of your business". "ehhr well actually, it is my business. This code is a new language, I can decipher parts of it but it's way beyond me". He stood up. Straight this time, Patrick remarked that his bent back had gone, there was something different now. Moving down the hall, he reached into a drawer and pulled out a wallet. "Actually, I'm working for the gov't, have been for the past 5 years, thank you both by the way, that 3-month stint in prison did my reputation the world of good, wasn't accepted here before, Now I'm sort of looked after, just an ex-junkie, geek. He had returned down the corridor and was offering his wallet, open to them. Taking the wallet but eyes still on Jimmy, he remarked "your voice has changed", "Thank you, nice to see the training worked". John glanced down at the wallet, his face turned to shock, he looked up and handed the wallet to Patrick. He glanced down, his left eyebrow, raised a tad, and he handed back the wallet to Jimmy, "MI6" he added at the end.

"And you must be, inspector burns and dep inspector Davis. Both of them nodded. "Now where did you get this, he held up the key. I need to know and why didn't you hand it over when you got the

visit from the secret service earlier today. Yes, I may be Jimmy, but I'm also on the ball. NOW, one last time, where did you get this. Patrick stepped up "It was found on the prisoner this morning, ????????, as far as we know. We.....forgot to pass it on, you know how busy it must be at the moment. Leading the way into the sitting room now, Jimmy motioned to the dry rotted sofa. He went over to the tall, what looked like the antique cupboard, bending down he opened the door and fetched 3 glasses with one hand and a bottle with the other. "Sorry.....what do I call you", " just call me Andrew when you want to, Jimmy sticks better sometimes though", "sorry Andrew but were on duty" uttered John? Standing straight, he came back and took his place in the armchair in an equally bad state as the sofa, he noticed Patrick admiring the cupboard, "An interest in furniture Patrick?". "Not really, just it's the only thing in this whole place that's in any nick, and yes, it is nice". "Best place to hide your valuables, out in the open".

Pouring whiskey into the glasses, Jimmy started talking "I think you're day for the moment is finished, you have kept valuable information from the secret services, this is stuff of top priority, we could put you both behind bar's, salute" and he raised his glass. The others responded open mouths. As if in a daze, they both took a gulp without noticing. Patrick was the first, "hhmmmm" and he sat back in the sofa, "I guess we're in your hands then, best enjoy it and he turned to John who had a scowl on his face, "Cheers he grinded at his partner, "just enjoy it".

"Let's play a little game, you give me as much as you know, and I'll answer all your questions". "How about the other way round, we got the key, it's recorded in the official documents, and forgetfulness should not be a crime.....", Patrick took another sip. "We know the connection between the news events that have been happening, and the case we are on involving kidnapping. In America, a capital crime". "But the kidnapping has taken a little turn hasn't it!!" returned Jimmy, it's become a global crime now and..." John butted in "Err I think you have to rephrase that, no crime has actually been committed except for the cybercrime bit. Except for the murder of the professor and we have the culprit in custody, confessed and put in by ????????. None of the children involved have any idea about how to hack a computer, we have been thorough".

Jimmy, sitting back in his chair now, glass in both hands, looked over it at the 2 men in front of him. He paused for a minute, then, "ok, lets stop the cat and mouse, someone is breaking into networks all around the globe, they are playing at god and I now know who it is, or should I say what it is, you have brought me the piece of the jigsaw that was missing, now I ask one last time, where did this come from?".

John looked at Patrick and Patrick back at John, John nodded to Patrick and Patrick started. "We are having to guess at this but, we think the course of events are this. "The children somehow got involved in a theft, a professor tiggerty, an independent scientist. We believe the children came upon international spies while they stole something, I am now starting to believe, that data key is that thing. What we want to know is what is it part of?".

"Thank you, finally. You confirm our assumptions. Professor tiggerty was a scientist that left our employ because of a difference of opinion from what I've heard, we were keeping a tab on him but, somehow the surveillance was led astray these past few years and we had no idea, what was actually happening. With the past few days havoc, we are now piecing it together". He took another deep sip and let the moment hang for a second, studying the other 2. "let me guess, in public, it is you john the boss, but outside that you 2 work as equals, you may not look like twins, your' probably not even related, but you 2 you're like twins, you bounce off each other". Like a pistol going off, he threw in the next bit, "AI. And he stopped. Finished his glass and poured himself another one. Shaking the bottle at each who refused, he then put it down. "What more can you give me?". "You mean artificial intelligence, that science fiction stuff," John asked. "yes, now what else have you that you can give me".

Patrick drained his glass and placed it with a clunk on the table, he reached for the bottle and poured himself another one, before he took a sip, he looked deep into the golden liquid, "there is a woman, she worked with ????????, we have been looking and almost in front of our eyes the data changes.

She used to be a spy, now she died some time ago" he looked up sideways at John who blinked slowly and surely, then to Jimmy.

"Ok, this AI, seems to be playing Robin hood. It seems this AI is way more advanced than anything in existence, Professor Tiggerty has taken what we were working on and after his dispute with the powers that be at the time, has proved his arguments, it is 100 times more advanced than anything we knew about. His actions so far have shown it capable of hacking into any system, anywhere, with ease, convince people on the phone he is real and has started making things happen. For example, this stock exchange stuff, in the aftermath of everything, it seems it's just the blue chip stock that has been affected, almost only the extremely rich. They are a little less in pocket. He's been robbing from the rich and using it to fund projects. We have been able to detect some of them, we are sure many haven't been noticed, We need to get to know the children more, if it's them guiding, what can we expect next, it's really scary the thought of children playing god, with a tool like that.....really scary" and as if to emphasise it he shivered.

It took a moment before Patrick burst out guffawing, loud, released, laughter was heard breaking the silence around the small apartment and in the immediate vicinity. "You want to psychoanalyse like criminals, 4 children, to work out and to try and stop them on their next step, you want to take this thing out of their control, and try and control it yourself". The laughter started again, "to be honest, I'd almost prefer it in their hands", he turned to his partner, "come on, we're out of here". They stood at the door shaking hands, Patrick held out an empty hand, "if you please, I know you've taken a copy". Jimmy's face changed from struck dumb to a mischievous smile. "Ok" and handed Patrick the key. Having turned and followed John outside he heard "the brains and the brawn", and a little smile flashed quickly across his face as he heard the door close with a gentle click behind him.

As they hit the streets, Patrick had a stern grin on him. "The next closest pub, a nice one, one with a big hearth and fire going, a pint....., yes, that's what we need. "I'll drive?" John questioned. Patrick threw the keys over the roof of the car to John and climbed in, "need to think" he uttered to no-one in particular.

In the car was silence, turning right out of the estate, John took the road that led into the country, he knew not far from here was what Patrick was needing, 'the Goat inn', small, secluded and they were prone to do a late night lock-in.

## Chapter 8 -

It was 6 weeks later, nothing mind-blowing had happened, a few scientific discoveries, one that seemed very promising, something that could change the world's energy production from algae.

Stolen paintings, had been turning up around the world of famous works, for years thought to have been somehow destroyed during the wars as well as other stolen masterpieces coming to light.

They were heading now for Bordeaux, "home of red wine" Sebastian had not stopped saying and it was getting on everyone else's nerves. Lots of things after 6 weeks together on a boat had been winding up the atmosphere. Ben had a place in his memories, somewhere that was used sometimes by Professor Tiggerty. He showed pictures of it to the others when they asked. They described it as "a big shack by a lake, so what". Inside they were dying to get off the boat and secretly most of them were looking forwards to this place, the children couldn't say it but it looked cool.

The first day at sea had been quiet. People getting to know their way around the boat. Opening cupboards with oddly shaped doors because of the hull, the children searched for these and were almost always disappointed as to what was in there. Twice, the children got a surprise. The first had been Owen who'd found the cupboard. It was lucky Sebastian had been curious why it had suddenly gone quiet in the room next to him, as he'd poked his head round he'd seen Owen holding a big gun and at the point, Sebastian had seen him, he was looking down the barrel. He'd managed to safely confiscate it and Gail then confiscated it off Sebastian.

The second find had been more fun. Lucy had found in one of these oddly shaped drawers and inside she found a box of fireworks. It had been in the morning, the sun was shining through a spattering of clouds. The sea looked blue all around and they'd been having breakfast outside on the deck. Ben had been taking care of the navigation and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, they'd started using the sails. It was now the 12<sup>th</sup> and with just the jib, they were gently working their way down past the sandy beaches of Brittany.

Toast and jam and toast and egg were the menu for the day. Sebastian had confessed the night before he'd never made anyone breakfast, it was just there, wherever he'd been, hotels on holidays, breakfast had always just been there. Charlotte and Lucy had for both their mum and dad, fried breakfast at that. Sebastian had asked Charlotte to show him. All the ingredients weren't there so it was just about showing him how to fry an egg. The first which had been for Charlotte ended up being for him because of the yolk bursting. He'd felt very chivalrous about that.

When Lucy came running in with the box of fireworks, excitedly she said: "Why don't we have a beach party, we can take the blow up boat, do some shopping, I think we're almost out of most stuff, we can build a fire on the beach and let off the fireworks". She stood watching with a big grin on her face. Owen jumped out of his chair "yees, sounds like an excellent idea". Gail watched the excitement grow through the room when she glanced down at the phone and saw Ben grinning and nodding she knew the decision had been made, "would it be safe" she asked Ben showing a face of concern, she knew they were going. "It might be better if you split up, 4 children and a woman. There was a story in the newspapers around here about the kidnapping a few days ago", one group can set-up the beach, and I should go with the other group, I suggest Charlotte and Sebastian". When Charlotte said "Ok, sounds good", the grin on Sebastian's face lit up even more.

Noah was sat looking at his screen, his mouth agape, he re-read the msg. Turning furtively he passed a look round the room, there were 10 other people in the room, they were all deep in concentration looking at their screens. He turned back and re-read the formula and started copying it onto a piece of paper.

Just that morning they had had the director on a motivation visit, it appears that news had reached him of a campaign that had come into mainstream news of how plastics were a large source of

world pollution, there were fears being raised about how if 3d printers became a household product like the computer had a generation before, the estimate of plastic then produced could tip the balance between winning the war on pollution and losing it.

The directors had had a meeting and had come up with the fantastic proposal that they should set the research and development department to the task of creating a plastic for their product that was biodegradable.

Noah had had to bite his tongue, he'd been in to see his director only 2 months before with his idea being that they should develop a way to develop the product to be able to use natural materials rather than rechargeable cartridges filled with plastic pollutants. He'd been rebuked because it went against any business sense the director had had. Their profits came from the selling of rechargeable cartridges, not the actual sale of the printers but in the consumables, "it would be like cutting our own throat" had been the words used exactly. Noah had tried to explain the big picture as he saw it, "isn't it cutting the throat of *everybody* if we create a product that tips the balance and ended up being the thing that could end the world" had been his reply and he'd been reminded he was on a temporary contract and his job was hanging by a thread.

It hadn't been for the salary that he'd taken the job but Noah kept that to himself. He'd been started on his quest when he'd seen government-run experiments exploring the possibility of teleportation, the ability to map every molecule and atom in the object and recreate an exact replica of it somewhere else. The experiments had been semi-failures, but Noah had taken from his time working there an idea.

This job was giving him more time to develop his ideas and he hadn't finished. He had been secretly working on a formula to create a biodegradable plastic.

Now, sitting there on the screen was the formulae he'd been trying to work out these past several months.

The message had been sent from an internal account on the closed system they worked on. ben1ai514-accounts had been the expedition account. Normally, there was no way it could be accessed from outside, he'd concluded it must be internal.

The subject part was "open at your own discretion, this will change your life". He'd seen this type of message all the time with his external personal account. But from internally, he was confused.

All the msg body part had been was the formula "bkd = .....". It was so close to one he'd tried a short while back, and he'd concentrated on it and yes, there were a few changes to his formula. He hesitated to try to weigh up the pros and cons of running the simulation program. It had been his curiosity that had got the better of him. He'd loaded the program and typed in this new revised formula in place of the one he'd tried last. He pressed the button,, he'd got up and went to make a cup of coffee and when he came back the simulation was finished and his screen had a green background. Before it had always finished red, meaning failure. He stood there, staring at the screen, it caught the attention of one of his other colleagues and turning to the others said out loud, "hey look, Noah's got a positive hit". Noah felt himself cringing under the gaze. Being timid and feeling a cheat, he'd been close, but that had been the real genius. The others were coming over and now started patting him on the back, "well done", "Jesus, Noah you cracked it". It wasn't long before the director was back on the floor. With a look at the screen, then a puzzled glance at Noah who sheepishly smiled back red-faced, the director sat at the screen and called up the formula that had been typed in. He spent a few minutes studying the information on the screen. "Have you double checked it", he asked not diverting his eyes from the screen. Noah confessed he'd not, he'd been just as surprised. He felt racked to confess there and then, he leaned forward and tapping the keyboard to bring up his messages, he felt that was the best way, the honest way. He couldn't take the credit. The screen came up but the msg itself with the formula had disappeared. He tapped a few times to find it but there was no trace of it. "What are you doing" the director asked. Noah just stood there gobsmacked. "Ok, we'll run a second test" and he switched back to the simulation program

and confirmed to run the simulation. "Noah, my office". Noah did notice the directors face had started going a bit red now and with a finger under his collar released some heat.

Having excused himself for a minute, he disappeared into the men's room. As he sat in a cubicle and rested his head back against the wall behind, he let out a great anxious sigh. What was happening, he was trying to puzzle it out.

Socially he was a bit of a recluse, he came to work, glued to his experiments, in his head he carried them home as well and worked there as much as he could. Contact with others outside work, only really happened at office parties or do's, he'd always been reluctant, feeling the odd one out even among these other geeks as they called themselves, he had no friends so when his phone beeped, he was a bit surprised and looked straight away. A text from the same "ben1ai514". "I can help you realise your ambition, the formula was small fry. If you are interested, 12 o'clock tomorrow, bens cafe on the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> street. The woman with the hat, remember small fry".

Ben didn't make it to the director's office after that, he'd made his way home and studies his notes on the formula he'd been close with and compared the 2 of them. He spent the rest of the night working out where and why he'd gone wrong. It was in the early hours of the morning that he finally sat back in his chair at home, he placed both his hands together and behind his head. Stunned was how he felt, with some of his error he could see the jump, but with 2 points, it had to be genius, the leap in thinking to get to that. "small fry" he said out loud to himself. If this was small fry....., the competition were way behind, it couldn't have been them. This must be either some brainbox individual or govt, whichever, it was way off the radar as far as he knew, which one, any American govt funded secret projects he didn't think, he'd been keeping as close an eye as he'd been able to. The Russians, the Chinese.....he didn't see how. Now his curiosity had been warmed up, he knew nothing would keep him from that meeting. Woman.....he started thinking. This whole thing was just so preposterous. He ran a bath, with bubbles, he was sort of feeling like celebrating. Once in, lounging in the luxurious vapours rising from the bath, he felt his body unhinge, his head sank back, he'd put a hand towel behind to make it more comfortable. Slowly the words "ambition" floated through his consciousness. What were his ambitions, his days working on teleportation eased in, the idea of breaking things down to their atoms and deeper, protons, electrons and neutrons How to break natural objects down to their smallest forms and use them as ingredients? This he'd had the idea, could be used in conjunction with the 3d printers, the idea being that anyone with this "deatomiser" as he called it and a 3d printer could take anything available, wood, stone, metal, water and then recreate anything they want from food products to car parts, unfortunately he also realised weapons as well. The idea turned and turned.

He walked into the Cafe, the bell above the door jingled. There was a long bar, typical, just what he had expected. There were people nattering away in the cubicles around. He went straight up to the bar and sat, before asking, a cup was put in front of him and a coffee served, piping hot. He asked for a touch of milk.

He gazed around the room, he couldn't spot any woman wearing a hat, he was not surprised, it was a warm day. He turned back to the front. When asked if he wanted to order something, he politely refused, he added he was waiting for someone. He sipped his coffee, trying to act calm though through lack of sleep and the past 24 hours still reverberating through his nerves and thoughts, he was on the edge of his seat. "Important date?" the waitress that had served him and was standing next to him asked as she surveyed the room looking for someone needing a top up. "ehhhrr, something like that" he responded. "Nervous" she added, he nodded with a smile.

Drrring, the bell above the door went again, he used the big mirror to see, his heart started going, it was a woman with a straw hat on, a short colourful feather standing proudly, highlighting it. She was wearing a power suit, grey pinstriped, with a skirt. Long dark straight hair, her green eyes flashing full of life. "That her, Nice catch if it is" the waitress threw sideways at him as she rushed off to a cubicle to fill a couple of cups with the coffee pot that seemed glued to her right hand. The coffee cup in his had started shaking uncontrollably and took his attention for a second as he spilt

his coffee, he was just reaching for the paper napkins to clear up the mess when he felt a tap on his shoulder, he turned. It was the woman who had just walked in. "Noah?" she enquired. He looked over his shoulder, "yes", as his eyes met hers, he almost choked, she was beautiful he thought, "eehhrrr, sorry". She looked at him puzzled. Unsure quite how to react, he held out his hand, realising he still had the coffee stained napkin in that hand, he placed it on the counter and turned back to her, "yes, I'm Noah, ehrr should we take a booth". She just stood, he got up off his stool. The waitress had returned, "there is a free booth over there and she pointed to one in the corner, he nodded, thank you, errr" he turned to the woman who'd just walked in. "what would you like". The waitress butted in, you take your seats, I'll be over to take your order". "Hot chocolate the woman said and turned away to head towards the free booth. "Blind date" the waitress whispered as she went behind the bar. Noah caught, nodded and his feet started moving. He watched the woman as he approached, all thoughts of why he was there seemed momentarily to have disappeared. She held herself with so much poise, he watched as she brushed her skirt under her as she slipped into the booth and glanced back at him. With his cup still in his hand, he slid in opposite her, again a few splashes of coffee splattered on the table. "sorry, sorry" he repeated and reached again for some paper napkins. As he wiped the table, the woman opposite started, "hi, my name is Sarah, I think this is for you and she pulled out of her inside pocket a large white envelope and handed it to him. He took it and studied it for a second. All that was written on the front was "Noah", it was still sealed. "I haven't taken a look at it" she added. He glanced up, "how did you get it?" he asked. "In a larger envelope with a letter for me, I'm a laboratory assistant for MSD....." she studied Noah, she watched as he studied the envelope, eventually, as he started opening it up, "it wasn't you who asked me here is it" she stated. He had torn the top of the envelope, he stopped and looked up, "no, I thought it might be you who asked me here", she looked straight at him and shook her head. They sat for a minute, both looking at each other as if on cue, they both started turning around and looking around the cafe, no-one seemed to be taking any notice of them. "open it she eventually broke the silence, he pulled the sheet of paper out and unfolded it. He started reading. The letter was typed,

Dear Noah, you don't know me, but I know about both of you and I have personally picked out you and Sarah, I share your visions. I wish to remain anonymous.

There is a laboratory set up, both your names are on the lease and it is paid for for the next 2 years. I have set-up a company, NoSaBe Ltd, and there is unlimited funding, there is a salary that I feel to be generous enough, between the 2 of you, 49% of the shares are in your name.

All of this is already set-up, you will be free to pursue whatever direction your desires take you.

The decision is all yours. The address is "????????????", there will be a taxi arriving to take you both there in a few minutes if you chose. Together we will be able to change the world.

Yours, with hope you can find a way to trust me. My intentions are but for the good.

Ben

Noah sat back limply, Sarah waited expectantly, "well!!". He passed the letter over, his eyes almost rolling in his head. Sarah took the letter and read it. It wasn't long before the 2 of them were sitting back in silence, jaws hanging, in their private booth. To the 2 of them, it was as if the rest of the world didn't exist. It was only when the waitress came back with more coffee and the hot chocolate the silence was broken. slowly things started to drift back for them, the sounds of the machines in the kitchen, the chatter going on at other booths. They were still both stuck in shock. It was Noah who started, he explained, holding nothing back, what had happened the day before. She explained a similar situation for her.

"Dring", the door sounded again, a head poked through the door, "Taxi for an mr Noah".

They both looked at each other, "if we are going to do this, start by shutting your mouth" she smiled, grabbing her handbag from next to her, "what have we to lose by looking, somehow I feel I

can trust you, I'm in for a look". Noah watched as she climbed out of the booth. Instinctively he followed.

Having left the city behind, they turned off the highway and travelled another 20 minutes. Through pine forests with lakes and rivers. They eventually turned onto a dirt road. This soon became a gravelled driveway leading to the front of a new building, red brick with a pointed roof. Big was the first adjective that came to Sarah's mind. Her heart was pumping, this place was gorgeous, a lawn space by a big lake, flower beds dotted meticulously around the house and garden with clear-cut gravel paths leading up and down to the pier. The driver came over to where they were standing gaping at the view. "'hrrrmpph", he coughed to get their attention. "Your keys" he handed them a bunch of keys and a letter. "Have a nice day" and he was off, they heard the crunching as the car sped off. They stood there perplexed, "how do we get out of here, the main road is miles away". "I guess ben took it for granted that we'd want to stay, come on", she grabbed the keys from Noah and bouncing, full of excitement and energy, she danced up to the house and slid the keys in. Noah had come over and was now standing on the step below her, she turned, a gently but solid click could be heard and she pushed the door open.

The fire was crackling and as the fire grew, and the embers floated up in their thousands, only to die when too far from their heat. Everyone had a bag and was sitting around the fire, the sausages were on a stick and hanging at angles over the fire. They had created a stone circle in the middle, just right for putting a kettle that they'd bought.

When Sebastian and Charlotte came back, their arms were full, they had returned in a taxi because of the amount of stuff they'd bought. Ben had paid naturally, but clothes for everyone, a new phone, food, crisps and chocolate. The taxi had helped them out with the stuff and then driven off, ben had stayed while Charlotte crossed the road and waded through tall grass that had sprouted through the sand. She disappeared down the bank and a few minutes later returned with the rest, it had still taken 2 visits to carry it back to the dingy. Most of the stuff they left there, except for the bags charlotte and Sebastian had prepared for each of them. Charlotte had done sebs and Seb had done charlottes. Sitting around the fire, it felt like Christmas. Underwear and socks for everyone, something charlotte had insisted on, socks. Chocolates and crisps and a brand new phone each. Gail kept the original with ben on it. All the others were set up and ben installed for each of them. He could run separately or linked.

"Christmas on the beach" Sebastian said cheerfully when they had all set up their phones and started on the sausages. "I didn't get much of a Christmas this year so I thought...." he stopped, they were all looking at him, a gloomy silence seemed to hit the beach. "what happened if you don't mind me asking, to your mum, you know" Gail tried to ask delicately but felt like she fumbled it all. Sebastian drooped his head, the cheerfulness seemed drained from him. "Cancer" he replied quietly. He lifted his head and looked at Gail, "it's ok, she had it for a couple of years, I got used to the idea, it was almost a relief actually when she did die", a tear broke and started rolling down both cheeks. Owen had lowered his head, he knew. He'd lived next door. "It was after that really, dads sad and just sits, he can't get out of that sadness. He cooks, cleans the house, he has benefits so he doesn't have to work, I don't know if that's good!!". Gail had moved behind him and put her arms around him. She held on to him, the tears continued, Charlotte moved closer and took his hand, he looked up and saw her eyes, slightly glazed too. He saw Lucy and Owen looking at him too. He smiled, "so what about these fireworks then" he wiped his eyes and cheeks with his cuff, cheering, the others got up and ran down to where they had already planted the rockets. Sebastian turned his head and looked up into Gail's eyes. "I knew you weren't a bad person" and gave one of those smiles and jumped up running to join the others. Gail just sat there, stunned, tears were pouring down her face, tears of joy, through her glazed blurry eyes, she saw all 4 of them, they were calling for her to join them, she'd thought she was saving them, she now realised, it was the other way round. She'd not felt this much.....she couldn't describe it but whatever it was it gave her a lightness, she bounded up from where she'd sat on the sand. She didn't want to wipe the tears away, they were part of it, the



release of something deep inside, she'd been holding it, whatever it was for so long, she felt it fading away into a warmth. As she got to the beach, Sebastian was lining them up and giving instructions. "One at a time, we wait till its gone off and never go back without asking, got it, ok", "ok" came the reply. She sat back now, the sky was clear and the stars shining like she'd never noticed them before. She lay back, listening to the whoosh of rockets flying free and then the explosions mixed with gasps as colour lit the sky in flashes and then slowly fading lights. With the lapping of the sea in the foreground, and the crackling of the fire behind, the sound of life all around, her head was spinning with the joy.

## Chapter 9 – policeman's holiday

It was 8 weeks after drinks with Jimmy. John and Patrick were sitting in the pub, "did you find out any more about the prof's travelling habits" asked Patrick straight away, it had not left his thoughts. "We still on THAT case, I know, I find myself thinking where the hell are those kids, but we've had to hand that one over to the secret service, it can't get better than that eh. They have the resources that we don't" John said biting into his burger. Patrick was sitting back in the alcove against the chimney bricks. He was looking up the chimney, "I know, me too, but, but, there's more, I know there's more. I know they have the resources, but what are they doing it for, I don't believe they have the kids interests, and if this story of jimmies is true, I've done a little research. If this AI is what they say it is, it isn't the kids that are in control, it's the AI itself" he stopped for a minute and took a gulp from his glass. John seemed to be mulling it over. "But what can we do about it, we have other cases now.....look there's that murder in the park, doesn't straight away look drug connected.

"Have we still got access to the house, the prof that was murdered, I think I'm going to have another look. You can cover for me, I know more now than I did back then, might have changed my perspective" and coming out of the gloom, he finished his pint and slammed it back on the table.

"This one got under my skin, when they got directly to the parents that time, it was still my responsibility, I remember Mrs Dodds almost in hysterics, after the call I felt responsible, what was she to think, her daughters didn't want to come home, it was a ruse, for what, same as for me, I want to know. Some can just say, ok, that's life, carry on, like you just said, we've got another case, well bollocks to another case, I won't this time" and he grabbed his coat, you getting this, cheers, I'll see you back at the station and not giving his partner time to change his mind, he left the pub. Waving down the first taxi, he gave the address that was now etched on the inside of his mind.

Having gone round the back, he knew where the spare key to the back door was, under the geranium pot. Rather obvious he knew and started wondering why the geranium, then he remembered, one of the easiest plants to keep. He slipped the key into the lock and turned. It had only been a few weeks since the whole police force had been searching the place since then it had remained untouched and Patrick ran his finger through the dust on the kitchen table as he walked through leaving a path in the dust. Looking down the hallway, he could still see the mayhem of it being packed with uniformed officers back then, now, apart from the blood stain on the carpet upstairs, and the police tape, it was like any other house in the street, quiet, almost too quiet he thought to himself and shivered, he guessed that the heating hadn't been on since then was what added to this spooky feeling he was having.

This was what he liked, on his own, piecing together the parts of a jigsaw. Not having the personality or whatever it was that you needed to rise through the ranks, he'd stuck close to John who had that charm, don't give a shit but at the same time be able to kiss ass and get on. Make the impressions on the people who choose. He, Patrick was quite comfortable sitting in the shadow, out of the limelight, if John was good at that part, he was good at what he did, together they had risen through the ranks, his salary was enough to meet all his needs now, it was more what he loved doing, being suspicious was a part of it. Picking up pieces, stories, facts and putting them together to make a story, the ability to replay something that had happened, but the need to be sure he was right was what it came down to.

He'd asked John to get a clear picture of the movements of the professor over the past few months, they had had all the fake passports, from a safe hidden in the wall, till they'd had to pass them onto MI6, They knew now the identities to track. As he wandered from room to room, he got the impression it was just a temporary stopping place, everything was clean, tidy, it was lacking a personal touch, that lived in feeling was missing. Apart from the postcard magnetised to the fridge next to a shopping list. There was no mug or anything on the draining board, everything had been put away in their cupboards. He'd opened them all and found them bare almost. He knew the man lived on his own and that was what he'd assumed at first but now he was using fresh eyes, hindsight

was guiding him now. Although the place was tidy, having looked in the understairs cupboard, he found there was no stack of old newspapers or magazines. Someone like the professor was sure to read world news or scientific journals, but no sign of them anywhere. In his office, any sign of a mad professor was nowhere to be seen, No loose lying about bits of paper or anything really out of place, there was an empty in-tray, and in the out tray, there was an old phone bill on top of a slim pile of paper. He casually picked it up and glanced down the short list. It was more the international calls that interested him. There was only France. He noted down the number as it was always the same one and placed the bill back in its place. Looking around the place, no shelves full of folders, A computer had been on the desk in the corner but that had been taken for analysis, showing up nothing special.

Going back downstairs, he decided to take another look at the postcard on the fridge. On the front, 4 separate pictures were there. A building with a beach and sailing dinghies splayed along it. A wooden building nestled in a forest by a lake. 2 other pictures of holidaymakers enjoying themselves in boats and canoes. He flipped it over, reading the small print, cantal, France. Then he read the short message written in pencil.

“once more unto the breach. It's only when it's gone that you realise what it was you had. Just a reminder ben, love dad”

They had checked and officially there was no mention of him having a son...., Patrick slipped the postcard into his inside pocket. Turning he had one last look around, everything was in its place. He closed the door behind him and turned the lock, putting the key back under the flower pot. The taxi that had taken him there hadn't waited. He knew there was a bus stop just down the road and started walking. Something was nagging, he could have called for a car to pick him up but something about being on a bus, strangers around him, going about their life heading to work or some fun activity, people, the singularity of their lives playing out, oblivious to what was happening on a large scale. He'd regularly been faced with the dark side of life, murder, theft, violence, but here he was reminded that behind closed doors it wasn't all doom and gloom. He started going through the series of events. However unbelievable, he opened his mind to the possibilities. As he sat on the bus heading into central London, he couldn't help notice the headlines of the newspaper being read opposite him. Art treasures turning up. He grinned, he had an idea where this was all coming from. Whoever or whatever was doing all these changes had a feeling for art and that gave him a feeling of ease, they or he can't be all that bad. Kids having been kidnapped, changing their mind about coming home, he had seen the video and those kids didn't seem harassed, they looked happy. It was as if a loose cog suddenly slipped back into place, he sat up in his seat. The old woman next to him with her shopping bag between her legs, glanced with an uncomfortable look. "you a copper?". Aside of his mouth twisted into a smile, "yes, how'd you know". She lifted a hand to her face and tapped the side of her nose, "can smell" and her grimace disappeared "you do a good job, hard, but good, thank you? But what you doing on a bus". He smiled openly, "just getting a feel, sometimes need to see life without its bad side, seemed like as good a place to see that". She smiled at him, "I remember the war, was quarantined to the seaside, get away from the war, one of the best times of my life. I think I understand". She looked round out of the window, "my stop, keep it up" and struggling, she shuffled to get up. He stood up and offered her a hand. She was a weight and he had to pull but he got her to her feet. Holding her hand he helped her off and got off himself. "Just remember, on the whole people are good, it's just they get confused in times of desperation" And she turned and headed off hobbling with her shopping bag. He just stood and watched for a while. Getting his phone out of his pocket he called for a car.

An hour later he was sitting with an agent, Jimmy's name carried a lot of weight and having confirmed with Jimmy, the agent was eager to help. "AS you can see", the agent was looking at a screen with a picture of the woman described by ????????, her name at the top was Sarah green "Seem's perfectly normal, died a few months ago. "Is there anyway, you could see if there is a hard

copy of this person's file, you know, from a few months ago. The agent looked at him oddly, "it will be exactly the same". "Just humour me please". The agent now looking less helpful, picked up the phone. He dialled 06 "records department came back the voice from the other end. "Need the hard copy of files for a Sarah green". There was a pause for a few minutes, "It might take a while, have you ever seen the storage facility here, huge, would you like another coffee".

Patrick smiled and nodded, the phone still sat where the agent had placed it on the table, it wasn't that long and Patrick was on his own when he heard a voice coming back. "Sarah green, that was the name you asked for, seem's to be missing, checked out by.....well, the signature looks like.....a jimmy. Simply Jimmy". Patrick asked if there was a file on a Professor tiggerty. Another few minutes and the voice came back, "eehhrrrr, very unusual, that one seem's to be out as well, the same signature, you don't seem to be having any luck here". "No, thanks anyway". He stood up, he had had to check this out first, he had a feeling that would be the case, Jimmy the spy, didn't seem to be someone who trusted a lot. Grabbing his coat from the back of the chair, he got up and walked out, the agent returned with 2 cups in his hand's, "sorry" Patrick looked at him glumly, urgent call and walked out of the office. Using another taxi, he headed off to Jimmy.

Knocking at his door, an angry face appeared, "what!". "Can I come in?". Jimmy looked up and down the block, "this is doing my rep no good, cops knocking at my door, get in quick and he slammed the door once Patrick had passed the threshold. "What do you want?" Jimmy asked again. "Some more of that whiskey if possible?". Jimmy's sour face lifted a touch, "a man of taste, come in".

A few minutes later they were in the same room as before, Patrick on the sofa nursing a glass, sniffing its contents with an air of pleasure. Jimmy still had that sour face, "why is it I have to always repeat myself with your lot, what do you want?". Patrick replied without hesitation, "Sarah greens file and that of the professor as well, I know you have them stocked safely somewhere". Now Jimmy sat back and started sniffing his glass, "best isle of Islay whiskey, I know someone who works at the brewery, send me a case every year. Can't get that smokey peaty taste from any other brand. So what turn of thought brought you here, Sarah greens files, why would you think they are here?". They were signed out by a 'Jimmy', you know anyone of that name, didn't expect you to sign it out using Andrew Hargreaves now did I". "Jimmy or Andrew raised an eyebrow, you have done some research, knew you were a bit faster than most of your crew, won't ask how you found out. Ever thought of changing office's, I could make sure there was a seat available". Patrick took another sniff, then a sup, thinking of retiring early actually, things seem to be changing too fast for me".

Now Jimmy smiled unabated. "what would you do, early retirement, very early retirement. It would be a wast for someone of your talents". "You flatter me, now about that file". "Not until you tell me why and what you're looking for".

Patrick took a gulp this time. He felt the warmth rising, he leaned forwards now. "I have gone around this thing a while now and there is a gap, We know ????????was involved in the kidnapping, now he's giving us Gail, ie Sarah, out of vengeance, why has her record changed on all electronic networks. We know someone is covering tracks, why?. I.....there were reports a few nights after the murder, of a car chase, that was treated as a separate incident. What if they are linked". Jimmy 's brow furrowed, "yes....", "Somehow, the kids got away from ????????, what if they were helped!!!!, Sarah green, once a partner of ????????? I am guessing on written records, turned and helped get the kids away, the chase was ??????? trying to get them back". Patrick looked straight at Jimmy's eyes, what if she is still with the kids, the AI covering their tracks". "But she's dead" Jimmy replied with lips slightly turned into a grin. "Only on electronic records, I have a feeling I don't trust these electronic records at the moment. "That is why I want to see her written record". Jimmy reached down and pulled out from under his chair 2 brown folders, looking coldly at Patrick, "can't keep them, you can look through but this is all unofficial ok". Patrick nodded. Handing them over, Jimmy left. "Call me when you've finished, I'll be just in the other room".

Patrick leafed through Sarah's file. Born and schooled in Hamstead, father of check origin, mum British. She'd had a normal school life, average grades except in mathematics where she'd excelled. There were no real incidents on her record apart from being accused of shoplifting when she was 14. Never proved and no charges made. Having been on holiday in Prague with her family, visiting grandparents. It seemed they had been at a restaurant when Bosnian terrorist had gone in and shot everyone in there, including staff. Sarah's body was missing. It was only 10 years later that the story continued, her fingerprints came up at the house of a murdered diplomat in Germany. No-one had ever been caught for the murder, it had been put down as an error when the prints matched those of what was assumed a dead girl. The case had been thoroughly investigated and a tenuous link to ??????? had been found, it had all then been dropped. Patrick found it a bit odd. Since then, there had been incidents involving political espionage had been linked to ?????? and CCTV footage of the incidents occasionally turned up a woman in the background. Nothing more.

Patrick changed folders and started reading the notes on the professor, Educated at denston college in the north, a boarding school originally set up for future clergy, he'd graduated and gone to MIT in the states. Shining out there he'd left and was recruited by a British company, a pseudo for the intelligence services. He'd started out there, and genius was an adjective that had been used by his superior. His work on state of the art technology had continued and his file from that time was full, he'd been followed. No interest in women seemed to be the conclusion, there were no reports of dates, his whole life had been dedicated to science it seemed. Patrick found this One most of it he'd already been through, there was a bit more in these files than in the ones he'd been given before. The first 18 months after he'd left his government post, had been prolifically reported. It seemed he'd locked himself away for that period, his phone being tapped had shown little contact with the outside worlds and he'd lived pretty much on takeaway deliveries. Indian food being the most regular. The last 6 months had had little addition, it seemed the high level of priority he'd been given at first had been lifted. He closed the folder. 'Jimmy' he called down the corridor. There was the sound of rustling papers, and Jimmy appeared. Find what you wanted", Patrick replied "I guess. A couple of questions though".

"Fire away!". "Sarah's father, any links to any cloak and dagger stuff?".

Jimmy smiled a guarded smile, "good question, not that we could find, tried to follow relations of his but records from that time and place, what with the war, were a bit, how can I say it, missing". I have tried to follow leads on that, trying to see if there is a link to ????????. Can't find any!". Patrick mused on this before he asked his next question. Why did anything connected to incidents related to ????????, were dropped quite quickly it seem's to me, does he have high connections. From what we can gather, he is quite independent but carries some clout with eastern countries, the Balkans and Russia, seem to turn a blind eye".

"Who signed the change of surveillance on the professor?".

"Ahhhh, that's the interesting part, no-one with of the level that could have changed it has any recollection.....".

"So we assume that is when this AI came online". Jimmy just nodded. They sat in silence for a while, Jimmy topped up their glasses. Keeping his eyes on Patrick, Jimmy sat for a while. Patrick eventually sat up, "thanks for the whiskey. Sorry to have bothered you", Jimmy stood with a quizzical look. "For the sake of the children, we should work together on this don't you think". Patrick nodded slowly. "Had any thoughts you might like to share??". "Just trying to piece things together, I'll let you know if I come to anything though".

Back at the station, Patrick sat at his desk. Deep in thought, unknowingly having stared at his screen for the past half hour without tapping a single key, he was getting glances from the rest of the staff. He was brought out of his reverie by a tapping on the glass behind him; He turned and looked. John stood there tapping the glass separation of his office. Motioning with his hand, he beckoned Patrick into his office.

"You OK, you seem miles away. That kidnap case has really taken you.....".

"It'll be ok", a subdued Patrick responded still locked away with his thoughts. John glanced up at the clock above the door to his office, "time for lunch", and he grabbed his jacket off his chair. "You coming, fancy the Salisbury arms". Patrick nodded.

Having ordered scampi and fries, Patrick sat picking at his food. John who was on the steak and shoving it down with gusto, taking gulps from his pint sat and stared at Patrick. After a while, he'd finished his plate and hed just refilled his pint, Patrick was still only halfway through his first. "Somethings wrong pat, you've not said a word these past 20 minutes. Patrick looked up and into John's eyes. "I need a break, haven't had an official holiday in years, I want one now". John, with glass up at his mouth, froze, looking over he slowly placed the glass back on the table not having taken his sip. "You sure you OK?", "sure, you are well overdue a vacation". His eyes narrowed. Patrick's demeanour showed tiredness, "I guess you're right, this kidnapping has got to me, I think I need to get some fresh air and new ideas to roll around in this noggin of mine" and a smile appeared. "You'll be ok without me won't you". John had started his sip and spluttered into his glass. Taking the napkin and brushing down the liquid that had spilled on his shirt and tie, "of course" he said not looking up from his shirt, "you and me work well as a team but I think I can handle things on my own for a while, you gone for a couple of weeks, I should be able to hold the fort. He looked up with a slightly uncertain and dishevelled look. "You go sort yourself out. You're no good as you are anyway".

"So I can leave you to do the paperwork", "sure, duck out when you want, I'll cover for you this time, you've done it for me enough" and a sly grin replaced the uncertain look. "When you wanting to start you're holiday". Patrick grinned, "right now if it's ok. Got a sudden urge to visit France, never been further than Calais on school trips, fancy seeing whats beyond the ports, heard so much about the cuisine, might take on a bit of weight before I come back". "Sounds, perfect, don't worry about things here, I can deal with that and an uneasy grin came to his face.

Patrick had a smile on his face as he left.

Patrick calls number in France, the phone was picked up at the other end but the call was ended 10 seconds later. When no passcode was given Patrick assumed. There had been no voice either. Next, he contacted France telecom, he asked for the originating address for the number he called and then checked it out on google earth. The Auvergne, Cantal, Tremouille, La renardiere.

There, by the side of a small lake, nestled inbetween what looked like pine forests, was a wooden house, he couldn't really judge the size of it but it looked quite big. An idealistic setting he thought. "The professors retreat," he said to himself.

## Chapter 10 – The cabin in the woods

Port Medoc, just inside the mouth of the girande was where they docked the boat. Easy to hide amongst so many other boats. Ben had also booked a large 4x4 for them. Gail went to get the car, she brought it back, and parked outside the marina. Each of the children now on their own individual phones got ben and he got them to the 4\*4.

"All documentation for the boat and our entry filled in?" Gail checked with Ben. "All done".

"Ok," Gail said, "time to move..."

Having picked up his hire car in Limoges, he drove using the GPS through some of the most beautiful countrysides he'd seen. Rolling hills, pine forests, natural forests, rivers and streams running first to the left and then to the right of the road. Old style towns and villages, none of this block system. Houses just plonked at angles to the road, town that had evolved not planned. Solitary Farmhouses, dotted about, cattle and sheep grazing. He felt renewed already. He had a booking in a town called Lanobre, "chez del mas" was the name. He'd stop off there he thought then head off to this Tremouille place, he'd not found la renardiere on the GPS, but someone in tremouille would know.

Having dropped his bags off at the hotel, he'd headed off. He had just crossed a bridge following the signs to tremouille. The GPS had still not picked up La renardiere but as luck would have it, down low, almost covered by long grass, he spotted the sign. La renardiere. From what he'd seen from google earth, this place was quite secluded. He wanted to do a bit of a recce.

No point in getting found out when you could have the element of surprise he thought to himself.

He continued past the road and eventually following the road, came to a view over a valley that was stunning. A mountain behind sticking solitarily up like a shark fin he thought. In the valley in front, peaks dotting each side. "wow", he said to himself, "professor tiggerty, my hat off to you. This was really the middle of nowhere.

He parked his car by the side of the road and walked back. Turning down the dead-end road as google maps had indicated and the road sign as well, he followed the tarmac. Up and twisting then down, up to a final gradient and the wood appeared. As he continued forwards he realised it was almost all pine but a strip of mixed unfarmed trees appeared as nature had intended. Just before was a metal farm gate. He continued along the road. Eventually, the road turned sharply left and then right, going down steeply, the high canopy of trees overhead gave the feeling of coming through a tunnel descending and turning sharply and as he came round what looked like the final bend, it opened up. A park sized lawn, grass looking finely cut, a variety of different trees dotted in different places. There in the back, stood a majestic house, patio leading backwards to the massive lawn. Next to the house stood a gatekeepers house. He walked forward a bit more, seeing now the full turn of the road, on a hairpin bend, stood this large wooden fairytale house. The backdrop being the lake in the background. He stopped, it felt like invading a private garden of Eden. He turned and headed back up part of the hill, to the right was a grass/mud road leading to another section of farmed pine. He stopped and looked for a strategic point. He knew he had to get equipped if he was going to spend some time on surveillance in the trees there. Besides, he looked down. Not the right shoes, smart black travelling shoes. Looking up, he spotted a vantage point, he worked out how to get there.

It was now dusk, he'd got his equipment and having brought the car as close as he dared, dropped off a large military bag with equipment. He hid it in the woods. Returning to the car, he drove back to somewhere it wouldn't be seen by passers-by and on shanks pony made his way back.

I took a bit longer than if it had been daylight to get to the place he wanted to get set-up. Thanking the military training course he'd chosen to go on, funded by the force. Having got himself as

comfortable as he could expect in a pine tree which was surprising. He'd had to choose a thick enough branch thick with separating branches and needles. Loose the branches above and actually with the way the branch spread, it was actually comfortable except for the odd branch that broke the natural direction and dug in in places. He had the answer to that though, attached to a cord he had he was able to pull up the rest of the gear and in there was a thick enough blanket he could spread out and lie on. The secret was the thickness of the supporting branch. As he got comfortable he became glad of his choice. Once ready, set up his camera with telephoto lens and his binoculars. He could see into the sitting room and upstairs sitting room through big glass doors. He focused to start with on the upstairs. There were 4 people, teenagers from what he could make out. 2 girls from the long blonde hair, a late teen and an early teen. Male both of them. It was matching up. Putting down the binoculars, he grabbed the camera. He took a few shot's that seemed clearer than with the binoculars and as he took them, he became certain he'd found what he was looking for. He didn't bother changing back to the binoculars. He started to focus on the downstairs. There was movement. He could make out 2 people. That was all. He stayed watching. Having put down the camera, eventually, someone got up inside and came to the windows, Patrick hadn't the time to grab either tool. Whoever it was now shut the curtains. He went back to focus on the upstairs. With the camera, he took a few more shots. The kids were playing with their phones.

At about midnight all the lights went off and the house went into darkness. For Patrick, it was a long night. HE'd attached himself to the tree in the case during his sleep he fell out. It made it more uncomfortable unfortunately and sleep was in fits and start.

The house woke early, well for one it did. When the first person came out of the house, he was ready. He snapped away at what looked like an older man. Carrying a full, unclipped beard. Torn jeans, and a tee-shirt, he also wore a hat, like a cowboy hat from what he could make out. He watched as the man went into a shed, sheep and goats came out first followed by him. At his heels he saw 2 dogs, following. Passing behind the house, Patrick caught him lakeside. What looked like a pig sty. He watched as the man opened the gate to it. Out came 3 geese. The man now continued his tour and going through another gate, finally re-entered the house. From his viewpoint, Patrick smiled to himself, "what a life!" and he breathed out noisily and long. He had one more sandwich left, he got it out and started eating it. Movement started again, this time in the little front garden. It was a woman he was sure, he grabbed his camera. She was carrying a tray. She took the things off and went back inside. She repeated, it three times and the last time, 2 others and the man appeared. It was over 10 minutes later that the 2 girls appeared. A Family Breakfast, with 4 kidnapped teenagers and a dead spy. He snapped away again. He'd been sure, he'd found the trail of breadcrumb, followed it and found grandmas cabin in the woods. Now he was certain. He placed both the camera and the binoculars somewhere in his nest and just stared. He'd been trying to work out what the next step of his plan was to be but had never actually made one.

He watched through the morning and into the day. The kids occupied themselves with the goats and sheep that grazed on the garden around the house, playing with the 2 dogs and doing things around the water's edge. Gail spent a lot of time in the house he saw, with the old man. A lot of time was spent talking. How he wished he'd had one of those gizmos that allow you to hear through walls. About midday, they say outside around the table for lunch. He took this as an opportunity to climb out of his tree and stretch his muscles a bit. The cramps that he'd been feeling had made him really wonder what he was doing there. It was only when he climbed back up into the tree that he stood on a wrong branch and it cracked. Immediately the dogs started barking he stopped moving as the others around the table stopped for a moment to look. He held his breath, luckily the interest from the dogs wained and he was able to get back up to his nest.

The day wore on and dusk started to settle. He could see the family, (having watched them all day, it seemed to him to be like a family unit. He knew they weren't.), they were settling down now to watch something on the telly he guessed. The old man was putting his jacket on, he seemed to be preparing to go out. He had to react fast, stay here or follow, what was the old man up to. Covering

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up his gear, he made his way as noiselessly as he could, out of the tree and started heading back up the path towards his car. He ducked into the bushes as he saw the headlights of the car coming round the bend. He was sure he wasn't seen. Once the car was passed, jumped up and ran over the brow of the hill, he saw the lights turn left. He was almost where he'd hidden his car, he jumped in and raced off in the direction the lights had gone. He didn't have to go far, at the crossroads, he turned right, there was a bar there, "Coeur du lac" and he saw the man's car parked in there. Having driven passed at a gentle speed, he was able to look in momentarily through the glass door. Carrying on a bit further, he got to another crossroads. He pulled over and stopped. Reaching into his pocket he took out a cigarette and lit it. Sitting back in contemplation, he puffed away. Having come to a conclusion, he turned around and parked in the car park next to the old man's car. He checked his pockets to see how much French money he had. Enough he thought and proceeded into the bar. The bar itself was straight there in front of him. The old man and another guy stood there. There was a young woman behind the bar and over the other side, who he guessed was the owner, stood a large man. Gruff faced hands like anvils, with a pinny. Obviously working in the kitchen.

It was with a very rough french accent that he ordered his beer. He saw the faces turn to him. Nothing was said like he imagined in the old American west, everyone had gone silent and it still hung. He smiled and paid. Glass in hand he turned, the standard television blaring out, was at the far end of the room. On the left-hand side, a huge stuffed stags head was attached to the wall above the large windows. Inside he grinned to himself, Back home, the bars had all tried to keep the old worldly look, a few places had changed for that modern look to attract the young, but here, it was bland, white walls, the odd stuffed fish hanging with an occasional picture of the landscape hanging around on walls. Modernish but bland. Obviously, a hunters hang out with little of the feminine feel. "you English?", made him jerk around, the accent was English, Yorkshire he guessed. He nodded. "London, here on holiday in one of the gites", if the guy asked any more questions, he was glad he'd done a bit of research on the place. He put out his hand, "Patrick", best to keep as much honest, less likely to get caught out he thought to himself. The guy took his hand, "John", "nice to meet you john" he replied. "You live around here?". "just the other side of the lake". The silence returned and he turned to lean on the bar, took another few sips. John turned back and started talking fluently in French from what Patrick could see.

He went through the drinks on the shelves with his eyes, translating those he could and hesitating on the ones he couldn't. The big mirror behind the bar made it easy for him to survey. It was about 10 minutes later that the guy John was talking to made his Au Revoir and left. It didn't take John long to turn to him then, no-one else in the bar. Patrick had thought that might be a chance, bars in remote places were never that full and he'd been rewarded. John started asking questions, where he came from, what he did and how he'd found out about this section of France. He kept as much to the truth, he only changed policeman to a fireman, he saw the eyes light up on the other 2 in the bar. John translated parts. Patrick made up a story about one of his colleagues who'd been there a few years back and had recommended the place. He offered a round, and the drinks flowed. Soon he felt himself slurring, he'd been invited by the owner to a few drinks and towards 1 in the morning, brought out what from the freezer, eau de vie. His face twisted when the liquid slipped down his throat and the burn hit. "fwhoaau" he almost expected flames to come out of his mouth.

He glanced to his side, John was now grinning up at him. "All homemade, see the bottle, that one was the prune, have another" and he filled the shot glass to the absolute top, not spilling a drop. This carried on for the next few hours. The chat swayed from football to hunting, to adventures. It was about 3 in the morning when John turned to Patrick and said, "you've had too much to drink to drive tonight, come back to mine, there's a spare sofa and I have English guests, they'd love to meet someone from there". Patrick wondered for a second, was this a trap, it sounded too good to be true, had they spotted him in the tree. "if I've had too much, what about you". "I know the roads" he replied, all seriousness returned and without giving Patrick time to say anything, grabbed his jacket and said, "come on". Patrick obediently followed, he did feel the carpark wobbled a bit but he felt sturdy on his feet except when a wind knocked him off balance.

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He managed to make it to John who was opening the doors, "get in". Patrick squeezed in between the sheep fencing and the wooden posts to fix it too. "doing the fencing I see" he threw in sarcastically.

It was only in the morning that he got his first real feel for the house. Lying there on the fold down sofa, the light shining in, he realised he was in the attic part, the sloping ceilings, beams not quite straight, each other one at a slightly different angle, as he rolled over in the bed, he saw the source of the light. Big bevitre windows following the angle of the roof, 3 of them. He guessed he was in the sort of library, the shelves looked odd at first, like the beams, none following the same line as the others. That was when he felt the first shooting of pain in his head, he winced. "that would be the aignol from last night", he had caught a shadow in the corner of his eye as he'd woken up, it had just been the surroundings had caught him first. He looked closer now, John was standing in the hallway the other side of the doorway, in the shadows. Patrick could see the end of the barrels of the shotgun he was obviously holding. "You haven't been entirely honest with me, have you?". Patrick was now sitting up, he was raising his hands. "it's ok, that aignol knocks you out, I've already checked for anything hidden, you can keep your hands down if you want". He was strict and concise Patrick noted, army background he guessed. He brought his hand down slowly, next to him on the bed. His naked legs were touching the wooden floor that wasn't entirely flat he could feel. The silence slowly built, Patrick was thinking, how much do they know, how could they, he was wracking his brains, there was no way, he'd paid cash the whole way. Perplexed he just sat there and John, if that was his name, just stood holding the shotgun, lurking in the shadows. He could hear voices coming from downstairs, "he can hear you, go outside" John shouted down, with strength and authority On the ball as well Patrick noted. He made a second note at the same time, not to misjudge people, he'd been fooled by Jimmy, and now this old man was turning out to be less senile and stronger than he'd originally thought.

Hearing the shout from upstairs, Gail motioned to the kids, they went out through the kitchen door onto the balcony that overlooked the lake. They sat around the big table. Gail had put her phone in the middle of the table. "there is something as I was saying. There is a man upstairs, he came back from drinking with John" she ground those last words out. "Ben has something to tell us about him, go ahead".

The phone lit up. "the man upstairs is Deputy Inspector Patrick Davis. Deputy to Inspector burns who was in charge of the investigation of your kidnapping". Gail looked around the faces, she was trying to judge the reactions. There was shock on all their faces, Lucy was the first to say anything, but she said what was on all their minds "does that mean we can go home now?". Gail felt the welling in her eyes. "She knew this was the end, " I guess". She felt torn in 2, the way Lucy had said it made her feel like she'd been the captor and that hit home, she was.....". She couldn't see any smiles though as she now scanned their thoughtful faces. They actually looked dejected, another cord inside twinged and she couldn't hold that first tear back. She then felt guilty, she was happy that they were sad to leave her. The second tear burst away as her face creased into a smile, that second twinge had released a flood from within, she opened her arms to Lucy. Lucy looked at her, the split second delay sent a lightning bolt of panic through her which turned into just an adrenalin shock as Lucy climbed down from her chair. There were tears as she walked open armed to Gail. Slowly one by one the others joined her, she managed to get her arms just about around the 4 when they huddled really close. She squeezed what she'd got tightly. A shiver went through her as she held back a flood she knew could break at any moment. This was the closest thing she'd had to a family that she could remember, a flash of the family at the table in Sweden, she was understanding why.

"There are a couple of other things you might need to know", Ben broke through the emotion. "The man upstairs is officially on holiday, the first he's taken in 8 years. I have been scanning the airwaves and there has been no contact anywhere near here since we came, there are no other police

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officers around, he is here on his own”.

“are you sure” exclaimed Gail though she knew not to doubt him. She was already going through the “what does this mean” in her head.

"I am sure, and the other thing is he has the "legal" USB key with him. That created a stir. Sebastian asked, "on him, right now".

"well actually, John has it on him right now, he went through his things this morning and found the key, he asked me what it was".

Another clanger came down on her, with the legal function, he'd have no need of them as his conscience. The joy that had spread through her, was now in danger of dissipating.

Gail sat back at the table, it took her a second to pull back from the softness that had just flowered inside her, she was reluctant to let go but she pulled from the other side of her, toughness, she forced through images of the aftermath when she was a kid in that restaurant, the day everything had changed for her, she pulled that back, she felt her muscles tense, the smile was going, she didn't see the lake and its beauty anymore, it was just a lake, movement to her right caused her to move instinctively, she turned to with suddenness, Owen jumped, then hesitated for a second, before he continued walking towards her. As he got to her, he reached up and took her hand "but I'm going to miss you, I'm happy here, why can't we get them to come here".

It wasn't as if she let go, stopped pulling, but that the reverberation from inside was blowing up like a balloon, it squeezed and squeezed till her grip pulling fizzled out. That was the only way she could describe it. She felt her muscles relax again, her smile returned. The joy part wasn't as strong anymore, she bent down, still holding his hand, "I don't know what is going to happen, I think you will get to see your parents though. And.... I will miss you as well" and she pulled him in and gave him the best hug she could imagine.

“Right, I think we have to have a meeting of the 5 rulers of the planet” and she sat at the table.

Upstairs, Patrick had started fishing. No bites so far, "no really, I don't know what this is all about, I came back here last night with no idea I'd be kidnapped", he didn't want to push it, that guy has his fingers on the trigger, he has those eyes, a soldier's eyes they call it, there but not there, "was it in the jungle?", "was what in the jungle", "your service, I'm a fireman, I know military when I see it". He saw the man tense I smidgen, ok he said to himself, back off, don't go near the service, what made me say jungle, as he berated himself.

“Falklands” came an unexpected reply. Patrick did a quick calculation, he'd be in his mid 60's he guessed. “How'd you end up here”. He heard a grunted laugh. “big question, you know the answer” and he clammed up again.

There were footsteps on the stairs, Gail was in front, she glanced at John, she motioned to the ground with them, she knew he was watching, "you sure!" and John lowered the gun to the floor, uncracked it and walked past Gail and the kids who were now finally reaching the top. She'd given them instructions and the kids now placed themselves comfortably around the room. She'd had a bit of experience with interrogations, she'd sat in on one but had left before anything gruesome happened.

The fold-down was in the middle of the room, at the back was a single bed placed horizontally to the wall, fitting snugly under the uneven beams holding the ceiling. Charlotte and Sebastian placed themselves there on the bed, Owen sat on the end of Patrick's bed. Gail didn't move but Lucy went and sat next to Patrick on whom a look of dismay appeared.

"As you can see", Gail had deepened her voice, "the kids are fine, I'm not keeping them against their will". Patrick looked around the room, " I can see that", he was very confused.

"who are you Patrick", first thing, put your interrogee on the back foot, tell him something you shouldn't know.

now his head took a spin, they know who I am, his jaw dropped, she gave him a moment, then “who are you?” she questioned a bit more sternly.

If they knew his name, they knew who he was. “Ok.....he wasn't quite sure how to do this, they

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weren't terrorist's, they didn't look dangerous, even her, John, on the other hand, he was capable of doing something, he'd seen that in his eyes. "Patrick Davis, I'm actually with the police, on holiday, staying across the lake, I was trying to keep my profession secret;, you know how it is, well look, and he looked around the room". Stone faces, not a twitch. He looked back at Gail, she was still just staring at him. "One of my colleague tol..." he didn't get a chance to finish his sentence, we know you were one of those in charge of the investigation into these kids kidnapping". He'd pulled himself together now, he'd sussed they had been into the police system. How were they doing it he wondered, he'd seen no computer equipment, not the night before and now with the glass doors leading into a bedroom, he could see the whole way down. The room looked half finished, no computer installation there. "Ok, I'm on my own, I assure you, no-one knows I'm here". Nothing, she didn't move a muscle. |

He started showing himself, "I was concerned, I saw the look on the parent's faces when those calls came through", he raised his voice, "the case was taken over by special branch, I was sent out on a kidnapping, the kids disappeared". It was almost a shout as he ended his sentence. He was sitting back down, he put his head in his hands, "I've had to look at the dead bodies of children gone missing, I was having nightmares, I couldn't help seeing those bodies in their place. It was getting in the way of me doing my job, I had to find you!!" he was looking her in the face as he finished, pleading almost. There was an old part of her that was still there, her first impulse was how sad he looked, but then a thought, she was realising how much she'd changed over these past weeks, she empathised with him, she'd had that the first few months with ???????, unable to sleep, seeing the last glance she'd had of her parents while being dragged away by a strange man. She had been a lot younger than him then, but she had been opening herself up to how she'd felt, she could empathise with him. In a stone voice, "well you see them now, you can go" and she stepped back off her chair and replaced it in the corner of the room. He looked at her, stunned again, in a few seconds he replied "hand on a minute, I've got no clothes on", besides, we can't.....their parents", he turned to Sebastian, "your dad's losing his mind. It not fair to put him through this, you are Sebastian aren't you?" he turned to the girls who were now standing next to each other, your mum is frantic, your dads not doing well, he spends his whole time worrying, and you", he pointed to Owen, don't you miss them. Owen had a tear in his eye as he nodded. The girls hung their head now as if in shame, Sebastian had sat down, his face looked so dejected now. She just stared at the misery that was now in the room, she'd not really thought about this side of things, the only time she'd had, she'd used watching them, playing, arguing, sometimes the girls fighting but it had all been so light, she'd not looked at this side, the parents, the kids now the realisation they too had been carried away, by events, she reminded herself, events had just taken hold. She looked at the kids, she should have dropped them off at the first service station, she remembered why she hadn't. Then something hit her, she turned to look at Owen who was just looking down at the floor beneath his dangling feet. | She looked at the kids, then at Patrick, he looked like he'd never been on holiday she thought, his clothes bought off a shelf, jeans that still had their crease in them, tee-shirt, she even remembered the garage she'd seen them in, just after Limoges. His jumper on the chair even still had its label on. "Breakfast," she said with enough softness she had to turn to him to see if he'd noticed it. He had but didn't show he had. |

Gail let the kids take the lead and made sure he was in front of her, a safe distance. It was only when he stopped descending that she glanced in front and saw the others frozen. She followed their gaze and what she saw, froze her rigid. |

There, through the archway into the kitchen, John stood, his face in an angry grimace, there were the 2 barrels of his own shotgun pointed at his head. He stood arms in the air, "sorry, he caught me by surprise" in a flat well-spoken voice. Patrick was squeezing past, she followed behind, the biggest shock was still on the way, she hadn't seen who was holding the gun, she reached the bottom of the stairs before she made out who it was, then the real horror really hit, ???????? stood there, grinning, she'd never seen him like this, he was wild, his hair all over the place and that grin, he was staring straight at her, "surprised", his eyes lit up, "you wouldn't believe the things I've had to do to find you". |

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She could feel her legs wobble, she held herself up. Slowly she was pushing the kids back, behind her. Patrick doing the same came to stand next to her, shielding the kids. "oohhh, so you've found a beau, perhaps that was why you betrayed me and the smile became a grimace as he crunched his teeth. "better warn you", John broke the tension, "that guns got a hairline trigger, don't want you blowing my head off when you didn't mean to".

??????? looked took his eyes off Gail and slowly swung to his target, he just looked at him for a second and turned back, his fingers did relax a smidgen.

"How'd you get out, we saw you arrested". He just grinned back. "now back to business, pleasure can come afterwards" and the malevolence that spewed out drew out all the warmth that had been slowly filling her through the day.

There she was again, a pistol in her hand, him leaning over her, it had only been 3 days since she'd escaped that restaurant, 3 days, "you have to learn to protect yourself" he'd told her then. That look from him had reminded her of how he'd calmed over the years, back came that anger, that hatred beaming through those eyes, untamed wild eyes filled with the memories of death. She'd been shaking so much that first shot, she hadn't even felt herself pull the trigger and the bang and jerk from the gun had sent her hysterical, he'd shoved that angry head in her face, he'd calmly said, use it or I use it. The same malevolence she saw now, it had then frightened her out of her hysterics, a calm had taken over her and she'd pointed, aimed and fired, steady as a rock, that had been the day she grew up. Afterwards, he'd patted her on the back, she'd not only hit the target but snagged the centre, he'd reacted with adoration of her, he'd drunk with her on his knee, recounting stories of what they'd do together, him and her, to his other comrades with him, it had been a raucous party, and a deal had been created then, he'd look after her, she'd be his daughter.

That had been survival, this was now, her feelings for him had changed again, this time it was disgust. It hadn't hit her at first, he wasn't just here for her, that was added benefit, he was here for Ben, she thought for a second then a giggle squeezed out, she took a step away from the door leading out, she hoped Patrick understood. She was wondering what Ben was doing at that mooment, was he calling for help, or, she wasn't sure what she prefered, but "the giggle turned into a laugh, which got louder and louder, she moved closer to the archway, she kept her hands in the air, she kept in sight, ????????s eyes followed her, he bum was slidding against the wall, feeling her way as far as she could, she didn't want to intimidate him, she was already taking a huge risk with the life of John but the kids had to get out, she knew also her life was hanging by a thread too. She saw out of the corner of her eye, Sebastian ushering the others towards the door. The laughter became a guffaw and for real she was now laughing, tears started rolling down. "You came for Ben", and the laughing grew more real. "You can't have him, it's like Pandora's box once opened, can't be closed. Her face took on a taunting look, "that only leaves the pleasure, seeing as we've finished with the business end".

"What do you mean, can't have him", "give me the keys, that is all I would want".

"Don't you get it, he's out there already, on the internet, in the stock exchanges, you name it he's already there". Get me the keys, and yes I saw the kids are gone, I don't need them, only you, where are they, first the real one!!". Her laughing fit over with, the smile was still there and it became even bigger, she glanced down to see John was looking, he was, the first one you want is in his pocket and she nodded, her head towards John, one of the outside pockets I think. Her eyes fixed on John moved up repeatedly, indicated to the window. Her hand still in the air was counting down with her fingers, it was only at the last minute ???????? realised something was up and moved, just as he heard the bang of a pistol going off, he caught a glancing blow on his brow and dropped, as he dropped, his fingers squeezed, he had lost his balance, the explosion indoors created a shock wave, ears rang. When he gained a bit of equilibrium, he realised he was groping on the floor, then he felt something being pulled from his waistband, he knew immediately what it was, his pistol with the silencer. The back door sprang open with a crash as Patrick jumped through, service revolver in his hands. He saw Gail already standing over the man, his own pistol pointed at him. For a split second,

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he wondered who he should be pointing the gun at. He didn't waver though and he aimed for the head again. The man on his hands and knees. He saw Gail shaking her head, trying to get the ringing out of her ears. It was then that he saw John scrabbling his way back from under the table where he'd fallen, there didn't seem to be any damage, "you ok?", "only my pride, he looked up behind him, there was a blast hole the size of a beach ball, as he turned back, his face had a wild grin on it, the wall I hadn't done" and he laughed, letting off the adrenalin pressure. ??????? sat heavily on the floor and turned around, legs outstretched in front of him, the rest of his upper body resting on his arm, tripoded behind him. He looked at them one by one, so who's going to be the one to do it, the madness hadn't left him.

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Just then Sebastian came bursting through the door, closely followed by the others, he stopped in his tracks when he took in what was confronting him, so did the others. ????????'s calmed face came across as he turned his head and looked at the kids. Gail was first, she didn't want the kids getting the brunt of this. "how'd you get out?" She almost screamed at him. His head returned from its gaze at Sebastian. She caught his eye, "you know", his hands were in his lap, he looked at her, he gazed around the room, taking each of the armed adults, in turn, he was looking for anything, any fragment of a chance, an idea, he kept his calm. He spotted the shotgun, splayed across the room, not that far. His head had stopped spinning, his hearing had almost returned to normal. "Not that easy" and she stepped to the shotgun and moved it away with her foot.

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His heart sunk. He knew what he had to do, he'd been through this so many times before, if it was between choosing himself or her, in his nightmares, he'd always chosen her. She watched as the features of his face changed, the muscles just seemed to droop, she started to see the person from her nightmares, a younger him, this person resembled the young monster she'd fallen prey to. "I caught sight of him, he pointed at Patrick at the airport, how'd he find you, no hang on, the postcard, I knew I should have taken it". Patrick fished into his pocket and brought out the postcard. He flipped it to ???????. "phone call just before he was killed?". Patrick nodded. "Traced the phone number. Not complicated". "Missed out on that last bit, followed you from the airport, saw you by chance.

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"And getting out, how'd you do that?", he ducked his head, that one was quite a coup, made a deal with British intelligence and Moscow. To search and find those keys, you know there will be no end till they get them".

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Gail turned and looked at Patrick who nodded, still holding his gun pointed, at his chest now. Keep an eye, she went back upstairs and got a small plastic bag with the USB keys. Back in the kitchen, she opened the furnace for the kitchen stove, it was alight she checked. She took one key after another out of the bag and threw them in the fire. His face just went agape, there were a couple of sounds from him before, "you probably shouldn't have done that", "it's ok, you can tell them what I did with them". Patrick's duty kicked in, John, can you take the kids out of here", no response but the order was taken and John moved past behind him, he started heading them out the way they'd come in. "I need to talk to you all about something" he made a reason there and then, Owen, I heard you say something about bringing them out.....". The voice trailed off into the distance. ??????? went into a thoughtful mood, "so it was a ploy about the key in his jacket", Gail couldn't help it, she glanced across at the table, there was also a movement by the doorway, one of the cats, she lifted her head, then there was a movement down vision again, she swung her hand down as she caught ???????, swinging an arm, towards the shotgun, he could,t reach it, he couldn't, through now filling eyes, he became a silhouetee against the wooden floor, "stop" she screamed, as he swung the other arm as if in front crawl towards the gun. There was another explosion next to her. Patrick had spotted it, ????? was guarding her to kill him, she knew if he didn't die here, he'd get out of wherever they put him and she'd be looking over her shoulder the whole time, he wanted her to take the guilt he'd carried around with him on his shoulders all these years, or he had relented to his conscience, Patrick wasn't there to judge, he reacted to training he could say when he got back.

## Epilogue.

Gail was feeling down, It had been 2 days before that Lucy, Charlotte and Owen had left with their parents. Somehow the whole thing was being washed under the carpet. Patrick had pulled a few strings with someone he knew called Jimmy, that had got the parents on the next flight out, free from the press, free from being followed. It had been like a normal few days she imagined. It had been quite an awkward meeting the parents though they had been special she thought. They had not once accused her of kidnapping their children, only that she'd made them safe. She saw Sebastiaan going into the forest with his dad.

John had explained he needed someone to help him, he was wanting to open some sort of park, suspended tents and cabins, John's dad didn't have a job so he'd invited him to stay and help. He agreed "only on a temporary basis mind, might need to get back". Sebastian had tried to point out "for what" but something was still tugging, memories perhaps she thought as she watched them chatting on their way up the hill. She was glad, he'd stayed, how long she didn't know but she hoped.

It was the first chance she'd really had now, to think about ????????, dead. She was so glad it had been Patrick who had pulled the trigger, she was still not sure she'd have been able to. She still couldn't get it, she heard a screeching cry overhead, she looked up and saw the buzzards circling upwards on the mists of heat started that morning. Apart from that, she heard the lap of water on the shore below, the clicking of the bells on the sheep as they followed Sebastian up the hill.

Patrick had resigned from the force. He sat on the balcony next to her, in silence, enjoying a cup of coffee. He still woke up in cold sweats, the aftermath from when he pulled the trigger in the kitchen. He'd once shot someone in the line of duty, but it had been from a distance and it hadn't killed the man. This was different, he turned and looked at Gail, somehow, it had been the thought of her that had helped him through the past few days, he'd started to piece together parts of her life, he couldn't believe most but knew they were true, it had been the first few years that had left their scar. He'd realised she'd never really mourned her parents, now her fake dad.

Jimmy had out surpassed all his expectations. Things had run smoothly, all evidence of what had happened that night was supposedly now classified, the case for the kidnapping had been closed, the guilty party ???????? had since disappeared and his name and photo had been put on the wanted people's list. It had been the night after the body had been cleared away that Patrick had not been able to sleep, bad images floating around had made him get up. It had been a warm night, he was feeling relaxed here, the sounds, the view, away from the greyness, pubs, fights. The adrenalin had never really been his cup of tea. It was the puzzle, solving the puzzle. He was looking up at the clear sky, the lights were so bright up here, the star clusters were now visible and he could see them patching the sky. He'd helped himself to a glass of wine from the box, leaning on the balcony, he heard a step behind him, "mind if I join you", and Gail appeared, to him she was like an angel, the light from the kitchen was behind her, enough light to make out her features. He nodded and turned back to watching the image of the moon rippling on the waves disturbing the flat canvas.

She came over to where he hung on the bannister, glass in hand draped the other side, she joined him in the same position just next to him. "could be in amongst the sound of car horns, screeching tyres, blaring radios, people shouting, the humm of people moving from one place to the next, but I'm here", he turned and looked at her, her face was so close to his, he felt the glow from her face, "but you're here," she was prompting him to finish. He turned his head back, I'm here now and I don't know why" his head sagged a touch. She placed a hand on his shoulder, he looked up, "I know the feeling" and she took the same position as before,

"Bens been quiet lately, I've had a few visits from him at night, it seem's to be like he's reporting into me. He doesn't need to, he knows he doesn't need to, but it's nice" and she smiled. Patrick had never seen Ben, she had never talked with Ben while he'd been there. He couldn't make up his mind,

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"what do you think about him, is he going to do it", he had had the whole exciting story told by the kids, the first night the parents had arrived, all the kids had to explain what they had been up to, they had explained BEN. It had scared the living daylights out of him. It sounded like a god, only he was real and he was here.

He could still see evidence happening every day. He kept up to date with the news pod on his phone. The art treasures found had not stopped, Scientific discoveries every day that would change the way they lived. Strange political turnarounds were now also becoming the norm, mostly for the good in his honest opinion. He still wondered though. "It's a tight line he's walking" he didn't realise he'd said it out aloud.

She turned her head, she nodded and looked at him. "Could I sleep with you tonight, just to hold me". He looked at her, she trusted him, he nodded himself, knowing the world he now knew was out there, looking up at the stars, he felt so small, for one night, to hold someone, the thought of not being on his own for one night, it came out dry, and he had to cough. He eventually nodded. She moved closer and took his arm, she may her head on his shoulder. He saw there was a smile, plagued as she was by her demons, she had found a smile, he was finding a way through his own, he didn't move for fear of spoiling that moment, just placed a hand over hers.

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