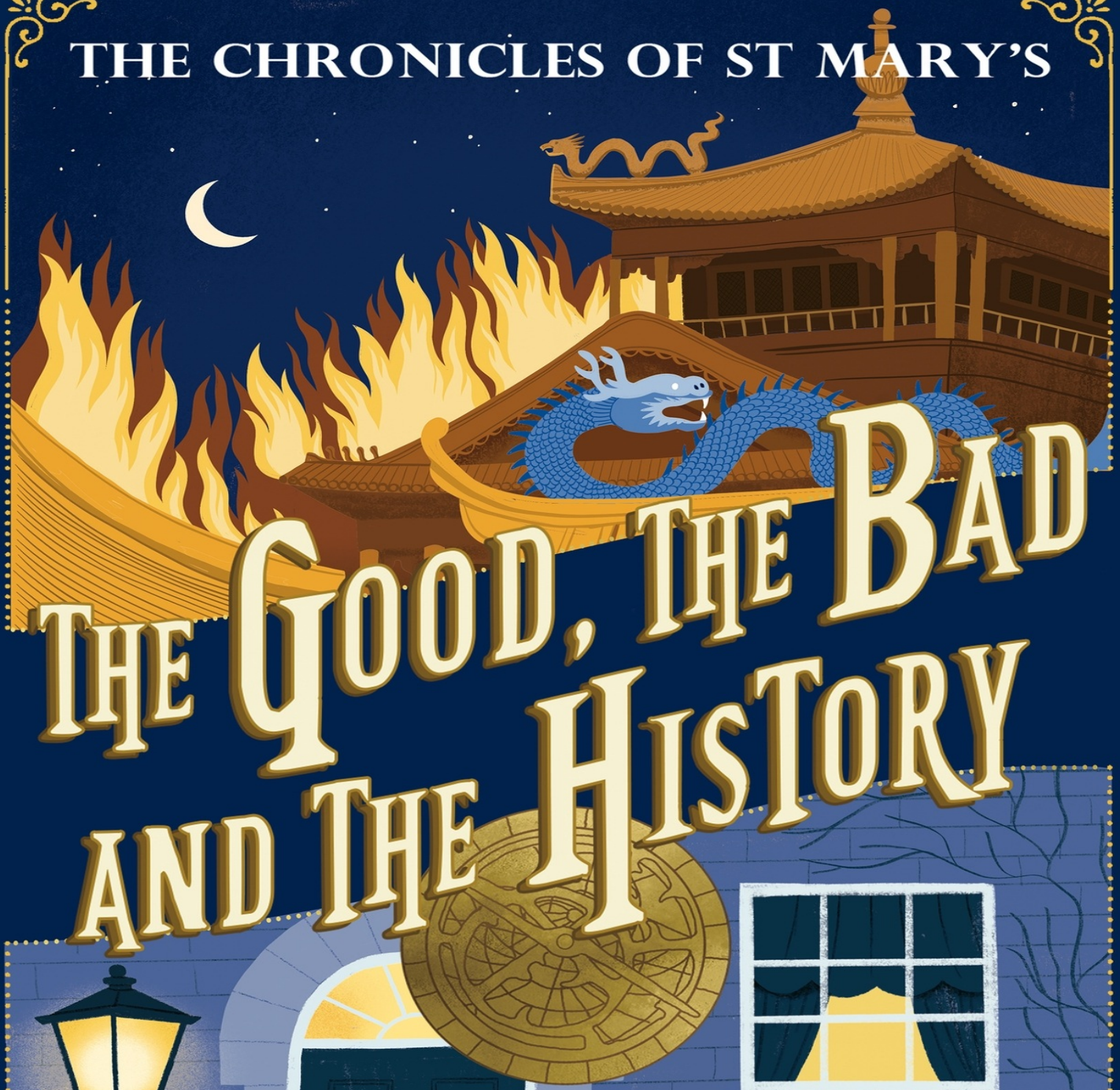
THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S



THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE HISTORY

JODI TAYLOR

ONE MILLION COPIES SOLD

JODI TAYLOR

The Good, The Bad and The History

HEADLINE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

St Mary's is under investigation. Their director has been shot and Max is Number One Suspect. Can things get any worse? We all know the answer to that one.

Max needs to get away – fast – and a Brilliant Idea soon leads her to a full-scale uprising in twentieth-century China. If she can come by a historical treasure or two in the process, even better. That is, if she makes it out alive.

Then there's the small matter of Insight – the sinister organisation from the future hell bent on changing History for their own dark ends. Having successfully infiltrated their ranks, Max is perfectly placed to stop them. But she knows her cover will soon be blown – because it's already happened.

Can Max take down Insight before they come after her? The circle is

closing, and only one can survive . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jodi Taylor is the internationally bestselling author of the Chronicles of St Mary's series, the story of a bunch of disaster-prone individuals who investigate major historical events in contemporary time. Do NOT call it time travel! She is also the author of the Time Police series – a St Mary's spin-off and gateway into the world of an all-powerful, international-organisation who are NOTHING like St Mary's. Except, when they are.

Alongside these, Jodi is known for her gripping supernatural thrillers featuring Elizabeth Cage together with the enchanting Frogmorton Farm series – a fairy story for adults.

Born in Bristol and now living in Gloucester (facts both cities vigorously deny), she spent many years with her head somewhere else, much to the dismay of family, teachers and employers, before finally deciding to put all that daydreaming to good use and write a novel. Over twenty books later, she still has no idea what she wants to do when she grows up.

By Jodi Taylor and available from Headline

TIME POLICE SERIES

DOING TIME

HARD TIME

SAVING TIME

ABOUT TIME

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S SERIES

JUST ONE DAMNED THING AFTER ANOTHER

A SYMPHONY OF ECHOES

A SECOND CHANCE

A TRAIL THROUGH TIME

NO TIME LIKE THE PAST

WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

LIES, DAMNED LIES, AND HISTORY

AND THE REST IS HISTORY

AN ARGUMENTATION OF HISTORIANS

HOPE FOR THE BEST

PLAN FOR THE WORST

ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER PLACE

A CATALOGUE OF CATASTROPHE

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE HISTORY

SHORT-STORY COLLECTIONS

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

LONG STORY SHORT

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S DIGITAL SHORTS

WHEN A CHILD IS BORN

ROMAN HOLIDAY

CHRISTMAS PRESENT

SHIPS AND STINGS AND WEDDING RINGS

THE VERY FIRST DAMNED THING

THE GREAT ST MARY'S DAY OUT

MY NAME IS MARKHAM

A PERFECT STORM

CHRISTMAS PAST

BATTERSEA BARRICADES

THE STEAM-PUMP JUMP

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR FATHER?

WHY IS NOTHING EVER SIMPLE?

THE ORDEAL OF THE HAUNTED ROOM

THE TOAST OF TIME

TIME POLICE DIGITAL SHORT

SANTA GRINT

ELIZABETH CAGE NOVELS

WHITE SILENCE

DARK LIGHT

LONG SHADOWS

FROGMORTON FARM SERIES

THE NOTHING GIRL

THE SOMETHING GIRL

LITTLE DONKEY **(DIGITAL SHORT)**

JOY TO THE WORLD **(DIGITAL SHORT)**

A BACHELOR ESTABLISHMENT

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Have you met the Time Police?
To discover more about

DRAMATIS THINGUMMY

Dr Bairstow	Director of St Mary's. Given all the recent excitement, a sensible director would opt for the path of discretion and definitely not defy the authorities and demand more money, more equipment and more staff and to be quick about it.
Dr Peterson	Deputy Director. Has a favour to ask of Max.
Dr Stone	Still struggling to persuade Max to do as he wants.
Mrs Partridge	PA to Dr Bairstow. Muse of History. Still manipulating events.
Rosie Lee	Former PA to Dr Maxwell. Don't mention nooks or crannies.
Captain Hyssop	Her alibi is keeping Max out of gaol. And vice versa.
Chief Technical Officer	Still hanging in there. Anticipating
Farrell	a long, happy and crisis-free future. We know differently, though, don't we?
Dr Dowson	Initiating his new library assistant into the Library Way.
Dieter	Is there to be a promotion?
Nurse Fortunata	Long-suffering as always.
Rosemary Salt	Seriously scary.
Miss Brooke and	Library shock troops.

Mr Bond

OUTSIDE SECURITY FORCES

DI Ivaan Mendis	His instincts are spot on.
Lt Den Trasker	As are his.

TIME POLICE PERSONNEL

Commander Hay	Commander of the Time Police.
Captain Farenden	Her adjutant.
Captain Ellis	Looking at promotion if he plays his cards right.
Commander Treadwell	You'll never guess what he's done.
Lt Filbert	Head of security.
Officer Varma	Security officer.
The Doctor	Not quite as depressed as usual.

Various other officers too numerous to mention.

INSIGHT PERSONNEL

The Board	Delightful, charming people. You'll never meet a nicer bunch of murderous megalomaniacs.
Bridget Lafferty	Head of Admin – and much, much more.
Eddie Middleditch	Ostensibly a filing clerk.
Geoff	Bleagghhhhh.
Maxine Forrest	Not who she seems.

Various security guards and others still too numerous to mention.

RECOVERY AGENTS

Lady Amelia Smallhope	Very successful bounty hunter.
Pennyroyal	Her butler and alleged member of the human race.
Markham	Appears to have taken up residence in a public convenience. Urine-stream expert.
Mr Evans	Formerly of St Mary's. Now a Pro and Con along with his colleagues.

CLIENTS

Svetlana Koslova	On the run.
Anastasia Koslova	Olympic-standard asker of questions.

PATARA INHABITANTS

Clerk	Doing very well. A happy family.
Prentiss	
Little Max	
Dorus	
The baby	
Lyssa, Anfia, Hestia	Part of the household and they know it.

MISCELLANEOUS

Sarah Greenwood	Provisional wing of the British Museum.
A couple of unpleasant	Recipient of their just deserts.
old men and their loom	
A woman and her two	Rescued by our heroes. Eventually.
daughters	
Potential firing-squad victim	Uses our heroine as a human shield. Don’t waste your sympathy.
A pack of	Not a laughing matter.

hyenas	
Ramses	The first time-travelling Ancient Egyptian.
Mrs Brown	Member of the government department nominally in charge of St Mary's.
Jack Daniels MP	Ranked slightly below Ramses.
Martin Gaunt	You'd think he'd know better by now. Ranked slightly below even a politician.
Helen Peterson	

Various soldiers, officials, staff, minions, panicking people, firing squads, bodyguards, etc.

PROLOGUE

Right – this will have to be a very quick catch-up because I can't hang around. The police want a quick word with me. So here goes.

Smallhope, Pennyroyal and I were still at St Mary's following a series of incidents involving a log pile falling on me, an attack on Home Farm, and me being arrested three times in one afternoon. Three times! Even Markham can't beat that, although he says he's going to give it a try.

Smallhope had been stitched back together and the wrist she hadn't known she'd broken had been correctly set and flexi-gloved.

Pennyroyal had, apparently, had a record-breaking number of bullets removed from various parts of his anatomy and was healing quietly and efficiently in the men's ward.

I was stiff and sore after my adventures with an Insight hit squad and a giant pile of logs. Guess which did the most damage.

Markham was around somewhere, hopefully holding himself in readiness to effect our rescue, should that become necessary. However, since his rescues don't always go according to plan, he was probably just holding himself.

Not surprisingly, the police turned up almost immediately. All of them. Time Police, civilian police, military police. They'd arrived in a perfect storm of black pods, black helicopters, black vans – even black bicycles for all I knew. All with one objective: to discover who had shot Commander John Treadwell.

Yes, I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't me. I had a perfect alibi – I was talking to Captain Hyssop at the time.

We still didn't know whether Treadwell was alive or dead and no one was saying.

St Mary's was grounded. And confined to barracks. No one in – no one

out.

We were all under investigation.

There were two of them. Smiling, pleasant, devious, almost certainly lying through their teeth and definitely not to be taken at face value.

So that made three of us, then.

I was being interviewed in Sick Bay, which, I hoped, would confirm my credentials as a very sick person who shouldn't be bullied.

Neither of them were in uniform, and although I'm now so old that policemen are beginning to look positively embryonic, these two were around my own age, which probably meant they'd be patient, experienced and tenacious. Or perhaps they'd been brought in to reassure a nervous patient.

The nervous patient sat up straight, smoothed her covers and endeavoured to look frail and helpless but – above all – law-abiding.

'Good morning,' said the elder of the two, flashing his ID. 'Detective Inspector Ivaan Mendis, and this is Lt Den Trasker, representing the military police. I expect you can guess why we're here.'

I nodded. Leon had warned me to keep my answers short and to the point and, most importantly, not to argue with anyone. I don't know why he thought I would.

They pulled up a chair each and sat down at my bedside. Not close enough to be intimidating but just that little bit too close. Invading my personal space but being very nice about it.

'Good morning,' said Trasker, carefully seating himself on my right. Mendis was on my left – all cleverly designed to split my attention. 'Do you mind if we call you Nicola?'

‘Of course not, Den,’ I said cheerfully. There was a more than slight pause and then we began again.

‘Let’s start with the easy stuff, shall we?’ said Mendis, placing his recorder on my bedside table. ‘Name?’

‘Nicola Hay,’ I said tremblingly. The very picture of someone who knew nothing but wanted to cooperate.

‘And your occupation?’

‘Library assistant.’

He’d placed his recorder so the blinking green recording light was just at the very periphery of my vision. Very irritating. And distracting.

‘Where do you work?’

‘Here – at St Mary’s. In the Library.’

‘And how long have you worked here?’

Shit. I didn’t know. I hadn’t thought that far ahead.

I said, ‘Um . . . let me see . . .’ and began to do complicated sums on my fingers, whispering, ‘November . . . no, December . . .’ until Peterson, who had demanded to be present at every interview to ensure any and all questions related solely to the Treadwell incident, said, ‘About four years, I think.’

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘Still a bit hazy. You know . . .’ and tailed away as if my strength was failing me.

Mendis peered at my dramatic facial injuries. My bruises were just transitioning from purple and blue to brown and yellow, which, trust me, was not an improvement. A face-full of logs can do that.

‘Yes,’ he said, with genuine curiosity. ‘What on earth happened to you?’

‘I crashed my car,’ I said piteously, letting my chin wobble. ‘Although . . . I still can’t remember . . .’

‘Last week,’ said Dr Stone, who was there to shore up my story with confusing medical details. ‘Her recollection of that event is a little foggy although you should find she’s clear enough over the events you’re interested in.’

‘Tell me what you do remember,’ said Mendis.

‘Do you mean my accident or the . . . the other thing?’

‘Where did your accident take place?’

‘In the car park.’

‘Here at St Mary’s?’

I nodded. That was my story, anyway. I was hoping the fact it had supposedly occurred on private property would muddy the issue a little.

‘Was a police report filed?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, truthfully. ‘I don’t remember. Perhaps you should ask our Legal Department.’

That would be Mrs Partridge, so good luck with that, guys.

His gaze took in my surgical skull cap and bald head and then travelled on to my bruised face and forearms. ‘It looks very painful,’ he said. ‘What exactly happened?’

I fiddled with the sheet. ‘Oh, well, so stupid . . . I left the car in gear and when I switched it on, it jumped and I hit something – I can’t always see very well – and then I tried to back away and I hit something else. Behind me. And I think I oversteered or something. And the car didn’t go where I thought it would. And then there was the chicken and I panicked and I think I stamped on the accelerator instead of the brake and there was a big bang and this giant bag hit me in the face.’

I let anxiety bleed into my voice. ‘I didn’t hit anyone else, I promise. I just . . . sometimes I’m not very good at going backwards. In a car, I mean. Am I in a lot of trouble? Angus . . . ?’

I suspected anxious witnesses were Mendis’s favourite thing. He twisted in his seat to look at Peterson. ‘Someone was hurt? Who’s Angus?’

‘Bashford’s chicken.’

‘Who’s Bashford?’

I felt safe answering this one. ‘One of the people whose car I hit.’

Should they require any evidence corroborating my story, Bashford’s car has sustained more hits than the surface of the moon during the Late Heavy

Bombardment four billion years ago. The entire vehicle is peppered with impact craters. I leaned forwards and said, ‘Please tell me she’s OK.’

He looked baffled. ‘Bashford?’

‘Angus.’

Mendis glanced at Dr Stone. For enlightenment, presumably.

‘The chicken,’ he said briefly.

‘Angus?’

‘Yes.’

‘She hit his car but not his chicken?’

‘And another car and the bin store and a bollard and the kerb and part of the fence,’ said Dr Stone, going into completely unnecessary detail.

Lt Trasker looked at me. ‘What were you driving? A tank?’

‘I don’t own a tank,’ I said primly. And unwisely, as it turned out.

‘So what do you own?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘What sort of car do you own?’

Shit again. How should I know the make and model of the wholly fictitious car I was lying to the police about?

‘It’s blue,’ I said helpfully.

‘I expect our Admin officer will be able to supply any details you might require,’ said Peterson smoothly.

Mrs Partridge again, so, again – good luck with that, guys.

Mendis tagged his partner. ‘Regarding the events leading up to the shooting of Commander Treadwell – I believe you saw the whole thing.’

‘No.’

They exchanged looks. Mendis consulted his scratchpad. ‘It says here . . .’

‘I saw him shot. I didn’t see who did the shooting.’

‘Ah. What exactly did you see?’

‘I saw Commander Treadwell being shot.’

He gritted his teeth. ‘Where?’

‘On the South Lawn.’

‘No,’ he said patiently. ‘Where were you?’

I nodded my head towards Peterson, sitting in the window seat. ‘Over there.’

Trasker got up and went over to the window, thus reminding me to be careful because they’d check and verify every word I said.

Mendis continued. ‘What were you doing in the window?’

‘Reading a book.’ I held up David Sands’ latest bestseller.

He pretended to be surprised. ‘Really? You can’t see well enough to drive a car successfully – or even at all – but you can read a book?’

I put on my specs. The ones that make me look both intelligent and sexy – although today I suspected they’d have a bit of a struggle – and beamed at him.

Baulked of his prey, he returned to the attack. ‘Were you alone?’

He would know this already. I wondered if, given that I’d incurred my injuries a day or so before Treadwell was shot, they’d written me off as a suspect and the purpose of this interview was actually to verify whatever Hyssop had told them.

‘No, Captain Hyssop, our temporary Head of Security, was here.’

‘What was she doing?’

‘Talking to me.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, I think I assumed she’d come to see how I was doing. Isn’t that usually why people visit the sick? Other than questioning them, of course.’

He put down his scratchpad and stared at me. ‘You’re very defensive, Ms Hay.’

For one nasty panicking moment I couldn’t think who he was talking to. Was the Time Police Commander here too? But no – I was Ms Hay. Concentrate, Maxwell. It was interesting that I’d chosen the surname Hay. Interesting psychologically, I mean. I thought I’d just gone with a variant of Nicola de la Haye because of our recent Lincoln adventure, but perhaps my reason was deeper and more sinister than that. Was Commander Hay a

descendent of Nicola's, perhaps? Given the relentless powerhouse that had been Nicola de la Haye and still was Marietta Hay, I could well believe that.

I blinked back to the here and now because everyone was staring at me – these two security officers, Dr Stone, and Peterson in his capacity as my official employer (he wished).

My fellow patient and roommate, Lady Amelia Smallhope – and also my actual employer and, like me, convalescing bounty hunter – had been wheeled into a nearby airing cupboard and was almost certainly, at this moment, quietly quaffing a margarita among the piles of bedding. And no, she hadn't gone willingly. Pennyroyal – fellow bounty hunter – was currently fast asleep in the female staff toilets.

But back to my interrogation.

I peered at Mendis from under my skull cap. 'I don't think I have anything to be defensive about. I didn't shoot Commander Treadwell. Ask Captain Hyssop.'

He brushed that aside. 'I want to be absolutely certain of this. You and Captain Hyssop were both in this window here? Looking out?'

'Yes.'

'What did you see?'

'I saw Commander Treadwell being shot.'

'Before that.'

'Oh. Well, I saw him come out of the fire door.'

'That one down there?' said Trasker, leaning forward to peer out of the window. Peterson obligingly moved to one side.

'Yes. He came out of the door and set off across the grass.'

The lieutenant frowned. 'Where was he going?'

'I don't know for a fact, but he was heading towards the stables. Those buildings to your right.'

He peered again. 'So he was heading towards the stables when he was shot?'

'No.'

‘You just said . . .’

‘No – he’d stopped.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He just stopped?’

‘Yes, he turned back to look up at the building.’

Mendis leaned forwards again, suddenly very interested. ‘Do you think he heard something?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, genuinely trying to help because the sooner I was cleared from this investigation the sooner I could get out of here and resume my nefarious activities. ‘The window was open and I didn’t hear anything.’

‘Did he do anything else?’

‘No, he was just looking up at the building.’

‘Why?’

‘Checking the roof, perhaps.’

‘Why?’

‘Again – I don’t know. I thought perhaps he was on his weekly inspection. You know the sort of thing – when the boss wanders around and appears just when and where you don’t want him to.’

‘But you don’t know why he paused in that particular spot?’

I shook my head. ‘It was a nice day. Perhaps he was just . . . you know . . . taking a moment to enjoy it.’

‘For how long did he stand there?’

I closed my eyes, reliving the scene. ‘About ten, twelve seconds.’

‘And then?’

‘And then I heard a popping noise. Like a car backfiring. Or a distant bird scarer, perhaps.’

‘Not like a gunshot?’

‘I don’t think I’ve heard many gunshots,’ I said. Seriously, I am never going to heaven. On the other hand, there was no point saying I’d never heard a gunshot at all because this was St Mary’s and gunshots and

explosions happened all the time.

'Could you tell where it came from?'

Sadly, yes, I could. The shot had come from inside St Mary's. Treadwell had been shot by someone inside St Mary's. I had no idea what Peterson or Dr Bairstow had told the officers, so I went with ignorance because that always works well for me. I shook my head.

'Can you describe this noise?'

I frowned. 'Not really. It wasn't loud . . .' Which was true. 'I assumed it was from some distance away.' Which wasn't true. One of these days I really must make a list of all the people – good and bad – I've lied to over the years. And the centuries in which I've done it.

'Are you certain?'

'No, I'm not.'

'You see, Ms Hay . . .' I really wished I'd gone with a name that didn't make me want to check behind me every time I heard it. 'All the evidence points to the shot coming from this side of the building.'

I widened my eyes in alarm. 'Does it?'

'And we wondered if it came from here.'

I pulled up the covers. 'Here? In this room?'

'No, I mean this part of the building.'

I shook my head. 'The shot didn't sound . . . inside . . . if you know what I mean.'

Apparently they did because they both nodded.

I thought I'd gained their trust enough to ask a question or two myself. 'Did you find the gun?'

Alas for this brave effort, they didn't answer, so I guessed no, they hadn't. I had an apparent inspiration. 'Perhaps he or she threw it into the lake. Have you searched the lake?'

'We are exploring all lines of enquiry,' said DI Mendis smoothly, which was probably police speak for *we're not going near those bloody swans until we absolutely have to*.

They refocused on me. Probably to prevent me making any more helpful suggestions.

'What happened after the commander was shot?'

I frowned. 'For a moment or two – nothing. Then Captain Hyssop told me to stay where I was. She ran out of the room shouting that Treadwell had been shot and for Dr Stone.'

'And you stayed put? As you were told?'

'Oh yes. I could barely hobble that day.' And then, because I felt the point couldn't be made too strongly, I looked down at myself. 'I'm not much better now.'

'And then?'

'Nothing. Not for a few seconds anyway. He just lay there. And then people started running out of the building. A couple of historians, then Hyssop appeared, then the medical team and so on.'

'And then what happened?'

I shook my head. 'I don't know. I felt rather sick and it seemed wrong to watch so I went back to bed.'

'And you didn't see anyone at all before Treadwell was shot?'

I shook my head. 'No, I'm sorry I can't help.'

Mendis looked up. 'Do you know, I find that quite hard to believe.'

Well, his instincts were spot on, weren't they?

'No,' I said tremblingly. 'I'm just a library assistant . . .' and prayed he'd have no knowledge of the extensive and improbable range of skills required for library work. Especially library work at St Mary's. 'You should talk to Captain Hyssop. She knows what's going on much better than me.'

'Captain Hyssop has already been interrogated,' said Trasker, and I didn't care much for the way he said that. Hyssop and I were each other's alibi, but suppose they decided we were in it together? I certainly couldn't afford any sort of investigation. It wouldn't take them long to discover that Ms N. Hay and Dr L. Maxwell were one and the same person. And that Dr Maxwell was responsible for liberating Dr Bairstow from a spot of illegal

internment. And I was prepared to bet that Martin Gaunt – the unpleasant individual from whom Dr Bairstow had been liberated – would be attempting to make all our lives utter hell as soon as he was able. Especially me.

Or – an even worse possibility – suppose Hyssop had lied? She didn't love me. Suppose she told them I'd done it. Her word against mine. Yes, the sooner I was out of here the better. Remembering I was seriously injured, I yawned heavily and let my eyelids droop.

'That's enough,' said Dr Stone, and about time too.

Mendis was silent for so long I thought that the interview was concluded. I should have known things wouldn't be that easy.

Right out of nowhere, he looked up from his scratchpad and said, 'Do you know a Dr Maxwell?'

My surprise must have looked very genuine. Because it was. 'Yes. Well, I used to. Dr Maxwell used to work here.'

'Where is she now?'

'She's not here any longer, that's all I know.'

'Why not?'

'Well, she . . . um . . . she . . .'

'She what?'

It suddenly dawned on me that shifting suspicion on to that criminal mastermind Maxwell might be a good idea. They'd waste a lot of time pursuing that particular red herring, thus freeing me up to return to my life of . . . as Lady Amelia would describe it . . . apprehending miscreants. Or, as Pennyroyal would prefer to describe it – *profitably* apprehending miscreants.

But back to my current crisisette. The one where I was completely innocent. Of shooting Treadwell, anyway.

I let myself gabble. 'Dr Maxwell had a row with Commander Treadwell. Well, several rows, actually. And in public, too. Which is how I know about them. But everyone knows about them. They really didn't like each other.'

‘He sacked her, didn’t he?’

‘He did, but I don’t think . . .’

‘Where is she now?’

I took good care to look startled. ‘I’ve no idea. I didn’t know her that well so I don’t know where she might have . . .’

‘Did you like her?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said unblushingly. ‘She was lovely.’ Behind the two officers, Dr Stone grinned and made gagging mimes.

‘What about Mr Markham?’

‘Our Mr Markham? He’s on paternity leave, isn’t he?’

I peered around Mendis to Peterson, who had gone back to the window seat.

He nodded. ‘That’s right. Due back . . . in about a month, I think. Mrs Partridge will know.’

‘Do you have an address?’

‘I don’t, but Mrs Partridge will. Why do you ask? You don’t think either of them . . . ?’

‘As I said, we are pursuing all lines of enquiry,’ he said smoothly.

‘Of course,’ said Peterson, equally smoothly.

‘Who do you think shot Commander Treadwell, Ms Hay?’

Any right-thinking human being who happened to have a gun in their hand at the time, was the obvious answer to that one.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, beginning to feel it was time to wrap this up. ‘He only ever spoke to me once and that was just to ask where Dr Dowson was. Perhaps someone was up in the woods – shooting – and they were careless . . . I really don’t know.’

Dr Stone stood up and fortunately, so did they.

Trasker looked down at me. ‘We’ll be back.’

I was unimpressed. Seriously? I’ve been threatened by experts.

‘Now,’ said Dr Stone, intervening before I could tell them this, ‘who would you like to see next?’

The door closed behind them.

Peterson lingered for a moment. He looked worried. I didn't blame him. All my breezy insouciance aside, St Mary's was an organisation with a lot of secrets. We knew where the bodies were buried because we'd buried most of them ourselves.

Future troubles were piling up thick and fast. Not just Treadwell; we were also hiding Smallhope and Pennyroyal following their recent punch-up with Insight at Home Farm. And that bastard Gaunt would never give up on his relentless quest for me and Markham after we broke Dr Bairstow out of his – Gaunt's – supposedly high-security establishment. I myself was here under very false pretences and God only knew where Markham was.

I sighed heavily and looked at Tim, whose face pretty much mirrored my own thoughts.

'These people you're trying to take down,' he said, 'Insight – are they likely to come after you here?'

I shook my head. 'There is absolutely nothing to link Maxine Forrest to St Mary's. We've been really careful, Tim.'

'I hope so. Anyone who can inflict that amount of damage on Smallhope and Pennyroyal . . .' He tailed away and then sighed again. 'Could things get any worse?'

'Oh,' I said comfortingly. 'I think we both know the answer to that one.'

2

After that brief excitement, the days in Sick Bay dragged past. And outside Sick Bay, too. St Mary's doesn't behave well in captivity, and after a few days of everyone being restricted to the main building and grounds, a sort of Colditz mentality set in.

First out of the gate – literally, as it turned out – were Bashford and Roberts, who disguised themselves as nuns. Why nuns was never actually established and Mrs Enderby was extremely unhappy over their unauthorised incursion into Wardrobe. Anyway, they'd blatantly strolled out of the gates and down to the village to enjoy a night's quaffing at the Falconburg Arms. And taking the opportunity to exchange news with Ian Guthrie, of course.

Their problems only began when they attempted – somewhat unsteadily and with a great deal of giggling – to break back into St Mary's and were caught trying to climb in through the window they had carefully remembered to leave open but Hyssop had since discovered, closed and locked. Even then they would probably have got in somehow had not the swans taken offence at this breach of the unofficial Swan/St Mary's Treaty as it related to nocturnal perambulations, and moved in for the attack. Our two swan-shit-covered rascals were eventually rescued, hauled before Dr Bairstow and subjected to massive sarcasm, the gist of which seemed to centre around the stupidity of being caught rather than the original transgression.

Exciting rumours that vital evidence revealing the identity of the shooter had been surreptitiously buried in the veg patch were sadly discovered to be

untrue, but only after two squads of police cadets had turned up with wellies and spades and the entire veg patch had received a thorough and much needed digging over. A grinning Mr Strong's comments on the quality of their bastard trenching had not been well received.

Back in Sick Bay, Smallhope and I were briefly joined by Miss Sykes. Her attempt to induce Turk to wear 13th-century horse armour had failed quite spectacularly. She'd ended up in the rhododendrons and he was subsequently discovered just outside B&Q on the Rushford bypass, attempting to rid himself of his decorative scarlet feather headpiece by rubbing himself against one of those diddy little smart cars. A comparatively minor event, you'd think, but equine intransigence escalated the situation considerably, eventually involving the car owner – trapped inside and terrified – the car park attendant, the police, several insurance companies, the Highways Agency, the farmer who owned the broken fence, Mrs Huntley-Palmer in her capacity as local magistrate, a traumatised veterinary surgeon, and Dr Bairstow's entire range of diplomatic and political skills.

The R&D Zip Wire to Freedom (patent pending) went about as well as you would expect and a reluctant Dr Bairstow was eventually forced to authorise use of the cherry picker for the purpose of rescuing those left dangling precariously some twenty feet above the ground. Apparently, everyone's first choice had been to leave them hanging there for the sport of crows. Or swans, possibly.

'It's never dull here, is it?' said Lady Amelia, watching rescue operations from our window.

Well, no, it wasn't, but we couldn't afford to lie around much longer. Not least because I was bored out of my skull. Fortunately, there seemed to be a general feeling that a bored Maxwell boded badly for everyone. I was supposed to be a library assistant and apparently it was time I took up my duties, so they kicked me out of Sick Bay to report to Dr Dowson.

The Library at St Mary's is beautiful. It's one of the first things I saw

when I arrived here for my job interview. It's a long room – but not narrow – with cases and bays all along one long wall and tall windows opposite with more bookcases in between them, because I suspect Dr Dowson is psychologically incapable of seeing a blank bit of wall and not shoving a bookcase against it.

The biggest section is History, obviously, but the whole Library is well stocked, and, like all librarians, Dr Dowson has friends in high – and low – places and can get you almost anything you want. And definitely everything you need. When I was Head of the History Department, a great pile of papers would appear on my desk at least once a month, all of which I had to read and initial. And persuade my department to read and initial, too. Everyone in the History Department is required to be current in their chosen field. Ancient History, before you ask. With British and European Medieval as my second speciality and the Tudors bringing up the rear.

Dr Dowson's giant desk stood in the back corner, littered with heaven knows what. Books, papers, the tools of his trade, what looked like a small handheld crossbow – for overdues, possibly – and occasionally the kitchen cat, Vortigern, because he fancied a different desk on which to snooze that day. I often imagine a couple of archaeologists roping themselves together for safety's sake, and indulging in a bit of exploratory excavation among the desk strata.

Behind his desk were two doors. One led to his office where he, me and Professor Rapson have shared many a toasted crumpet around teatime. The other door led to the Archive room – currently almost empty since the main body of material had been removed for its own safety.

Our Archive is really what St Mary's is all about. As Dr Bairstow always says – it's important to have a true record of events. Not the political version, not the religious version, not the version put about by the winners – and definitely not the bought-and-paid-for version – but the actual, warts and all, correct version. Given the way History has been rewritten, reimagined or downright faked over the last hundred years or so, you can

imagine how many people would like to get their hands on our Archive. To misrepresent, alter, amend or completely obliterate the inconvenient bits of History not quite in line with current fashionable thinking. And if that ever did happen, everything we had ever accomplished would be a complete waste of time because we wouldn't be able to go back and do it again. There are no do-overs in History.

I should probably include a teeny-tiny explanation here. The purpose of St Mary's is to investigate major historical events in contemporary time. To discover what actually happened, and record and document these events as they occur.

Brace yourselves.

It's **TIME TRAVEL**, people.

Bloody hell, that felt good – I'm going to do it again.

It's **TIME TRAVEL**, people.

I'd better stop now before I become overexcited.

Please don't ask where the Archive is at this moment – Leon and Professor Penrose have stashed it somewhere and, wisely, they aren't telling anyone – so I say to the Forces of Darkness, 'Torture me as you will – I cannot tell you a thing.'

Back to the first day of my new job. Dr Dowson himself is short, round and bespectacled – the very epitome of librarianism. He's also a master forger, swan-battler, former freedom fighter and perpetually at war with his best friend, Professor Rapson, who occupies R&D on the floor above. The two of them were at Thirsk before they came here and they've been together for years. Sometimes I worry about what will happen to the survivor when one of them dies. Which, if the professor keeps inventing stuff that can eat its way through the Library ceiling, could happen at any moment.

Anyway, I'd been an historian, a bounty hunter, a filing clerk in a sinister organisation in the future, and now I was a library assistant. Quite a logical career path if you think about it.

The job itself was quite enjoyable. I began by developing the traditional Oppressed Librarian Shuffle. That's Library 101.

The next step was to overload the book trolley's top shelf until it tips over as soon as you try to wheel it away.

Once that's mastered, you can move on to overloading the entire trolley. You heave it around the Library, adding more and more books as you go and complaining loudly about your back. Library staff who don't have bad backs aren't doing their job properly. Of course, you could easily take just half the books, shelve them and then come back for the second batch, but that's not the Library Way.

Then there's the *never being able to access the top shelf because you're not tall enough and can't find the elephant's foot* manoeuvre. There's supposed to be a foot in each bay but there never is. Anyway, the correct procedure is to stand on one of the lower shelves and clamber up like a monkey, book clenched in your teeth. And before Health and Safety people begin to fibrillate, you don't *always* bring the bookcase down on top of yourself so stop complaining. The whole manoeuvre is stylishly completed by returning to ground level and falling over the elephant's foot, which turns out to have been hiding behind you the whole time. Colleagues will then mark your dismount for artistic content and technical difficulty.

Obviously, I was agog to take up my new duties but first things first.

'I have to know,' I said to Dr Dowson. 'The dermestids – from my last visit. Who won the flesh-eating contest? Us or Thirsk.'

'Oh, us,' he said, beaming. 'Naturally. By one and a half cadavers. And the buggers cheated, Max. There were cut marks on the long bones, would you believe.'

I would believe. Academic competitions are cut-throat and rules are not always adhered to quite as strictly as they should be.

'Anyway,' he went on, 'I'm happy to say there was massive ill will at the presentation ceremony. Our esteemed colleagues at Thirsk are not good losers, I fear.'

‘Oh, excellent,’ I said, making a mental note to stay well clear of Thirsk’s representative at St Mary’s. At least until the dust had settled.

Without any planning on my part, I’d arrived at a good moment – according to Dr Dowson, anyway. Most of the professional staff were still away at the Annual Cataloguing Conference in Criccieth. They’d been in training for months, he informed me as I slathered butter on a stack of crumpets nearly as tall as me, and had escaped our current lockdown by less than twenty-four hours.

‘Training?’ I said. ‘For a conference?’

He nodded eagerly. ‘The Annual Cataloguers’ Conference Cataloguers’ Cataloguing Competition. In Criccieth.’

I stared at him. ‘You’re making that up.’

‘No, no, I promise you. The highlight of the cataloguers’ year. Not that there are that many, of course, which may go some way to solving the problem of perpetually depressed cataloguers.’ He frowned. ‘Perhaps we could organise a series of events to cheer them up a bit. I’ll give it some thought. Anyway, our hopes are very high this year. Miss Brooke is joint favourite in the Speed Cataloguing section, and she and Mr Bond are strong contenders for the Cage Cataloguing event.’

‘Cage Cataloguing?’ I said cautiously, because like all librarians, his sense of humour is different to that of lesser mortals.

‘Yes, indeed. A brutal and bloody affair. I myself was twice a runner-up in my youth. Not these days, of course. My old wound still aches when the wind is in the east. I was at Thirsk then and it was, perhaps, unfortunate that that was the year our Thirsk team was drawn against that of Northallerton. No love lost there, as you can imagine. It was carnage, Max. So much blood. I vividly remember a colleague – both arms broken – turning the pages with her teeth, rather like that Spartan at Thermopylae, you know.’

‘Good heavens. Did you win?’

His face darkened. ‘No. There was . . . well, let’s just call it foul play. Never turn your back on an indexer, Max. Or an archivist. Especially an

archivist. Just plain bonkers, every single one of them. Rituals,' he added mysteriously. 'Among the stacks. The more powerful archivists can actually hear the documents whispering their secrets to each other in the dead of night. Never ever venture into an archive without the most powerful protection you can afford.'

'Really? And what would that be?'

'Well, I personally wouldn't even contemplate such a thing without a platoon of SAS, half a dozen surface-to-surface missiles and a jug of holy water. There – best advice I'll ever give you. That and staying out of Northallerton, of course.'

'I've been banned,' I said gloomily. There had been the small matter of a stolen sword.

Dr Dowson beamed. 'A good start. I really feel you and the world of librarianism are meant for each other. Now, until our team returns – triumphantly, I have no doubt – we must simply do the best we can. How are you at accessioning?'

So, as you can see, a whole new range of skills for me to master, but I enjoyed it. There's something very satisfying about shelving books. Making sure the whole bay is perfect before moving on to the next. And then scowling at the bunch of feckless wastrels – or historians as they like to call themselves – as they burst into the Library and TOUCH THE BOOKS. AGAIN. Which, apparently, is something that is allowed to happen. Whereas glaring at any and all potential readers is not. It strikes me the world of librarianism needs a little rethinking.

Where was I? Yes. Working happily away in the Library, eating crumpets and not bothering anyone. I still had to report to Sick Bay – presumably they hadn't given up hopes of me suffering a relapse – but there were snatched hours with Leon and Matthew for chats and things and, just for the moment, everything was astonishingly quiet. I tried not to worry that this might be the calm before the storm.

The two things happened almost simultaneously.

I was in the Library, staring at the Egypt section – the Middle Kingdom – and trying to remember whether ☥ came before ¤ when I dropped a book. Chinese history. Green, leather-bound, I remember. I bent to pick it up – a little stiffly because one or two things still weren't working quite as they should. Trust me, you never want to find yourself acting as a ground sheet for someone's winter log pile.

The book had fallen open. I smoothed the pages and an illustration caught my eye. Well, that was interesting. I sat down at one of the tables and read the rest of the page. And then the rest of the chapter. And then the next. And then I had a bit of a think.

The best place to hide a book is in its correct position in a library, so I finished the shelving and wandered off to Sick Bay. I just about had enough time before lunch.

My route took me through the Great Hall, where the History Department hung out. St Mary's was still grounded pending the outcome of the Treadwell inquiry so they were all there and, I'd like to think, beavering away.

The Great Hall is one of the oldest parts of St Mary's, which, having been burned down at least twice – I was there on both occasions – was a pretty mixed bag, architecturally speaking. It's a hefty medieval space with an ornate oak staircase at the far end. Ten shallow steps lead up to the broad half-landing from which Dr Bairstow addresses the troops on the many occasions the troops need addressing.

Two rows of haphazardly placed tables ran from the staircase to the vestibule doors. Whiteboards were propped precariously against the walls, which themselves were covered in random notes and diagrams because you can never find a bit of paper when you need it. And the random notes and diagrams were covered in yellow stickies. It all made perfect sense and everyone knew where everything was but it had probably driven Commander Treadwell insane. Until someone shot him, of course. A

kindness really, when you actually think about it.

Mindful that the History Department now belonged to David Sands, I was trying to keep contact to a minimum, and social rather than professional. Normally, in my efforts to stay out of their way, I'd have climbed out of one of the Library windows, nipped around the outside of the building, in through one of the back doors, and up the back stairs. Not this time, however. Firstly, because it was raining, and secondly, I was pretty sure Hyssop and her Security people would be monitoring everything very closely these days. They might even have to hand over each day's footage to the investigating officers. Gone were the happy days of ham-sandwich--munching Mr Evans. Under him, the Security Section would have watched my graceless scramble out of the window, speculated on the reasons for this bizarre behaviour and very probably laid bets on how catastrophic the outcome was likely to be.

The third reason for choosing this route – and the most important – was a swan poking around outside, sticking its great long neck into everything and muttering to itself. Not only am I not as brave as I used to be, I'm not as stupid as I used to be, either. Therefore, I waited until most of the History Department shot off for an early lunch. I didn't have long to wait – the History Department is always at the front of the queue when it comes to mealtimes – and headed towards Sick Bay.

Where the second thing happened.

Lady Amelia was just emerging from the men's ward. She'd obviously been visiting Pennyroyal. She was also looking uncharacteristically worried.

'Ah,' we said simultaneously. 'The very person.'

She motioned for me to go first.

'I bring good news,' I said.

She sighed. 'And I bring very bad news.'

My heart chilled. Had Pennyroyal taken a turn for the worse? For God's sake, don't tell him this or we're all dead, but I'm quite fond of Pennyroyal.

And I like to think I'm growing on him. Like black mould on a bit of dodgy grouting.

'In that case,' I said, 'you'd definitely better go first.'

There was no one in sight but she drew me back into the women's ward anyway. For good measure we even went over to stand by the now infamous window.

She got straight to it. 'We appear to be approaching Pennyroyal's date of birth.'

For one mad moment I had visions of balloons, party hats, birthday cakes, and the world's most inappropriate, rousing chorus of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow', and then the true impact sank in. Not his birthday – his date of birth.

Shit.

I suspect some explanation would be helpful.

You can't be in the same time twice. Ever. For instance, if I nip back to October 1066 to watch the Battle of Hastings – and I already have – and I miss something, then I can't go back to do it again. Ever. Because I'm already there and you can't be in the same time twice. Even if it's in a different location. Better minds than mine have addressed this issue and everyone is unanimous. I have to say I'd always been a little sceptical. Short of the timeline rolling itself up and disappearing, I'd reasoned, what could possibly happen? This *not being in the same time twice* thing was probably just something dreamed up to enhance the awe and mystique of our profession.

And then one dark day I'd been present when someone did exactly that. They didn't mean to, but they clipped the corner off their own timeline. They'd miscalculated and arrived at exactly the same moment their former self had been departing. There had been a fractional overlap – possibly less than a single microsecond – and the result hadn't been pretty. Sometimes I can still hear the crack as his spine snapped. Can still smell him as he rotted from within. Can still hear his strange, off-key voice singing 'All Things

Bright and Beautiful' as his body fell apart in front of me. It had been sickening and brutal, so trust me – you never ever want to be in the same time twice. Or even be close to someone who is.

This was interesting, though. I'd often speculated on their origins – Smallhope and Pennyroyal's, I mean. Where and when had they been born? Were they both from the same time period? How had they got into all this? And now I'd discovered Pennyroyal wasn't really some cyborg from the future but an actual human being.

I said, 'Oh, hell.' Because if an infant Pennyroyal was about to be ejected from a birth canal somewhere – does anyone else find that a deeply disturbing image? – then we needed to get him out of here. 'How long have we got?'

'Well, it depends on whether we work from his date of birth or his date of conception.'

'We can't afford to take any chances,' I said. 'We have to work from the earliest date. Conception.'

'In that case, about a month.'

I gusted a sigh of relief. 'Well, that's not too bad. I was thinking we only had about ten minutes.'

'I don't want to get anywhere near that date. As soon as possible, he and I are out of here. We need to get back to check out the damage to Home Farm, anyway.' She sighed. 'Repairs are not going to be cheap.' She looked at me. 'What about you?'

Yes indeed. What about me? Even setting aside the damage done by a hostile log pile, I wasn't match-fit. And hadn't been for a long time.

Brace yourselves for more explanation.

I'd been overdoing things a little. Jumping up and down the timeline, I mean. Worse, I'd been criss-crossing from the past to the future and back to the past again – often all on the same afternoon. Do this too often – and I had – and you eventually develop severe disorientation problems. Which is a nice way of describing projectile vomiting, a lot of falling over and

generally failing to function properly. That's bad enough, but worst of all are the really nasty hallucinations that go with it. I'd been so far gone I'd actually mistaken Markham for something truly unpleasant and nearly gutted him like a fish. About which he hadn't been very happy.

The result of all this was that I'd been banned from jumping anywhere for at least six months. I'd been instructed to spend time in the here and now in an effort to reset my body clock which, apparently, was all over the place.

Just for once, I'd done as I was told. I hadn't been in a pod for months and months and now half of me was desperate to know if I was fit enough to continue with the Insight mission and the other half was scared I wasn't. And never would be.

However, it looked as if my mind was about to be made up for me. We had to get Pennyroyal out of here and I definitely wasn't going to be left behind. Whatever it cost me, I was going with them. Besides, my session in the Library had given me a Brilliant Idea. And more importantly – a Profitable Idea.

Lady Amelia poked me, recalling my wandering wits. 'What did you want to speak to me about?'

I checked the door was closed and then said, 'Have you ever heard of the Yong-le da dian?'

'Who's he?'

'Not he – it.'

'All right – what's Yongle . . . ?'

'It's usually known as the Yongle Dadian.'

'Not helping.' She narrowed her eyes. 'You're up to something, aren't you?'

How could she tell? I hadn't seen her since breakfast.

'Is this your Brilliant Idea about you going back to Insight, Max? Because I'm still not convinced . . .'

I shook my head. 'No, not yet.'

'Well, what is it about, then?'

I grinned. ‘Money. A whole shedload of the stuff.’

‘Ah,’ she said cheerily. ‘Singing my song.’

She sat on the window seat and I dragged myself up a chair and took a deep breath. ‘Short version. There’s a Chinese encyclopaedia. Written between 1403 and 1408. Over eleven thousand volumes. The biggest in the world until Wikipedia. Two copies were made – one of which was completely lost. Centuries ago. The other has been mostly lost over time, especially during the Boxer Uprising, but there are a few remaining volumes scattered around the world.’

Smallhope looked doubtful, but I’d planned for this. Time for the big finish. ‘Two volumes – just two – sold at a Paris auction house for eight million euros. And that was way back in 2020. Think what they’d fetch today.’

‘And your idea is . . .’

I lowered my voice even further. ‘Just for once, we have unusually specific data. We know the where, the when and how it all goes down. I propose we nip in and rescue a few volumes. Well, actually, as many as we can.’

‘And then?’

‘Well, what normally happens is that we conceal our finds in the country of origin and Thirsk arranges an archaeological expedition of some kind and the items are “discovered”. To great excitement and worldwide acclaim. Everyone wins. The country in question gets their treasure, Thirsk gets the glory and St Mary’s gets the funding.’

She looked very unimpressed. ‘How would that benefit us?’

‘Well, obviously we don’t hand over *all* our treasure. We’re the ones running the risk, after all.’

Smallhope frowned. ‘And is this instead of, or as well as, your Brilliant Idea to take down Insight? The one we discussed when I first got here?’

‘As well as. Think of it as filling time until we’re ready to move in on them.’

She sat silently, working at her flexi-glove.

Pennyroyal and Lady Amelia Smallhope have worked together for years. They're a team. They're smooth and slick and highly competent. I know virtually nothing about them but I do know that Lady Amelia is the boss. She obviously values Pennyroyal's opinion and I suspect nearly always takes his advice, but she is, very definitely, the one in charge. I waited in silence. There was no point in gabbling details at this point. Not least because I hadn't worked them out yet. And, of course, the news about Pennyroyal changed everything. Removing him from this time was now a priority.

'Pennyroyal first,' she said.

I nodded.

'And we include Mr Evans as well.'

That was a brilliant idea. Smallhope was injured, Pennyroyal was out of the game, and no one knew how I would react to my first jump in six months – taking Evans was only sensible.

'Can we do that? Isn't he supposed to be bodyguarding Dr Bairstow?'

She smiled and suddenly the day seemed a little chillier. 'Like you, Mr Evans works for me.'

'Great. Not a problem then.'

Her smirk deepened. 'Not even a little bit. We need a planning session. Do you think we could get hold of Mr Markham?'

'A quick word to Evans and it's as good as done.'

And it was.

A meeting was convened in the men's ward.

'Good to see Pros and Cons back together again,' said Markham happily, and actually, he wasn't wrong. Other than being grouped around Pennyroyal's bed instead of the kitchen table, this was just like being back in the kitchen at Home Farm. Lady Amelia was even clutching her traditional margarita. Ostensibly, we were there to cheer up the patient – the massively ungrateful patient, I might add – but in reality, we were plotting

our escape.

'I'll speak to Peterson,' I said. 'We have to tell him we're leaving and why, because we'll need him to cover for us. Although, theoretically, we could disappear for months and still be back here this time tomorrow. But it's a courtesy.'

'We have to come back,' said Evans. 'The investigation isn't over with. St Mary's will be in a lot of trouble if we disappear, and they don't deserve that.'

Everyone nodded.

'We take nothing with us,' said Lady Amelia. 'We make no preparations – nothing to give us away. We just go.'

'Is that wise?' I asked. 'We don't know what sort of shape Home Farm will be in. If it's anything like you two when you first arrived here, it won't be good.'

'The Faradays know what to do,' rasped Pennyroyal, who still found it difficult to speak. 'The builders will already be on site. If the building isn't habitable, we'll just have to sleep in the pods.'

I groaned – but only internally. Markham and I had spent some time living in our tiny pod and it hadn't been pleasant. It was a very small space and not designed for two people. Things had got very whiffy very quickly.

'We'll leave tomorrow,' said Smallhope. 'Three o'clock in the afternoon, which is not a suspicious time to be wandering around the place.'

I would be leaving Leon and Matthew again. I couldn't keep doing this. It wasn't fair. On the other hand, going up against Insight wasn't something you could leave half-done. Once it *was* done, though – that was it for me. Back to our little cottage in Streetley. To paint and be with my family.

'And Max will have the opportunity to see how she handles the jump,' said Lady Amelia.

I nodded and decided that everything would be absolutely fine, even if it killed me. Lady Amelia was good to work for, but if I couldn't pull my weight, then my time as a bounty hunter was over. I had no doubt there

would be a generous payoff but I was determined to see this through.

‘Practical details,’ she said. ‘We need to get to our pod – which is still up in the woods.’

We all looked at Pennyroyal, who could barely walk.

‘No need,’ I said. ‘We’ll blag you a wheelchair, get you downstairs, and you can jump with me and Markham.’ I looked at Smallhope and Evans. ‘You two can get yourselves to the woods easily enough.’

They nodded.

‘Anything else?’ said Lady Amelia, downing the last of her drink. ‘Right then. Meeting adjourned.’

I went to speak to Peterson about our proposed expedition and the possibility of St Mary's finding itself the delighted owners of several volumes of the Yongle Dadian and discovered, to my dismay, that I'd got Dr Bairstow instead. I followed him into his office and we sat down.

He surveyed me over his desk. The years rolled back. I swallowed hard. This was no time to be sentimental about the past. On the other hand, I needed to be very clear I wasn't asking his permission. In the end, I simply gave him a brief outline of our plans and left it at that.

His response surprised me. Seemingly ignoring everything I'd just told him, he said, 'Setting all that aside for one moment, Dr Maxwell, where do we go from here, you and I?'

I'd played this scene out in my mind. Several times, in fact. I would make a fine speech and he would admit the error of his ways and grovel, and then I would magnanimously . . . what . . . ? What would I magnanimously do?

I took a breath. 'I have given this a great deal of thought, and it seems to me there are two issues here. Firstly, our business with Insight remains incomplete and I cannot sufficiently emphasise that we can't leave Insight half-finished. We – Lady Amelia and the rest of the team – are on their radar now. The longer we stay here, the bigger the risk to St Mary's and you have enough on your hands at the moment.

'Secondly – with all the respect in the world, Dr Bairstow – with the exception of Markham, who is on perfectly legitimate paternity leave, none of us work for St Mary's any longer. We all have livings to earn and should get on with it. If you feel our leaving during the investigation puts St

Mary's at risk, then I can assure you we can return – tomorrow, if you like – so should there be any follow-up to the Treadwell inquiry, we can easily present ourselves for further questioning.'

I was actually quite pleased with all that. Respectful but making it absolutely clear we had uncompleted business. *Important* uncompleted business.

Dr Bairstow, however, wasn't giving up without a fight.

'With equal respect, Dr Maxwell, I disagree. I suspect the pod you intend to use belongs to Chief Technical Officer Farrell, who does work for St Mary's. This means that, whether you like it or not, St Mary's is involved.'

'With even more respect, Dr Bairstow, the pod is not on the official inventory and may, therefore, be regarded as being in private ownership.'

Silence fell. I could hear his clock ticking. As always, it sounded as if it was on its last gasp. One day there would be one last tick but the corresponding tock would never materialise and that would be it for the clock.

Mrs Partridge sat still and silent behind Dr B. Interestingly, she wasn't taking notes. Time to apply a little pressure.

'Obviously, engaging with Insight won't be easy. I would prefer to use Leon's pod but there's always Smallhope's pod up in the woods. It isn't my first choice, but I'm sure we would find it perfectly adequate.'

I got up to go. I'm not sure if I've said this before, but it's always important to have the last word.

Alas, he wasn't going down without a fight.

'Since you – and your associates – are, at this moment, receiving care and attention from St Mary's, I think it reasonable to assume you do fall under our umbrella.'

I drew myself up to my full, very unimpressive height. 'On behalf of Lady Amelia and the team, I thank you for that care and attention. I am sure she would be delighted to receive an invoice, especially since that would remove us from any sort of obligation towards St Mary's.'

He made no response so I headed towards the door, fully expecting him to call me back and he didn't.

I was joined for lunch by Peterson. We sat at our usual table. Leon wasn't around. I told myself that the pressure of work meant he and his team frequently ate in Hawking Hangar.

Peterson looked around. 'Where's Matthew?'

'With Mikey and Adrian.'

He winced. 'Oh God, are they all together?' He looked around again, possibly expecting a re-enactment of the Permian mass extinctions.

'It's fine,' I said. 'They've gone into Rushford to do whatever it is young people find to do in Rushford. If anything goes wrong, the police will contact you. Relax.'

He looked unconvinced. 'Matthew gets his exam results soon, doesn't he?'

I nodded. 'Last Thursday in August.'

'Still on course for his sixth-form work at TPHQ?'

'Mm.'

He looked at me. 'You all right with that?'

I nodded. 'I'm not thrilled but I'm OK with it. And given my lifestyle at the moment, I think it's a good idea. The poor kid's got to have a formal education at some point.'

And it was getting him safely out of the way in case Insight decided to have another go at me. I couldn't say that out loud, though, so I changed the subject.

'Seen Buggerlugs recently?'

Peterson shook his head. 'Not to talk to. Not since he disguised himself as the world's most improbable Time Police officer and led what he persists in referring to as your dramatic rescue.'

'I rescued myself,' I said indignantly.

'Not to hear him talk.'

‘He’ll be lucky if Dr Bairstow doesn’t charge him for the damage done to our front doors.’

‘That’s a point,’ he said, brightening up.

I shook my head. ‘He’s not here, so good luck with that.’

‘He’s only on paternity leave. I’ll get Mrs Partridge to do a Deductions from Wages for Damages Incurred form. You know – to welcome him home. Let him know we haven’t forgotten him here.’

‘That’s such a kind thought. He’ll be thrilled.’

My final word was with Leon.

He didn’t see why I had to go. He made it quite clear that I should stay until I was completely recovered.

‘At my age,’ I said gloomily, ‘this is probably as good as it’s going to get.’

‘Max . . .’

‘I do understand,’ I said.

‘But you’re going anyway.’

‘I have to,’ I said gently, because I was determined not to lose my temper. ‘You went after the Time Police and I stayed behind. You went after Clive Ronan – and nearly didn’t come back – and I stayed behind.’

‘That was different.’

‘In what way?’

He made no answer.

‘I can’t leave this Insight thing uncompleted, Leon. It puts everyone in danger. Please don’t make it difficult for me to come home again.’

The words *if* you come home hung in the air between us.

I waited.

Eventually he said, ‘I’m sorry. This is difficult for me.’

‘Yes. I think staying behind is more difficult. But I will come home, Leon. I promise you.’

He put his arms around me. ‘Max . . .’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I know.’

Between them, Markham and Evans got Pennyroyal up and dressed, and we wheeled him to the pod at three on the dot. I had everything ready and we gave Pennyroyal the seat.

Leon was there to see us off. He kissed my hand and then my cheek. We both knew that if, at that moment, he'd said, 'Max, don't go,' then I wouldn't have.

He didn't say it and so I smiled, closed the door behind him and turned my attention to the console.

Like everything else in the pod, it had been thoroughly cleaned and serviced – it really had been in a bit of a state when I brought it back from the Gunpowder Plot. Now, newly refurbished, it no longer smelled of blood and sick. Just the traditional *odeur de chou*.

I checked over the power levels and everything was fine. The toilet was working and the locker filled with compo rations. And three giant boxes of tea bags. It was almost as if my Brilliant Idea was meant to be.

And now for the difficult bit.

'All set?' I said, knowing full well they were both watching me.

'Ready when you are,' said Markham.

I closed my eyes. Not that that ever helped.

'Computer – initiate jump.'

And the world went white.

I opened my eyes and looked down at myself. Not only was I still here but things seemed relatively stable. Markham and Pennyroyal were also regarding me somewhat warily, so to distract them I activated the cameras.

I'd aimed for our usual spot – the barn at the back of the house – and panning around, everything seemed more or less in place.

Evans and Smallhope were only seconds behind us. With Evans supporting Pennyroyal, we let ourselves out to take a look at the damage.

The last time I'd seen it, Home Farm had been intact. Comfortable, ancient, remote, picturesque, but most importantly – intact.

And it still was – nearly. Repairs were well underway. There were lighter patches among the tiles where parts of the roof had been replaced. Some of the window frames were new. The chimneys had obviously incurred heavy damage and it must have taken some doing to replicate the barley-twist pattern so accurately. The new front door was a faithful replica of the old one. Most of the creeper adorning the front wall had been ripped away but it would grow again. Since it was listed, the repairs were required to be sympathetic and in keeping with the original building, so it was still Home Farm. I wondered what sort of state the inside was in.

The lawn sloping down to the stream had disappeared into the mud. You could see this was where the builders had been parking their vehicles and stashing their materials. But again, it would all grow back.

'This must be costing a fortune to put right,' said Evans, staring around. 'Is it worth it? Suppose Insight come back?'

Lady Amelia shook her head. 'Well, with luck they think we're dead – we

certainly strove to give them that impression.'

'We will be if we don't finish the job,' I said.

'It's a bit chicken and egg, isn't it?' said Markham. 'Do we divert into something profitable to pay for the repairs or do we concentrate on bringing down Insight, even though we're no longer secure, and just trust to luck they don't bring us down first?'

'Both,' I said firmly. 'I can't go back to Insight looking like this, so that makes the decision about the Yongle Dadian for us.'

We went back to staring at Home Farm.

'It'll all weather in,' said Lady Amelia, determinedly cheerful. 'It's not as bad as I thought it would be. Let's go.'

Evans and Pennyroyal went off to talk to the 'builders'. I say 'builders' because I'd met them before. Unmarked vans. No registration plates. A distinct lack of hard hats and high-vis vests. In fact, last time I'd seen the driver, he'd had a knife in his boot. However, they'd done a cracking job. The exterior work was almost completed and the building was now weatherproof and secure. Time for them to move inside.

We waited by the door while they and Pennyroyal moved through the building, scanning as they went. No surveillance devices. The building was completely clean electronically speaking, but not in any other way. Insight had gone through the house and wrecked everything in sight. There had been fires in several rooms. All our electronic equipment had disappeared. Not that that would do them any good. Smallhope and Pennyroyal didn't really do electronics.

'This,' said Lady Amelia, looking around, 'is why we always use paper. What about the safe?'

Pennyroyal limped into the office, calling over his shoulder, 'Gone, my lady. But there is a very satisfactory acid burn halfway up the wall.'

'Oh – excellent.' She turned to me. 'Any miscreant attempting to open our safe will have been on the receiving end of something nastily corrosive that will not only have taken his face off but destroyed the contents as well. I

don’t think we need worry about anyone plundering our secrets.’

Pennyroyal nodded, looking greyer by the moment. I found him an unbroken chair and he actually sat down, saying, ‘And, with luck, it will have taken a few more of them down when it self-destructed. Bastards.’

The far end of the farmhouse – Lady Amelia’s quarters – was comparatively untouched, so we helped Pennyroyal into the sitting room – the one we’d used at Christmas. He stretched out on the sofa and Evans dropped a blanket over him. Normally this would have been a pretty suicidal thing to do but Pennyroyal just closed his eyes. We left him in peace and went off to check upstairs.

My room was dirty, full of rubble and someone had crapped on the bed – otherwise fine. I bundled up the bedding to chuck it all in the builders’ skip.

Markham’s was the same, minus the gigantic turd.

Evans’ room, down at the other end of the corridor – so he could always be on hand to ensure Lady Amelia’s safety, he’d said, grinning – was full of broken glass because that was where they’d blown in the windows.

We went downstairs for brushes, mops, buckets and so forth. There was no electricity yet so Markham lit the range for some hot water and we got stuck in.

We pulled out all the broken furniture and swept, mopped and dusted – and then the next day we had to do it all over again as more dust settled. But, as Evans said, it wasn’t as if there was much else to do at the moment, was there?

Around all this unrewarding toil, the Faradays, who actually ran the farm for Lady Amelia, were in and out with farm machinery, fodder, livestock, dogs, Land Rovers, bowsers and heaven knows what. Pennyroyal dragged himself off the sofa to have a word with them as well, and they reported that no one had ever returned to complete the destruction, obviously regarding the job as done and dusted. Perhaps one Insight team had been here while another had come after me at the cottage. Perfectly possible, I suppose. Again, I wished I knew what I’d done to give myself away. And when I

would do it. I really don't like this sort of uncertainty.

The days passed in a whirl of cleaning, repairing, and sorting things out. Pennyroyal's builders fixed the plumbing and electrics – the evening I could finally have a proper bath was a good one – finished the plastering and slapped up a few quick coats of paint. At the end of it all, we had a functioning farmhouse.

The builders left, all looking extremely happy. There had been a great deal of backslapping and handshaking. I gathered Pennyroyal had been more than generous with the bonus. A wise move. If our schemes went tits up, we'd be needing them again. Perhaps we should put them on retainer.

Lady Amelia and Evans were going shopping. Furniture, equipment, bedding, data tables, pretty much everything. They expected to be absent for a couple of days and were dropping off Markham so he could spend some time with Hunter and their daughter, Flora, while he still could. Which, as I informed Pennyroyal, would leave only me to minister to his every need.

Words cannot describe his unenthusiasm.

'I'm a field medic,' I said, trying to reassure him. 'You can suffer a relapse with complete confidence.'

And, believe it or not, he did. Suffer a relapse, I mean.

'You'll be quite safe,' said Evans as they prepared to depart. 'All the security systems are in place.'

'The wherewithal for soup and sandwiches is in the fridge,' said Markham. 'Just remember it's not all for you and to feed the invalid occasionally.'

Honestly, the way they were carrying on you'd think I'd never nursed anyone before.

'I saved Peterson from the plague, you know,' I said, quite indignantly.

'Hope you've washed your hands since then,' said Pennyroyal, who was obviously regarding the next thirty-six hours as some kind of unpleasant

ordeal to be got through as quickly and easily as possible.

'Deliveries should start arriving very soon,' said Lady Amelia, pulling on her gloves. 'I'll leave you to unpack and organise everything. We'll help you shift the heavy stuff when we get back. Toodles.'

I waved them all off, closed the gates against the outside world and then trotted back to see if Pennyroyal needed anything. He was asleep on the sofa so I went into the kitchen. I filled a bucket and began by giving the cupboards and surfaces a final wipe-down, ready for all the good food soon to be heading in our direction.

An hour and a half later I stuck my head around the door and he was still asleep. I turned to go back to the kitchen and stopped. I have instincts – they're not particularly brilliant but I do have some – and they were waving to attract my attention.

I crossed the room and bent over him. His face was flushed and he was breathing heavily. Shit – I didn't like the look of this.

I retreated to his slightly less lethal end and gently waggled his left foot – very gently, because he has the instincts and reflexes of a natural killer – and said, 'Wake up. Pennyroyal – open your eyes.'

He murmured something I didn't catch.

I tried again, saying sharply, 'Pennyroyal. Wake up.'

Sweat stood out on his forehead and top lip. His pulse was racing, his skin hot and clammy. This wasn't good.

I shot out through the back door which leads directly to the barn – 'Just in case we ever need to make a quick getaway,' had been Lady Amelia's cheerful explanation – and into my pod, dragging out our first-aid kit.

His temperature was a hundred and one. Shit. Had he picked up some sort of infection? It wouldn't be surprising, given the conditions here. Or had he simply done too much too soon? Equally possible. Bloody bollocking hell.

Given the number of bullets removed and all the surgery he'd had recently, I needed to have a look at his wounds – check for heat, redness, swelling, bleeding, oozing and other unpleasant things – and then stick him

with a hefty dose of antibiotics, followed by regular top-ups. Just to be on the safe side. If that didn't work . . . I'd have to get him to a hospital somehow.

Moving him as little as possible, I inspected every inch of him. Details of which I intend to take with me to the grave. The good news was that everything seemed to be healing just as it should. Perhaps he was prone to recurring fevers for some reason. I wished Lady Amelia hadn't left.

I was just wringing out a wet cloth when, with lightning speed, he reached out and grabbed me with a grip of iron. One hand twisted in the front of my T-shirt and he pulled me close, hissing, 'Derek.'

I tried very hard not to panic. He could snap me like a twig and never notice.

Keeping my voice calm, I said, 'Derek's gone. He left. It's Max. Let me go, please.'

For a moment, I really didn't think that was going to happen. There was no comprehension in his eyes. I remember thinking, wouldn't it be ironic if – after everything that had happened to me – I died of friendly fire? Because here I was, all alone with a very sick Pennyroyal, and suddenly that was a very real possibility.

I put some authority into my voice. 'Pennyroyal, it's Max. Let me go, please.'

The moment seemed to go on forever and then, slowly, his hands dropped. He lay back again and closed his eyes.

Very, very carefully – because he could go off again at any moment – I did the business with cold cloths on his forehead, armpits and wrists. Antibiotics every four hours. I kept talking to him, speaking firmly, trying to recall him from whatever dark place he was in at that moment and back to the real world. Outside, the sun went down. I drew the curtains, made up the fire, performed the usual security checks with doors and windows, and set the alarm.

There was no improvement when I went back in with a mug of tea.

I had no idea where to find help. The Faradays lived several miles away. I didn't have a com. No electronics. I made up my mind that if I couldn't get his temperature down by morning, I'd jump in the pod and nip off for Dr Stone.

By now I didn't have time to listen to Pennyroyal's mutterings – not in between renewing cloths, trying to persuade him to drink something, turning his head so I could administer another hypo shot, and so forth. He was worse just before dawn, but that's not unusual so I didn't panic too much. Patients frequently worsen at dusk and dawn. I don't know if there's some medical explanation for that – they just do.

Finally, as the light strengthened outside and I drew back the curtains, he subsided and seemed to fall into a more natural sleep. I watched him anxiously – just in case this was the beginning of the end. I was bending over him wiping his face and hands when he opened his eyes and, typically, began to complain.

'What are you doing?'

'Preparing to harvest your organs. Nothing to worry about.'

'Why am I wet?'

'I've been sponging you down. Trying to keep you cool. We're both a bit wet, I'm afraid.'

I began to remove the cloths and cover him with blankets again.

He didn't seem too impressed with the quality of his care. 'What's happening?'

'You've been running a temperature. I suspect you might have been starting an infection. How are you feeling now?'

'OK. A bit weak.'

'Can you turn your head? It's time for another dose.'

The hypo hissed and he let his head drop back on the cushions with a sigh. 'I told you to wash your hands. You've given me the plague, haven't you?'

'Looks like it, yes. But Peterson survived and so will you.'

'Are you some kind of Typhoid St Mary?'

I said, ‘Yes,’ which I think took him back a bit.

‘Thirsty.’

‘I shall go and find some dirty water and make you a nice cup of tea.’

He closed his eyes.

‘Stay awake.’

He groaned. ‘Go away.’

‘I don’t want you drifting off again. If you’re asleep when I come back, then I shall wake you up and talk to you. It will go on and on and on. I’ll never shut up. And if you don’t answer, I’ll poke you until you do. It’ll be at least this time tomorrow before anyone gets back to save you. Think of the lovely conversations we shall have.’

‘Get away from me, you madwoman.’

I laughed playfully and got up to make him a cup of tea, ignoring his instructions to put some whisky in it.

‘Not a chance, sonny.’

‘Don’t make me get off this sofa.’

‘If you can even lift your head I’ll be surprised.’

He did have a go, I’ll give him that, but he wasn’t going anywhere.

I made him his tea and since I was dying to know who Derek was, I thought I’d just casually bring up the subject. ‘You were chuntering away,’ I said, supporting his mug while he drank.

There was no reaction. Not that I expected any. He sipped some more tea and then said, ‘Did I say anything important?’

I chickened out. On reflection, I didn’t want Pennyroyal knowing I knew his secrets. Not that I did, but even so . . .

‘Obviously I listened closely in case you revealed the location of your secret stash, but sadly, you weren’t saying. Hard to believe, but you’re even more boring asleep than you are awake.’

He scowled at me over his mug. ‘You’re very brave when you know I can’t even sit up properly.’

‘Yep.’

‘When I’m able to leave this sofa . . .’

‘Yeah – like I’m hanging around for that. By the time you emerge from your foetid pit, I’ll be long gone. Do you want a top-up?’

He shook his head. ‘What time is it?’

‘Nearly nine.’

‘I’ve been ill all afternoon?’

‘You’ve been ill since around midday yesterday. Are you hungry?’

‘No, but I’m betting you are.’

I suddenly realised I hadn’t eaten since the others had left.

I raced into the kitchen and slung some bacon into a frying pan and shot back again in case he’d had a relapse in my absence.

He was squinting at the hypo. ‘What have you been sticking me with?’

‘Antibiotics. And you need to finish this course.’

‘*This* course? How many have I had?’

‘I gave you a multi-dose to kick-start what passes for your immune system and then I’ve been shoving more down you every four hours. I’m actually surprised you haven’t exploded. I’ve killed every germ in your body and probably cleared up your lingering STDs as well.’

‘I’m surprised I survived.’

‘Among my patients, survival is high. Gratitude is usually correspondingly low.’

He nodded. ‘Sounds right. Can I smell bacon?’

‘Shit.’ I shot off to save the bacon.

He regarded the sarnies dubiously. ‘Did you make these?’

‘No – the bacon-sarnie fairy dropped by on the off-chance.’

He took one and peered at it.

I bit into mine with relish. He watched me carefully for a minute and when I didn’t keel over, he took a small bite.

I’d made four sandwiches. He ate three of them.

I scowled at him. He ignored me.

I finished my one sarnie and asked if he was up for an enema.

He pulled a small gun from under his pillow.

I picked up the tray and trudged back to the kitchen.

I was hugely relieved when they all returned. Lady Amelia went to talk to Pennyroyal while Markham and Evans shot off to get his bedroom ready and help him into bed. I started unpacking the food. Priorities.

'What do you think?' I asked her when she came back.

'He'll do,' she said. 'It's very hard to kill Pennyroyal. Many have tried and failed.'

This seemed a good opportunity. 'Who's Derek?'

She was unpacking a goodie box from Fortnum & Mason and never faltered. 'Did you ask him?'

'No – I was going to but chickened out.' I watched her face. 'And, I suspect, saved my own life.'

She nodded. 'Derek is from his past.'

'And he doesn't like him very much.'

She began to pass me tins and packets to store in the cupboard and didn't speak. I decided to let it go. I don't want people knowing my secrets. Hell, I wish *I* didn't know some of my secrets. The least I could do was accord Pennyroyal the same privacy. So obviously, no sooner had I decided the safest course was to let the subject drop, than she spoke.

'Sister. Very promising officer. On patrol with her platoon. Surrounded. Angry mob. No way out. No hope of rescue in time. Platoon stripped her naked and pushed her out of the vehicle. Used the diversion to get away.'

I swallowed and concentrated on very carefully lining up two tins with maximum precision. No wonder Pennyroyal had a long, angry scar where his soul used to be. I wasn't sure I blamed him.

'He tracked them down. Killed them all. Except two. One killed himself. Remorse. Fear. Whatever.'

'And the other was Derek?'

She nodded.

I added more tins to the shelf. ‘Not like Pennyroyal to let someone get away.’

‘He thought he’d killed him. Turned out he hadn’t. Did him some lasting and very visible damage, though. Never mention this again or I’ll kill you myself.’

I nodded and picked up a couple of packets of something. ‘Should this stuff go here or in the fridge?’

One hard-working fortnight later, we were more or less back in business. Not as secure as before, but the house was mostly habitable – stores stored, weapons replaced, security systems up and running, pods quietly charging in the barn. Nothing could make up for the fact we'd been breached, however. I knew our time at Home Farm was coming to an end. If we survived Insight, then we'd have to move on. Or, more likely, split up and go our separate ways. If we survived.

The best news was that Pennyroyal was on his feet again and gifting the world with his psychopath stare. Time to rescue the biggest encyclopaedia in the world. Well – a tiny part of it, anyway.

We assembled in our traditional meeting room – the old kitchen – where it was warm and, as Lady Amelia said, there was always a drink nearby.

'This meeting is called to order,' she said. 'Everyone is present. No one can remember the minutes of the last meeting or cares anyway. Take it away, Max.'

'All right,' I said, spreading various printed images across the table.

'We three have done something similar once before . . .' I nodded at Evans and Markham. 'So we know what to expect. To some extent. I don't think this will be as bad as the Library at Alexandria. We won't actually be inside the burning building as we were there. However, the Boxer Rebellion will be happening all around us, so we can add gunfire into the mix as well. Neither the Chinese nor the foreign forces will regard us as friends, so the chances of being shot by just about everyone are correspondingly high.

'We've discussed a lot of this already – especially relating to the

encyclopaedia – and I don't want to go over old ground again, but I've tracked down some images and physical descriptions of the books themselves. We need to be in and out asap so we must know exactly what we're looking for.

'Some background first. The Boxer Rebellion was part of China's determination to rid the country of foreigners, and this manifested itself in rebel action against all the foreign legations in Peking and an attempt to drive out or kill their inhabitants. It's both good and bad for us that the British compound and the Han Lin Academy, where the encyclopaedia is kept, are in very close proximity to one another.'

'Why Boxers?' enquired Evans.

'So called because of the secret society known as the *Righteous and Harmonious Fists.* Their boxing rituals led to them being known as Boxers.'

I laid out a copy of an ancient image of the Han Lin Academy. It wasn't a lot of use, being a copy of an original 1744 drawing, and was, therefore, rather heavy on the stylised images of trees, and ornate, open-sided buildings, lotus pools and storks, together with neat figures bent studiously over low tables filled with manuscripts, but it certainly gave a flavour of the venerable institution.

'The academy was founded in 725 AD and was China's premier seat of learning until 1911, when it was superseded by more modern universities.'

No one seemed that impressed and so I plonked down a map showing the legation area to the south of the academy.

'As you can see, most foreign legations – the various diplomatic compounds – are clustered together in the southern part of the city, with their backs to the brick wall separating the Chinese and Tartar areas. To defend themselves against the Boxers, legation staff will build a massive barricade along here.'

I traced the route of the barricade with my finger.

'This will run along the back of the US legation, across Legation Street,

through the market, around the back of the British legation, across what is either a moat or an open sewer – and given our luck, I think we can all hazard a guess as to which – around the back of the Spanish and Japanese legations here, and the nearby hotel, straight through the middle of the French compound, back across Legation Street, behind the German legation, and back to the wall again. Within this barricade will be four hundred and seventy-three civilians of varying nationalities, four hundred and nine soldiers and marines, three thousand Chinese Christians, and a bunch of assorted priests and nuns – all of whom will be fighting for their lives.

'Between them they have a variety of small arms, three machine guns and the International Gun, so called because the barrel was dug up by the British, mounted on an Italian carriage, loaded with Russian shells and fired by American gunners.'

Evans pointed. 'What is this line running parallel to the barricade?'

'That's the Chinese line.'

'Very close.'

'Yes. As you can see, the two sides are virtually face to face. Boxers versus foreigners.'

'Nasty.' He peered at the map. 'So where are the books? If they're that important, won't the scholars have removed them before all this kicks off?'

'No. Some books are saved but not the encyclopaedia, I'm afraid.'

'Do we have any idea of their location?'

'The books were stored in the southernmost buildings of the Han Lin compound, only a few yards from the British legation here.' I pointed a finger. 'Sadly, for us, that's where a lot of the action will take place. We'll need to be very discreet. This won't be like ancient Alexandria where everyone had pushed off, and apart from a few troublesome Christians, we had the place to ourselves. This is a modern city in 1900 and there will be fighting, raging fires and panicking people all over the place. While it would undoubtedly be safer to park some distance away, we don't want to

have to struggle through a major uprising to get to our target, so we'll be parking near the British legation which, coincidentally, is where the worst of the fighting will be. Be aware most of the buildings will be destroyed – they'll either collapse in the fire or be brought down in an attempt to make fire breaks. Get too close and we could easily find them coming down on top of us.

'Most buildings – academy, legations, stables, dormitories and so forth – are made of wood or a combination of wood and stone. It's summer, it's hot and everything will be bone dry, so they and all the lovely old trees will go up like torches. There are lotus ponds scattered around the gardens and that's where most of the books will end up.'

They all looked at me.

'It's not deliberate vandalism. Many of the books will be smouldering as they're brought out and people will chuck them into the ponds to stop them spreading the fire. No one will have the time or inclination to fish them out afterwards, so they'll be left there. And since the books are handwritten on vellum, they'll begin to rot, and everything – books, ponds, everything – will have to be buried when the conflict is over because the smell is so bad.'

I paused but there were no comments. Obviously, everyone was stunned by the brilliance of my briefing. Encouraged, I moved on.

'Hazards of which to be aware:

'Fire – obviously.

'Smoke – ditto.

'Wind – apparently it was a very windy day. Be prepared for gusts fanning the flames and sudden, unexpected direction changes.

'Gunfire – we will be in the middle of a full-scale uprising. The fighting will be fierce. The Boxers are in the upper parts of surrounding buildings and will fire down into the legation area. Legation staff will be firing back, defending themselves, their families and what they see as their property. And watch out for a squad of British marines led by a Captain Harrison – who will win the Victoria Cross for his part in the action.

‘Also be aware of falling trees and buildings. As I said, all the buildings are made of wood, and just to make things even more difficult, the bookcases themselves are made of camphor wood and stuffed full of paper, vellum, parchment, papyrus and the like. So hugely inflammable. The whole Han Lin area will be an inferno. The academy will be virtually destroyed in one afternoon. Anything that survives will be either looted or used as firewood.

‘Typically, I suspect that our best opportunity will be at the height of the action when everyone will have more important things to think about than rescuing books.’

‘If most of the books are thrown or carried outside,’ said Pennyroyal, ‘why not just wait until it’s all over and move in then?’

‘Because by the time it will be safe enough to do so it will be too late.’

‘So, after the books are removed but before they end up in the water, then?’

‘Yes. The problem – from our point of view – is that although the fire dies down, the political situation doesn’t, so we can’t wait until the fighting has finished. I’m hoping if we go in under cover of the flames, most people will have more important things to worry about than us.’

‘Still risky, though,’ observed Evans.

I nodded. ‘Very.’

‘And a very narrow window of opportunity.’

‘Yes.’

I paused in case anyone had anything else to say but it seemed no one did so I carried on.

‘Fortunately, the books we are looking for are very distinctive.’ I found the appropriate images and passed them around. ‘As you can see, each volume is hardback, encased in yellow silk covers, nineteen and a half inches long, twelve inches wide, one inch thick and with a strip of coloured silk bearing the title of that volume. Nothing else you will see will look even remotely like these books. They should be very easy to identify. If in

any doubt, open them up. You're looking for entries in red ink – formerly only used by the emperor, who graciously granted permission for it to be used in the encyclopaedia.

'If you find yourself in doubt, take the book anyway. We need to grab whatever we can find and get out. Everything we will see is about to be destroyed so we shouldn't have to worry about safety protocols and the like.'

I paused again to make sure I had their full attention.

'The usual procedures apply. Two pods – two teams. Lady Amelia and Mr Evans in one – me and Markham in the other. We will most definitely be in harm's way, so everyone remains in their teams at all times. No splitting up. If someone's hurt, then both members return to the pod for treatment. If one is too injured to continue, then that's the whole team out of the game. If both members are injured, then shout out and the other team will come and get you.'

I pulled out the map again.

'Picking a landing site has been tricky. We want to be as close as is safely possible. Team One will land around the back of the British legation – between it and the sewer/moat/canal behind. Team Two – me and Markham – will land to the northwest which puts us right around the corner from the Han Lin Academy. Both sites will be uncomfortably close to the fighting around the barricade.'

Pennyroyal pointed at the map. 'This looks to be a weak point.'

'The moat,' said Evans.

'Or the open sewer,' said Markham. 'Anyone want to put money on it?'

He might as well have added, 'And who will end up in it?' although I think we all knew the answer to that one.

'Whichever it is,' I said firmly, 'it's liquid. Given the massive conflagration, we may find ourselves grateful.'

'Yes,' said Markham. 'It won't be the first time we've been up to our necks in it as a result of one of your little schemes.'

I ignored this and forged on. ‘Both teams are to remain in contact at all times. We’ll be wearing fire-retardant overalls and hoods. If the smoke is particularly bad, then tie a wet scarf around your face. If you do burst into flames, then your teammate will push you into the nearest pond. Check out any books while you’re in there. Gloves will be provided – whether you wear them is optional. Everyone will have a bag in which to shove anything they pick up. We should be behind the British lines but it might still be an idea to keep talking to a minimum.’

Everyone nodded.

‘It will be daylight but I anticipate that the enormous amount of smoke will both help and hinder us. And it’s going to be hot. And noisy. And crowded and confused. People running, panicking – the usual stuff.’

Pennyroyal sat back, folded his arms and scowled at me. ‘And shooting.’

‘And shooting, yes. If we don’t come home, you can be the rescue party,’ I told him, which didn’t seem to cheer him up at all.

‘So that’s the situation. However, because we have a precise location, date and time, there’s a very good possibility we might be on site for less than thirty minutes. Once the mission is completed, we only have one further decision to make – what do we do with the books afterwards? Our normal procedure – St Mary’s normal procedure – is to bury them. Nearby, if we possibly can. Our policy has always been that the treasure is concealed somewhere in the country to which it belongs. Theoretically, because these books are about to be destroyed anyway, we could just walk off with them. This would certainly make our lives easier, but there are several drawbacks to that, not least because it’s wrong – they don’t belong to us.’

Pennyroyal stirred.

‘I know,’ I said, ‘and there’s no reason why we shouldn’t make a great deal of money from this – we’re the ones taking the risks, after all – but we’re not looters. The ideal result is that we get the money, Thirsk and St Mary’s get the glory and China gets their treasure back.’

‘Practically speaking,’ said Pennyroyal, ‘we’re going to have to stash the

books somewhere for a while because they'll reek of smoke, which will be a bit of a giveaway.'

'We could bring them here,' said Smallhope. 'Yes, I know what you're going to say, but think about it. They'll be safe here. We'll put them in one of the secure cellars and wait for the smell to disappear.'

I said nothing because I couldn't think of a good reason why not. The books *would* be safe here and it would buy us some time to decide how best to dispose of them. I just wasn't happy jumping them around the timeline. At St Mary's, I'd never really had to deal with the aftermath of a bit of search and rescue. We'd just retrieved the artefacts, buried them somewhere safe and left Thirsk to handle the rest.

'If I can make a suggestion,' said Markham. 'We take most of them back to St Mary's. Shunt the whole problem on to Dr Bairstow. Security, preservation, discovery, whatever – let St Mary's handle it.'

There was a long silence.

'Actually,' said Evans, 'that's . . .'

Markham beamed. 'Bloody brilliant – yeah. Dr Dowson can ensure the volumes are buried somewhere they could legitimately have been stashed, then Thirsk can do their usual thing – mount a joint archaeological expedition with the Chinese and "discover" them. Yippee – another spectacular find for the world. Doing that would enable us to keep a couple of volumes for ourselves with a clear conscience. A finder's fee.'

He looked at Smallhope and Pennyroyal. 'Don't tell me you wouldn't know exactly how to fence something like this safely. And profitably.'

There was a long silence as everyone sat back to think about this.

'Works for me,' said Smallhope, necking the last of her margarita.

Everyone else nodded.

So that was that sorted.

Well, here we were. Beijing, China – or Peking, as it then was – 23rd June 1900. Right in the middle of the violent and bloody conflict known as the Boxer Rebellion.

Over one hundred thousand people killed by both sides – mostly civilians, including several thousand Chinese Christians and a couple of hundred missionaries. No historians, as far as I knew, and I intended to keep it that way.

We were, however, right where we wanted to be, which was uncomfortably close to the foreign lines, between the British legation and the hastily assembled barricade, and with the Han Lin Academy just around the corner and currently out of sight.

Smallhope and Evans were positioned on the other side of the canal/moat/sewer/whatever to the east of the legation and would approach the academy from a different direction. They too would be right up against the barricade. We'd discussed whether the convenience of being on site (but dying in the fighting as soon as we stepped out of the pod) outweighed the safety of distance (but probably dying as we made our way to the academy). We'd gone for the convenient option.

'Less running,' Markham had said.

'A much neater death,' agreed Evans, nodding.

I engaged the camo device and opened my com. 'Are you here?'

'We are indeed,' said Mr Evans. 'Just taking a moment to comb our hair and make ourselves presentable. Exiting the pod in about thirty seconds. Race you there.'

Good to see Security taking things seriously.

'Good luck,' I said.

'You too.'

This was not my first visit to this part of the world – we'd done some recording and documenting on a few sections of the Great Wall during my very early years at St Mary's. Marco Polo was still on my bucket list somewhere, together with Yu the Great and his famous flood defences. Especially if he had his yellow dragon and black turtle with him. And now I came to think of it, former St Mary's historians Baverstock and Lower had done some work on the Boxer Rebellion as well. But not this day. Or so I hoped.

I angled the cameras for an idea of what we would have to cope with out there, and waited in vain for congratulations on what had actually been quite a tricky bit of coordinate calculation. That wasn't forthcoming so I sighed and carried on.

All the major world powers had a presence in the capital, their purpose being to represent their country as they negotiated trade deals with the Chinese. The British legation – one of the largest – offered luxurious facilities for its inhabitants: the minister and his family and all his staff, important guests and so forth. There was a sumptuous ministerial block, a billiard room, a students' house, tennis courts, a surgery, stables and more, all with trees and lawns and rosebeds, surrounded by a ten-foot wall. Under normal circumstances, the scene would be one of tranquillity and peace, with the legation staff and their families enjoying a delightful promenade around the walled area, visiting friends, taking tea and so forth. Not recently, however. The siege had been going on since June and would last until mid-August.

At the rear of the British compound stood the Han Lin Academy – the seat of Chinese learning – where Chinese academics would normally be found strolling from building to building in deep contemplation, their heads bowed, or engaging in earnest discourse as they discussed the mysteries of

the universe, the air filled with the scent of pine trees and lotus blossoms.

Actually, it probably wouldn't have been like that at all, as anyone who's ever been within rock-throwing distance of any academic institution anywhere in the world will happily testify. In reality, those dreamily drifting seekers of knowledge and truth would be mentally composing the words and phrases best suited to trashing their colleagues, their colleagues' work, and their colleagues' reputations, all for the purpose of leaving them wailing in the outer darkness of academic discredit, disgrace and dishonour. Life is brutal in academia. However, since most of these differences of opinion usually occur in the hallowed halls of learning, blood is rarely shed. Most disputes are carried out in icily polite undertones as the participants strip the intellectual flesh from each other's bones.

Well, that's what would normally be happening. Today, however, most people had other priorities.

'Shit,' said Markham, staring at the screen.

On the spot we might be, but I'd landed a little later in the day than I had intended. Normally, I like to turn up around dawn, giving myself plenty of time to jump away if the situation looked a little tense. With all the smoke billowing around, it was hard to tell what time it was, but that didn't really matter because events had already kicked off without us.

With the barricade disturbingly close on our left and the walls of the British legation disturbingly close on our right, we had ended up in a bit of a pinch point. I panned the cameras very carefully. The only figure in sight was what looked like a distant American marine, standing guard on a stepladder, rifle at the ready, peering cautiously over the top of the barricade.

Well, I say barricade because that's how it's always described, but this part of it was just a pile of torn-off doors, every piece of furniture you could possibly imagine, and carriages, carts, wagons and ceremonial vehicles of every kind, all rammed together, hammered into place and braced and reinforced with hastily felled tree trunks or roughly hacked buttresses.

Amateur, but it looked solid enough.

‘We shouldn’t hang around,’ said Markham, swinging his bag over his shoulder. ‘This situation is not going to get any better. Ready?’

I nodded, tucking my gloves in my belt and stamping my feet in my boots. I don’t know why I do that but I do.

‘At my shoulder at all times,’ he said. ‘No running off to investigate anything anomalous. As soon as our bags are full, straight back here to unload, grab a drink, and discuss whether to risk a second trip.’

I grinned at him. ‘Roger dodger.’

We lined up ready. Both of us were wearing top-of-the-range fire-suits as procured by Pennyroyal. Both were stiff and new. I could still see the fold marks in mine. Our hoods came down over our shoulders. I wore a wide belt festooned with torch, gloves and water dangling therefrom. Like a fire--fighting Christmas tree. We’d also slung wet scarves around our necks, all ready to be pulled up at a moment’s notice should the smoke be overwhelming.

‘As soon as we’re outside,’ I said, ‘follow the legation wall to the corner and then look right. The academy is directly ahead of us on our left. On three . . .’

I opened the door. Normally, it’s the smell that hits you squarely in the face when you arrive somewhere new. Hot dust in Greece and Ionia, muddy river in Egypt, that unique desert smell in Mesopotamia, horse shit in Europe. Today, however, it was the heat. Bloody hell, it was hot.

The whole world was on fire. Flames billowed high above the walls to our right. Slowly, I reached out and touched the stones. Hot, hot, hot. The British legation was already ablaze. Great thick clouds of acrid smoke swirled skywards to be torn apart by the stiff breeze. The heat being thrown out was colossal. Our fireproof suits would keep us reasonably protected, but they didn’t breathe that well and I could feel the sweat break out all over my body. I’d forgotten how unpleasant it was to be encased in one of these things.

The drifting smoke set me coughing almost immediately. I pulled up my wet scarf to cover my nose. It didn't help much and the heat was so intense it certainly wouldn't be wet for long. Still, there were always those lotus pools.

The noise was tremendous. People don't always realise how noisy even a small fire can be. And this one wasn't small.

After the heat and the noise came the smell. Smoke. Burning paper. Burning wood. Gunpowder. I could taste it all at the back of my throat. Sweat was pouring down my face, and my eyes were stinging. Proper masks would have been a really good idea if we hadn't thought they'd further panic already panicking people.

Markham indicated we should move. Shouting at each other would probably be pointless. He went first. We moved very cautiously. Neither of us was armed with anything more dangerous than a stun gun. As Markham had said, given the eye-watering conditions, pepper spray seemed a little redundant.

The ground was rough and littered with personal possessions and broken furniture. I could see shattered crates, a tangle of something I thought might once have been a sewing machine, several boots – there's always discarded footwear in any major rebellion – an empty canvas rucksack and a broken wagon wheel, all abandoned during people's panicked evacuation into the comparative safety of the legation. We needed to watch where we put our feet, but every third or fourth step I stopped and looked back. The orange flames were roaring so loudly an entire army could have crept up behind us and we wouldn't have heard them.

The fires seemed worryingly well advanced in some areas. The attack must have started just after dawn. We should have got here earlier. I wondered how Evans and Smallhope were getting on. Visibility was so bad they could have been only a few yards away and we wouldn't have been able to make them out, but my com remained silent – no shouts for us to render assistance – so either things were going well or they were dead.

There was never any halfway house with Smallhope.

Reaching the end of the wall, Markham dropped to his knees and peered carefully around the corner. I faced back the way we'd come. The American marine who'd been standing guard was lost to sight, but I could see some movement through the smoke about thirty or forty yards away – though who it was and what they were doing was anyone's guess. They weren't coming this way and that was good enough for me.

Markham pulled his head back and motioned for me to look.

Oh, shit.

There were civilians everywhere, streaming in and out of a pair of wooden gates that were pushed open against the wall. I remembered from my plan – the stables were along the north wall, so this was probably the tradesmen's entrance to the legation. The minister wouldn't want scruffy deliveries coming in through their smart front gate. People were racing in and out with buckets of water, drawn from the large public well situated midway between the legation gate and the academy.

They were mostly Europeans – women and older children. Two red-coated soldiers were running around, organising the people into a bucket chain. Another stood at the gate, rifle at the ready, all the time looking up, down, around.

I was cursing because, without all these people, *now* would have been the ideal time for Markham and me to get to the academy, less than fifty yards away to our left. I could see the academy wall – they did like their walls in this part of the world – and through an open gate, I could catch glimpses of more people running to and fro. Many were dragging out furniture or staggering about with armfuls of books and papers. This was so frustrating. The academy itself wasn't yet ablaze, and the fighting still distant enough. This was the perfect moment to get in there, grab the books and get out again. Instead of which, we were trapped against the legation wall with precious little cover should things turn nasty. And they would.

I knew the Chinese were only on the other side of the barricade and that

this whole area was overlooked by houses from whose upper storeys and roofs the rebels could fire at will down into the compounds. That they weren't doing that here, now, at this very moment, was an enormous piece of luck for me and Markham. If only we could get inside the bloody academy.

The sudden rattle of gunfire was so close I nearly jumped out of my skin. Great lumps of wall flew through the air as a hail of bullets rained down on the bucket chain. People around us started screaming. The two soldiers knelt and returned fire, covering the retreat back through the gate. They must have been shooting blindly because the shifting smoke made accurate aiming impossible. The gate guard fired twice and then shouldered his rifle and started pulling people through to safety. The last women abandoned their buckets, hoicked their skirts high and ran for their lives in a froth of petticoats. The two soldiers rose to their feet, running backwards, trying to cover all angles. The one on the right – I saw his face quite clearly, he had a dark moustache – lurched as he was hit, but his mate grabbed him and used their forward momentum to get both of them through the gate, which slammed shut on their heels.

I rather hoped that now everyone was safely back inside the legation compound, the rebels would go and fire on someone else. But they didn't. Perhaps they had sightlines into the British legation itself. Whatever the reason, they stayed put. They were firing less frequently now, but that would surely change as soon as they caught sight of us. Which they would as soon as we moved.

'We need a diversion,' whispered Markham.

In any sort of crisis, my signature move has always been to set fire to something. It's never let me down in the past, but I couldn't help feeling, looking around, that anything I could do in that area would be a little superfluous today. My view was somewhat restricted, but everything was either smouldering or already well ablaze. It was quite hard to see how I could improve the situation in any way.

We couldn’t hang around much longer. There was no cover. Nowhere to hide. Nowhere to run to except back to the pod. This situation was never going to improve. For God’s sake – think of something, Maxwell.

Actually, I didn't have to. Several things happened all at once.

Firstly, from deep within the Legation Quarter, came the reverberating boom of a single cannon shot. They'd got the old International going. This was followed by another rattle of gunfire.

Markham and I crouched lower, expecting yet another rebel bombardment in response, but there was silence. Were the Boxers in the process of moving off?

Secondly – the wind changed. In typical historian fashion, I'd warned everyone to bear this in mind and then promptly forgotten all about it myself.

There was a sudden gust, right into my face. Flames roared over the top of the wall. I remembered the stables were on the other side. Wood, straw, hay – everything would burn beautifully. The wind propelled a storm of sparks and burning embers through the air – all in the direction of the Han Lin buildings.

In almost less time than it takes to tell, tiny fires started up everywhere, racing across the dry lawns and coming together in a great inferno. I was astonished at how quickly it took a hold on everything. Ancient, tinder-dry wooden structures stuffed with paper. Books and scrolls scattered all around the grounds. Even the trees. If we ever got inside the academy, there was a very definite chance we could end up trapped.

Now there came urgent shouts of alarm and warning – at least I assumed that's what they were. Ten or so Chinese men, all wearing traditional loose tunics and trousers, ran out of the academy gate and began to gather up the

discarded buckets.

This was our chance.

'Come on,' I said, and ran out from the shelter of the wall and grabbed a bucket. Markham did the same and we trotted inside with everyone else. The secret in these situations is not to catch anyone's eye. I stared firmly at the ground as we ran up the steps, under the roofed entrance, past the two worn stone dragons – their mouths open wide in what I chose to regard as snarls of welcome – and straight through the open gate.

And just like that – we were in.

Clutching my bucket, I stepped to one side and risked a quick look around.

Inside, the academy looked pretty much as it had in the illustrations I'd handed around at our briefing, except there was no sign of the storks today. Presumably, being considerably more intelligent than the human race, they'd pushed off to find somewhere safer. And cooler. With fewer flames. I didn't blame them in the slightest. This twelve-hundred-year-old academy would burn to the ground in a single afternoon.

A wide, paved avenue led from the gate to an imposing building some six storeys high. Although roofed, the top floor consisted of open arches, through which I could hear the slow bong of a bell. I'm not sure what the original purpose would have been – calling the students, perhaps. Today it was the equivalent of a modern fire alarm and certainly a bloody sight more effective than the systems at St Mary's which, even if they hadn't had their batteries removed, were ignored on the grounds that someone somewhere would sort it all out, and anyway they couldn't evacuate because it was raining outside. This bell's tone was deep and melodious. Much softer than European bells. Rather pleasant, actually.

Two smaller, lower buildings flanked this main structure, one on each side. There would have been many more behind them that weren't visible from where I was standing but I didn't have time to look.

The most striking thing about all the buildings was their tiled roofs. At

some point the tiles had been yellow – an auspicious colour – although at the moment, they were flecked black and grey with ash and dust. Beautifully carved and decorated, the roofs had those traditional upturned corners that made them look as if they had horns. All the rooflines were decorated with statues along the ridge, but who or what they signified I didn't know.

Each building stood on a raised stone platform. Stone dragons guarded every entrance. Very effective against human intruders, I'm sure, but not a lot of use against a raging inferno. Nothing here would survive the events of today.

Two long pools flanked the main path, with a small grove of pine trees at each end. All very pleasingly symmetrical. Small benches faced each other across the pools. A lovely place for study and contemplation.

Markham nudged me. 'Stop daydreaming.'

Faculty, students and servants were racing in and out of the buildings, but it wasn't complete chaos. Somehow new bucket lines had formed, running from the doors to the pools. More men emerged from buildings, their arms full of books, shouting to each other, presumably seeking directions as to what to do with their load. Discipline still prevailed.

Clutching our buckets, Markham and I edged past one of the long pools. I suspected it and its fellow had been designed to reflect the pine trees. Or, depending on where you were standing – the sky. At the moment the water was murky – churned up by the constantly scooping buckets – and all the lotus flowers had been snapped off. Some plants had been uprooted and floated forlornly across the black surface. The water level was dropping fast. The pools couldn't be that deep. I hoped there was access to more water than just these two pools and the well outside the gates. There must be, surely. This was a large complex. Hundreds of people would live here. There would be smaller wells and cisterns dotted about the campus.

Smoke tastes awful. I was suddenly aware my throat felt red and raw. My mouth was so dry. I had no saliva and the inside of my cheeks had the

consistency of felt. My tongue was stiff and swollen. My eyes and nose were streaming. I pulled up my scarf but it made very little difference. All of me felt as if I was on fire and my head was about to burst with the—

—and suddenly I was back at Alexandria, trapped inside a different fire-suit while different flames engulfed the armoire in front of me and the ceiling fell. Stone, wooden beams, and plaster crashed to the floor. At any moment the entire roof would come down and I would be crushed—

And then, just as suddenly, I was back. Shit – were these stupid flashbacks starting up again? Had one fire triggered the memory of another? I could really do without this. I was hot, breathless, drenched in sweat and I needed to concentrate on the here and now.

They'd abandoned stacking the books in neat piles. Now the running figures were just dropping them anywhere and racing back inside again for their next load.

'Let's start over there.' I gestured to Markham.

The key to this sort of thing is always to look as if you know what you're doing. Act with purpose. Never look uncertain or lost. I knelt alongside a heap of books, scrabbling through them, looking for yellow.

I could hear water splashing everywhere as men hurled bucketfuls through doors and windows in a desperate attempt to pre-empt the fire.

It didn't do any good at all. Even the deep carpet of dry pine needles was smouldering. We didn't have very long. Leaving Markham to watch my back, I crawled further in among the piles of books, blinking the sweat out of my eyes. I found the quickest and easiest way was to knock over each tottering pile and rummage. Always looking for the yellow.

Nothing here. On to the next pile. And the next. Where the bloody hell were they? The Yongle Dadian was a national treasure. Surely they'd at least try . . .

No. Nothing.

I crawled another few yards. Never mind what was going on around me. I had to find these bloody books. Dear God, it was hot. I could feel a pulse

pounding inside my head. My vision was blurring. My breath rasped in my throat. If we didn't find something soon, I was going to pass out. Try over there. Push the pile to the ground. Sort through . . . No – nothing. On to the next. Try not to cough. Don't look up. Don't catch anyone's eye. If I didn't look at them, they wouldn't look at me. Don't laugh – sometimes that works.

No – not here, either. I sat back on my heels and looked around. This was a university. There would be thousands and thousands of books. Think, Maxwell. We knew the Yongle Dadian would be held in these, the southernmost buildings. The chances were that all the volumes were shelved together and would, therefore, be carried out more or less together. Find one volume and I'd probably find them all. Or most of them, anyway.

Markham touched my shoulder and pointed. The right-hand building had not yet begun to burn, but here on the other side, the wind gusted again and the flames roared their response. Shouts and screams of warning and alarm rose above the noise of the fire.

'Let's try over there,' I said, using Markham to pull myself to my feet because my legs were stiff.

We dodged around a group of shouting men. They were pointing at the big middle building. Flames were creeping along the roof. As we watched, one of the statues toppled, cracked by the heat. It rolled down the roof and shattered on the paving below. No one was hurt – this time – but all the others would fall before long. Something else to watch out for.

And then the guns – which, along with the wind, had completely slipped my mind again – started up. The International thundered its response. I really should try and remember there was a major historical event occurring all around us.

Heads down and being careful not to run, we made our way around the pool and across the path towards the right-hand building.

Things seemed slightly less frantic here. Indistinct figures I assumed were either academics or staff were moving swiftly but not panicking. And they

were still bringing out the books, stacking them neatly on the ground along with boxes, crates and even bundles wrapped in blankets. The smell of burning was strong but nothing in front of me looked to be on fire. Yet.

This was better. Much better. Given the chaos on the other side of the complex, I'd expected to have to rummage among burned or drowned books, but here they were being laid out carefully for us. We paused under the trees, waiting for an opportunity to present itself.

I took a moment to consider where Smallhope and Evans were and whether they'd made it inside the academy yet. I was tempted to call them up but we'd agreed to contact each other only in the event of an emergency. There was so much noise around us that a garbled message could easily be misunderstood, but if you maintain radio silence, then hearing any message at all can only be construed as a shout for help.

I edged towards the nearest pile of books. No one was paying me any attention at all. I should take my time, have a good rummage and find what we'd come for. We could be out of here in under half an hour.

And then, of course, Fate, not playing any major part in events so far, woke up and decided things weren't anywhere near dodgy enough.

The wind changed. Again. Having deliberately blown the flames towards the western building, it now propelled them towards the east. Towards us. And the books.

I felt it in the hot blast directly into my face. I heard it in the sudden, increased roar of the fire. And I saw it. The flames streamed suddenly sideways. Reaching out, like giant greedy orange hands. Sparks – millions of them – flew through the air, falling on to other roofs, blowing into the trees, landing on the books. Some glowed and went out. Others, fanned by the treacherous wind, began to smoulder.

It all happened so quickly. Suddenly I could hear shouting inside the building. Men began to run. The ordered evacuation of all the books became a desperate attempt to save even a few. I could see smoke beginning to billow from open doors and windows. The shouts became screams.

Those outside ran inside, leaving all the books unguarded.

'Come on,' I said, scrambling to my feet. We worked as a team. Markham pushed at pile after pile while I rooted around, scrambling after anything that looked even remotely yellow. Like a pig sniffing out truffles, as Markham later described it. We couldn't come this far and then go home empty-handed. And it wasn't just the money – these books had to be saved for posterity. I wished now that I'd kicked all my historian training into touch and landed the pod here on the main avenue, between the pools, right at the centre of all the action. Yes, there would have been massive panic and consternation among the civilians but we could have just grabbed everything in sight, pitched it all into the pod and trusted to luck.

Yellow, yellow, look for yellow. It shouldn't be this difficult. Markham had gone to the end of the first neat row and was making his way back along, occasionally stopping to check something out.

Nothing yellow. Nothing yellow anywhere. This couldn't be right. We knew some volumes were saved, so the encyclopaedia must be here. Dammit – perhaps they hadn't got it out yet. Now what?

I think the same answer occurred to both of us. We'd have to go into the burning buildings and look for it. We were going to have to rescue the bloody encyclopaedia ourselves.

Well, so much for waiting quietly outside while an obliging faculty and students unknowingly brought the books to us. I should have known that would be too good to be true.

Everyone was using the same door to get in and out and there was a bit of a bottleneck. Perfect.

We trotted briskly to the back of the group. I pulled up my scarf to hide my face, noting that several other men had done the same, so I wouldn't stand out. It was important not to push, so I stood patiently, masked by Markham, inching forwards until, finally, we were through the door.

Details were difficult to make out – people and smoke were everywhere. There were at least two large rooms, one each side of a wide hallway, itself leading to a flight of stairs. These rooms were entered by archways – no doors to hold back the smoke and flames, sadly – and were for working, as far as I could see. Wide tables had wooden stools pushed underneath them. No shelves and no books. Perhaps they had the standard library system here. Books would be too precious for general access. Library staff would bring students and academics what they needed and take it away when they'd finished. In that case, what Markham and I wanted was probably upstairs.

Another bottleneck at the stairs, but they'd organised themselves into two lines – going up on the right, down on the left. We went right and paused on the landing. Rooms on both sides. Smoke was beginning to fill the air, which made identifying the books more difficult. Not that either of us could read medieval Chinese. Or even modern Chinese. So we were back to

looking for the yellow.

I took the rooms on the right – Markham the left.

In through the door. Turn left. First bookcase. These shelves had already been stripped. Books and papers lay on the floor where they'd either been discarded as not important enough to be saved or just dropped.

I developed a rhythm. Scan the shelves. Nothing. Move on to the next. Cough a bit. On to the next. And so on. Keep looking for the yellow.

The smoke was less dense up here so something was working in my favour. And then – even more luck.

'Here,' shouted Markham from the back of the room. He must have finished his side already and joined me.

I slipped quietly past a couple of elderly men hurriedly dropping books on to a blanket. One got to his feet and began knotting the corners together. The other was struggling to get up. I knew the feeling. I stopped and helped him to his feet. He said something – I'd like to think it was thank you – and then the two picked up the bundle between them and staggered off. A Chinese Dr Dowson and Professor Rapson, perhaps.

I rounded a corner and found myself with a much better view of the room. The walls were plain. There was no electricity. A work table stood under a small window, covered in burn marks and candle wax, presumably where careless students and faculty had rested candles and lamps. The wooden floors creaked quite alarmingly as I ran towards Markham. The only windows were small and high up. They wouldn't want the sun on the books presumably. And it helped to regulate the temperature, perhaps. I wished I'd picked up more knowledge in the short time I'd worked with Dr Dowson. More than the Library Shuffle, I mean.

I found Markham swiftly pulling books from the shelf and placing them in his bag.

'I've got four.'

I'd thought there would be row upon row of yellow books. There weren't. There were only eight altogether. I grabbed the other four and stowed them

away in my own bag. Then we both stepped back and looked up and down the adjoining shelves. No more yellow books. Not anywhere.

'Is that all that's left?' said Markham, disappointed.

'Not necessarily,' I said hopefully. 'Others might be stored at different locations.' Although I couldn't think of a reason why. Unless . . . because of fire, perhaps. The academics had split them up as a safety precaution. Or perhaps some volumes were more in demand than others and stored in this building for ease of access. Now was not the time to speculate, though.

I could hear men's voices on the landing outside. The floor bounced again as more people poured into the room. Markham and I immediately grabbed a few books at random as camouflage, oozed silently into the shadows and began to edge our way along one wall.

Reaching the door, we waited for a couple of men to run past. They too wore face coverings and their dark clothes didn't look that much different to ours. I suddenly felt quite optimistic. We'd got the books. Now all we had to do was get them back to the pod. And surely with all this smoke and confusion that would be easy.

'Go,' said Markham, giving me a little push.

I clattered down the wooden stairs. There was no way I could get down them quietly and this was not the time to start looking suspiciously surreptitious. Following the person in front of me, I ran through the big reading room – now filled with more smoke even in the few minutes since I'd left – towards the main door. There was another small bottleneck as we all queued to get out and then, suddenly, I was outside in the heat and confusion and running down the stone steps.

It made sense to follow everyone else towards the great piles of books at the side of the path. I was surprised how many more had appeared during our short absence. The academy staff could have no idea that this was the end, that the blaze would be so intense that nothing would escape. And that those books that didn't burn would be buried. And that they themselves would be lucky to escape with their lives.

I stopped, dropped my books, and leaned forwards as if catching my breath, allowing others to run past me, and then stepped in among the shadowy pine trees to wait for Markham.

Who never appeared.

He'd been right behind me. I swear he'd been right behind me.

I stared wildly around. Now all the buildings were alight. The middle structure especially was belching flames from every window. I could hear flat cracks I thought might be gunfire at first, but actually were the roof tiles shattering in the heat. Even as I watched, a whole row slid downwards, hung over the edge for a long moment and then crashed to the ground. People shouted panicked warnings and scattered.

Surely Markham wasn't still inside. How could he possibly have got lost? I should go back for him. This was why we weren't supposed to split up. He was an idiot.

On the other hand, if, for some reason, he'd had to nip out of a side door, then me going back inside would be a stupid thing to do.

I risked my com. 'Markham?'

No response.

I tried again. 'Markham?'

Nothing. Not even the tap which means someone can't talk right now. Perhaps his earpiece had fallen out and he couldn't hear me?

In my mind's eye I saw him face down somewhere as bright orange and yellow flames swept towards him. Shit – I was going to have to go and get him.

I set off through the little grove of pine trees in case he might be hiding there for some reason. No, I don't know why he would – I can only say it seemed a good idea at the time. He wasn't there.

I emerged from the trees, checked around and then tried to sneak along the side of the building, searching for another entrance and probably looking more than a little suspicious, and that was when the soldier grabbed me. At least, I'm assuming a soldier. He had a uniform of some kind with

overlapping leather lozenges and a rifle. Yeah – soldier. Whose soldier, of course, was a problem. As far as I was aware, the Boxers hadn't broken through the barricade, which meant he was either a regular soldier, sent here to defend the academy, or an actual university guard. Just for info – neither of these would be good.

He shouted in my face. Great – another man who thought they only had to shout loudly enough and I'd understand every word.

Obviously, I hadn't got a clue what he was on about. He grabbed at my bag and opened it. I could see it in his face. Bag + books = looter. Well, that solved that mystery. Almost certainly a university guard.

I tried to explain, gesturing at the burning buildings, the books, the pools, and he didn't believe a word of it. I was female. Wearing strange clothes. I didn't speak the language. I was a foreigner. And did I mention female? Really, I didn't have a lot going for me at that moment.

The soldier grabbed me by one arm and the scruff of my fire-suit and dragged me along with him – round the back of the big buildings and out of the main area. I struggled to reach for my stun gun but my belt had got twisted around and I couldn't reach it with my only free arm. There were more buildings here – lots of them – smaller and less grand; I suspected these were the workshops and dwellings of all the people required to keep the Han Lin Academy going. A worrying number of them were on fire. The dwellings – not the people. He hauled me round a corner and into a small courtyard. Now that we were away from the flames, suddenly everything seemed very dark. I felt the sweat cool on my face. The courtyard couldn't possibly have been silent – not with everything going on around us – but that's what I remember. Dark and silent. I was suddenly very cold. This wasn't good.

Half a dozen people were gathered there. All men. And all but two in local dress. There were five or six other soldiers pushing them around. There was a lot of shouting from both sides. I had no idea what was going on.

And then I did. The soldiers pushed three terrified men against a wall and

then lined up to face them.

I'd been caught looting and this was a firing squad.

There's never any mercy for looters. From anyone. No extenuating circumstances. Certainly no trial. No appeal. Just execution. Oh my God, I was going to be shot.

There was no way out. We were in a square formed by three stone buildings and with a very useful – and very pockmarked – wall behind us.

I couldn't help thinking of my first room at St Mary's – scruffy and with equally heavily pockmarked walls, I used to joke that it looked as if a firing squad had been in there. The joke was definitely on me now.

The three men were terrified, on their knees and pleading to the soldiers for their lives. There was no misunderstanding the gestures, the begging, the hysteria. I couldn't believe this was happening. Not two minutes ago I'd been congratulating myself that Markham and I were done here and would soon be home and safe.

Now . . .

A man I presumed to be the officer shouted a command. The soldiers raised their rifles.

He shouted again. I could only just hear him over the screaming prisoners. They were all screaming. Everyone was screaming. Except me. My voice wouldn't work. My legs were wobbling all over the place. If it hadn't been for the soldier holding me up then I'd have been on the ground. These three men were about to die and then it would be my turn.

The officer lowered his arm. The rifles barked. Smoke exploded from their muzzles. When it cleared, the three men lay crumpled on the ground. Like puppets whose strings had been cut. One wasn't quite dead. I saw his hand move.

The officer stepped up, pulled out a handgun and shot him in the head.

Shit . . .

My soldier dragged me towards the wall. I wasn't going quietly. I kicked and struggled and dug my heels in and he slapped me so hard around the

head I could now add ringing ears to my other problems.

The other two men were putting up an equal struggle. Looters too, I assumed. A couple of little caskets lay on the ground, now completely forgotten. And a small bundle of cloth which looked to have concealed a ring on a chain. Almost certainly not gold. Tiny things to lose your life over. Says the woman just caught stealing books.

One man actually broke free for a second, running blindly towards what he hoped was freedom.

They were on him immediately. Two soldiers grabbed him and hauled him back. He fought hard for his life. Biting, punching, struggling.

Eventually, they clubbed him to the ground with their rifles. He curled up, wrapping his arms around his head which did him no good at all because they shot him where he lay.

Both I and the other man – a European – froze on the spot. I know the guards had only anticipated the actual firing squad by a few seconds, but even so . . . there's something quite shocking about shooting a man while he's lying helpless on the ground.

The soldiers shoved us up against the now bloodstained wall. I think the man next to me was praying. He was repeating the same phrase over and over again. I don't know in what language because my thoughts were all over the place. Making my peace with the universe, trying to think of a way out, of Leon and Matthew, of how I didn't want to die . . .

The soldiers retreated. Not anywhere near far enough away. Ten, twelve feet? No further. I could see the fastenings on their uniforms. The wrinkles in their trousers. Dust and ash on their boots. Their every detail. One had a pocket unbuttoned. Something heavy was weighing it down. I wondered what it was. Not that I'd ever find out now. Because I was going to die. Oh God – I was going to die. I was actually going to die. This was it. This was how I ended. I wasn't ready to do that. There was still so much I wanted to do. To see. To say. I didn't want to go like this. Actually, I didn't want to go at all.

The officer shouted. The firing squad raised their rifles. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the wall because my legs were slowly giving way.

And then the bloke next to me grabbed my arms and dragged me in front of him. This must be why executioners usually tie you to a post – to stop the bastard next to you using you as a human shield. He was shouting something. I've no idea what. I was shouting back. Indignation. Terror. The officer was shouting, too. Instructing his men to sort us out, presumably. I was surprised they would bother. At that range they could probably fire straight through me. Soldiers like to do things by the book, however.

They lowered their weapons and two of them strode towards us. The man pivoted, still holding me in front of him, using me to keep them back. He was very strong. His hands crushed my arms. If I survived this – ha! – I was going to have massive bruises.

The two soldiers yanked us apart. I was pushed hard against the wall again. There was very much an *and stay there* air of finality about it. My fellow executee backed away, hands held in front of him. He was crying. So was I.

This was the end of the line at last. My famous luck had run out. Now that the moment had come, I couldn't think of any way out other than to just close my eyes and try to accept my fate with grace and dignity.

And then, from around one of the buildings, another soldier appeared and shouted something, gesturing for the squad to follow him.

The officer responded. I didn't need to speak the language to know he was saying, 'Yeah, I'll just finish here and then be with you.'

The other guy wasn't having it, though. He shouted again. Much more sharply this time. As if to back up his argument, there was a massive explosion – from somewhere very close to the British compound, I think. The sky flashed white and yellow. Heaven knows what it was – perhaps an ammo store going up – but it was enough. All the soldiers disappeared out of the courtyard, shouting as they ran.

In less than three seconds we were completely alone.

I contemplated the sobbing heap on the ground. Grace and dignity went home for an early tea. So this bastard thought he'd use me as a human shield, did he?

For those of you who deplore violence, it was only a couple of swift kicks. And not that hard because my legs were still pretty wobbly. And I missed his nadgers completely. So – you know – quite a humanitarian kicking. No need for anyone to be upset.

Finally, breathless, I stared down at the sad, shivering little shit, and then my brain re-engaged and told me to get the hell out of here. My bag was lying where the soldier had dropped it. I grabbed it, turned and ran. And ran and ran.

I had no idea where I was going – it was more a case of running away from than running towards. I raced between buildings, hurdled anything in my path, dodged around anything unhurdleable and just generally fled the scene. Looking where I was going was pretty much an optional extra and I wasn't exercising the option.

The next moment I was rolling downhill. Although not for long. I tried to brace myself. We were in the middle of the city. There were no hills here. I was on the ground. How far could I fall?

It wasn't so much a splash – more of a squelch. For anyone who remembers the previous discussion as to moat or sewer – it wasn't a moat. Of course it wasn't a bloody moat. Why would it be? It was a bloody ditch full of waste, dirty water, rotting food, sewage . . . and me. Fortunately – that's not the word I want but I can't think of any other – it hadn't rained for a long time and so the water – I use the term loosely, perhaps *contents* would be better – was quite shallow. The sides were steep, however, and I was forced to splash my way along what I shall refer to as the channel, until I found a place where I could finally scramble out.

I heaved myself over the edge just as the old International boomed again, and looked around.

Oh . . . shit.

You won’t believe this. I was right back where I’d started. In my panic I’d run the wrong way along the channel. I couldn’t believe it. The firing-squad courtyard was only just over there. The would-be human-shield user had gone but the four bodies still lay at the foot of the wall. The blood was still fresh, glistening in the roaring flames. The gun fired again. People screamed and shouted. An entire war was still being fought around me and the smoke was making my head spin.

And I was still here. I’d run and run and run but I was right back where I’d started. Why couldn’t I get away? I looked down at myself. Was I dead? Had I actually died at the hands of the firing squad? Or perhaps I’d never made it out of the burning building, which was why I couldn’t find Markham. I was dead and tied to this spot forever. A pale, foreign ghost, haunting the scene of her violent end. Unable to escape. Living the last terrible moments of her life over and over again.

For all eternity.

Forever and ever.

Amen.

There were many things I should be doing, but at that moment I didn't actually have the strength to do any of them. I wobbled towards a nearby building, found a shallow recess formed by the angle of two walls, slithered down the wall and waited for my heart to calm down. The thing was thumping so hard I was convinced I was having some kind of cardiac event, so if I wasn't already dead, I soon would be. I crouched, arms wrapped around my head, and closed my eyes.

That was where Markham found me God knows how many minutes later.

'Hey,' he said, sliding down the same wall to sit beside me, bravely ignoring the smell.

I nodded.

He peered across the courtyard at the bodies. The wall. The blood. 'All right?'

I nodded.

We sat for a while.

'Did you know this building's on fire?' he said chattily.

I nodded. Because good manners are important and he likes standards to be maintained.

He shifted his weight and put his arm around me. 'No rush.'

I realised I was hyperventilating like an idiot. Sucking in great gasping breaths that were making my head spin.

I breathed out. Slowly.

And then in. Held it for five seconds. Then out.

Then again. And again. And again.

‘That’s really good,’ he said. ‘I always said you’d get the hang of basic bodily functions one day.’

I sighed. ‘We should go.’

‘No rush,’ he said again. ‘Let’s just take a moment, shall we?’

I wiped the tears off my cheeks. Where they were immediately replaced by some more. I couldn’t believe I was crying. And in front of someone, too.

I pulled off my face scarf and used it to wipe my eyes. And my nose. And then my eyes again and struggled for some more words. ‘I . . .’

He actually leaned back and closed his eyes. ‘I thought we could take a breather,’ he said. ‘It’s been a busy morning. Let’s just sit and enjoy the moment, shall we?’

Something exploded not that far away. There was yet another hail of gunfire. The International thundered again. I could hear screaming and yelling. The world was coming back to me.

‘You’re an idiot,’ I said.

‘Feeling better?’

‘I’m fine. Absolutely fine.’

‘Let’s get going, then. Things here aren’t good and they’re about to get considerably worse. Up you get now.’

Markham pulled me to my feet. Actually, I felt better standing up. It’s quite hard to be cheerful when you’re curled in a foetal heap reliving some very bad moments on a continual loop.

He passed me a flask of water. I’d lost mine somewhere along the way. In the sewer, probably. I hadn’t realised I was so thirsty. I tried to sip slowly but once I started, I couldn’t stop. There wasn’t much left when I handed it back to him.

He sighed heavily and we got going again, working our way back through the college complex, skirting burning buildings and milling crowds of people.

I knew it couldn’t have been more than about one or two in the afternoon,

but the light was very poor, the air thick with soot and ash – something for which we were both grateful, although we were still keeping a weather eye open for soldiers, collapsing buildings, stray bullets and sudden conflagrations. Being us, of course, peril came from a completely unexpected direction.

Literally.

A small bureau appeared from on high and landed at Markham's feet, shattering on impact and sending wooden shards flying in all directions. He yelped and clutched his hand to his chest. I saw blood spray through the air. I was going to have to look at that, but not right at this moment.

The bureau was followed by two stools and some sort of occasional table. Although half a second after impact it was an ex-table. And then the books started to rain down on us. Which was good – it would seem the academy staff were still trying to save what they could, but they were fighting a losing battle. Libraries always burn well.

We had to pick our way extremely carefully. I had no idea where we were at that moment, but Markham seemed to know so I simply followed him. The heat was immense. I was drenched in sweat. My eyes were streaming. And I still wasn't completely convinced I wasn't dead. Jerking black figures silhouetted against raging orange flames made our surroundings a scene from hell. Flames roared out of doorways and literally ran up the walls. Some buildings were already beginning to collapse. Tiles rained down on to the people below. There were no longer any statues on the rooflines.

We rounded the last corner to face the worst sight of all: whether in an effort to keep the rebels out, or whether the rebels were already here and it was to prevent anyone escaping – there was no way of knowing – someone had closed the gates.

Our way out had disappeared.

We drew back against a wall. I heard Markham hiss and suddenly remembered his hand. 'Are you hurt? Let me see.'

He had a wooden splinter sticking out of his palm, just below his thumb,

although splinter was completely the wrong word. Splinter gives the impression of something that could be teased out with a judiciously wielded darning needle. In this case, calling it a bloody great chunk of wood would be more appropriate.

I pulled out my com.

'Evans. Where are you?'

He replied at once. 'Heading towards the back of the academy. There's a second gate. Where are you?'

'Just arrived at the front gate. Can't get out. Markham's hurt his hand and won't be able to get over the wall.'

'Go somewhere I can find you.'

I looked around. 'We'll work our way along the west wall. Towards you.'

'We'll do the same. Meet you in the middle.'

I had to ask. 'Did you get anything?'

'Yes. You?'

'Yes. See you in a few minutes.'

Markham's front was drenched in blood. I daresay he'd have been looking quite pale if his face hadn't been so smoke blackened. I wondered how I looked. The same but with tear tracks, probably.

I nudged him towards the west wall. Still twelve feet high. It hadn't shrunk any during the last hour or so. We weaved our way through courtyards and clusters of buildings – purposes unknown until we left the academy proper – and found ourselves in a kind of shanty town. I couldn't resist slowing a little because here, behind the public face of the academy, were the bits that made it work. Lots of little wooden huts. Laundries, kitchens, workshops, butchers and bakers, little livestock pens – they were empty of animals, but people were everywhere, all trying to drag their personal possessions to safety. I saw two elderly men grappling with what looked like some kind of giant loom. They'd managed to get it wedged in the doorway and behind it I could see the pale outline of a woman's face as she frantically pushed from the inside.

Typical men. Save the loom before the wife because a good loom is valuable, whereas you can pick up a wife any day of the week. And probably a better one than the current model. Younger. More fertile. Less knackered.

All this shoving was of no use, however. The loom wasn't budging. The woman was trapped. The hut wasn't yet burning but it would be very soon.

I stopped.

OK – here's the problem. You can't interfere. It's wrong. It's dangerous. It's against the rules. And I don't mean St Mary's rules – I mean History's Rules. If this woman was marked for death – and it very much looked as if she was – then there wasn't anything I should do about it. If I saved her and she went on to marry someone she shouldn't – because she should be dead – then that meant her children shouldn't be alive either. Or their children. And so on and so forth down the generations, until a whole huge section of the population weren't who they should be. Including, with my luck – me. And if I wasn't me, then I wouldn't be here, and if I wasn't here, then I wouldn't be here to save her, which meant she would die and I would never have existed and, in a final effort to resolve the paradox, History would do something unpleasant. Like actually kill me now before I could screw things up for everyone. So I should walk away. Leave well alone. Not get involved.

That was when I saw the two other little faces peering through the tangled machinery.

So . . . yeah . . . bollocks.

Normally I'm the first to say, 'They're not my rules so why should I care?' And this wouldn't be the first time I'd intervened . . . On the other hand, I'd only got my own life back about twenty minutes ago. An irritated Fate was perfectly capable of turning round and telling me I'd been spared once today so why was I pushing my luck again?

'Go,' I said to Markham. 'I'll be along in a minute.'

He didn't move. 'Max . . .'

‘I know, but you’re hurt. You shouldn’t hang around.’

He shouldn’t. There were endless opportunities for me to die here this afternoon. The combinations of fire, heat, bullet, sword, History, whatever, were myriad and fascinating. If I really worked at it, I could probably die of frostbite.

Markham hadn’t gone anywhere. Because he’s an idiot.

We ran to the doorway. Markham pushed the men aside and twisted his head to scope things out. ‘No. No chance. That metal bit there is well and truly embedded in the doorjamb. We’d have to take the whole frame out. Is there room for them to crawl underneath?’

I crouched and used my sleeve to wipe sweat and dust from my eyes. ‘Yes. Maybe.’

I held out my hands to the children, only to be dragged back by one of the elderly men. Who was a lot stronger than he looked. He stabbed a finger at the loom. Which obviously took priority over the worthless wife and two even more worthless daughters.

I resisted the urge to chuck him into the flames. Which I think should earn me a little credit. And no, there weren’t actually any flames at this precise moment but I was perfectly prepared to go off and find some.

I pushed his hands away and told him to go forth and multiply himself. With both hands. He went to wallop me and found himself being faced down by Markham who, even with a splinter, was more than capable of dealing with this little shit.

I went back to holding out my hands for the little girls. One squeezed out under the loom, narrowly avoiding the heavy wooden treadles, followed by the other. I pulled them to their feet and pointed to an open space.

‘Go and stand over there. Out of harm’s way.’

They got the message.

The woman was still pushing at the loom. Which was going nowhere.

‘Hang on,’ said Markham, handing me his bag – and the next moment he was wriggling underneath.

‘You’ll never make it,’ I said. ‘Come back, for God’s sake.’

‘I’m nearly there. Bugger – no, I’m not. I’m stuck.’

‘For . . .’ Words failed me. Seizing his ankles, I pulled.

‘No,’ he shouted. ‘Push. Push.’

On the other side of this bloody loom, the woman seized whichever part of Markham she could get hold of – which she wouldn’t have done if she knew where he’d been over the years – and tugged. There was a tearing noise – if Pennyroyal had hired these suits, then he’d just lost his deposit – and Markham wriggled out of sight, only to reappear moments later inside the tiny hut.

‘I’m in,’ he shouted.

‘How is that an improvement, you muppet?’

Smiling brightly at the woman, he put his shoulder to the loom. As did the woman. The two old men stopped complaining and heaved. The hut creaked ominously. I had visions of the whole thing collapsing on top of us all. And it didn’t look to be made of balsa wood.

The loom shifted not one bloody inch. I was in despair. We should be long gone by now. I could hear crashing and banging all around us as buildings began to topple and then collapse. I was ready to tear my hair out.

That’s just a colourful phrase, you understand.

And then, thank God – Smallhope and Evans turned up.

‘You found us,’ I said, relieved.

‘The noise you two were making, it would be hard not to,’ said Evans.

I was pleased to see he pushed the two old men aside with no ceremony whatsoever.

Hands on hips, he assessed the situation. ‘You do know there’s just enough room for the pair of you to wriggle underneath, don’t you?’

‘She won’t do it,’ shouted Markham, ‘and even if she wanted to, those two old farts won’t let her out. They were very reluctant to let the kids out.’

Smallhope stared thoughtfully at the two kids huddled by the wall, turned back again and said something nasty in Mandarin.

The older of the two men seemed momentarily taken aback, but the other raised a knobbly fist. It was the last thing he ever did with that arm. I heard the bones break from where I was standing. He dropped to the ground and began to wail. No one paid the slightest attention.

Evans spat on his hands and shouted to Markham through the tangle of loom. ‘All right. You push. I pull. Max, get out of the way.’

I stepped back.

Evans dug in his heels, threw all his weight backwards like a tug-of-war participant and heaved. There was a tearing metal noise. I could see Markham pushing away. The jamb splintered and suddenly the loom jerked free. Evans leaped sideways so it missed him, and Markham and the woman tumbled out of the door in its wake.

Evans and Markham picked themselves up, ignoring the man who lay cradling his arm and moaning.

The woman ran to her children, pulling them close. Smallhope followed her over, spoke briefly and pointed, presumably in the direction of the back gate. They hesitated, looked across at the men. The uninjured one shouted, the gist of which, I imagine, was that they were to get back here and help.

Picking himself up, Evans dusted himself down, lifted first one man and then the other and tossed them into the hut, slamming the door on them both.

They weren’t locked in, of course. The jamb had splintered; all they had to do was kick at the door and they’d be free in minutes. Possibly seconds. Still – it wouldn’t do them any harm to find themselves trapped in a building in the middle of a raging conflagration and major rebellion. And even if they got out, they still had that bloody great wooden loom to shift and one of them had a broken arm.

Yeah – quite a good day’s work, I think.

When I turned back, the woman and her daughters had disappeared. I checked around and none of us seemed to be dead so presumably we’d got away with it this time.

Evans was grinning down at Smallhope. ‘Nice trick with the old man’s arm.’

She grinned back. ‘I’ll show you the move if you like.’

‘Fair’s fair,’ said Evans, looming as only he can. ‘If you show me one of yours, then it’s only right I show you one of mine.’

She stepped even closer. They were chest to chest. ‘I’m only interested in your *good* moves.’

‘All my moves are good moves.’

They grinned at each other some more and I swear the surrounding temperature rose by another ten degrees.

‘Um . . .’ said Markham and made movements indicative of leaving. Presumably before they set fire to the rest of Peking.

‘Yes. Last one home misses out on the margaritas,’ said Smallhope.

Exiting the back gate we parted to find our own pods.

And then Markham and I were safe inside and I was finally able to shut the door on the Boxer Rebellion.

We took a few seconds to draw breath. I ripped off my scarf and threw it on the floor. Followed by my bag of books.

‘Got to get these boots off,’ said Markham. ‘My feet are on fire.’

I’ve lived with Markham’s feet. ‘Don’t you dare. There’s sensitive equipment in here.’

He grumbled but I ignored him. ‘Computer, initiate jump.’

And the world went white.

10

The return jump wasn't that bad. I suspect being hauled in front of a firing squad gives the brain something else to think about. Although, on balance, it wouldn't be my first choice as a cure for time-travel sickness.

Pennyroyal was waiting for us when we got back to Home Farm. I reckoned he reckoned none of us should be allowed out on our own and that without him there to keep things on track, the whole mission would career off the Rails of Success and flounder in the Ditch of Catastrophe. Which, given the day I'd had, wasn't that far wrong.

Markham and Evans plugged in the umbilicals. I decided I'd come back and clean up the pod later. After I'd cleaned up myself. For the moment the best thing I could do was leave the door open for the smell to escape by itself.

Pennyroyal sniffed delicately as I walked in through the back door and yes, all right, smoke, stagnant water, cordite, a soupçon of sewage, sweat and so on is a potent blend. He said nothing, however.

'Oh, jolly well done, Pennyroyal,' said Lady Amelia, as he handed her the traditional post-op margarita. 'And good to see you looking so hale and hearty, too.'

Actually, he did. During our twelve-hour absence he'd put on a little weight and lost the grey-corpse look that had actually, as I had informed him, suited him so well. Now he was tanned and clear-eyed.

'I have just returned from three weeks in Monaco, my lady. At the tables. I am pleased to report that, should we ever require them, several offshore bank accounts have been opened and some very healthy sums deposited

therein. The usual password.'

'*You* took a holiday?' I said, grinning.

He addressed Lady Amelia but his words were for me. 'The thought of Dr Maxwell's continuing ministrations was all it took to get me back on my feet again, my lady.'

'And all our new security systems checked out? No problems in your absence?'

'I may have spent three weeks in Monaco but I was only gone for ninety minutes, my lady. The Faradays were working in the yard the whole time and the security systems functioned perfectly.'

'Ninety minutes well spent, my friend. Now – first things first. Mr Markham's hand requires attention and then we'll have a quick look at our treasures.'

Evans saw to Markham's hand. Markham wouldn't let me near him because of sewer germs, he said, so I passed the time with a margarita. Or killing germs internally, as I called it.

'Shall we see what we have?' cried Lady Amelia when Markham was all bandaged up. 'You first, Max.'

Pennyroyal had laid a clean white cloth on the kitchen table. I opened my bag to a strong smell of burning and gently laid out four yellow silk-clad volumes. And not only were they not scorched – they weren't even damp, either. I'm such a professional.

'Excellent,' she said, holding out her glass for a refill. 'Next.'

Markham laid out his four books alongside mine.

Evans and Smallhope also had four books between them. And something that wasn't yellow.

'Sorry,' said Evans. 'The light was a bit dodgy. I honestly thought it was yellow.'

I could see Pennyroyal making a mental note to have him checked for tritanomaly at the first opportunity, but in Evans's defence, a lot of things look yellow when the only source of illumination is the raging conflagration

about to consume everything in its path.

'Interesting,' said Smallhope, picking up the very battered and non-yellow volume and examining it closely. 'Having done a little research on the subject myself, I'm wondering if this little chap might not be part of the Siku Quanshu – the Four Treasure Library. I'll show it to someone we know and if it is what I think it is, then we won't have done too badly at all. Congratulations, everyone. We'll take this one,' she put the unknown volume to one side, 'and one of the yellow ones and unless you want one' – Markham, Evans and I shook our heads – 'the rest will go into the pot for future relocation at St Mary's. An excellent day's work.'

Pennyroyal began to gather up the books. 'With your permission, my lady, I'll take these downstairs and put them somewhere safe until then.'

'Yes, do, Pennyroyal.' She sniffed. 'Something smells good.'

'Slow-roast pork, my lady. Thirty minutes.'

'So long?'

'I would not have mentioned the matter, my lady, but I think we all feel that Dr Maxwell should take the earliest opportunity to rid herself of what can only be described as her pungency.' He laid a hypo on the table. 'Followed by a very hefty dose of antibiotics.'

'Absolutely. Can't afford to take any chances,' said Lady Amelia. 'Off you go, Max. Dinner in thirty minutes.'

I scrubbed for nearly thirty minutes. At least I didn't have a ton of hair to wash. Just to forestall any possible complaints from my colleagues, I drenched myself in just about everything I found in the bathroom. Some of which might have been toilet cleaner. On the other hand, the strong smell of pine more than overcame 20th-century sewer germs.

When I came down, absolutely ravenous, the kitchen was empty, other than Markham stirring the gravy. He was giving it his full attention because Pennyroyal has strong feelings on the subject of lumpy gravy, and, as Markham pointed out, it still wasn't too late for him to shoot us.

I told him I didn't see why I should be shot just because he couldn't

perform a simple function correctly.

He sighed. ‘Why are you standing there?’

I handed him the hypo. ‘I can’t find my specs – can you read what the instructions say?’

He sighed, stirred and read.

‘Wow,’ I said. ‘Multitasking. Impressive.’

‘OK. Bend over.’

‘No.’

‘Bend over.’

‘No. You’re not stirring the gravy with one hand and sticking me with the other. It’s not hygienic.’

‘Fine. Die horribly as some nine-foot-long parasite forces its way out of the nearest orifice and says, “Hi.”’

I folded my arms.

He sighed. ‘All right – how about this? You stir. I stick. Bend over. Come on – this’ll thicken in a moment and then I’ll have no choice but to leave you to die.’

Still massively suspicious but unable to think of any alternative, I pulled down my outer nether garment.

‘Here.’ He handed me the spoon. ‘Bend over and stir.’

I concentrated hard on the gravy. I felt him lift my sweatshirt – there was an unpleasant little prick – two of them, actually, if you think about it . . . and Pennyroyal walked in.

‘What in God’s name are you doing to that gravy?’

‘I’m having a shot,’ I said, reclaiming my clothing and my dignity.

He picked up the packet and read. ‘According to this, any large muscle mass will do. Dr Maxwell’s upper arm would have been perfectly acceptable.’

I spun around just in time to see the door close behind a cackling Markham.

One good night's sleep later, Markham and I were raring to be off again. We discussed our next move over breakfast.

'You can't go back to Insight looking like that,' said Markham and he wasn't wrong. I still had fading bruises on my face. I had brand-new bruising to both upper arms, sustained during my brief career as a human shield. And parts of me were red and shiny because I'd been standing too close to a giant fire. Other than that, I was absolutely fine.

Markham's hand was beginning to heal – but he too was bumped and bruised from his loom adventure.

'Take the books to St Mary's and then take a week off,' said Lady Amelia. 'Pennyroyal has benefitted from some down time. You should do the same. Somewhere sunny. With a beach. And lots of wine.'

'That sounds wonderful,' I said, because I'd just had a Brilliant Idea. 'We can drop the books off with Ian Guthrie and then, unless you want to visit Hunter and Flora, of course, I thought we could jump to Patara. See Clerk and Prentiss. What do you think?'

'I think that's a brilliant idea.'

I blinked. 'You do?'

'Yeah.' Markham looked at Evans. 'You coming?'

'Um . . .' I swear he blushed.

'What?' I said.

'Well, you know, lots to do here.'

I blinked. 'Such as?'

'Um . . .' I swear he blushed some more.

'The whole place has just been refurbished.'

He shuffled his cutlery. 'Well . . . you know . . . it's still not perfect. Things to do.'

'Max, you're an idiot,' said Markham, getting to his feet. 'Of course he doesn't want to come with us. Shall we collect our spoils and go?'

Halfway through the door into the barn, the penny dropped.

'Oh,' I said. 'You mean he wants to stay because he and Sma—'

‘Just get in the pod, will you?’

Sadly, this time, I had a very minor wobble and Markham noticed.

‘Max?’

‘It’s fine,’ I said. ‘Just a bit of nausea from wallowing in all that crap yesterday. Or possibly a reaction to the antibiotics. It’ll pass in a moment.’

‘So just a coincidence we’re in a pod.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I had a slight twinge when we landed in Peking.’

‘You didn’t say.’

‘It was over before I could mention it. As it is now. Are you ready?’

It was still summer at St Mary’s which was nice because it’s a lovely place to be in summer. Lots of green hedgerows. Bright gardens. The smell of cut grass in the air. Leafy exuberance everywhere.

‘How long have we been gone?’ he asked, slinging a sports bag full of priceless books over his shoulder as we set off. At least they weren’t down the front of his trousers, his traditional spot for hiding historical artefacts.

‘Around twenty-four hours.’

‘I don’t think we should go anywhere near St Mary’s. Not before we’ve enquired whether there are any warrants out for your arrest.’

I smirked. ‘Not so long ago I was arrested three times in one afternoon.’

‘Show-off.’

‘Leon’s quite cross that I’ve been arrested more times than he has.’

‘No husband is happy with his wife having a more impressive arrest record than he himself.’

By this time, we’d arrived at the Falconburg Arms.

‘What ho,’ called Markham as we entered the reception area. ‘Shop.’

A door opened and Ian Guthrie limped from his office, uttering the traditional Guthrie Cry of Welcome. ‘Oh God. Go away.’

Markham flashed his usual sunny smile. ‘Hello to you too. Everything OK?’

‘It was.’

‘Are the police looking for us?’

‘No one is looking for you. Why would they? I’ve heard they’re all having massive parties up at St Mary’s. Celebrating your departure.’

‘Everything OK up there?’

‘As far as I know. They’re back to fully operational with effect from tomorrow, anyway.’

Markham dropped the sports bag on the reception desk. ‘Can you shove this in your secret cellar?’

Guthrie rolled his eyes. ‘Why don’t you shout louder? Let everyone know.’

‘Well, I could,’ said Markham, considering this. ‘But surely you don’t want people knowing what’s knocking around down there. Not when it’s full of stolen property.’

Guthrie put his hands on the counter and loomed menacingly. ‘I’m looking forward to augmenting the contents with a couple of corpses.’

‘Where’s Elspeth?’ I said, looking around.

‘Upstairs. With instructions to stay out of the way. Plausible deniability.’

‘Hi, Elspeth,’ I said, as she came down the stairs.

Markham frowned at the sight of her. ‘Didn’t there used to be a lot more of you?’

‘There was, but now she’s sleeping in Ian’s office.’

I turned in horror. ‘You’ve got Elspeth back to work already? What sort of monster are you?’

Ian scowled at me. ‘How I long for the good old days at St Mary’s when I had the legal authority to shoot you both.’

‘Speaking of which,’ I said. ‘Thank you for rescuing me from Martin Gaunt. Simple, stylish and successful. A typical Guthrie scheme.’

‘Hey,’ protested Markham.

Guthrie sighed. ‘I didn’t want to do it. Elspeth made me.’

‘Ignore him,’ said Elspeth. ‘He loved every moment of it. He was quite frisky when he got back.’

We grinned at Guthrie who threatened to shoot us both and bugger the good old days at St Mary's.

'Can we see her?' I asked and Elspeth took us in to look at the baby.

'Alice,' she said proudly. 'After Ian's mother.'

Markham blinked. 'He had a mother? Like Grendel?'

Elspeth laughed. 'He still does. She's thrilled. Apparently, she'd given up all hope.'

'Of Ian? Understandable, I suppose.'

'Are you going to be here for much longer?' said Ian from the doorway.

'Just bringing you some books.'

'I am not a library. Come out before you wake her and the shock stunts her growth.'

The bag had vanished from the counter.

'Where's it gone?' I said, panicking. If we'd lost the books, the world would not be big enough to hide us from Pennyroyal.

'Relax, they're under the counter. What idiot put you two in charge of priceless treasures?'

'Pennyroyal.'

'Oh. How is he?'

'Fine. Almost completely recovered.'

'Which is more than can be said for you two. Max, you look even more battered than ever.'

'I know,' I said. 'That last assignment was a bit of a bugger. Still, we're off for a holiday. To see Clerk and Prentiss. Any messages for them?'

'Give them my best.'

I nodded.

As I turned to go, Markham said casually, 'Any news of Treadwell?'

Ian shook his head. 'None whatsoever.'

I frowned. 'That's . . . concerning.'

Ian nodded, grim-faced. 'It is, isn't it?'

Patara, 5th century BC – I'm not telling you the exact date for reasons which will become apparent – was the administrative capital of the Lycian league. Magnificent, busy, prosperous and best of all – peaceful.

I'd set the coordinates for some years after we'd left them here. Clerk and Prentiss, I mean. It's a long story, but they'd been captured on the Babylon assignment, thanks to Hyssop and her Half-Wits. We found them eventually, but Paula had given birth in the meantime and wouldn't abandon her baby in a different time, so Rosie Lee (seriously, don't ask) and I had rescued her and brought the three of them – Clerk, Prentiss and baby Max – to live here at Patara.

We'd stolen enough stuff from St Mary's to give them a good start. At the time, I thought I was doing it under Treadwell's very nose, but it turned out he'd known about it all along. In fact, he'd organised regular supply jumps to keep them going, which had gone a little way towards me regarding him slightly more kindly. But not by very much.

I've visited Patara as an archaeological site. As a student, I remember standing on this very hill – almost exactly on this very spot – looking down on the extensive ruins, and even then, they'd been impressive. But the thing I remembered best from that time had been the complete silence. The silence of sleeping centuries. Other than the faint sound of crashing waves and the breeze softly sighing in the pines, there hadn't been a sound. Patara had slumbered quietly in the sun, dreaming of her past glories.

We'd landed the pod close to where we'd left them. A sheltered little valley overlooking the city. There was water nearby and the climate here

was kind. Clerk and Prentiss weren't here, however. There was no trampled grass, no cold ashes, no disturbed ground. No one had been here for a long time.

'Well, you expected them to move down into the city,' said Markham. 'No need to panic yet. Let's go and look.'

Patara is amazing. Bisected by the wide, sluggish River Xanthos, the city's impressively large stone buildings flanked the river on either side. Warehouses, granaries, storerooms, temples, merchants' properties, and so forth. Behind them were the allied trades – chandlers, ropemakers, carpenters, sailmakers, metalworkers, and so on. Behind them were the necessary trades – bakers, butchers, grocers. Over on the other side of the river and opposite to where we were standing was the necropolis, studded with imposing rock-cut tombs. The necropolis, in turn, was surrounded by purely residential areas, with some very fine houses indeed, with their own gardens, vines and vegetable patches, even small fields for grazing livestock. Olive groves were scattered across the surrounding hills, their boundaries delineated by low stone walls. There was no shortage of rocks around here.

The agora ran arrow-straight through the city, bordered by tall pillars and fine shops. The place heaved with people. The harbour was crowded with ships loading, unloading, or waiting their turn. Small boats zipped about, carrying passengers from one side of the river to the other because there was no bridge.

And overlooking everything was the awe-inspiring Temple of Apollo – still undiscovered in modern times. Home of the oracle of Patara, which was said to rival that of Delphi. I stood for some moments, quietly noting the spot. If things ever went badly for me or Markham, knowing the location of the Temple of Apollo could put me in a strong bargaining position.

All of Patara lay before us and it was vast.

'They could be anywhere,' I said, rather defeated by all this urban sprawl.

‘We’ll find them. It’s what we do. Come on.’

Markham and I followed a goat track down into the city. No one seemed particularly bothered about who we were. Markham wore a respectable--looking chiton actually knocked together out of two bedsheets and carried a himation which, in a former life, had been an old blanket.

‘Portable bedding,’ he said cheerfully.

I walked one pace behind him, dressed in a peplos – actually an old evening gown of Lady Amelia’s, adapted for the purpose. I’d bloused it out over the waist partly to stop it trailing on the ground behind me and partly for that fashionable two-garment look. Modesty dictated I had to wear my himation – an old opera cloak. I pulled the hood up over my head to shield me from public gaze. Quite useful actually, because it certainly didn’t shield the public from me.

Patara was throbbing with life. You could not hear yourself speak. Or even think. There were people everywhere. Crowds of them, pushing their way along the agora, heading to and from the harbour, bustling in and out of buildings. Men stood on the wharf yelling at other men unloading the boats. The other men yelled back. In a completely different language, obviously, but the meaning was very clear. And there were helpful gestures for anyone out of their linguistic depth.

Some crates and barrels were trundled into various warehouses. Others were loaded on to patient donkeys who, unbidden, turned away and plodded off along well-worn routes into streets too narrow for wagons.

They must have thought this city would last forever. It didn’t, of course. Nothing ever does. It would take a while, but the harbour would silt up over the centuries and the river would shift its course to the other end of the beach, some ten miles away.

Away from the harbour, more people surged up and down the agora – the main street and marketplace. Shops lined both sides catering for all needs. There was even an accurately signposted brothel.

I was entranced – and not just by the sign for the brothel. Commerce,

activity, social customs – I'd have given anything for a recorder. Markham regarded me with some sympathy – I didn't even have anything on which to sketch. All I could do was try to hold the scenes in my memory and hope I could recall them when – if – needed.

We fought our way along tight, narrow streets, some paved, some not. The sun rose higher and the smell of people began to overcome that of hot donkey and dirty harbour water.

Small houses, some built of stone, some of wood, stood shoulder to shoulder, jammed in wherever there was space. They seemed to follow the traditional design: blind walls overlooking the street, one entrance only, opening on to a courtyard where most daily life took place. Living accommodation and storerooms surrounded the courtyard. Women bustled in and out. Bedding and mats hung from the roofs, airing in the hot sun.

The whole town had a gritty feel about it. The surrounding hills looked dry and dusty. All the grass was brown. This was the end of summer. In a few weeks the rain would come and then all this would burst into life again. Grass would green up almost overnight, plants would lift their heads again, flowers would bloom and the temperature would begin to edge away from the molten end of the thermometer.

But – no matter how carefully we scanned the crowds – there was no sign of either Clerk or Prentiss.

By now it was mid-afternoon and the sun was beating down. I was hot and vaguely hungry.

'We'll try over there,' I said, pointing to the artisans' quarter – i.e. the poorer part of the city, which was a lot more interesting than the richer areas, and again I wished for my recorder. I could smell hot metal – there must be a blacksmith somewhere nearby – and the rich smell of freshly cut wood. There were the dyers – we moved on pretty sharply because that's not a smell you want to linger alongside – and potters, and many more I didn't have a clue about. There were a lot more women on the streets here – only the rich could afford to confine their women to the home. All the doors

were open and I could hear clacking looms. And mothers shouting at their children. And bleating goats and barking dogs. We walked for a long time along narrow streets, around corners, past higgledy-piggledy wooden sheds. No one took any notice of us, and I have to say I felt quite at home while we were there, but we still didn't find Clerk and Prentiss.

It was Markham who called a halt. 'Let's get back. We need a meal. I'm tired and you look knackered. No wonder no one's tried to buy you off me. We'll try again tomorrow.'

I nodded. It made sense. It would have been unreasonable to have expected to find them on the first day.

A blank wall divided the agora from the street proper. Or it would have been blank if people hadn't scratched advertisements, messages and scurrilous comments all over it. Before anyone asks, I couldn't read all of them but some were embellished with drawings that left no one in any doubt what they were about.

Markham tilted his head. 'That one on the right's impossible. You need at least three people.'

'I'm not even going to ask,' I said, pointedly not asking.

We looked around and he spotted a handy piece of chalky rock. I sat on a low wall and watched him scratch 'St Mary's' in a conveniently blank spot on the wall. In big letters.

'There,' he said, dusting off his hands. 'We'll come back early tomorrow and see what happens.'

We were up just after dawn. Another beautiful, sparkling morning in Patara. Markham made the tea and we wolfed down a quick breakfast in the sunshine just outside the pod.

I was surprised at how excited I was at the thought of seeing Clerk and Prentiss again. Their calm good sense – a bit of a rarity at St Mary's. The resilience with which they'd endured their enslavement. Paula's determination to keep her daughter. Clerk's refusal to leave her. The way

they'd faced an unknown future together.

We knew they were in the city somewhere – sooner or later they'd see the message. Treadwell had been monitoring them and he'd never mentioned that they moved away. And I'd carefully selected Patara because it was peaceful. There were no big battles around this time – not even civil disturbances.

We strolled down the hill again, to be greeted this time of the morning by the smell of baking. Despite breakfast, I was hungry all over again. As were the inhabitants of Patara, apparently. People pushed and jostled, queueing up to buy their daily bread.

She was waiting for us. We rounded a corner and there was Paula Prentiss, looking, I have to say, not much changed since the last time I saw her. Her hair was mainly covered and she wore a simple saffron-coloured peplos and leather sandals. Fashionable complexions were pale – to demonstrate women didn't have to do menial work in the fields. Prentiss was obviously out and about a great deal because she was deeply tanned and looked fit and well. She sat on the same wall on which I'd perched yesterday, spinning as she waited and with a baby sitting on a blanket at her feet.

We waved madly. She leaped to her feet, scattering spindle and thread as she did so. There were hugs. And a few tears as well.

'I'm sorry,' I said, gabbling like an idiot. 'I'm sorry I haven't got here before now. It's all kicking off out there . . .' I waved my hand vaguely in the direction I assumed the future to be, 'and we've been in the thick of things.'

'Of course you have,' she said. 'I wouldn't have expected anything else.' She looked up at the sun. 'He should have finished the early morning rush by now and be able to leave the shop. We'll have a meal and hear everyone's news.'

She picked up the baby – who immediately held out its arms to Markham, so she laughed and handed it over.

'Clever kid,' he remarked. 'Straight for the brains of the outfit.'

Prentiss and I walked in front, with her giving me a guided tour – who lived where and in what house and what they did for a living and whether their wife was cheating on them – while Markham and the baby were engrossed in their own private conversation behind us.

Clerk and Prentiss lived not too far from the harbour and their house was surprisingly prosperous. One storey high, blank-walled and with two wide wooden gates thrown open. The width surprised me until I realised they had to be big enough to get deliveries through.

Two children ran out. Followed by Clerk in a flour-dusted tunic.

'You're here,' he shouted, and there were greetings and hugs all over again.

'Welcome to our home,' said Clerk, formally escorting us across the threshold.

Obviously prompted, the little boy brought a bowl of water for Markham and I to wash our faces and hands, and the little girl solemnly handed us a cloth to dry them with. We both smiled and said, 'Thank you.' They looked puzzled. Of course, Clerk and Prentiss wouldn't speak English to them. What would be the point, after all?

We ate in the inner room where it was pleasantly cool away from the heat of the day and well away from the flies and mozzies. There were mats on the floor and two tapestries on the wall. I could see a small loom in the next room, carefully placed where it would get the light from the open door. I asked Prentiss if she'd woven the tapestries herself and she laughed and said no, she'd turned out to be near terminally cack-handed and she believed Clerk had been advised to trade her in for a bucket with only one hole in it. He was laughing as well and it was good to see them so happy and relaxed with each other. On the other hand, they'd had two children together, so they'd obviously been happy and relaxed with each other at least twice. Or so I thought.

We sat on the floor and tucked in.

The meal was a feast, and initially I worried the demands of hospitality –

very important in this part of the world – might be leaving them short but no, looking around, this was a comfortable house and well kept. And they had servants – I could hear women's voices in another room.

Well – no, not servants – almost certainly slaves. Given their previous status as not-very-well-treated slaves – Clerk had been particularly badly brutalised and Prentiss's owner had exercised his traditional rights – I wondered what their relationship with their slaves could be.

Two girls – about seventeen or eighteen, I guessed – brought in plates and dishes and laid everything out in front of us.

I looked at Prentiss.

'Yes,' she said. 'You're right. We fought against it for ages, until it occurred to us we couldn't change the system but we could improve the lot of a few, so we purchased these two. They were from Caria, originally. Anfia and Hestia. Lyssa, our housekeeper, actually came with the house and therefore has bragging rights which she doesn't hesitate to exercise. She mainly looks after the children now. And Keelan works and sleeps at the bakery. He prefers it there. Apparently there are too many women here and he can't hear himself think.'

'In a few years,' said Clerk, 'we'll free them and provide the girls with a small dowry. We would have done it before except they have a good life here – better than with a husband, perhaps. With freedom comes responsibility so . . .'

He tailed away.

'And Lyssa?'

'We've tried freeing her. She won't go. She sees herself as belonging to the house and nothing will change that.' He sighed. The ex-slave trying to do the right thing by his own slaves and being thwarted at every turn.

'I suspect,' said Paula, passing the bread around, 'they know we're a soft touch and they're unlikely to do better on their own.'

'You're a baker now?' said Markham, helping himself to still-warm bread.

Clerk nodded. 'When we first came here, I got a job with Ossos the

baker.’

‘Ossos?’

‘That wasn’t his real name but that was what it sounded like to me and he seemed happy with it. Anyway, he was failing and his son had disappeared long ago. I started off heaving sacks of flour around and worked my way up. Thanks to Treadwell, I was able to buy him out. And this was his house. We cared for him for nearly a year and he died last winter. Pneumonia, I suspect.’

‘You’re doing well,’ I said.

‘We’re all doing very well,’ he said proudly, and I reached out and touched a wooden stool standing in the corner because it doesn’t do to push your luck.

‘Thanks to the gods,’ Prentiss added, because it doesn’t do to ignore the local gods, either.

The food was very good. There was bread, dipped in olive oil flavoured with herbs, and a great bowlful of ezogelin soup, thick with lentils. Followed by figs, a dish of olives and soft, white, salty cheese cut into chunks.

‘Good bread,’ said Markham, tucking in as if he hadn’t eaten breakfast less than three hours ago.

‘Thank you,’ said Clerk, pouring wine. ‘It’s not watered,’ he said. ‘We’ve tried, because that’s the custom here and we should blend in, but Paula and I just can’t do watered wine.’

I sipped. A bit rough but not bad and it went very nicely with the cheese.

The two eldest children ate with us. They were both quiet and well behaved and very keen that our dishes should never be empty. They alternated between eating and staring at us curiously. Especially me. My hair was growing but not evenly, obviously, because why would it? I was probably their first mangy redhead.

I looked at the oldest child. The dark-eyed, dark-haired girl, daughter of a Babylonian silk merchant but obviously much loved. And named after me.

‘Is this little Max? She’s grown so much.’

‘Big Max now,’ said Paula. ‘She’s six.’ She ruffled the little boy’s hair. He grinned at her, suddenly looking just like his dad. ‘And this is Dorus.’

I mentally translated. ‘The gift,’ I said.

‘That’s right. Because he is.’ She ruffled his hair again. He grinned and said something. Asking to be excused, I suspected. Clerk nodded and the children stood up, bowed courteously to us, their guests, and ran out of the room. I could hear them calling to each other out in the courtyard.

‘And this one,’ said Paula, scooping the baby up on to her lap, ‘is Mitta.’

‘No translation for that,’ I said, puzzled.

There was a pause. ‘No,’ said Clerk. ‘This one’s a bit of a mystery.’

Something was wrong. ‘What?’ I said, looking from Clerk to Prentiss.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Markham put down his bread. Quite casually, but should anything kick off then his hands would be free.

‘We’ll talk later,’ said Clerk. He picked up a dish. ‘Have some more of this cheese.’

‘I’m pleased you’re doing so well,’ I said, ‘but even setting aside Ossos, how have you managed this in such a short time? There must have been bad harvests and taxes and such.’

They looked at each other. ‘Well . . .’

‘What?’

‘Treadwell came to see us. In person. By himself.’

‘To apologise, presumably.’

‘Not exactly.’

‘*It was all his fault. His and the idiot Hyssop.*’

Markham put his hand on my arm and Lyssa poked her head through the door. She had a wooden ladle in her hand. Obviously an ancestor of Mrs Mack.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, embarrassed. ‘I didn’t mean to shout. I’m . . . not very balanced about what happened to you.’

Clerk was silent and then said, ‘I want you to try to understand this, Max.

Yes, it was a disaster when it happened, but it turned out to be a Good Thing.'

I deliberately didn't shout. I said, in my reasonable and understanding voice, 'How could this be a Good Thing?'

'Well, as you can see, we're prosperous and healthy and, not to seem too critical, but how many at St Mary's could say that?'

'But you were a slave. Both of you.' I turned to Paula. 'Your owner . . .'

I stopped, too distressed to speak. Markham patted me gently on the back. Probably in much the same manner as he brought up Flora's wind. I've no idea why but, somehow, it was calming.

Clerk spoke quietly. 'Treadwell came to visit us one day, bringing us a pot of gold, so to speak. Not that we weren't doing well, thanks to the start you and Rosie gave us, but now there was enough for us to buy out Ossos. Treadwell came alone. We were living in a room behind the bakery at the time. He apologised, Max; he was quite distressed when he spoke to us. Anyone in our line of work has nightmares about being left behind, he said, and for us that nightmare had actually happened. We talked about our plans for the future. He wanted to know every detail. You know what he's like. Then he promised to do everything he could to assist us and handed over the gold. God knows where he got it from – we didn't ask.'

'He was just easing his conscience,' I said angrily.

'Whether he was or not, Max, it set us up very nicely. We have this house, a good, solid business, our health . . .'

There was a warning cry from the courtyard followed by the sound of something smashing. Lyssa went charging out, scolding as she went. I could hear Dorus protesting his innocence. Language wasn't needed. I could tell he was blaming his sister Max. Probably quite rightly.

Markham grinned. 'And three lovely children, as well.'

'Oh,' said Paula, carelessly and with no idea of the bombshell about to drop. 'They're not all ours.'

I didn't know what to say. We knew Max was the daughter of her former

owner – was that what she meant? Dorus was obviously a miniature version of Clerk. Which left . . .

It was cool in here. This inner room insulated us from the heat outside but I grew colder. Something was happening. I swallowed and tried to speak normally.

'Mitta – that's a strange name.'

Clerk smiled. 'When she first came, neither of the children could say her real name properly and . . .'

'When she first came?'

'Lyssa found her outside. Just opened the outer gate one morning and there she was. In a little basket wrapped in a torn sheet.'

'Abandoned?' said Markham.

Paula nodded.

'And you took her in?'

'Of course we did.'

Of course they did – I doubted there were two people anywhere in this city more willing to help those in trouble.

'We put the word out, of course, in case anyone knew who she was or had possibly changed their mind . . .'

'But you never heard anything,' I said slowly.

'A couple of obvious slavers turned up, claiming her as their own. We let Lyssa deal with them. They never came back.'

'So no clue at all?' said Markham.

'There was a pot shard with her name scratched on it. Which neither Dorus nor Max could pronounce, so we called her Mitta.'

The universe slowed. I could hear my own heart pounding. Somewhere I could hear a high keening sound as if someone was running their finger around a wine glass. I've had this feeling before. Several times. Something important was happening. Whether good or bad, I had no idea, but something universe-changing was about to occur.

I had to swallow before I could speak. I tried to smile and speak casually

but it was a poor effort. ‘And what is her real name?’

‘Marietta.’

It was a bloody good job they hadn’t given the baby to me. I’d have dropped her on her head in shock. The only thought racketing through my brain was that this could not be a coincidence. Not in a million years. And they had no idea. None at all. Neither of them had ever had much to do with the Time Police. I couldn’t remember if they’d ever met Commander Hay, but it was obvious they’d never heard her first name. Both of them sat in happy ignorance.

Not so me and Markham. Trust me, ignorance is sometimes a very desirable state of affairs.

I knew I should say something. ‘A very pretty name.’

Fortunately, at this moment, Lyssa appeared to take sleepy little Mitta away, which was probably just as well since I couldn’t stop staring at her. I had a feeling we’d just acquired knowledge that could end us all if we weren’t careful.

‘Anyway,’ said Prentiss, happily handing her over. ‘Tell us all the gossip.’

I needed a moment but Markham leaped effortlessly into the breach. ‘Well,’ he said in his best gossipy voice, ‘you’ll never guess what’s been happening at St Mary’s . . .’

We stayed for a week. A week full of drinking wine and gossiping in the shade of the fig tree, and eating lots of good food. And exploring the city. Markham and I walked the hills and along the rocky coastline, marvelling at all the ships lined up at anchor in the bay, waiting their turn to row into the city. To see such a sight reminded me of our time at Troy.

We played with the children. Markham tried to teach them football, which resulted in the breaking of one of Lyssa’s precious ceramic jars – we all ran away and left Markham to die alone – and just generally had a good time. My bruises faded. My hair grew. Although not very much. I think it was still in shock. But all in all it was just what Smallhope had recommended. A

nice relaxing holiday with good friends, sun, sea, and wine. We never mentioned the mystery of Mitta again. Safer for everyone. And as far as Clerk and Prentiss were concerned, she was just a local child. An unwanted and abandoned baby girl.

We could have stayed longer but Insight were never far from my thoughts, and after seven days, both Markham and I felt it was time to go.

We left them all with great regret. I couldn't see any time when we would be able to return. Insight hung over everything like a threatening storm and we certainly couldn't risk leading them back here. The whole family saw us off from their gate. Markham and I waved one final goodbye, promised to return one day, turned the corner, and made our way back to the pod.

Once inside there could be only one topic of conversation. I shut the door, we stood for a moment and then I turned to look at Markham. 'Treadwell. It has to be.'

He nodded. 'Treadwell left the baby. That's why he came to see them. He was looking for a home for her.'

I frowned. 'He and Hay are of an age. He must have done this as a younger man. Otherwise . . .'

I fell silent. The ramifications were difficult enough to get my head around, never mind the actual mechanics. But Treadwell . . . of all people . . . and Hay . . .

'Did he deliberately abandon Clerk and Prentiss knowing they'd end up here?'

He shrugged. 'It's possible, I suppose. Or he somehow knew they would be here and used that knowledge. Could be either.'

I looked at Markham. 'In the story of our lives, is anyone who they actually seem?'

He shook his head.

I turned to the console. 'Once we're back, I'm going to wipe these coordinates.'

He nodded. 'I have to ask – what do you intend to do with this info?'

‘Nothing. Unless threatened.’

‘A bit of a backhanded compliment from Treadwell, don’t you think?’

I was astonished. ‘In what way?’

‘Well, he must’ve known you’d turn up sooner or later, and yet he brought her here. And there was the pot shard with her name on it. He didn’t have to do that.’

‘And it was written in English, presumably.’

‘He’s a very clever man, Max. We’re his insurance.’

‘In what way?’

‘Well, as you said, he must have known we’d visit them at some point. And that we’d discover who she was. But now – should anything ever happen to Clerk and Prentiss . . . we know who and where she is and can take the appropriate action. We’re his safety net, Max. If anything should happen to him, then it’ll be up to us to . . .’ He stopped.

‘To do what?’

‘No idea.’

I said slowly, ‘He might already be dead.’

‘Whether he is or not, knowing what we know, we could bring down the Time Police.’

I shivered again. ‘We say nothing of this visit to anyone. Not Leon, not Hunter, not anyone.’

‘Agreed.’ He paused. ‘Not even Smallhope and Pennyroyal?’

‘Well, they know we were coming here so useless to deny we’ve been. We just saw Clerk and Prentiss and their children. Let’s leave it at that.’

He frowned. ‘Do you think Hay knows? About this?’

‘I’m guessing not.’ I added thoughtfully, ‘If Treadwell *is* dead . . . It will be interesting, don’t you think, to get back and see if Marietta Hay still commands the Time Police? If Treadwell dies and we do nothing, then she’ll live out her life here, won’t she?’

He looked over at me. ‘We’re sailing closer and closer to disaster, Max.’

‘Tell me about it.’

The jump back wasn't too bad. A moment's disorientation but no vomiting. And no second attempt to disembowel Markham, either. It was hard to tell which of us was most pleased about that.

We had a late supper together. Take it from me – egg and bacon sarnies go very well with a couple of margaritas.

'It's good to see you both looking better,' said Lady Amelia. She looked around the table. 'That's all of us back to normal then.'

Pennyroyal gave Markham and I a look that clearly implied the word normal would never cross his lips when describing either of us.

'And now it's time to discuss our future plans.'

Evans shifted and glanced at Smallhope. 'I don't want to, but I think I should go back to St Mary's.'

'They're up and running again,' said Markham. 'Guthrie told us.'

'But not out of the woods yet. And' – Evans looked at me – 'if you don't come back, I might have to cover for your absence. To the police.'

Smallhope nodded. 'Reluctantly – agreed. You can be our inside man. Contact us through Ian Guthrie if things go badly wrong. Pennyroyal and I will join Max and Markham in London.' She looked at us. 'We have one or two teeny-tiny things to do first and then we'll be with you.'

I didn't dare ask. For these two, teeny-tiny things could mean anything from afternoon tea at the Ritz to overthrowing a government.

'We'll be around,' she continued. 'You're not alone this time, Max. Full back-up. Contact will be through Mr Markham, but someone will be around at all times. Standard instruction – don't look for us.'

I nodded gratefully. Now that the time had come, I wasn't looking forward to returning to Insight at all. Not one little bit. Why do I do these things? What is wrong with me?

'An early night and an early start, I think,' Smallhope said, getting up from the table. 'We'll assemble here in eight hours. Goodnight, everyone.'

12

I hate jumping into the future. I'm an historian. It's the past that interests me – with the added bonus of knowing how everything is going to turn out. More or less, anyway. We know the Normans win at Hastings, Leonidas loses at Thermopylae, and the Crusaders plunder Constantinople – but even knowing the end result doesn't stop historians getting themselves into some serious trouble sometimes. Now imagine how much riskier it is to jump into an unknown future. Factor in not knowing what you're doing, a dark and sinister organisation with unknown aims, and my general tendency to drift in the direction of disaster, and you'll have an idea of my apprehension.

Still – too late for sensible thinking now. I was on my way back to Insight on what, if I was of a dramatic disposition, could be called a suicide mission to take them down.

Insight were the public face of History, a respectable and respected institution, benign and beneficent. Markham and I knew differently, however. We'd thwarted their wiles at Runnymede, Lincoln and with the Gunpowder Plot – unknown to them, we hoped – and were now, as Markham persisted in describing it, moving in for the kill.

Or possibly vice versa. Only time would tell. We landed in the dark and it was summer here. So that was two of Dr Stone's instructions ignored. According to him it was jumping from night to day, from summer to winter, backwards, forwards, sideways, then backwards again and so on, that had done me so much damage over the years. I'd promised to cut back and I'd made six – no, seven – jumps already in the last four weeks. If St Mary's went ahead with his plan to restrict people's jumps to twelve a year, then I

was going to be grounded by the end of February. Perhaps I could persuade them to class the outward and return jumps as one. That would help considerably. I sighed. I'd forgotten again – I didn't work for St Mary's any longer. I could jump wherever and whenever I pleased. Of course, that would probably kill me.

On the other hand, the chances were that Insight would finish me off long before things got really bad again, so I was probably worrying unnecessarily.

I sat with my eyes closed. There had been just the very faintest sensation – as of half of me catching up with the other half. It was gone in a moment. If I was sensible, I would regard it as a warning. I gave it another couple of seconds, just to be on the safe side, but no – everything else seemed stable. Time to get cracking.

I panned the cameras around – they weren't picking up any movement at all.

'It's ten past one in the morning,' I said. 'And a Sunday night – well, Monday morning – so if we meet anyone, we're on our way back from a stonking party and a little the worse for wear.'

'Good thought,' Markham said. 'And if anyone gives us any trouble, you can just vomit over them. You're good at that.'

'Are you going to keep bringing that up?'

'Yep – just like you. Ready?'

We opened the door and peered out. London is never silent, of course, but I reckoned this was about as quiet as it would ever get. No stars overhead – just the usual orange glow in the sky. A slight wind lifted my hair. We stood for several moments but nothing happened.

'Here goes,' murmured Markham.

We'd landed in the rather grotty garden at the back of our block of flats. There was no access to the flats from this side so we had to scramble over the rough ground and through the thistles. The sound of us crunching our way over all the broken glass seemed very loud in the night air. If anyone

opened their windows to find out what the hell we thought we were playing at, we'd be hard put to think of a credible excuse.

The street was deserted. As far as we could see, our arrival had attracted no interest whatsoever, but just in case there was someone out there, I supported an artistically staggering Markham – who was definitely a lot heavier than the last time I'd done this. I asked if he'd put on weight. He accused me of getting soft in my old age. I threatened to drop him in the gutter. He said I'd already done that in London 1605 – and thus engrossed in amicable discussion, we approached our depressing block of flats.

The area in which we lived was lovely – full of sensitively restored and repurposed houses of various periods, all with charming window boxes, tubs and roof gardens. We, however, rented a flat in a brick shoebox that celebrated all the worst of late 20th-century architecture. And, trust me, when it comes to the worst of late 20th-century architecture, there was a lot to celebrate.

We let ourselves in and crept up the stairs to the second floor. The building was silent and still. Nothing seemed to have changed.

Markham made me wait while he examined our front door for any signs of illegal entry. We both put our ears to the door and listened carefully. Finally, he drew back, whispering, 'Go and wait in the stairwell.'

I nipped through while he opened our front door and disappeared inside. Sensing no movement, the internal hall light switched itself off and I sat on the stairs in the dark, listening, waiting and fretting.

After what seemed a very long time, he stuck his head out of the door, saying quietly, 'All clear. You can come in now.'

Our flat was exactly as we'd left it. Sparsely furnished, dingy, and still smelling slightly of Markham's last lasagne. With everything that had happened to us in the last more than six months, it was very hard to believe we'd only been away from here for the weekend.

'It's Monday morning,' said Markham, opaquing the windows and switching on the light. 'You still going back to work later today?'

‘I think so. It’s funny, but now that I’m here, this seems more real than the stuff we did at Runnymede and Lincoln.’

‘No afterimages of the House of Lords and the infamous undercroft?’

‘No, none. Right as rain.’

‘In that case, I suggest we get our heads down. I’ll go with you tomorrow and talk you in.’

Talking-in is what we do when we’ve been away from somewhere for a long time and have to reorient ourselves to a new time and place. I nodded and we went to bed. The flat was supposedly two-bedroomed but one bedroom and one fairly large cupboard would be more accurate. Markham had generously donated the bedroom to me, the working girl, while he nested in the cupboard.

I think it would be fair to say I didn’t sleep much that night. I lay on my back in the dark – because electricity was a hell of a price and only to be used sparingly – and tried to get my mind around where I was and what I was doing here.

What would I be walking into at Insight? A trap? An ambush? Or – and this was my argument – a normal working day. Well, there was one easy way to establish that – a simple telephone call. Markham would phone first thing and ask for Bridget. If she was there, then we hadn’t killed her at Home Farm yet and my day could proceed normally. If she wasn’t there, then she was dead, I’d been discovered, and we needed to get out as quickly as possible.

Simples.

‘She’s in,’ Markham said, as I emerged from the bathroom the next morning.

It was only as he said it that I realised a good part of me had been hoping she wouldn’t be and we could both go home.

‘Jolly good,’ I said, with creditable bravado.

We made some toast to eat on the way and off we set.

‘OK,’ he said, striding out in the crisp, cool, really rather pleasant early morning air. That would disappear as the temperature soared but for now, very nice. ‘Let’s get you reoriented. What’s your name and backstory?’

‘Maxine Forrest. Employed as a temporary filing clerk for Insight, the historical research people in Great Russell Street. I’ve been there for . . . around three or four months now.’

‘Why a filing clerk?’

‘Because it gives me access nearly everywhere.’

‘Who are your colleagues?’

‘I work for Bridget Lafferty, who’s very pleasant despite the fact she keeps trying to kill me. My colleague is Eddie Middleditch, who may or may not wear the world’s worst toupee.’

‘Why are you there?’

‘To investigate. We were first aware of something wrong in London 1893. Then Insight came after us at Home Farm and Bridget died in the attack. Which is really ironic because if they hadn’t done that, then they wouldn’t have brought themselves to our attention. But because they and we are doing things in a slightly different order, for them, that hasn’t happened yet.’

‘OK,’ Markham said. ‘What’s your Insight password and login?’

Shit. I had to think. I’m not good at this sort of thing and my screens are usually covered in a thicket of yellow stickies with details of all my passwords. Insight, however, were very security-conscious. An organisation that makes you clear your desk every evening and hand the key to your boss was never going to look kindly on me plastering my desk with login details, so I’d had to commit them to memory and that had been a long time ago. I frowned at my feet.

‘Mforrest@insight.co.eng.’

‘Password?’

‘milkchocolaterules!1483. No spaces. Lower case.’

He grinned. ‘Tell me about your last working day.’

I thought back to what had been last Friday. ‘Got my key from Bridget, sat at my desk, logged on, downloaded my file-request list, retrieved the files from the Cave, distributed them around the building. Raced around like a maniac because

a) I was terrified they’d discover who I was and shoot me, and
b) I wanted to finish early so we could get off and thwart their wiles at Runnymede.

And then, of course, Lincoln and Westminster.’

‘How did you leave things at Insight?’

‘Well, as far as I know, no one suspected I was anything other than what they thought.’

‘How will you account for your hair?’

Nurse Fortunata had shaved my head at St Mary’s for what she was still claiming were very good reasons. True, I had a tiny amount of regrowth – or tufts, as Markham called them – but it was nowhere near the amount of hair I’d had when I’d left Insight on Friday, two days ago. Or well over six months ago, depending on your point of view.

‘I have two possible explanations. I told them I was going to a party – I could say things got a little out of hand and I did it for a dare. Or that you tried to henna my hair and there was a terrible accident.’

‘Why me?’

‘I’ve already established you as my hairdresser.’

‘Really?’ he said.

‘*Unpaid* hairdresser.’

‘Aw.’ He bit into his toast. ‘Did you have anything special planned for today?’

‘No, as far as I know it will be just a normal day. File retrieval and distribution. Walking endless corridors. Climbing endless stairs. Covering myself in dust in the Cave.’

‘Ah – the glamour of filing.’

‘And you? Your day?’

‘Actually, I thought I’d hang around. Just in case. I’m not saying anything will go wrong, but let’s face it, your boss has twice tried to kill you. I know that’s not unusual for you – rumour has it Dr Bairstow’s had to restrain himself on a significant number of occasions – but I’ll stay close by in case anything kicks off.’

I shook my head. ‘You’ve established Bridget is already there. She’s not dead. Therefore, her attack on Home Farm hasn’t happened yet. Therefore, they still don’t know who I am.’

‘Or you’re walking into a trap.’

‘Or I’m walking into a trap. Exciting, isn’t it?’

‘There is something so wrong with you.’

I grinned. ‘Pot . . . Kettle . . .’

‘Walkway,’ he said, inserting his citizen’s ID card.

We stepped on to the energy-generating walkway and began to contribute to the National Grid, which shut us both up because you need to stride out for that.

Ten hard-walking minutes later we were approaching Insight.

‘Got your head back in the game?’ enquired Markham.

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘Got your personal alarm?’

I flourished my backpack, hanging off one shoulder. ‘Yes.’

‘Well, put it in your pocket now before you forget. You can’t take your bag downstairs with you, remember.’

‘Are you sure you’ll hear it? If you’re outside, I mean.’

‘I thought I’d give you half an hour or so to get yourself into trouble and then I’d visit their public library to “do a little research”. If you activate your alarm, I’ll hear it. Actually, I suspect everyone in the southern counties will hear it.’

‘You can’t stay there all day.’

‘No, but I’ll be around, don’t worry. Look – if it appears things might head south – just leave. Don’t stop to pick up your personal belongings – just get yourself out of the door. I’ll pick you up either on the way out or just outside.’

I nodded, suddenly dry-mouthed. Why hadn’t I stayed safely at St Mary’s, pottering around the Library, enjoying crumpets with Dr Dowson? Why was I doing this?

Markham stopped. Insight were directly opposite us.

A seriously impressive building for the ultra-respectable historical research organisation known worldwide as Insight. Six storeys high – not counting the basement where I worked – the frontage was a complicated arrangement of windows, arches and those classy wrought-iron balconies, with the whole thing topped off by a dome containing a clock. Flanked by a couple of stone lions, steps led up to the imposing double front doors – now wide open to welcome visitors.

I don’t know why I was so surprised to find everything unchanged since I last saw it. It had only been a weekend, after all.

We halted and let the constant stream of pedestrians and cyclists find their way around us.

‘Max . . .’

‘I’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘You called them. Bridget’s there. It’s just a normal working day. Everything’s fine.’

He put his hands in his pockets and stared at his feet. ‘Shit, Max . . .’

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘if it all goes tits up and you can’t get me out, then recognise that. Leave. Save yourself. It won’t do anyone any good if we both go down.’

Still not looking at me, he nodded.

‘OK – I’m off to earn an honest crust. Shall we eat out tonight?’

‘Yeah, OK. My treat.’

‘Well, there’s an incentive to survive the day. See you later.’

I weaved my way through all the other workers, climbed the steps to

Insight and pushed my way through the inner doors straight into the usual chaos of people milling around, getting themselves sorted for the day. Everything seemed absolutely normal.

I joined the queue and had my bag checked, but was spared the random wanding and made my way to the staffroom. Leaving my backpack in my locker, I changed my shoes, took a breath, squared my shoulders, and walked down the stairs to the basement. To the Cave – and all its glory.

As a filing clerk, my desk was next to the filing system, obviously. And, as is often the case, the filing system was in the basement. The Cave, as it was known. The Cheddar Gorge of filing. Although hot, dusty, labyrinthine and bewildering might be a better description. Oh – and massive, of course. Like Smallhope and Pennyroyal, Insight really, really liked paper. A tip from the future, people – forget the paperless office. It never happens. Along with efficient public services, quality public transport and good government.

The only access was through a keypadded door and the only people allowed in there were me, Eddie and Bridget, although many had tried. Like all lowly minions, I thoroughly enjoyed exercising the tiny amount of power allowed to me and cheerfully refused admittance to anyone who wasn't one of us three, no matter what their grade. Sadly, no one yet had tried to bribe me, so my integrity remained untested.

Bridget, my boss, and Eddie Middleditch – supposed colleague but suspected security guard – were already at their desks. Bridget had one of those glassed-in offices from which she could see everything. I tapped on her door. 'Morning.'

Bridget Lafferty was the perfect employer. Apart from her attempts to kill me, she was the best boss I ever had. She was a little taller than me – although so is everyone – with very blue eyes. She was slim and always immaculate in her well-cut shirt and trousers. Oh, and she had proper hair. Dark and glossy, and cut in one of those styles that only looks good if you never have a hair out of place. Guess who never had a hair out of place.

And, as if all that wasn't enough, although she was a member of the Board, and Head of Admin, she didn't have her office on the top floor like all the other senior managers, but slummed it down here with the minions. The impression given was that of a democratic boss, but I had a strong suspicion the door in her office led to areas not normally accessed by the uninitiated. I was going to have to get in there one day but there were never any opportunities. If Bridget wasn't in her office – which was quite often – then Eddie Middleditch was slumped at his desk not doing any work. I was pretty sure Eddie was the reserve gatekeeper. Actually, when you thought about it, none of the three of us were what we seemed.

Bridget looked up and recoiled. 'Dear God, Maxine, I know your hair was . . . unusual . . . before, but this is . . .' She stopped. I suspected words had failed her. A common occurrence in people I work for.

'Yeah.' I tried to look sheepish. 'There was a party . . .' and tailed away so she could use her imagination.

She grinned. 'I've said this before – can I have your life?'

'Only if you adopt my hairstyle.'

She patted her own sleek, dark bob. Rather defensively, I thought. 'But what happened?'

'It was for charity,' I said, as if that would make things any better.

'I'll pay you double to glue it back on again.'

I fished in my pocket. 'Anticipating the shock and awe, I brought a headscarf – just in case I frightened the more timid among us.'

'Actually, that might not be a bad idea.' She passed me my key, and just as I was about to turn away, she said casually, 'Do you have anything special planned for today?'

My heart stopped. I pretended to think. 'Um . . . no, I don't think so.'

'We need to have a chat sometime. About eleven good for you?'

'I'll check my diary – see if I have a window.'

She snorted. 'And now you're just showing off.'

'Any clues what it's about?' I said, as if she was likely to say something

along the lines of *Yeah – we've discovered you're not who you say you are and we suspect you're the person who's been screwing up our plans for world domination and we're going to shoot you and bury your body in one of the more obscure corners of our massive filing system.*

I took a chance. 'You're not going to sack me, are you?'

She looked quite taken aback. 'What? No.'

'Or shoot me? Because I have had bosses who've threatened to do that.'

'No. Well, not today, anyway. I might shoot you tomorrow.'

'I'll check my diary for tomorrow,' I said. 'See if I have a window and pencil you in.'

She laughed. 'Go and do some work before I get ideas.'

I'll say it again – she was easily the best boss I'd ever had.

I made my way limply to my desk, put on my specs, fired up my data table and downloaded my first file list.

At five to eleven, I got up and went to the vending machine for a cup of coffee. In the event of an emergency, I could use it to fight my way to freedom. I wondered where Markham was. I couldn't hear any shouting so presumably he wasn't in the building. On the other hand, I was down in the bowels – anything could be happening up there and I wouldn't know a thing about it. I got a coffee for Bridget as well because bribery often works. Ask any politician.

Bridget looked up as I appeared in the doorway. 'Is one of those for me?'

'I want you to regard it as a bribe.'

'Happy to do so. Close the door.'

Shit. Bridget's office was soundproof. No one would hear the shot . . .

I closed the door with my foot, plonked the coffees on her desk, felt in my pocket for the reassurance of my personal alarm and sat down.

She opened the batting. 'I've jumped the gun a little bit here, Maxine. You're not actually due your six-month appraisal yet but I thought now would be a good time for us to have a chat.'

‘OK,’ I said cautiously, sipping my coffee, wondering if she could actually hear my heart beating from where she was sitting behind her desk.

‘I know, from your interview, that you don’t want a regular job. That you like to take off and travel whenever you want. That you don’t like commitment or being tied down. But . . .’ She looked directly at me. ‘We both know you are capable of so much more than this.’ She gestured at the Cave outside. ‘Have you ever considered that the reason for your wanderlust is because you don’t have a satisfying job? That you’re bored? That you travel to get the enjoyment and stimulation you’re not getting from your work? In other words, Maxine, you’re in a vicious circle – boredom leads to travel leads to having to take a dead-end job which leads back to boredom again.’

‘Well,’ I said in genuine surprise, because she’d obviously given this some thought. ‘No. I hadn’t thought that at all. I rather like the lack of responsibility. Being able to take off as I please. I should perhaps tell you I don’t do discipline well. Or even at all.’

‘What about self-discipline? If you were given a task, a target, and told to find your own path to achieve that end, would you do it?’

‘If it were something I wanted to do, then yes, I probably would.’

‘To a deadline?’

‘Honestly? I have a bit of a problem with deadlines.’

Bridget sat back and smiled. ‘Let me guess. Given a deadline of, say, three months, you bust a gut to get the work done in six weeks. Seriously, Maxine, you have underachieving overachiever written all over you.’

I had to laugh.

She clasped her hands on her desk, suddenly serious. ‘I’d like to give you something a little more interesting than usual. A piece of research – just to see what you make of it.’

‘What sort of research?’

‘We have a thing here at Insight, every now and then. A little competition. Anyone who wants to is invited to contribute a piece of research on the time

period in which they'd like to live and why. I want you to have a go, Maxine. It's only a bit of fun but there is a small prize.'

'Why me?'

'You've studied History. You have the qualifications. You must have thought, over the years, what period you'd like to live in if you couldn't live now.'

'Ah,' I said, relaxing a little. '*That* question.'

'Well, I know I've asked myself the same thing. Several times. Especially when things are going badly here.'

'Really? And your answer?'

'You tell me yours first.'

I finished my coffee and set down the cup. 'My speciality is Ancient History but I think Ancient History is somewhere you would go for a holiday; you wouldn't want to live there. All that slavery, famine, disease, warfare. All those bad-tempered gods – not that there's such a thing as a good-tempered god. And they definitely weren't big on women's rights. And no hot water, no dentistry, not much medicine – if your appendix kicks off, it'll kill you. And no chocolate.'

Bridget nodded encouragingly so I forged on because who hasn't asked themselves this question at one time or another?

'Not the Middle Ages either, for the same reasons. Plus, there was all that religion kicking about, when they tended to sling women on bonfires for the good of their soul. And that would happen to me, because I wouldn't be able to keep my mouth shut.'

I stared at the wall and frowned. 'Nor the 19th century. Women went backwards under Victoria and I'm not a big fan of corsets – well, only under certain circumstances, which we needn't discuss here. I think . . . if I had to choose somewhere to live permanently rather than just visit . . . then I'd go for some time shortly after World War One. The world is in chaos. Hundreds of thousands of displaced people everywhere. There isn't much in the way of official paperwork around that time and it would be easy enough

to say it had all been lost. Fitting in wouldn't be too hard – the social mores weren't that different from now. From around 1920 onwards, women worked, drove cars, became doctors, and a lot of the best writers were women, so earning a living wouldn't necessarily be too much of a problem. Being independently wealthy would probably be best, although then I'd have boredom to contend with.'

'And where would you settle?'

'I wouldn't want language to be a problem, so in this country, I think. Or America possibly. I could probably survive the Depression and I'd be safely dead before they started to turn on themselves. Or Canada, perhaps – I do speak French. Or Australia . . .' I tailed off.

'If I asked you to write all that up and enter the competition, would you?'

'Yes, but don't we have people upstairs who do this sort of thing for a living? Hundreds of them, all clamouring for obscure files every moment of the day.'

'We do – and a load of them will be working on their essays even as we speak – but I want to see how you compare.'

'Why?'

She shifted the stuff around on her desk. 'Because I think you'd do it well.'

I narrowed my eyes at her.

'Oh, all right. I'm sick of other departments pissing me off. I want to beat them at their own game. Imagine all those professional historians being outdone by a filing clerk. We could rub their noses in it afterwards. Forever.'

I laughed. 'You should have led with that. I'm definitely your man. Woman. When do you want it?'

'Is Friday too soon?'

I grinned my underachieving overachiever grin at her. 'You can have it by Wednesday, if you like.' I had a sudden thought. 'What about all my usual stuff?'

‘Eddie will just have to do some work for a change. It won’t kill him. Shunt all your stuff on to his desk. I’ll have a word with him.’ Bridget picked up a file and said briskly, ‘By close of play Wednesday then, please, Maxine.’

I nodded and returned to my desk on the Wobbly Legs of Relief. And triumph.

Because I had an idea I was beginning to get somewhere.

Right – this was important and I needed to do a good job.

I sat down, made a list of everything I thought I'd need to do the assignment justice and disappeared into the Cave to get all the files. When I came out, Eddie was just leaving Bridget's office with a face of thunder. Ha ha ha . . .

I didn't waste any time. Activating my data table, I shunted everything over to Eddie as instructed. I could hear his computer pinging away as each file list thudded into his inbox. I didn't dare look at him. On the plus side, he was definitely going to have to leave his desk, go into the Cave to collect his files and then, having done that, he would have to distribute them around the building. And collect up the old ones as well. He'd be gone for at least half an hour each time – probably longer. I could take the opportunity to have a bit of a root through his desk, as he regularly did to mine – looking for the scissors, my arse! – and if Bridget disappeared too, then there might be an opportunity to check out the other door in her office.

Alas – it was not to be. I don't know if it was coincidence or regulations but one of them was always present. I was more convinced than ever that Eddie was some kind of heavily disguised security person. No one could possibly get away with doing as little work as he did, despite everything Bridget had said about the difficulty of sacking him. In the end I was forced to abandon any idea of penetrating Insight's dark secrets and start work on my new project.

There was no such thing as overtime at Insight. You finished at five on the dot when an army of office cleaners moved in, and by six thirty the building

was empty. I suspected that was when the real business of Insight began.

As part of my cunning plan to see what happened in the building after knocking-off time, I asked Bridget if I could stay late. She thought for a moment and then said yes, but only for an hour and only because she was staying late, too.

And then she perched on the corner of my desk and said, 'Fancy a drink afterwards?'

Fortunately, I was searching for something in a drawer when she asked so it was easy to pause for a second or so before answering. I had to get this exactly right.

I straightened up. 'Oh, I'm sorry – I'm meeting my roomie for a meal tonight and it's his treat which doesn't happen often.' I smiled. 'But you're welcome to join us if you want. He's a bit odd but he does know how to behave himself in polite society.'

She laughed and got up. 'No, it's OK. Do you have a free evening this week?'

I wondered if I was blushing. A swift tactical blush might be useful at this point.

For those of you who've forgotten – during the attack on Home Farm, just before Bridget and I fell down the stairs to her death, she'd shouted, '*You bitch – I could have loved you.*' Which, I admit, had certainly given me something to think about, even though I was fighting for my life at the time. It's a good job women can multitask.

Anyway, once or twice we'd done the ladies who lunch thing – which pissed off Eddie no end – and I'd definitely had the feeling that if I gave a subtle sign . . . I hadn't, though, because:

a. I'm a married woman.
b. My life is complicated enough.
3. Any attempt by me to give any sort of subtle sign would almost

certainly end in confusion and humiliation. Mine, that is.

d. And most importantly:

e. We could never have that open, honest relationship so beloved of romance writers everywhere, because sooner or later the bloody woman would try to kill me.

So I'd been polite and friendly, but at some point I would have to decide – if push came to shove, how far was I prepared to take whatever this was between me and Bridget? It could be a very useful shortcut to finding out what I wanted to know. Even so . . . It was a long time since I'd been available. And I'd never been that good at flirting even before . . .

I surfaced to find her looking at me.

I blinked. 'Sorry – I've forgotten the question.'

Bridget rolled her eyes. 'We should go out for a drink sometime. After work.'

I nodded. 'Yeah – that would be good.'

She nodded and walked away.

I went up to the staffroom, pulled out my com and left a message for Markham. *Home a little later tonight. Don't forget we're eating out. Your treat. It's Monday so water the orchid.*

I sat at my desk with files spread around me, spinning everything out for as long as I could, just in case any sort of opportunity arose for me to get into Bridget's office, but she just sat, head down, working away, and in the end, I gave up. I locked my desk, handed my key to Bridget who absently wished me goodnight, and went home.

Once inside our flat I kicked off my shoes and threw myself on the sofa.

Markham placed a mug of illegal tea in front of me. 'Good day at the office, dear?'

'Actually,' I said. 'Not bad at all.'

'I gather no one shot you.'

‘Far from it. There have been developments.’ I took a swig of my even--more-than-usually-welcome tea. ‘I’ve just been fed a right load of old codswallop about an inter-departmental competition. Bridget has asked me to submit my thoughts on the best time period in which to live and why. Given Insight’s lucrative sideline in settling criminals in different timelines . . .’

Markham frowned and stared into the middle distance, saying, ‘That’s interesting, very interesting.’

‘I thought you’d say that.’

‘Almost too good to be true, in fact.’

‘That was my first thought, but I’ve checked it out and it’s definitely a legitimate thing. I spent my lunch hour talking to one or two people who entered the competition last year. Interestingly, it’s generally seen as a route to accelerated promotion.’

‘I thought your cover was unambitious drone.’

‘Well, they seem to have seen straight through that.’

‘It’s not very subtle, though, is it?’ He put on a twee little voice. ‘*Oh, if you could live in any time, which would you choose?* Could they make it any more obvious?’

‘I suspect that to most people it’s just a bit of fun.’

‘Historians have the strangest ideas of fun.’

‘It’s typical of Insight, though, isn’t it? Hiding their intentions in plain sight.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Only we know they’re looking for someone daft enough to defy the law – to say nothing of the Time Police – and move dangerous criminals up and down the timeline.’

‘Hey,’ I said.

‘Max, we both know what this is. Remember those two guys we took down in 1893 – the ones who came to kill everyone in Swan Court? By the sort of irony the universe finds funny, you could be on the shortlist to replace them. What sort of evil, twisted mind could dream up a coincidence

like that?'

Another word of explanation – there's a lot of words of explanation in this story because all our chickens seemed to be coming home to roost at the same time. Rat-face and Smuggy, the two guys we arrested in 1893, were members of Insight, and part of Insight's less-well-known agenda is assisting people to live in the past. Illegally, of course. People who, for various criminal reasons, needed to make themselves scarce. Insight will find them a property, prep them for their new life and oversee the move. All for a massive fee, of course.

The second part of the operation – and unknown to their customers – consists of Insight giving said customers a few months to settle in and drop their guard, and then sending the boys round to take them out, dispose of the bodies, strip the house of anything valuable their clients might have acquired, empty their bank accounts and then, a short time later, the next lot of potential residents turn up and it all happens again.

In an idle moment, Markham and I had calculated what sort of annual income we thought this would bring Insight and been somewhat staggered by the number of noughts involved.

And these were only the activities we knew about. Far from their publicly stated aim of championing History to the world, for them, the past was there only to be plundered or manipulated. Basically, these people were the exact opposite of St Mary's – an anti-St Mary's, if you like.

All this was on top of their normal, highly publicised, above-board activities – promoting the teaching of History at all levels, providing bursaries and grants for students, maintaining a hardship fund, advising the government and education authorities on the curriculum and suchlike. All very laudable. Such a pity they'd allowed themselves to be tempted to the dark side.

For whose benefit Insight were acting, whether governments, big business or private individuals, we – Markham, Smallhope, Pennyroyal and I – had no idea but hoped to find out. And soon, because messing with History is a

very dodgy business. Try assassinating Hitler and see what happens. You'd be deader than a very dead thing long before you could get anywhere near him. History protects itself. And if for some reason History falls down on the job, then the Time Police have an entire department focused on keeping History on the straight and narrow. They're called Hitler's Little Helpers because that's who they seem to spend most of their time and resources protecting. I probably don't need to say this, but they're all as fruity as nutcakes – even for the Time Police. On the other hand, people who think assassination will solve all their problems aren't usually the sharpest knives in the sandwich, either.

So, as you can see, rather like matrimony, attempts to change History should not be undertaken lightly. Or even, if you're sensible – at all. And now it looked as if I might be offered the opportunity to join the insanity at Insight. Exciting, isn't it?

He took my mug off me for a refill. 'What did you say to Bridget?'

'Like a good little employee, I said, "Ooh, how exciting. Of course I'll do it." There's not much point in being here if I don't seize every opportunity, is there?'

'It'll be interesting to see what comes of it. Do you think they suspect you and this is a trap?'

'I've no idea. Perhaps this is a normal part of their recruitment process into this side of the business. I should imagine they mostly select internally. Every now and then they announce a perfectly above-board competition, weed out the ones they don't think are dark or devious enough for their purposes, and slowly bring the rest under their sinister umbrella.'

There was a bit of a thoughtful pause.

'How good are you going to make your entry?'

'As good as I can. No point, otherwise, is there?'

Markham sighed. 'Are you hungry? Chinese or Indian?'

'I fancy steak and kidney pudding at The Pear Tree. Don't forget your wallet.'

14

The next morning, I sat at my desk and had a bit of a think about my essay.

My gut feeling was that Insight didn't even recognise poor people, let alone do any business with them. They dealt with major criminals – people who, for many reasons, had made this world too hot to hold them and were not only pretty desperate to avoid the attentions of both the civilian and Time Police but were willing and able to pay big time for the 'special' services offered by Insight.

Such people would certainly want an easy and comfortable new life so I assumed my imaginary subject – a woman, because I guessed most of their clients would be men and this *was* supposed to be from my perspective – would be of independent means and slanted my entry accordingly. And I laid it all out formally – footnotes, file references, bibliography and so forth. I suspected no one would be interested but:

a) I couldn't help myself and

b) I wasn't supposed to know the purpose for which I was doing this, so I presented it as a report with shoulder headings and bullet points.

My chosen year was 1922 so I started with a brief history to that date – the aftermath of the Great War, Spanish Flu and so forth, all of which led nicely to the politics of the time. The Labour party had overtaken the Liberals and become the second biggest political party in Britain. For the Conservatives, this period saw the beginnings of the ruthless and secretive 1922 Committee. They used to call the Earl of Warwick the Kingmaker – he had nothing on the 1922 Committee. They didn't actually assassinate people –

not physically, anyway – but they've been credited with every other form of coercion down the centuries. Is credited the word I mean? Anyway . . . moving on to other events . . .

The civil war began in Ireland. The Royal Ulster Constabulary was founded. Dublin Castle was handed over to the Irish Provisional Government.

Politics led nicely into social conditions. The BBC was formed. And the Transport and General Workers Union.

Which led nicely into work, wages, the cost of living and money in general: guineas, pounds, shillings, pennies – not pence – ha'pennies, farthings and so forth. I also included details of the Married Women's Property Act, just in case anyone thought they'd try the old *managing your own money is far too difficult for women – let me do it for you while you brush your pretty hair* routine.

All that led nicely into housing and the differences between urban, suburban and rural living at this time, followed by the intricacies of domestic life and managing servants. I imagined a detached villa, standing in its own grounds, in a small market town such as Rushford. A big, comfortable house with large rooms and high ceilings. It might even have basic central heating. And tennis courts, croquet lawns and herbaceous borders. Servants were nowhere near as plentiful as in the Edwardian age so I allocated just a married couple and an indoor girl, with a gardener outside.

The lifestyle would be pleasant and certainly less formal than at the turn of the century. However, letters of introduction would still be required, of course, to show you were the right sort of person and worthy of being admitted to the appropriate social circle. You couldn't just rock up, unpack your suitcase and expect to be invited round to tea. There would be a formal visit from one of the more prominent ladies in the area. Cards would be exchanged. The visit would last for twenty minutes and refreshments would not be served – presumably no one wanted to commit themselves at this early stage – and then, after a suitable interval (because it didn't do to seem

overeager) the visit would be returned. This time, several other ladies would be present, and if everyone liked the look of everyone else then you'd be launched into whatever activities were currently fashionable.

Tennis was pretty popular. The king was about to open the centre court at Wimbledon. Men and women played – against each other! And it was a strenuous game – young gels running around being hot and breathless. In mixed company, too. How tongues must have wagged. And cinemas were popular. Silent films to begin with. And the comedies, of course. Unlikely heroes bumbling through a series of misfortunes to rescue the heroine. Who, for some reason, always seemed to spend most of the film tied to the railway line. Which is about the only near-death experience that's never happened to me, but give it time.

All this led nicely into women's expanding worlds. Because of the late war, for the first time in a long while, women outnumbered men. Women drove cars and the immensely popular Austin 7 was launched. On the other hand, it wasn't all good. An accident at an explosives factory killed nineteen employees – all girls aged between thirteen and fifteen.

History books say the first women were *allowed* to vote in 1918, but I always think that assumes who could vote and at what age was the prerogative of men in the first place. That prerogative had to be wrested from them. There was no *allowed* about it. Women *won* the vote, gentlemen, and don't you forget it.

Suddenly women were everywhere – called to the bar, becoming architects and doctors. Oxford University officially decided to award women their degrees although Cambridge lagged behind until 1948.

And then there were the flappers, of course – young women earning their own money, dancing, smoking, drinking, generally kicking up a storm – yep, we've never looked back.

I described the fashions of the time – formal suits for men, but sports jackets and separate trousers were becoming fashionable. For women – young women, anyway – hemlines and hair were short. Lipstick became

overwhelmingly popular. Plus close-fitting cloche hats to cover those shingled heads, instead of the massive, wide-brimmed, flower-laden hats their mothers and grandmothers had worn. And with hard-working jobs and a more active lifestyle, women began to wear trousers. *In public*. I'm not sure the world has ever recovered.

And because I can't help myself, I included a sneak preview of the next twenty years, with some helpful hints on how a woman should position herself successfully through the Depression, and again when the next world war would sweep down upon the country.

I wrote it all from the female point of view – because life for middle-class men was pretty much the same in any century. I described the lot of an unmarried or widowed woman because there was such a huge shortage of marriageable men after the war. I assumed my subject enjoyed independent means but possibly indulged in voluntary work – for social as well as humanitarian reasons. It was important to remember the country – Europe, everyone – was still recovering from the Great War. And the Spanish Flu epidemic. Millions of lives had been lost in both events. People already struggling to pick up the pieces after the war had been devastated all over again when the epidemic hit. As had happened in the 14th century after the Black Death had decimated the population, and the peasants had woken up to find the advantage suddenly lay with them, something similar was happening in the twenties. The whole decade was a time of rapid change.

Leonard Woolley began the excavation of Ur. Lucky devil.

Carter and Carnarvon discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun. I wouldn't mind being around for that. Hmm . . .

Edith Thompson and Frederick Bywaters were both found guilty of the murder of Thompson's husband, Percy, and were sentenced to death by hanging.

I concluded by pointing out that these were also times of massive advances in science and technology – for instance, commercial airlines were about to (pardon the pun) take off – all of which, with the advantage

of hindsight, full financial advantage could be taken. I didn't want to gild the lily so I left it at that. Just a throwaway remark.

I proofread and spell-checked, printed it out, stapled it all together, made sure my name was on every sheet, crossed my fingers, and handed it in to Bridget on Wednesday afternoon. She took it without comment. I asked how many other people had taken part and she said vaguely that she didn't know. I nodded and, with some regret, returned to the dusty life of a filing clerk.

I heard nothing for ages. Days passed and no one at Insight contacted me to say how good or bad my entry had been, or even whether it had been rejected out of hand. Perhaps they were so gobsmacked after reading it – for all the right reasons, of course – that they were stuck for words. The weeks wore on and after a while I began to travel the Dark Paths of Panic.

'Relax,' said Markham, infuriatingly calm. 'Obviously it was so bad they just threw it in the bin and forgot to tell you. Better luck next time.'

'Thank you. That's very reassuring.'

'All right – they were so blown away by your brilliance they're arranging something really special for you.'

Actually, I didn't find that particularly reassuring, either.

There was nothing I could do but keep working, keep quiet and definitely keep my head down. Life continued as normal – me racing around like a madwoman, festooned with files, completely failing to penetrate Insight in any way, and Eddie playing games on his computer. Bridget and I lunched occasionally and on no occasion did I elicit anything useful from her. It was hard not to feel discouraged.

Summer wore on. The days were long, hot and dusty. Everyone began to wilt. The aircon came on for the whole building except for those toiling in the supposedly temperature-controlled basement. The dust got worse. Well, no, it probably didn't – the place was dusty all the time – but the heat made it seem worse. I battled on but it wasn't pleasant.

One day, emerging from the Cave with the usual armful of files, I had a fit of uncontrolled sneezing. I've always had bolshy sinuses and today they'd

had enough. The force of my sneezing sent me ricocheting around the room like a demented snooker ball and eventually the inevitable happened and my nose exploded. I always said it would one day.

Bridget came racing out of her office with the first-aid kit and Eddie pushed off. Perhaps the sight of so much blood made him queasy. It wasn't doing me a lot of good, either.

'For God's sake,' said Bridget. 'Hold this to your nose, Maxine. Don't tilt your head back unless you want to drown in your own blood.'

She handed over a thick wad of gauze and rummaged for more. I continued to gush. And not in a fan-girl way.

Five minutes later, miraculously, the big air vents came on. The temperature dropped almost immediately.

I said, 'Dak you.'

'Not me,' said Bridget. 'I didn't do a thing. I suspect Eddie's off menacing Maintenance.'

'Good for him.' I surveyed my blood-soaked self. 'I suspect a cup of tea and a biscuit isn't going to be enough.'

'A cup of tea?' said Bridget, laughing. 'What world are you from?'

Yes – it's that easy to give the whole game away.

'The 20th century,' I said, trying to sound calm because a quick getaway was out of the question. 'It was the traditional reward for donating a pint of blood.' I applied yet more gauze. 'I've lost several armfuls this afternoon. I demand double tea and biscuits. Nothing less will do.'

'How about coffee and a bar of chocolate and I take you home?'

'I'm fine,' I said bravely. 'Absolutely fine.'

'Maxine, have you seen yourself?'

I glanced down again. I honestly looked like one of those chainsaw massacre films. And I hadn't been stingy about distributing my bodily fluids around the place. Me, the chair, the floor, even a bit on Bridget. There was, literally, blood everywhere.

'I've been short-listed for Department Head of the Year again,' Bridget

said. ‘But not if you stagger round the building looking like that. Home.’

She took me home in an Insight vehicle – the one used by Board members – which I thought was very kind of them, even though they insisted on covering the seat before letting me in. Bridget drove me. I sat beside her, my nose encased in the northern hemisphere’s entire supply of gauze and with huge, bloody, cotton-wool tats hanging from each nostril. It took a while – longer than walking – because not all streets were open to vehicular traffic.

I knew she’d want to come in, so I didn’t bother arguing. I could only cross my fingers that Markham wasn’t doing anything unseemly as we walked through the front door. My first choice was that he wouldn’t be there at all so obviously – he was.

He was hoovering our little lounge and wearing one of those tiny frilly housewife mini-pinnies with pink flowers all over it.

And nothing else.

Dear God – I’d experienced World Naked Gardening Day and now there was this.

We stared at each other in mutual horror, each uttering the immortal ‘What the hell’s going on?’ simultaneously.

Bridget stared at the floor, her shoulders shaking.

Markham switched off the hoover. The apron remained in situ for which, I think, everyone was grateful. ‘Max . . . ine . . . what happened?’

He glared accusingly at Bridget, who was still laughing.

She pulled herself together, saying, ‘Maxine, I’ve asked politely and now I’m demanding it. I want your life.’

‘It’s very hot,’ said Markham huffily. ‘And these old places don’t hoover themselves, you know. Don’t sit down, Maxine – into the bathroom with you.’

‘I’ll leave her with you,’ said Bridget. She turned to me. ‘Don’t come in tomorrow if you don’t feel up to it. Just give me a call.’

‘Can I offer you any refreshment?’ enquired Markham, the pinny-clad

perfect hostess.

She cast a glance at his skinny, aproned glory. '*No*,' and continued more calmly, 'thank you, but no. I should be getting back. With luck, Eddie will have finished watching Maintenance wash away the blood and we can all crack on with our day.'

'I'm so sorry,' I said.

'Not your fault. And thank you for making such a compelling argument for having the vents on in the basement.'

'A gallon of blood is worth a thousand written requests,' I said. 'But I think I'd like a bit of a lie-down.'

'I'll see you out,' volunteered Markham, gesturing at the door and moving towards her.

Bridget stepped back. '*No*. I mean, I can find the way, thank you. Nice to . . . um . . . see you again, Mr Ham. Get better soon, Maxine.'

She slammed the front door behind her.

Markham and I looked at each other. The words *look at the state of you* were mutually unspoken.

Eventually I said, 'What the hell?'

'Hang on a minute.'

He turned and disappeared into the kitchen, possibly forgetting his pinny didn't go all the way around the back – I swear I actually heard my eyeballs scream – and emerged with some kind of scanner which he ran over me and then around the little room. Nothing beeped.

'Are you checking for bugs?'

He nodded. 'Just in case she seized the opportunity to plant something. All clear, I think.'

'Could you . . . um . . .'

I gestured at his workwear.

'Oh, yeah. Just let me get this bloody thing off, will you?'

He shot back into the kitchen before I could decide whether to faint through blood loss or pinny-removal shock.

I shouted through the door, ‘What was that all about?’

‘You were lucky. I thought I’d do a spot of shopping. I was halfway down the front stairs when I saw you pull up. I guessed she’d want a good look round. You know – putting you to bed and making you a drink. She’d have been all over this place. We couldn’t have that, so I improvised.’

‘*Naked hoovering?*’

‘I was wearing a pinny,’ he said defensively.

‘How does that make it any better?’

‘I wasn’t trying to make it better . . .’

‘In that case – good job.’

‘. . . I was trying to get rid of her. I’m telling you she was here to check us out.’

I gave my nose an experimental poke. It hurt like hell so I wouldn’t be doing that again. ‘She couldn’t know I’d have a nose bleed.’

‘No, because unlike you, she’s never taken advantage of an unexpected opportunity and twisted events to her advantage, has she? Here.’

He made his way back into the living room and thrust a mug of tea at me. ‘And sit down.’

‘I’m covered in blood.’

He draped the mini-pinny over the sofa and I sat on that.

Nervous readers should be reassured that he was, by now, fully clothed.

I sipped the tea. It tasted the way tea always does when it’s illegal, you’ve suffered massive blood loss, been confronted by a naked hooverer, and there are two slices of lemon and a hundred sugars in it. The tea – not the hooverer.

I closed my eyes. ‘Oh God, that’s good.’

Markham looked at my blood-soaked front. ‘Have you been cooking again?’

Well, didn’t he sound just like Leon?

Alternately sipping and talking, I explained the morning’s events and he shook his head. ‘I had no idea the world of filing was so exciting.’

‘It is the way I do it.’

‘Go and have a shower. Chuck your clothes outside the door and I’ll see if I can save them. It’s going to be a bugger to get all that blood out. Don’t lock the door in case you faint. I’ll get you another mug of lemon-flavoured syrup to take in with you.’

I spent the rest of the day on the sofa, in my pyjamas, with my feet up and making substantial inroads into our illegal stash of tea.

Nor did I go into work the next day. Frankly, I just didn’t fancy the forty--minute walk there, racing around all day, and then the forty-minute walk home. And it was so bloody hot. So I stayed on the sofa. It was nice. Markham and I chatted – avoiding any contentious subjects – drank tea and ate our own bodyweight in toast.

In the evening, when it was cooler, we dropped in at The Pear Tree. This was a typical London corner pub, barely visible beneath a multitude of colourful hanging baskets and window boxes. I’m sure I’ve read somewhere that hanging baskets and window boxes are the direct descendants of the bushes legally required to be planted outside pubs and inns in olden times.

We sat outside for a while, watching hot people struggle home from work, and then went inside because it was Quiz Night. We came last by a mile – as you would expect from two people living outside their own time, especially if, as Markham said, one of those two people didn’t have much of a clue what was happening in her own time, either.

However, there was chicken in the basket. Markham had a Guinness while I went with that well-known cure for blood loss – a couple of Black Rats. Neither the food nor drink improved our performance any, but after a while we didn’t care.

And then, because I couldn’t put it off any longer – the next day I went back to work.

Where all sorts of shit was waiting for me.

I went to get my key from Bridget.

'Hey,' she said, looking up. 'How are you?'

'Fine,' I said. 'We went down The Pear Tree last night, came last in the quiz and there was cider. The sick day was welcome, though. Thanks for that.'

I held out my hand for my key and she didn't hand it over.

Somewhere in the dead zone of my brain, a couple of warning neurones fired.

'Don't start work just yet. The Board want to see you.'

I tried not to sound too wary. 'Do we know why?'

'I do. You don't. Come on.'

I followed on behind. This was not good. The Board were housed on the top floor. About as far away from the front doors as was physically possible. And with hundreds of people between the doors and me.

'Can I have a moment to tidy myself? I've just walked to work.'

I think I had some idea of communicating with Markham. I'd have to get to the staffroom to do that because we weren't allowed electronic devices in the main part of the building – no contact with the outside world. Was this the reason why?

'You look fine. Compared with the other day, you look wonderful.'

'You're never going to let that go, are you?'

She smirked. 'What do you think?'

Of course, this would be the one day of the year when the lifts were working, wouldn't it? We stepped in and were propelled to the top floor in mere seconds. I stepped out and looked warily around. I'd been here once before, but this was Board territory.

An immaculately turned-out receptionist sat behind the desk.

'Ms Lafferty?'

'Robert. We have an appointment.'

He peered at his screen. 'You do indeed. Boardroom One.'

I followed Bridget down the gleaming corridor. Panelled walls, parquet

floor, portraits along the walls. I peered at them with interest. Anything to put off whatever they had in store for me.

And then I stopped dead. This was a different part of the building from my previous visit which was probably why I'd missed it.

After a while Bridget realised she'd shed her load and turned back.

'Maxine? Are you feeling faint?'

I swallowed. And then again. 'No, I'm sorry – just a momentary thing.' I took a few deep breaths. 'Absolutely fine.' I took a chance and, apparently changing the subject, I said, 'What a wonderful painting. That's a very striking face, isn't it?'

She came to stand alongside me. 'That one? Oh yes. I remember that being hung years ago. Some sort of anniversary. I'd just started working here.'

I squinted at the little brass plate alongside the painting.

She told me anyway. 'That's our founder, the man who started Insight way back when. Conrad Rossiter.'

I didn't know whether to run, hide, punch the air in triumph, burst into tears, spit, anything. A thousand thoughts rushed through my brain. A log jam. My head was bursting. Just as it had done all those years ago when I'd first laid eyes on him in the Cretaceous.

I was looking at a portrait of Clive Ronan.

16

You'd think, wouldn't you, that the universe would at least allow me a moment to recover. To take a few deep breaths. Regain my composure. Give me time to stop my heart trying to abandon ship and resume its rightful function.

No, of course it didn't. The universe hates me.

There were four sets of doors along this corridor. Bridget opened one to my right – without knocking, I noticed – and ushered me in.

Here was another light, sunny room, with windows overlooking Great Russell Street on the right-hand wall. The walls were panelled with oak, darkened with age but still glossy. The table in this room was circular – very democratic. I braced myself to meet the supervillains. Who were charming. Absolutely delightful. I warmed to them at once.

One of the women stood up in welcome. 'Maxine, come in. I think we met briefly a few weeks ago. You brought us up a file.'

Yes – just before I'd 'inadvertently' walked off with one of their black files and Markham and I went on to ruin their plans for Magna Carta, the assassination of William Marshal, and the Gunpowder Plot. Wisely, I kept all that to myself.

There were six of them. Seven if you counted Bridget, who took the nearest seat. Four men and three women. And all of them were youngish. Did this mean that Insight was a thrusting, innovative organisation fuelled by young blood and energy? Or simply that no one lived long enough to grow old?

'Take a seat,' said Bridget, gesturing to the last empty place at the table.

Somewhat nervously, I sat. And no, that wasn't another powerful piece of acting on my part. I was more than somewhat nervous. And completely on my own. Even if Markham could, somehow, miraculously divine that all was not well, he'd need an army to get to me up here.

The woman straightened the papers in front of her. 'Well, firstly, Maxine – can I call you Maxine? – congratulations are in order. We read your essay on living in the 1920s, and can I say we all thought it was very nice work. We were hugely impressed, both by the detail and the presentation, and I'm delighted to tell you that you are the winner of this year's competition. Bridget has been talking to us about you . . .' she stole a glance at my hair, 'and we all very much wanted to meet you properly.'

'Really?' I said, not having to feign incredulity at all. 'I won?'

The woman laughed. 'You did indeed.'

'Well . . . I . . . thank you.'

'Not at all. A very deserving prize winner.'

'Prize?' I said cautiously. Because prizes aren't always rewards. Perhaps they were one of those organisations that culls the best and brightest and everyone left was just an unthreatening, unthinking drone who did exactly as they were told. Like the government.

I don't know where I get these daft ideas from. Everyone at Insight – with the possible exception of Eddie – was very bright indeed. And I wouldn't be surprised if even he had hidden depths. Very-deeply-hidden hidden depths.

'There will be a gift certificate and a mention in next month's staff magazine.'

'Well, thank you,' I said politely, 'thank you very much,' and made movements to get up.

She looked across the table at Bridget, who nodded. 'And there will be a little something extra that Bridget will talk to you about later. Thank you, Maxine. A pleasure to have met you today.'

'And you,' I said. 'Thank you again.'

Bridget followed me out.

As the door closed, I heard someone say, ‘So that’s her, is it?’

The lift was elsewhere ruining someone else’s day so we both walked back downstairs. Neither of us spoke. I don’t know what Bridget was thinking about but my mind was dwelling on the exact meaning of ‘a little something extra’.

Back in the basement, Bridget said, ‘Look after things for a minute, will you, Eddie? Maxine, come and talk to me.’

She closed her office door. I’d been in her office hundreds of times before but, despite it being made of glass, I’d never noticed how claustrophobic it was. The walls seemed to close in around me. Eddie had disappeared into the Cave and I was alone with Bridget. There wasn’t another person on this entire floor.

I told myself I was being stupid. Surely if Insight had discovered who I was they wouldn’t be handing me gift certificates and mentioning me – possibly posthumously – in next month’s staff magazine.

‘Maxine, what’s your philosophy on life?’

‘Um . . . sorry?’

‘Well, I’ve always found there are people who want to know things and those who don’t. One is not necessarily better than the other, but which one are you?’

‘Oh,’ I said, crossing my burning boats before I got to them, ‘I always want to know. Don’t you?’

‘I do, but even I admit it’s not always the wisest policy.’

I shifted on my chair, surreptitiously checking my personal alarm was still in my pocket. For all the good it would do me. ‘Am I in trouble?’

‘Not yet, but I could be about to lead you that way.’

I began to measure the distance to her door. Across the open office. Up the stairs. Abandon everything in my locker – there wasn’t anything to give anyone any clues. But the only exit was out through the main doors. Yes, there were fire doors scattered around the building – by law – but the quickest and easiest way out was through the front doors. A massive

security bottleneck. Deliberately designed to be so, I reckoned.

Or should I seize the initiative? Take her down while she didn't expect it. Bundle her unconscious body under the desk. Up the stairs, get my stuff and stroll, whistling, out of the building. Once free, I could warn Markham who would immediately strip the flat. We'd meet at the pod. Jump away. Anywhere. All doable. Probably.

Or, I could calm down, keep my head, and wait to see what happened next.

Bridget unlocked her top drawer. I tensed. All I had with me was a notebook and pen but on the other hand, people have toppled entire civilisations with only an idea.

She took out a sealed, sterile packet. Inside was a hypo spray, very similar to the one Markham had used on me. She laid it on the desk and looked at me. I, on the other hand, couldn't take my eyes off the hypo.

She smiled. 'You like to travel, don't you?'

I dragged my eyes to hers. 'I . . . do.'

'What if I could offer you the opportunity to travel? Really travel.'

My heart began to thump.

'As part of this job?'

'You could say that.'

Could this possibly be what I thought it was? 'Well, that sounds quite interesting. You mean I wouldn't be a filing clerk any longer?'

'No, we're considering offering you a new position. And a very rewarding one, too.'

'Am I being promoted?' I looked at the hypo again. 'What is all this?'

'Maxine, I've been watching you. Almost from the moment you arrived. We all have.'

Shit. I tightened my grip on my pen. Was there anything on her desk I could use to fight my way out? Having no idea what to say next, I stayed silent.

'It was very apparent to me – as soon as you walked in through the door,

in fact – that there's more to you than possibly even you think there is.'

'Was there? I mean, is there?'

She sat back in her chair. The hypo on her desk still within easy reach. 'We'd like to offer you an opportunity.'

'To do what?'

She smiled. 'Tell me, Maxine, if it was possible to see the great events of history for yourself, where would you go? What would you want to see?'

Whether it was the similarity of the phrasing or just my stupid time-lag thing again, but suddenly I was back in Dr Bairstow's study, all those years ago, being interviewed for what I thought was a simple research job. *'Tell me, Dr Maxwell. If the whole of History lay before you like a shining ribbon, where would you go? What would you like to witness?'*

Just for a moment my mind ricocheted between the two. Here – there. Here – there. And then I took a deep breath, dug my nails into my palms and concentrated. What would a normal person's reaction be?

I went for confusion. 'You're talking about . . . time travel? I thought all that sort of thing had been shut down. There were the Time Wars and . . . It's horribly illegal, surely . . . I mean . . . I once knew someone, years ago, who . . . well, perhaps I shouldn't say any more, but you're telling me that Insight . . . you're saying you actually time travel . . . I . . . should you be telling me? . . . I mean . . .' I had an apparent thought. 'What about the Time Police?'

'They are not currently a problem. Their eyes are elsewhere and, not to boast, but Insight have some powerful friends. We have been operating for some time and the Time Police are completely clueless.'

Well, that I could believe but even so . . .

I groped for something to say and it must all have looked very convincing to Bridget.

'It's all right, Maxine. Take your time. This is not an uncommon reaction.'

I pulled myself together. 'Right. OK. Here at Insight – you time travel. You're an illegal time-travelling organisation.'

‘Not all of us. Only a very few. The important ones. Everyone else is just camouflage.’

‘And you’re offering me the opportunity . . . ?’

She nodded. ‘To join the few.’

‘Suppose I say no? You’ve just admitted to carrying out illegal activities. Suppose I go straight to the Time Police?’

‘But you won’t, will you? Do you think we’d be having this conversation if I had even the slightest fear you’d do such a thing?’

‘You can’t know that.’

‘We’re pretty certain.’

I felt displaying a certain agitation would not only be appropriate but necessary. And buy me some time. I got up and began to pace her office.

She sat silently and watched me, saying nothing until eventually I came to sit back down again.

‘Well, what do you think?’

I swallowed. ‘I think I have questions.’

‘Of course you do. Off you go.’

‘Well, many of them focus on whether I’m still going to be alive in half an hour.’

‘Maxine, what do you take us for?’

‘People who are operating illegally.’

‘Not for very long.’

I stared at her. ‘What does that mean?’

‘Time travel wasn’t always illegal. One day it might not be again.’

‘But the Time Police . . .’

‘Forget the Time Police.’

‘I wish I could,’ I said, with perfect honesty. ‘Unfortunately . . .’

‘Trust us. We know what we’re doing.’

‘I . . .’ I flapped my hands uselessly. The very picture, I hoped, of someone suddenly made the recipient of information she really wasn’t too sure about but who could almost certainly be tempted from the straight and

narrow.

Bridget smiled. ‘Let me see if I can help you out a little. What concerns you most about all this? The time travelling itself? Or being caught?’

‘Oh, being caught. Definitely being caught.’

‘So without that fear, you’d be interested?’

‘Well, yes, who wouldn’t be? But I’m sorry, I just don’t seem able to get past being gunned down by the Time Police.’

‘Very natural. After the Time Wars, the Time Police taught everyone to believe that time travel – in the wrong hands – could end the world. The wrong hands obviously being all the hands that aren’t theirs.’

‘Well, yes. I remember when they came to my school and did a presentation. It frightened the living daylights out of everyone. And there was another when I was at uni, too. They were very big on people not doing it.’

‘Suppose I could offer you an opportunity to operate with impunity. You’d be completely safe.’

‘Completely safe?’

‘Yes.’

I tried to assume the expression of someone very willing to be tempted into nefarious activities but the tempter was going to have to put her back into it. ‘Well, I . . . um . . . I don’t know . . .’

She sat back, smiling. ‘I knew I wasn’t mistaken about you.’

Oh Bridget, you were so mistaken about me.

I cleared my throat. ‘Am I still allowed to ask questions?’

‘Of course.’

‘All right – the one that’s concerning me the most: what happens to me if I say thanks but no thanks?’

‘Have you heard of selective memory manipulation?’

We both looked at the hypo.

I nodded. ‘I have, yes, but isn’t it mainly for PTSD sufferers? Traumatic memories can be manipulated or erased. Is that what you’d do to me?’

‘Yes. You’d lose today. I would find you asleep at your desk and send you home because you obviously haven’t got over your nose bleed the other day. You might have a few distorted memories of this conversation but they would be very confused. And then you’d come in to work tomorrow, everything would be as it was before, and even those memories would soon fade.’

Yeah, I bet. Wasn’t it far more likely that I’d have an unfortunate mishap on the way home? I’d fall off a walkway and bang my head. Freak accident. Oh, what a tragedy. *We thought she wasn’t completely recovered but she insisted on coming back to work.* Or even a small fire in the flat where both Markham and I would die in the flames. Or suffocate in the smoke. Or succumb to carbon monoxide poisoning. I might be overreacting – I probably was overreacting – but I’d seen Insight in action and I had a suspicion the hypo was only camouflage and there was a very good chance I might not be alive this time tomorrow.

On the other hand – this was exactly why I was here. My heart was thumping so fast I was surprised I hadn’t fainted. Half terror – half exhilaration.

I took a deep breath. ‘OK.’ I took another one. ‘Why?’

‘Why what?’

‘Well, several whys, actually. Why me? And why do you do it? What is the point? Is there a purpose to your time travelling?’

Bridget smiled again. ‘I’ll happily answer all your questions but this is the point of no return, Maxine.’ She picked up the packet. The office was so quiet I could hear the paper wrapping rustle. ‘This is the point where you say yes or no. Will you trust me?’

Oh Bridget, you tried twice to kill me. And died in the attempt. And you’re asking me to trust you.

I wiped my hands on my trousers and looked about me as if seeking inspiration. I could see a shadow on the stairs. Eddie for certain. Just in case Bridget had read me wrong and I tried to race out of the building to alert the

authorities.

I stepped off the precipice into the unknown. ‘Of course I trust you.’ I put on my shrewd face. ‘Do you trust me?’

‘I do, yes. I think we could do great things together.’

I forced a laugh. ‘Well, this will teach me to tell people I like to travel. I certainly shan’t be doing that again.’

She shook her head. ‘You won’t have to. Because you will travel, Maxine. I guarantee that. Farther and wider than you ever thought possible. Sadly, you’ll never be able to tell anyone about it. Not outside of this organisation, anyway. If it’s any incentive, the money you will earn will enable you legitimately to go anywhere and do anything. Although you will need to display some discretion, obviously. We’ll offer you a permanent contract, of course, but you’d still only be on the books as a filing clerk.’

I writhed in what I hoped could be read as indecision.

Now she leaned over the desk, saying softly, ‘Just think of the sights you will see. No longer will you have to stare at ancient ruins trying to picture them in their prime. You’ll see everything as it was meant to be. Imperial Rome at its height. The glory of Athens. You’ll watch the pyramids being built. Sargon, Nebuchadnezzar, Caesar, Kandake, Chandra Gupta, Nefertiti, Makeda – you’ll see them all. And their palaces. Bright, fresh, new and gleaming in the sunshine.’

I gave her my shrewd face again. ‘I suspect there would be a lot more to it than that.’

‘A little – but I need to know from you now. Are you interested in taking this further? Yes or no? In or out?’

She might as well have added ‘dead or alive’.

I took a deep breath. ‘Yes. I mean, I’ll do it. In.’

You’d think by now I’d have learned to take a moment and consider the implications before embarking on this sort of thing. Half of me was shouting, ‘OMG – there’s no way back now.’ And the other half was shouting, ‘OMG – I was right all along. This is going to be *awesome*.’

‘Congratulations, Maxine. You’ve made the right decision. However . . . you know we can’t let you return to your flat, don’t you? Not at this particular moment. Security implications.’

I blinked. ‘But surely I can’t just disappear. My flatmate ringing round the hospitals and making a fuss is the last thing you need. And my things are there. I’ll need to go home and pack. And tell him something. Anything.’

‘Don’t worry about that. We’ll supply everything you need.’ She opened another drawer and pulled out a cheap, single-use com and laid it on the desk. Holding my eyes, she said, ‘What you tell him is entirely up to you.’

I got the message.

My hands weren’t quite steady and it took me two goes, but fortunately, Markham answered almost immediately. On speakerphone.

‘Hey,’ I said, before he could speak. ‘Can you do without me for a week or so?’

‘I expect so. Why?’

‘I’ve got the chance to take off for a bit. Gibraltar to begin with and then over the straits. Tunisia. Ruins of Neapolis. Not sure after that.’

‘Yeah, OK,’ he said, equally casually. ‘Bring me back a blonde.’

‘You can’t cope with the one you’ve got,’ I said.

‘Anything I need to do while you’re gone?’

‘Yeah – don’t water the orchid. Not after what happened last time.’

Orchid was our safe word. I needed to reassure him I was doing this of my own free will.

‘Well, that was hurtful.’

‘Better than coming back to poor Audrey slowly drowning. Again.’

‘OK – hands off Audrey. Anything else?’

‘No – I’ll see you soon.’

‘OK. Bye.’

He closed the link, seemingly completely unconcerned as I took my first faltering steps into the world of illegal time travel. A sentence that would be far more dramatic if I hadn’t been making substantial inroads into the world

of illegal time travel for some time now.

I handed Bridget's com back to her. Even as I watched, the screen faded. It was dead.

I looked at her. 'I just saved his life, didn't I?'

She grinned at me. 'I knew I wasn't mistaken about you.'

Oh, Bridget – yes, you were. So much.

17

I'm such an idiot. I thought there might be a secret underground base. Or a mysterious mountaintop lair, with self-destruct buttons and tanks of piranha and rocket-assisted escape vehicles. A robot army, even.

Instead, Bridget took me to the second-hand bookshop next door.

I'm going to take a moment to gloat. Skip ahead if you want.

If everyone casts their minds back to Markham's advance recce – when Pennyroyal had sent him to scope out the area around Insight and make a note of any sinister organisations in the vicinity – you'll all remember I said it was the bookshop. 'It's always the second-hand bookshop,' I'd said.

Well, no, actually, that's not quite right. When it came to sinister organisations, the British Museum had been my first choice and only very reluctantly had I relinquished my conviction that they were evil incarnate – but my second choice had been the bookshop. I'd made some compelling arguments. Yes, all right, I'd told them the bookshop was a portal to another universe and inhabited by sinister beings disguised as little old men with spectacles and carpet slippers, but other than that, I'd been spot on. It *was* the bookshop. Such a shame Markham and Pennyroyal weren't here to pay tribute to my brilliance.

We're all familiar with typical second-hand bookshops. Trust me – this was a typical second-hand bookshop on steroids. Mismatched and randomly placed bookshelves appeared to have grown organically as required, but, I suspected, were all very carefully placed to hide the general size and shape of the place.

To confuse the unwary even further, there were odd stairs and doorways –

some were locked, but others led deeper into identical rooms, all stuffed to the ceiling with books, many of which had spilled across the floor and constituted a major trip hazard. There were no clearly designated categories. There was no shelf signage. Nothing to help the casual browser in any way.

It was a perfect cover. All the aisles were narrow – only one person could move along them at a time, and even then they would frequently have to turn sideways to get through. Many led only to a dead end, forcing the bewildered customer to retrace their steps until they became so turned around, they had to be personally escorted to the front door. I half hoped I'd round a corner and there would be a bleached skeleton slumped against the lower shelves, still clutching a rare edition of something or other.

There were no sightlines. About six feet in any direction was the maximum range of vision. And books are wonderful at distorting and deadening sound. Quite honestly, the whole thing was a massive sensory--deprivation area.

The thoughtful owners had, however, provided ancient and saggy armchairs in which customers could sit and browse, and they didn't object to people eating and drinking either, except in the rare-books section. The shop was warm and smelled strongly of dust and old books, and it wasn't unusual to find any number of customers quietly nodding off with an open book on their laps, with everyone just silently tiptoeing past. Occasionally a member of staff would appear and shelve something, but otherwise they just left people to get on with it. I wondered if they ever made any money at all, far less turned a profit.

Anyway, after traversing about seven miles of book-strewn aisles, creeping past apparently sleeping bookworms – it was only afterwards that I realised they might be security staff – customers would eventually arrive at a wonderfully old-fashioned wooden counter with, believe it or not, an actual till. And not even an electronic one, either. They would hand over their money – this was another lot who didn't like electronics – and an

elderly and apparently half-blind member of staff would press a series of keys for the amount required, and with a ting and a clatter, a wooden drawer would shoot out. This was divided into various sections into which the proprietor – or one of them, anyway – would carefully drop the money. The drawer would spring shut again – taking a couple of fingers with it if he wasn't careful – and at the same time a paper receipt would be ejected from a slit near the top. The book would then be placed inside an actual paper bag, together with the receipt, and handed to the customer with a courteous, 'Thank you. Do come again.'

The whole procedure was fascinating and I wouldn't mind betting that customers would come to buy their books one at a time for the sheer pleasure of participating in this wonderful old ritual.

The shop was quite well known, actually. Several documentaries had been made about its history – nobody could remember when it hadn't been here – and I later learned it frequently featured as a backdrop to various costume dramas. The final episode of a thrilling supernatural series had been filmed here. They'd hardly had to dress the set at all. Typical Insight – hiding in plain sight again.

There was no connecting door between Insight and the bookshop. Everyone entering had to come in through the bell-jangling shop door. Members of the public were completely unaware that their photo was taken as they entered – and again on exiting – and at five-second intervals throughout their visit as well. And that those photos were never destroyed or recorded over – they were run through facial recognition software. Keying in a certain code would bring up details of all the customer's previous visits, dates, with whom they had spoken, their purchases, their requests or orders and so forth. Particularly valuable were the perfectly genuine names and addresses given by people ordering books and prints to be delivered, because no one would ever expect a bookshop to be up to no good, especially if it has an old-fashioned bell over the door, miles of apparently random dusty shelving and a cute cat or dog snoozing on the

counter.

On that first visit with Bridget by my side, we successfully negotiated this cross between a 3D maze and a literary obstacle course and approached the counter. Bridget got me through this time, but on subsequent occasions the trainee – that would be me – was required to approach the counter and ask if they had a copy of whatever book – the folio edition. The title was unimportant – it was the phrase *folio edition* that would gain me access. Obviously, being me, I couldn't resist and this is perhaps the place to warn everyone that asking for the folio edition of *The Ladybird Book of Anarchy* or *The Girls' Own Guide to Riot and Revolution* gets you an interview with Bridget Lafferty on the subject of taking the piss. I don't know how either of us kept a straight face.

However, I took the hint after that and on the increasingly less frequent occasions I left the building, I simply alternated between Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, *Just One Damned Thing* and *The Woodlanders*. All of which are virtually unreadable.

Anyway, on this first occasion, having, like Gandalf, given the correct password at the Gates of Moria, Bridget and I were ushered behind the counter, past the shelves of reserved books and the piles of random stuff that might have been there for decades, through a door in the corner and into another world. And – since we'd done it properly – all without a multi-tentacled creature hurling holly bushes at us.

Once into the sinister nether regions, I was introduced to my – I really don't want to say handler, or trainer, because he was a greasy little reptile; let's go with mentor – I was met by my mentor, a young and very unpleasant man who introduced himself as Geoff.

'My name is Geoff,' he announced, rather more impressively than the situation warranted, I thought. 'And my motto is *Always say yes to everything.*'

My own opinion was that that was just as well because I certainly couldn't see anyone else ever saying yes to him. For any reason whatsoever.

‘*Yes* to opportunities,’ he cried, dazzling me with his teeth. ‘*Yes* to adventure. *Yes* to excitement. *Yes* to taking chances. *Yes* to . . .’

I tried to switch off at this point but there was no chance.

‘Lovely to meet you,’ he gushed, grabbing my hand in his own warm, wet paws. ‘I’m certain we’re going to get on splendidly. You should know I’m a very positive person and if you remember that we won’t go far wrong.’

I stared stonily at Bridget who stared expressionlessly back again. And then she pissed off and left me with this bollock-brained pillock. Yes, I know I was infiltrating a deeply sinister organisation and therefore it followed that it would be staffed by deeply sinister individuals, but with Insight, that wasn’t actually the case. Geoff was the only person I met throughout the entire organisation whom I truly disliked. Typical, isn’t it? Even Eddie had more going for him than this particular . . . mentor.

He, Geoff, was cheerful and jolly and upbeat. I could only assume he’d once read a book on merry mentoring and decided that was the way to go. Several times throughout my training I made a mental note to track down the author of said book and kill her/him/them slowly and painfully, because no matter how unpleasant Geoff’s true nature had originally been, it couldn’t possibly have been any more repulsive than his blinding smiles and cloying insincerity.

I was allocated my own room high up on the very top floor of the bookshop. No lift, obviously, and reached only by slightly fewer stairs than at Russell Square Tube station, but I did have a fine view of a brick wall about ten feet away. I say ‘room’ but it was actually a rather pleasant suite. I had a small sitting room with a mid-range entertainment wall that was certainly better than the tired old thing in my and Markham’s flat which had only picked up the free government information channels. Trust me, I now know far more about genital warts than is comfortable. Or even necessary.

There was a tiny but modern wet room off the sitting room, and a neat wooden screen across the opposite corner concealed a combined wardrobe and bed unit. They’d given me a microwave and a kettle – full-scale

cooking was strictly forbidden, and since my immediate environment consisted entirely of wood and paper, I wasn't going to argue. I've seen enough burning books in my life, thank you.

There was a small communal dining room two flights of stairs down, serving surprisingly good nosh. Not out of any concern for the staff, I suspected, but so that no one was ever tempted to sneak out for a curry and a pint and a gossip.

Not that that was a problem for me. The facilities at our flat had been considerably more primitive than this and it wasn't as if I'd ever be short of anything to read here so – yeah, I was quite comfy, thank you.

And, frankly, there wasn't anything to blab about. Insight training bore absolutely no resemblance to that of St Mary's. There was no team building of any kind. Nor was there a uniform – no equivalent of the St Mary's grey jumpsuit – I just wore normal clothes and was slightly less covered in dust. There were no group lessons. No groups of similarly confused trainees herding together for mutual support and encouragement. Everything was done individually and face to face – which meant I saw far more of the lovely Geoff than should be expected of anyone.

There was no formal induction explaining the purpose and structure of this particular discreet branch – or twiglet – of Insight. Which would have been very helpful to an undercover agent like me. No organisational charts to show where I stood in the scheme of things. No formally stated aims and objectives. No mission statement. No job descriptions. No person specs. The contrast with the public face of Insight – where mission statements were plastered over every available surface – was considerable.

Note-taking was not encouraged, nor were there any exams, so I had no idea how my progress was being monitored – or even if I was making any. There wasn't even a formal timetable – Geoff provided a daily list of places I should be and at what times.

Nor were there any introductions. Other than my mentor and guide – and *friend*, as he seemed very keen to be known – I had no idea who the people

around me were. I grew to recognise faces and heard the occasional first name, but any contact I had with anyone else – other instructors, for instance – came only through Geoff.

As did whatever information Insight deemed necessary for me to know – and at this stage, it wasn't very much. Seriously, I could easily have gone home to Markham every night and told him absolutely nothing he didn't already know.

'Right,' said Geoff briskly, at my first mentoring session – a one-to-one in a tiny dark box up in the eaves. Most of the classrooms were identical – a small table with two chairs and that was about it.

'You think you know the purpose of Insight, Maxine,' he continued. 'You don't. You don't actually know anything about Insight at all.'

Ha – little did he know. Given what Markham and I had already discovered and surmised about Insight's activities, I suspected it might be very possible I knew more than Geoff did. However, I smiled with simulated interest and made a note to watch what I said to him.

We started with Insight 101 – Resettling Clients.

'We resettle people who aren't happy in their current lives,' said Geoff.

I tried to remember I wasn't supposed to know anything about this – which was a wonderful opportunity to ask some really awkward questions.

'What sort of unhappy? Are they sick?'

'No, not necessarily . . .'

'Are they trying to travel to a time when there's a cure?'

'No. Mostly they want to jump backwards.'

'Do we ask why?'

'No. We don't enquire into people's personal circumstances,' he lied. 'Only their finances and . . .'

'Are they jumping back to warn themselves not to do something?'

'No. As I was saying . . .'

'What happens if they meet themselves? Do they die?'

'No,' he said quickly. 'Nothing happens.'

An interesting answer, I think everyone will agree.

‘Only that would be so cool.’

‘No, it wouldn’t,’ he said, suddenly nasty. ‘Although you could warn yourself not to have your head shaved at a drunken party.’

I laughed merrily while simultaneously vowing retribution – long and painful retribution.

We started to work through the procedures and I followed my favourite strategy – that of never actually allowing my mentor to complete a sentence. Always a successful tactic if anyone wants to give it a go.

‘Do I actually have to go out and find these customers?’

‘No. And we call them clients,’ he said, reverting back to his oily smarm. ‘We don’t—’

‘Sorry. Do I have to search for these clients?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘That’s handled by another part of Insight. Our “Sales Team”, if you like.’ He made hooks with his long, white, wormy fingers. ‘Your part of the process begins when you’re introduced and—’

‘To the client?’

‘*Yes. To the client.*’

He took a deep breath and attempted to achieve optimum mentor calm.

‘Your task will be to advise them on life in the various time periods in which we operate and help them select the one most appropriate to our needs.’

‘*Their* needs, surely.’

‘No.’ Just for once, he wasn’t smiling.

I gave him my shrewd look. ‘And which one *will* be most appropriate to our needs? How many do we have to choose from?’

He hesitated. ‘We have a number of establishments. You simply identify the one most . . .’

‘Appropriate,’ I said cheerfully, making a mental note to try and acquire these addresses for onward transmission to Smallhope and Pennyroyal. Intercepting ‘clients’ and their belongings could prove extremely profitable

for them.

Geoff went on. ‘Exactly. Having done that – and allowing them to speak occasionally – you guide them – gently – through their assimilation. I’ve seen your essay and you obviously have a knack for that sort of thing – dress, manners, money . . .’

‘Speaking of money, do I . . . ?’

‘No.’

‘Let me guess – payment is handled by yet another part of Insight?’

‘Correct. Apart from advising them on currency, cost of living and such, you never ever mention money. We have other, more qualified people for that.’

‘So no chatting about the cash.’

‘No,’ he said, saying no rather a lot for a man whose mission statement was always to say yes.

‘Gotcha,’ I said.

‘So, you do your bit, we provide the client with everything they need to get them started, and install them in their new home where they . . .’

‘Them? They?’

‘Well,’ he said, sitting back. ‘Obviously, I don’t want to pander to gender stereotypes . . .’

‘Heaven forfend,’ I said.

‘But the majority of our clients are men.’

‘And they take their family with them?’

He hesitated. ‘They take companions, certainly.’

‘Ah, right,’ I said, nodding wisely. ‘Excellent opportunity to disappear with some bright, shiny new trophy model and leave the wife behind to carry the can. Serves her right for being old and ugly. The world doesn’t need women like that.’

Geoff glanced at me uncertainly. Like many people with no sense of humour, he was slow to recognise it in others. He obviously found himself in complete agreement with me but present-day legislation, together with a

lively sense of self-preservation, was preventing him from actually saying so.

'Shall we move on?' he said. 'The next stage is . . .'

'Do I accompany the client?' I said. 'Or just wave him goodbye?'

'*If* I could be allowed to finish,' he said, somewhat testily, and although winding him up was enormous fun, I should probably rein it in a little. 'Naturally you will accompany the client. You will spend a couple of weeks helping them to familiarise themselves with their new environment and then return to us here for your next client.'

'And they all live happily ever after,' I said, unable to resist the temptation.

'They do indeed,' Geoff said, so smoothly that I guessed the second phase of the operation – namely killing the client and everyone in sight and seizing their possessions – was the remit of yet another department within Insight. They really were rather like an iceberg. The one eighth above the water was blindingly obvious to everyone. The seven eighths below the surface were dark and dirty and would kill you as soon as look at you.

'Just a thought,' I said, taking care to sound as if this had just occurred to me. 'What happens if something goes wrong? What happens if I . . . you . . . whoever . . . can't make it back to our proper time? For any reason. What happens then? Does someone come and rescue us?'

His smile really should come with a health warning. 'That never happens.'

'Really?'

'Yes,' he said, sounding pleased to be saying yes, for once. 'Our people always make it back.'

'Always?'

'Oh yes,' he said blithely. 'I can't remember the last time we lost someone. It's never happened in all my time here.'

I was rather astonished at this blatant lie. If I hadn't known better, I would probably have believed him. I hadn't actually expected him to come out with, 'Oh no – we will leave you. When the time comes, the pod will

depart, whether the crew are on board or not,' but he was surprisingly convincing.

I looked at his bright, beaming, lying face. 'Well, that's a relief.'

'Yes, nothing to worry about there.' He smiled.

I smiled back because he was my friend and mentor and I believed every word he said.

'I think we'll call a halt for this morning,' Geoff said, getting up, and I didn't argue. I think we'd each come to the conclusion that a very little of the other went a long way.

Running concurrently to my mentoring sessions – which were growing shorter and shorter as I slowly wore Geoff down – was the more practical stuff. Insight took for granted that I had the appropriate History background, so a lot of my time was devoted to weapons training and self--defence.

Weapons training was good fun. I've always enjoyed shooting things. Actually, one of my many ambitions is to operate one of those massive blasters the Time Police are so fond of. Or, failing that, a building smasher. How cool would that be?

Back to my training – I did wonder about seeming less proficient than I actually was but they knew I'd knocked around the world a bit so it would be stupid to pretend I couldn't look after myself. Besides, I didn't want to spend the rest of my life doing this. I was aiming for Star Pupil, accelerated promotion, being inducted into all their secrets, discreetly tipping off Smallhope and Pennyroyal, standing back as mass arrests happened, and then going home to Leon, Matthew and a nice cup of tea.

I spent a lot of time in a cellar under the bookshop, part of which had been done out as a shooting range, where I fired off various guns and blasters, all the time imagining the less than lovely Geoff spread-eagled against the target.

There was no knife training. 'Always take a gun to a knife fight,' said Geoff, on one of the rare occasions I found myself in complete agreement with him.

There were also long periods of unarmed self-defence during which my

partner, sadly, was usually Geoff. Fortunately, I'm Ian Guthrie-trained and he'd passed on a whole range of dirty tricks. My main motivation was always to get out of range of Geoff's breath, which for some reason smelled like metal polish. I always made sure I had him flat on the mat in nanoseconds. I actually passed that class in considerably less time than usually allocated.

Obviously, I don't want to toot my own trumpet, but all my training seemed to be going well and I was beginning to feel quite optimistic. With luck, all I'd have to do would be to spend a little while successfully resettling a couple of wealthy and unpleasant clients and then, in my capacity as Bridget's golden-eyed girl, move on to more interesting areas. Such as how Clive Ronan was connected to all this. Who paid for Insight to nudge History on to different paths? And why? What was their end purpose? First things first, however. Insight took priority over everything. Ronan was a whole new can of worms I didn't have time for right now.

The weirdest thing was that, as far as I knew, I was the only trainee there at the bookshop. I didn't know if there were others and we all had solitary training to ensure we never met, or whether I was, genuinely, Insight's only trainee. Was everything so stringently compartmentalised that should one of us turn traitor we'd have nothing to tell the authorities? No names – nothing.

Or, worryingly, perhaps no one else had survived this really very mild training regime and they'd been disposed of. Perhaps I was the last of a bad bunch. Carefully casual, I mentioned this to Bridget when she turned up for a progress report from Geoff. She laughed.

'I can't be the only one,' I persisted.

She just kept smiling.

I changed tack slightly. 'And there must be people here whose professional qualifications are more current than mine. I've been out of the academic game almost since I left uni.'

'Facts and figures can be learned,' she said. 'We look for that extra spark.'

I wasn't too sure how I felt about that. I'd been selected by a ruthless and sinister organisation because I had an extra spark. Was that actually a good thing? I opened my mouth to ask but Bridget was already heading towards the door.

I followed her out of the beige box and headed to the dining room for lunch. Far too late to have second thoughts now, anyway.

I did, however, enjoy one significant success. High up in the building in yet another of Insight's dingy boxes, with a giant bluebottle headbutting the dusty window in an attempt to escape – I didn't blame it in the slightest – I took a chance and asked Geoff a question. And he actually answered it. I was so surprised I nearly forgot to follow through.

We'd nearly finished the session – Resettlement Planning Module 6, I think – and out of sheer boredom – and because the fly was getting on my nerves – I asked Geoff straight out.

'Geoff – Insight can travel through time. There's got to be more to it than resettlement, surely. What is the real reason for Insight? What are they – we – really up to?'

I honestly didn't think he'd answer. Or that he'd fob me off with some meaningless mission statement. Or change the subject. Or something. He was certainly silent for a long time and then he closed down his lesson notes and said, quite simply, 'We're changing the world.'

I let my jaw drop, hoping that if he thought he'd managed to shut me up just for once, he might be encouraged to say more – so, skilfully, I said nothing.

'Slowly but very surely, we're changing the world as it was. Over the course of history, we've been installing presidents, kings, political leaders of our choosing. Which, in turn, has led to different outcomes. Different histories. The future is very, very carefully manipulating the past.'

I was chock-full of questions. How was that even possible? Why weren't we all dead? In my experience, attempting this sort of thing can get you

killed more quickly than . . . something that gets killed very quickly. It shouldn't be possible. History always protects itself. As, I suspected, did the timeline.

I asked Geoff instead, 'Isn't that dangerous? How can you change History?'

'Quite easily,' he said simply. 'Everything we do is meant to be. Because it has already happened.'

I'd heard of this before. There are all sorts of theories about time travel.

There's the Fixed Timeline Theory that says the timeline is unchangeable. That events should not – cannot be changed. They have happened so they have to happen. Any attempts to change them will result in death – to the changer at least and probably whoever else History considers necessary at the time. This is the theory by which St Mary's operates. You can't change History. Although, actually, you can. Markham and I had once successfully changed a small but significant date, and without that intervention the Gunpowder Plot might well have succeeded and History would have been very much changed. A warning, however, before everyone gets excited and attempts anything reckless: on that occasion, I suspect we were operating with the approval of History itself.

Then there's the Dynamic Timeline Theory that says events changed in the past impact the future. Usually, the example given is the Grandfather Paradox. You know the one – if a person travels to a time before their grandfather had children and ends up killing him – as you do – that person would never be born. Therefore they couldn't kill their grandfather and we're all enveloped in the p word. That's paradox – not penis. It's a dodgy theory to operate by and it's the one cited by the Time Police, who don't mess about. They move in and kill everyone both in and on sight. Their priority is to shut down whatever's happening or about to happen.

And then there's the Many Worlds Theory. Everyone likes this one – except the Time Police, of course – because it seems to say that, more or less, you can do whatever you like and pretty much get away with it. That

an obliging universe creates a new universe for every eventuality. The downside of this apparently unlimited opportunity to do as you please – and it's a big downside – is that you can never return to your original universe. You can never go home.

Something like that had happened to me at Agincourt, except I was the one who died – an arrow through the chest will do that. The result was the same, though. I can never go home. I'm dead. Leon's dead. Matthew was never born. The only good thing is that my friend Helen lived. I hope with all my heart that she and Peterson are as happy as they deserve to be. But David Sands died in that world and that broke my heart. Perhaps Rosie Lee and Joe Nelson got their act together afterwards. I hope they did, but I'll never know. That's the price I paid for my life.

Anyway, it would seem this was Insight's theory. All changes are accommodated by an obliging universe. Which begged the question – how much of our History is true and how much has been Insight-manipulated? Interesting, eh?

Theoretically, History could have been changed in any number of new and exciting ways and no one would know anything about it because we'd have no memory of the original events. Suppose the Saxons originally won at Hastings. Or Catharine of Aragon gave Henry VIII five or six healthy sons. Or the Americans lost the War of Independence. Or Napoleon triumphed at Waterloo and rampaged all over Europe and we all used to be French?

I had a sudden insight – sorry! Was this why the Time Police stamped so hard on time travel? Because, actually, you *can* change the past?

There had been a mercifully short period, between my time at St Mary's and the future where I was living at the moment, when time travel was legal and it had resulted in all sorts of unfortunate events – the formation of the Time Police, for example – and the start of the Time Wars as they struggled to shut everything down and regain control of the timeline. There had been temporal catastrophes all over the shop.

Bubble universes, for example – been there, done that, not fun – were

formed as temporary protection for a damaged timeline. Think of them as a sort of giant scab.

Or Bluebell Time – when the fabric of time has been so worn away as to require direct intervention by the Time Police. Captain Ellis compared it to putting down decking, which gives you a fair idea of their grasp on reality.

To say nothing of time-slips, alternate universes, time-loops – any number of mini-apocalypses can occur if anyone attempts to tamper with the timeline.

I had to pull myself up short at that point because, trust me, speculating on every temporal catastrophe is a rabbit hole down which you can disappear for weeks. Instead, I assumed an expression of huge admiration. 'Wow, Geoff. That sounds amazing, but how on earth can you possibly change History?' and hoped he wouldn't think I was taking the piss.

He said carefully, 'Under the strict supervision of certain people, of course.'

'The Board,' I said, as if struck with sudden inspiration. 'I've met them. They seemed . . .' I searched for the right word. 'Very impressive.'

'Yes, they like to meet all new recruits. Even if only briefly.'

'But . . .' I said. 'You . . . we . . . Insight must have friends in very high places. To escape the notice of the Time Police, I mean.'

'We do,' he said complacently, striving to give the impression he was on nodding terms with these august beings. 'We have spent many years – many decades – inserting people at key points up and down the timeline and all of them are quietly working away to achieve our goals.'

'But . . . obviously I don't know much about this sort of thing – but wouldn't that affect the present? Thousands of people could disappear – they'd never have lived. Or vice versa. The repercussions . . .'

He shook his head. 'All that sort of thing – the repercussions, as you call them – are very carefully worked through. We have whole banks of historians, economists and political pundits whose job it is to sit down, assess the facts and work through the ramifications. Their recommendations

are vital to the decision-making process.'

Just for a moment I forgot where I was. 'That sounds really interesting. I'd quite like to have a go at that.' Because it did and I would.

He looked at me. 'Yes – you'd be quite suited to that sort of work, I think.' He puffed out his chest importantly. 'I could put in a word for you if you like.'

'Oh, Geoff,' I trilled girlishly. 'Would you? Thank you so much.' I took a chance. 'But surely, by doing all this, isn't Insight putting itself at great risk?'

'The thing is, Maxine, Insight work through intermediaries. Any unfortunate repercussions don't usually get as far as us.'

'So who benefits?'

'Us. Insight. Obviously.'

I had to phrase the next bit quite carefully. 'So Insight don't work for anyone specifically, do they?'

He shook his head.

'But we do have clients. Big clients.'

He nodded.

'Who?'

He shrugged. 'Anyone who can afford us. And anyone whose interests run concurrently with ours. An organisation. A country. A religion.' He lowered his voice, although I don't know which organisation or country or religion could possibly have overheard us up here in this tiny room. 'And this is the really clever part: they pay us to achieve their ends. Which are usually our ends as well. They genuinely believe we work for them. But the point is, once they've committed themselves, we own them. Whatever we've done on their behalf – and it's always something unpleasant, because they can't risk global public opinion by being seen to do it themselves – once we've achieved their aims for them, they are no longer masters of their own fate. We know – literally – where the bodies are buried. Willingly or otherwise – they now work for us.'

I sat back, hoping to God I looked impressed and not appalled. What should my reaction be? Shock? Horror? Enthusiasm? Disbelief?

He was watching me. I swallowed and said quietly, 'But that means . . . surely not . . . Organisations? Businesses? They work for you?'

'Maxine – governments – whole countries – work for us.'

I gaped at him. I know there are people who genuinely believe in worldwide conspiracies and I'd never paid them great heed but now . . . now it would seem . . . I just couldn't process the enormity of it. My mind was running about in all directions and I couldn't think of the right questions to ask. Fine undercover agent I was.

He smirked. He actually smirked. 'Are you finally without words, Maxine? Surely not. Have I actually managed to render Maxine Forrest speechless?'

OK – don't blow this now, Maxwell. Pull yourself together. You've been lucky. He's told you far more than he should and any moment now he's going to realise it. Shut up and let him talk.

I opened my mouth and closed it again. Maxine Forrest – bereft of speech for the first time in her life.

Geoff leaned forwards. I could smell his breath. 'We're changing the world, Maxine. You've heard of terraforming? That's what we're doing but with history. Because if you want to change the future then you have to change the past.'

I tried to combine bewilderment with admiration. 'You're changing the past but your goal is to affect the future?'

'A bright, *new* future, Maxine.'

'What's wrong with the old one?'

He leaned forwards again, whispering, 'It's buggered. Shot. Ruined.' He lowered his voice even further. I could barely hear him. 'There's one goal, Maxine. One key objective that will change everything, and that's what we're working towards. And then . . . well . . . for some people, the world will be full of opportunity.'

I swallowed. ‘Oh my God, Geoff, this is incredible. What event . . . ?’

I was all set to follow through with a winning combo of girlish enthusiasm and penetrating questions but, sadly, that was the moment he realised he’d told me too much. Much, much too much. I saw it in his eyes.

I had a nasty feeling I might have reduced my chance of survival to slightly less than that of Sean Bean surviving to appear in the second part of a major franchise. He – Geoff, not Sean Bean – had a strange faraway expression. Was he reviewing what he’d told me? Apart from this key objective he’d mentioned, it wasn’t much more than Markham and I had already guessed, but he wouldn’t know that. How could he be certain I never reported our conversation? To Bridget, for instance. Would he ensure I suffered a training accident? No – he wouldn’t do it himself. He wasn’t the type. He might report me as a security risk and Insight would do the rest. Eddie, probably.

The silence had gone on too long. I had to say something. Preferably something that wasn’t ‘Piss off and die, Geoff, you giant pustule, and take your collection of rabid Insight shits with you’.

I peeped up at him through my eyelashes and that, trust me, is nowhere near as easy as it sounds.

‘Geoff . . .’

‘What?’

‘When the time comes . . . this new future . . .’

His face stiffened. I could see the panic in his eyes. What was I about to say? How much trouble was he in?

‘Geoff . . . could you . . . do you think . . . when it happens . . . can I be there? With you?’

OK – a whole shedload of brownie points here. Firstly, he had relief written all across his face. Secondly, his trainee considered him important enough to be included on Insight’s List of People Important Enough to be Involved in World-Changing Events, and thirdly, that someone – a woman, even – wanted to be there with him. A woman who would, presumably, be

suitably impressed. And grateful. Someone who'd given him a bit of a hard time but now realised her mentor was rather more splendid than she'd given him credit for. And then there would be all that gratitude to be enjoyed . . . Seriously, you could read the bloke like a book. I really was going to have to sit down and play cards with him one day. For some substantial sums of money.

He coughed and opened his scratchpad again. 'Shall we continue?'

I spent a couple of days thinking over what Geoff had told me. And I think he was doing the same. Several times I looked up to see him watching me with a very strange look on his face. Not calculating . . . more speculative. As if he wasn't quite sure of something. I assumed he was worrying over the implications of letting his mouth run away with him – and I was right.

'Maxine, we're nearly at the halfway stage of your training . . .'

We were?

'And at this point a small group of us usually take an evening off and go out. Nothing fancy. A pie and a pint, usually. We'd all be very pleased if you'd care to join us.'

Something about this wasn't sitting right. Geoff looked anxious. Apprehensive, even. Surely not just nerves at possibly having his invitation rejected; there was something more. I'd never heard of our instructors taking an evening off and going out. I'm sure they did but they wouldn't ask trainees to accompany them. Was this a trap? Was he going to murder me in a dark alleyway?

No, I'd had him on his back too many times for that to be feasible and he was far too chicken to pay someone else to do it. He wasn't going to tell the higher-ups that he'd spilled some of the beans to a trainee. No . . . something was off.

I cudgelled my brain for some way to reject him without causing him to worry he'd made a mistake with me, and I couldn't think of a thing. I swear this place with its unending sameness – the rooms, the stairs, the corridors,

the unvarying structure of every day – was beginning to affect my brain.

I smiled. ‘Oh Geoff, I’m sorry – it sounds lovely but I . . . I’m not fond of crowded places. I thought I’d just have an early night. Perhaps one day, when my training is finished . . . Oh, I know – what about a celebration then?’

I wondered if adding ‘just the two of us’ would be too much, but I couldn’t bring myself to say it anyway, so instead I went with, ‘If I pass, of course.’

‘Of course you’ll pass,’ he said, genuinely indignant. ‘All my students pass.’

‘Well, that’s very reassuring,’ I said. And then, because it wouldn’t do him any harm to know I had friends in high places, I added, ‘Bridget said you had a very high pass rate last time we spoke. She’s taken rather an interest in my training, you know. We had a long talk only the other day.’

‘Really?’

I could see him dying to ask what I’d said and now I was going to have to think of more lies. Fortunately, I’m Treadwell-trained in that area.

Mentally apologising to the poor trainee who came after me, I said, ‘Well, it’s your . . . your positivity, Geoff. You just radiate . . .’ I couldn’t think of another word for positivity. ‘It.’

He beamed. I felt my retinas flinch.

‘Optimism,’ I said, suddenly thinking of one.

‘Thank you.’

‘Confidence,’ I added enthusiastically, because I was on a roll now.

His eyes narrowed. Had I gone a word too far?

‘Actually, that last one was Bridget’s,’ I said, struggling to make up lost ground.

The beam was back. Time to go, before I dug myself in any deeper.

‘I have to go,’ I said. ‘Have a great time this evening, Geoff.’

He nodded and floated away in a little bubble of positivity, optimism and confidence.

Sadly, Geoff must have said something to Bridget, who literally backed me into a corner the very next day.

'Confidence?' she said ominously.

I hung my head. 'I'm sorry – he asked me out and I panicked.'

'Understandable.'

'I told him you were taking an interest in my training.'

'Don't hesitate to sacrifice me to save yourself, will you.'

'And that you admired his confidence. He was thrilled.'

She folded her arms. 'I, on the other hand . . .'

I hung my head again. 'Sorry . . .'

The upside of Geoff asking me out was that our relationship changed a little. Not much – but a little – and now I felt confident enough to throw out other questions. Normal questions. I didn't want to alarm him again.

'Is resettlement all I'll ever do?' I said one day, feeling that this was a legitimate comment/complaint.

'No, no – as we discussed the other day – you haven't mentioned that to anyone, have you?'

'Not a word,' I said truthfully. 'I don't want to get you into trouble.'

'Good – not that it's important, of course. But yes, there will be opportunities to specialise.'

'In what?'

'Whatever you feel you would be best suited to. Remember our mantra: always say yes.'

Our mantra?

'I mean,' I said, 'resettlement is just glorified babysitting, really, isn't it?'

'Well,' he said reluctantly, and I had a sudden flash of inspiration.

'What have *you* done, Geoff?' Fishing and flattering all at the same time. 'You're my role model – what can I aspire to?'

'Many things,' he said and for a while I thought that was all I was going to

get. ‘Exploration – advance reconnaissance for something big. That’s usually quite interesting. Right up your street, I should imagine.’

‘Wow,’ I said.

‘Or how about acquisitions? Occasionally a client might express an interest in a particular object and we acquire it for them.’

‘From the past?’

‘Sometimes,’ he said vaguely, obviously having learned his lesson about giving too much away.

‘For a price, though?’

He nodded. ‘For a very good price.’

‘Wow,’ I said again. ‘Anything else?’

‘Well, occasionally we perform certain tasks. I can’t go into details, obviously,’ he said hastily as I opened my mouth again.

‘Lots for me to look forward to,’ I said.

‘Indeed.’

‘More opportunities to say yes.’

He looked at me a little oddly then, so I was a very good student for the rest of the day.

Anyway, he must have reported selected snippets of that conversation because here was Bridget again, intercepting me on my way to lunch.

‘I hear you want to run before you can walk.’

‘Well, obviously,’ I said. ‘This is the cross you must bear when igniting a person’s overachievingness.’

She gave me the look patented by Dr Bairstow.

‘And don’t forget – I have that extra spark.’

She rolled her eyes and walked away.

The end of my training was disappointingly low-key. There was no formal ceremony, no certificate, no recognition of any kind. As far as the world knew, I was exactly the same person now as I had been twenty-eight days ago. Maxine Forrest – filing clerk.

Any hopes I might have had of garnering enough information to enable Smallhope and Pennyroyal to wind this up quickly had been dashed. And should the authorities descend upon the place, there was nothing that couldn't be explained away. The tiny rooms were indeed for staff training. Ordering, cataloguing, accessioning, delivery and despatch – all the normal functions of a bookshop. Even the shooting range in the cellar could be dismantled and disposed of at a moment's notice. No, I was going to need more dirt on Insight.

It was just a morning like any other. I didn't even know it was my last day.

Geoff stood up as I entered the room, which was unusual.

'Congratulations, Maxine.'

'Thank you,' I said cautiously. 'What for?'

'You have completed your training.'

It took a while for this to sink in. 'I've passed?'

'This stage of your training, yes.'

'I've passed?'

'With distinction. Congratulations. Well done. I told you all my students pass.'

It was obvious this was his achievement not mine, but hey-ho.

'Well, thank you, Geoff,' I said. 'I suspect I wasn't an easy student.'

‘I’ve had worse,’ he said bravely but didn’t go into details, so I guessed they hadn’t been that much worse.

‘So, what happens now?’ And suddenly I remembered I might have agreed to a date with him. For God’s sake, Maxwell – learn to plan ahead.

‘Well, you return to your normal job – filing clerk, I believe,’ he said patronisingly.

‘Yes,’ I said, smiling bravely. ‘But not for long. Because I’ve learned to say yes.’

The next day I returned to Bridget and the Cave.

It wasn’t anything specific, but something felt different. Or was it me? I was disoriented. The world was bright and noisy and hot and dusty after the peace of the bookshop. And so many people. Not that I was given time to dwell on any of that. Bridget had some news for me.

‘You can return to your flat if you wish,’ she said, ‘but your flatmate must go. I’m sorry but it’s a rule – you have to live alone. We can’t run the risk of anyone – not necessarily you – leaving something incriminating on the kitchen table or talking in their sleep. And while we don’t object to people living out, if you do, then you mustn’t be more than one hour away – which you wouldn’t be – to ensure you’re always available at short notice. Before you say anything, it’s the same for everyone. Even me.’

I took a step into the unknown. ‘Where do you live?’

‘Next door.’

There was a pause. I nodded, unable to think of what to say next.

Anyway, the living-alone thing wasn’t completely unexpected. And Pennyroyal had warned us not to put all our eggs in one basket. The time might come, he’d said, when we’d have to split up, so we needed to make sure we had ways of communicating with each other.

Step forward Russell Square Gardens, niftily situated between the Tube station and the good old British Museum. Prettily laid out with plane-tree--lined avenues and central fountains. A discreet shrubbery concealed a

groundsman's shed, a heavily padlocked equipment store and the public conveniences, behind which a small space had been earmarked, should it prove necessary, as home for a small pod and its scruffy inhabitant.

The silence between me and Bridget had gone on too long and, in an attempt to fill an awkward moment, I made a joke about there not being an official diploma for her to present to me. She laid down her pen. 'That reminds me. You're due upstairs to pick up your gift certificate and have your photo taken for the staff magazine.'

'Really?' I said, a little horrified. Trust me, there is no good photo of me anywhere on this planet. Cameras hate me.

'Yes,' she said, in that tone of voice senior managers everywhere use when confronting recalcitrant employees. I hear it a lot. 'And comb your hair.'

Yes, I had hair again. Enough for people to think I was just sporting a very short crop rather than having my head shaved at a drunken party.

I tried changing the subject. 'Actually, I think I might be a bit busy this morning. Backlogs – you know. In fact, I'd better get cracking.' I gestured over my shoulder with an enthusiasm getting cracking didn't usually engender.

'As soon as you've accepted your award, thanked everyone politely, nibbled just one finger sandwich at the small reception in your honour – remember, I've seen you eat – and generally behaved like a model employee. And don't forget to have your gift certificate framed and hung on the wall behind you.'

'Really?' I said again.

Bridget nodded. 'You're displaying your credentials.'

I blinked. 'Am I? How?'

'Anyone in the know will now recognise who and what you are.'

'OK,' I said, staring at the rows of framed certificates on the wall behind her. 'When is this reception?'

She looked at her watch. 'In about fifteen minutes.'

‘Bugger.’ I shot off to comb my hair.

As commanded, I served Markham his notice. I did it on speakerphone in Bridget’s office while she pretended to rummage in one of her cabinets and not listen to our conversation. Markham accepted his eviction quite cheerfully, telling me he was going north for a while anyway, and to behave myself without him.

‘Oh, by the way,’ he said. ‘You’ve had a message from our landlady. Shall I open it and read it out to you or just forward it on?’

Conscious of Bridget nearby, I said, ‘Read it out, please.’

Obviously addressing our flat’s ancient data table, he said, ‘Show message from username landlady@landlady.co.eng.’

There was a pause. ‘She says . . . Oh, she’s on her way back. End of the month – middle of next month by the latest. Her apologies but she and her husband are going to try again. They’re extending their marriage contract by another two years so she wants her flat back.’

He was telling me that Smallhope and Pennyroyal would be around in a week or so. As back-up, I assumed. And they’d be in the flat. But I couldn’t have roommates. Bugger. Now what? Bridget was gesturing thumbs up.

‘What will you do?’ enquired Markham.

‘I’ll find somewhere, I suppose,’ I said dubiously, watching Bridget who nodded and gave me the thumbs up again. I said quite naturally, ‘My boss seems to think that won’t be a problem.’

‘Brilliant,’ said Mr Chirpy. ‘Everything works out for everyone. See you around, Maxine. Thanks for the roof over my head these last months.’

‘Buy me a drink when we next meet,’ I said.

He laughed and disconnected.

‘You can keep your room next door in the bookshop,’ said Bridget. ‘I’ll get that organised.’

This actually suited me down to the ground but I thought it wise to show a little resistance. ‘I like my privacy.’

‘You shall have it.’

‘I’ll be allowed out?’

‘Of course.’ She stared at me. ‘Why wouldn’t you be?’

‘Well, I don’t know. I just assumed . . .’

‘You can come and go as you please.’

‘Even . . . you know . . . knowing what I know?’

‘What do you think we’ve been doing this last month?’

‘Um . . . somehow managing without me?’

‘Checking you out, stupid.’

‘Oh. Well, I assume I passed.’

‘You did. The official verdict was *Definitely Weird but Within Acceptable Parameters.*’

I gave silent thanks for Smallhope’s excellent staff work. ‘I shall try to find that reassuring. Can I have an afternoon off sometime to fetch all my stuff from the flat?’

Markham was already gone when I eventually returned to the flat a few days later – which was good because I didn’t want Insight getting ideas about me passing info to any interested parties – but it would still have been nice to say goodbye.

I’d missed him. Before I joined St Mary’s, I always used to work alone and was happy to do so until they turned me to the dark side. Or teamworking, as they called it. Over the years I’d become used to it and now I was alone again. The knowledge that someone would always be around to pick up the pieces and bring them home if I screwed up had been immensely comforting. The knowledge I was now pretty much on my own – wasn’t.

I sighed and began to pack up my few possessions. My Insight room was nicer than this dingy little place, but I’d enjoyed living here with Markham. Mug of tea as I walked through the door. His lasagne. Even naked hoovering. I never really knew what he’d do next. I remember watching

The Matrix with him one night and asking whether he'd take the red pill or the blue pill and, without even thinking about it, he'd said, 'Both.'

The flat seemed very empty without him. We'd been in and out of trouble together a long time. Even before we'd both left St Mary's, in fact. I told myself he wasn't far away and just because I couldn't see him didn't mean he couldn't see me. Unless Insight had quietly disposed of him, of course. That was a thought. They might have buried his body in the back garden, removed his few possessions and slunk away into the night. And then I remembered that any number of people had been trying to dispose of Markham since 1483 and not one of them had succeeded.

I sighed. All I could do now was carry on.

Alone.

The next stage of my training, I was informed, was to join someone else's assignment as an observer.

'Exciting,' I said excitedly.

Sadly, the downside was that I would be accompanied by my mentor. In case I had some sort of meltdown, presumably. I promised myself that should such a thing occur, I would certainly do my best to melt all over Geoff.

As it happened, however, I didn't need to. He did it all to himself. Other than throwing him off a cliff, I barely had to lift a finger.

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Finally, I got what other people have been saying for years. It *is* me.

I know I've always denied it, saying, 'If a thing can go wrong, then it will,' and blaming the god of historians – an airhead if ever there was one – or the universe, or the weather, or even anyone not around to defend themselves at the time. But no, I finally realise – it's me. I'd been with Insight what – six months? Eight? They were fine. Ruthless? Yes. Murderous thugs? Yes. But they were also an efficient bunch, competent and successful and all that, and then I turn up and on my very first assignment, things definitely do not go according to plan. It couldn't be a coincidence.

The only consolation is that Ramses is now in a better place – but otherwise, yeah, I finally get it. It's me. And probably always has been.

I didn't have to wait long for my first assignment. Only a few days later, Bridget informed me I was to be included on a job. 'Observation only,' she said sternly, and I honestly did mean to keep my head down and my mouth shut. Sadly, that didn't quite happen.

The best thing was that I finally made it down into their Pod Bay. Very gratifyingly, I'd been right all along. Access *was* through Bridget's office. She flashed a card at a discreet reader, the door opened, a light flickered on, and down we went. The staircase was narrow, twisting and made of metal. Our feet made hollow booming noises on the treads as we descended. Very slowly, because the lights were activated by motion sensors and only came on as needed. In front and behind, the rest of the staircase was in total

darkness. There was just enough light to see where to put our feet and no more. In other words – unless they brought their own light source, no attackers could ever run down these stairs. Anyone descending would have no choice other than to move slowly and cautiously. And noisily. Obviously, anyone like the Time Police would have headtorches or night visors, but this was another layer of Insight security.

We emerged into a tight, twisting, dimly lit corridor and I followed Geoff into what looked like a small briefing room. Four or five men, including Eddie, were already waiting. There were no screens, no maps or images – just a table and about ten cheap folding chairs. Geoff pointed to a seat, indicated that I should sit, and we waited in silence.

Bridget appeared, closing the door behind her. Everyone stood up as she entered. Including me. I don't normally do that sort of thing for anyone except Dr Bairstow, but now was probably not the moment to showcase my completely justified problems with authority.

Her briefing was flawless. Concise, on point and, from my point of view, interesting. Very, very interesting.

This was obviously the first everyone here – other than Bridget – had heard of our assignment. Yet another example of Insight not burdening their people with superfluous knowledge.

'In a word,' she announced. 'Butehamun.'

Another bit of backstory. Last Christmas, Markham and I had attended a Flying Auction. They pop up every now and then – sleek, well-run affairs at a secret location. Well, not secret to those in the know, obviously. Anyway, one of the many questions that arose from that – apart from very quickly learning how to arrest a room full of people single-handedly and why was the sword down Markham's trousers so unpleasantly warm? – was the enormous stone sarcophagus of Menkaure.

Markham and I had wondered how the organisers had managed to get anything so unwieldy out of its final resting place, because, trust me, that thing was *vast.* And heavy. And if Menkaure had been inside it still – *very*

heavy. A bit of a logistical nightmare to shift. And then, Markham had said something about how the easiest way to steal it would be to wait until someone else pinched it and had done all the hard work, and then to pinch it from the pincher.

I'd stored away that particular Brilliant Idea, meaning to speak to Smallhope and Pennyroyal about it when next we had a moment's peace, because it could be a quick and easy path to untold riches. It would appear, however, that Insight had had the same idea.

Butehamun was an Ancient Egyptian scribe who went on to become a state-sponsored tomb robber. At some point around the 20th and 21st dynasties, Egypt was, financially speaking, having a bit of a wobble. Not surprising, really, with so much treasure tied up in tombs. From a fiscal point of view, tomb robbers were actually doing the country a favour by hoicking out all that treasure, melting it down and putting it back into circulation.

Not surprisingly, some enterprising priests and court officials had had the same idea, except they'd made it legal. They appointed an official, gave him proper titles and job descriptions – Scribe of the Necropolis and Opener of the Gates of the Underworld being just a few of them – and sent him out to grab the gold.

Obviously, they didn't call it tomb robbing. The official reason, the state said, was that they were protecting the bodies of the kings and queens as they made their all-important journey to the afterlife – and the scribe appointed to oversee this was Butehamun, son of Dhutmose.

Butehamun set to with a will, even conscientiously – but not particularly gently – unwrapping the mummies themselves to get at the gold amulets and charms carefully placed among the mummy's wrappings. The mummy was then rewrapped – very carelessly in some cases – and replaced (often in the wrong coffin) and now that their tomb was no longer secure, reburied elsewhere. A lot of them ended up in the tomb of Amenhotep II, KV35.

Anyway, the point was that our idea – to steal from the original thief – was

obviously not new. Bridget's plan – Insight's plan, she said, but I was betting it was hers – was for us to station ourselves in an appropriate spot and relieve one of the state's donkey trains of any and all extraneous precious stones, gold, alabaster, cedarwood, etc., and return to base.

Interestingly, no specific date, time or location coordinates were discussed. If Bridget knew, she was keeping that information to herself. The coordinates, presumably, were preloaded. I looked around the room. Seven of us. A team of four, plus Eddie, plus me as observing trainee, plus, sadly, the very unlovable Geoff. Still, there would be lots of open tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Perhaps I could club him with a rock – no shortage of those, either – and roll him into something dark and deep. I found the thought quite cheering.

At the end of the briefing – from which I emerged only slightly less ignorant than when I went in – Bridget asked if there were any questions. It was very apparent from her tone and the way she was already gathering up her gear that she wasn't expecting any.

I put up my hand.

She raised an eyebrow and then remembered trainees were to be encouraged and their contributions valued. It would be in a mission statement somewhere. Plus, Insight had already invested a great deal of dosh in this particular trainee.

'Yes, Maxine?'

'What about the Medjay?'

The Medjay were the feared Egyptian police whose answer to pretty much every legal infringement was impalement. For everyone involved. Whether they were guilty or not. Rather like the Time Police when you think about it. Apart from the impalement bit, of course, although give them time.

Bridget's response was calm, practised and reassuring. 'Since Butehamun is actually an agent of the state, I think we can safely assume the Medjay will not be a problem. If indeed they are actually present.'

That was a relief. I had no intention of ending my days on a stick.

‘Are there any other questions?’ she said in a voice that made it quite clear there had better not be.

There weren’t.

Immediately after the briefing we were issued with our desert kit. I didn’t say anything because there was no point in making an issue of it, but I quietly tucked the Insight boots away in the bottom of a locker and wore my own. My boots and I had been together for a long time now and they knew what they were doing. It could be said that of the two of us, the boots were the brains. Actually, it *had* been said. On several occasions.

There was no separate female changing room. Other than Bridget, all the people I’d encountered during my new incarnation at Insight had been men. Perhaps they didn’t have female operatives. I changed behind my open locker door. No one paid me any attention. I had a horrible feeling my shaggable days were long past.

Everyone was issued with a weapon except me. Understandable, I suppose. No one wanted to be accidentally shot by a panicking trainee. Of course, there was always the possibility they’d be shot by a clear-headed, professional bounty hunter in the execution of her duties. Yes, that would be me, for anyone wondering.

Everything had been accomplished in almost complete silence. There were no bad jokes or insults. No banter. The atmosphere was tense but that might have been just me worrying about my innards and how they would behave.

‘Don’t forget your cam cream,’ said Eddie, holding up a jar. One of the few times he ever spoke to me directly. ‘Remember, it’s not there to emphasise your cheekbones or hide your wrinkles. It’s not make-up. It’s to disguise the pattern of your face.’

I knew that but didn’t say so. I also knew it gave you spots for days afterwards, but I didn’t say that, either.

Geoff seemed distressingly keen to apply mine for me, so I grabbed the jar from Eddie and smeared a dollop from my left eyebrow over the bridge of my nose and across my cheek.

Eddie regarded me. ‘A bit on your chin as well. And across your mouth.’

I complied.

‘Yeah, that’ll do. Don’t forget the back of your hands and ears.’

I passed the jar on to someone else and watched everyone apply theirs. They’d all done this before – I could tell. So, an experienced crew who almost certainly knew what they were doing. I remembered I was the nervous trainee.

‘How are you feeling?’ said Geoff.

I nodded. ‘Fine.’

‘It’s absolutely normal to feel a little apprehensive,’ he said, and I suddenly realised he was the one feeling a little apprehensive and was masking his fears by supposedly addressing mine.

Actually, I *was* a little apprehensive. I was making an illegal jump with a bunch of people about whom I knew nothing. In fact, pursuing my paranoia to its logical conclusion, suppose they knew who I was and this was another attempt on my life. Jump to Egypt and leave me there.

Logic said that was rubbish, but lacing up my boots in that whiffy locker room, in silence, in the presence of four unknown men – five, if you counted Eddie – oh, and Geoff, of course – I couldn’t help falling prey to all sorts of silliness. Anything could happen. Anything could go wrong. Suppose, for example, this was the night the Time Police got their act together and came after us. Or the Medjay didn’t get the memo about not impaling people tonight. Or the Lords of the Underworld took exception to our presence. Or this was the jump that finished me for good. Or any of the million and one things that could go accidentally wrong when people jumped up and down the timeline.

Pull yourself together, Maxwell. There was no reason to assume these Insight people suspected me. Or that they weren’t perfectly competent to carry out their assigned task. They would land, acquire their target, shoot anyone who got in their way and bring back as much as they could carry. Easy.

I made a mental note to ask Bridget about her plans for the treasure after we'd recovered it.

When everyone was ready, we entered another dimly lit room. I looked around. Finally. It had taken a long time but I was here at last. Insight's Pod Bay. I call it that because I never actually heard Insight refer to it at all – so in my head it became their Pod Bay.

I felt staring openly was perfectly acceptable under the circumstances so I made sure to take a good look around while making mental notes for the report I hoped I'd live long enough to write.

We were standing in a rectangular room with space for six pods – three down each side – although there were only two in at the moment. Interesting. Where were the other four and what were they up to? There were no plinths.

Locked weapons lockers stood against the far wall. Interestingly, Bridget made no attempt to explain them or their contents. Good to know my employers were keeping me in the dark about so many things.

As on my previous clandestine visit, the place was spotless. Big fans whirled in the high ceiling. The whole area was basic and utilitarian. There were no tools lying around. No staff rotas pinned to the walls. Not even the obligatory health and safety notices. Typical Insight. Efficient. Clean. Soulless. Sterile, even. I could have had my appendix out in here.

I turned to Geoff, whispering, 'Is this it? Are we actually doing it now? Time travel, I mean. Does it hurt?'

'No,' he said. Definitely not an occasion to say yes.

'How does it work?'

He shrugged and said disparagingly, 'I really have no idea. I have people for that.'

I saw Eddie stiffen slightly. Yes, Geoff – pissing off probably the only person who can drive the getaway car. Really smart move.

It had been a little while now since my last jump but that hadn't been too bad, and I was fairly confident I'd be fine for this one. Well, I had to be,

didn't I? If, after spending all that money on my training, Insight discovered I couldn't physically jump, then, knowing what I knew, I was a massive liability. A massive liability who wouldn't last the night, probably. They wouldn't shoot me here – inconvenient body disposal, etc. – they'd just push me out the door and leave me in Ancient Egypt. So . . . yeah . . . I'd be fine. I'd have to be.

Still in silence, we entered our pod. The one at the end on the left. A flat-roofed, plain, rectangular box – they hadn't even attempted to disguise it – but then, Insight pods were mostly for transportation only. They dropped their passengers and jumped away almost immediately.

I stood just inside the door as if unsure where to go or what to do next. I considered that now might be an appropriate moment to show a little apprehension. Reassuring me would give Geoff something to do and add to the myth that he was making a valued contribution.

The first thing that struck me was that Insight pods were considerably less sophisticated than those of both St Mary's and the Time Police. There were cameras but no recorders. No decon lamp that I could see. For all their avowed purpose of preserving and respecting History, they obviously didn't care what pathogens they carted from one time period to another. I couldn't help thinking back to the mysterious origins of several global pandemics.

No time for that, however. Concentrate, Maxwell.

This wasn't my first Insight pod – I'd once been having a poke inside one when the bloody thing kidnapped me. Which hadn't been the best moment of my life. This one was almost identical. There was a small control console, a large locker – weapons for the safe stowing of, presumably – together with what seemed to me to be a very inadequate first-aid kit. I suspected – well, I *knew* – that if one of the team were badly wounded then they were abandoned. Left in a foreign time and place to live or die. Die, almost certainly. And I already knew that if any of their people didn't make a rendezvous, then Insight wouldn't wait.

Which, actually, from a certain point of view, did make sense. Pods are

expensive to build. Very expensive, according to Dr Bairstow, who always reckoned you could buy an entire government for considerably less than the cost of one pod. That was the problem with homemade pods – people tended to cut costs, which led to cut corners, which inevitably led to a disaster that took a very long time to clear up. People, however, are usually provided free of charge – so obviously Insight policy dictated that if everything goes tits up then the priority was to save the pod. On the other hand, knowing you'd be abandoned forever if the mission went south had to be a really powerful performance incentive.

Eddie took a seat at the console and began to fire things up. I watched his hands move around the console. He'd done this before. Many times, by the look of it.

Bridget didn't stay around to see us off. I had the impression that everyone else was slightly nervous of her. Except Eddie, of course, although it was hard to tell with him because he wasn't a great one for facial expressions. Perhaps he'd realised that everyone spent all their time staring at his peculiar hair and so had abandoned any facial expressions as a waste of time.

We were all wearing coveralls in black and grey night-camo pattern. I'd been handed a black balaclava which was currently in my pocket.

Geoff touched my arm. 'Go and sit down. Don't touch anything.'

I nodded and did as I was told, rather enjoying the novelty of being the newbie.

The door closed. Eddie switched to interior night vision and bent over the console. There were no voice commands. I knew these pods could speak but the AI was also silent.

'Brace yourselves,' he said, so I did, artistically screwing my eyes shut at the same time.

I'm sure the world did something but my eyes were closed so I missed it.

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I did not throw up. There was a moment or two as the world wobbled, but as the newbie I had a perfect reason to stay frozen in my seat with my eyes shut while everyone else sorted themselves out. By the time they were ready to leave the pod, my innards were all more or less back in place and any residual wobbliness could easily be ascribed to newbie nerves.

I stood in the doorway while Eddie and his team assembled outside.

Dusk was falling on the Valley of the Kings. Dark purple shadows were sweeping across the valley floor while the tops of the surrounding hills were still lit up with golden sunlight. It was so beautiful I nearly forgot why I was here. Focus, Maxwell.

Around me, everyone was checking their weapons and pulling on night visors. I was struck by the contrast between St Mary's assignments and this smash-and-grab raid. No carefully contemporary clothing. More guns than you could shake a stick at. No attempt at concealment. And if they shot a contemporary, what would I do? There were a lot of weapons here. I had a vision of Insight stepping out of the shadows, gunning down Butehamun – if he was here in person, which I doubted – grabbing as much as they could carry, and heading straight back home again. Which meant the safety protocols on this pod must be extremely dodgy if it would allow them to do such a thing.

Well, yes, of course they would be, Maxwell. Not much point in bringing a pod that wouldn't jump if it detected something anomalous, is there? And I bet they'd never heard of FOD and POD plods, either – the mandatory final checks to ensure nothing has been left behind or accidentally picked

up.

The question was – what was I going to do about this? How much damage to History were these people causing? And I wasn't quite sure I wholeheartedly believed in Bridget's airy dismissal of the Medjay, either. To say nothing of the normal hazards of an historian's life – snakes, scorpions, Ancient Egyptian curses, flash floods. Don't laugh – we once nearly lost a security guard to drowning and we were all halfway up a mountain in the desert.

I sighed. In all probability, I would be very lucky to survive this night.

Which actually turned out to be an extremely accurate prediction although, as usual, the main problem came from a completely unexpected direction.

I stood quietly, breathing in the evening air. Even if I'd kept my eyes closed, I'd have known where we were as soon as they opened the door. The Valley of the Kings has its own distinctive smell. Dust, the desert, hot rocks, spices, *time*. It's an *old* smell. Unique and evocative. Nothing smells like the ancient desert kingdoms.

I waited while the team oriented themselves and tried to identify the particular tomb they wanted, wondering whether to offer my assistance and deciding against it. No one likes a smart arse.

'This way,' said Eddie eventually, shutting down his scratchpad and gesturing towards the western hills and the last light of Ra as he disappeared below the horizon all ready to battle his nightly foe, the serpent Apep. Or Apophis, as he's sometimes known.

Someone gave me a poke and we set off in single file. Quick and quiet. They were professional, at least. I had Geoff behind me, so pushing him off a cliff – accidentally, of course – was going to be quite tricky, but I refused to be downhearted. The night was young.

In the end, identifying the right tomb was no problem at all. It was the one with the smashed entrance, yawning black in the gathering dark. A small group of men were working around the doorway, carefully loading a group

of seven or eight donkeys waiting patiently. Each donkey carried a couple of wicker panniers, slung either side for balance, and most of them looked full. It was almost dark so it was safe to assume this would be the last load of the day.

I strained my eyes but shadows were creeping towards the entrance. Was this KV35? That would be amazing because Amenhotep II, Amenhotep III, Thutmose IV, Seti II, Merenptah, Queen Tiye and any number of Ramses were reburied in there thanks to Butehamun. I wondered if I'd be able to get inside.

There was a sudden click in the silence. And then two or three more. Safety catches. The truth hit me like a blow. Insight were going to gun them all down from up here. Then they'd stroll down the hillside, finish off anyone not quite dead, ransack the tomb – doing no end of damage to the contents – and bring everything back to the pod. Job done. An hour at the most, leaving a plundered tomb and a dozen dead men behind them.

I couldn't let that happen. Never mind whether it *could* happen – it *shouldn't* happen. I've always been convinced St Mary's only operates with the (mostly) goodwill of History and I could see that goodwill being withdrawn pretty sharpish if I let this go ahead. That might be me being over-fanciful, but I wasn't going to take the risk. Not with my lifestyle. I needed History on my side. What could I do? Where's a torrential downpour or a sandstorm when you need one?

I looked around. No inspiration struck. I looked behind. And up. OK . . .

I turned back and plucked at Eddie's sleeve.

'What?' he said, annoyed.

I gestured behind. 'Does that slope look a bit loose to you?'

He lowered his gun and turned. I wasn't lying. We were crouched on a path that wound its way around a steep slope consisting almost entirely of very loose shale. It wouldn't take much to set it off. A raised voice can set off an avalanche in the Swiss Alps. A twenty-second burst of machine-gun fire might do the same here. I hoped.

Eddie thought for a moment and then nodded. ‘Move out, everyone. Not you,’ he said to me. He looked at Geoff. ‘Or you.’

Well, that suited me. I wished he’d taken Geoff with him, though.

They followed the path and disappeared behind some rocks further down.

‘I think we should wait in the pod,’ said Geoff, suddenly very nervous now the guns had disappeared. What a wuss.

‘I think you’re right,’ I said demurely. Dr Bairstow wouldn’t have been deceived for a second. ‘Do you know the way? I think I might be a little lost.’

He nodded importantly. ‘This way.’

I let him get four or five paces ahead of me, picked up a convenient stone – there were a lot of them about – and threw it up the hill. It landed with a thud, and a fair bit of loose stuff started to slither down the slope. Perfect.

I called, ‘Geoff, look out. Behind you,’ and pushed him as hard as I could.

Just for a moment he balanced on the very edge, his arms flailing.

I called, ‘Here – take my hand,’ and reached for him. Unfortunately (!) I misjudged the distance in the dusk – so easily done if you’re a novice on your first jump ever – pushed rather than pulled – so easy to confuse the two – and regrettably, he disappeared from view. There was a long cry, a whirlwind of arms and legs, a lot of sliding shale and dust, and some unfortunate bouncing, all culminating in a bit of a collision with something fairly big and hard and rocky at the bottom.

I didn’t know where Eddie’s team was just at that moment, but the effect on the Egyptians below was immediate. They scattered. Interestingly, none of them ran back into the tomb where you might think they’d feel safer. I wondered whether, state-sanctioned though they might be, there was still a great deal of reluctance to disturb the dead. Especially dead pharaohs. Yes, I’m sure the senior officials were right on board with this sacrilege and desecration, but your average man on the street might have a very different view.

And now, with the shadows long and Ra about to disappear behind the highest hills, some sort of whirling devil was coming at them out of the night, half hidden in a cloud of dust and uttering wild cries and curses. They fled. I think there were about ten of them and they fled in at least twelve different directions.

Well, good job, Maxwell. Better still, the donkeys had disappeared with them and it was getting darker by the second. Eddie might actually decide to call it a night. Yeah – good job, Maxwell.

There was a sound behind me. I couldn't have told you what it sounded like – it was just a sound – but the smell was unmistakeable. A zoo smell. Rank and pungent. I was on my knees at the edge of the path, peering down at the tomb below. Slowly, very slowly, so as not to frighten anything, most of all me, I looked over my shoulder.

Bloody bollocking hell. A pair of yellow eyes gleamed at me. Which was bad enough. But they came with one of the biggest heads and jaws I'd ever seen in my life, and these in turn were attached to the heftiest pair of shoulders I'd ever seen in my life. I knew what this was. I was in Egypt, after all. I was looking at a hyena. And where there's one, there's always many more.

Holding it with my eyes, I groped for a rock to throw. I never got the opportunity. It ran straight at me. I dropped the rock and curled up in a foetal heap. One of my most frequently assumed positions. At any moment I expected excruciating pain as those massive jaws seized an arm or leg and crushed my bones. How much would it hurt?

Not at all was the answer to that. I felt it rush past me, smelled the truly awful smell – seriously, I never thought anything could be worse than sharing a pod with an unwashed Markham but apparently it could – and then it was gone. I thought I heard stones falling – caused by the rest of the pack, presumably – and then silence.

But only for a few seconds. The next moment the night was alive with the sound of hysterical braying. The hyenas hadn't wanted me at all. It was the

donkeys they were after. I tried not to feel slighted. After all, there was a lot more meat on me than a skinny Egyptian donkey. I began to feel the hyena's reputation for intelligence was overrated.

I clambered to my feet and drew in a few deep breaths. Eddie's night was not going according to plan. How could I make things even worse? I set off down the path, curious to see what sort of dog's breakfast I'd managed to make of things. Strangely, I felt quite at home. It was just like being back at St Mary's.

I'd just reached the bottom of the path when a voice said, 'Psst.'

Eddie was gesturing at me. Daylight was fading fast and I was completely unable to decide whether he was beckoning me forwards or telling me to go back so I assumed the former and joined him behind his rock.

'Hyenas,' I said in a whisper. 'Don't know how many. And Geoff fell over the cliff. Anything happening here?'

He pulled down his visor. 'Stay behind me.'

I was very willing to do just that and as Eddie's team moved cautiously forwards, guns raised, I followed them towards the dark entrance to the tomb.

We edged our way past the opening. To me it looked like an open mouth leading to the underworld. Half of me wanted to go in and look – the other half was advising me to stay well away. Just as I drew level, there was a sudden exhalation of stale air. As if whatever was in there had sighed. I didn't run because that would be undignified but I did pick up the pace, following the path around a large boulder.

Eddie halted suddenly and dropped to one knee. Everyone else followed suit.

There had been a movement in the dark. The men raised their weapons. Then lowered them again. Some of the donkeys had found a crack in the rock that was, in effect, a small, donkey-sized cave. They clustered together, bums pointing outwards, all ready to kick the living daylights out of any passing hyena. Of said hyenas there was no sign. I knew they would

choose the weakest target so perhaps they were following an elderly or injured donkey, silently creeping up behind him in the dark . . .

This, however, was a stroke of luck for Eddie and his team. We'd all watched the donkeys being loaded up. Their panniers would be stuffed with Egyptian goodies. We wouldn't even have to carry it ourselves – we could just lead the donkeys to the pod and unload there. No sign of the officials returning. If Insight were very quick, they could bag untold treasures with very little effort. Bloody bollocking hell – this wasn't what I'd planned at all.

On the other hand, if they just grabbed the gold and buggered off, then no one need die tonight.

'Grab those donkeys,' hissed Eddie.

'Slowly,' I said. 'They'll be nervous.'

'You do it, then,' he said.

I gave him a hard stare but it was dark.

'Go on,' he said, gesturing.

Thanks, Eddie.

Murmuring gently, I approached the nearest shaggy bottom. 'There's a good boy. Everything's fine. You're safe now. That's a good boy. Stand still now. What a good boy. Hold still . . .'

I inched my way past him, reached over and took hold of the rough rope noose around his neck. He didn't move. I pulled, very gently, because you can't rush a donkey. He was a very obedient boy. His ears were twitching nervously, but he responded to my tug, allowing me to pull him backwards out of the cave.

Eddie's team surged forwards. 'Gently,' he said to them irritably. 'Do you want to be chasing donkeys all night? Take it slowly.'

There was no need. I rather suspected I might have grabbed the boss donkey because, without a word from me, all the other donkeys turned as well, lined themselves up in single file and followed him out. How about that? I was a donkey whisperer.

‘Nice,’ said Eddie. ‘Well done, Maxine.’

I scowled because it was too dark for anyone to notice.

Eddie pulled the cover off one of the panniers and rummaged around.

‘Empty,’ he said incredulously.

The others were doing the same, flinging blankets to the ground in frustration. Every single pannier was empty. We stared at each other. How could this be? We’d watched the panniers being loaded. Gold is not light. It would have taken a while to unload again. Where could it possibly be? The hyena attack had taken less than a few minutes. Some donkeys had run off to take their chances in the desert. These few had huddled inside what could loosely be described as a cave and there they’d stayed. There were no other people here. Officials, labourers, slaves – they’d all scattered. So where was the bloody treasure?

‘What the fuck?’ said someone, and I have to say I was in complete agreement. What the fuck? Had the donkeys somehow all spontaneously shed their loads? No – nothing on the ground. Half a dozen donkey-loads of treasure had completely disappeared.

Eddie was not in the best mood. Actually, he was deeply unhappy. I didn’t blame him. He’d be carrying the can for this.

‘Jackson, keep watch for the workers coming back. They won’t leave this open tomb unguarded for long. Murthy and Barnett, look around. Find that bloody gold. Armin, check the cave in case there’s anything there. Maxine, you come with me.’

‘Where to?’

‘We’ll have a look inside the tomb – see if there’s anything still worth stealing.’

‘OK,’ I said, very willing to do that. The opportunity to study, however briefly, a newly opened Egyptian tomb? Point me at it.

We approached the dark hole that was the only way in.

‘Take my torch and stay behind me. Pick up anything you find.’

I nodded, all agog to get in there.

And then, in the silence . . . hoofbeats.

‘Fuck,’ said Eddie, who really wasn’t having a good night.

We drew back into the shadows. His team did the same. I heard the safeties coming off again.

The hoofbeats approached. Quite slowly and not quite evenly.

Eddie raised his gun . . . everyone else raised theirs . . .

A little donkey appeared from around the bend in the path. Walking very slowly. Every now and then he would raise his head and appear to sniff. One of the other donkeys made a low sound, the newcomer responded and then, having apparently arrived at his destination and presented his credentials, he halted and waited.

We waited too, but that appeared to be it. He was alone.

‘You’re the donkey whisperer,’ said Eddie, pushing me out on to the path. ‘Off you go.’

Off I went.

‘Hello, little fellow,’ I said, circling around to approach from the front. ‘Where have you been, eh? How did you get away from those nasty hyenas?’

His nose was soft and velvety as he gently sniffed my hands and then all down the front of me, incidentally covering me in donkey slobber.

Having waited to see whether I’d be savaged or not, Eddie’s team appeared. Someone kicked a rock and the little donkey threw up his head and stepped back.

‘Hang on,’ I said. ‘Just stand still a moment.’

They stood still a moment.

I peered at the donkey’s big, milky eyes. ‘I don’t think he can see very well. Don’t make any sudden movements. We don’t want to frighten him off.’

‘Don’t we?’ said someone.

‘No, we don’t,’ I said, lifting a scabby blanket off his left-hand pannier. ‘Because this one’s carrying a full load.’

‘Everyone wait here,’ said Eddie. He approached the donkey from the front as I had done. I presumed that was where his vision was best. The donkey’s, I mean. Eddie moved slowly, but I held on to the rope collar, just in case. He held out his hand and was subjected to sniffing and slobber and then he gently pulled the blanket off the other pannier.

‘Gold here, too. Well done, lads. Not a bad night’s haul. Bridget will be pleased.’

There were some noisy exhalations of relief. Bridget being pleased was obviously everyone’s number one priority.

‘Let’s get him back to the pod,’ I said, looking around. ‘We won’t be alone for much longer.’

We set a brisk pace back up the path. Murthy went first, leading the way. Then me with the donkey. Then Jackson and Barnett. Eddie and Armin brought up the rear, stopping to check behind us every few moments. I was actually quite impressed by Eddie’s performance. As a filing clerk he was crap, but he certainly knew his way around an assignment.

We were just approaching the pod when I suddenly remembered. ‘Shit.’

‘What?’ said Eddie, striding to catch me up and looking around. ‘What?’

‘Geoff. I forgot Geoff.’

‘We all forgot Geoff,’ said someone, sounding remarkably unperturbed. ‘Where is he?’

‘He fell off the cliff,’ I said, adding quickly, ‘when the hyenas attacked,’ feeling this statement was close enough to the truth for bounty hunter work. ‘And then I forgot him.’

The silence indicated this was perfectly understandable.

‘He could be badly hurt,’ I said, not relinquishing my grip on the donkey and certainly not volunteering to go down and look.

Suddenly, no one was catching Eddie’s eye. Not that that did Murthy and Jackson any good. They were despatched to go and hunt for Geoff.

‘Is this Insight’s policy?’ I asked, resuming my role as trainee. ‘We never leave our people behind?’

Eddie shook his head. ‘Geoff’s management,’ he said briefly. ‘Minor management but management nonetheless. Shitload of paperwork if you lose one of them.’

I nodded sagely. Some things never change.

Sadly, Geoff was retrieved and I have to say he did not look good. Even allowing for all his natural disadvantages – appearance, attitude, personal hygiene, brain the size of a politician's integrity, charisma bypass and so forth – he looked terrible. Wherever he'd landed, his face had arrived first. To be specific, his nose – which was now spread over most of his face. The contents of his nose were spread over most of the rest of him. What wasn't covered in blood was covered in dust or ripped to shreds by sharp stones. Everyone took a step away from him. Even the short-sighted donkey.

Unfortunately, Geoff wasn't. Short-sighted, I mean. He raised a trembling finger. 'What is that?'

Everyone looked at the donkey. 'He's a donkey,' I said. Perhaps Geoff had banged his head and was suffering short-term memory problems. I myself, while under the influence of some very dodgy medication, had once forgotten the word for Doncaster. And before anyone says, 'It's *Doncaster*, you daft bat,' yes, I know that now, I just couldn't remember it at the time.

Geoff swept all this aside. 'I can see it's a donkey – what's it doing here?'

'Carrying the gold.'

Which shut Geoff up for a moment.

'So what the hell happened to you?' said Eddie.

Geoff swung back to me. I had a horrible feeling his short-term memory wasn't anything like as badly affected as I could wish.

'Oh,' I warbled. 'He was amazing. There was a rockslide. I was terrified. Geoff tried to save me. He was so brave. Somehow he fell off the cliff. I tried to save him, but it was too late. I'm so pleased you're all right, Geoff.'

Murthy turned his head. ‘Voices down below,’ he said softly. ‘Coming up the path. We should go.’

‘No time to unload,’ I said, and before anyone could object, I led the donkey into the pod.

Eddie followed me in. ‘We could just unfasten the baskets,’ he said in an undertone.

‘We could,’ I said, ‘but I don’t want to leave a blind donkey up here with hyenas about.’

‘We’re not taking a donkey back with us,’ snapped Geoff. ‘It’s completely against regulations to have livestock in the pod. I’ll have you up before the Board for this night’s work, Middleditch.’

‘And say what?’

‘That under your leadership this mission has been a complete fiasco.’

Eddie gestured to the gold. ‘Gold.’

Geoff gestured to the donkey. ‘Donkey.’

No one actually gestured to Geoff and said, ‘Idiot,’ but it was close.

I assisted the situation by keeping my mouth shut.

Geoff started to say something else, but Eddie – who I’d swear would happily have pushed the donkey out into the night if Geoff had just had the sense to shut up – cut across him, saying sharply, ‘The donkey stays. Sit down, everyone – not you, Maxine. You’re with the donkey. I’m taking us home.’

I made very sure to stand alongside the console because I needed to check the coordinates. I’d had a Brilliant Idea which would need to be very carefully planned.

We landed back at Insight and everyone picked up their gear and departed, leaving Eddie shutting things down, me, and the donkey. Whom I’d named Ramses because there was something about his nose that reminded me of Ramses II.

‘Get it out of here before it craps all over everything,’ said Eddie.

Bridget was waiting for us. Eddie’s team, all safely behind her, were

grinning their heads off and enjoying the show. Geoff was talking and gesturing but since he was always talking and gesturing, I didn't pay a lot of attention.

Neither did Bridget. Her eyes widened as I stepped out of the pod. Cutting Geoff off in mid-sentence, she stared at me, utterly gobsmacked. Probably for the first time ever. She actually took a step back and then stood, one hand covering her eyes – presumably she couldn't believe them – and leaning against the desk in the corner. For support, I guessed.

I have to say I was slightly disappointed. Dr Bairstow would either have:

1. Taken everything in his stride and been sarcastic at everyone involved, and then pushed off, or
2. Taken very good care not to have seen any of it and only reappeared when his staff had successfully dealt with the situation. That there is a mammoth in the Pleistocene Park – part of their successful cloning programme – is testament to the success of this tactic.

However, I was dealing with amateurs here.

Bridget pulled herself together. 'Who is responsible for . . . ?'

All eyes turned to me.

'It's not a huge disaster,' I said, slipping effortlessly into damage limitation mode. 'We've brought back gold as you instructed – it's just still in its original container, that's all. Don't think of it as a donkey – think of it as an early Egyptian forklift. You grab the treasure and I'll take him to the nearest park and leave him there. He can have a nice rest and eat some grass. Someone will see him and ring the police or an animal rescue place. They'll find him a lovely home and he'll live happily ever after. No one will ever associate him with Insight. Problem solved. Everyone's happy.'

I beamed.

Personally, I thought that was definitely one of my more Brilliant Ideas, conceived on the spot and solving everyone's problems with minimum pain and expense, but even so, I suspected Bridget only said yes just to piss off Geoff. As anyone would.

'Don't get caught, Maxine. Insight will accept no responsibility.'

'Understood.'

Geoff drew himself up. Very clearly not happy. 'I have deep concerns at the way this mission has been allowed to deteriorate. Middleditch's handling of . . .'

Bridget had other priorities. 'Did you get anything?'

Eddie nodded. 'An entire donkeyful of gold.'

Someone snorted. Geoff wheeled about but everyone's face was suddenly as blank as a very blank thing.

Eddie twitched aside a blanket and pulled out what looked like a golden palette. A beautiful piece of work. This would have sat on a queen's dressing table somewhere. And a tiny golden statuette. And a lovely alabaster box that glowed even in the dim light of their Pod Bay.

'Not bad,' said Bridget, who always gave credit where it was due. 'Nice work, everyone. The usual bonus for you at the end of the month.'

'I think not,' said Geoff nastily. Perhaps his nose was hurting him. I have to say he was cutting a very unimpressive figure. At some point he'd been slobbered on, his front was a messy mixture of blood and dust, and his nose was turning purple. And it wasn't as if he'd been particularly attractive in the first place.

He'd said the wrong thing now, however. Never get between a minion and his bonus. The atmosphere changed immediately. Somewhere, a safety clicked again. The message was unmistakeable.

'Thank you, everyone,' said Bridget smoothly. 'Unload our friend here and then have a drink on me.'

We were dismissed. Except me, obviously. I looked around as everyone shuffled off, carrying the panniers between them, and realised I might have

fallen short in the planning part of my scheme. I couldn't see a door anywhere. How was I going to get Ramses out?

I turned to Bridget. 'How do I get him out? Those stairs are a bit narrow.'

She put her hands on her hips. 'Really? You didn't think of that before bringing him back here?'

'Um . . . well . . . no, not really. I just . . .'

'Yes?'

'If I tell you I mostly did it to piss off Geoff, will you refuse to tell me where the exit is and Ramses and I will have to stay here forever?'

'You cannot think how tempted I am to do just that.'

I hung my head in badly simulated repentance.

It turned out there *was* a loading door. I had not known that, so there was more useful information gleaned. I was having a very productive night.

Bridget headed towards the stairs and then turned back. 'And for God's sake, wash your face first.'

I left Ramses dozing peacefully in the Pod Bay while I shot into the locker room, changed, tidied myself up as best I could, returned to the Pod Bay, gently woke him up, exited through a hitherto unsuspected loading bay, and strolled through the dawn streets towards Russell Square Gardens. I'd chosen them a little bit because they were close at hand, a little bit because I knew where they were, but mostly because they contained some very interesting features. And one of them was named Markham.

The sun was up when I arrived and the gates were already open, which was good. I thought Ramses would be thirsty so I led him to the central fountains. They weren't founting at the moment but the basin was full and he enjoyed a good long drink.

Fun Fact – as Markham would say – an old man once told me that to know a good, honest horse, watch the way he drinks. If he just puts his lips to the water, sips gently and does everything but crook his little finger, then think again. If, however, he shoves half his face under the water, slurps like a congested drain and the level of the water drops a good twelve inches,

then you've got yourself a winner.

I'd chosen well. Ramses was a winner. He lifted his head, water cascading like Niagara, and snorted. And there was another outfit covered in donkey slobber.

He stuck his head in for another go. I pulled him away because I didn't want him taking on too much too quickly, and we perambulated the park with Ramses snorting and sniffing at all this unfamiliar green stuff. It was a fine morning. What was the rush?

I soon found what I was looking for. Just behind the toilets . . .

He wasn't there. The pod was but he wasn't. For God's sake, I'd been to Ancient Egypt and back, I was standing here with an illegal donkey, and he wasn't here. I could be having all sorts of crises. Bloody wonderful back-up he was.

Then I stopped, had a bit of a think and found the sign saying 'Toilets'. I followed the path and there they were. Ignoring the Ladies – because they were further away – I turned into the Gents, saying, 'This way,' to Ramses and we clopped our way inside. No turnstiles, thank heavens. Negotiating a turnstile takes more skill and coordination than is usually associated with Markham.

I think Ramses thought the washbasins were some sort of manger. I put in the plug and turned on the taps and off he went again. Water slopped everywhere as he practically immersed himself. I wondered if perhaps, as a working donkey, he wasn't allowed to drink during the day. It seemed likely.

I looked at the four doors. Three read 'vacant' and one 'engaged'. As if that wasn't enough, a voice on the other side of the door was intoning, '. . . Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen . . .'

I had no idea what was going on in there and I certainly wasn't going to ask, so I just folded my arms and waited while an unseen voice chanted, 'Eighteen, nineteen, twenty.'

The voice ceased. There was a short silence while I tried not to use my

imagination, the chain pulled, the door opened and Markham said, ‘Most people hear hoofbeats and think horses. A few hear hoofbeats and think zebras. I hear hoofbeats and think Maxwell. Especially when they’re in the Gents’ lav.’

I ignored this. ‘What on earth were you doing in there?’

‘The usual.’

‘We have a bathroom in the pod.’

‘I’m conserving energy.’

‘Yours or the pod’s? And why were you in a stall?’

‘Privacy. Obviously.’

‘You saw me coming and you hid in a stall?’

‘Nearly right. I saw you coming with a bloody donkey. One tried to eat me once.’

I ignored this. There isn’t an animal on the planet who hasn’t tried to eat him at one time or another.

‘You were counting.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, here’s a Fun Fact for you.’

Markham’s Fun Facts are usually anything but. ‘Never mind that now – I need your help.’

He stared at me. ‘You certainly do. Whatever have you been up to? And why is there a donkey?’

‘Long story involving gold and hyenas. We need to save this little fellow.’

He was keeping his distance. ‘You’re not bringing it into the pod.’

Markham has never related well to the animal world and the animal world is relentless in its quest to wipe him from the face of the earth. This could be the trickiest part of the whole operation.

‘I saved him,’ I said. ‘I can’t abandon him now. Someone will make sausages out of him.’

‘From what?’

‘From him, of course, you muppet.’

Markham sighed in a manner that actually reminded me of Pennyroyal. And Leon. And Dr Bairstow. Has anyone else noticed how often men sigh? ‘No – what did you save him from?’

‘I think you mean from what did I save him.’

‘What?’

I intoned,

‘Death.’

He looked startled. ‘You sound like a Rider of Rohan.’

We paused for a moment for the inevitable result of a donkey drinking an entire washbasinful of water. None of it went in the urinal so he was obviously upholding the proud standards of men everywhere. And before anyone starts whinging, all I can say is that Matthew can shoot an arrow and hit a target at fifteen yards but still can’t aim his own pee down the gaping maw of a toilet six inches in front of him. *Get it down the pan, guys.*

Where was I? Yes, in the blokes’ bogs with a scruffy, stubborn, lower life form. And a donkey.

‘Where are Pennyroyal and Smallhope?’

‘Still at Home Farm. As far as I know.’

‘In that case, we need to take Ramses back to St Mary’s.’

‘What?’

‘Via Home Farm.’

‘Why?’

I frowned. ‘This has to happen because I think it already has.’

He closed his eyes. ‘Oh God.’

Ten minutes later we were back at Home Farm. Me, Markham, and the most widely time-travelled donkey in History. And no lingering after-effects for me, either. I began to entertain a faint hope of recovery.

We sat in the kitchen – without Ramses, obviously; he was in the barn

getting himself on the outside of an entire haystack. I have to say events took some explaining. No one seemed able to get past the donkey.

Eventually, after I'd demonstrated using the cruet set and Pennyroyal's scratchpad and they still hadn't got it, I said, 'Look, I'm there in Egypt watching them load the donkeys.'

I stood up and mimed being there in Ancient Egypt.

Everyone stared, baffled.

I persevered.

'The gold is definitely being loaded on the donkeys. I watched it. Gold . . .'

I mimed gold.

'Donkeys . . .'

I mimed uniting one with the other.

'There's a hyena attack during which no one covers themselves in glory. When everything sorts itself out, the gold has completely disappeared.'

I mimed shock and amazement.

'All the donkeys were empty. Except for Ramses here because he'd wandered off. The Egyptian officials were coming back and so we legged it back to the pod.'

'With the donkey,' said Pennyroyal, pursuing as doggedly as only he can. I suspected it was only my frequent use of the word gold that was keeping me from an early death.

'Yes,' I said patiently. 'With Ramses, the fully laden donkey. But you're missing the important bit.'

'No,' said Pennyroyal in the tone of voice a prudent person would heed. 'I don't think I am.'

'Where did all the other gold go?'

Pennyroyal opened his mouth and then closed it again.

'Exactly,' I said. 'Gold is heavy. You know that. It would have taken nearly as long to unload as to load. Where did all that gold go? Who took it? And what did they do with it?'

‘How much gold?’ he said.

‘Masses,’ I said, waving my arms so he’d know exactly how much gold had gone missing. ‘At least five donkeys’ worth.’

I stared at them, willing them to get it.

‘Are you saying,’ said Pennyroyal, ‘that *we* steal the gold?’

‘I am. You have a very narrow window of opportunity. Only minutes between the hyena attack, donkey panic and the arrival of Eddie’s team. Good luck.’

I made for the door.

‘Aren’t you taking the donkey with you?’ enquired Smallhope.

‘No time. Here’s the coordinates.’ I passed over a scruffy bit of paper. ‘And when you’ve finished, could you drop him off at St Mary’s, please. The big field next to the stables. Now we have to get back.’

We left our employers in the barn, staring at a small and dusty donkey.

‘That was fun,’ I said.

Markham grinned.

I left him resuming his interrupted ablutions in Russell Square Gardens and strolled back to Insight. *Sans* donkey, as per instructions.

I never found out what Insight did with their gold because I forgot to ask.

23

The very next day Bridget invited me into her office. Given the dog's breakfast my first assignment had turned into, together with my leading role in said dog's breakfast, I was somewhat apprehensive. Setting aside any and all complaints made by the lovely Geoff, Insight did not strike me as the sort of people who would be happy with me having brought a donkey on to the premises, even if he had brought his own gold. However, to reassure nervous readers, at no point was Ramses mentioned and I have to say, given the subsequent conversation, he went straight out of my head. Along with the gold.

'Do you fancy lunch?' Bridget said.

'I always fancy lunch. Do you mean today?'

'Yes – now you've completed the first stage of your training – more or less successfully . . .'

'Is Geoff very upset?'

'Oh God, yes. Well done.'

'It was my pleasure,' I said.

'I thought we could talk about your next stage.'

'OK,' I said. 'In the meantime . . .'

'Yes, back to work as normal, I'm afraid.'

I was slightly surprised to find myself taken next door to the bookshop for lunch. We normally went to a very nice little place on the corner where they knew Bridget, and I could stuff myself on bao buns. After Bridget had finished talking, however, I could understand why we hadn't gone

anywhere public. I didn't know it at the time, but I was in for the second most astonishing lunch of my life.

For a start, Bridget shunted me into one of the discreet booths where the senior staff usually ate and there was waiter service. And she sat me with my back to the room which I didn't much care for.

'We'll eat in a moment,' she said to the waiter, who immediately disappeared.

'Maxine . . .' She paused.

I felt my stomach shift. Something was coming and I had no idea what.

'Maxine, I want to ask you something . . .' She stopped. 'There's no right or wrong answer – just the one that you give. And no consequences, either.'

'All right,' I said cautiously. 'Am I in trouble?'

'No. Not at all. Far from it.'

'All right,' I said again, not reassured in any way.

'Maxine, you are now a member of the Insight elite and this entitles you to certain benefits and . . . privileges.'

I brightened up immediately. 'You mean like a bonus of some kind?'

'Yes, although the bonus would be non-monetary.'

I think my mind was running along the lines of gift certificates, so I was completely unprepared.

'Certain members of Insight – of whom you are now one – are entitled to avail themselves of a number of services.'

'What sort of services?'

Again, I was thinking hairdressing appointments, theatre tickets . . .

'Sexual services.'

I didn't fall off my chair. For which I think I deserve some credit. Neither did I laugh – which was my first reaction – because . . . well . . . this was me . . . and there was Leon . . . and I'd rather thought that Bridget herself was . . . well . . . you have to admit . . . and . . .

At this point my thoughts hit the buffers and toppled off the rails.

'Sorry?' I said. 'Could you run that by me again?'

‘Insight ask a lot from their people. There isn’t always the time for a normal social life. Well, actually, there’s never the time for a normal social life. Life here is intense. Pressures build. You know . . .’

‘Most employers just offer free membership at a gym for that sort of thing.’

‘There’s that too, if you want it. There’s a whole range of benefits . . .’

But Bridget had chosen to mention this one.

I rather suspected I now had a decision to make. Not about the whole employee-with-benefits thing but something more personal. I’d had the impression, as soon as I’d first met Bridget, that there was . . . an interest. And there was that moment as we fought together. *You bitch – I could have loved you.* She was looking at me now. If I returned that look . . . if I gave her to understand . . . ? How far was I prepared to take this to get what I wanted?

OK – deal with first things first.

‘Thank you very much for the offer,’ I said. ‘Because you asked me to, I’ll be frank. That sort of thing isn’t really my bag. I . . .’ I paused artistically. ‘I’ve actually had very few relationships in my life.’ Which was true. ‘I don’t seem to need them. To have people close to me makes me uncomfortable. I like easy, friendly relationships with no trauma, no drama, and definitely no commitment.’

Bridget nodded. ‘From what I’ve seen of you, I can well believe that. Does this mean, though, that you’ve permanently closed the door on anything . . . potential?’

‘I’m not sure . . .’ I said slowly, twiddling my water glass and striving to give the impression of someone completely out of her depth. For the record – not a lot of striving required.

‘Maxine, am I making you uncomfortable? We can talk of something else if you like.’

‘No, no, I’m not uncomfortable. Well, not much, and it’s more the discomfort of addressing something I’ve always suspected other people

might regard as not quite . . . normal . . . but I've grown to accept. If that makes sense.'

'It does indeed. I'm going to ask you a question. Please answer honestly. Would you accept an easy, friendly relationship with me?'

Now I fiddled with my cutlery. 'I assume you're talking about being more than my boss?'

'If you would be comfortable with that.'

I took refuge in bureaucracy. 'Would it be allowed? How would that square with Insight policy on inter-staff relationships?'

'Well, I admit . . . this . . . if there is a *this* . . . would be my first. I don't know if you were aware of it as well, but from the first time we met, I've been conscious of a . . . desire to know you better. There's a connection between us. We think alike. I can relate to you.' She too rearranged her cutlery for the umpteenth time. 'It's not just the physical thing. I had forgotten . . . until you turned up, just how . . . Not lonely . . . not exactly . . . but how pleasant it is to . . . to have someone to laugh with. Who finds the world as ridiculous as I sometimes do. I think that's quite rare, don't you? That sort of connection, I mean.'

She shot me a quick look and then went back to her cutlery.

I had no idea what to do. Or say. Or feel. Bridget was one hundred per cent sincere – I'd known her long enough to be able to tell. She meant every word. She did have feelings for me, and they were genuine. What should I do?

Not panic. I should definitely not panic. OK. So, while not panicking in any way – what else should I do?

Bridget was my way into Insight. I *should* do everything I could to stay on her right side. But she wasn't stupid. If I faked feelings I didn't have, she'd know immediately and then I'd be in real trouble.

I stared at my spoon and suddenly everything became clear. I should set aside the Insight stuff – I should do what I normally would on this sort of occasion.

What had I done when Leon stumblingly laid out his feelings for me?

Well, that was easy – I'd floundered through the Shoals of Incoherence to land squarely on the Shores of Complete Word Failure.

The fog of panic cleared. Inarticulateness is something I can do really well.

'Um . . . well . . . you might not be aware, but I'm not actually very good at this sort of thing . . .'

She put her hand to her chest and affected astonishment. 'No . . . !'

'I . . . um . . . well . . . I think . . . perhaps . . . I . . .' I looked up in completely unsimulated anxiety. 'If you . . . I . . . we . . . do decide . . . um . . . could we . . . um . . . go at this quite slowly?'

'I think that's a very good idea. This is quite a big thing for me, and I suspect an even bigger thing for you.'

I nodded. 'It is.' I moved on to fiddling with my fork. 'I have to tell you – I'm flattered, but I haven't actually had that many romantic attachments. I'm not one of those idiots who thinks their life is incomplete without an intimate partner.'

'Can I ask why not? And I'm only asking – please don't read any disapproval into my question. Why don't you want an intimate partner?'

'Are you going to tell me that's not normal?'

'No. I'm curious. On the face of it, you're easy-going, friendly, good--natured, reasonably attractive – even Eddie quite likes you. You could enjoy any number of close relationships if you chose and yet you don't. Your whole lifestyle seems geared to avoiding them. Why?'

'I was subjected to a close relationship at the age of nine,' I said bluntly. 'Which was when I discovered I really didn't care for that sort of thing. Do you know what the soup is today?'

Bridget looked up, shock on her face. 'Oh, Maxine, I'm so sorry.' She cast a quick look around and said, 'Is he still alive? Would you like him not to be?'

OK – so we'd gone from me being offered the services of an official

Insight gigolo, to discussing a potential relationship with my supervisor, to putting out a contract on my father. I hope by now everyone can see how I came to forget the donkey.

'He's already dead,' I said, because that was true.

'Shame. But we could always dig him up and jump on his bones. What do you say?'

I choked out a laugh and felt some of the tension slide away, which was, no doubt, exactly what she'd intended.

I sipped some water. 'To return to my previous question – and I only ask as someone perpetually in trouble for breaking everyone else's rules – what is Insight's policy on inter-staff relations?'

'Insight regulations wouldn't be a problem. We wouldn't be the first. Far from it – which takes me back to the whole *not having time for a relationship in the outside world* thing I mentioned earlier. There's a form to sign, of course. Well, actually, there are about twenty forms to sign, but that's pretty much it. Basically, they say I can't use you just for sex and you can't use sex to gain accelerated promotion.'

'Damnation,' I said. 'Sorry – that's a dealbreaker. Forget it – the whole thing's off.'

She smiled at me. A warm, shy, uncertain smile. She was right. This was a big thing for her as well as for me. Some people don't find it easy to talk about their feelings – or in my case, even having them – and she'd clearly taken a big leap today. I could have run screaming from the room, straight to personnel to lodge a complaint. I could have laughed at her. I could have rejected her loudly and publicly. I could have recoiled in disgust. Bridget had spoken out and by doing so had launched herself off a cliff into the unknown. No wonder she'd screamed her hatred of me at the end, at Home Farm, when she found out I wasn't what or who she thought I was. I could well imagine all her rage and humiliation at my betrayal. And her very understandable desire for revenge. Don't think I didn't feel a pang of conscience, because I did.

‘I think,’ Bridget said, ‘that until you finish your training, we shouldn’t . . . our best course is to remain . . .’

‘Platonic?’ I said.

‘Yes. I don’t want to be accused of grooming vulnerable trainees and I’m sure you don’t want to be accused of sleeping your way to success. Especially since you’ve already been marked out for big things. Perhaps, when your training is completed and we can meet on a more equal basis . . .’

I tried not to nod too enthusiastically. An excellent solution. And it kicked the problem of anything more intimate further down the road. For the time being, anyway.

I sat back in my chair, my shirt cold and clammy with sweat. That had been quite a . . . difficult moment, but Bridget could be my entrée to the very heart of Insight. Suddenly the future looked bright and full of opportunity. Until I was found out, anyway.

Too late to step back now.

‘Ready to order yet?’ said the waiter.

Three days later, well ahead of schedule, and, I was certain, as a result of my lunch date with Bridget, I was awarded my very first proper assignment.

'I'll be with you on this one,' said Bridget.

I grinned and asked why.

She grinned back. 'Well, obviously I enjoy your company.'

'And Geoff has refused to get into a pod with me ever again.'

'Something like that, yes. Again – well done. The rest of us are wishing we'd thought of a donkey years ago. Anyway, standard procedure: I show you how it's done. Then we do the second one together. You do the third one by yourself, but I'll be on hand just in case. After that, if you're confident, you're on your own. OK?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Sounds good. What have we got?'

'The usual first assignment. A resettlement.'

'Great.'

Bridget pushed over a black file. No name, just a file number as usual. 'Have a look through that while I nip off for a quick word with Eddie.'

I sat back and opened the rather slim file.

There wasn't a lot there.

Svetlana Koslova, aged thirty-one – although she looked younger – and her daughter, Anastasia, aged nine. Not their real names.

Svetlana had been married. There were no details – nothing to reveal her real identity – but apparently her husband was the semi-public face of something fairly unpleasant and she'd done the unthinkable and left him. No reasons were given and obviously we didn't have his version of events. I

was interested to see the first thing Insight had done was demand proof Svetlana could afford their services. There were several pages of financial details. It would seem Svetlana had spent years very slowly and carefully amassing enough money to escape, skimming some here, some there, squirrelling it away, never spoiling things by being too greedy, bit by bit by bit until, finally, the day came. She set out one day on a perfectly normal shopping trip, gave her escort the slip, collected Anastasia from a prearranged location and the two of them had disappeared.

I bet heads rolled that day.

However – things are never that easy. Twelve months later, Svetlana embarked on a tentative relationship with a new man and the guy died badly. Car crash.

Mother and daughter fled once again, started a new life again and the same thing happened again. It was very apparent that wherever Svetlana went, whatever she did, eventually her husband would find her. It was only a matter of time before he tired of the game, and when that day came . . .

I stopped reading at that point and sat back for a bit of a think, trying to imagine what their life must be like. Staying inside. Never venturing out. Continually watching for signs of anyone showing an interest. Or, if Svetlana did go out, scanning the faces of everyone around her. Waiting for the gunshot. Or the car that would mow her down as she crossed the road. Or the supposed mugging gone wrong. Or the prick of a hypo as someone brushed against her in a crowd. Or worse – that it would happen to Anastasia first. That was Svetlana's life. Day after day. Year after year. How do you live with that level of constant vigilance?

Well, you don't. Not if you can afford the solution. Insight weren't cheap, though. She must have really ripped off the old man before she left him, and he was making her pay. So now she'd come to Insight looking to them – sorry, us – to solve her problems.

I'd been prepared for someone unpleasant enough to have made their own time too hot to hold them. Another Feeney or Winterman – two very major

and very unpleasant criminals who had briefly benefitted from Insight's resettlement facilities. Someone who wouldn't be much of a loss when Insight had them murdered. Not this. This was going to be a problem.

But not yet. Pay attention, Maxwell.

'Is this it?' I said, as Bridget came back in again. 'Is this all we have to work with?'

'That's not necessarily bad. Trust me, a file six inches thick with a detailed list of client demands is far more difficult to deal with. This one hasn't expressed any sort of preference for relocation so we can easily pop these two anywhere.'

I placed the file on her desk and said, 'The kid's going too?'

She nodded.

Which meant that Anastasia would die along with her mother. But I wasn't supposed to know anything about that.

I pushed the file towards Bridget. 'What now? Do we already have a . . . a date and place for them?'

'A location has been selected, yes.'

I crossed my fingers in my lap. Don't let it be 19th-century London. Not Swan Court. Not Swan Court. Not Swan Court.

'London,' she said. 'Eighteen ninety-five. A very nice house in a place called Swan Court has recently become available. One of my favourites.'

I called down silent but massive curses upon the head of every god who had ever existed. Trust me, I really put my back into it. No god anywhere, past, present or future, escaped my blanket cursing. Basically, if you were a god you were cursed. By me. And what are you going to do about it, eh?

On the other hand, I'd missed 1893 – the date of my last visit there so, you know – good and bad.

'OK,' I said casually. 'What would you like me to do now?' I had a sudden Brilliant Idea. 'Shall I go and check the place out? You know – get everything ready in advance, interview staff, all that sort of thing.'

She shook her head. 'No need. We've used the house before. We know

what we're dealing with.'

'Oh? Does that mean there's someone living in it now?'

There was only the tiniest pause. 'Not any longer. We often use this property as a kind of entry-level house. Clients stay just long enough to find their feet and then they move on.'

'Move on?'

'Yes – they buy their own property elsewhere. A lot of people don't like the noise and dirt of London and move to a more rural location.'

'And do we assist with the move?'

'We can do, yes, but only if they want us to.'

I made a mental note never to forget that Bridget Lafferty was a superb liar. So that was the two of us at it, then.

'I'd like you to do your thing,' she continued. 'Put together a briefing document for the 1890s. Just as you did for your essay. Tailor it to a widow and her daughter. Independent means.'

I probed gently. 'Including education and such for Anastasia?'

Bridget smiled at me. Bright, friendly, deceitful, deadly. 'Oh yes. Anastasia will be included at every stage of the operation.'

Our clients – or victims, depending on your point of view – came to Insight two days later. Bridget handled the interview while I took notes. We were in one of the smaller boardrooms – a pleasant, sunny room – and refreshments were laid out ready. Delicate sandwiches, cakes and coffee. All of which was a complete waste of time because neither Svetlana nor her daughter touched a thing. Bridget shook her head when I asked if I could get her anything, and because she wasn't eating anything, I didn't feel I should, either. The whole lot went back to the kitchen untouched. Broke my heart.

The three of us adults sat around the table. Anastasia, at a word from Svetlana, took herself off to a corner and sat down. She made no protest or comment. She seemed a confident and self-possessed little girl, clearly accustomed to unfamiliar situations. Svetlana herself chose a seat against

the wall, away from the windows and with clear access to the door, while a couple of private security guards waited outside in the corridor. The door was protected, the kid was in the corner where she couldn't be easily reached, and Svetlana was in a defensive position but able to get out should she need to.

Svetlana and Bridget were soon deep in discussion over my briefing document – life in the 1890s, specifically 1895 – spread on the table in front of them. Nothing electronic, Bridget reassured her. Nothing that could be hacked. Only one copy of everything, the keeping of which would be my personal responsibility. Svetlana turned her head to weigh me up while I did my best to look at least reasonably competent. Insight, said Bridget, took the security of their clients very, very seriously.

I didn't present – Bridget handled that. Half my attention was on taking notes as instructed by Bridget – queries, reminders and such – and the other half was on Anastasia, who simply sat on a chair in the corner and . . . sat on a chair in the corner. Neither she nor her mother had brought anything to keep her occupied. No books or toys. Not that she misbehaved in any way. She sat very still, occasionally swinging her legs or looking out of the window. Our meeting lasted several hours and even to me it was as dull as ditch water. Nevertheless, she didn't speak the whole time.

I studied them both. Svetlana Koslova was a very attractive woman who spoke excellent English with only a very faint accent that was rather charming. She was well dressed and obviously confident in her appearance. She neither adjusted her clothing or played with her hair. Her hands remained quietly in her lap at all times. I was interested to see she wore plastic fingertips. She wouldn't be leaving any fingerprints here. A little bit rude, I thought. She could have just worn gloves.

I glanced at the daughter to try to see if she was wearing the same. Anastasia sat with her hands in her lap, just like her mother. Was this learned behaviour? Was she just aping her mother or had she been trained? She was so unnaturally well behaved I began to wonder if she'd been

drugged. And why bring her at all? Presumably Svetlana was wealthy enough to afford a hundred nannies. She could easily have left Anastasia at home.

Because she dared not let her out of her sight, was the obvious answer. I would bet Home Farm that Anastasia rarely left Svetlana's side.

I was roused from these thoughts by Bridget's voice. Apparently, they'd reached the talking-about-money stage of the negotiations and perhaps I'd like to show Anastasia around the building.

Personally, I thought Anastasia deserved better than that and I'd been struck by yet another Brilliant Idea. I'd been wondering how best to contact Markham – or, more realistically, put myself in a position where he could contact me. I needed to pass on details of my latest assignment and here was the ideal opportunity.

'I could do,' I said, tucking my pen in my notebook and handing them both to Bridget. 'Or, since it's a lovely day, we could cross the road to the British Museum, have a stroll around the interactive section and then get an ice cream.' I looked at her mother. 'If you agree, of course.'

Svetlana looked at Bridget and raised a perfectly groomed eyebrow. Bridget, herself the owner of two perfectly groomed eyebrows, wasn't thrown for a moment.

'Ms Forrest is a key member of my team,' she said smoothly. Which was gratifying but meaningless. 'You can have complete confidence in her.'

That was good enough for me. I held out my hand to Anastasia. 'Would you like to see what flavour ice cream the British Museum is offering today?'

Anastasia still didn't speak, looking at her mother, who nodded.

'We'll be back in an hour or so,' I said and then, because I never know when to leave well alone, I added, 'We could take Eddie if anyone has any concerns over security.'

I'm not entirely stupid. I wanted to see if Bridget would leave the Cave unguarded.

She wouldn't. 'It's fine,' she said airily. 'Miss Koslova has her own security who will accompany you. Both of you enjoy yourselves.'

We nipped into the staffroom while I picked up my bag from my locker. Anastasia took my hand and, crossing the street, off we went, dodging cyclists, an automatic bus, a school crocodile and sundry pedestrians. The day was hot and dry although it wouldn't be long until we could expect some rain. The third week in September, usually. After which the air would be fresher and cooler and we'd be into the rainy season and every building along the Thames would be activating its flood defences. But we still had a fortnight at least before that kicked in, and today was hot, sticky and dusty.

We passed through the gates, crossed the forecourt between the East and West lawns, went up the steps and in through the massive pillars. After the heat outside, the museum was cool and echoing.

'What would you like to see?' I said, consulting the giant electronic guide in front of us. 'Any favourites?'

Anastasia shook her head. I still hadn't heard her speak. Perhaps she couldn't. There was nothing in the file to suggest that, though. And I have to say, in all my not-very-extensive experience of children, she was one of the most docile I'd ever met. To begin with.

'How about we start off in the interactive section?' I said. 'There will be tombs for you to discover, holos to watch – the one about Tutankhamun is very good – we can make some Bronze Age pottery to take back to your mum and then have an ice cream.'

Well, none of that happened. We never got out of the Egyptian and Assyrian gallery because I made the mistake of taking a shortcut on our way to the interactive section.

We came to a screeching halt at Ashurbanipal's colossal winged human--headed lions. Anastasia just stared. For ages. She couldn't take her eyes off them. I began to worry I might be giving her nightmares.

And then all that stuff about her not being able to speak? Forget it.

What are those? What were they for? Why are they so big? Why do they

have five legs? Who was Ash . . . ipal? Were they real? Why are they here?

Her voice was soft and very quiet. Unlike her mother, there was no discernible accent. However, soft and quiet though her voice might have been, it was also incessant. She wanted to know *everything.*

What was the floor made of? Who were all these people? Could anyone come in? Really – it was free? What was that over there? Were there any other big rooms like this? Could she see it all?

Good God – what had I unleashed? Was this normal? My only experience of children was Matthew who, initially, had communicated in grunts, then single syllables, then the occasional word and finally short sentences. He was mostly fine now although I suspected his spoken word count was still below average. This kid, on the other hand, had used up the equivalent of two years of Matthew in just ten minutes.

'Now you've done it,' said one of her minders.

'You could have warned me.'

He was grinning. 'Yeah, we could have. We just didn't.'

'I was thinking she couldn't speak.'

'Yeah, well, it's not encouraged. Not in public.' He closed his lips together in a thin line. The message being *I'm not saying any more*.

I nodded and shut up because it wasn't any of my business.

From there, we inspected the bronze gates of Shalmaneser – with a lot more questions – and spent some time gazing up at Sobekemsaf I before finishing in front of Ramses the Great.

'Who's he? What's that hat for? How old was he when he died? What's a mummy? Can I make one?'

'Sure,' I said. 'All you need is a ton of natron and a body.' I nodded at her guards, well within earshot. 'These guys should be able to help you out there. Ask them.'

Well, I owed them, didn't I?

We spent a lot of time looking at Ramses while I ransacked my brain for every tiny fact I could remember about him. And I did have a chance to air

my seldom-asked-for knowledge of the Battle of Kadesh. First time I've ever had an appreciative audience. Most people just switch off.

I showed Anastasia the Rosetta Stone and in a vain effort to stem the flow before it could get started, told her the story of Jean-François Champollion and how his translation enabled the world to read Egyptian hieroglyphics. She stared thoughtfully for a while and then it was back to the winged lions again because she'd obviously lost her heart to them.

We completed this circuit several times. I'm surprised we didn't wear a groove in the BM's lovely marble floors. Eventually I called a halt. Museums are not kind to feet and ankles. And my ears were hot. This child was like a black hole for facts, sucking in everything around her.

'The Great Court now,' I said firmly. 'Cake or an ice cream?'

She looked up at me. 'Can I have pizza?'

'If you want.'

'I've never had pizza.'

I stopped. 'I'm not buying you pizza if you have an allergy. Or you're not allowed.'

'I'm not *not* allowed,' she said carefully. 'No one ever offers so no one says no.'

'What do you usually have?'

'Steamed chicken. Brown rice.' She made a disgusted face. 'Leaves.'

Oh God – poor kid. No wonder she was so small and skinny and pale. She wasn't being fed properly.

On the other hand, there might be a very good reason for that. 'I'm not buying you pizza if it's against your mother's religion or something.'

'I don't know,' she said sadly. She raised huge, tragic eyes to my face. 'Because I've never had pizza. Ever.'

I looked at her. The brutal reality was that if she and her mother stuck with Insight then they'd both be dead in a few months anyway. Along with her security team if they made the jump too. In the scheme of things, how much did one pizza matter? It wasn't as if they'd be available in Victorian

London. And I could always force-feed her some fruit afterwards – just to even things out a bit.

I turned to the security team, both of whom were admiring a lovely Minoan plate painted with a grinning octopus. I warmed to them at once.

'Is she allowed pizza?'

They shrugged. 'As far as I know,' said one.

'In that case,' I said, and off we set.

The Great Court wasn't as crowded as usual. In one of the cafés, a long bench ran along the wall with tables set at regular intervals and we bagged a nice one. Even I'm not stupid enough to sit with my back to what's going on, so I plonked Anastasia in one of the two chairs opposite. The two minions politely declined to join us – as I knew they would – and stood casually nearby, looking over each other's shoulders.

I had three-cheese pizza and Anastasia had ham and pineapple. She was a pizza virgin – don't judge her. Five ecstatic minutes later, all that was left was the tomato sauce on her chin. I passed over her glass. 'Drink your juice.'

Having had her own way over the pizza, she obediently buried her head in her glass.

'So,' I said, waiting for my coffee to cool. 'What do you think?'

I meant the pizza but she misunderstood.

'It's fantastic,' she said, emerging from the orange juice. 'Can people really come here every day?'

'They can, yes. To do research or just to wander around. And it's huge – I've been coming here for years and there are still bits I've never seen.'

'Can I come with you?'

'Not necessary,' I said, striving to keep a professional distance between the client and her possible future assassin. 'They do brilliant guided tours and their staff know much more than I do.'

Her face fell. 'Mummy doesn't like me going out by myself.'

I glanced at her two bodyguards.

‘They won’t let me go anywhere if Mummy hasn’t said so.’

‘And neither will I,’ I said. ‘Are you trying to get me arrested for kidnapping?’

‘I’m nine,’ she said crossly. ‘I’m not a child any longer.’

Nine. She was nine years old. Why do bad things happen to nine-year-old girls?

I pretended to have an idea. ‘I tell you what – let’s make a list of what we’ve seen so you can tell your mum all about it, and when she sees how much you enjoyed today – and that it’s very educational – she might let you come again. She might even bring you herself.’

I felt quite safe saying this. It would never happen.

Anastasia nodded. I wondered how much of what was going on around her she actually understood.

Obviously I hadn’t been able to bring my notebook with me, so I pulled out a paper napkin from the holder and found a pen in my bag. ‘So, the first was . . .’

‘The big lions with the heads and five legs.’

I wrote *Winged Lions of Ashurbanipal*. ‘And the next?’

We made a list of the afternoon’s treasures. I made sure to take another napkin and scribbled a few lines, at the same time intoning, ‘Statue of Ramses the Great,’ for anyone who might be paying us any attention.

I handed her the list. Quite openly. ‘Keep it safe.’

She folded it very small and tucked it in the pocket of her shorts. ‘I will.’

Casually I wiped the tomato off her chin with the second napkin, balled it up and let it fall on the bench beside me. Then we tidied the table a little. When I looked down again, the napkin had gone and the woman with ash--blonde hair who had been sitting at the next table was just easing her way unobtrusively through the crowd. I was relieved to see he had his tights on the right way round this time.

Result. I’d probably just saved Anastasia’s life. And Svetlana’s as well. I suddenly felt a hundred years lighter and a hundred pounds younger.

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘Time to get back.’

The next stage was to prep our clients for their jump. We started with the simple things, such as teaching them to pay with money rather than cards. Then we talked them through the intricacies of Victorian costume. How to dress themselves. How to let a maid dress them. Daily routines. What was acceptable and what was not. How to manage the house and servants. How to address those above them on the social scale and those below. How to get about town. Places where they shouldn't go and places where they absolutely mustn't go.

Their two bodyguards would not be accompanying them. I suspected Anastasia might be upset over that. From the little I had seen, she appeared to have a good relationship with them. Mother and daughter would be alone in their new life. I sighed. They would be sitting targets.

There would be a good supply of cash at the house ready for Svetlana to pay the servants' wages and cover everyday expenses, and a bank account would be opened for her since women wouldn't be able to do that for themselves until 1975. I had to spend a lot of time explaining that. Which led on to the things women could do in this time and the many things they couldn't. At which point I thought we might have to call the whole resettlement off. Which I was in two minds about – if she and Anastasia pulled out now, would that save their lives? A few minutes' thought convinced me otherwise. Svetlana knew too much for Insight to allow her to walk away. But, I had to put in some solid work to keep her on board and Bridget congratulated me afterwards.

'You're doing well, Maxine.'

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘Is she a particularly difficult client?’

‘God, no, we’ve had far worse. Men usually, wanting an entire culture rearranged to suit themselves.’

‘It would be easier and quicker just to shoot them,’ I said, just to see what she would say.

‘Don’t think that hasn’t occurred to me,’ she said. ‘When is your next session with them?’ And since discretion is the better part of valour, I let the matter drop and we concentrated on other issues.

Finally, we were all ready.

Surreptitiously, I ran an eye over my clients. Madame Koslova, as she would be known, was wearing a dark blue outfit with a matching hat and gloves. Poor Mademoiselle Anastasia had been saddled with a calf-length dress in dark brown with a pinafore over the top. Over that she wore a light coat buttoned high to her neck and a straw hat with a narrow brim and a ribbon hanging down her back. Given the previous freedom of her shorts and T-shirt, this was not a change for the better. She did not look happy but, true to form, stood quietly, said nothing and watched everything. I was beginning to think she might be a child of considerable intelligence. Did she realise her life wasn’t normal? Although she had no one with whom to compare. She had no friends. No one in which to confide. Perhaps, being a bright kid, she was keeping her thoughts to herself and waiting to see what would happen next.

I myself wore grey. Very reluctantly. I’d bludgeoned my brains for a reason not to go on this jump. I couldn’t just back out. This was to be my first proper donkey-free assignment and it would be too suspicious for words for me not to be wildly enthusiastic about the whole thing.

I’d considered throwing myself down the stairs, or suddenly catching something dire and infectious, or even not actually turning up, but after an evening’s deep thought, it made sense to get this over with. I’d done what I could to warn them, but sooner or later, I was going to end up at Swan

Court, so let's do it now and hope for the best. I do a lot of hoping for the best.

Bridget wore dark red and was being the bright and professional face of Insight. 'Are we all ready, then?'

Svetlana nodded, too nervous to speak, I suspected. She looked very tense. I didn't blame her. This was it. Insight had issued very strict instructions. There were to be no clues that she was leaving, let alone moving to another century. She and Anastasia would have followed their instructions to the letter. Don't say goodbye to anyone. Don't wind up your affairs. Be prepared to walk away from your old life. Don't bring anything with you. Spend your last day as usual. Go to bed as usual. Everything must seem perfectly normal. Do nothing to arouse any suspicions.

At some point Insight had spirited them away. When morning came, they'd have vanished and no one would ever see them again. Her husband and his cohorts could look high and low – but no trace of Svetlana and Anastasia would ever be found. I doubted anyone would alert the Time Police – why would they? – and after a few months, mother and daughter would be completely forgotten. The waters would have closed over their heads and it would be almost as if they had never existed. Which would suit Insight down to the ground.

We filed into the pod. This was our clients' first glimpse and they stared around nervously. I thought Svetlana might hold Anastasia's hand but, as always, the two of them were together but apart.

I seated them both, gave them a reassuring smile and joined Bridget at the console, full of ulterior motive. I already knew, from watching Eddie, that a code was entered at the beginning of each assignment. This had been worrying me. On the very unforgettable occasion I'd been inadvertently kidnapped from Home Farm by an Insight pod, I'd been able to programme in my return coordinates and escape. No code had been required. But since being at Insight, I hadn't been able to work out why. Technically, I should still be trapped in their Pod Bay. And long dead, of course. Now, watching

Bridget at the console – inspiration! The code was entered at the beginning of the mission and I bet the same code shut everything down on completion. It was an admin thing. Insight could see, at a glance, who'd supervised what, where, and when. This would be for their statistics perhaps. Insight were very big on statistics. Neat. And it made it easy to apportion blame in the event of a cock-up, as well. Very neat indeed. Typical Insight.

'Stay with our clients,' Bridget said quietly. 'I'll handle this end.'

'I was hoping to learn,' I said.

She made an ambiguous noise.

That was interesting. Obviously control of the pod was not for just anyone. Only an elite few, I suspected, and if you weren't one of those or didn't have one with you, then you and your pod weren't going anywhere.

She turned back to the console. I lingered another second under the pretence of adjusting my hat to cover as much of my head as possible because I was expecting my hair to cause some comment. In reality, I was trying to get a look at her personal code. The one that gave her access to the controls for this pod and, with luck, all the others as well. I could only cross my fingers that the code was personal to her and valid for any pod rather than pod-specific.

Six six zero two, and either four or five. Thank you, Bridget.

I took my seat, trying to decide whether, for the benefit of my clients, I should look as if jumping to another time was something that happened every day, or whether, for the benefit of Bridget, I should look terrified out of my wits at only my second go at time travel. I settled for expressionless, which they could all interpret however they pleased.

There were no voice commands and whatever Bridget was doing at the console was hidden from us. 'In five,' she said. 'Four, three, two, one . . .'

The world heaved.

Well, that was rough. I forget just how . . . not luxurious, and certainly not comfortable . . . but how much *smoother* St Mary's pods are. If you

discount the smell of cabbage, of course. Even Time Police pods were better than this. But – and this is the important bit – we had all survived and were in one piece.

Bridget turned to face her passengers – both of whom were as nervous as me but for completely different reasons.

'Welcome to your new life. I'll just shut things down and then we can disembark. The time is twenty-five minutes past one in the morning on 13th October. We have landed just behind your new home. A short walk will take us to your front door where we will be met.'

Shit. Any hopes of me creeping in unseen by the servants due to the late hour flew out of the window. Or would have if we actually had a window.

Bridget opened the door, giving us all a few minutes to take stock.

The night was very dark. And much quieter than I had expected. Hoofbeats clopped along somewhere, the sound bouncing off the surrounding houses, but otherwise there were no signs of life. No lights were showing, either.

We were, however, benefitting from a typical London fog. Not one of the really bad *can't see your hand in front of your face* pea-soupers, but tendrils of yellow mist did swirl past, doing a good job of concealing us from any curious eyes. It wasn't the most reassuring introduction to their new life, and I myself found it all too easy to imagine Jack the Ripper erupting from the fog, eyes and mouth wide open . . . I shut that thought down very quickly.

Both Svetlana and Anastasia began to cough. After a moment, so did I.

'Use your muffs to cover your face,' said Bridget and I had an overwhelming urge to laugh. Good job Markham wasn't here – we'd both have been face down in the mud, giggling.

'This way,' she said. 'Please do not be alarmed at your surroundings. Our landing site is chosen for discretion rather than the picturesque. Your new home is just around this corner. You may find it easier to lift your skirts out of the mud. Like this. That's right.'

She gestured and off we set. Bridget in the lead with a small, anomalous torch, Svetlana and Anastasia in the middle, hand in hand at last, and me bringing up the rear with my own torch and trying not to imagine Kathleen flinging open the door and shouting, ‘Mrs Farrell. Lovely to see you again.’ Was this, perhaps, the moment that gave me away and Bridget realised who I was?

We entered Swan Court and paused. I was particularly proud of myself for remembering I’d never been here before and therefore had no idea where Number Six was situated.

There were gas lamps here, radiating yellow haloes in the fog and making a silhouette of the giant plane tree standing in the centre of the square. What with that and the fog, the whole effect couldn’t have been more atmospheric if we’d tried.

We switched off our torches because, to my left, a solitary house showed a light by the front door. Number Six was welcoming its new owners. *Temporary* new owners.

‘This way,’ said Bridget again and we made our way through the shifting yellow fog.

The house looked no different. There was no reason why it should, I suppose. I made very sure to stand behind Svetlana who was taller – although not so wide as me. I heard Bridget tap quietly at the door.

‘We are expected,’ she said, smiling reassuringly to our clients. ‘The house will be all ready for you.’

I looked over my shoulder. If everything went tits up, then I’d be back down the steps, along the pavement, and out of the square to be lost in the fog and any passing traffic. I had no idea what I’d do then, but escape is always the most important part.

I heard the door open and braced myself for Kathleen’s cheerful greeting that would end my life.

A plummy voice intoned, ‘Good morning, mesdames. Please enter – you are expected.’

I peered around Svetlana to see the perfect butler standing in the doorway, a dark shape against the brightly lit hall behind him. Even at that late hour, he was immaculately turned out in proper butler gear – a black coat, grey striped trousers, black waistcoat, and shoes so shiny they could blind you on a summer day. Shame about the psychopath stare but I suspect he was born looking like that. Probably frightened the midwife to death.

I've never been so pleased to see a menacing manservant in all my life. In fact, I very nearly collapsed with overwhelming relief. It wasn't until the tension rolled away that I realised how scared I'd been.

Pennyroyal – for it was he, gentle reader – sorry, it's the clothing. I just can't help myself – stood patiently, holding open the door. As I said, the perfect butler.

Bridget swept into the still-dismal hall and we all followed in her wake.

Pennyroyal was brilliant. Without as much as even glancing at me, he welcomed Bridget politely and informed her the housekeeper was on her way up.

The servants' door alongside the stairs opened to reveal – who else? – Smallhope herself, wearing respectable black, her keys rattling on her chatelaine, with a snowy white widow's cap tied under her chin. She curtseyed politely.

'Good morning, madam. I am Mrs Danvers, the housekeeper.'

Bridget nodded. 'Good morning. This is Madame Koslova and her daughter, Miss Anastasia. They will be staying here for the time being. They are strangers to London so please render them every assistance.'

Mrs Danvers nodded. 'Of course, madam.'

I was completely ignored. Fortunately, I'm used to that.

Mrs Danvers turned to Svetlana and bobbed a neat curtsey. 'It is very late and so, madam, with your permission, I shall introduce you to the staff tomorrow.'

'Er . . . yes,' said Svetlana, disoriented and confused despite all my careful briefings.

‘Refreshments for you and the young mistress have been laid out in the drawing room, madam. This way, please.’

‘Actually, I think I’ll just go and run my eye over the place,’ said Bridget. ‘Make sure everything’s in order.’

Mrs Danvers stiffened slightly, obviously offended by the idea that any house over which she presided could be in anything other than perfect order.

‘As you wish, madam.’

She inclined her head, suddenly reminding me very much of Mrs Partridge. One day I must sit down and count up the number of terrifying women in my life.

Pennyroyal was holding open the drawing room door. I said to Bridget, ‘I’ll stay with them if you like,’ and headed for the drawing room before she could argue.

This was as warm and comfortable as I remembered it. A merry fire was burning and a tea trolley drawn up nearby.

Pennyroyal waited for Svetlana’s hat, coat and gloves – I was pleased to see she managed all that quite easily, including the hat pin – and I helped Anastasia with hers.

‘Shall I pour?’ I said, as Pennyroyal disappeared, laden with ladies’ apparel.

They sat down, nervously looking around at the room.

This wasn’t my first visit here – or even my second or third – and nothing had changed. A bigger fire burned in the grate but the same clock ticked on the mantel. A familiar armchair stood to one side of the fire, with a small sofa on the other. There was a desk under one window and a china cabinet displaying some hideous but probably quite valuable ornaments. The room spoke of warmth and comfort and welcome.

I poured some tea and put a small cake on a plate for Anastasia, who politely said thank you. I was pleased to see she seemed quite self--possessed. All due to my magnificent prep work, of course. She sat on the

sofa, munching her cake, looking about her as she ate.

Svetlana was sipping her tea so I had a very welcome cup myself, wondering what was going on in other parts of the house. Was Smallhope overcoming Bridget at this very moment? Or even vice versa? Or were they being extra polite to each other in that special English way that says, *I detest you and will rip out your heart at the first opportunity. May I pour you another cup of tea?*

We sipped in silence until Bridget appeared. 'Goodness, you're drinking tea.'

For a moment, I couldn't think. Focus, Maxwell.

'I couldn't resist,' I said. 'I wanted to see what it was like.'

'Ghastly, isn't it?'

'Mm,' I said non-committally, just in case the god of tea decided to have a go at me as well. I poured Bridget a cup.

Svetlana and Anastasia had drunk theirs without comment. I suspected they were no strangers to illegal tea. There was still some about in the future – it was just the tax was so high that most people couldn't afford it.

'This house is perfect for you,' announced Bridget, pulling a face at the tea. 'You have adjoining bedrooms. We have procured some clothing and toiletries – enough for a few days. As discussed, Ms Forrest will remain here with you to help you find your feet. Mrs Danvers appears to be reasonably competent.' I flinched but the world did not end. '. . . And you'll meet the rest of the staff tomorrow. I understand that, in addition to the butler and the housekeeper, there are several maids and the cook. You will remember how to address them, I'm sure.'

She smiled at Anastasia. 'Don't worry if you get it wrong. This is England and you are foreigners – everyone will feel sorry for you because you aren't English. I would capitalise on that if I were you.

'I'll be back in a week to pick up Ms Forrest. After that, she will be your liaison officer. She'll return in a month's time – just a courtesy visit because I feel certain you will soon find your feet here – and then there will be a

final visit around two months after that. To discuss your future plans and make sure everything is running smoothly.'

Yes, there would be a final visit. Long before two months had expired. Just when they would be least expecting it. That, however, was out of my hands. You couldn't fault Insight's after-sales service. All this concern that they would settle into their new home, the hints of a long and happy life here, their future plans – all designed to lull their clients into believing they'd still be alive in two or three months' time. And the really clever part was that these clients were paying – heavily – for their own murders. You had to hand it to Insight – and quickly before they turned up and took it anyway – the whole scheme was genius.

Bridget looked at me. I put down my cup and saucer and followed her out into the hall.

'I don't think you'll have any problems,' she said.

I agreed. Although for completely different reasons. However, a little nervousness would seem reasonable.

'You're not going to leave me here forever, are you?'

She laughed. 'Of course not. Listen – when you get back, how about going out for dinner? To discuss how things have gone here and make some plans for the future.'

I swear I blushed. 'Um . . . yes . . . I'd like that very much.'

'Good.' She began to draw on her gloves. 'Watch that butler, by the way. I think he drinks,' she said, just as Pennyroyal appeared through the servants' door. I didn't dare look at him.

He trod, majestically butler-like, towards the front door and opened it for her.

Bridget smiled. 'Goodbye, Maxine. See you in a couple of days.'

I nodded. Pennyroyal closed the door and finally I was alone with my clients. I drew a deep breath and cast a swift look around. All the doors were shut.

'The servants are all in bed . . . ?' I paused.

‘Jeeves, madam.’

Not a muscle flickered. Two could play at that game. ‘Servants all in bed, Jeeves?’

He bowed. ‘Yes, madam.’

‘House all locked up?’

‘All secure, madam.’

‘Good. We’ll meet the staff in the morning, then. I’ll see if Madame Koslova and her daughter are ready for bed. They’ve had a tiring day.’

‘Indeed, madam. Mrs Danvers is waiting upstairs to convey them to their bedchambers.’

I swear he was enjoying every moment of this. I wondered how long he and Smallhope would leave it before sweeping up our clients, delivering them to the Time Police and claiming the bounty. What would happen to Svetlana I had no idea. Given her reasons for fleeing, how much would the Time Police take into account? Anastasia, on the other hand, was another matter.

The important thing, though, was that when Insight turned up to kill them, they’d find their victims had already vanished. Along with any valuables they’d encountered along the way, because Pennyroyal and Smallhope were very thorough. With luck Insight would assume their clients were even dodgier than they were and had vanished into the murky world of Victorian London. They might send some people to track them down, but they wouldn’t find anything and I suspected they’d cut their losses and move on. It wasn’t as if they didn’t have clients queueing up. I believe next on the list was an ex-dictator, victim of a successful coup, who was now seeking to vanish himself, his mistress, and his billions. Well, Insight would soon relieve him of the greater part of his fortune. And then his life, as well.

I left Svetlana and Anastasia in Svetlana’s room, preparing for bed. Mrs Danvers had put me in the same room I’d had when I stayed here before. I undressed slowly, trying not to see Leon sitting in the chair by the fire. Or Matthew hunched over a chessboard. A sudden wave of homesickness

washed over me. I had no idea when this would be over. Not until Insight were completely exterminated, anyway.

Someone tapped quietly at the door. I stiffened, although it was extremely unlikely any Insight assassins would knock politely first.

'Come in.'

Mrs Danvers stood on the threshold. We looked at each other for a moment and then she said, 'I trust everything is to your satisfaction, madam?'

'It certainly is. And I'm sure I can rely on you and Jeeves to manage the household until such time as Madame Koslova becomes more acquainted with her new surroundings.'

'You may, madam. Is there anything you require?'

'Not at the moment, thank you. I look forward to meeting you and Jeeves properly tomorrow. Well, later today.'

'Of course, madam. I shall wish you goodnight.'

She closed the door.

I put some coal on the fire, checked the fireguard, blew out the candles and climbed into the big, soft bed.

We met the rest of the servants the next day. They stood in a neat line in the hall, just outside the servants' door. Not a flicker of recognition from any of them. I was so proud. They'd obviously learned from their Feeney and Winterman days.

Which reminds me – and this is a little out of sequence – but for anyone wanting to know what happened to poor Mrs Leyton, I took advantage of Mrs Danvers escorting Svetlana and Anastasia to the park one day (I don't know where Jeeves was that afternoon) and went down to the kitchen to speak to Mrs Proudie, who had baked a chocolate cake for the occasion. We all – Mrs Proudie and the servants – drew up our chairs around the kitchen table and prepared to dish the dirt.

'First things first,' I said. 'Mr Evans sends you all his very best.'

They smiled. Our Mr Evans had made a very favourable impression on the female staff.

'I'm sure Mr Jeeves and Mrs Danvers have explained what's going on,' I said. 'Please be aware that you yourselves are not in any danger. Nor, if we can help it, are Madame Koslova and Miss Anastasia. Mr Jeeves and Mrs Danvers will take care of everything when the time comes.'

Everyone nodded. Not only did no trace remain of the traumatised servants so terrorised by Messrs Winterman and Feeney, but I think they were actually quite enjoying all this drama. Anyway, speaking of Winterman and Feeney . . .

'I have to ask,' I said, 'because we were quite concerned about her – what happened to Mrs Leyton?'

Mr and Mrs Leyton had been the next-door neighbours. Whatever stupid thing Mr Leyton had done to put himself in Winterman's power, it was Mrs Leyton who had been paying off the debt. Upstairs with Winterman. Markham had rescued her and she hadn't been in a good way.

Mrs Proudie leaned forwards. 'Well,' she said, with enormous relish. 'There was a *huge* scene, ma'am. Disgraceful, it was. I've never seen such goings-on in a respectable household.'

'How terrible for you,' I said, grinning.

'Me and the girls were horrified, ma'am.'

'I can imagine. Do you feel able to tell me what happened or shall I change the subject?'

'Well,' she said quickly, before I could change the subject. 'We helped Mrs Leyton back home. Simpson, her maid, took her upstairs. I don't know if the doctor called – Kathleen didn't see his carriage.' She glared accusingly at Kathleen, who had obviously fallen down on the job.

I winked at Kathleen, who kept a straight face because she'd been well trained.

Mrs Proudie pushed on. 'Obviously, some sort of message was sent, because not two hours later, Mrs Leyton's parents – Lord and Lady Greeling – turned up. In their carriage. Four horses. They must have come quick, ma'am, because carriage and horses were covered in mud. And up on the box, next to the coachman, sat one of the biggest footmen I've ever seen in my life. Bigger even than . . .' She nodded at me and I understood. Our Mr Evans had made a substantial impact on Mrs Proudie and her girls' lives. For the good, I hasten to add.

'Anyway, they disappeared inside the house. With the footman. According to Simpson, Lady Greeling went straight up to her daughter while his lordship dealt with Mr Leyton. The shouting, madam, you would not believe. And the screaming. From him, Mr Leyton, you understand. And things breaking. Simpson said afterwards they must have thrown him all over the house. Mr Leyton, I mean. We had all the windows open – to air

the rooms, of course.'

I nodded understandingly because aired rooms were very important.

'But you din't even have to do that to hear the racket, ma'am. At it 'ammer and tongs, they were. And the next thing, the front door flies open and that big footman is hurling Mr Leyton down the steps. He weren't gentle and them's stone steps and it must have hurt something awful, ma'am.'

'Indeed,' I said. 'I've fallen down any number of stone steps and they do not forgive.'

'And then his lordship came steaming back out through the front door roaring like a Trojan. The footman took his horsewhip from the driver and damn . . . I mean drat me, ma'am, if his lordship don't start laying about Mr Leyton as he sprawled on the pavement. Horsewhipped him, he did. *In public*, ma'am.'

'Good heavens,' I said.

'Something shocking, it was, ma'am. I never seen anything like it in all my born days. There was his lordship giving Mr Leyton the hiding of his life – he had to stop after a bit cos he's not a young man, ma'am – but he handed the whip to his footman who took off his wig and really set to. With a will. Mrs Leyton being a very pretty, very nicely behaved young lady who was liked by all and din't deserve what her husband let them do to her, ma'am.'

'No,' I said quietly. 'She didn't, did she. How did it end?'

'Well, eventually even his lordship said enough. Mr Leyton was bleeding all over the cobbles, ma'am. I dunno how much he could understand by then but his lordship warned him to stay out of the house and never to go near his daughter again. And then he gave him a bit of a kicking cos he'd got his breath back. Then he climbed back into his carriage and drove away. The big footman stayed behind – to prevent Mr Leyton getting back into the house, he said.'

'You heard all this?'

‘Well, we was out on the steps by this time, ma’am, giving the brasses a good going-over.’

‘Of course,’ I said gravely.

‘And Kathleen went round and asked him. The footman.’

Kathleen smirked.

Mrs Proudie forged on. ‘I have to say, Mr Leyton were in a right state. Crying and carrying on. Blood everywhere, there was. I ’ad to send Maggie out with a bucket of water.’

‘For Mr Leyton?’

‘To wash the pavement down, ma’am. This is a respectable neighbourhood.’

She cut me another giant slab of chocolate cake because gossiping is a tiring business.

I said, somewhat thickly, ‘So what happened to Mr Leyton?’

‘Well, he lay there for a bit. About half an hour. No one went out to help him, not even when he was moaning fit to bust. In fact, old Mr Breckenridge walked around him as if he weren’t there. We were a bit worried he might try to get back in again but that big bloke was stood standing on the top step so Mr Leyton picked himself up and staggered off. He ain’t been back since, ma’am, and what happened to all his belongings and such, I have no idea.’

‘And Mrs Leyton?’

‘Lady Greeling was with her, ma’am, but Mrs Leyton din’t leave the house for three or four weeks, and then the carriage came back and away they went. Sarah heard from Number Four’s tweeny that they’ve gone off to Cheltenham for a while. She ain’t . . . hasn’t come back, anyway. Don’t reckon she ever will. The house is empty now.’

‘Well,’ I said, swallowing the last of my cake, impressed not only by the tale but the telling of it. ‘What a thing to happen.’

‘Indeed, ma’am,’ Mrs Proudie said, and I allowed her to set another table-sized morsel of cake on my plate. ‘And if I might enquire after the

master and mistress?'

Dr Bairstow and Mrs Brown had occupied this house for a short while. To the benefit of all, I suspected.

'They're very well,' I said, 'and send you their best wishes. They often speak of their happy memories of living here.'

Well, they might do – I wasn't really on those sort of terms with Dr Bairstow and Mrs Brown any longer, but it never does to fall out with the servants. They can smile and make your life a living hell.

Around the table, heads were nodding. Along with Evans, Dr Bairstow and Mrs Brown had also made a very favourable impression on the staff. On the other hand, when you considered the previous inhabitants . . .

Anyway, our time at Swan Court was passing very pleasantly. Every morning Mrs Danvers would present Mrs Proudie's menus for the day and Madame Koslova would approve her choices like a pro. I was pleased to see I hadn't been wasting my time with their briefings. They would go on to discuss any household issues. I was quite surprised to hear of any problems under Mrs Danvers's regime and I suspect she had to sit down every morning and invent a few.

A pleasant light lunch was followed by either a walk, or taking a cab into town to have a look around and possibly do a little shopping. All of these activities came under the society-approved aimless sort of existence considered appropriate for middle- and upper-class women. Working-class women, of course, were out there working their arses off in the factories and dying in childbirth.

Frankly, I couldn't see Anastasia being content with this sort of life for very long. I did some calculations. She was nine now. By the turn of the century, she'd be fourteen or fifteen and approaching marriageable age. Whether or not she managed to avoid that, by the time the Great War started, she'd be nearly thirty. Old enough to do war work. After the war ended, if she still had the financial means, she could do almost whatever she

pleased.

And then I caught myself. None of that would be an option. She'd either be dead or the Time Police would have her. As far as I knew, they didn't wage war on children – I couldn't see Commander Hay sanctioning that sort of thing. Perhaps they'd just cut Anastasia adrift. I reckoned they'd either shove her into the care system or push her out of the front door and tell her to look after herself. And then, of course, her father would move in.

I was going to have to have a bit of a think about Anastasia's future.

Bridget turned up on the appointed day to take me back to Insight and I left the house with genuine regret. Svetlana gave me a warm embrace, which surprised me slightly because she'd never deviated from polite and slightly remote before. I knew her no better now than when we'd first arrived. She never spoke about herself or her past. Even her conversations about Anastasia were confined to the present. My gentle probing as to Anastasia's previous schooling and interests had always been politely rebuffed. So, as I say, the warm hug came as a bit of a surprise. Perhaps she felt that I was her last link to her previous life. In which case, you'd think she'd be pleased to see the back of me.

Anastasia was very nearly tearful. She'd had no opportunity to make friends during her time here. No one had come to call. I worried her new life would be as lonely as her old one.

I did have a proper formal farewell from the staff with everyone lining up to say goodbye. Bridget was actually quite impressed with the show of it and complimented me on acclimatising so quickly. I accepted her compliments with becoming grace and modesty.

'We've had to speed up the programme,' said Bridget after I'd showered, changed, and was being debriefed in her office.

'Insight have too big a backlog,' she continued. 'It's growing exponentially. We literally have people queuing up for resettlement, and if

we can't accommodate them, then we'll start losing clients and the Board will not be happy. Therefore, you'll be handling your own clients much sooner than normal.'

'I don't understand,' I said, understanding horribly and playing for time. 'How can things be speeded up?'

She fiddled with the corner of a file. 'After we've resettled people, sometimes it becomes necessary to unresettle them.'

I pretended to misunderstand. 'You mean we bring them back again?'

'No.'

'You mean we chuck them out of the house to fend for themselves?'

'No.'

A horrible cold hand closed around my heart.

Bridget looked at me. 'Maxine, we need to talk.'

My heart stopped again. Seriously, this job was going to kill me and Insight wasn't going to have to lift a finger.

I stared at her. She stared back. The silence went on and on as she waited for the penny to drop.

When I thought she'd waited long enough, I said, 'You mean . . . ?'

'Yes.'

'But . . .' I said. 'But . . .'

She folded her hands on her desk. 'The people we resettle are usually criminals. Unpleasant people who are wanted by law enforcement agencies around the world. Quite often their contemporaries are gunning for them as well.'

'But not Svetlana. Especially not Anastasia.'

'Maxine, if we had not resettled them, her husband would have killed her anyway. We have actually given them a few months of extra life. A pleasant life. It's a kindness, really.'

'They paid to be resettled.'

'And so they have been.'

'I'm assuming we don't give the money back.'

‘To whom would we give it?’

I sat back in my seat. How was I supposed to respond to this? How much of a shock would this be to someone like me? Someone who had skipped through life shirking responsibility and commitment? How much would that sort of person care? Presumably not very much. Bridget would have thought long and hard about jumping so far ahead in the programme and telling me this. And I’d thought I’d have much longer before we actually got to the moment where they’d tell me what really happened to their clients. And now – bang – right in the middle of my first assignment. Either they were very sure of me or it was a trap. How should I respond?

If in doubt – sidestep. ‘Can I ask a question?’

‘What is it?’

‘Well, isn’t all this a bit of a waste of time?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Why bother actually resettling people? Why not just kill them here – after they’ve paid, of course – and dispose of the bodies?’

‘We have considered that, but that would only get us the resettlement fee. They say you can’t take it with you, but our clients certainly do. Bank accounts are set up for them in their new life. Gold – the international currency – is deposited – by us, obviously – on their behalf.’

‘Butehamun,’ I said suddenly. ‘Gold. That’s why . . .’

‘Well done. As you can imagine, we need an almost continual supply of the stuff. We sell it to our clients – at a hefty markup – and deposit the cash equivalent in the accounts we have opened for them. For which we also charge a fee.’

I struggled to get it all straight in my head. ‘So Insight steal from, say, Butehamun, relocate the gold to . . . in this case, the 19th century . . . for which the clients pay with cash and then—’ I stopped, apparently struck by a thought. ‘And then after you’ve— Afterwards . . . you close down the accounts you opened for them. Along with all the interest accrued. And you still have the fee you charged them in the first place.’

Bridget gave a curt nod. ‘Plus, since many of our clients are competent . . . businessmen . . . we can also access the not inconsiderable sums they themselves have managed to accumulate during their brief stay. Our target is an eighty to one hundred and twenty per cent return on each client.’

I gaped. ‘Insight must be rolling in it.’

‘Well, we’re not poor, but you’ve no idea of the costs of running this sort of organisation.’

Oh Bridget, yes, I do. Dr Bairstow used to address me regularly on the subject.

‘And, obviously, we can’t put any of this through Insight’s public books. It’s almost certain HMRC aren’t ready for that sort of information.’

I pretended to have a Brilliant Idea. ‘Why don’t you just sell the secret of time travel?’

‘We did. We licensed it and everything. Through any number of shell companies, of course, so no one knew it was us, but all completely legal. To begin with, anyway. Then things started to go wrong because you just can’t trust people to behave responsibly, can you? The next moment there were time-slips, bubble universes – you name it, people came up with it – all making life very difficult for us here at Insight. And then, to make things even worse, the world got its act together – and who’d have thought that would ever happen? – and came up with the fucking Time Police.’

She wrenched open a drawer, rummaged for a moment and then viciously slammed it shut again.

‘I have to ask,’ I said. ‘From where did Insight get the knowledge?’

‘From our founder.’

I pretended to rack my brains. ‘Conrad . . . Rossiter?’

‘That’s him.’

‘I’m going to take shameless advantage of your info dump – where did *he* get it?’

Bridget pursed her lips. ‘We seem to be straying from the original topic, Maxine.’

Ah, yes – back to the imminent murders of Svetlana and Anastasia Koslova. In my mind I saw a couple of hitmen with silenced weapons moving through the still, dark house, shooting everyone they found, and shuddered inwardly.

It took me a while to find my voice. I could only hope Bridget thought I was thinking it all through and slowly coming round to her point of view.

'Well,' I said eventually, twisting my hands together. 'I can understand your arguments. Sort of. But I've met them . . . worked with them . . . and Anastasia's only nine. I'm not sure . . . I mean, I'm sorry, but I don't think . . . no, I *know* I won't be able to . . . you know . . .'

Bridget stared at me in horror. 'Oh, good God, Maxine, it wouldn't be you. What do you take me for?'

Oh Bridget, you don't want to know what I take you for.

'Of course it won't be you. How could you think such a thing?'

I heaved a very genuine sigh of relief. 'So who?'

'I'll put together a team. It'll be quick and quiet, Maxine. In their sleep. No one suffers. We're professionals.'

'Will I actually have to be there?'

She played with the file some more.

'Normally, yes. Even if you remain in the pod for the actual deed, it would be your responsibility afterwards to confirm absence of life. However' – she looked up at me – 'I personally feel you're not quite ready for this stage, especially given it's your first assignment, and the involvement of a minor. I can assign someone else if you don't want to be there.'

A lifeline. I seized it. Shuffling my feet, I said, 'I don't want to seem unwilling. Or ungrateful. It's just . . .'

'Understood,' she said crisply. 'Although attendance will be required in the future.'

'Understood,' I said in return. 'When will it happen?'

'Very soon, I think. They won't be expecting anything.'

I nodded.

Bridget pushed back her chair. ‘Is there anything else you want to ask me?’

‘No. Well, yes, I’m sure there will be, but I can’t think of anything right now.’

‘That’s understandable. I’m impressed by how calmly you’ve taken all of this.’

My mind flew back over the years. Dr Bairstow himself had once remarked that the more outrageous the things he told me, the calmer I became.

She stood up. ‘What are your plans for this afternoon?’

I dragged my mind back to the here and now. ‘Oh . . . um . . . well, if you don’t need me for anything else, I thought I’d wander over to the BM for some lunch and a spot of fresh air.’

‘Mind if I join you?’

Well, yes, I did mind. Very much, was the answer to that question.

I smiled. ‘Not at all.’

‘Good. I’m a member of their Gold Club so we can eat in the patrons’ private restaurant on the top floor. Less crowded than the Great Court.’

I couldn’t think of a single reason why not. Well, I could, but none that I could mention to Bridget. ‘Um . . . OK. I’ll shoot off to the staffroom and tidy myself up a bit.’

‘Meet you upstairs in thirty minutes then.’

Obviously, there was a little more preparation required than just combing my hair but I made it in the time specified.

The day was hot and we didn’t hurry. I didn’t dare look about me. He’d know where we were going.

‘Don’t look for me,’ he’d said. *‘You won’t see me but I’ll be there.’* Well, I couldn’t see him so he must be here.

Put it this way – he’d bloody well better be.

I'd already had the second most stressful lunch of my life – this one made that one look like the Teddy Bears' Picnic. I lost my appetite. Completely.

'Well,' Bridget said, as our waiter escorted us to the quiet table she'd asked for. 'This is very pleasant. You deserve it, Maxine, you've worked really hard. We're all so pleased with you.'

'Oh,' I said, blushing. 'Thank you. I'm really enjoying the work. Well, other than . . . you know.'

She waved that aside. 'This is just the beginning. Get through this initial stage and there are many different and more exciting areas into which you can move.'

Well, here was an excellent opportunity. 'Such as?'

She looked around but it was early and the restaurant was mostly empty – there weren't even any waiters about – and other than a woman with one of those ratty little dogs currently asleep under the table – the dog, not the woman – there wasn't anyone within earshot.

A waiter turned up – literally out of nowhere – with a tray. Standing behind Bridget, he said, 'Can I take your drinks order?' He had a strong Geordie accent. I closed my eyes but it really didn't help.

'Margarita, please,' I said, not daring to look up.

'And you, madam?'

I held my breath because if she said, *'My usual, please,'* then I think we might have had a problem. But no, she didn't.

'White wine, please. Very dry.'

'Coming right up.'

I watched him move swiftly to the unmanned bar and start pouring the drinks like a pro.

'The thing is,' said Bridget, recalling me to the present. 'We've been thinking of tailoring a position especially for you, Maxine.'

'Really?' I said. 'Really?' I let excited disbelief bleed into my voice.

'Yes, we feel . . .'

Astonishingly quickly, the waiter was back again with the drinks.

I sneezed.

'Bless you,' said Bridget, raising her glass.

'Sorry – I think my nose is struggling to get used to the Cave again.'

I pulled a tissue out of my bag, wiped my nose with it, scrunched it up and looked around for somewhere to put it.

The waiter held out his hand. 'Shall I take that for you, madam?'

I passed it over without even looking at him. 'Thank you. So, Bridget, you were saying something about tailoring a role for me . . .'

From the corner of my eye, I watched the waiter quietly put down his tray on an empty table and walk straight out of the restaurant, just as two waiters appeared from the staff doorway. Four minutes from start to finish. His usual winning combination of balls of steel and incredible luck. Go on – hands up all those who thought Markham was the ratty little dog under the table.

I made an effort to concentrate on Bridget.

'Nothing's decided yet, but believe me, Maxine, Insight spare no effort to retain and reward high quality staff. You could have a very bright future with us.'

'Wow,' I said, wondering how long I'd live to enjoy it. I already knew that sooner or later they'd tumble to who I was and what I was doing.

We ordered our food. From a real waiter this time. I had the salmon. Bridget had chicken in white wine sauce.

The room was still almost empty. There might never be a better chance.

I laid down my knife and fork. 'Why?'

She looked at me. ‘Why what?’

‘Why are we doing this?’

She frowned. ‘I just told you. A mounting backlog.’

‘No, I mean Insight.’ I looked around and lowered my voice. ‘Why do we do what we do? What’s the end objective? Geoff said something about . . . a key event and changing the future.’

‘Geoff’s an idiot,’ Bridget said, endorsing the world view of Geoff.

‘So that’s not it?’ I said.

At this point I’d like to make it very clear that I didn’t actually expect her to tell me anything. She wasn’t Geoff, always feeling the need to impress people, so when she did speak, no one was more surprised than me.

‘It’s complex,’ she said, reaching for her wine. ‘There are several threads to our work – of which Geoff’s version is one – and each thread is dependent upon the others and they all contribute towards the big picture.’

I nodded encouragingly.

‘There’s our continual need for funding, of course.’

‘So you – we – plunder History. For money.’

‘I sense some disapproval, but yes. Nothing happens without money. Insight is no exception.’

I nodded. ‘That’s the first thread.’

‘Yes. Basic but vital.’

I sipped my own drink. ‘And the second?’

‘There are areas in which history is not quite as it should be, and so, occasionally, we . . .’ She paused, looking for the right word.

‘Tweak?’

‘Good word. Yes, we tweak. And, as you have discovered, history itself often supplies the financial wherewithal for our tweaking.’

‘Neat,’ I said admiringly. ‘I do like a tidy solution.’

She grinned. ‘Thank you. How’s the salmon?’

‘Very good.’

‘Yes, I often eat here.’

I didn't want to get into the many excellent qualities of British Museum catering and tried to nudge things back on course. 'So you tweak events?'

She nodded, sipping her wine.

I checked around again. I knew the answer to this but it would look too suspicious if I didn't ask. 'How?'

'Well,' she said calmly, putting down her glass. 'As far as we are able to, we ensure global key positions are filled by people who think as they ought, which leads, quite naturally, to governments acting as they ought. That makes our lives so much easier.'

'Friends in high places,' I said. 'Geoff said something about political leaders, presidents, etc.'

'Exactly.'

'Does that include our own government?'

She rolled her eyes. 'That bunch of greasy, mindless troglodytes? Don't get me started.'

'Really?' I said, quite astonished, actually. 'Insight's responsible for those . . . ?'

'No,' she said bitterly. 'This current government's incompetence is all of its own making.' She sighed. 'It all happened a long while ago. Insight had everything well in hand. The right people in place. Everything on schedule. We were poised for the final stages. And then a couple of ministers overplayed their hand, deviated from their carefully dumbed-down instructions, and the next moment there's a full-scale rebellion going on. Riots in Cardiff, barricades springing up everywhere, civil uprisings, our expensively bought government kicked out – half of them in prison – before a bright, shiny new government was installed and we had to start all over again. Apparently, there was blood up the boardroom walls that day, but – as I said – a very, very long time ago. Well before my time.'

'Yes,' I said. 'No chance of you being caught up in any subsequent . . . recriminations.'

Bridget laughed. 'Another good word. Anyway, there was a lot of ground

to make up after that particular debacle.'

'I can imagine, but to revert to my original question – if I'm allowed to ask it again – there're obviously things going on behind the scenes that no one is aware of, but why? What do Insight hope to achieve, long term?'

She looked around. The room was filling up. A large and somewhat noisy party was attempting to push three tables together. Somebody's birthday, apparently. No one was paying us the slightest attention.

Then she looked at me and I suddenly thought – this is it. She was about to tell me something massive and once she did, there would be no going back. I'd never be able to unknow it – whatever it was – and my life expectancy would decrease accordingly.

Bridget laid down her cutlery and so did I. I'd already lost my appetite anyway.

She picked up her wine glass. Watching me over the rim, she said, 'What do Insight hope to achieve, long term?'

'Yes.'

There was a long pause, appropriate to the moment. And then . . .

'America.'

Yes, I'd definitely lost my appetite. Along with my voice. And my ability to think properly. I took several deep breaths, leaned across the table and whisper-shouted, '*America?*'

She nodded, watching me very carefully.

'What about America?'

'We want it back.'

I had no idea what the correct response to this should be. Should I, as a mustard-keen employee, exude enthusiasm? Should I express disbelief? Fear? Uncertainty? Ridicule? Because . . . come on . . . *America?*

Astonishment. I decided on astonishment. After all – who wouldn't be astonished?

'You want it back? America?'

Bridget picked up her cutlery again and resumed eating. 'We do. We've

worked long and hard to destabilise it and now it – and we – are almost ready.'

I swallowed and said, 'How? How do you intend to achieve that?'

'Plans are afoot. Some minor tweaks to major events in English history should – *will* – result in a much stronger monarchy and a very much weaker Parliament. All we have to do is ensure the right king sits on the throne at the right time and the thing is done.'

Oh my God. Was she talking about Magna Carta? The Gunpowder Plot? Lincoln Fair? I needed to be very, very careful. The circle was closing.

I sat back and let my mouth fall open. 'Bloody hell, Bridget.'

'I know,' she said sympathetically, 'but once you get over the initial shock, your historical knowledge will enable you to see the many, many benefits for everyone. I do, and I think you and I are very alike, don't you?'

Oh Bridget, you and I are so not alike.

But, actually, that wasn't true, was it? What was it Clive Ronan had once said to me? *'You dance on the edge of darkness, Max, and I don't think it would take very much for you to dance my way.'*

He hadn't been far wrong. Given the right circumstances, how easily could I, Lucy Maxwell the Good (most of the time, anyway) – have been Bridget Lafferty, the Bad? Such a fine line . . .

To give myself time, I said again, 'How? How do you intend to . . . bring this about?'

'Well, that's one of the reasons I've brought you here today.'

I looked around, all my original suspicions concerning the dark underbelly of the British Museum bursting back into life.

She lowered her voice. 'You remember what I said about a special role for you?'

I nodded.

'You're a trained historian, Maxine. And Geoff's reports indicate you're a reasonable shot and can take care of yourself. I envisage an important job for you. How would you like to form part of a very special team?'

I blinked. ‘Are you talking about a sniper team?’

‘There would be a sniper element, but your role would be to provide the historical background, map out the mission, get the right people to the right place at the right time, perhaps act as spotter and so forth. Eddie would take the actual shot.’

Hang on, hang on, hang on. This wasn’t Svetlana she was talking about. This wasn’t an ordinary, run-of-the-mill resettlement assassination. This was something else entirely.

‘Who would be the intended target?’

‘Well, let’s see if you can work it out, shall we? Date: 28th February 1657.’

She looked at me and raised her eyebrows.

I made a *sorry, not a clue* gesture. ‘Sixteen fifty-seven is practically yesterday as far as I’m concerned,’ I said. ‘When I was a student, I couldn’t be bothered to get out of bed for anything after 1485.’

‘Yes, of course. All right, I’ll give you a name. John Washington.’

Normally that wouldn’t have meant a thing to me but given the content of this conversation . . . I put down my cutlery for the last time, feeling my mouth drop open in genuine shock. ‘You don’t mean . . .’

‘Yes – great-grandfather to General George Washington himself. John sails to the colony of Virginia on the ketch, *Seahorse of London*. Having loaded with tobacco, they sail back down the Potomac only to run aground on a shoal near Mattox Creek. On 28th February 1657. Before they can get themselves off, a great storm blows up and the ship sinks. The cargo is ruined. Worse, the master, Edward Prescott, holds Washington, who was sailing as second mate, wholly responsible for the loss.

‘Fortunately – although not for us – Washington marries the daughter of a local merchant, Ann Pope, and founds the Washington line in America, culminating in George, born 1732.’

I swallowed and wished like hell for another margarita. Under cover of the noise from the birthday party, I whispered, ‘You mean we’ll be offing John

Washington before he can . . .'

Bridget smiled and sipped her wine again.

Cold sweat ran down my back. This was not a tweak. This was . . . I couldn't think of words serious enough to describe the implications. This had to be stopped. This had to be stopped right now. Svetlana and Anastasia were no longer my top priority. What happened to me was no longer important. Nor Markham. Nor St Mary's. Insight had to be stopped in their tracks before . . .

I eyed my cutlery. Was there anything here I could use to kill her? Here. Now. Never mind what happened to me. Take her down before she could do any more damage. Except someone else would immediately step into her shoes, I was sure of it. And I'd be dead and no one would know what they were planning. Not until it was too late anyway. No, my priority was to live long enough to pass this on.

I said carefully, 'What you are saying is that if something happens to John Washington then he will never be shipwrecked, marry and found the Washington line? That there might never be a War of Independence? Or if there is, it will be unsuccessful without General George Washington to lead it?'

She smiled at me and picked up her wine. Holding my eye, she deliberately passed it over her glass of water. The traditional toast of the Jacobites, toasting the kings over the water. The exiled Stuarts.

I stared hard at her water glass, working it out. She was watching me like a cat.

'We are Insight,' she said softly. 'We always make sure. Belt and braces, Maxine. There's also a link to Charles I himself. William Washington marries into the Villiers family. Belt and braces.'

I gave my brains a serious racking. 'The Villiers family? The Duke of Buckingham. Close friend of Charles I. Oh.'

'Exactly.'

'Wasn't he assassinated?'

She smiled at me. ‘Imagine if he isn’t. Imagine if he lives long enough for someone to whisper advice into his ear. Which he can then whisper into the king’s ear. Good advice. I mean, let’s face it, martyr or not, Charles Stuart was a bit of an idiot. But suppose, as a result of careful guidance from, say, strategists, military planners . . .’ she looked at me, ‘historians . . . people with the benefit of hindsight . . . suppose he defeats Cromwell in the Civil War. Washington’s family never lose their lands. Washington never sets out to make his fortune in America. I’m not saying the War of Independence might *never* happen but it could happen *differently*. So – we take a two-pronged approach. By removing both John Washington *and* the reason for him going to America, success is guaranteed.’

I looked her in the eye. ‘I’m going to argue with you.’

I thought she might be angry but she laughed. ‘Excellent. Finally, someone with whom I can have a proper discussion. Go on, Maxine – argue away.’

No one had ever said those words to me before. I seized the opportunity.

‘History rights itself,’ I said, with a lot less conviction than I’d had before I met Insight. ‘These events have already happened so therefore they have to happen. Otherwise you get . . . what’s that word? Paradox – yes, that’s it. If you change the past, you change the future. Which might affect you and I, so we wouldn’t be around to change the past in the first place and History remains exactly as it was before.’ I paused. ‘Except we’d probably be dead.’

‘This sounds to me very much like Time Police propaganda,’ she said.

‘Well, yes – it’s the only propaganda I know.’

‘They say that so they and only they retain control of the timeline. History has been changed in many ways you know nothing about.’

I remembered Laurence Hoyle at Bosworth. Lying broken and bloody after two fully armoured horses galloped straight over the top of him. And the times I’d been on the verge of doing something and been warned off. That plummeting stone at Westminster Abbey. Don’t go through that door

in Mechelen . . . Never interfere . . .

However . . . whatever my own private misgivings, I was a member of Insight now, not St Mary's, and I wasn't supposed to know any of this.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'It's just that this is so . . .' I groped for a word and then found exactly the right one. 'Dazzling.'

Bridget smiled at me again. 'I'm so thrilled you see it that way. Audacious. Daring. *Brilliant.*'

'So . . . what now? What happens next? And, selfishly, how does this affect me?'

She leaned over the table. 'Listen, Maxine – this will be a power grab. That's why we're lunching here and not in the bookshop. Insight's current structure is unsuitable for anything particularly . . . dazzling. Yes, we're good at what we do but we need to do more. The days of us moving in the shadows are ending. I've put together plans for a complete restructuring, bringing everything under one umbrella.'

I sat up straight. '*Your* umbrella.'

'Correct. A bit of a leap, I accept, but how do you fancy making the leap with me? You would bring the historical perspective – and you could be as active as you wished during the actual missions. Think of the adventures we could have together.'

'Just us? No one else?'

'The trick is to identify key people and bring them onside. The rest will follow easily enough. There's Eddie, of course, and he has one or two good people under him. Then there are a couple of really excellent people in Finance who can do all sorts of things with figures. I've got my eye on them. Plus three or four historians – real gung-ho historians, not the namby-pamby, salad-munching, knitted-sandals do-gooders only interested in "the people's story".' Bridget hooked her fingers derisively. 'Historians who are able to recognise where the true power lies and how to direct it to the right outcome.'

'Which would be *our* outcome, presumably?'

‘Of course.’

I must have been looking as if I’d just been sandbagged because she signalled the waiter and ordered more drinks. She grinned at me. ‘I expect you’d like another one.’

‘Oh God, yes,’ I said. The most truthful words I uttered that afternoon.

She gave the order and the waiter whipped off, returning a minute later with another round.

I remembered my manners and didn’t gulp.

She waited until he was out of earshot and then went on to deal me another heart-stopping shock.

‘I’d also like you to start work on a series of projects for me, Maxine. We can’t make any mistakes over this, so John Adams is definitely going to have to go – as will most of the Founding Fathers. And anyone else you think important enough to warrant our attention. I want you to review American history . . .’

‘For that particular period?’

‘No – all of it – certainly until the end of the 21st century – and draw up a very special list. Would you be up for that?’

‘Compiling a list of . . .’

‘Of key figures whose removal will very much facilitate our success,’ she said quietly. ‘Actually, we’ve already made a start. One or two presidents, a couple of prominent social reformers and so on. Conversely, there will be one or two people to be . . . inserted. Right-thinking people. You’d be reporting to me and to me only. I’m afraid you’re still going to have to continue with your normal duties – I don’t want to arouse anyone’s suspicions. But there will be a major role for you in this new order, Maxine, with all the benefits that will entail. What do you think?’

I didn’t know what to think. In fact, I couldn’t think at all. Words wouldn’t come. I think I opened my mouth a couple of times and then had to close it again. For something to do I folded my napkin and laid it on the table beside my plate. I don’t mind saying – at that moment I wished I’d never

started this. That I'd never heard of Insight. That I'd stayed quietly at St Mary's with Leon and Matthew. That someone else could take on the responsibility.

I looked at Bridget, smiling at me across the table. *Why* was she telling me all this? Why was she telling *me* all this? I'd been with Insight less than a year. Until very recently I'd been a filing clerk. And now, here I was, being inducted into things that were so far over my pay grade I couldn't even begin to get my head around them.

'I'm sorry,' I said eventually. 'I honestly don't know what to say.'

'Of course,' she said. 'Perfectly natural.'

'Are you sure – I mean, why me?'

'Well, you're an independent thinker. You're not cowed by authority. You see things clearly. You have the oversight of an historian. You're unconventional. You're not tied down by the burdens expected of normal people. You're not interested in family, or domesticity or settling down or acquiring possessions. Frankly, Maxine, you're perfect.'

She reached across the table and put her hand on mine. 'In every sense of the word.'

Crunch time, Maxwell. Now what should I do?

Survive. I had to survive long enough to pass this on.

I turned my hand under hers. She took it. Her hand was cool and dry. Cynic that I am, I wondered if she was feeling for my pulse. Which, if anyone is interested, was all over the shop.

My instinct was to ask for time – time to consider everything I'd heard – but something told me that was no longer an option. We'd both passed the point of no return. She could never unsay what she'd told me and I could never unhear it.

She was still waiting for my response. Refusing would not be wise. Smoothly and without any effort on my part, I'd moved from promising--new-recruit Maxine Forrest to Maxine Forrest, person who knew too much ever to leave Insight. Not alive, anyway.

Neat work, Bridget. She'd landed me. Hook, line and sinker.

I tried to smile. 'I'm . . . a little overwhelmed. I . . .'

'It's a new life for you, Maxine. In every sense.'

I looked down at my plate. Pull yourself together, Maxwell. Remember why you're here. Remember your purpose. A lot of people have worked hard to get you right here, right now, on the verge of achieving everything. Don't blow it now.

I lifted my chin and grinned at her.

'Yes. All right. I'm in.'

28

‘When could you make a start on your project?’ said Bridget as we left the BM and walked down the steps.

Yes – when? What I wanted to do was race to Russell Square Gardens and dump all this on Markham so we could shoot back to Swan Court and discuss a plan of action with Smallhope and Pennyroyal. Because suddenly I’d moved into the biggest of the very Big League. This was far more than we could handle. This was proper Time Police territory.

The problem was he wouldn’t be in the park. He’d have read my tissue and shot off to save Svetlana and Anastasia. And even if he was back, I’d just become the recipient of a ton of red-hot, potentially life-ending information. Surely it would look beyond suspicious to Bridget if the first thing I did was push off. But the longer I kept all this to myself . . . If anything happened to me, no one would ever know anything about it.

Perhaps there was some sort of middle path.

There was no point in behaving anything other than perfectly normally. Until Markham returned, anyway. I had no idea when he’d be back although I was certain he wouldn’t leave me on my own for too long. This evening, possibly – tomorrow, certainly. I’d go then. When I was absolutely sure he’d be there. Never mind what the wait would do to my nerves. It was always at this point I would remember Dieter’s favourite saying: *If in doubt – do nowt.* Which has to be heard in an Austrian accent for full effect.

I decided to push my legendary Maxwell luck.

‘Can I have tomorrow off? With everything that’s happened recently, I really need to do some shopping.’

Bridget considered this. ‘Yes – why not?’

‘Thanks.’

My mailbox was full of file lists. I didn’t stop moving all afternoon. Not even for coffee. I was in and out of the Cave, up and down the stairs, delivering and picking up files, before finally trudging wearily up to my attic room where I sat staring at the wall for quite some time, just thinking about things.

I spent the evening tidying my room. Which actually didn’t take that long, but if anything went wrong, I wanted to be absolutely certain there wasn’t anything that could lead Insight back to St Mary’s or Home Farm. There wasn’t and I knew there wasn’t, but I did feel paranoia was my friend on this particular occasion.

I didn’t sleep much that night – actually I didn’t sleep at all, fretting that Bridget and her team of assassins might, at this very moment, be setting off for Swan Court to murder the inhabitants and there wouldn’t be anything I could do about it. This was rubbish because her diary showed she had a full Board meeting the day after tomorrow – for which she would spend this evening and most of tomorrow preparing – and then a series of follow-up meetings over the next few days.

Or, and more likely, suppose she was regretting confiding in me and even now might be creeping up the stairs, weapon ready, to kick down my door and murder me in my bed. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know from personal experience how ruthless she could be.

Or, just as bad, that she was creeping up the stairs with a view to us spending a little leisure time together. And how I’d play that I had no idea. She was my boss. She was a member of a deadly organisation hell-bent on breaking the world to get what they wanted. And she was considerably more intelligent than me. She’d see through any fakery in an instant. After which I might have only seconds to live.

And – and I always came back to this – at some point I would do something that would give me away. Something that would trigger the

attack on Home Farm in which Bridget would die. I had a horrible feeling that moment was very close now. I kept hearing her voice. *'You bitch – I could have loved you.'*

My instinct was to get out now and hide somewhere until Markham turned up, but nothing would look more suspicious than me exiting the building in the middle of the night. I had to hold my nerve and remain here until at least a reasonable time tomorrow morning.

Right – prioritise, Maxwell. The first thing with which to deal was the upcoming Swan Court massacre. Get your head around what that will entail and start making a few contingency plans.

I got up and laid out my Swan Court costume. This had been allocated to me permanently, which meant I was stuck with the grey monstrosity for the foreseeable future, and it was by no means as fashionable as the outfit supplied by Smallhope on our previous visits. Other outfits would be added to my wardrobe, Bridget had said, depending on which centuries I'd be operating in, and I'd be responsible for their care and cleaning. There was an allowance, apparently.

I folded it carefully and shoved it into my backpack. I only just got it all in. And I would wear my boots. I wasn't leaving them behind. At six thirty in the morning I showered, taking my time, and slowly dressed. Lightweight jacket, top, trousers. I made myself a coffee and was too nervous to drink it. I combed my hair, took one long, last look around my room to see if I'd forgotten anything, wondered briefly whether I'd ever see it again, and quietly let myself out. Then let myself back in again. The room was too tidy. It had *never coming back* written all over it. I left my book opened and face down on the bed, draped a shirt over the back of the chair, and left the unwashed mug on the bedside table. That looked much better.

I walked slowly down the stairs, backpack slung carelessly over one shoulder as if it hardly weighed anything at all. If I really was trying to convince people this was just a normal day for me then I really should stop for breakfast. I paused in the doorway, which was a huge mistake because

the next minute Bridget was standing beside me, looking bright and well-rested.

'Good morning, Maxine. You're up early. Join me for breakfast?'

'Mm,' I said, 'I'm trying to decide whether to have breakfast now or get something later.'

'Where are you off to?'

'Nowhere in particular, but after our conversation yesterday, I thought I'd better up my game a little, sartorially speaking. You know, buy something smart in which to meet and impress our clients. And the Board, of course.'

She nodded approval. 'Excellent idea. Keep your receipts – there's an allowance.'

Of course there was. I'll say it again: Insight were the perfect employers. The best I ever had. If they'd just stop killing people, looting History, interfering with the timeline and employing Geoff, they'd be absolutely perfect.

'Good to know,' I said. 'If you don't mind, though, I think I'll get an early start. See you later.'

'Enjoy your time off, Maxine. You deserve it.'

I nodded and escaped.

The bookshop wasn't open to the public yet, but they let me out without comment. I called a cheery thank you, hoisted my backpack, and strode out along the pavement. Great Russell Street was crowded with people going to work. If anyone was following me, I'd never spot them. I told myself there was no reason why anyone should be following me, but Pennyroyal always said to act as if I was being observed at all times and that was good advice.

I threaded my way between the crowds, stopping occasionally to study a shop window – and watch the people behind me reflected in the glass. I saw nothing suspicious at all.

I bought a bacon butty from a streetside vendor and strolled into Russell Square Gardens, meandering and munching, just in case anyone was watching. I wanted to look as if I was heading to the Tube station but had

stopped for breakfast.

Internally, my thoughts were racing around like a hamster on a wheel, expending enormous amounts of energy and not going anywhere at all. As far as I could see, no one seemed to be paying me any attention at all, so when I couldn't stand it any longer, I threw the remains of the butty in a nearby bin and casually made my way towards the toilets. If Markham was here then he'd had plenty of time to see me.

'Oi,' hissed a bush.

'Oi to you too.'

'Turn left at the laurel bush.'

I turned left at the holly bush because he's a horticulturally challenged idiot and there he was. You can open your eyes. He was fully clothed. A moment later and I was safely inside the pod.

I let the backpack slide from my shoulder and all the weight I hadn't known I was carrying went with it. I leaned forwards, resting my hands on my thighs, as if I'd just run a long race. Relief washed over me. I'd made it safely. I wasn't out of the woods yet but I was safe for the moment. Yes, there would be problems ahead but I was no longer alone. I no longer had to watch every word, every action. It was only now I realised just how much of a strain all this had been. I very nearly cried. Which would have been stupid and unproductive. But even so . . .

'I was just about to set off for Insight when I saw you wandering around looking even more out of it than usual,' he complained. 'I nearly missed you.'

'Sorry. Bridget dropped her bombshell after you'd left the restaurant and I didn't want to arouse suspicion by leaving last night.'

'If you're fretting over Svetlana and Anastasia, Smallhope and Pennyroyal have all that in hand. They'll be gone within a day. Perhaps even less.'

'No – there's more.' I took a deep breath. 'Much more.'

He switched on the kettle. 'Tell Uncle Markham all about it.'

I dragged it all out for his inspection while he made some very much--

needed tea. America, John Washington, Conrad Rossiter, Charles I, Bridget's power grab – the lot. It wasn't the best report I'd ever made and I admit it was a little jumbled but I was feeling a little jumbled myself. In fact, by the time I got to the end I was struggling. Quite a lot. Even just recounting what I'd been told was overwhelming. My thoughts kept bouncing around and refusing to do anything coherent. And my hands were shaking so much I actually spilled my tea.

Markham was very quiet for a while, simply staring into space, and then said, 'Fun Fact.'

I couldn't believe him. '*What?*'

'Fun Fact. All mammals – from a rat to an elephant – take twenty seconds to pee.'

'*What?*'

'It takes an elephant exactly the same amount of time to empty its bladder as a cat,' he said patiently. 'Twenty seconds.'

I stared. 'No, it doesn't.'

'Yes, it does. It's a fact. A Fun Fact.'

'For God's sake, I'm trying to save the world here and you're . . .' I reviewed his contribution to our current crisis again. 'No, it doesn't.'

'Yes, it does. Twenty seconds. Some say twenty-one but I'm going with a nice round number to make it easy for you to understand.'

'But an elephant's bladder could hold Lake Windermere, whereas a cat's has the capacity of what – half an egg-cupful?'

'Longer urethra,' he said confidently.

'*What?*'

'Another Fun Fact – an elephant's urethra is a yard long.'

'*What?*'

'Pressure pushes the water out. Do you know an elephant's stream has been measured at four yards per second?'

'No, of course I don't. No one does.'

'Think high-pressure fire hose.'

‘The only thing I’m thinking right now is that I’m standing on the edge of the apocalypse and the idiot next to me is banging on about urine streams.’

I paused for a moment, suddenly remembering. ‘Is that what you were doing the other day when I turned up with Ramses? You were counting your wee?’

‘Of course. What did you think I was doing?’

‘Well, I don’t know – teaching your tapeworm to count?’

‘Don’t be silly. Tapeworms can’t count. And anyway, I don’t have a tapeworm,’ he said. ‘Not any longer, anyway.’

‘That’s not what Hunter says.’

He shook his head. ‘She’s so dazzled by me that sometimes she doesn’t know what she’s saying.’

‘I don’t think it’s dazzling the poor girl is suffering from.’

‘But don’t you find it fascinating?’

‘What?’

‘That everyone takes twenty seconds to pee.’

I fixed him with my death glare which he completely failed to notice, remaining as undead and unhygienic as usual. ‘No. No normal person would. And I’m not convinced I wasn’t followed here.’

‘You weren’t. I was watching.’

‘You don’t know that. Insight could be crouched outside right now, all ready to hit us with EMPs, ICBMs . . .’ I ran out of initials.

‘Well, they’re not, but we shouldn’t hang around.’

‘We?’

‘You’ve done a brilliant job, but speaking as Security Supremo and your intellectual superior in every way – your Insight days are done. You’re not going anywhere near Insight ever again. And when you don’t return, Board meeting or not, Bridget will put two and two together and move on Swan Court immediately. We need to warn them.’

I finished my tea. Which didn’t take long because most of it was in my lap. ‘Surely Pennyroyal has already planned for this scenario?’

Markham nodded. ‘He has. The whole *shooting everyone in their beds* thing is something about which he frequently fantasises.’

‘Everyone?’

‘Including you.’

‘What?’

‘Top of the list, he said.’

‘Why?’

‘He felt it would be quicker and easier than shooting you while you’re awake.’

I stared at him. ‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘I wanted to reassure you.’

‘How is telling me the world’s most competent assassin is going to shoot me in my sleep in any way reassuring?’

‘I think he wanted you to know he’d do a good job for you. Professional courtesy. Quick and quiet. Not leaving you writhing in a pool of your own blood and screaming in agony.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Hey, don’t thank *me*.’

There was a short pause during which one of us breathed heavily. No prizes for the correct answer.

He grinned. ‘Better now?’

‘Actually – yes. Although I’m still mad at you.’

‘Better me than Insight, Bridget, Dr Bairstow, Treadwell, Hyssop, Gaunt, Ronan, the Time Police . . . Leon.’

Curse him – he was right.

‘Curse you – you’re right.’

‘Of course I am,’ he said, patting me in a manner that bumped him to the very top of my angry list. ‘You do the coordinates while I shoot into the bathroom.’

He closed the door behind him.

The coordinates were easy. In fact, he was still in there when I finished.

I banged on the door. ‘Do you want another cup of tea?’

‘Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Yes, please.’

Two minutes later I was halfway down my second mug when he said thoughtfully, ‘Once we’ve got things at Swan Court sorted, and now we know what Insight are really up to, I think we should hand this over to the Time Police. It will be up to Smallhope, of course, but I think she’ll agree.’

I nodded. ‘You’re right. This is much too big for us – let the Time Police sort it all out. And quickly. Before this bunch of raving loonies do any more harm to the timeline.’

We sat in silence for a moment, looking at each other, and then he said quietly, ‘This is it, Max.’

‘Yes, it is, isn’t it? The endgame. It’s come much sooner than I thought it would. But I’ve cleared my desk and my room. There’s nothing there to give them any clues as to our identity. We save Svetlana and Anastasia and then step well back while the Time Police do the rest. I don’t think I want to be around for that. Most of the people working there are completely innocent, but they’ll all be swept up in the Time Police net.’

‘Not our problem, Max. Our aim was to bring them down and protect History. Although I suspect the Time Police won’t be interested in the small fry. They’ll be concentrating on the big stuff. The major players.’

He was right. We’d done our bit. We had Insight on illegal time travel, interfering with History, concealing people in other times, plundering the past, murder, you name it. It was time to go. Time to return to what passed for our normal lives.

It was a lovely day out there. The sun was shining and it wasn’t yet too hot. I allowed myself briefly to imagine a genuine day off. Any time – anywhere. Grab Markham and browse the shops – especially the bookshops. A nice lunch somewhere. To be able to chat about everything under the sun and not have to worry whether the next word I uttered would be the one that gave me away. We could watch a holo. Or visit the planetarium – I’d always wanted to go there. Afternoon tea at the

wonderfully Gothic St Pancras Hotel. And then the stroll home. Stop at the pub on the way for a few drinks. A lovely, normal day.

But not for us. Not today.

I changed into my grey outfit. Markham handed me a small blaster and then checked the pod's power levels. He'd had the camo device activated and it does tend to drink power. The solar panels would have helped but, with luck, this operation was winding down anyway. Back to Swan Court, stash Svetlana and Anastasia at Home Farm safely out of harm's way, grass up Insight and we were done.

Almost none of that happened.

Things were about to move quickly. Not that they'd been going slowly before, but this was the final mad dash towards . . . I don't know. Triumph or disaster, I suppose. In this instance, anything that wasn't a complete success would be a complete failure.

Markham and I arrived at Swan Court just after midnight. There was no moon – which was both good and bad. And no one about, either, which was definitely good, but I engaged the camo device anyway. We couldn't do anything about our pod signature but based on the very few jumps I'd made with Insight I'd seen no evidence of them even possessing a signature reader, let alone using it.

'No other pod signature,' reported Markham. 'Which means nothing – we know their pods drop and go, so don't assume they haven't arrived yet. Stay sharp, Max.'

We exited the pod. I shivered. The London night was cold and, just for once, there was no fog, which was a shame. We could have done with the cover. I opened my com to let Pennyroyal know we'd arrived. Having your head blasted off by one of your own team is so embarrassing. 'We're here.'

Silence. Complete silence. Not even the usual faint static.

I looked at Markham. Who looked back at me.

Something was very wrong, and I wasn't going to waste my time gabbling uselessly into my com while someone crept up behind and shot us both. I shut it down and we headed for the back gate.

The back gate was not only unlocked – it was ajar. Markham poked it with the business end of his blaster and it swung open a couple of inches.

Nothing happened. No one was waiting behind it.

No lights showed anywhere. To all intents and purposes, the house was asleep. I stepped back and looked up. What was going on behind those dark windows?

Two possibilities occurred to me. Either, for reasons that were nothing to do with me, Bridget had advanced the schedule.

Or, for reasons that were everything to do with me, Bridget had advanced the schedule. Somehow, between seeing her a couple of hours ago and now, I'd been rumbled.

I think we all know which is the most likely.

The back door was also open. My heart kicked up a beat. There was no way Pennyroyal would ever be so careless. Markham checked the charge on his blaster and pushed past me, indicating I should follow him down the steps.

I pulled out my own blaster, hitched up my skirts so they wouldn't swish so loudly, and we moved swiftly along the servants' passage, past the laundry, pantries, storerooms, cold rooms and so forth, and through the empty kitchen. I shivered. The stove was out. I'd never known that here before. Without the rosy glow, the kitchen was a dark and sinister place. We crept up the servants' stairs and waited by the door, listening.

More silence.

With infinite caution, Markham cracked open the door. I could see the familiar hall where a single candelabrum burned on the mantel, throwing flickering shadows across the black and white floor.

For Svetlana at least, we were too late.

She lay face down. I couldn't see all of her but she was dead. Her head rested in a pool of her own blood, shockingly bright against the black and white tiles. Her empty eyes stared at an endless nothing.

I felt a huge pang of regret. This woman had tried so hard for a new life for herself and her daughter, but she'd run from one threat straight into the arms of a bigger one. And I was angry I hadn't saved her. RIP, Svetlana.

My thoughts jerked back to the present. Were Insight still here?

As if in answer, from somewhere upstairs came the crash of furniture overturning, shockingly loud in this quiet house. I jumped a mile. Something shattered. And then again, a similar noise from a different part of the house.

Markham pushed the door a little wider. I drew back against the wall to watch our rear. My guess was that someone was conducting a room-by--room search and, by the sounds of it, not being tremendously careful how they went about it. It was going to cost Insight a lot of money to put this house back together in time for the next tenant. Bridget would not be happy.

The hall itself was wrecked. Shards of porcelain and pottery lay scattered across the tiles. One of the armchairs had been pulled out from the wall and overturned. Looking for someone who might be hiding behind it, I guessed. A little girl, perhaps.

Markham slowly eased the door shut and put his lips to my ear.

'Find Anastasia. Your job is to get her out, Max. I'll deal with this. No matter what you see or hear – your priority is to get her out.'

'I'll bring help,' I whispered.

He nodded. 'Yes. Go.'

I oozed backwards down the stairs towards the kitchen quarters. OK, Maxwell, think. Insight were in the main part of the house so where else could I look? Kitchen, pantries, storerooms, housekeeper's room and so on. If that failed, then I'd nip up the back stairs to the upper storeys. Insight might be up there now but if, as I suspected, Smallhope had hidden Anastasia somewhere, then they weren't going to find her quickly or easily. The fact they were still crashing around up there confirmed they hadn't found her yet which could mean she was down here. And the back door was open. All I had to do was find a frightened little girl who could be anywhere and get her back to the pod.

I had no idea where Smallhope and Pennyroyal might be. They might be lying dead somewhere. No – they weren't – not by any stretch of the

imagination would those two ever lie dead anywhere. They might not be visible but I refused to believe that they weren't here somewhere, and now that Markham was upstairs wielding a blaster, I reckoned the balance of power had changed in our favour.

I started in the housekeeper's room since it was the closest. A small stuffy room completely bare of personal possessions. And empty.

Next door was the butler's pantry. Similarly empty of personal gear but smelling slightly of silver polish. I stood still. Silver. Of course . . . the silver room. Every big house had one. Those small, lockable strongrooms used to house the family silver, the mistress's jewellery boxes, and other valuables. And while the master kept the key, the butler often had a duplicate.

There was a small door in the corner. Wooden, but very solid. With a good lock. And no key.

I scratched on the door and whispered, 'Anastasia?'

The door might be hefty but there was a gap at the bottom. I tried to see underneath, remembering she might have witnessed her mother being killed and trying to keep my voice calm.

'Anastasia? Are you there? We have to go.'

There was no response. Perhaps she wasn't here after all. Where else would Smallhope have hidden her?

'Anastasia – it's me – Maxine. Open the door.'

There was a very long silence. I couldn't afford to wait any longer. I was just turning away when a barely heard voice whispered, 'Maxine?'

'Yes. It's me.' I remembered I worked for the organisation that had killed her mother. 'I've come to save you. Please open the door.'

'Prove it's you.'

In any other circumstances I'd have been quite proud of her.

'How?'

'What did I like when we went to the museum?'

For a moment I couldn't remember. My memory and I are not always on

speaking terms. And then I could.

'The Ashurbanipal Lions. And the human-headed bulls. And the statue of Ramses. Actually, pretty much anything over ten feet tall. And then we had pizza.'

'Mrs Danvers said you were on my side.'

'I'm always on your side.'

There was a pause and then a long, old-fashioned key appeared under the door. Because it couldn't be unlocked from the inside, presumably. I seized it and scrabbled at the lock. A moment later the door swung open.

She was grubby and tear-stained. I spared a moment for a quick hug. Good Lord, she was nearly as skinny as Matthew.

'I'm taking you to safety,' I said. 'Danvers and Jeeves will make sure we get away.'

Well, that was the plan anyway.

'Mrs Danvers made me hide in here. Where's Mummy?'

'I don't know,' I said, because I couldn't afford for her to burst into tears now. Not at this precise moment. 'This way.'

They nearly caught us. And then we nearly got away. And then they caught Smallhope.

We couldn't get out the back door. I could hear men's voices muttering nearby. The corridor dog-legged and they were still out of sight so I took a chance and pushed Anastasia ahead of me. We headed for the stairs and the front door, with a great deal of reluctance on my part. I really didn't want Anastasia walking past Svetlana's lifeless body and that pool of blood, so red in the flickering candlelight. I would have to cover her eyes.

Just as we reached the foot of the servants' stairs, there were voices again and the door at the top swung open. I whirled us both into the kitchen. Nowhere to hide here. What to do?

The pantry. I pulled us inside and half closed the door. A closed door is suspicious – a half-open door less so. At least that was what I was banking on.

We stood very still. Not daring to move. I held Anastasia's hand in the dark. She was shaking.

And then – one, two gunshots. Disturbingly close and loud. And then another.

'Got her!' a voice shouted.

Shit.

The kitchen door banged open and two figures entered, dragging Smallhope, bloody but unbowed, eyes blazing defiance. A fourth man strode in.

Eddie.

The only view I had was through the long, thin gap between the doorjamb and the door itself. I could see a little more if I turned my head either way, but nothing helpful.

I eased Anastasia to one side and raised my blaster. It wasn't massive as blasters go – for some reason no one ever seems willing to trust me with one of the really big ones – but I had the element of surprise. Eddie first and then one other, and if Smallhope couldn't deal magnificently with the third one then I'd be very disappointed. And probably very dead.

The advantage of the smaller blasters is that not only do they not take long to charge, they do it almost silently.

Smallhope was still in her Mrs Danvers gear. She was on her knees and a trifle dishevelled but very much the matriarch in charge.

'Unhand me,' she said haughtily. 'I am the housekeeper.'

'Yeah,' said Eddie. 'Because all housekeepers carry one of these.' He held up an automatic something or other with what looked like – and probably was – a portable rocket launcher attached.

'We have mice,' said Smallhope with dignity.

Eddie walked around behind her and kicked her hard. In the right kidney. Two men held her up. She never made a sound.

'Where's the other one?'

It was unclear whether he meant the other one, Anastasia, or the other one,

Pennyroyal.

He kicked Smallhope again. This time they let her go and she fell face forwards on to the stone floor.

I could feel Anastasia vibrating beside me. Keep calm, Maxwell. Wait. Just for once, don't do anything stupid.

'Keep at it,' said Eddie, heading towards the door. 'Whoever he is, he'll turn up fast enough when he hears her scream.'

They were after Pennyroyal – not Anastasia. That was encouraging.

Eddie disappeared out of the door and I could hear his footsteps fading down the passageway.

'Right,' said one. 'Let's do as the man says, shall we? Remember, boys – she needs to scream.'

Sadly, none of them really had a chance to get with the programme. There was, literally, a blur, and Pennyroyal flew past me. He'd been behind the shelving the whole time. I'd had no idea he was there. I hadn't even heard him breathing. He'd changed out of his butler gear and grasped an automatic in either hand. Two blasters had been slapped on his rip-grip patch.

A continuous hail of gunfire erupted around the kitchen. Pots, pans, glassware, bowls, jugs – everything either shattered, flew through the air, bounced or went *boing* depending from what sort of material it had been made. Wooden shelves splintered and sagged, causing even more kitchen equipment to slide to the ground and shatter. Great lumps of jagged plaster, brick and wood flew around the room. The noise was intense, amplified by the cavernous structure of the kitchen. Slowly, the room filled with blue smoke. On and on and on. He stood in the middle of the room and slowly rotated, destroying everything in sight.

Men dived in all directions. I don't know whether they'd been hit or were just trying to get away from the firestorm. I pushed Anastasia against the wall and raised my gun in case any of them had any misguided ideas about sheltering in the pantry.

Anastasia had her hands over her ears and her eyes squeezed tightly shut. I put one hand on her shoulder and pressed downwards. We crouched together – there would be a letter of complaint from my knees very soon – but I wanted to minimise the chance of being hit by any unfortunate ricochets.

Smallhope, obviously not as injured as she would have had the world believe, rolled painfully across the floor to where a man was crouching behind a kitchen chair – for all the good that would do him – waiting for a chance to shoot Pennyroyal in the back. She punched him behind his ear. He went over like a very short tree. And now she was armed as well. All I had to do was wait while they dealt with everyone else and then Anastasia and I could walk out of this room and to safety.

No, we couldn't. There was a sudden thunder of boots. Many boots. Many voices. Bloody bollocking hell. There was another team.

We'd obviously grossly underestimated the number of people Insight would send tonight. Although, to be fair, they'd only sent two men to deal with Winterman and Feeney – and they were proper villains. And yet here, Insight had sent at least six, possibly eight, people to deal with a woman and a child. Why?

The thought struck me immediately. The number of servants had increased since Winterman's time. There were eight of them now and some of them would sleep in the same room. Possibly even the same bed. Ten bodies at least to get rid of. A lot by anyone's standards. Insight had sent extra people just to be on the safe side. They'd need at least two carts. And their drivers. Yes – all this extra manpower could be perfectly normal.

And then – a second, nastier thought – where were Mrs Proudie and all the others? Were they lying dead in their beds in the attic? Was that why the kitchen fire was out? How could Smallhope be so careless as to neglect . . .

No – she'd have got the servants out of the way. They would be elsewhere. That was why the kitchen fire was out. That was why Insight were ransacking the house. Not just for one little girl, or Pennyroyal, but for

the servants as well. Or *witnesses*, as they would call them, and of whom they could find no trace. Other than killing Svetlana, this night was going really badly for them.

Smallhope had stopped firing. Pennyroyal tossed her another gun. The kitchen was full of smoke, debris, spent ammo and the smell of burning. Pennyroyal vaulted the table, overturned it with a crash and took cover. Smallhope scrambled to join him, looking very white. Maybe she wasn't as uninjured as I had thought.

I stood up very carefully. Partly because my knees wouldn't let me do anything else and partly because I didn't want to alarm my colleagues out there. Falling victim to friendly fire was not on my agenda.

Before I could move, there was the sound of boots as more Insight personnel stormed down the stairs. The firing started before they even entered the room. They obviously intended to spray the room with something lethal even before they were properly through the door.

Eddie came first.

And then . . .

Never mind my agenda, Insight's agenda, Smallhope's agenda – this was the moment when everything changed.

Eddie burst into the room, rolled, and came up on his knees not ten feet from Pennyroyal, teeth clenched, weapon raised, all set to wipe him from the face of the earth.

Pennyroyal himself was in a very similar position and with a very similar intention. I braced myself for a hail of gunfire. At that range they'd blow each other apart.

It never came.

They stopped. Everyone stopped. The world stopped. They stared at each other.

'You,' said Eddie, lowering his gun.

'Yeah,' said Pennyroyal, tossing aside his own weapon. 'Me.'

And then they closed on each other.

If I'd been on my own, I'd have hung around to see how this turned out. But I had Anastasia. I quickly pulled her away from the wall and we began to edge our way back between the racks of shelving. Behind me I could hear the dull thud of flesh on flesh. Something went over with a crash. Something else smashed. I heard someone shout not to shoot. And then we were at the back wall.

There was a tiny window high up. We could climb up the shelving. I blessed Dr Dowson and the easily transferable skills of the Library Way.

There was no glass in the window – to keep the pantry cool, I supposed – just a fine mesh to keep the flies out.

I tried to put my elbow through it – which hurt – but I managed on the second attempt. Catching hold of the jagged edges, I pulled away as much as I could.

I made Anastasia go feetfirst because I didn't want her falling headfirst on to the flagstones below.

I ripped my grey costume to shreds as I wriggled through and then my skirt caught on one of the jagged edges, causing me to land on my bum which, in turn, caused me to drop my blaster. I heard it skitter away into the dark and there was no time to look for it. I whispered, 'This way,' and we edged around the side of the house and back into the garden. More gunfire started up behind us. I stopped. Markham was in there somewhere.

No – his instructions had been to get Anastasia to safety and go for help.

And now I had a decision to make: St Mary's or the Time Police. My heart said one, but my head said the other. This was no time to mess about. There was a pitched battle going on at Swan Court. I needed boots on the ground, giant weapons and people who didn't arse about. So – against all my instincts – I went to the Time Police.

Next time I'll listen to my instincts. The bastards tried to arrest me.

We landed in their Pod Bay. As always, there was tremendous alarm and confusion. From them, I mean – I was fine with it. I don't know why they do this – as far as I know, it's only ever me popping in and out. And even I wouldn't be here if I had a choice.

I used the time it took them to sort themselves out to activate the decon lamp, wait for the floor to stop spinning, and issue a few quick instructions to Anastasia.

'When you were in the silver room, did Danvers tell you to stay put?'

'Yes.'

'The same applies here. Don't worry – no one can get inside except me. They don't know about you. Sit tight and I'll be back soon.'

Her eyes were very big in her pinched little face. 'You will come back?' and I realised I was her one certainty in this terrifying world.

I touched her cheek and smiled. 'I promise I'll come back. I'm St Mary's. We never leave our people behind.'

'Where's my mummy?'

I had no idea what to say. Quickest and easiest would be to tell her Svetlana was fine, because this was not exactly the time to break the news that she was dead. On the other hand, lying about something that important and traumatic just to make life easier for myself? How could I do that? No, somebody else – a childcare professional – should handle this. Someone experienced and competent enough to deal with the aftermath. So, like every adult before me, I chickened out.

‘We’ll find out later. Let’s concentrate on keeping ourselves out of trouble, shall we?’

By now the Time Police had assumed their traditional formation – semi-circle, weapons pointed, etc., etc. It gets old after a while.

I stepped outside the pod, very carefully closing the door behind me.

Things did not go well. They never appreciate people just popping in for a chat, and all of them were far more focused on my actual visit than the reason for it. I could feel myself becoming hotter and angrier by the second as they kept shouting me down. I was making truly heroic efforts to remain calm and present my case in a coherent and logical manner and the buggers just weren’t listening.

I took a deep breath and tried to ignore the impressive weaponry pointed directly at me. ‘You must send at least one team to these coordinates. And please don’t shoot everyone on sight. My colleagues are in there somewhere, fighting to bring down the biggest bunch of bastards you’ll ever come across.’

The officer bristled. ‘In that case, why aren’t you there with them?’

‘I came for help. Are you going to give it?’

‘On just your say-so? Unlikely.’

‘Let me speak to Commander Hay.’

‘Westminster.’

‘Captain Ellis?’

‘Out on a job.’

I scraped the bottom of the barrel. ‘Grint?’

‘Not here.’

‘Bloody hell, does anyone ever do any work in this sodding place?’

‘We have better things to do than hang around waiting for you to turn up begging for assistance in St Mary’s latest screw-up.’

‘Is there anyone actually in charge?’

‘Everyone’s out.’

‘Where?’ I demanded in exasperation. ‘What could possibly be more

important than this?'

Another spoke. 'Rome. Great Fire. Arresting looters.'

I thought for a moment. 'Is Commander Treadwell still alive?'

'Who?'

Shit. This wasn't going well. They weren't going to assist. Even worse, they had on their *let's arrest Maxwell and shoot her* faces. And let's not even think about what they'd do if they found the illegal in my bathroom.

I managed a polite smile. 'All right, if you're not going to help, then I'll be off. Sorry to have troubled you. Nice to see you all looking so well.'

'Not so fast.'

'Sorry, guys, can't hang around. Have to update Dr Bairstow.'

'For whom you no longer work.'

Shit. How did they . . . ? Treadwell, I suppose.

'Nevertheless . . .' I said and left it hanging because I honestly couldn't think of anything to say. This had been a mistake. I needed help and I wasn't going to get it here. Which only left St Mary's. I didn't want to involve them but my mind just couldn't get past Svetlana lying in her own blood. Smallhope, white and dogged. Pennyroyal, a whirling dervish of destruction. And Markham – still in there somewhere.

Actually, my position was worse than I thought. As I turned to go, the officer went to grab my arm. 'Not so fast.'

I did the haughty Dr Bairstow look-down-my-nose thing. 'Am I under arrest?'

'Not yet.'

Well, that was concerning. Cut your losses, Maxwell, and get your arse out of here now. I began to edge towards the pod.

'Halt.' He lunged for me again.

I shouted, 'Door,' and threw myself backwards. This was going to hurt.

It did. The door didn't open fast enough and I caught my shoulder. That hurt. I flailed for the doorjamb to break my fall and managed to rip a couple of fingernails. That hurt. I hit the floor with a thump. Again. That hurt most

of all because my bum hadn't recovered from falling out of the window at Swan Court. And I didn't get my legs in quickly enough and the door bounced off my left shin. That really hurt.

The Time Police bugger tried to follow me in, so I kicked out at him, because we're always being told not to be selfish and to share with our fellow man. I'd like to think that hurt, too.

He raised his sonic.

I didn't waste time trying to get up. I lay on the floor, shouting, 'Computer – emergency extraction. Now. Now. Now.'

The door slammed shut, cutting off the Time Police mid-shout. I was so angry with myself. I'd tried to do the sensible thing and now I'd alerted the Time Police for no good reason. I should have gone straight to St Mary's. Stupid, stupid Maxwell.

The floor heaved. It wasn't the only one.

As Shakespeare liked to say – Exit, pursued by a bear.

The world went black . . .

. . . Bollocks . . .

I'd have liked to lie there for a bit. Just a little while. Just close my eyes . . .

However . . . things to be . . . places to do.

I climbed groggily to my feet and tried to peer at the screen. My eyesight was completely shot. Everything was green. Hawking was covered in green. Everyone had gone and left only green in their wake. I squinted. I squinted some more.

Oh.

I was looking at grass. Lots of it. This wasn't Hawking. As I said – bollocks.

I panned the cameras. Ah . . . mystery solved. We were on the South Lawn. OK, Hawking would have been better but it could be worse.

Emergency extractions are no fun but pods are supposed to whip us back

to St Mary's – to Hawking, to be precise – where both pod and people can benefit from prompt attention. I don't know why this one had dropped me on the South Lawn. We were only about a hundred yards off-target, but on a bad day that hundred yards could be fatal. I wondered if the Time Police had tried to hit us with one of their EMP thingies. Quite likely, now I came to think of it. Had I pissed them off just that once too often? Or, possibly, the pod was beginning to drift.

That was a point. Never mind me – how many jumps had this pod made recently? Twelve? Thirteen? What was my name again?

I leaned against the console and waited either for recovery or for my life to end. Whichever came first. All this leaping around had completely negated my recent enforced grounding. I was right back to square one. And at some point, when I had a moment, I was going to have to come to terms with the fact I might never move past square one.

In a perfect world I'd have had the door open and be bounding powerfully but gracefully towards the front doors of St Mary's. At that actual moment I was having a problem standing upright.

'Ms Forrest?'

'Mm?'

'Maxine?'

OK – I knew that voice. Anastasia. And now I remembered why I was here. And I really should not be collapsed across the controls and not doing anything about the current crisis. I couldn't remember exactly which crisis was occurring but it seemed safe to assume the combination of me and an emergency extraction equalled crisis.

'Maxine, are you all right?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Can you . . . ?'

I'm not sure what I was asking her to do but someone tugged at my shoulder.

'Here.'

Bless her, she'd brought me a cup of water. I sipped once. Twice. Thrice.

No time for any more. I was certain the Time Police would be hard on our heels. They must know I'd head for St Mary's. They might even be here ahead of me.

I had to move. I was certain the Time Police would send assistance to Swan Court eventually – but how quickly? Would they wait for Hay to return from wherever she'd taken herself off to? Whatever they had decided, I couldn't afford to hang around. At this moment, Anastasia was my top priority.

'Let's go,' I said.

She stared at me. 'Where?'

'Good thought.' I pointed at the screen. 'Listen – in case I collapse somewhere along the way – leave me. You run across the grass. Up the steps. Through those front doors. Through the Great Hall. Up the stairs. Turn left. Along the gallery. Door at the end. If anyone tries to stop you, ask for Mrs Partridge. Say I sent you. Mrs Partridge. Got it?'

She nodded. I wondered what else had happened in her life that she could take all this so calmly. 'Yes.'

'Then let's go.'

We lurched across the grass. Well, I lurched. I could see St Mary's ahead of me. And fractionally to the left of it, another St Mary's. And superimposed over them both, the medieval version with the gate, and the little postern, and those bloody chickens, and any moment now William Hendred would step through to welcome me home . . .

The Time Police materialised behind us on the South Lawn just as we reached the steps. The worst possible time for us because they could see Anastasia and, being the Time Police, jumped to entirely the correct conclusions.

'Time Police. Halt. Hands behind your heads.'

You have to ask yourself – does anyone ever do that? You're running for your life – presumably because you've been a very, very bad girl – and all the Time Police have to do is tell you to stop and put your hands on your

head and you immediately abandon all hopes of escape and comply. The Time Police – eternal optimists.

'Run,' I said, keeping Anastasia in front of me in case they started shooting. Although Dr Bairstow would be more than sarcastic if they tried that . . . And where were bloody Hyssop and her Half-Wits? Why weren't they out here doing Security things?

We raced up the shallow stone steps, two at a time. I reached for the big iron handle and we barrelled through the doors. I slammed them behind us. No time for the bolts – they were at such a height as to require a stepladder, anyway. We raced through the vestibule and straight into the Great Hall. Home of the History Department, usually full of sagging tables, unstable whiteboards, and Bashford wandering around shouting, 'You don't understand – it's the wrong beetroot.'

Yes – that has happened.

Not today, however, because the buggers weren't there. The place was deserted. And unfamiliarly tidy. Tables in more or less neat rows, whiteboards lined up against the walls, files stacked slightly less haphazardly than usual.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Now what? I stared around. The door to Wardrobe was shut. I couldn't see anyone in the Library and there were no explosions or flames so presumably R&D was temporarily dormant as well. This really didn't look good at all.

I heard voices shouting outside. We couldn't afford to hang around.

'Come on.'

I seized Anastasia's hand and we headed for the stairs, which immediately started to twist and weave in front of me, all three sets of them looking like something produced by Escher with a hangover and a grudge against physics.

I told myself these were just stairs. Just start climbing, Maxwell. Close your eyes and trust your legs. Grabbing the banister, I made a start. One – two. One-two. It got easier. OK – this was good but I needed to move more

quickly.

We'd just achieved the half-landing when I heard the doors open behind us.

A voice shouted, 'Time Police. Halt.'

Bollocks to that. I didn't think they'd shoot, but that didn't mean I should allow us to be caught. We speeded up. Sped up? We ran, anyway. I risked opening my eyes. Just stairs. One set. Wooden. Behaving just as they should do. I took the rest of the flight two at a time. Not quite as easily as I used to. Beside me, Anastasia cruised effortlessly and making no friends at all as far as I was concerned.

Lungs heaving, I arrived at the top of the stairs and we turned left along the gallery. Past Peterson's office – which was empty, the door standing ajar. Bloody hell, where was everyone? The place was horribly quiet. Had they all fled? Was it possible . . . ? Were they under arrest? Taken away? By the Time Police? Just because they could. Or by Martin Gaunt in his quest for revenge? Or by the civilian police? Or even – a thought that made my spine tingle – had Insight become aware of the existence of St Mary's? Not unlikely given their connection with Ronan.

Never had the gallery seemed so long. The worn runner stretched away in front of me nearly to the horizon.

Below us, a team of four officers were threading their way through the tables, weapons raised. They caught sight of us above them. 'Halt . . .'

Oh God, give it a rest, guys.

Mrs Partridge's office was in the right-hand corner of the gallery, with Dr Bairstow's office alongside looking out over the South Lawn. We were nearly there.

I could hear boots on the stairs. They'd be able to get a shot off any moment now. I'd like to say I was pulling Anastasia along the gallery but I suspect it was the other way around. I risked a wobbly glance behind us. Shit. The first two officers had reached the top of the stairs.

'Final warning. Halt.'

I grabbed for the handle at the same time as Anastasia pushed. The office door flew open, rebounded against the wall and very nearly knocked the two of us out cold. Mrs Partridge would not be happy. We tumbled into her room.

She was standing at her filing cabinet, rummaging for something or other. She looked up as we literally crashed through the door. Behind me I could hear running feet. She must have been able to see the Time Police officers charging towards us.

I had just enough breath to gasp, 'Dr Bairstow.'

'Not here. London.'

'Peterson?'

'Great Fire of Rome. They all are.'

I stared at her. Oh God – St Mary's were all out on a Big Job. Just a skeleton staff remaining. No wonder the place had that empty feel. What could I do? I had to do something. I hadn't got this far only to fail in the last two feet. In my mind the Time Police were already dragging us away. Think, Maxwell. *Think.*

Mrs Partridge was watching me. She does that a lot. It means there's a solution but I'm just too dense to have thought of it yet.

And then I did. I knew exactly what to do. And there wouldn't be a thing the Time Police could do about it.

Whirling around, I seized Anastasia's right hand.

There's a time-honoured custom, established down the millennia, which Mrs Partridge would not – could not – ignore.

I slapped Anastasia's right hand down on Mrs Partridge's desk, along with my own, and invoked the traditional plea of those seeking protection and justice from a higher force.

'Sanctuary!'

All right – it was a bit left field, possibly, but what else could I do?

Sanctuary originally meant a shrine or sacred place and then went on to mean a place of safety. A refuge for the persecuted. Which was definitely me at that moment. The tradition reaches back to the dawn of time, is almost universal, and can be invoked by anyone.

The rules are simple. You place your hand on the altar and claim the right of sanctuary and there isn't anything anyone can do about it. As long as you are touching the altar, you are safe.

Which tends to be the downside of the scheme. Cleopatra's sister, Arsinoe, sought refuge at the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. Holding the altar with both hands, she defied Mark Antony's soldiers who, the legend says, solved their problem by chopping off both her hands and then, probably redundantly, her head.

I didn't think the Time Police would go that far – *probably* wouldn't go that far – but a prudent bounty hunter – sorry, recovery agent – couldn't afford to take that chance.

Someone kicked the door shut. It wasn't me and Anastasia couldn't reach, so it must, by process of elimination, have been Mrs Partridge – or Kleio, Muse of History, daughter of Zeus, and PA to the inconveniently absent Dr Bairstow.

The Time Police were almost upon us.

'Quickly,' she said, standing against the door. 'Go out through Dr Bairstow's office.'

I paused at the door. 'Where are they? Exactly?'

‘Temple of Jupiter Stator,’ she said, fortunately understanding who I meant by *they*. And where. And why I wanted to know. ‘Salvaging what they can before the temple burns.’

Or, as the Time Police had just defined it – looting. Bloody hell, Maxwell. Frying pan – fire. Or, given the magnitude of my current crisis – out of the Great Pan of Edirne Belediyesi and into the Great Fire of Rome.

I turned to go.

‘Wait.’ She tossed me her scratchpad. ‘Coordinates.’

I looked at Anastasia.

‘Everything is under control here,’ said Mrs Partridge. ‘Go.’

I went.

I’ve always known that Dr Bairstow had his private quarters somewhere along this side of the gallery. Adjacent to his office, I assumed. Unless he simply hung from the ceiling like a bat, of course. Always a possibility.

I shot into his empty office, around his desk, had a thought, slammed on the brakes, wrenched open his bottom drawer, and pulled out his long--barrelled gun. Or cannon, as I always thought of it. Holding it carefully – and with no idea whether it was loaded or not – I shot through the discreet door between the bookcase and the window. There was a large room on the other side and no, sorry, I didn’t have time to look. Oak panelling, windows, bed, armchair, ornate fireplace – that was all I managed at the speed I was travelling.

Through another door and into a somewhat Spartan bathroom smelling faintly of his aftershave.

The only door left now was back out into the corridor. Locked, but the key was in the door. I opened it a crack and peered out. There was a lot of shouting coming from Mrs Partridge’s office, but I had every confidence. And I could hear her calling for Security. That should keep everyone tied up for some considerable time.

I eased my way out on to the gallery again and closed and locked the door behind me.

You know what they say – as one door closes another one opens and it's absolutely true. A door opened on the other side of the gallery and Rosie Lee stuck out her head, saw me, and gestured wildly and incomprehensibly.

I made a WTF gesture and she jabbed a finger at the back stairs. Excellent idea. Seriously, who needs a PA who can type, file, answer the phone, and make the tea when you can have one who not only doesn't do any of that but can extricate her boss from sticky situations *and* turn innocent visitors into stone as well?

I raced around the gallery knowing full well I could leave her to cover my rear. She'd crossed swords with the Time Police before. One of them had once injudiciously placed his hand on her bosom area and the echoes from the resulting slap were still reverberating around the building. They'd deal with her eventually but she'd slow them down and that was all I needed.

I could hear Mrs Partridge smoothly explaining that the door to Dr Bairstow's office was locked and she didn't have the key. However, should they care to make an appointment, she would apprise him of their visit on his return from London.

The Time Police were becoming more and more irate. I hoped she wouldn't have to hurt them. Not too much, anyway. Admin staff – the lethal force you never see coming. There's probably one of them standing behind you at this very moment. DON'T look round.

I approached my pod very slowly and with caution because:

1. I was a top-notch recovery agent and on the alert for any stray Time Police officers they might have left lying around.
2. Now that Hyssop was in charge of Security I was just as likely to be shot by one of them. And:
3. My lungs were heaving. If there was anyone lurking, I wouldn't have the breath to argue.

I banged in the coordinates, checked the screen for inadvertent bystanders and jumped.

The world went white.

The floor went multi-coloured because here came my morning bacon butty. As always, the carrots were a surprise.

OK – Great Fire of Rome. Obviously there hadn't been any time to prep, so this is off the top of my head:

July, 64AD.

The fire began near the cramped, crowded and very inflammable merchants' quarter near the Circus Maximus.

It was a very windy day which not only fanned the flames but carried sparks to the other, hitherto unburnt areas of the city.

Narrow streets and wooden buildings contributed to the speed and ferocity of the fire. Everything was crammed on top of everything else, with no open spaces to act as a fire break.

The official firefighters – the vigiles – were completely overwhelmed.

Looters threw torches into buildings to spread the fire and hinder the firefighters. When arrested, some of them said they were under orders to do so – which may have given rise to the rumours of Nero's involvement.

Ditto the Christians, who, under the impression this was the Last Judgement, and possibly feeling the End of Days couldn't come quickly enough, also did their best to hamper the firefighters.

The people blamed Nero and Nero blamed the Christians.

The fire burned for six days, before dying down just long enough to fool everyone into thinking it was all over, then flared up again and burned for another three days.

That's all I have for the moment.

I took a minute to sip my water and recover. My head was thumping. I didn't think I'd be able to keep going much longer. On the other hand, if I didn't get this sorted, it wouldn't matter.

I split the screen and angled the cameras. The coordinates were spot on. I was parked on the Via Sacra and actually looking up at what I was pretty sure was the Temple of Jupiter Stator itself. It was difficult to tell because most Roman temples had a common layout and apart from size and god--specific statues, they all looked very similar. However, if I was right, then that very imposing porticoed building off to my left was the House of the Vestals and the Porta Mugonia was over on my right.

A word about Roman temples. They weren't really used as Christians would use a church. The public were rarely granted access inside. There was only ever one entrance – as opposed to, say, the Parthenon, which was accessible from all four sides. A Roman temple was approached from the front, and a flight of steep steps would lead to a wide, flat, open platform which was the main area of worship and where all the sacrifices would be made. The god – in the form of their statue – lived in the cella behind this space. This cella was protected by eight forbiddingly massive pillars and was never usually accessed by the public, who were permitted to enter only to leave a donation or gift.

Often there was another room either behind the cella or down in the basement. This was where the temple treasure would be kept. In addition, because they were physically very secure, temples often acted as banks and record keepers. The Temple of Saturn, for example, housed the Roman mint.

This was what St Mary's would be after today. Not the treasure so much, although a little treasure comes in very handy sometimes – ask Smallhope. No, St Mary's would be after artefacts, records, anything that would give them an insight (sorry again!) into everyday Roman life and times.

If I'd hoped for a spectacular view of Rome on fire, I was to be disappointed.

To begin with, I could barely see to the other side of the street. Vast clouds of black smoke were being driven almost horizontally by the wind. I was squinting away when, without warning, the wind dropped and the clouds

slowly parted and . . .

Shit – that wasn't good. I squinted again, cursed, picked up Dr Bairstow's cannon and very carefully let myself out of the pod.

Where things went immediately and very badly wrong.

Smell is the most evocative of all the senses and no sooner did I catch a whiff of nostril-searing smoke than I was back in Peking. Or was it Alexandria? Or St Mary's, waiting for Margery Daw to light the . . . Or Persepolis. Or London during the Great Fire.

Images whipped through my mind. Here. There. Crashing pillars. Paternoster Row. The roof coming down around me. The fires of Persepolis reflected in Ronan's eyes. It was too much. I was truly lost. Lost in time.

I staggered sideways and fell heavily to my hands and knees. There was no fire here but the paving stones were hot beneath my hands. I could hear but not see roaring flames. Feel the heat. I should run. But in which direction? Away from St Paul's? Out of the library?

Pull yourself together, Maxwell. Focus. Deal with the now.

I closed my eyes and relied on my other senses. That helped. Breathe slowly.

In. Out. In.

OK. Better. Slightly. Job to do. Move. I creaked to my feet.

The hot wind whipped my skirts around me and the stink was even worse than in Peking. Still, at least no one was shooting anyone this time. Part of me wondered what day of the fire this was and the other half gave me a metaphorical slap round the head and told me to concentrate. Deal with the now. Because this situation wasn't good.

I was standing on a paved road. There was some quality stonework here, as befitted such a posh area, but at present the whole street was littered with debris. Some of it clearly abandoned as people had fled, some blown along by the really quite strong wind. A couple of dilapidated wicker baskets bowled along the gutters. A woman's shawl lay soggy and forgotten, next to an old metal pot dented almost beyond use. Whether it had been left behind

because of that or had been dropped and trampled in the mad panic to get away was unclear, and I didn't have time to think about it.

The temple loomed above me, the steps stacked with piles of coarse mats of some kind. To be used to beat out the flames should they get this far, I guessed. I couldn't tell whether they'd been left here in readiness or whether the vigiles had been called away to fight the fire elsewhere and left them behind.

The good news was that I'd found St Mary's. All professionally kitted out in fire-suits and masks so it was hard to tell who was who, but I reckoned all the History Department and most of the Security Section were here.

The bad news was they were all lined up to face a soot-streaked wall at the foot of the steps.

The really bad news was the large number of Time Police keeping them there. Too late I remembered what they'd said back at TPHQ about dealing with looters. Not that St Mary's were looters, of course – this was legitimate search and rescue as authorised by the treaty – but the large amount of miscellaneous stuff stacked against the wall with them wasn't going to help that argument. I could see small statues – mostly bronze, I suspected – which would certainly melt in the flames if not carried to safety. I could see four or five wooden chests – they could contain anything from treasure to household records. Investigating their contents would be exciting. There were several modern archive boxes – obviously brought by St Mary's to carry scrolls and wax tablets – together with a whole jumble of other stuff, most of it with a street value of zero because – and I'll say it again – St Mary's isn't interested in money and gold. Documents and records are what really float our boat. Their boat.

The other good news was that the Time Police looked to have at least two teams on site. Preventing looting would be the official explanation – getting up St Mary's nose would be the real reason. I, however, could offer them much more legitimate prey.

I was furious, though. What the fuck did Hyssop think she was playing at?

Bloody hell, if Markham were here, he would never have allowed us – them – to be caught like this. He'd have posted at least a couple of people to keep watch. Elementary, my dear Hyssop.

I stood still. Yes, it was, wasn't it? Security 101. So where exactly was the daft bat? This wasn't good. Although St Mary's were facing the wall, rather than against it, so it seemed safe to conclude they were under arrest rather than participating in the opening stages of a firing squad.

Once again, the scene blurred. There were two walls – one superimposed over the other. With bullet holes and blood. And shadowy figures sprawled on the ground. And then I was back. Here. Now. Staring at the Time Police and wondering what to do next.

Silently – although that was a complete waste of time because I could have been accompanied by the Dagenham Girl Pipers and still no one would have heard – I made sure the pod door was closed behind me. I didn't sneak or creep. I was wearing ripped and bloody Victorian clothes in Ancient Rome. What would be the point? Besides, the sooner the Time Police saw me, the sooner I could whirl them off to Victorian London to save the day. So, as is always the way when you're not trying to conceal your presence, I actually managed to get quite close before anyone noticed me.

Peterson, bless him, was arguing with the Time Police. I like to think he learned that from me. Mask pulled down, he was saying over his shoulder, 'This is legitimate search and rescue as permitted by the treaty.'

And yes, it is true. St Mary's will stand on the edge of catastrophe and argue the hind leg off a donkey, but it was keeping all their attention on him.

I walked up behind Captain Ellis, supervising things from a short distance away, and stuck Dr Bairstow's gun in the back of his neck.

'Please ask your people to put down their weapons.'

He sighed. 'You won't shoot me.'

I channelled my inner Pennyroyal. 'Not in the head, no. That would be

unsporting.'

'Put the gun down, Max. You're outnumbered and your people are breaking the law.'

'No, I won't, yes, I am, and no, they're not. There's a treaty, remember? Legitimate research. Call off your men or decide which foot you can live without. And no, I'm not messing. I'm here for far more important reasons than this piece of nonsense. Stand your people down and listen to me, Matthew.'

I waited. The air was thick with smoke. Great golden embers danced around us like demented fireflies. The air sizzled between the temple pillars. I could feel the heat coming up through my boots. Over the roaring flames I could hear faint noises of screaming and panic from the surrounding city. Two officers had turned and were training their guns in my general direction. One began to ooze to the side, hoping to get behind me, presumably. If I didn't sort this quickly, I'd be the tasty filling in a Time Police sandwich.

'Give the order, Captain. Stand your people down.'

'I'm not going to do that.'

'Matthew, I pulled you out of the ash at Pompeii. I took a falling wall for you in Constantinople. Take off your stupid Time Police hat – not literally – and listen to me.'

Something touched the back of my neck. 'Put down the gun, Maxwell.'

I sighed. This day wasn't getting any better, was it?

And then Hyssop said, 'No – you drop yours. Now.'

Well – what do you know. A double-decker sandwich. Good for Hyssop.

I said, 'Everyone put their guns down. Seriously, Matthew – you need to hear this.'

As if to reinforce my point, a burning scrap of something floated down on to my skirt. I shook it away. Was the fire drawing closer? Time was ticking . . .

I sighed. 'As a sign of good faith, I'm putting down my gun.'

‘As a sign of intelligence,’ said Hyssop, ‘I’m not.’

Oh great. Now she remembers the role of the Security Section.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘Can we just pretend everyone’s threatened everyone else, honour is satisfied and we can get on with something really important? I need you and your team and I need you now. Render me the assistance I require and they’ll make you a major. I’m not kidding.’

Unseen but quite close, a wall or building collapsed with a roar of flames and a shower of hot, bright sparks. Instinctively, everyone half ducked and there was a long pause as we were enveloped in another cloud of throat--stinging smoke until, with much coughing and air flapping, we were able to see each other again. I think it was dawning on everyone this was not the place for a casual chat.

‘All right,’ called Ellis. ‘Everyone stand down. Weapons safe. No one fires at anyone else. No matter how irritating St Mary’s manages to be.’

Reluctantly, the Time Police stepped back. St Mary’s collectively turned around and waved.

I wiped the sweat off my face. ‘Thank you, Captain. How many men do you have?’

‘Here? Two teams plus me.’

Peterson came over. ‘Max – what’s wrong?’

‘A lot. Listen up, both of you – I don’t have time to say this twice.’

The only good thing about this was that we were in a posh part of Rome with big stone buildings everywhere, no wooden huts and no trees or undergrowth, so there wasn’t a lot to go up in flames, but that didn’t mean the wind wasn’t blowing the heat, the smoke, burning embers, everything, directly into our faces. We huddled against the wall for shelter, and with soot and ash dropping around us, I gave them everything. Ending with, ‘Captain Ellis, you and your people must come with me. Now. We need to jump to Swan Court and pull my people out. Before it’s too late.’

‘Whoa,’ said Ellis. ‘Just hold on a moment.’

I swallowed down my panic. I couldn’t shout. My throat was killing me

from all the smoke. Any moment now I would start coughing and never stop.

'Matthew, we can't afford for anyone from Swan Court to make it back to Insight and warn them. They have to be stopped, and there's a full-scale war going on there. Markham is MIA. Smallhope is down. Pennyroyal is probably fighting for all their lives and he's going to be just a greasy smear on the kitchen floor if we don't get him out. Can we please stop talking and move? At this moment Insight have no idea they're blown. Play this right and the whole organisation could fall into your lap – but for that to happen, we must get to Swan Court. Now.'

Ellis stared for a moment, obviously came to some decision, and gathered his people around him.

Taking advantage of their conflab, I took Peterson aside and spoke quietly. 'Tim, I need you to go back to St Mary's. You might find a young girl called Anastasia there.'

'Might?'

'She's being pursued by the Time Police. Who also might still be there if Mrs Partridge hasn't got rid of them. I need you to keep her safe. Please.'

Peterson nodded and raised his voice. 'OK, everyone – let's grab what we've got and get back to TB2.'

'Thank you,' I said in huge relief.

He cast a look around. 'It's only day four of the fire,' he said. 'We can come back tomorrow. And besides, we've left Professor Rapson and Dr Dowson in TB2.'

'Alone?'

'No, Lingoss is with them. And Dr Stone and Fortunata in case of injuries. This was a Big Job, Max.'

I thought of the contents of Ian's secret cellar and put my hand on his arm. 'Thanks, Tim. I'll make it up to you. Trust me.'

'How?' said Ellis, suddenly materialising at my elbow.

I caught Peterson's eye. 'Oh,' I said vaguely, resisting the urge to twirl a

finger in my hair. ‘Somehow.’

Ellis rolled his eyes.

As I was turning away to join the Time Police, Peterson said very quietly, ‘Bring him back safe, Max.’

I nodded. ‘I wouldn’t dare go back to St Mary’s without him. You know that.’

‘Yeah – the little bugger still owes me a tenner.’

‘I’ll be sure to mention it.’

Peterson gathered up his team and St Mary’s disappeared into the smoke. Leaving me with Captain Ellis.

‘Safest place for a briefing, Max?’ he enquired. ‘Here or there?’

‘There,’ I said, as something big toppled to the ground, enveloping us in more dust and sparks. ‘Swan Court is under attack but definitely there.’

‘Then let’s go.’

32

The Time Police went through Number Six Swan Court faster than a politician submitting his expenses claim. One team at the front and the other at the back, they entered the house simultaneously. There was sound, fury, shouting, bangs, bigger bangs, smoke – God knows what the neighbours thought was going on. This was nearly as bad as Mr Leyton being publicly horsewhipped. Property values in Swan Court must be in free-fall by now. No sign of the authorities, fortunately, but in those days, such was the reputation of the police that they were often the last people to be called on in an emergency. And people were more afraid of scandal than burglars. And the law didn't apply to the upper classes anyway. An attitude still embraced today.

I'd been instructed to stay out of things on pain of being shot. There had been no shortage of volunteers for that, apparently, so I waited outside, hopping from foot to foot in my impatience.

Eventually silence fell. Officer Grint appeared and jerked his head at me and I followed him into the house. There were bodies everywhere along the servants' passage and not one of them was Markham – which was reassuring. None of them was Smallhope, either. Nor Pennyroyal.

Up in the hall, Svetlana was still sprawled in her own now congealing blood. Two men lay head down on the stairs, with another half in and half out of the drawing room. My heart and stomach were churning. Markham was indestructible. Pennyroyal was a fighting machine. Smallhope was equal to anything. And yet there was no sign of any of them. For the first time I opened my mind to the possibility I'd lost all three. Or, nearly as

bad – they were alive but Insight had them.

Officers spread out through the house, room by room, calling to each other as they went. Someone shouted. They'd found something.

Markham had tried, unsuccessfully, to barricade himself inside one of the storerooms behind the pantries. An unconscious Smallhope was with him. There had been one hell of a fight here. The floor was littered with spent ammo and there were great blaster scars up the walls. The door was hanging off its hinges. The wooden shelving had burned in some places and disintegrated in others. Barrels, crates, boxes – all had shed their contents. The floor was littered with coffee beans, flour, loose tea, packets of spices, rice and a ton of other stuff I had no clue about. The smell was . . . pungent.

I crunched across the floor to Markham, who was propped against a crate, bleeding badly from a head wound. 'Nothing serious,' he said, somewhat groggily. He'd been hit by a lump of wall exploding across the room.

'Did any of them get away?' I said urgently. 'Did anyone get back to Insight?'

Markham shook his head and then winced. 'No. All . . . accounted for.'

He closed his eyes.

'Don't go to sleep.'

Someone bent over Smallhope with a first-aid kit while I helped Markham out through the pantries and into the kitchen. Where things were no better.

The kitchen table had been shot to smithereens. There was broken china and glass everywhere. All Mrs Proudie's beautiful tureens were no more. The big dresser had been pulled away from the wall and lay in pieces.

I found Markham a miraculously unbroken chair and sat him down. Someone – Grint probably, given the size of the arm – reached over my shoulder to hand me a first-aid kit. I wadded up some gauze and pressed it to his forehead.

'You've made a right mess in here. If Mrs Proudie kicks off about it, you're on your own, mate.'

He leaned back in the chair. 'Yeah. There was a bit of a punch-up in here.

Smallhope?'

'They're treating her so she's alive. You all right?'

'Yes. Actually – no.'

'Can you get up?'

'No. I think I'll just sit here for a moment. If no one minds.'

'You do that. It's not as if you ever contribute anything useful anyway.'

I got up and went back to check on Smallhope. There wasn't a great deal of blood. Which wasn't necessarily good news. The officer looked up. 'Still alive.'

Ellis was ordering the house to be secured. 'Grint, Nash – let's get the wounded back to base.'

I helped Markham back to our pod while the Time Police secured the house and posted guards pending further investigation.

I waited until the door was shut and then said to Markham, 'Where's Pennyroyal?'

'No idea,' he said, slowly lowering himself into the seat. 'There was the mother of all battles. I've never seen two blokes go at it like they did, Max. Fists, boots, teeth – all up close and very, very personal. And then I was busy trying to keep Smallhope out of the way and holding off whoever else tried to get through the door, and when I looked up, they'd disappeared. Both of them. But it's Pennyroyal. He'll be fine. You'll see.'

He shot me a reassuring grin so I knew he was as worried as I was.

We'd been commanded to return with Ellis to TPHQ. I didn't argue. Markham needed medical attention. As did Smallhope. And I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept.

Before any of that, though, the Time Police wanted our statements. And not just a brief outline – they wanted very, very detailed accounts from us. And having got those, they went over them line by line, word by word. Markham got Filbert and I was assigned to Varma. I'd had the forethought to stuff a few tea bags in my pocket so at least I was able to fortify myself

with a couple of mugs of tea. Which helped to settle my stomach, as well.

After all that, I was offered breakfast. I held a brief internal discussion, weighing the benefits of eating and then seeing it all go by in a different direction whenever I made my next jump, or declining and spending twenty minutes dry-heaving. Neither was particularly appealing so I accepted the breakfast on the grounds it would give me strength for the upcoming ordeal. Because now we'd been invited to a full briefing. Commander Hay had been summoned from wherever she'd been and was waiting in her office.

'For God's sake, behave yourself,' said Markham as we were escorted along the corridor. 'We've come too far for you to provoke them into shooting us now.'

Neither of us was looking particularly respectable. I was still in my Victorian gear – my heavily singed, scorched and bloodstained Victorian gear. I reeked of Roman smoke and Markham was sporting a rakish bandage across his forehead.

Present were, in reverse order of importance, Commander Treadwell, Lt Filbert, Officer Varma, Captain Farenden, Commander Hay, Captain Ellis, Markham and me.

I found myself sitting opposite the dreaded Treadwell. He opened his mouth to make some sort of comment, so I made sure to get in first. Smiling my biggest and best smile, I kept my voice low.

'Commander Treadwell – and believe me, I say this with genuine regret – still not dead?'

He made no response.

With the typical Time Police grasp of priorities, they wanted to discuss Anastasia first, and it was very obvious at the outset we weren't going to get anything done until that was cleared up.

Markham gestured for me to take this one so I told them everything I knew.

'I'll send a pod to collect her,' said Hay, when I'd finished.

'You will not,' I said, and there was a short silence. 'Anastasia Koslova is

under the protection of St Mary's. Any attempt to remove her would prove detrimental. To her and especially to the Time Police.'

'She has been removed from her own time. She is an illegal.'

'She is nine years old. I understand your timidity – nine-year-old girls are a continual threat to the timeline – but shooting her is rather an overreaction, don't you think?'

'No,' said Treadwell. 'Especially since we only have your word for events as they have occurred . . .'

I ground my teeth. My own fault. I'd forgotten what idiots these people were. They wouldn't believe I had no idea of her true identity. I tried to explain how Insight worked because we hadn't touched on that at all and therefore everything was out of context. I watched them grow more and more disbelieving and I became more and more impatient and then there was shouting – which wasn't all from me – although it did lead to someone telling them to fuck off, I'd sort it myself, and some people – Treadwell actually – told me to sit down before they shot me, and I said if he handled a weapon as badly as he'd handled St Mary's I was in no danger at all, and then there was a rather nasty silence and a lot of glaring.

It was Markham who broke the tension, saying feebly, 'Could I have some water, please?'

'Yes,' said Hay. 'I think a short break might be in order.'

She got up and stretched. Captain Farenden disappeared into his own office to organise refreshments. Varma and Filbert engaged in discussion at the end of the table and Ellis was talking to Markham. Just me and Treadwell, then.

Very conscious that every word I said would not only be overheard but recorded, I smiled and said, 'I forgot to mention, Commander, Clerk and Prentiss send their regards.'

There was no reaction. 'You've been there?'

'I have indeed. And met all the family.'

Still no reaction. 'How are they?'

‘Very well indeed. And the children. Max has really grown up, hasn’t she? And young Dorus. And . . . what was the little one’s name? Can *you* remember?’

I was actually quite impressed by the fact his face didn’t change. Not even a fleeting expression of . . . well, anything, really.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I can’t say I do.’

‘What a shame,’ I said. ‘Such a delightful child.’

I was vaguely aware of people returning to the table clutching mugs of brown fluid. They needed to think I was still talking about Anastasia so I framed my words carefully. Treadwell would get the message.

‘I think it would be better for all concerned if she remains a closely guarded secret known only to a few – a very few – people, don’t you? Far less chance of her true identity being discovered. She’ll be safe and sheltered, and growing up in peace will enable her to fulfil her full potential. She’s a very bright girl.’ I looked at Treadwell. ‘Don’t you think?’

Fortunately, before he could shoot me on the spot and claim his finger had slipped, Hay said, ‘I agree. We don’t wage war on children. But she must return here.’

‘No,’ I said to Treadwell. ‘I don’t think so. She should remain where she is. And never spoken of again.’

Filbert and Varma were looking bored. Captain Ellis was politely attentive. Markham was rocking his innocent face and Hay was looking at me.

Treadwell clasped his hands on the table in front of him. ‘On reflection, Commander, I am inclined to agree. We can revisit this subject in the future, should it become necessary, but I suspect we are about to have something much more important on our hands. About which, I believe, we are not getting the whole story.’

No way they were getting the whole story. Especially since there were one or two teeny-tiny details – swords, encyclopaedias, Fabergé eggs and the like – that wouldn’t benefit anyone should they become known. Obviously

concern for Time Police welfare was my main reason for withholding what was, in the scheme of things, very trivial information.

Markham leaned towards me, saying quite audibly, ‘Leave this to me, Max. I’ve had a ton of experience evading other people’s issues.’ He turned back. ‘You won’t hear anything until I get a guarantee of non-prosecution.’

‘Yes,’ I said admiringly. ‘That should certainly convince them we haven’t been up to anything illegal.’

‘Allow me to follow through,’ he said, his face alight with the desire to benefit his fellow man. ‘Before you all baulk at the idea of providing the assurances so essential to our smooth passage through these rocky waters, please take a moment to reflect that St Mary’s knows exactly where we are and won’t hesitate to come looking for us. Rather in the manner of a large and slightly clumsy mummy bear searching for her offspring in a honey factory, I should imagine.’

‘What?’ said Ellis.

‘Particularly Chief Farrell, of course. Whom you will all remember.’

Silence.

‘And not forgetting Pennyroyal who, any moment now, is going to erupt into the building, riding the storm and reaping the whirlwind – if, indeed, he isn’t here already . . .’ I was impressed no one looked over their shoulder, ‘as he searches for the missing three quarters of the imaginatively named Pros and Cons.’

‘Hardly seems worth the effort,’ murmured Treadwell.

‘Possibly,’ said Markham, ‘but if you imagine that any power on earth will prevent him locating Lady Amelia Smallhope, you are being so wildly and unrealistically optimistic as to render yourself open to charges of being unfit to command. Commander.’

‘For God’s sake,’ said Filbert. ‘Someone either reassure this pair of buggers or shoot them.’

A swift glance around the table made it pretty clear which was the more desirable option.

‘Very well,’ said Commander Hay, a trifle wearily, I thought. ‘You may consider yourself reassured.’

‘See,’ said Markham to me. ‘My people skills remain unchallenged.’ He looked at Hay. ‘You may proceed.’

It was very apparent that while I’d been eating breakfast, heads had been put together. There was a bit of a silence. No one looked at me. And then Ellis said, ‘Max, we want you to go back to Insight.’

‘No,’ I said, alarmed. ‘I have to go back to St Mary’s. To reassure Anastasia. And when I’ve finished there, I’m going back to Swan Court to see if there’s any news of Pennyroyal and to discover what’s happened to Mrs Proudie and the staff. And when I’ve done that, I’m off to Ho— back to base to check if anyone’s there. Sorry, but no can do. Take Markham instead.’

‘Markham does not have your unique knowledge of the building.’

‘Oh, if that’s all, I’ll draw you a quick plan before I shoot off.’

‘Thank you. But we still require you to access Insight on our behalf.’

‘To what end? Can’t you just shoot your way in as usual?’

‘From your description, I suspect an invasion will not be easy. Access through only one door results in the creation of a deliberate choke point.’

‘Building smashers?’ I said.

Hay shook her head. ‘Not helpful in this case. Once inside, the layout is more than labyrinthine. I suspect as soon as we turn up, a discreet alarm will sound and the important people, the ones we really want, will make their various ways to the pods and jump away to carefully prepared sites long before they can be apprehended. From what you’ve said, Insight appear to operate over a wide range of different centuries. They’ll scatter and we’ll lose them – possibly forever. Those left behind won’t know anything and we’ll have achieved nothing. We’ll need people inside before it all kicks off.’

‘Large parts of the building are open to the public,’ I said. ‘There’s a fire door on every floor – a legal requirement. They’ll hit the alarm and you’ll

be caught up in the chaos of a hundred people trying to get out fast.'

'Mr Markham – who tells me he's been in and out of Insight a couple of times and has a legitimate pass – will attend to the fire doors.'

Mr Markham didn't look terribly enthusiastic.

Hay rolled on regardless. 'We want you, Max, to disable the pods. We can supply you with portable EMPs. They're quite small and don't have a very wide range but just attaching one to the outside of each pod should do the trick.'

Markham stirred. 'I'm extremely reluctant to risk Max like this. I know it's unlikely, but suppose someone from Insight caught sight of her at Swan Court and survived long enough to pass it on. And no one knows where Eddie Middleditch has got to. If he's returned to Insight, they'll all be waiting for her.'

'If Pennyroyal was after him,' I said, 'he's already dead.'

'In which case,' said Markham, 'where is Pennyroyal? No one is indestructible, Max. It might be Pennyroyal who is already dead.'

No one said anything.

Commander Hay leaned forwards. 'I'm sorry, Max, but it has to be you. You have the entrée.' She smiled. 'If it makes things easier, I could forbid you – on pain of death – to go anywhere near the place and then we can all sit back and watch you scamper disobediently up the steps.'

Well, she probably wasn't completely mistaken. And everyone important would be there for the Board meeting. There might never be a better time.

'I'm willing,' I said to Markham. 'Let's get this finished.'

'Sure?'

'Yeah.'

'All right,' said Ellis, activating the screen. 'Let's start putting this together.'

Markham hadn't completely given up. 'Suppose Max *has* been rumbled?'

Hay probably did her best to look reassuring. It was hard to tell. 'Then at the very least that will provide a distraction. They'll wonder why you're

there, Max, and not at Swan Court. Where are all the others? What's gone wrong? They'll be so focused on you they won't notice us until it's too late. If anything goes wrong, I promise you we'll do everything in our power to get you out alive.'

'I'll get her out,' said Markham. He looked at me. 'I'll get you out.'

So here I was, back in Russell Square Gardens again, in the pod, sprawled on the floor, not quite whimpering but not far off.

‘Just give it a minute,’ said Markham, wisely keeping his distance. ‘Don’t try to get up just yet.’

I groaned. ‘This is it for me, isn’t it? If I live long enough to get back home, I’m never going to be able to jump again.’

‘You don’t know that,’ he said, hovering with a basin. No idea where he’d got that from, but I suspected it would be standard equipment from now on. ‘I think your recovery time is definitely getting shorter, don’t you?’

No, was the answer to that one. The recovery period was definitely not getting shorter, but we were on the clock so no more lying around. He helped me up.

‘Go and get changed into your normal gear,’ he said, ‘and then I’ll walk with you.’

‘Insight will pick you up on their cameras.’

‘We’ll deal with that when it happens.’

I rather thought there was going to be a lot of dealing with things when they happened. But he was right – we had no idea of the situation at Insight. It really was a case of crossed fingers.

‘Ready?’ he said as I emerged from the bathroom in my normal gear.

‘As I’ll ever be.’

We exited the pod and set off through the park.

‘How did you leave things with Insight?’

I thought back. ‘I had lunch with Bridget and then took a day off to go

shopping. Smarter clothes for my new role in a sinister organisation attempting to overthrow the world order.'

'This is the next morning. Remember – just a normal working day.'

I nodded. I could only hope the short walk would help settle my nerves.

The rendezvous with the Time Police was for 0945 outside Insight. The plan was that I'd enter at my normal time, make my way down to the basement and neutralise the pods. Bridget should be upstairs preparing for her Board meeting and Eddie was MIA so I should have the place to myself.

Markham was to head for the library, spread his material out across a study carrel and wander off, ostensibly to consult the reference section, but in reality, to deal with the fire doors. We had until 0945 to complete our end of the mission and get clear, at which point, ready or not, the Time Police would move in.

I'd told them staff would start drifting in from around eight thirty onwards but the building wouldn't be open to the public before 0900. I'd clock in as usual just before then.

'Nine o'clock is too early to make our move,' said Ellis. 'I'm betting the people we're really after won't be in much before ten.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Board meetings usually start at ten a.m. but members gather around 0930 for a coffee and pre-meeting discussions.'

'Don't take any chances,' said Hay. 'I want as many Board members as possible.'

Both Markham and I wanted to be gone by 0945. Long gone. My plan was to watch everything go down from the safety of the other side of the road.

'I can't be armed,' I'd said. 'And there's no point handing me any electronic devices because I'll be wanded.'

'Leave that to us,' said Hay.

In my mind I'd named him Q. I kept expecting him to say, 'Pay attention, 007.'

He didn't. The Time Police are such a bunch of miseries.

He'd given me a set of smart headphones and they actually worked. I could hear music coming out of them, but the left-hand pod was really a communicator as well. Once I was inside, I was to detach it from the headpiece and stick it in my ear. I was moderately dubious about this. I'm not good with tech.

'What about the EMPs?'

'Your headphones will plug into this. The source of the music.' Q held up a small player. 'However – slide off the front and *voilà*.' *Voilà* was six miniature EMPs disguised as old-fashioned minidiscs.

I regarded them doubtfully. They looked awfully small. 'Will they work?'

He drew a breath. 'Probably.'

'Probably?'

'Probably. Each one should pack just about enough punch to disable a pod.'

'Should?'

'Yeah. Should.'

'How will I get them through the security scanner?'

'Shouldn't be a problem. We'll be monitoring you, so if it all goes tits up just scream and we'll move in immediately.'

I was determined to find some problem tech couldn't solve.

'The door to the Pod Bay is in Bridget's office and always locked.'

'Here.' He handed me a long, thin device shaped like a pencil but slightly thicker. I was mystified, although as Markham always says, it doesn't take much.

'It's a door opener. Place this end against the lock. If you can't access the lock then the handle is second choice. If there's no handle then try one of the hinges. Twist this and wait two seconds. Make sure you're holding the right end or you could lose your hand.'

'Explosive?'

'No, it propels a bolt which will wreck the lock, handle, hinge, whatever.

And it's relatively silent. Looks like a pencil so put it in your pocket. With luck it shouldn't embed itself in your lady parts.'

'*Shouldn't?*'

He slapped my shoulder. 'Good luck, 007.'

Smart arse.

And here I was, walking up the steps to Insight, doing something stupid for the umpteenth time. Markham would give me a minute and then follow me in. I could hear him behind me. 'Twelve . . . thirteen . . . fourteen . . .' Either he was counting to sixty or peeing on the steps. One was considerably more likely than the other.

I said good morning to the guard – whose name I can't remember, sorry. He knew me, however.

'Morning, Maxine.'

'Nothing to declare,' I said, placing my open bag in the scanner tray, pulling down my headphones so he could hear the tinny music, and holding up my arms ready for a good wanding. That's Markham's expression – not mine.

Speak of the devil . . .

''Scuse me,' said a vaguely academic voice behind me. 'Have I come to the right place?'

The guard enquired where he wanted to be.

'I've booked a carrel in the British and European medieval section,' he said querulously. 'But I don't know where that is. It's for my book on the fate of the Princes in the Tower. I do have my ID card somewhere.'

He began to rummage in various pockets, crowding me slightly.

I grinned at the guard and shifted to get out of Markham's way.

'The thing is . . .' he said, unloading the contents of his pockets on to the table in a vain attempt to locate his card.

For those who want to know what Markham keeps in his pocketses . . . an odd length of string, two pencils, three data cubes, two notebooks, a set of

index cards held together with a rubber band, a small rock, a grubby rag, a pair of scissors, a piece of paper with ‘Don’t Forget’ written on it but no further clues as to what he wasn’t supposed to forget, a small model of an Egyptian cat – or a model of a small Egyptian cat, it could be either – a diary with hundreds of tiny pieces of paper dropping all over the floor, a com unit flashing its red power-warning light, a tube of mints, and a scratchpad so battered it shouldn’t, by rights, still be working. His briefcase was held together by a vast number of plastic ties – all of which would later be used to secure the fire doors. If he ever got that far.

The guard was eyeing this little lot in amazement. I shuffled over to make more room.

‘It’s definitely here somewhere,’ Markham said, perplexed. ‘Perhaps it’s among my notes.’

‘Or you’re using it as a bookmark,’ I said helpfully. The guard shot me a look.

Markham began to scrabble among notebooks, diary and the vast number of scraps of paper, most of which were now on the floor. I stepped back to avoid standing on any of them and suddenly found myself on the right side of the security line.

‘You’re cleared, Maxine,’ said the guard, turning all his attention to Markham who was currently bringing new meaning to the phrase *public nuisance*.

I had only taken three steps before the guard called me back. ‘Maxine.’

I pasted on a smile and turned around, desperately trying not to look like someone whose heart had stopped working properly. If he remembered he hadn’t wanded me . . .

He nodded at my headphones. ‘You know you can’t take those downstairs, don’t you? Leave them in your locker.’

I nodded and very slowly my internal organs heaved themselves out of their premature graves and went back to work.

Just like me.

I did everything exactly as normal. Into the staffroom. Change my shoes. Dump my bag in my locker. Toilet, where I pulled off the earpiece and shoved it in my ear. It was open – I could hear faint static. I washed my face and hands. I didn't hurry. Or fumble. Or stare guiltily over my shoulder as people wandered in and out. Just a normal day at work. I shoved the player in my pocket alongside Q's door-opening pencil and made my way slowly downstairs. I couldn't see any sign of Markham anywhere and there was no shouting, so presumably he was in position as well.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, I made it down to the deserted basement. The lights were on, as the saying goes, but no one was home. No sign of Eddie. Or that he'd been in here. Not that I'd expected him. I heard again the solid, meaty sounds of two blokes punching the living shit out of each other. I've been present at any number of historical battles and, believe me, TV and holos in no way prepare you for the vicious savagery with which men can go at each other.

Eddie's desk was locked, his screen switched off, his chair under the desk. The whole office had that unmistakeable *no one else here* vibe.

No Bridget, and her office door was locked.

Bugger. I'd hoped she would unlock her office before going upstairs – if only so I could access my key. Had she gone off to investigate Eddie's non-appearance and discovered the disaster at Swan Court? Very possible. Probable, in fact. Once there, it wouldn't take her more than two seconds to associate what had happened there with the only other person who had known about it: me. I really needed to get a move on, but I only had this single-use device and that was for the door accessing the Pod Bay.

Think, Maxwell. What would I normally do if I couldn't get in?

I rang through to the security office upstairs. 'Bridget isn't here and I need my desk key.'

'On my way,' said a voice and a minute later, another security guard came down. A different one this time. Sadly, he seemed keen to linger and chat and time was passing. In the end, I actually had to take the key from his

hand and open Bridget's door, and still he lingered. Why? Had I somehow aroused his suspicions? No, of course I hadn't. He was waiting for me to finish with Bridget's spare key.

I retrieved my own key and walked out of the office so he had to follow me. I locked her door, smiled at the guard, sneezed and dropped them both. 'Oh. Sod it. This place just kills my sinuses. Sorry.' I handed a key back to him.

'Cheers, Maxine.' And off he went.

I pulled out Bridget's key before he discovered my mistake and unlocked her office door. The clock on the wall showed 0926. Shit – where had all the bloody time gone? That couldn't be right, surely. I was well behind schedule. I should be down in the Pod Bay by now.

Bridget was a snappy dresser. Tailored suits, crisp shirts, and smart court shoes which she would kick off as soon as she arrived, changing into something more comfortable for getting around in. She would hang up her jacket and place her shoes neatly against the wall. And there they were. Not the jacket but the shoes. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Bridget was somewhere in the building. And she wasn't upstairs with the other Board members because these were her smart shoes.

Nothing I could do about that. I took a moment for a few deep breaths and pulled out my pencil. Taking great care to hold the correct end, I twisted.

The kick was enormous. Q could have warned me. It was, however, quite silent. The door springing open made more noise. I had no idea whether it was alarmed or not. The door, I mean. I know I was. Nothing I could do about it, however, and now time was well and truly racing away from me.

Barely had that thought crossed my mind than the fire alarms went off, so Markham at least was on schedule. There was the whooping sound of the fire alarm, any number of electronic bells, and an automatic recording requesting everyone to make their way quickly and quietly to the nearest signposted exit.

AND THEY WERE LOUD.

I slipped through the door, pulling it to behind me. I didn't want any chance visitors noticing it was open and raising yet another alarm.

Any moment now there would be a stampede of people all heading for the clearly marked but now illegally locked fire doors. There would be chaos as people tried to turn around to head for another exit and couldn't for the crush of those behind them. We would be lucky if someone wasn't seriously hurt. I did feel guilty about that.

More chaos and catastrophe would be provided by the Time Police, who would turn up and put no one's mind at rest. Half of them would crash, weapons drawn, through the front doors, while the remainder would abseil down from the roof to swing in through the boardroom windows – just the sort of thing those gung-ho idiots would enjoy.

I crept slowly down the metal stairs, the noise of the alarms fading with every step. I had to watch where I put my feet and I was certain I could hear a voice somewhere. Reaching the bottom, I crept along the corridor and past the dark and empty briefing room.

The Pod Bay was in semi-darkness as it always was. Five pods in. Was one still out with Eddie? There were the weapons lockers against the walls. Five or six wooden pallets were neatly stacked against the far wall. The empty desk and chair stood just to the left of the stairs. As always, the place was tidy and clean to the point of sterility.

OK – the good news was that I could now, with complete confidence, state that Bridget wasn't anywhere else in the building. The bad news was that she was here. Only about twenty feet away, addressing the troops. I risked a tiny peep around the corner. Yep – there she was. I thought things had been rather too easy up until now.

She was dressed for combat and facing a group of similarly dressed men. She appeared to be in the final stages of her briefing. As I watched, she banged in the code for the gun cabinets and stepped aside to allow her team

to pull out their weapons. Without fuss, they lined up outside a pod.

'We all know what to do,' she said, her voice dripping venom. 'We all know the target. You've seen her often enough. Your instructions are simple. I. Want. Her. Dead. And everyone with her, but mostly her. If you can manage slowly and painfully, I won't have any problem with that. In fact, there might even be a bonus for any additional suffering you are able to inflict. Don't bother with discretion. Damage to people and property is Board-authorised. Whatever is necessary. Just get this job done.'

One or two men exchanged glances. At the time of their attack on Home Farm, I'd felt a faint regret that most had perished – now I was suddenly very glad they had.

I stayed very still. They were moving out for the attack on me at the cottage, and when that failed, they'd go on to Home Farm. The circle was closing and I mustn't do anything to change that. The slightest alteration to the timeline and they could live and I would die. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe quietly.

Bridget was winding up. 'All right, everyone – let's move out.'

They filed into the pod. Bridget paused on the threshold to take one final look around. She couldn't possibly know this was the last time she'd ever see this place, but it was spooky, nevertheless. The moment stretched endlessly. I couldn't look away. This was the last time I'd ever see her, as well. I knew I was invisible here in deep shadow, but I had to bite down hard on the urge to draw back. If I moved, she would see me.

I held my breath. Did she know I was here somewhere? Could she somehow sense my presence? No – that was nonsense. I stood stock-still and finally the door closed behind her. I remained frozen, counting the seconds away, rather like Markham in the toilet.

Finally – several geological ages of the earth later – the pod disappeared. I breathed out. And then back in again. Because you can't have one without the other. The coast was clear. Bridget was off the premises, taking her team with her, and I was free to finish laying the rest of the EMPs. Suddenly,

miraculously, everything was doable.

I was very careful, because dropping anything in this gloom would be fatal – I'd never find it again. I slid the front of the player off and pulled out the first disk.

'Self-adhesive,' Q had said. 'Just place and press. Simple.'

He was right. I picked a spot at knee-height because no one ever thinks to look down, and planted the first one. It stuck like a dream. In fact, when I tried to pull it off, it wouldn't budge.

One down – three to go. By now, Markham should have left the building. Another forty-five seconds and I'd be gone too.

And then the sixth pod turned up.

Before I could decide what to do next, the pod door lurched open and two men literally exploded out of it. Still locked together, they fell to the floor, rolling over and over, kicking and punching at each other. No holds barred. They swept past me and I only just had time to step back out of their way.

Eddie and Pennyroyal. Last seen at Swan Court. Now here. This was obviously Round Two. Eddie fleeing for his home territory with Pennyroyal pursuing him every inch of the way.

They fought in deadly silence. Absolute and implacable. Other than the occasional grunts of impact, not a sound from either of them.

Eddie somehow broke free and staggered to his feet, aiming a vicious steel-toe-capped kick at Pennyroyal's face. Pennyroyal deftly rolled under it, seized Eddie's leg and twisted it violently in a direction no knee was supposed to go. I swear I heard something crack.

Eddie made a stifled sound and fell to the floor. Where he remained, clutching at his knee.

Pennyroyal heaved himself up. He'd taken a real beating. I didn't know how he was still on his feet. Blood covered his face and neck. It looked as if a part of his ear was hanging off, and when he turned away, I could see thick, dark blood oozing from a massive gash across the back of his head.

He headed straight towards me and for one moment I thought he'd seen me but he was going for the office chair nearby. Seizing it, he raised it high above his head and hurled it down at Eddie, still in agony from his leg.

Eddie rolled away across the floor, closely pursued by Pennyroyal. They both crashed into the pallets. The top few toppled on to Pennyroyal, who

must, by now, have been almost blind from all the blood running into his eyes. He went down with a crash, bringing even more pallets down on top of himself. Sluggishly, he struggled to break free. I had no idea how long they'd been fighting but Pennyroyal at least looked to be in the last stages of exhaustion.

Using the wall and leaning heavily on his good leg, Eddie dragged himself to his feet. Limping badly, his one leg almost useless, he closed on the helpless Pennyroyal. Who ceased his struggles, lay still and waited for him.

I couldn't believe it. That Pennyroyal would give up and just accept his fate was unthinkable. It wasn't in his nature. How badly was he injured? I should do something. I wasn't armed. I looked around for something to use as a weapon.

It wasn't needed.

As Eddie hobbled towards him, I saw Pennyroyal draw back his foot. Moving faster and harder than I would have believed possible in his state, and presumably heedless of the damage it would do to him, he smashed his boot into a pallet. It splintered and he grabbed a wickedly jagged piece of wood and yanked it free.

As Eddie threw himself on top of him, Pennyroyal stabbed upwards. For a moment they were a perfect tableau – Pennyroyal, teeth clenched, gripping his makeshift weapon in bloody hands. And Eddie impaled upon it.

The moment went on and on. Then the spell broke. Pennyroyal fell backwards and Eddie dropped heavily to his knees, gasping for breath. As was Pennyroyal. Given the amount of punishment each had inflicted on the other, I was gobsmacked either was still functioning. Or even alive.

And it wasn't over yet.

Eddie wrenched out the wooden stake – which, thanks to his vest, wasn't that deeply embedded – and threw it aside. By now, Pennyroyal was also up on his knees and they closed again. Grunting, panting, punching, headbutting, rolling around.

Another bone cracked somewhere. I didn't know whose. I should be long

gone by now except there was no way I was leaving Pennyroyal. But what could I do?

The answer was – nothing. I should take advantage of the distraction and finish my own job.

I slipped around them, fixing EMPs on all the pods, except Eddie's – that one I couldn't get close to. But I couldn't leave the task half done. If Eddie overcame Pennyroyal, he could get away, and nowhere would be safe with a vengeful Eddie Middleditch out there with his own pod.

I inched my way along the wall, taking very good care to stay well away from the fighting. Either of them could kill me and never even notice. I reached the corner and turned around just in time to see Pennyroyal draw back his arm and deliver one final crashing punch.

Eddie remained motionless for one moment, then, slowly, he crumpled to the ground.

Pennyroyal dragged himself to his feet. He stood, swaying, waiting to see if Eddie would get up again, I think. He himself was in a terrible state. His eyes were swollen shut and covered in blood. His hands a bloody mess. As was his left ear. And that was just the damage I could see.

His chest heaving, he limped to where Eddie lay. Eddie's eyes were open but after a blow like that I wasn't sure he knew what was happening. Well, he couldn't, otherwise his instincts would have cut in and he'd be struggling to his feet. No one wants a bloody and merciless Pennyroyal to be the last thing they ever see on this earth.

Pennyroyal leaned down and heaved him to his feet. I was surprised he could see. And definitely surprised he still had the strength to lift Eddie, who wasn't a small man. He took hold of Eddie's combat vest and slammed his head back against the wall. There was another sickening crack.

Eddie's head was rolling on his shoulders. His injured leg couldn't hold him up properly but it didn't need to. Pennyroyal dropped to one knee, took a two-handed grip on Eddie's vest, lifted him above his head, and in the manner of a man breaking a stick, brought Eddie down, hard, across his

knee.

The last time I'd heard a crack like that had been when Clive Ronan died.

Eddie was suddenly nothing more than a heavy rag doll. His arms hung limply. His legs splayed. His body was a dead weight. With the emphasis on dead. Pennyroyal let go and Eddie fell to the floor in a tangle of useless limbs. Broken beyond repair. Never to rise again.

Chest heaving for breath, Pennyroyal bent over him, and in one swift, shocking movement, ripped off Eddie's hair. It had been a hairpiece all along, but one of those permanent ones, stitched to his head. And it hadn't been vanity: its purpose was not only to cover Eddie's patchy hair – judging by the mess of his scalp, it looked as if some of it had been either burned off or pulled out by the roots – but also to conceal the very nasty scars criss--crossing his skin. Acid burns, perhaps. Very distinctive. No wonder he'd covered them up.

I heard Smallhope's voice. 'Lasting and very visible damage.' Of course . . .

I watched Pennyroyal fling the hairpiece away. It slithered across the floor like a legless rat and into the shadows.

I gave it a moment before approaching Pennyroyal with extreme caution. The blind fury of battle was still upon him. He was perfectly capable of backhanding me through the wall without a second thought.

I said very quietly, 'Pennyroyal, can you hear me?'

He made no response. I wondered if he was too far gone. He was head down, hands on his thighs, sucking in great lungfuls of air. Even in this dim light I could see dark patches of blood on the floor and I reckoned a lot of it was his. Eddie lay very still, his limbs at strange angles. He wasn't going anywhere ever again.

Actually, neither was Pennyroyal. Not without help, anyway.

'Can you hear me? It's me – Max.'

He made a dreadful sound. Bloody saliva dripped to the floor.

'The Time Police are on their way. In fact, they're here already. They'll

bring medical help.'

He made another sound.

'No, it's all right. Lady Amelia is safe. She's injured but she's safe at TPHQ.'

He made a different sound and then tried to straighten up. 'No.'

'No what?'

'Not . . . both . . . same place.'

His head sagged again. And then I got it. He didn't want to be at TPHQ with Lady Amelia. It must be some sort of insurance thing. They were both injured, unable to defend themselves, and if the Time Police decided to turn nasty – and you never knew with those buggers – they'd both be trapped.

'Yes,' I said. 'Good thought. Tell me where you need to be.'

He took a lurching step towards the pod and nearly fell. He wasn't going to make it and I had strong doubts about being able to get him there. And then, thank God, Markham turned up. I heard his voice on the stairs.

'Max, where the bloody hell are you?'

'Here,' I shouted. 'Give me a hand.'

He picked his way delicately through the blood and destruction. 'Shit.'

'Pennyroyal needs to be out of here asap. Can you get him to this pod here' – I pointed to Eddie's pod, the one without the EMP – 'and I'll send him back to Home Farm. The Faradays will know what to do.'

I left him with Pennyroyal while I accessed the pod.

I could hear Markham talking gently. 'Just take it easy, mate. Support that arm and lean on me. Nearly there. Another couple of steps. Nearly there.'

The console was dark. It took me a moment to dredge up Bridget's security number – 6602, 4 or 5 – because a lot had happened since then. Crossing my fingers, I went with 5. I held my breath but everything lit up just as it should. I banged in the Home Farm coordinates, being careful to move the last digits forward a couple of days, just to be on the safe side, and then I heard running footsteps on the metal stairs.

'I'll hold them off,' said Markham, which was pretty brave of him

considering we didn't know who it was.

I closed the door behind him and turned back to Pennyroyal, who was sprawled in the seat. 'OK, it's all laid in. You're good to go. Just give me a minute to get clear.'

He made a sound I interpreted as 'OK' and reached for the controls with shattered hands. He must have been in so much pain.

'Hey,' I said softly, but he heard me. Very, very gently, I put my hand over one of his. 'I'll come with you.'

'No,' he said, without moving his lips. ''m OK.' He paused and suddenly I knew. This was the end. Whether he lived or died – whatever happened to Lady Amelia, whatever action the Time Police took, whether Markham and I ever returned to St Mary's – it was over. Smallhope and Pennyroyal would move on, but Pros and Cons was done.

He squinted up at me and slurred, 'En . . . joyed.'

'Me too,' I said. 'I've loved every moment of it.' I swallowed. Because suddenly it was ending and I wasn't ready. 'You take care – you hear me? I don't want to have to come and rescue you because you've done something daft. You know what you're like.'

He huffed something that might have been a laugh. Blood bubbled on his lips.

I gestured around generally. 'Don't worry about all this. I'll make sure you and Lady Amelia get your share. And I'll tell her you'll be back for her.'

'She . . . know.'

'Thank you for taking us in.'

'Pleasure.'

'I'm going to do something I'd never dare do if I wasn't almost certain you were dying.'

I leaned forward and gently kissed his cheek.

There was a slight pressure on my hand. 'God bless . . . Max.'

'It's been an honour and a privilege,' I said. 'Remember – all laid in. Just press that and that. If you die, remember I've got first dibs on your organs.

Take care.’

God knows how I found the door because my eyes had gone all blurry.

The Time Police were not happy with me. They weren't happy with Markham, either, although, as he informed me, people not being happy with him was his default state. They were especially unhappy with me, though. Nothing ever really changes, does it?

Obviously their go-to action was to arrest everyone in sight. Including initially startled and then outraged members of the public who'd only popped in to check the date of the Battle of Something or Other.

And a party of schoolchildren on an educational trip, all of whom regarded this Time Police-provided entertainment as a special treat.

Together with any number of creatives from various holo and TV companies who were there to check out historical facts for upcoming projects so they could get the costumes and settings deliberately wrong instead of just accidentally wrong.

And any number of important academics from around the world, which itself caused several international incidents.

And, sadly, a pair of teenagers having sex in the big stationery cupboard behind the library, who were so traumatised at being discovered by the Time Police they probably never had sex again.

And not forgetting, of course, every member of staff, all of whom were arrested with great relish and most of whom, as I helpfully pointed out, were completely innocent.

Only a few very minor fish escaped, one of whom, I'm sorry to say, was Geoff. He probably reverted to his natural state and slimed his way out under a door while everyone thought he was just a nasty stain on the floor.

The Board had been arrested and immediately taken back to TPHQ. Everyone else was corralled in Great Russell Street which had been completely blocked off, crippling traffic for miles around which led to even more shouting all of which the Time Police completely ignored.

Once they'd stopped yelling at me and the place was emptied of Insight personnel, I took Ellis and a team on a grand tour of the two buildings.

Officers were everywhere. I had no idea there were so many of them. And they weren't all in uniform so there must be a vast army of Time Police support staff they could call upon that I'd known nothing about. They scurried to and fro, busily bundling up files, records, computers, everything. There was no finesse about entering the Cave. I would have given them the code but they simply blew the door off its hinges and poured in. The building was to be completely stripped. Even the furniture was being impounded. It all took a very long time. Room by room. Corridor by corridor. Up the stairs – back down the stairs. Round corners, into alcoves, down into the Pod Bay.

And then on to the bookshop next door. I showed Ellis my room, the tiny one-to-one classrooms, the shooting range and where we ate. The rest of it, I had to confess, was still a mystery. I didn't even know which had been Bridget's room. Ellis offered me the chance to accompany him as he and his team cleared the building but by then I'd had enough. I still had Pennyroyal's blood on me, I'd lost Markham somewhere along the way, events were catching up with me, and I really, really needed a moment or two to myself.

I went outside for some fresh air but it was just as bad out there. People were in and out of the front doors all the time. Fleets of vehicles arrived, were loaded up, and departed again. Helicopters buzzed overhead. This was a massive operation. Already there was talk of government involvement. Or at least government turning a blind eye. I shrugged. Nothing to do with me.

I found Markham sitting on Insight's steps. Being Markham, he'd found a can of beer from somewhere. He offered me a swig and I was so thirsty I

accepted.

Bleeargghhh!

I wouldn't be doing that again. I was mid-complaint when he suddenly stopped listening – if indeed he'd ever started – and stared over my shoulder. I turned to see a bunch of very strange people approaching. And that's me saying that. Six of them emerged from the watching crowds, wearing neat grey uniforms with smart peaked caps emblazoned with a familiar logo.

They marched smartly to the steps, halted and stared down at me and Markham. I was conscious that between the bruises, the blood and the beer, we weren't, at that moment, looking quite at our best.

The woman in front removed her cap. Jet black dreads dip-dyed in cobalt exploded around her head like a blue-tipped supernova. I was overcome with massive, massive hair envy. Suddenly I got the whole Lingoss thing. I was going to get mine done just like that. In about ten years' time, obviously. When it had grown. But not blue – I'd have orange. Bright flaming orange. Or scarlet. Scarlet would be fantastic. With black tips. I would look *amazing.*

Everyone was looking at me rather strangely. Oh God, had I said all that out loud?

'Sarah Greenwood,' she said. 'Provisional wing of the British Museum. You seem to be enjoying a spot of excitement and we wondered if we could be of any assistance.'

Captain Ellis materialised from nowhere. He pulled himself to attention and morphed straight into Captain Frosty. 'How very kind. I don't believe we are, in fact, in need of any assistance, but I am certain Commander Hay of the Time Police would wish me to thank you for your kind thought.'

Greenwood grinned widely, obviously greatly enjoying herself. 'Not at all. Always happy to help out our junior colleagues.'

Ellis smiled even more widely. I've never seen so many teeth in such a small space. 'Even when that help is not actually required.'

Her grin reached past her ears and around the back of her head. ‘Oh, I’m sure if we give it a moment . . .’

Captain Frosty’s expression indicated he wasn’t to be trifled with. ‘Shouldn’t you be off somewhere preventing one of your archaeologists from digging up something he shouldn’t and triggering yet another British Museum-generated apocalypse?’

She smiled mockingly. ‘Shouldn’t you be off somewhere preventing yet another time-loop? Didn’t that poor woman give birth fourteen times before you finally got things under control?’

They stared at each other for a moment and I don’t know how it would have ended if someone hadn’t shouted for Ellis. He gave it a moment and then withdrew with immense dignity.

Greenwood watched him go, nodded to us, then returned to her team, said something, and they laughed. In another second they’d melted back into the crowd.

‘Oh my God,’ said Markham, spilling his beer in his excitement. ‘I want that job.’

‘Oh my God,’ I said. ‘I want that hair.’

He nudged me. I nearly fell off the step. ‘We thought there was something dodgy about the British Museum.’

I nudged him back. He did fall off the step. ‘And I told you the same about the bookshop.’

‘We are so cool,’ he said. ‘The bees’ knees. The dog’s bollocks. And any other part of an animal’s anatomy you care to name. Have some more beer.’

‘Don’t mind if I do.’

Bleeargghhh!

Eventually someone remembered us and Markham and I were bundled up and taken back to TPHQ. I didn’t know our escort team and none of them would answer our questions. In fact, they wouldn’t speak to us at all. Because I’d let Pennyroyal slip through their fingers, I assumed.

There was quite a nasty moment when a completely different set of officers took me away to ask questions about harbouring an illegal at St Mary's, but after half an hour of me muddying the waters to such an extent that even I was confused, it turned out we were all talking at cross purposes and they were actually trying to track down a member of the *Equus asinus* family. Don't bother with the jokes – I've done them all, having spent a very agreeable half-hour taking the piss. It turned out their Time Map – worryingly sentient every now and then – had picked up an anomaly which they rather thought was a living entity being shifted through time.

'A donkey?' I said blankly.

They nodded.

'You're looking for a donkey?'

They nodded.

'Have you looked around this building recently?'

No one shot me but I suspect it was close.

Probably because they were sick of the sight of me, I was finished before Markham, and rather than hang around inside, I had a sudden urge to enjoy a glimpse of Old Father Thames. There was a bit of a tussle as I tried to leave the building but I got there in the end and strolled slowly along the river towards Barricade Bridge. I read the plaque commemorating that famous day, smiled at the flowers still laid there, and crossed the road to Battersea Park.

You have to hand it to London – they really know how to put a park together. They'd modernised a large area just inside the gates, paved it nicely, planted shady trees and installed water stations against the heat. And fountains. The ones that kids like to run through. Or sit on. Or pee in. And small dogs, too. They jet out of the ground – the fountains, not the dogs – and then they stop and everyone bends over them to see where the water's gone and that's the moment they come back on again and everyone gets a face full. Except for those sitting on the jets, of course, who get an entirely different experience. Great fun is had by all, and the fountains themselves

are very welcome during these hot, dry summer days.

Benches had been provided for those who enjoyed watching kids getting wet and dirty. Which would be me. In fact, even I contemplated kicking off my own boots and taking ten minutes to cool the tootsies.

One little boy caught my eye. He was very small and thin. Little pink arms stuck out of the sleeves of his outgrown, homemade superhero sweater. It was far too hot for him to be comfortable in it and I guessed it was a much--loved garment. It would probably fall apart before he could be persuaded to give it up.

His skinny legs poked out from shorts slightly too big for him. I couldn't catch a glimpse of his face – either it was always turned away from me or his long, fine, blond hair obscured it.

Arms outstretched like an airplane, he was weaving in and out of the fountains, happy and absorbed.

And singing to himself.

Off-key.

All things bright and beautiful

All creatures great and small

My world slid sideways. The singing grew louder until it filled my head.

And then it was all gone. Silence fell. The crowds, the noise, the breeze, the colour – everything disappeared.

I stood under a milk-white sky. No sun, no wind, no rain, just a fine powder dropping gently from the sky. It had a greasy feel.

There was no park. Only a few burned and stunted long-dead trees. I looked around. The fine buildings lining the embankment were gone. TPHQ, brick-built and massive, its giant chimneys poking skywards, had been destroyed. Only vast piles of blackened rubble remained. Northwards across the river, a few stumps of shattered buildings still stood, but otherwise London was just undulating heaps of broken and tangled structures, rubble and slag. I looked to the river. There was no river. Only a hollowed-out channel filled almost to the top with bones. Human bones.

The last resting place of hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of people. And not just in the river. All around. Long bones. Skulls. Eyeless sockets looked up at me.

No birds hung overhead waiting to feast. No dogs. No rats scuttled among the ribcages. No movement. No sound. No life anywhere. The silence hurt my head.

From nowhere – a memory. A horrible penny dropped. What was it Geoff had said to me?

'A bright, new *future, Maxine,'* and I had asked him what was wrong with the old one.

'It's buggered. Shot. Ruined.'

Was this what he had meant? It was hard to imagine anything more buggered, more shot, more ruined than what I was seeing now.

Who did this? Insight – either deliberately or accidentally? Had they woven such a complex web they finally damaged History beyond repair? When was this? What was happening? And why?

I held out my hand. The powder was dark and fine, falling silently all around me and slowly covering the world. This was a dead place. Barren and stark with broken superstructure sticking out of the earth like ancient dinosaur bones after the comet. Perhaps that was what had happened here. There was no one to ask. I was the only one left.

No, I wasn't.

A tall figure stood a little way off. She was dressed in white, stark against this blackened world. Her dark hair was confined in a jewelled net that reminded me of stars splashed across the night sky. I looked down. Ash had settled in the creases of my clothes but not on her.

She was wearing her usual judgemental expression.

I gestured around. 'What is this? What has happened?'

My voice sounded dull and dead. As if I was speaking in a padded room.

'You chose wrongly.'

'When?'

‘In a minute.’

I felt the blood drain from my face, leaving it stiff and cold.

‘I did this?’

‘Not yet.’

‘I don’t understand.’

There was no response.

A great weight was resting on my chest. I could barely speak above a whisper. ‘What have I done?’

She gestured around. ‘This.’

I struggled to ask the question. ‘Are you telling me *I* did this?’

‘You will.’

‘What? What will I do? What will I do wrong? Tell me, you have to tell me.’

‘You will make a decision that will end the world.’

‘Mummy, Mummy, look. The water is going up. Why is the water going up?’

What? I looked around. Green trees. Boats on the river. Clouds in the sky. Wet children and dogs everywhere. What was going on?

‘Mummy – look. All the water is going up. What makes the water go up?’

I looked to my left. A woman I assumed was the skinny boy’s mother was busy on her com. She wasn’t listening. ‘Not now, Clive.’

His high-pitched voice was cutting through my mind like a wire through cheese. ‘But, Mummy . . .’

‘In a minute,’ she shouted. ‘I’m busy.’

I closed my eyes and shook my head to clear it. What was happening?

When I looked back, the little boy had left the fountain area and was heading towards the gates. Alone. There was a bendy bus coming. One of the automated ones, trundling along its preset route. Not fast. It was painted brilliant blue and orange. He would see it. Of course he would see it. It was designed to be seen.

I stood up. He was still looking back at the fountains. Not at the road. Lost

in his own world. Where, I guessed, he spent most of his time.

I tried to shout but my mouth wouldn't open. Like one of those dreams where danger threatens and suddenly you can't shout or scream or call out or even make the slightest sound.

I stood up and began to walk and then to trot and then to run. Straight across the fountain area. I weaved in and out of people. I think I hit someone. I know someone called out after me but I ignored them. The fountains came on again, splashing me with cold water. Still I ran. It wasn't far but I wasn't going to make it in time. It didn't matter. The bus would stop. They had sensors. Lots of sensors. It would stop. He couldn't be the first kid who'd ever run out into the road.

All the time my brain was screaming at me – *Don't do this. This is why Mrs Partridge was here. This is why you saw what you saw. Because this is Clive Ronan and he does something that ends the world and if he dies now then humanity is spared a shedload of pain. Leave it. Walk away. Let him die. You've seen what will happen if you do this. Let it go. For God's sake, Maxwell, for once in your life – let it go.*

My legs kept going. I don't know why. I just kept going.

I was only an arm's length away from him. I could still veer off. Walk away. Leave events – good or bad, only History could tell – to play out as they should.

Except – you don't leave little boys to die. You just don't. Perhaps, a long time ago, a kind stranger had given Matthew a crust of bread when he was starving. A random act of kindness and now I was paying it back. Closing a circle. I don't know. I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't stop myself.

And now I was here. This was it. The moment. The choice. I could reach him. I could save him. And initiate a chain of events that would destroy the world.

Time stopped.

Sussman lived.

Schiller lived.

And Big Dave Murdoch. And Jamie Cameron. And Jenny Fields.

And Helen.

Matthew had a proper childhood.

So much death and pain. I could wipe it all out in an instant.

And the burnt and blackened world of just now? That would live as well.

I could see him so clearly. Such a little boy. His tousled blond hair. His superhero sweater, carefully knitted for him by a loving granny or aunt, perhaps. Worn with pride. The last thing he would ever wear.

I could let him go. I should let him go. So much evil would never happen. He would never grow up to cause so much anguish. The world would be a better place. And this death would be quick. The adult Clive would never know the drawn-out agony of his real death.

Suddenly, I was there in Bronze-Age Crete, back in the teapot. When Ronan's spirit had departed but his body carried on. Dancing to his own off-key singing.

All things bright and beautiful . . .

The sharp, sour smell of his voided bowels. The crack as his spine snapped with the force of his convulsions.

I would be saving the world from everything that was this child's future. He'd never go on to work at St Mary's. Never shoot Dr Bairstow. Never lose Annie Bessant. None of it would happen. All I had to do was nothing and the future would be saved.

But would it? What was it I always said? Deal with the now. Deal with the now and often the future takes care of itself.

He ran out into the road.

I grabbed at his arm. He was travelling fast. His arm slid through my hand. I tightened my grip on his wrist. His momentum pulled me out into the road as well. Great. Now we were both going to die. Smart thinking, Maxwell.

I didn't try to pull back. I went forwards with him, pushing off with my back foot for more power. Something hit my shoulder. I spun, taking the

little boy with me. We both hit the roadway. I put out my arm to save myself and felt something give. There was a fiery pain in my hip as I rolled – away from the bus and not underneath it, I hoped, because I'd lost my sense of direction. I expected any moment to feel the metal wheels roll over me, the red-hot pain of severed legs. Dimly I could hear people shouting. Screeching brakes. The warning siren. He was underneath me. I curled myself around him. It was all I could do. I curled myself around him and waited to die.

It didn't happen. There were voices. Hands reached for me. Someone gently turned me over. Someone else said, 'Careful. Careful.'

My hip hurt like hell. The boy was crying. So was I. Because now it was all over, I realised what I had done. The Muse of History herself had come to warn me, and I'd ignored her. I'd saved Clive Ronan. Because I hadn't been able to save my own little boy.

I felt the tears roll down my cheeks as I lay in the road. Sensors had brought the bus to a halt – too bloody late now – and people piled off to see what had happened.

They wanted me to stay where I was but I've spent enough time lying in roadways. It's not a good look and people draw the wrong conclusions.

Someone helped me up. I looked around but Clive and his mother had disappeared. I said, 'The little boy?'

They assured me he was fine. His mother was taking him home.

Then they wanted me to go to hospital. I shook my head. 'No, I'm fine. Just a bit bruised. I'll go back to TPHQ. It's only just down there.'

The crowd dispersed quite quickly. Mentioning TPHQ can do that.

I hobbled back across the road and down the steps to get to embankment level and there she was. Minus the white robe and judgemental expression this time.

I very nearly carried on walking. I was too tired and throbby to care about anything Mrs Partridge had to say. On the other hand, she had protected Anastasia for me. On the other other hand, I'd just ballsed things up big

time and let Clive Ronan go on to kill the world by the looks of it, so I thought it advisable to pre-empt a little.

Finding the least painful position in which to stand, and torn between tears and self-justification, I said, 'Well, now I've blown it, haven't I? I'm sorry, but you definitely chose the wrong instrument. Seriously, with all the people in all the universe, whatever made you choose me?'

'Because you always do your best.'

Standing still hurt too much. I started down the last steps to the river path. 'Yeah?' I said, wincing. 'How has that worked for you?'

'Very nicely indeed.'

I had to stop and lean against the wall.

'May I take your arm?'

'I think it's broken.'

'No – it just feels that way. Let me help you.'

'Not sure you shouldn't be hurling me into the depths of Tartarus.'

'Whatever for?'

'Because I could have saved the world and everyone a ton of grief and I didn't.'

'You weren't supposed to.'

I thought I'd misheard her. 'I'm . . . sorry?'

'Clive Ronan wasn't the worst thing that could happen.'

My head hurt. 'No . . . ?'

'Just a little further and then you can rest.'

I might have leaned on her a little. 'Clive Ronan killed so many people.'

'And among them was someone who would have gone on to be a far greater threat than he could ever be. Now, thanks to you, that person won't live long enough to damage this world and everyone in it.'

I shook my head. Reaction was setting in and I was beginning to shake. 'But I got it wrong.'

'No, you didn't. You did exactly as you should. You made the right decision. You didn't let the little boy die. Well done, Max. Very well done

indeed. I'm very proud of you.'

'Oh,' I said, unable to think of anything else to say. 'You're welcome.' And then, because I couldn't resist . . . 'You could have just told me.'

'Free will,' she said vaguely. 'There are rules.'

'What now?'

'Nothing. You've done everything asked of you, Max. Live your life and be blessed.'

'But . . .'

She'd gone and suddenly Markham was running towards me.

'For God's sake, Max. You were only gone for twenty minutes. Twenty bloody minutes. You went out for some fresh air and look at you. What am I supposed to tell Leon?'

He put his arm around me and we hobbled towards TPHQ.

'Why are you always so worried about what Leon will say?'

'He gets very tense when I bring you back injured.'

'He can't possibly blame you. You weren't even there.'

'Won't stop him. Let's get you to their Sick-Bay place.'

'Oh,' I said, suddenly very aware that everything hurt quite badly. Because I'd been hit by a bus. 'Yes, please.'

Apparently, I wasn't badly injured – which didn't seem right. Not after hitting a bus. Bruising and road rash and stop making such a fuss, they said. Bed rest for a day or two and I'd be fine.

Whenever I'd been in Sick Bay at St Mary's and requested a discharge, Dr Stone would just smile and ignore me. The Time Police doctor didn't even bother to smile. Consequently, I was feeling somewhat grumpy – or, if you listened to Markham, even grumpier than usual – when Treadwell turned up. There was a certain amount of eye-rolling from one of us.

He still didn't look quite right and I could tell from the way he eased himself into the chair that he was in some discomfort. I did try to remember he'd been shot recently – and at St Mary's, as well – and rummaged around for some sympathy.

We contemplated each other for a minute or so. Eventually, to get things moving, I said, 'How are you feeling?'

'Better than you by the looks of things.'

'Yeah – I've made a note not to argue with buses in the future.'

'You come from the most traffic-laden century of all time. Today there are only about twelve buses in all of London and yet you managed to fall over in front of one of them.'

I'd told them I tripped. No point in clogging up their tiny brains with extraneous info.

Pleasantries over, we paused. Which one of us would speak first?

You'll probably be surprised to hear it was him.

'I feel our previous discussion was somewhat inconclusive.'

‘Relax,’ I said. ‘I’m not going to say anything. Why would I? Leave me alone and I’ll return the compliment.’

Treadwell nodded, not saying anything.

‘And use your influence to lift the investigation at St Mary’s. I know you can.’

He paused, and rubbed his temple. ‘And what do I get in return?’

‘I do nothing.’

‘Markham?’

‘Can keep a secret better than anyone I know.’

He nodded again and stared at his hands.

‘So,’ I said quietly. ‘What’s the story?’

Treadwell was silent again for so long I thought he’d decided this was above my pay grade.

‘I’m not going into the circumstances, but for some reasons . . . good reasons . . . it became necessary to . . . remove someone from her own time.’

I’d been quite prepared for him to say nothing so the fact he was bothering to explain was rather a surprise. For someone like Treadwell to break one of the Time Police’s most fundamental laws, the reasons would have to be very good. What set of circumstances could compel a Time Police officer to do that?

‘You must remember that, in this time, the Clerk/Prentiss incident took place many, many years ago.’ He looked around and then painfully inched his chair a little closer. ‘As a very much younger man, through circumstances we need not discuss, I found myself in need of a place to conceal . . . someone. I consulted our archive – illegally, of course – and came across my own records.’ The corner of his mouth turned up. ‘It’s a very peculiar feeling – a young man reading log entries made by his older self some years in the past. Disorienting.’

I nodded. I could imagine.

‘Anyway, the Clerk/Prentiss situation seemed ideal. Patara was stable both

politically and economically – which was no doubt why you'd chosen it – and so I took the child – illegally – and jumped back. I didn't feel the need for tedious explanations so I . . . left the child on their doorstep.'

'You scratched her name on a piece of pottery. That could have identified her.'

'I did so in case anything happened to me, because then she would have been lost forever. That wasn't my plan.'

'What was your plan?'

Treadwell shook his head.

'But you're the Time Police,' I said, actually quite shocked. 'And you removed someone from their own time.'

He looked me straight in the eye. 'Yes. What are you going to do about it?'

'Absolutely nothing,' I said, from my own position of equally guilty. 'So you moved the child to Patara.'

'I did. I watched from afar and an hour later – for me – when she was five years old and when no one was looking, I removed her.'

I was speechless for a moment. 'What? How could you? Clerk and Prentiss would have been frantic with worry.'

Typically, he offered no excuses, no explanations. 'I moved her to an expensive but discreet school in Ireland. Another hour later – when she was eleven – I placed her in another school just outside Bristol that had an excellent science and maths programme. From there – and by now back in her own time – she earned a place at Durham University, all by herself. I had nothing to do with that. She graduated with honours. I had already made the decision to step back at this point – let her get on with her life.' He sighed. 'And then . . .'

I folded my arms. 'And then she joined the Time Police.'

He sighed again. 'She did indeed.'

'Rather a shock, I imagine.'

The corner of his mouth quirked up. 'You could say that.'

‘Didn’t she recognise you?’

‘No. I’d only appeared three times in her childhood – very briefly each time – and other than that, I had taken care to stay well away. And I was older, of course.’

‘Did you ever tell her?’

‘No.’

‘Will you?’

‘No. The opportunity has never arisen.’

‘You could make the opportunity.’

‘I could. I won’t. My resolve is helped by the fact she sees as little of me as she can manage.’

‘Why?’

‘I can be extremely unpleasant when I try.’

‘At last – a statement I can fully endorse. And Clerk and Prentiss? Can I tell them? They raised her as their own.’

‘You can mention it to them – and only to them – next time you visit. I say this only to keep you quiet, but be aware – if I think there is the slightest danger of this getting out, I will kill them. And you. I hope that threat is sufficient to ensure your cooperation, Dr Maxwell.’

I stared at him. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who uses people quite as ruthlessly as you do. No wonder people keep shooting you.’

‘You haven’t looked in the mirror recently, Dr Maxwell?’

I said coldly, ‘I don’t aspire to your skills level.’

‘No one does,’ he said calmly. ‘No one can.’

He sat back, watching me.

I honestly couldn’t think of anything to say. The commander of the Time Police was an illegal. Unwittingly, but even so . . . And this man had been the perpetrator of what – two, three, four Time Crimes? That he’d admitted to, anyway. God knows what he’d done over the years to protect Hay. And himself, of course. It occurred to me – somewhat belatedly – that I was alone with one of the most cold-blooded people I’d ever met. And that I

knew enough to bring him down. And possibly his whole organisation with him.

I looked him in the eye. ‘Now you’ve told me this, exactly how long do I have to live?’

‘Let me assure you, I have no intention of interfering in your life. Return the compliment as you said you would – stay out of my way – and any nasty situations can easily be avoided.’ He looked down at me. ‘By both of us.’

I believed him, actually. We both had a lot to hide and this could be a matter of mutually assured destruction. ‘Deal,’ I said.

Treadwell nodded and got up to go. ‘Oh – by the way.’ He pulled something from his pocket. ‘You might find these useful. They’re a proprietary medicine not available in your time although you should have no difficulty reproducing them. They will go a long way towards reducing what we call time lag. However, be aware – you need to reduce your jumps. Drastically. If you don’t, then all the medication in the world will not save you. The condition can be fatal if neglected.’

I went to take the pack and he moved it slightly out of reach.

‘I am a Hunter, Dr Maxwell. You know what that means. I would be grateful if, in future, you did not recognise me.’

‘It will give me enormous pleasure not to recognise you at any time, Commander Treadwell.’

‘By the way,’ he said. ‘Your little girl.’

‘What about her?’

‘Change her name. To be on the safe side.’

He handed me the pack and I slipped it under my pillow. When I turned back, he’d gone.

The jump back to St Mary's wasn't too bad. Perhaps my body knew I was home at last. We landed in the paint store. We decontaminated and then I shut things down for the last time. The console went dark, and in the sudden silence, Markham and I turned and looked at each other.

'Well,' he said eventually. 'Adventure over. Job done.'

I nodded. I couldn't think of anything to say. We'd pitchforked ourselves into this escapade, done our bit, and now the rest of it belonged to someone else. The Time Police would deal with Insight from now on. Without us. Smallhope and Pennyroyal would carry on. Without us. I suddenly felt quite lost. I think Markham felt the same.

'What now, Max?'

'Short term – I'm off to find Leon. Long term – no idea. You?'

'Short term – the same, only with Di and Flora. Long term – back here, I suppose. My paternity leave must have ended long ago.'

There was a pause and then he said, 'This is it, then. The parting of the ways.'

'I should be so lucky,' I said. 'Once I'm back at the cottage, we might celebrate with a giant barbecue. Everyone will be invited. You can come if you wait in the street. I expect Leon will bring you out a sausage.'

I looked at the floor.

'Hey.'

I looked up and he put his arms around me. 'You take care.'

'You too.'

'We'll see each other soon,' he said. 'There's our share of the loot from

Pros and Cons to hand over to St Mary's.'

I nodded, unable to speak.

'Look after yourself, Max.' He paused. 'I think I might call in to Security. Frighten Hyssop to death.'

It was as if neither of us wanted to let the other go. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat.

Eventually he said, 'See you around, Max,' and pulled himself away. He hit the door control and a second later he was gone.

I wiped my eyes and went to look for Leon.

Who swept me up in his arms and, believe me, I was very willing to be swept.

'Home at last?'

'Home at last.'

'For good?'

'For good.'

'Unbelievably, you look even more battered than when you left.' His face changed. 'You haven't been cooking again, have you?'

'I was hit by a bus,' I said proudly. 'If you play your cards right, I'll show you my road rash. I hope you've tidied the cottage and have a good supply of sausages, margaritas and chocolate.'

'The nationwide campaign for healthier eating has just passed you by, hasn't it?'

'My diet has made me what I am today. Where's Matthew?'

'Working in R&D with Mikey and Lingoss. I didn't ask for any details of what they're up to and he didn't volunteer them. We can tell him you're here or we can snatch an hour or so to ourselves.'

'He's probably in the middle of something important and, as responsible parents, we shouldn't disturb him. Actually, has he even noticed I've been gone?'

'I think so. He did mention you the other day.'

I smiled up at him. 'How soon can you finish in Hawking?'

‘About five minutes ago,’ said Dieter, appearing at Leon’s shoulder. ‘Go.’

Neither of us argued.

Dr Stone insisted I remain at St Mary’s. I was simply too battered and knackered to do anything else so I said I’d give it a day or two. I should be making plans for the future but my brain was so tired. And it was an opportunity to hand over the tablets Treadwell had given me.

‘Interesting,’ said Dr Stone, studying the list of ingredients on the packet. ‘These will probably work, Max, but be aware . . .’ He fixed me with an awful stare, probably intended to convey the might and majesty of the medical profession. ‘These will only alleviate the symptoms, not cure them completely. I’ll run a series of tests on you and then we’ll have a better idea of where we stand.’

Mrs Partridge made an appointment for me to see Dr Bairstow, because courtesy demanded I inform him I would have to stay at St Mary’s, at least for Dr Stone’s tests. And I needed to talk to Mrs Partridge about Anastasia as well.

‘No cause for concern,’ said Mrs Partridge, before I even had a chance to ask. ‘She’s safely in Rushford with Hunter and little Flora. She’s doing very well there and it’s a breathing space for both of you.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, genuinely grateful.

‘What are your long-term plans?’

‘I don’t know. I think a lot will depend on what Dr Bairstow has to say.’

‘Ah, Dr Maxwell,’ he said, appearing unexpectedly behind me in the manner he’s perfected over the years. ‘Mr Markham is on his way in but I wonder if you could spare me a moment in my office before then.’

I thought he’d want to talk about me returning to St Mary’s. Or demand I bring him up to date on what had happened with Insight – or everything I’d been up to since I saw him last – but no.

He seated himself at his desk and regarded me severely.

‘A *donkey*, Dr Maxwell?’

Shit. I’d completely forgotten about Ramses. For which I think I can be

forgiven. However, time to rally my forces.

'And not just any old donkey,' I said, because it's important to sell this sort of thing properly. 'An *Ancient Egyptian* donkey.'

'How does that help?'

'A living, breathing piece of Egyptian History.'

'Strangely, Dr Maxwell, when I think of Egyptian History, it's rather more pyramids . . .'

'We couldn't get them in the pod.'

Seamlessly, he adjusted his argument. '. . . more canopic jars and shabti, and rather less scruffy donkey.'

As anyone would, I dismissed canopic jars and shabti with a wave of my hand. 'I don't think we could compete with the British Museum on that score – they're up to their waists in that sort of thing – but I bet they don't have a real live *Ancient Egyptian* donkey.'

'I am equally certain they do not. Probably for any number of very excellent reasons.'

'The main one being they're not St Mary's, Dr Bairstow. They don't have St Mary's resources. Really, one can only feel sorry for them.'

'One would be happy to forward them the donkey.'

'The *Ancient Egyptian* donkey. With dust from the actual tomb of Amenhotep II still on his little hooves.'

'And yet I still find my mind wandering in the direction of more conventional objects such as shabti and canopic jars.'

I shrugged. 'It was a question of opportunity. I work with what I can get.'

'As do I, Dr Maxwell. As do I.'

Was it me or wasn't this going well?

There was a slight commotion at the door. Almost certainly, that would be Markham trying to get in with his hands and trousers full.

'With your permission, Dr Bairstow.' I got up and opened the door. 'Come in.'

He limped into the room. 'Good morning, sir.'

Dr Bairstow blinked. ‘You are injured, Mr Markham?’

‘No, no, everything’s fine. Can I ask you to avert your eyes, please?’

I’d already averted mine. There are some things with which the human eye cannot cope.

Not so Dr Bairstow, who didn’t avert anything like quickly enough and was left with no choice other than to stare in fascinated horror as Markham pulled the legendary Durendal from the front of his trousers.

Before anyone faints, Durendal is the famous sword of Roland and not, definitely not, whatever *you* might have been imagining. Shame on you.

Barely had Dr Bairstow even begun to recover from that shock than Markham dumped a by now very tatty Tesco carrier bag on his desk with a slight, but expensive, thud. From this, rather in the manner of a conjuror pulling a rabbit from his hat, he drew forth a Fabergé egg.

‘The Alexander III Commemorative, sir.’

He laid it reverently in front of Dr Bairstow. With the sun streaming through the windows, it would be fair to say it was a glitteringly spectacular sight.

Wisely not allowing Dr Bairstow any time at all to recover the power of speech, he followed through with the St Mary’s share of yellow silk-bound encyclopaedias.

‘Commissioned by the Yongle Emperor himself, copied from the original eleven thousand volumes, and worth, at a very conservative estimate, more than five million euros, sir. Each.’

It was very possible you could have bought St Mary’s and everything in it three times over with the objects currently nestling on Dr Bairstow’s blotter. Actually, that’s not true. You could probably buy St Mary’s three times over with a low-denomination postal order.

Anyway, back to a gobsmacked-but-not-admitting-it Dr Bairstow. He rallied magnificently. ‘What am I supposed to do with all this?’

Markham grinned. ‘Strengthen your position.’

‘With whom?’

‘Anyone you like.’

There was a long moment of very deep cogitation. I was inclined to leave him to it. Always quit while you’re ahead, was my motto. Or should be, anyway.

Dr Bairstow opened his eyes. ‘I understand, Mr Markham, that your period of paternity leave is about to end.’

‘It is indeed, sir. When would be convenient for me to return?’

‘Monday next would, I think, be perfectly acceptable.’

‘And Captain Hyssop?’ I said, entirely forgetting I didn’t work here any longer and that it wasn’t anything to do with me.

‘Captain Hyssop is a subject for future discussion,’ Dr Bairstow said smoothly. ‘Might I enquire as to *your* immediate plans, Dr Maxwell?’

I hesitated. I wanted to . . . What did I want to do?

‘I . . .’ I took a breath. ‘The decision is not mine to make, sadly. Dr Stone tells me I am still suffering from time lag and that I may never recover completely. It’s not possible for me to rejoin St Mary’s, even if I wanted to.’

‘That is a blow, Dr Maxwell. I had hoped . . . But your health must come first, obviously.’

‘Self-inflicted,’ I said. ‘He warned me to cut back on the jumps and I didn’t. In fact, I think I’ve jumped even more frequently than ever during the time I’ve been away. My only defence is that circumstances warranted it. Sadly, this is the price I must pay.’

‘I understand. It seems a pity. Do you have any specific plans?’

‘To return to the cottage, obviously, paint and . . . um . . .’ I tailed away. I really didn’t have any other ideas.

‘May I enquire as to your plans regarding the young person you appear to have acquired?’

Good question. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘I . . . um . . . well, I think I saw her being adopted by a lovely couple and she’d live in a lovely house in the countryside. With a lovely pony. And just generally . . . have a lovely life.’

‘Hmm,’ he said. ‘Well, I see you both have lives to resume. Please accept

St Mary’s grateful thanks for these . . . objects. Rest assured they will be put to good use. Mr Markham, I will see you on Monday. Dr Maxwell, St Mary’s will be delighted to offer you the use of our facilities for as long as you need. Good day to you both.’

Well, you'd think that would be it, wouldn't you? All bases covered. Everything sorted. And they all lived. Yes, I know it should be *And they all lived happily ever after*, but sometimes that last part's a bit of an optional extra.

Anyway, I was wrong. It wasn't finished at all. Not by a long chalk. Because something happened which very nearly stopped my heart.

Anastasia came back to St Mary's with Markham and Hunter and moved in with Leon and me. I was surprised how pleased I was to see her again. She had more colour in her cheeks, and, let's face it, St Mary's was God's gift to a little girl filled with more satiable curiosity than the Elephant's Child.

I introduced her to Matthew – not without some trepidation – but I needn't have worried. She could talk for both of them. And frequently did. She spent a lot of time in the Library, where she became excellent friends with Dr Dowson.

While I think of it – and if anyone is still interested – the Library staff had returned victorious from the Annual Cataloguers' Conference Cataloguers' Cataloguing Competition. In Criccieth. Their trophy had been proudly mounted in pride of place over the mantelpiece, where Dr Dowson drew our attention to it ten times a day. There had been some collateral damage – Miss Brooke had two fingers taped together and Mr Bond was walking strangely – but this was nothing, apparently, compared to the ravages they'd inflicted on their fraternal colleagues from Thirsk.

Anastasia obviously liked St Mary's and was happy here. Mrs Enderby

made her some pretty clothes. Mrs Mack showed her how to make jam tarts and sausage rolls, and Leon and I ate them afterwards. Well, Matthew ate most of them. He does have his uses.

We kept her busy and she seemed content and happy. Distressed at losing her mother, obviously. She talked about her occasionally. There was no great outpouring of grief. Just little sentences every now and then, to which I listened and nodded, feeling as helpless as everyone does in these circumstances.

I took her for a medical with Dr Stone. He emerged later with the slightly shell-shocked look of one encountering Anastasia for the first time. They were both rocking a giant chocolate moustache so I guessed he'd made her cocoa – his go-to treatment for everything up to and including, but not limited to, death.

'My,' he said faintly as Anastasia skipped off to talk to Fortunata. 'Such a lot of questions.'

'Everything OK?' I said, adding another one.

He pulled himself together. 'Yes. Oh yes, everything's fine. She's fractionally underweight but she has a small build so I'm not overly concerned. We talked a little about her mother. She seems to be dealing well with her loss. I'm sure you and Leon will keep an eye on her.' He blinked a couple of times. 'I think I might go and stare at a wall for a while. She's bright, Max. A very bright child.'

I nodded.

He turned back to me. 'You, however, are a bit of a lost cause.'

I sighed because I knew what he was going to say. 'I'm sorry. I did my best to cut back on the jumps as you told me, but it just wasn't possible.'

He said very quietly, 'I don't think it would have made much difference. I rather think the damage was already done.'

'Well, in a way, that's no bad thing, is it? It makes up my mind for me. I won't be coming back here to work.'

He flipped open a file. 'Max, I've looked at your test results. They're not

good.'

'As I said, I don't think that's going to be an issue.'

'I'm afraid it is going to be an issue, whether you return to St Mary's or not.'

My stomach twisted. 'I'm not sure I understand.'

'I . . . It may be, Max . . .' He stopped again. 'Max, I think you've passed the point of no return.'

'I don't understand.'

'It's possible you might never recover completely. Your body clock isn't resetting. Your disorientation may be permanent. You could experience problems with balance and coordination for the rest of your life. If your eyesight continues to deteriorate, it's possible that one day you might not even be able to process normal text.'

I must have looked stricken.

'That's not necessarily a problem,' he added hastily. 'There's text-to-voice and vice versa, and all sorts of aids for . . .'

I wasn't listening. I could hear his voice going on and on, but my brain wasn't able to take it in. I'd have poor vision, no balance, no coordination – for the rest of my life. I couldn't get past that. The rest of my life.

'Um . . . I might need to think about this.'

'Of course. Take your time to get your head round things. I'm always here if you want to talk.'

He disappeared back into his office, leaving me with no time to think about any of this because here came Anastasia, and I had to pull myself together pretty sharpish.

'Well,' I said, chivvying her towards the door. 'Did you enjoy your cocoa?'

She nodded. 'Is chocolate made from cocoa or the other way round? Is chocolate a tree? Can we grow it here? What happens if . . . ?'

Two could play at the question game. 'Have you given any more thought to choosing your new name? The name you'd like to be known by?'

I was quite surprised when she nodded. ‘Yes, I have.’

‘That’s good news. What have you decided?’ I braced myself because she’d been down in the Library with Dr Dowson, and if she said Euphemia or Sophronia or Jezebel then I foresaw she and Leon having a long and difficult conversation. Well, it wouldn’t be me – not if I could help it.

She looked up at me. ‘She said I could be Helen.’

I stopped dead.

‘Helen?’

‘Yes. It’s nice. Do you like it?’

‘Who said you could be Helen?’

‘The cigarette lady.’

We’d reached the door and I couldn’t remember how it worked.

‘The cigarette lady?’

She nodded vigorously and opened the door for me.

‘You’ve seen this . . . cigarette lady?’

She nodded again. ‘She sits in the window. She said I could be called Helen.’

We started down the stairs. I managed to say, ‘Would you like that?’

‘Yes, I think I would. Because of Helen of Troy. And Beatrix Potter. And some others. I forget.’

‘Mm,’ I said carefully. ‘Did she . . . Did she say anything else?’

‘Yes. She’s very cross with you.’

Somehow, I found enough voice to ask, ‘What did she say?’

‘She said to stop arsing around, Maxwell, and sort it out.’

I swallowed. ‘Sort what out?’

‘The bad man.’

She ran off down the stairs while I stood rooted to the spot like an idiot.

The bad man? What bad man?

And the cigarette lady? No one at St Mary’s smoked. It wasn’t fashionable these days. As far as I knew, only one person had ever smoked here. I had a sudden picture of her, my friend, sitting in the window seat, the sun behind

her, wreathed in cigarette smoke. After she'd died, there had been one or two occasions on which I thought I might have smelled cigarettes when I couldn't possibly have, but to hear Anastasia say it . . . How could she have known? How could she possibly have known?

And she wanted to be called Helen.

And what was all this about a bad man? Could this be Anastasia dredging up a childhood nightmare? Given her past that was very possible.

I went off to find Leon and found Atherton instead. Although technically, he found me. He appeared suddenly and I jumped a mile.

'Sorry, Max. Sorry, sorry, sorry. You all right?'

'I will be,' I said, leaning against a wall and waiting for my internal bits and pieces to return to their normal positions. 'Did you want me?'

'I don't – Dr Bairstow does. That government bloke's arrived.'

Yes, yet another hoop for St Mary's – and me and Markham – to jump through. A flaming hoop, this time. They – whoever *they* were – had sent someone down to check out what the hell was going on here. Were we fit for purpose? Had anyone else been shot recently? Were we bringing down civilisation? Undermining the very fabric of the universe? Thus causing Peterson to remark that St Mary's had been undermining the very fabric of the universe for years and why were they getting their knickers in a twist about it now? And, apparently, they also wanted to discuss a certain Head of Security who'd broken the terms of his agreement and spawned. No one had actually come right out and said the future of St Mary's depended on whoever it was sending back a favourable report, but some things don't really need spelling out, do they?

I'm not famed for my in-depth knowledge of the major political players of the day. If asked – and no one ever did – I'd describe all politicians as a bunch of over-promoted, under-talented twats with egos directly proportionate to their incompetence and I personally wouldn't have one in the house. Anyway, I'd made plans to have an elsewhere to be and then been told my attendance was requested. *Demanded* was the actual word

used. *Not optional* was another. I'd pointed out that was another two words. It had not been well received.

'You're to go straight up,' said Atherton. 'The meeting begins at ten thirty.'

'On my way,' I said. 'Can you round up all known troublemakers and send them out for the day?'

By which I meant Adrian and Mikey, who, along with Matthew and Anastasia, were to be given an enormous sum of money to take themselves off to Rushford for the day and not come back before dark.

'I'll see them off myself,' said Atherton. 'You get yourself up there.'

I sighed. 'Have you seen her? Or him? Who have we got? What're they like?'

He grinned. 'It's Jack Daniels.'

Oh shit. Even I'd heard of Jack Daniels.

James Daniels – commonly known as Jack after the illegal whiskey smuggled out through the Canadian Corridor and for which he was known to have a weakness – was generally reckoned to be a contender for prime minister one day. Not that that's any sort of reputable career goal. He was a cabinet minister, although he'd not yet held one of the great offices of state – but unless he did something exceptionally stupid, even by political standards, it was only a matter of time. He'd been tipped for the top, as they say.

He had all the right background. Born rich and privileged, he'd been educated at Eton – who one day will be forced to examine the flawed educational regime that has foisted so many political half-wits on to an innocent country – and Cambridge.

From there he'd gone on to Sandhurst, served in the army for a while, and then moved into the banking and financial services sector which had, presumably, removed any last lingering traces of humanity and instilled the basic principles of greed and corruption so vital to those wanting to climb the ladder of success. From there he floated downwards into the murky

world of politics, and was elected to the House of Commons at his first attempt.

He'd almost certainly never seen a poor person in his entire life and so to remedy this defect, he and his party had created quite a lot of them. He'd cultivated an estuary accent so that everyone would know he was one of the boys. Amusingly this slipped every now and then. He wore suits carefully tailored to look off the peg, and brown shoes, and was frequently photographed clutching a pint although he'd never actually been seen to drink it.

Even by parliamentary standards, he was famous for shagging around. His wife and kids were known to loathe him so he must be paying them a fortune not to walk out and cause a scandal. I myself strongly suspected his wife was shagging a super-stallion on the quiet and could barely remember her husband's name. Both children were shaping up to become politically active but for other parties. The country lived for the day he'd find himself facing his eldest daughter across the despatch box. Think of all the old scores she'd have to settle. And in public, too.

Markham, hair in his favourite spiky style, and familiar again in Security Section green – already stained with something pungently mysterious – caught me up just outside the door. 'This is going to be fun. Promise me you won't behave yourself.'

Meetings at St Mary's are rarely dull. This one turned out to be a doozy.

Dr Bairstow was already seated at the head of his briefing table. I wondered if Jack Daniels had assumed that place would automatically be his.

Sitting on Dr Bairstow's left hand, surprisingly, was Commander Treadwell. Looking very much better than the last time I'd seen him. As per our treaty, he ignored me and I him.

Peterson was also there, at Dr Bairstow's right hand. He grinned at us both. Markham sat next to him and I was next to Markham, with an empty seat – a kind of no-man's land, I guessed – on my other side.

Jack Daniels had placed himself at the foot of the table. His two assistants ranged themselves on either side.

Mrs Brown – a member of the department nominally in charge of St Mary's – seated herself at a carefully neutral mid-point. She looked very crisp in a cream suit with black lapels and buttons. Definitely not someone to mess with.

Mrs Partridge closed the door, seated herself in her usual position just behind Dr Bairstow, and pulled out her scratchpad. Everyone looked expectantly at everyone else.

'No notes,' said Daniels. 'This meeting never happened.' He looked at Mrs Partridge. 'I don't think we shall be needing you, thank you.'

She didn't move. The silence lengthened. Nobody moved. In the end, he gave it up and said, 'Shall we begin?'

First round to us.

I'm sure Jack Daniels would have liked to open the meeting, but as he drew breath to do so, Dr Bairstow got there first.

'Welcome, everyone. I think introductions will prove helpful at this stage. I am Edward Bairstow and I am the director of the Institute of Historical Research here at St Mary's Priory. Dr Peterson?'

We went round the table. I introduced myself as former Head of the History Department. Markham was very clear he was still Head of the Security Section. Treadwell introduced himself as a member of the Hunter Division, itself part of the Time Police, an international organisation created for the specific purpose of preserving the timeline. I'm not sure Jack Daniels quite believed him.

He simply referred to himself as Jack Daniels, MP. I'm not sure how impressed we were supposed to be by this modesty. His assistants didn't introduce themselves at all. In fact, I don't think they spoke once throughout the whole meeting.

'The purpose of this meeting,' said Dr Bairstow, 'is to resolve one or two issues, recently arisen, concerning this organisation. Firstly, the threat to St

Mary's constituted by an organisation—'

'An organisation recently uncovered by a joint Time Police/St Mary's action,' intervened Treadwell.

I coughed and Peterson grinned.

Treadwell ploughed on. 'This illegal organisation had established links between officials of your government, Mr Daniels, and the renegade Clive Ronan – known to you, I believe, as Conrad Rossiter – which constituted a direct threat to the safety of the Timeline. And history, of course,' he added as an obvious polite afterthought.

'That's as may be,' said Daniels, possibly wanting to move on from the bit about government officials, 'but a more important threat is that *of* St Mary's. The danger St Mary's presents to this country and, indeed, the world. And especially the danger posed by one particular member of St Mary's to the political stability of this country.'

He adopted the politicians' stock expression number three. The weighty decision-making one assumed when they publicly discussed important issues and privately opened the plain brown envelope containing the unmarked non-consecutive banknotes.

'It occurs to me that all these issues could be resolved in a heartbeat should the organisation commonly known as St Mary's cease to exist.'

'That is very true,' said Dr Bairstow amiably. 'In fact, although this is slightly jumping ahead in our agenda, I am relieved to hear you say so, Mr Daniels. Allow me to reassure you – plans are even now being drawn up to transfer St Mary's, in its entirety, to another location not within this realm. In other words, Mr Daniels, you may return to your paymasters – and the government – and assure them that St Mary's will no longer be posing any sort of threat to this country. With almost immediate effect, we will cease to be resident in this country at all.'

An expression flitted across Daniels' face. Just for a moment. This wasn't what he'd wanted. This wasn't about getting rid of St Mary's. This was about control. He was to threaten closure and Dr Bairstow was supposed to

give ground, make concessions, agree to various conditions – anything to remain operational – and then Daniels would return to London to report job well done, control gained, and that in future St Mary's would be a good little organisation and do as it was told. Problem solved. All thanks to him. I don't know how I didn't laugh.

'Yes,' said Dr Bairstow thoughtfully. 'We've been having top-level talks' – just rubbing in the fact that Jack Daniels wasn't quite top level enough to have been informed of this – 'concerning various locations throughout the world, and I have to say . . .' He looked at Peterson. 'One or two are looking very promising indeed.'

Peterson solemnly nodded.

Daniels swallowed. 'Where . . . ?'

Dr Bairstow smiled his cat-versus-canary smile. The one with the feathers still between his teeth. 'Obviously no details can be discussed – security issues, you understand – but there have been several very gratifying expressions of interest. Better premises, more freedom in which to operate, considerably increased funding, less secrecy – in fact, we are being regarded as a possible flagship project with which to dazzle the world. I must say, obviously without any undue self-aggrandisement on our part, this move will be very much to the benefit of all. Problem solved. And that, I believe, concludes your interest in this meeting, Mr Daniels.'

Dr Bairstow made a move as if to escort him to the door but Daniels had pulled himself together. 'I'm afraid none of that will be possible. It is the resources of *this* country that have enabled you to operate. There is no question of you taking equipment and expertise – which this country could ill afford – to benefit another. We couldn't possibly run the risk of all this . . .' he gestured around, 'falling into the hands of someone who does not regard this country as a friend.'

'Well, that certainly narrows our field of opportunity,' murmured Peterson. 'I'm trying to think of any country anywhere whom our government hasn't upset, offended or insulted over the past century or so.'

He appealed to Dr Bairstow. ‘Can you, sir?’

Dr Bairstow assumed a thoughtful expression. ‘Casting my mind back – no.’

‘This is ridiculous,’ said Daniels angrily. ‘You can’t just get up and go. I won’t allow it. I have only to say the word and the army would be here in under an hour.’

Dr Bairstow smiled politely. ‘My dear sir, you have, I’m afraid, very firmly grasped the wrong end of the stick. I have only to say the word and within ten minutes this unit is gone. Your problem is whether we ever come back again.’

Jack Daniels opened his mouth but Dr Bairstow was relentless.

‘The army will arrive to find the bird has flown. And you, sir, as the person who left the cage door open, will have a very great deal of explaining to do.’

Daniels wasn’t going down without a fight. ‘This only goes to strengthen my argument. St Mary’s is dangerously out of control. There have, over the years, been a number of deaths, explosions, and episodes of a dangerous nature. A woman named Isabella Barclay, I believe, was shot in an incident not entirely unconnected with this woman here.’

I opened my mouth but Dr Bairstow got there first.

‘Isabella Barclay was an associate of Clive Ronan – or as you know him, Conrad Rossiter. She shot Dr Maxwell and was, in turn, shot by a third party.’

‘Another member of St Mary’s.’

‘A member of the Time Police, actually,’ said Treadwell, so smoothly you’d never know he was lying. ‘With all the protection that implies.’

‘And what of Helen Foster?’ said Daniels, consulting a list.

‘Again, murdered by your colleague, Conrad Rossiter,’ said Dr Bairstow in his *I can do this all day* voice.

‘And the former director, Roderick Halcombe?’

‘Who?’ I said blankly.

‘Malcolm Halcombe,’ said Markham. ‘Leprosy, remember?’

Daniels sat up in a hurry. ‘You gave him leprosy?’

‘We treated him for leprosy,’ said Markham. ‘He didn’t actually have it.’

‘Then why was he treated?’

‘He insisted. He was convinced he was leprotic.’

‘Is that a word?’ I said, curious.

‘It is now,’ he said proudly.

‘I remember Malcolm Halcombe,’ I said. ‘He contravened St Mary’s regulations by forcing an illegal jump to the crucifixion. We saved your arse that day, Daniels. And the government’s. And the world’s, probably. But by all means, continue.’

‘Lisa Dottle,’ he said. ‘Thrown from the roof by you, Dr Maxwell.’

‘She was another associate of Rossiter’s,’ I said. ‘He shot her and she fell off the roof, taking me with her.’

‘You survived and she did not.’

‘Well, no, she’d been shot. All I did was hit a tree and break some bones.’

‘Quite boring, really,’ murmured Markham.

Jack Daniels opened his mouth again but never got the chance.

‘There are many threads, all of which connect to Conrad Rossiter,’ said Dr Bairstow quietly, ‘and whichever one you pull will unravel more than this government will be comfortable with and for which your colleagues will not thank you. Whoever survives the resulting political apocalypse, it will not be you, Mr Daniels.’

Daniels still wasn’t giving up.

‘You, I believe,’ he looked at Treadwell, ‘were shot and wounded while acting as director. By a member of this unit. The identity of whom has never been discovered. What is more, the investigators reported a high level of non-cooperation right across the board.’

Treadwell shrugged. ‘I believe I am aware of the identity of the person who shot me, which, incidentally, is an occupational hazard for me. The Time Police pay a small bounty to those wounded in action. Carefully

invested, it all mounts up quite nicely.'

'You know who did it? I order you to . . .'

Treadwell's expression didn't change but the temperature plummeted.

'I take my orders from one person and one person only,' he said, very quietly. 'The Time Police answer to no one. As laid down in the terms of the treaty.'

'I am not aware of this treaty.'

'Well, no, it hasn't been signed yet. Greed and stupidity have not yet rendered the timeline so unstable that only drastic action can save it. But this country's government will sign it – do sign it – have signed it – along with everyone else.'

Daniels stared. 'Who exactly are you?'

'I told you. I am a Time Police officer. A member of the Hunter Division and not yours to command. Not anyone's to command. My orders are to watch, listen, and report back.'

'To whom?'

'To the commander of the Time Police.'

'And what will he do?'

'She will decide whether any further action should be taken.'

'Against whom?'

'Against anyone she deems necessary.' He cast a look around the table. 'Including anyone here today.' He looked at Daniels. 'Believe me, Mr Daniels, your safest course of action will be to forget this entire affair, return to London and cobble together a report you think will satisfy your superiors.' He did not look at Mrs Brown. 'I guarantee it will not be acted upon.'

Daniels was furious. 'St Mary's is—'

Treadwell interrupted. 'Much though it pains me to admit it – and it does pain me greatly – this bunch of stumbling basket cases – or St Mary's, as I suppose I should refer to them – are necessary to the safety and well-being of all.'

He looked directly at me and Markham. ‘Your actions appear to have averted the early onset of the Time Wars. Commander Hay has asked me to convey her gratitude.’

He looked back at Jack Daniels. ‘St Mary’s must exist so it can assist the Time Police in its task of protecting the timeline. As I believe will be discussed in detail as soon as we are able to move on from this tedious part of the agenda, they have recently concluded an investigation that, quite literally, has saved your government’s arse. Every government’s arse from 1605 onwards. My own opinion, Mr Daniels, is that you should strive for a little more gratitude.’

Jack Daniels rallied magnificently. ‘Be that as it may, there is still the issue of the man Markham, here . . .’

I grinned at the man Markham, who grinned back again, apparently completely unconcerned.

‘Ah yes,’ said Dr Bairstow. ‘Our Head of Security whose recent actions have prevented a series of events that would have proved fatal to the good governance of this country. Who was instrumental in neutralising the threat of a certain Laurence Hoyle, placed at St Mary’s by a group of shadowy figures not unconnected with highly placed members of *your* government, and whose intentions were to undermine the institutions of the monarchy and Parliament. Treason, as I believe it could be legally defined. Mr Markham’s actions, of course, were ably assisted by Dr Maxwell.’

Actually, I rather felt he’d got that the wrong way round but now was probably not the time to argue my point.

Daniels still wasn’t giving up. ‘Nevertheless, because of who this person is . . .’

Oh, for heaven’s sake. I opened my mouth, but Treadwell got there first. ‘I think, sir, the only person in any danger of forgetting who Mr Markham is – is you. Allow me to refresh your memory. Do you have an interest in history at all, sir? At university, perhaps?’

‘Economics,’ said Daniels shortly.

Well – that accounted for a lot.

'Perhaps, then, you are not aware of the nature of medieval princes and the means they employed to gain power. No? Perhaps I could recommend a brief perusal of that classic, Machiavelli's *The Prince*. You might find it instructive.'

'I cannot . . .'

I sighed. Time to shove my oar in. And since I didn't work here any longer, Dr Bairstow could disavow any knowledge of my actions. I might even self-destruct in five seconds.

I leaned forwards to get his attention. 'The point Commander Treadwell is making too difficult for you to understand is that my ex-colleague comes from vicious, ruthless and bloody stock, accustomed to doing whatever is necessary to achieve their own sinister ends without a single pang of conscience.'

Markham twisted in his chair. 'How is this helping?'

I think Jack Daniels was in agreement. 'Your point . . . er . . . Miss . . . ?'

I saw Markham, Peterson and even Dr Bairstow open their mouths but it was Treadwell who got there first.

'That's *Dr* Maxwell, Mr Daniels.'

Daniels fumbled with his notes.

I felt no compunction about putting the boot in. He knew who I was. He was probably just wondering why I wasn't off making the tea and passing around the biscuits. 'Let me make things much easier for you, Mr . . . um . . . I take it you're not familiar with Margaret of Anjou?'

'Of course not.'

You see – this is what happens when History comes off the curriculum. You get a country run by idiots.

'A stupid woman – an indirect cause of the Wars of the Roses. Mostly she's famous for treating Richard of York . . .' I nodded at Markham, 'his grandfather, as an enemy, and by doing so turned him into one. A self--fulfilling prophecy. The point we are all labouring to make is that you are

doing exactly the same thing. By treating this man as an enemy of the country, you might actually turn him into one. And given his pedigree – how wise is that?'

Daniels persevered. 'There was an agreement . . . no issue.'

'Yeah,' said Markham. 'Sorry about that, but we were slightly overcome by the moment.' He paused meaningfully. 'You know how things can be.'

Since rumour had it that our Mr Daniels had been overcome by more than several extra-marital moments – and with more than several inevitable results – he wisely glossed over that bit. No one actually said *pot, kettle, black*, but the words hung above his head for all to see.

Daniels paused, possibly to consider his position, which was a mistake because Dr Bairstow took full advantage.

'Might I suggest that we continue as before? Mr Markham has stated – repeatedly – that he has no interest in disturbing the status quo. Nor has he any reason to. Might I suggest you adopt the same policy with St Mary's? Leave us alone and we will be happy to return the favour. I look forward to hearing your decision.'

He paused, but Daniels seemed to have nothing to say.

'To that end, allow me to invite you to remain for the more exciting part of today's agenda which should provide you with a splendid opportunity to judge for yourself the sterling service he and Dr Maxwell have rendered this country. Dr Maxwell, I understand you have a report to submit.'

'I do.' I had just taken a breath to begin a dramatic account of the sterling service Markham and I had rendered this country when the door was flung open and in walked two soldiers. Followed by Martin Gaunt. Followed by a grumpy-looking Mr Evans. 'Sorry, sir. He has a warrant. And there's more of them outside.'

Well, bloody bollocking hell.

I think I've mentioned before that occasionally – especially in times of stress – my mind uncouples from my normal train of thought and wanders off on its own. Usually, just when I need it. On the other hand, it often returns with something useful. As it did now. Instead of dealing with the utter disaster unfolding before me, I found myself musing on how little we needed this right now. So many secrets and the impossibility of keeping most of them if Martin Gaunt was allowed to enter the arena.

I wasn't really Lucy Maxwell.

Dr Bairstow and Leon weren't who they said they were either.

Treadwell was guilty of a crime that would have him executed if it was ever discovered.

Markham and I were guilty of breaking Dr Bairstow out of Gaunt's secure establishment.

Mrs Partridge wasn't really the world's greatest PA.

And for an MP not to have any number of nasty skeletons in his cupboard simply meant he hadn't been doing his job properly.

In fact, was there anyone in this room who didn't have something to hide? Because we all had secrets, didn't we?

Yes . . . we did . . . everyone had a secret . . .

And, typically, when all my thoughts should have been concentrated on this Gaunt-related crisis and how to extricate myself successfully – that was the moment when the neurons went into overdrive and I realised who, of everyone at St Mary's, had the greatest secret of us all. Who had the most to hide. Who had the most to lose. Who possessed a secret far greater than all

our lesser secrets put together.

And once I thought about it from that angle . . . once I saw things from a different perspective . . . suddenly I knew exactly how Insight had known about me. About us. About Home Farm. Dazzlingly, sickeningly – I could see it all.

We'd all of us made an incorrect assumption. Every single one of us. We'd accepted events in the way they'd been presented to us, but if you removed that assumption . . . then everything was turned on its head.

My first reaction was complete and total disbelief. This couldn't be right. I must be wrong. Even thinking it was . . . unthinkable. My mind flailed for excuses . . . reasons . . . explanations . . . but deep down, I knew. Knowledge might be painful – excruciatingly painful, in this case – but somehow, deep inside, you always know when something is true. There's a rightness to it. The horrible inevitability of everything sliding smoothly into place.

Martin Luther once said, 'Each betrayal begins with trust.' And that was so true. I'd trusted. Blindly. I'd never questioned. Never thought . . . Not once. I'd believed implicitly. Unquestioningly accepted everything I'd been told. We all had.

The pain was sharp and red and all-consuming. For a moment I couldn't breathe. I reached for the jug of water. My hand was shaking. All of me was shaking. Adrenalin spiked my systems. I was a whirlwind of emotions. Shock. Hurt. Disbelief. Denial. Especially denial. I'd have given anything to be wrong, but I wasn't, and my world could never be as it once was.

And now what did I do? What should I say? Was this the time and place? There were outsiders present. But the longer I delayed . . . And now Gaunt was here, and once in his clutches, I'd never have the chance to act on what I knew. What should I do?

Suddenly, it was as if Miss North herself was speaking in my ear. No matter how difficult, how painful, I should do my duty. I couldn't not do my duty. This wasn't about me. This was about . . . I didn't know what it was

about. I didn't know anything any longer. I didn't even trust myself.

Someone – I don't know who because there was a roaring in my ears – said, 'Max? Are you all right?' and took the water jug off me before I spilled it all over the table.

Treadwell was regarding me with no expression at all. I remembered he'd said he knew who shot him. Markham was sitting next to me and I couldn't see much of his face. And I couldn't see Peterson at all. Dr Bairstow was leaning forwards. Mrs Brown had pushed back her chair as if to come to my aid.

And then Mrs Partridge was there beside me. She poured me a glass of water and helped me drink. Things cleared.

She then took the glass off me because obviously I couldn't be trusted, saying, 'Please take your time, Dr Maxwell.'

Yes, I would take my time.

Dr Bairstow was speaking. 'Dr Maxwell, if you wish to retire . . .'

'She stays exactly where she is,' said Gaunt in his best menacing voice and it made me jump because – don't laugh – I'd forgotten all about him. Honestly, I'd been so caught up in my thoughts – realising who'd betrayed us all, been betraying us all for years – that I'd completely forgotten about the thoroughly nasty specimen of humanity who'd just turned up to drag me away – and Markham, even Dr Bairstow – to take his revenge on us for making a fool of him. A day ago, an hour ago – a minute ago, even – I would have thought that was the worst thing that could happen to me. Well, not any longer, Martin. You missed your chance. There were more important issues to be dealt with today.

And here came the darkness again. And the roaring. And the sensation of falling. And the sudden sharp crack of pain in my right shinbone as the bastard sitting opposite – you know him as Commander John Treadwell – fetched my leg a right crack with his Time Police-issued steel-toe-capped boots. And it hurt. It really bloody hurt. There was a massive bruise afterwards. And he broke the skin.

I yelped and glared at him. He stared impassively back again. ‘You can thank me later.’

‘I shall,’ I said. ‘Appropriately, trust me. No matter how long it takes.’

But I was back. And functioning. In agony, of course, and it would be a miracle if I’d ever be able to walk again, but I was back.

There was a massive argument going on. Gaunt and Daniels were shouting about something. Custody, perhaps? I suspected Mrs Brown was waiting patiently for the contest to end so she could move in to annihilate the winner. Dr Bairstow had steepled his fingers and was watching us all.

And Markham? Markham had twisted in his seat and was looking at me. He spoke very quietly. ‘Do you and I need to have a conversation, Max?’

I made a decision.

‘I know,’ I said through lips that could barely function. ‘I know how Insight knew.’

‘Do you indeed?’

Under cover of the raised voices around us, I managed to whisper, ‘I know who betrayed us.’

I hadn’t spoken very loudly at all but suddenly, everyone in the room fell silent.

Markham regarded me narrowly and said quietly, ‘Who?’

I swallowed. ‘The same person who shot Treadwell.’

There was a very long silence and then Markham said to the room in general, ‘If everyone does exactly as I say, then no one will be hurt. Is that understood?’

I looked up at him and somehow forced myself to speak. ‘I don’t think I’m very well. I can’t . . .’

Markham pulled out the stun gun I should have known he’d have on him somewhere, stood up and moved away from the table, out of grabbing range.

‘Dr Bairstow, I’m afraid Dr Maxwell is suddenly very unwell. May I ask Mrs Partridge to summon Dr Stone, please.’

Dr Bairstow's face was completely blank. He nodded.

'No, you may not,' shouted Gaunt. 'This is just another Maxwell trick to deceive us all.'

Seriously, he'd missed his calling. He'd have been right at home in the Middle Ages. One of those religious bods who saw witchcraft and the devil in every woman he met. There would have been meticulous examinations as he looked for the witch's mark. Not because he enjoyed it but because it would have been his duty to be thorough. I could just see him standing at the foot of the bonfire, the flames reflected in his shiny pink face and his cold black shark's eyes, rejoicing at the thought of another soul saved from herself and how much his God would love him for it.

I glanced quickly around the table and wondered who here, if push came to shove, I could actually rely upon.

Dr Bairstow – probably.

Peterson – absolutely.

Treadwell – he'd be too busy wiping my shin off his shiny boots.

Mrs Brown – possibly.

Jack Daniels – he'd be weighing up whether saving me would help or hinder his path to the top.

His minions – would do as he told them.

Mrs Partridge – hard to say. If it suited some greater plan, then yes. Otherwise – probably not.

'This is an escape attempt,' shouted Gaunt, as single-minded as ever. 'Under no circumstances is anyone to enter or leave this room.'

Ignoring Markham's weapon, he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a piece of paper. 'A warrant. For the arrest of Markham and Maxwell. All legal and above board. Do not hinder me again in the execution of my duty.'

'Oh dear,' said Markham, with what sounded like genuine regret. 'Can I see?' Casually, he reached out for the warrant and zapped Martin Gaunt with what I could only hope was full power.

Gaunt folded like a wonky deckchair. All angles and knobbly extremities.

His two minions surged forwards, raising their own weapons, and who knew how everything would have ended had not Treadwell pulled out his sonic and stopped the nearest in his tracks. Mr Evans followed through with the other one and they both dropped where they stood.

For a moment no one moved. Typically, it was Dr Bairstow who recovered first. ‘Perhaps you would be good enough to glance out of the window, Commander, and advise what is happening outside.’

Unhurriedly, Treadwell crossed the room to open the window and lean out. ‘Four more squaddies. Two vehicles. One of them I suspect is a prison transport van. Belonging to the unlamented Mr Gaunt, I suspect. To the west of them stands my pod with two officers awaiting my instructions. Standing not too far away in a wisely non-confrontational formation are Captain Hyssop, together with Messrs Glass, Gallacio and Cox. Everyone is watching everyone else but there are no signs of alarm. No weapons have been drawn. It seems safe to assume no one is aware of the events occurring within this room.’

He withdrew his head.

‘Dr Stone is on his way,’ reported Mrs Partridge quite serenely, considering we had three semi-conscious men stretched out on the floor.

‘Remember,’ said Markham, moving his gun to cover the room. ‘Everyone stays still and quiet.’

This was some sort of nightmare. It had to be. Any moment now I’d discover I couldn’t speak. Or that I was being pursued by a pair of giant scissors. Or the floor had turned to custard. Or there was some important secret to which everyone was privy but me. Actually, that last one is just about the story of my life.

A long minute passed. No one spoke. Markham watched us all like a hawk. Then the door opened, Dr Stone strode into the room and the tension collapsed.

He surveyed the prone Martin Gaunt and his minions all in a heap nearby.

Then Markham and his gun. Then Treadwell and Evans and their guns.

‘Dear God, what the hell is going on now?’

Dr Bairstow indicated he should deal with me first.

The doctor stepped over the dribbling bodies. ‘Is that Martin Gaunt? When did he get here? What did you do this time, Max?’

He put down his bag, knelt beside my chair and felt for my pulse.

As he did so, Markham stepped up. Close. Very close. Shoving his gun against Dr Stone’s temple, he said, ‘Stay very, very still.’

Once again, the accent had disappeared. A small part of my mind wondered if it was gone for good this time. ‘Stand up slowly, Dr Maxwell, and step away, please.’

I did as I was told.

Dr Stone was bewildered. ‘But . . .’

‘You too, Dr Peterson. Over by the desk out of the way, please. And you, Dr Bairstow, if you would be so good. Thank you. You will remain where you are, Mr Daniels. And your team. One wrong move from anyone and I will shoot the doctor here. High-charge stuns directly to the head for a prolonged period of time are invariably fatal.’

Jack Daniels sat bolt upright, his hands splayed on the table in front of him. ‘I told you. I warned you. This man is a danger to us all.’

Dr Stone seemed paralysed. He was still on his knees. ‘I . . . What’s going on?’

My voice was shaking. ‘What’s going on is that I’ve realised who’s been working for Insight all this time. I know who betrayed me. How Insight found out about Home Farm. And who shot Commander Treadwell.’

I looked across at Markham. I could barely see him for the tears in my eyes.

Dr Stone said hoarsely, ‘Who? Who was it?’

‘Someone I trusted with my life. Someone who . . .’ I couldn’t go on.

Dr Stone turned his head very slowly to look up at Markham.

‘You?’ he said incredulously.

‘No,’ said Markham, and in that moment his voice carried all the power and authority of someone whose ancestors had spent centuries mowing down any and all stupid enough to stand in their path. ‘You.’

Contrary to every thriller I'd ever read, Dr Stone's face did not contort with maniacal fury. In fact, not a muscle moved. His expression never changed. Good-humoured, a little bit ridiculous with his sticky-out ears, polite, concerned – the very epitome of a conscientious, competent doctor.

Nor did he burst out with vehement denials. That was when I knew we were dealing with a highly trained professional. He simply shut down. Expression, body language, voice. In fact, I never heard him speak again.

Dr Bairstow said nothing, either. I suspected he was remembering that Dr Stone had been his own personal choice, made after Helen's death. He was contemplating the damage this choice had done to St Mary's. This was going to be hard for us to come back from. It was at that moment that I realised I really wanted to return to St Mary's.

Dr Bairstow gestured. 'Dr Maxwell, please come to stand over here.'

I couldn't move. I was enveloped in the same horror, the same emotions, the same paralysis as I'd experienced that day. When time slowed . . . when Helen died . . .

His voice was very gentle. 'Max, I'd like you to stand by me, please. Hear my voice, Max. Come and stand over here. That's it.'

I had to make a huge effort just to lift my foot, but I did as I was told, moving very slowly and telegraphing my every move because I didn't want to end up as collateral damage until, finally, I ended up between him and Peterson, who put his hand in the small of my back. Only then did I remember to breathe. And pull myself together a little. And think.

I'd never recovered from Helen's death. I couldn't even guess how many

times I'd seen the last seconds of her life play out in front of me. Could I, somehow, have saved her? If I hadn't left Matthew with her, would she still be alive? If only I'd gone to collect Matthew five minutes earlier. Or she'd come out of the toilet five minutes later. Always blaming myself, and now – now I saw clearly. We'd all thought Clive Ronan had come for Matthew, and Helen had simply been in his way, but we'd got it the wrong way round. It was Helen he'd come to kill, and stealing Matthew was simply a snatched opportunity.

Ronan had never extended his hand in genuine friendship. Everything he'd done – the initial approach, his actions in the Egyptian desert – had been geared solely towards getting himself inside St Mary's. The appearance of the Time Police after the sandstorm had provided him with the perfect cover. Everyone had assumed his actions were the result of St Mary's and the Time Police's betrayal but that simply wasn't so. If that hadn't happened, he would have found another opportunity. Perhaps he might even have accompanied me back to St Mary's. As a gesture of trust and cooperation, of course.

At some point he would have seized the moment to kill Helen. Snatching Matthew had disguised his true purpose. An unexpected bonus. Something with which to torture me and Leon. But his main purpose – the whole point – had been to create the vacancy which would get Dr Stone inside St Mary's. Where he'd been the perfect sleeper for all these years.

I wondered who had recommended Stone to Dr Bairstow. Had they known who and what he was or had they acted in good faith? I had no doubt Dr Stone's medical skills were genuine. That his background was genuine. But he was Clive Ronan's man. Not Insight's – or they'd have known about me leaving St Mary's. Clive Ronan had bought him. I wondered what his price would have been.

His instructions would have been to do everything St Mary's required of him in the persona of medical professional, right up until the moment he was activated. But Ronan had died. Was that why Stone had never been

activated? Did he know about Insight but they didn't know about him?

And then – he'd been unable to resist the perfect opportunity to find out what I was up to after I'd left St Mary's. Me nipping into Sick Bay for a quick check-up while collecting Dr Dowson had provided him with it.

I remembered his quiet voice asking me to make a list of my jumps over the last three months. And then the three months before that. And because I'm stupid – because it never occurred to me – because I'd believed in him completely – I'd made a neat list and given him everything I should have kept to myself. A complete history of everywhere and everywhen I'd been. Insight. Home Farm. Runnymede. Lincoln. Westminster. No one had betrayed me to Insight – I'd betrayed myself. Like the gullible idiot I was, I'd handed over everything to the very last person in the world who should have seen it. I felt the nausea rise again. And then he'd passed it on. I had no idea to whom or how, and that would be someone else's concern, but somehow the info had found its way to Insight. The small miracle that had saved us all was that somehow, at some point, they hadn't got their coordinates quite right and attacked Home Farm before any of this had kicked off. You could say Insight had been the authors of their own destruction.

'You're the one who brought down Insight,' I said to Dr Stone, because it gave me great satisfaction to do so. 'Not me. If you hadn't disobeyed your instructions and broken cover to pass on that info then everything would have gone exactly as they planned. Insight failed because of you.' I swallowed hard. '*You're* Helen's bad man.'

There was no reaction of any kind. Still, none of that was my problem. I had my own guilt to deal with. I suspected everyone present – those from St Mary's, anyway – were reviewing past events from a suddenly different perspective and searching their memories. How many secrets – how many vulnerabilities had we revealed? I was lost in a tangle of guilt and shock and shame and humiliation.

And Tim? How was he feeling at this moment? As devastated as me,

probably. As everyone else in the room.

Which was how Stone came to escape.

He moved so quickly I didn't even see him go. My eyes only caught up with him as he leaped straight out of the window.

We all crowded around. I arrived in time to see him picking himself up off the gravel. He staggered once or twice and then set off down the drive towards the gates.

Seriously, it was pathetic. The army, the Time Police and St Mary's Security – they all watched him go. God knows what everyone thought was going on. As far as they knew, our doctor was still a respectable member of St Mary's – if that's not a contradiction in terms – so they all stood still and watched his getaway.

'Excuse me, one and all,' said Treadwell, shouldering his way to the open window and pulling out his blaster. 'I have a favour to return.'

He took seemingly casual aim and fired at the fleeing figure. Tight beam right between the shoulder blades.

Stone fell flat on his face.

'Gotcha,' said Treadwell with great satisfaction, checking the charge on his weapon and replacing it on his rip-grip patch.

'You knew it was him all along?' said Markham.

'I am so tempted to smirk and say yes, but no, not definitely. Although I was very suspicious. He wasn't in Sick Bay when I was shot. Captain Hyssop couldn't find him anywhere.'

That was true. I remembered her shouting for someone to find Dr Stone and tell him Treadwell had been shot.

'Why? I mean, why did he shoot you?'

'I fear he was as suspicious of me as I was of him. And to cause trouble, of course. His friends in high places were just waiting for an excuse to move in.'

Down below, Hyssop and her team were heading towards our ex-doctor.

Markham stuck his head out of the window and yelled at them to hang on

to him. Not to let him get away under any circumstances.

'Is he dead?' I asked.

'No, I'm far too good a shot,' said Treadwell, who had obviously been behind the door when modesty was being handed out. 'Besides, I so want him to enjoy our future sessions together. The ones where he tells me everything I need to know.' He smiled. 'Whether he wants to or not.'

He surveyed us all with his usual mocking disdain. 'Should anyone be contemplating writing a stiff letter of complaint to my commander, please remember I am a member of the Time Police and licensed to do pretty much as I please.'

His gaze lingered on Jack Daniels who almost certainly hadn't envisaged his day turning out like this.

From somewhere at ground level, Gaunt groaned.

'I shall leave him to you,' said Treadwell. 'I have a prisoner to take back.'

Daniels stood up. 'Wait – you can't just . . .'

Treadwell turned. 'What? What can't I just do?'

'Shoot people. And then walk away. And . . . he was a doctor, for God's sake.'

'He was a sleeper,' said Markham. 'He's directly responsible for the deaths of scores of people and indirectly for the deaths of hundreds. Possibly thousands. He was almost certainly installed here with the backing of one or more of your colleagues. He's an associate of Clive Ronan's, possibly a member of Insight, and wanted by the Time Police for execution.'

'But you can't just . . . We no longer have capital punishment for . . .'

'Well, the Time Police do,' said Treadwell. 'Because we have no choice. And if your generation hadn't been so short-sighted . . . And if the generation after that hadn't been so greedy . . . And if the generation after that hadn't been so . . .'

He stopped, his voice vibrating with anger. It was the only time I ever saw him anything other than coldly smiling at the world around him. 'I exist

because of you, Mr Daniels. You and all those like you are part of the problem. I, on the other hand am the solution. As are others like me. And if you don't like it, then you shouldn't have created the problem in the first place.'

He took a deep breath and resumed his normal sarcastic tone. 'And now,' he turned to Dr Bairstow, 'a pleasure to have met with you again today, Dr Bairstow. A visit to St Mary's is always so . . . let's go with *unpredictable*, shall we?'

'If it's unpredictable you're after, then you should stay on until tomorrow,' said Markham, straight-faced. 'It's the semi-finals of the Annual All-comers Indoor Blindfold Axe-throwing competition. You'd be more than welcome.'

Treadwell appeared to consider this. 'Remarkably tempting though I find the thought of being in an enclosed space with axes and St Mary's . . . I regret I must decline.'

Someone tapped politely on the door.

'For God's sake,' said Jack Daniels. 'Now what? Is there no . . . ?'

At which moment the door was thrown open and in marched our former associates. Both of them. And completely unescorted. It seemed safe to assume they hadn't come in through the front doors.

I was gobsmacked. So was Markham and it takes a lot to gobsmack him.

Dr Bairstow greeted them, courteous hospitality oozing from every pore. 'Good morning. How very pleasant to see you both again.'

'Hello there,' cried Lady Amelia, giving us all a jolly wave. 'Max, Markham – lovely to see you both. You're looking very well.'

'As are you,' I said. And they were. Pennyroyal had a fresh scar bisecting one eyebrow, giving him a slightly unbalanced look I thought it wise not to mention. And as he turned his head, I could see he now had even fewer square ear inches than Markham – whose lack of ear was the result of an ill-judged William Tell experiment, before anyone asks. I was going on to say Hunter had given him a proper ear-bashing afterwards, but I think we can all agree that remark would be in very poor taste.

‘May we offer you any refreshment?’ enquired Dr Bairstow.

Smallhope shook her head. ‘Just passing through, thank you.’ She looked over at Treadwell. ‘Are we on time?’

‘Almost to the second,’ he responded. ‘Most impressive.’

‘Well, yes,’ she said. ‘This is us, after all. Do you have it?’

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a document. ‘I do.’

The three of them looked at Jack Daniels. Who looked faintly alarmed. I didn’t blame him. Being regarded by Smallhope and Pennyroyal rarely bodes well for anyone and when you chuck Treadwell into the mix as well . . .

‘What?’ said Daniels.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Treadwell, looking anything but. ‘Where are my manners? May I introduce the two most successful bounty hunters . . .’

Smallhope coughed.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he continued smoothly, ‘the two most successful recovery agents in the entire history of recovery agents. I am about to hand them an execution warrant. I wonder, since this will now concern him as well, if someone could bring themselves to handle the Gaunt creature and bring him round.’

Markham and Evans picked him up off the floor and dumped him in a chair. Rather ungratefully, he immediately began to mutter threats and complaints.

‘I can do it again,’ said Markham, reaching for his stun gun.

Gaunt shut up.

Treadwell handed the document to Smallhope and then turned to address Jack Daniels.

‘Mr Daniels . . . and Mr Gaunt – should one word of today’s events ever become public, this warrant will be acted upon.’

Daniels looked perplexed. ‘What? What does that mean?’

‘We’ll kill you,’ said Pennyroyal, keeping it simple for the politicians among us.

Daniels rallied well, I'll give him that. 'I'll have you arrested.'

Dr Bairstow leaned forwards. 'Can I invite you to contemplate the difficulties involved in tracking down people who have access to the entire timeline?' He smiled again. 'When *you* don't. Because to escape your government's short-sighted policy regarding St Mary's – as recommended by you – we are decamping.'

Smallhope passed the document to Pennyroyal, who pulled out his spectacles and carefully perused it. 'Just checking the details,' he said with his least reassuring smile.

'As a matter of interest,' I asked, because I was certain everyone was dying to know but was too polite to ask. 'How much is Mr Daniels worth dead?'

Pennyroyal read on for a few seconds and then raised his eyebrows. He passed the warrant to Dr Bairstow, who raised *his* eyebrows. 'I thought it would be more.'

Pennyroyal nodded. 'Yeah, but there's still enough there for me to buy myself another two-year-old.'

Smallhope sighed. 'Pennyroyal, I've told you this before. You must insert the word *racehorse* somewhere into that sentence. Otherwise, people get completely the wrong idea.'

'I beg your pardon, my lady,' said Pennyroyal, and grinned.

Jack Daniels was quite affronted. 'What do you mean – you thought it would be more?'

He was ignored.

Smallhope took back the warrant and ran her eye over it. 'Nothing for the Gaunt creature?'

'Well, he is an unplanned addition today so he hasn't been written in.' Treadwell looked over to the still slightly groggy Gaunt. 'If you feel he's not worth your while then I'm very happy to call open season on him. We could lay bets on who gets to him first. Kester de Maggio or the Hussain sisters, I imagine.'

Pennyroyal looked over at me. ‘This the bloke who chopped your hair?’

I nodded. ‘Yes.’

He looked at Treadwell. ‘I’ll do him for nothing.’

Treadwell nodded. ‘Then the matter is settled.’ He looked at Jack Daniels. ‘The slightest indiscretion . . .’

Daniels stood his ground. ‘I am an elected member of this government.’

‘Not by me,’ I said. ‘Nor anyone at St Mary’s. You disenfranchised us, remember.’

‘Are we finished here?’ said Pennyroyal, pocketing the warrant.

‘I believe so,’ said Dr Bairstow. He looked at Gaunt and Daniels. ‘Remember the value of discretion and the warrant will never be acted upon. Otherwise . . .’

Pennyroyal grinned. ‘You’ll never even see us coming.’

‘Time to say goodbye,’ said Lady Amelia. ‘Or, possibly, in the case of Messrs Gaunt and Daniels – *au revoir*.’

Both Gaunt and Daniels broke into angry speech, which was an excellent reason for following my ex-employers out of the room. Along with Markham.

‘I’m so pleased to see you again,’ I said, closing the door on an argument that didn’t interest me in the slightest. ‘Are you completely recovered?’

‘Sufficiently,’ said Smallhope. ‘Although we are thinking of making the move into something a little less strenuous. Industrial espionage, perhaps.’

‘I’m sure you’ll find it equally rewarding,’ said Markham politely.

‘Mrs Proudie?’ I said anxiously, because it had been worrying me. ‘And the others?’

‘We presented them with the deeds to the house. It is to be sold and the proceeds divided among them. You need have no concerns.’

I moved on to the next question on my list. ‘Were you able to retrieve Butehamun’s gold?’

‘We were indeed,’ she said. ‘Most of it will go a long way towards establishing ourselves comfortably in a different time and place. Our

grateful thanks. Speaking of which . . .'

Pennyroyal pulled out his wallet and extracted a few papers. 'Some practical matters to complete. Final accounting, bank details, account numbers, passwords and so forth.' He looked at me. 'Termination bonus.'

I smiled nervously, wishing he'd been a little clearer on the precise meaning of 'termination bonus'.

'Max . . . Markham.' He handed everything over.

'Thank you,' I said, tucking it all away without bothering to look. Neither did Markham.

There was a short silence.

'Well,' Smallhope said, with rather an effort, I thought. 'We had better be off. I'm rather afraid the next forty years or so are out of bounds to us.'

'Please,' I said. 'Don't let this be the last we see of each other.'

'I'm certain it won't be. The very best of luck to you both. We have enjoyed working with you. Next time you're chucked out of St Mary's – look us up. And should you ever need us – just talk to the major.'

'I'll miss you both,' I said. 'Especially Pennyroyal's carefree *joie de vivre*.'

Once again, I was the recipient of his deadpan stare. 'My friends think I'm joyous and light-hearted.'

'You have friends? Actual . . . ?'

'We'll meet again,' said Smallhope hastily. 'I'm sure of it.'

Pennyroyal just looked at us and then they turned away. We watched them walk around the gallery, turn a corner, and then they were gone.

'You OK?' enquired Markham, rubbing my shoulder.

I sighed. 'All in all, quite a *difficult* morning.'

He pulled out the slips Pennyroyal had given him and flipped through them. 'Shit, Max.'

'What?'

He indicated I should take a look at mine.

It wasn't as much of a shock as it might have been a couple of hours ago

because, frankly, my heart was getting used to this sort of thing.

'Bloody hell – I'm rich.'

I was roused by the sound of voices coming through the door. Perhaps Jack Daniels thought he was back at the hustings.

'Once more unto the breach, dear friends,' sighed Markham.

I was all set to stop the wall up with our English dead when I remembered something Markham had said. Or rather, hadn't said.

'Wait – when I told you I knew who it was, you didn't ask who. Did you know it was him? Stone?'

He scratched his head. I swear something dropped out. 'Well, while you were working at Insight, I had plenty of time to sit down and have a bit of a think. I managed to narrow the suspects down to two. He was one of them.'

'And the other?'

'Um . . .'

I couldn't believe it. '*You thought it might have been me?*'

'Well, I knew it wasn't me. I was pretty sure it wasn't Dr Bairstow. Or Pennyroyal or Smallhope. Or Leon. That left you or Dr Stone.'

'*You thought it was me?*'

His life was saved by Treadwell coming out through Mrs Partridge's office. He was wearing his bored face. He swept past us without a second glance and disappeared in the direction of the stairs.

I wasn't going to let it go. '*You actually thought it was me?*'

'No, no,' he said, very unconvincingly. 'I thought it *might* have been you.'

His life was saved again by Peterson and Evans escorting a groggy Gaunt and his minions to a place of greater safety. I don't think any of them were firing on all cylinders and Gaunt definitely had that *what just happened?* look about him. We see that one a lot at St Mary's. They shuffled past us along the gallery, turned a corner and disappeared.

'I don't understand why you're so cross,' said Markham. 'Didn't we just establish it *wasn't* you?'

'How could it possibly have been me?'

‘Well, there was always the chance Insight had got to you. You were cruising through the ranks – accelerated promotion, confidential lunches with Bridget – anyone would have suspected you.’

It was perhaps fortunate that at this moment, Mrs Mack brought up refreshments. Never ones to let tea and biscuits go to waste, we followed her in.

Everyone was still gathered around the windows.

Martin Gaunt and his minions were handed over to their own people. Peterson told me afterwards that Dr Bairstow had had a quick word with him on the importance of making sure none of them ever spoke of what they’d seen today. Because if they did, then the nasty people would come back and terminate him, Gaunt, without a second thought. Dr Bairstow was smiling the whole time, said Peterson, which, for some reason, hadn’t seemed to reassure Gaunt at all.

They climbed – or were helped – into their vehicles and drove away.

As soon as they’d gone, Cox and Gallacio heaved a limp Stone to his feet and looked up at the window. Dr Bairstow nodded and they handed him over to the Time Police. Treadwell climbed into his pod, followed by the two officers supporting the prisoner.

Hyssop waved everyone back and after a few seconds the pod disappeared.

No one outside the Time Police ever saw Nathaniel Stone again.

We all resumed our seats.

‘Well,’ said Dr Bairstow, stirring his tea. ‘That all went very well – don’t you think? And now your report, please, Dr Maxwell, if you would be so good.’

‘Hold on a moment,’ said Jack Daniels, and I exchanged a glance with Markham. We were obviously going to have to shoot him as well.

Jack Daniels leaned forwards. ‘I have to know,’ he said earnestly. ‘Are all St Mary’s meetings like this?’

Dr Bairstow sighed. ‘I wish I could say no.’

Daniels grinned, and in that moment, I quite liked him. ‘In that case, you’ll definitely be seeing more of me. Now, let’s hear this long-awaited report, shall we?’

So, having sorted out Insight, the Time Police, St Mary's and everyone else – it was time to look to our own futures.

I was curled up in one of the Library armchairs with a book when Evans plonked himself in the seat opposite.

'Max, I have a problem. Well, not a problem as such but . . .'

I thought I might know what he wanted to talk to me about.

I sighed. 'You have a decision to make, don't you?'

He nodded.

I put down my book. 'Let me guess – do you stay at St Mary's or follow Lady Amelia?'

He stared out of the window. 'I'm not sure what to do.'

I nodded and sighed. 'I do sympathise. I've had some difficult decisions to make, myself. Although I suspect it's easier for me. My family is here. Your closest relationship is with Lady Amelia.'

He nodded again. 'She made it quite clear – I was welcome if I wanted to join them but it was my decision.' He stared out of the window again. 'It was fun. The whole thing.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Being a bounty hunter *is* fun. There are no rules other than those you yourself choose to abide by. No one's telling you what to do all day long. Exhilaration. Enjoyable danger. Head-banging sex. Sometimes all at the same time. And it's profitable. More money than you thought you'd earn in an entire lifetime.'

He looked at me. 'But . . .'

I nodded. 'Yes. But.' I sighed. 'Times change. The world moves on.

People age. One day someone cleverer, faster, and more ruthless will come along. There will be a bullet, or a sword, or a blaster, or a spear – something, anyway – and one or both of them will end their days in an unknown location somewhere, and the sands will cover their bodies, and no one will ever know what became of them, and there'll be no one to mourn, no one to mark their ending or remember the extraordinary lives they led. And even if one of them survives – with those two, how long do you think that one would last without the other? Would you want to be the one dying in the desert or the one drinking themself to a lonely death three months afterwards?'

He stared at me. 'Jesus, Max, that's . . . brutal.'

'But I'm not wrong.'

'No,' he said quietly. 'You're not wrong.'

'I haven't helped, have I?'

'Yes, you have, actually.'

He went to get up.

'No. Stop. Listen. If you're thinking you could be the one to change that future, persuade her to settle down and live a normal life – you're wrong. She's not that sort of person. Neither is Pennyroyal. They're not made to live life like other people. Yes, she might do it if you asked her, but for how long? How long before she grows to hate that life? And resents you for it. And everything you had is soured and spoiled. Think about that. Sometimes it's best just to let go. Let it gently float away. Fragile but intact. Rather than cling on so hard you cut your fingers off in the trying.'

Evans leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

I put my hand on his arm. 'Dr Bairstow always says never be the last to leave the party and that's exactly right. We should always recognise when it's time to end something, and I think you do, don't you?'

He nodded and we sat in the sunny library for a while. With our memories.

There's never any rest for the wicked, is there?

I was quite happily pottering away in Leon's rooms – I'd ordered myself some paints and canvases and was carefully packing it all away, ready to take back to the cottage – when Dr Bairstow knocked at the door. I felt a little guilty because the attic stairs wouldn't have been easy for him.

Offering him the least lumpy armchair, I sat down opposite, mildly curious as to why he was here.

He took his time making himself comfortable and then turned to me.

'I'm not sure quite how up to date you are on current events, Dr Maxwell – a great deal has occurred while you've been away from St Mary's – but perhaps you will allow me to recap. You may find some or all of this information useful in deciding your future.

'Halcombe is dead. Last April, apparently. Of natural causes, should you be curious. Such is the mental condition of Major Sullivan that he will never leave the facility to which he is confined. The words "screamingly insane", while not strictly a medical diagnosis, are nevertheless extremely accurate. In any case, neither constitute a threat any longer.

'Martin Gaunt is, in the words of Mrs Brown, being moved to a position where he will find decision-making to be a little less challenging. Early retirement will be encouraged. It has been made very clear to him that the events of the other day did not actually occur and he has re-signed the Official Secrets Act. There was no need for him to do so – the signee is bound for their lifetime – but Mrs Brown was of the opinion, and I agreed, that the point could not be made too strongly.'

I nodded.

'Mr Daniels is unlikely to constitute a problem. We discussed his preliminary findings last night. Apparently, St Mary's is performing well under difficult circumstances and greater levels of supervision are not recommended.' He sighed. 'He is a politician, of course, and no doubt he will expect something in return.'

'Spencer Perceval,' I said, suddenly.

'Good heavens, Dr Maxwell. Are you proposing we shoot Mr Daniels in the lobby of the House of Commons?'

'That can be Plan B,' I said. 'No, I was thinking perhaps he would benefit from a small demonstration of what St Mary's can do. Impress him with our powers. And it might be a timely reminder should he ever have the wrong idea about us in the future.'

'An interesting thought. I shall ask Dr Peterson to investigate the possibility.'

I nodded. Jack Daniels witnessing that small piece of parliamentary History would be appropriate on so many levels. And it would be a nice day out for Peterson.

Pleasantries over, we came to the true purpose of the visit.

Dr Bairstow gave me a long, steady look. 'We've touched on this once before, Dr Maxwell – where do *we* stand, you and I? Are you ready to return to St Mary's?'

'Well,' I said cautiously. 'As far as I know, nothing has changed. I'm not sure I'm ever likely to be fit enough to work for St Mary's again. Some of the after-effects of jumping have not been pleasant. Not all the time, but perhaps that's the worst thing. I never know how and when I'll be affected. Our former doctor informed me I wasn't up to spec and no matter who or what he was, there's no arguing with that.'

'I'm not sure, Dr Maxwell, that I would be so quick to accept any diagnosis from our former doctor. I can temporarily remove you from the active list if you wish, but not every job at St Mary's involves leaping into a

pod and initiating a near apocalypse.'

'True, but all the best ones do.'

He smiled. 'Allow me to lay a proposal before you. I am prepared to give you all the time you need to recover. Whatever is required to assist your return to health, St Mary's will provide. To be frank, Dr Maxwell, your experience and expertise are unique and I'm prepared to pay for them.'

Believe it or not, I couldn't think of anything to say. Not that I was given the chance. He swept on. 'My plan is to promote you to Chief Operations Officer.'

CHOPS? Well, there was a blast from the past. Once upon a time, in a world far, far away, I'd been appointed CHOPS. In this world I'd mostly been known as Head of the History Department. Same job – same grief – less grand job title.

'But,' I said, 'and please don't construe this as criticism, but what about David Sands? He's done – is still doing – a great job leading the History Department. It really wouldn't be fair on him if I came back and took it away from him. And he's match-fit and I'm not.'

'As Chief Operations Officer, you would have overall responsibility for – among other things – an expanded History Department, which will continue under Mr Sands' direct supervision.'

'Expanded History Department?'

'Yes. Comprising a proper Pathfinder Section under Mr Atherton. With its own dedicated pods. A new Search and Rescue Section with Miss Van Owen in charge. And I intend to set up a permanent Training Section, for which Miss Sykes will have day-to-day responsibility. And they'll all be promoted to Senior Historians, of course.'

Wow. I couldn't imagine any training programme devised by Sykes would be anything other than inventive and exciting. And possibly fatal, of course. I could already see her and Lingoss putting their heads together. Many of us still remembered the bombed rat and the former septic tank. And the Caernarvon pollock riot.

He hadn't finished. 'All that would be your overall responsibility, together with, as before, the Library, R&D and Wardrobe.'

Wow. I still couldn't think of anything to say.

'Of necessity, this will mean you spending most of your time at St Mary's, although should you wish to avail yourself of the occasional opportunity to jump, I would certainly have no objection. Once you are recovered, of course.'

Wow. And he hadn't finished yet.

'I intend to promote Mr Markham similarly. He will be Chief Security Officer, presiding over two sections – Internal Security under Captain Hyssop, which will deal with all matters relating to the St Mary's campus – and Operational Security under Mr Evans, dealing with matters pertaining to jumps.'

'Both you and Mr Markham will report to Dr Peterson since, for a short period at least, I shall be spending more time in London and Thirsk, protecting our backs and securing our position.'

Well, that made sense. And with Mrs Brown by his side, he would be unstoppable.

'Mrs Partridge will be responsible for all Admin and Housekeeping matters (together with the redoubtable Mrs Midgley, of course). The kitchen will continue to be an area into which I dare not venture. Chief Farrell will have the Technical Section and IT. I am also considering appointing Mr Dieter to head up a new Logistics team, the purpose of which will be to manage our plant and equipment more efficiently. He and Leon will work closely together. Mr Strong, who appears to be ageless but I think would benefit from a little help, will continue in charge of Caretaking and I shall be asking him to set up a new Grounds Maintenance team.'

I didn't know what to say. All this was good, rewarding those who deserved it. And me, of course.

'On the advice of Mrs Brown, I'll be significantly increasing our numbers and our range,' he continued. 'An old trick. When your position is weak –

expand. Raise your profile. Demand a bigger budget. Additional and more diverse personnel. Better equipment. Ask any large organisation – it never fails. I have already submitted the appropriate paperwork citing our need to open up new areas to explore.'

He paused and looked at me, waiting.

I honestly didn't know what to say. He'd incorporated as much recovery time as I needed, a promotion, more time with Leon, less jumping, and put me in charge of a greatly expanded department. He'd thought of everything.

'I need your help putting St Mary's back together again,' he said. 'These last twelve months have not been easy and Dr Stone's betrayal has affected us all. The government threat has more or less been dealt with. No doubt it will continue to rear its head periodically, but for the moment that danger is past. My main concern now is to restructure St Mary's to enable us to meet future challenges. I thought perhaps we could start with the ruined city of Great Zimbabwe. I will be blunt, Dr Maxwell, I want you on board for this.'

I didn't know what to say. This was exciting stuff. I really wanted to be involved. In fact, I didn't want it happening without me – but there was still no getting away from what Dr Stone had told me.

'Dr Bairstow, this is an exciting offer and I'm so tempted, but I must be clear – not only am I never likely to jump again, but Dr Stone said I would experience difficulty even in normal everyday situations. My vision, for example. I'm grateful for the offer, but physically, I'm not sure I'm going to be up to it.'

He glanced at my book, lying face down on the arm of my chair. 'Are you experiencing ocular difficulties, Dr Maxwell?'

'Well, no, but according to Dr Stone I soon will.'

He sighed. 'As I said before, I think we would be foolish to place too much reliance on anything Dr Stone said to you after your return from Insight. For instance, you seem to me to be recovering very well.'

'I am, I think, but we still don't know whether I'll be able to jump safely.'

'I understand Commander Treadwell supplied you with medication

appropriate to your problem.'

'He did,' I said. 'Dr Stone has it . . . I mean, the medication is in Sick Bay. Should I ever need it.'

'A new doctor has already been appointed and will join us at the end of next week. I shall ask her to conduct a thorough analysis.'

I blinked. This was something I hadn't thought of. 'You think Treadwell might try to poison me?'

'I think, Dr Maxwell, that in the very likely event of Commander Treadwell deciding the world would be a better place without you, he would not deny himself the satisfaction of ending you face to face.'

I wasn't sure how reassuring that was supposed to be.

'No, my concern is that the medication in Sick Bay awaiting your future use is not the medication passed on to you by Commander Treadwell.'

There was a bit of a silence. I hadn't even thought about that. That would be so easy. To the uninitiated – me – one blister pack looks very like another. I might have just dodged a bullet.

'Whether you can or can't jump will not be an issue,' he continued, recalling me to the present. 'Your primary role will be to develop policies and people and ensure the smooth running of a large part of St Mary's.'

'I don't think I want to live here,' I said. 'I . . .' and struggled to put into words something I myself couldn't define and not wanting to give offence.

'I don't think that would be a problem, either,' he said calmly. 'With Mr Sands as your deputy and Mr Dieter as Leon's, I don't think we would require a twenty-four-hour presence from either of you. And I suspect our proposed expansion will leave us short of living space anyway.'

Wow. He was really determined not to let me go, wasn't he?

'I would like a little time to think about it, if I may.'

'Of course,' he said, getting up. 'And you'll want to discuss it with Leon, as well. But Matthew will be off to the Time Police for his sixth-form work soon – contingent upon his exam results, of course – which I think should make the decision a little easier.'

I nodded and he left.

It was only when he'd gone, I realised neither of us had mentioned Anastasia.

Well – now what? A choice lay before me. I could walk away from St Mary's, live in our little cottage, paint, read, do whatever I liked. Thanks to Pros and Cons, money wasn't an issue. I didn't have to work if I didn't want to. For the first time in my life, I had no clear path ahead of me. My actions need not be dictated by necessity. It was a bit of a strange feeling.

What if I did return to St Mary's? If I thought about it honestly, I hadn't done half of what I wanted. There was still so much I hadn't seen. Carthage. The Vikings in Moscow. Sun Tzu. Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Catherine the Great. Leonardo. And Michelangelo. Brian Boru. Çatalhöyük. Doggerland. Nero. Marco Polo. Kublai Khan. And Dr Bairstow had mentioned the ruined city of Great Zimbabwe. We could put together specialist teams. More diverse teams. There would be nothing we couldn't do – nowhere we couldn't go.

But I wasn't well. Suppose I was never able to jump again? What then? What would it be like watching everyone shoot off to have exciting adventures while I waited quietly at St Mary's? If I couldn't handle that, then I might be better off making a clean break and doing something else entirely.

I tried to get my thoughts in order so I could present Leon with a balanced argument when I saw him that evening, although I knew what he would say. It was my decision and he would support whatever that decision was.

Once, when I was young, my parents sent me away. I can't remember why – I think they'd been invited somewhere important and didn't want me spoiling it for them. I had no complaints – I was quite happy, actually, and not the slightest bit bothered to be shunted off to complete strangers. I have no idea what their relationship to my parents was. They were hired sight unseen, I suspected, and if this was a Dickens novel then it would all have

ended quite badly – but it didn't. I had a wonderful time.

Their names were James and Diana; they had a house in the country, a lovely dog and lots of chickens. Bantams. I think perhaps they felt a responsibility to ensure I had a good time and didn't miss my parents too much. Who were very much out of sight, out of mind.

It was a fantastic month. I ran through the fields with their dog, we had barbecues, we went to an old-fashioned cinema and I helped build a chicken coop. And they talked to each other. All the time. And laughed together. And made each other cups of tea. There were no cold silences. No sudden episodes of . . . anything.

I could have lived with them forever. In their home, I wasn't that troublemaker Maxwell of whom everyone expected the worst. There was no baggage for me to drag around. It was a window into another world. The one most people get to enjoy.

Of course, the day came when I had to leave and it nearly tore the heart out of my chest. In fact, if the car hadn't turned up for me I probably would never have gone back. I sat in the car, watching the landscape glide past, every turn of the wheels taking me back to somewhere I didn't want to be, and forced myself not to cry.

Anyway, the point of this fairly pointless story is that I'd been torn away from somewhere wonderful once before and if I wasn't careful it would happen again. And this time I would be doing it to myself.

Leon and I talked about everything that evening and the next morning I went in to see Dr Bairstow.

Two days later, Dr Bairstow called an all-staff meeting. I sat at the back as I used to do with Peterson in the days when we were young and carefree and would play Battleships. These days, as Deputy Director, Peterson was forced to sit at the front, pay attention, look supportive and not play Battleships.

Dr Bairstow began with a carefully curated version of my adventures with

Insight. He reported briefly on his meeting with Jack Daniels – not the bits with execution warrants and so forth, obviously. Nor the bits about Markham's identity. Nor his own bluff about moving us to another location.

He talked of restructuring to enable St Mary's to meet future challenges, while very carefully not giving the impression a tsunami of said challenges could break over our heads at any moment.

Only then did he turn to the matter of Dr Stone. Naturally there had been a great deal of shock and speculation concerning recent events which had ended with our doctor jumping out of the window, bleeding all over the South Lawn and being carted off by Treadwell.

He began with an accurate account of the dramatic events that day. And then the explanation.

'Nathaniel Stone was deliberately embedded in St Mary's. His instructions were to sit quietly and do his job until he became an important and integral part of the unit. An objective he achieved very easily.'

Dr Bairstow paused. 'I know many of you are angry or upset or fearful, even, because of personal, professional and medical matters that you may have discussed with him over the years. You are in no way to blame for anything you may have said or done during your interactions with Dr Stone. He was a naturally likeable person, a first-class doctor and a very, very talented infiltrator.

'As we now know, he was placed here by Clive Ronan to provide a watching brief and to be an early warning system. It is possible, especially after Ronan's death, that he might never have been utilised at all, in which case he would almost certainly have ended his time here quite normally and retired, highly regarded by all.

'Initially, I suspect he had no idea of Dr Maxwell's intentions regarding Insight but as soon as he discovered them, he acted quickly and a team was despatched to kill both Dr Maxwell and Mr Markham. The attempt failed and, as you now know, Insight have been dismantled. That is all in the hands of the Time Police. Their investigation will cover the entire timeline

and is expected to take some time. It is unlikely anyone will escape their net. St Mary's involvement, however, is at an end and we are able to move on.

'A new medical doctor has been recruited. Dr Rosemary Salt. Please allow me to reassure you that even more rigorous than usual background checks have been carried out. Dr Salt will take up her new position next week. Please use your best endeavours to remain injury-free until then.'

He looked around as if inviting comment but there was none.

'Very well. Moving on.

'As some of you may know, after extensive discussions, Dr Maxwell will be returning to the fold in six weeks' time. She will take up the position of Chief Operations Officer.'

I looked across at Kalinda who mouthed 'CHOPS' at me and mimed a belly laugh.

'Mr Sands remains Head of the History Department and will become her deputy.' He paused again. One or two people were looking very apprehensive indeed. I couldn't think why until he said blandly, 'And Miss Lee will return to her position as PA to Dr Maxwell.'

What? The old bugger – he hadn't mentioned that.

'Are there any questions?'

There never were.

'In that case – Chief Farrell, I shall require a breakdown of our pod status, together with your maintenance schedule, sometime today, please.

'Mr Dieter, an inventory of all plant and equipment is to be on my desk by Thursday, please.

'Mr Markham – a survey and report on both Internal and Operational Security, together with your recommendations, by the end of the week, please.'

He paused. 'I know things have been a little haphazard recently, but St Mary's is to be up and fully functioning by next Monday. It's been a refreshing interlude but it's time to pick up the reins again. Dismissed.'

Dr Rosemary Salt was not what anyone was expecting. She was very short, very dark, had hair like an explosion in a sheep factory, and all the attitude of a more-belligerent-than-normal aurochs burdened with toothache and a bad hangover.

She wanted to see everyone for an initial consultation. Yes, apparently that did mean me. Like everyone else, I approached my appointment with some trepidation, which was completely unallayed by the document she handed me – and everyone else – on entering her office.

To whom it may concern:

I am Dr Rosemary Salt.
I am not Nathaniel Stone.
Use the colour of my skin to differentiate between us.
Or, failing that, the two bumps in the front of my scrubs.
Men talk to them a lot.
No, I don't know why either.
I have more qualifications than anyone in this building, including historians.
I understand your last doctor was a bit of a bastard.
Sadly for you – so am I.

The ground rules:
You will, at all times, describe your symptoms and/or the circumstances of your injury accurately and truthfully.
You will not waste my time concocting unconvincing explanations for whatever stupid thing has led to you reporting to Sick Bay.
Lie to me and I will let you die.
You will comply fully with any and all instructions from any and all medical staff or we will let you die.

You will not argue with me. See my previous comment re qualifications. And the ones about letting you die.
In return, I and my team will do everything in our power to save your lives and heal your wounds.

Sign here to confirm you have read and, more importantly, understood these instructions.
Should it be required, another version is available in crayon.

Signed:

PS: Do not bother with any jokes concerning wounds and the rubbing of Salt therein. You are unlikely to break new ground.

Hunter and Fortunata thought she was wonderful.
She frightened the living daylights out of the rest of us.

I took the six weeks' leave, using the time to move back to the cottage.

Leon and I loved living there and now that it looked like becoming our permanent home, we began to make some improvements. I worked on turning the area outside the back door into a proper courtyard garden, stuffing it with pots and tubs overflowing with colour. Leon started to build a bridge over the stream, using anyone foolish enough to visit as unpaid bridge-building apprentices.

Matthew, meanwhile, had departed to the Time Police and his new studies.

The newly promoted Major Ellis came to pick him up – the Time Police obviously didn't want anyone from St Mary's back in their building. I walked around Ellis several times, admiring his new shoulder flashes until he told me to bugger off before he found something in my extensive files to arrest me for.

Everyone trailed out of the front door to say goodbye. There was a good ten minutes of hugging, cheering, waving and so forth. One or two unkind people made jokes at Time Police expense. I might have been one of them.

In among the general hubbub, I took Matthew aside.

'You're still all right with this?'

'Yeah.'

'We'll all be here when you get back.'

'In six weeks, Mum – half-term.'

'Take care. Love you.'

I wasn't going to hug him because we were in public, but he held out his arms to me. One hefty hug later, he stepped inside their pod. Then one last

excited grin, a final wave and he was gone.

'He'll be back before you know it,' said Leon, rubbing my shoulder.

And finally, I went back to work.

I breezed up the stairs and was met by Rosie Lee, standing on the gallery clutching the traditional box of possessions common to those moving to a new office. Including the artificial plant she had managed to kill. It had probably looked at her wrong and was paying the price. We were both regarding each other with massive unenthusiasm, shot through with silent protest and top notes of hostility, when Mrs Partridge turned up, all ready to escort us to our new office. Something befitting my enhanced status, apparently. I'd already had Peterson whinging away because he thought mine was bigger than his. He's a bloke. Size matters, apparently.

'Just along here,' said Mrs Partridge, shunting us further around the gallery and in through a door.

I looked around. Actually, this was very nice. One of the big rooms at the front of the building with two windows and lovely views over the South Lawn to the lake. Distressingly close to Dr Bairstow, of course, but he'd never hear a thing if he was wise enough to keep his door closed.

Rosie Lee looked around. 'And where am I supposed to sit?'

I invoked a premature New Year's resolution and did not kill her.

'There's a nice alcove over there. Plenty big enough for your desk and the tea-making gear, and far enough away for you to pretend you can't hear me when I want you to actually . . . you know . . . work.'

'That's not an alcove – it's just a bloody indentation in the wall. I'll never fit all my stuff in there.'

I was placating. God knows why. 'It will be your very own space.'

'I *had* my own space.'

Placating flew out of the window. 'No, you didn't. That was *my* office.'

'All you ever did was sit in front of the window and drink tea. Everyone knew it was my office really, and now not only have you piled all this extra

work on to me, but you expect me to work in some sort of cranny.'

'You never worked before – I don't see why you think you're starting now.'

'Look at all these extra files you've lumbered me with. What am I supposed to do with those?'

'Going by past experience – sweet Fanny Adams.'

We glared at each other.

'That's all settled, then,' said Mrs Partridge calmly. 'I'll ask Mr Strong to assist you with moving your desks and filing cabinets and so forth.'

'If you're unhappy,' said Peterson, appearing at the door and possibly with his own agenda regarding this office, 'can I suggest you complain to the union and . . .'

'The union,' uttered Rosie Lee, eyes blazing with contempt.

Peterson took a wise step backwards.

'That bunch of useless, ineffectual, feeble, toothless fu—'

It seemed likely that at some point in her life, the union had failed to live up to expectation.

'Yes, indeed,' I said, stirring the pot, because you should always start as you mean to go on. 'Never trust an organisation whose first move is to assemble all parties for a session of constructive debate aimed at identifying a solution that satisfies everyone and can be utilised as a platform for future negotiations. Utter bastards.'

'Too bloody right,' she said.

'Big bunch of wusses,' I said. 'Put the kettle on, Miss Lee, and I'll find the biscuits.'

'I've already found the biscuits. You put the kettle on. Can we help you at all, Dr Peterson?'

We spent the rest of the day arguing over territorial rights and what would go where until Leon came to pick me up and we drove back to our cottage.

Our empty cottage.

Because Anastasia wasn't with us any longer.

She had settled well, spending her days at St Mary's, where, between them, Professor Penrose and Dr Dowson had instituted a gentle regime designed to get her used to her new life and times. And it wasn't all books – she liked animals, too, so Mr Strong gave her Ramses to look after. Every day she groomed him, cleaned his little hooves and took him for a walk around the grounds. Our two Time Criminals, as Markham called them.

I wasn't entirely happy about this. Physically she was small and frail and I could easily see her being kicked, trampled, eaten . . . until I walked into the stables one morning and Turk was inside for some reason. Mr Strong had tied him up at the entrance and she had to get past him to reach Ramses. I opened my mouth to warn her to keep her distance because he could be nasty, when she slapped his great bony rump and shouted, 'Move over, you big brown bastard.'

And he did.

He shunted his backside out of the way and let her get past. I remembered that time when, as a trainee, I'd spent nearly thirty minutes pinned to the side of his box until Grant and Sussman came to rescue me – which they did as soon as they'd stopped laughing. I glared at him as I passed and he bared big yellow teeth at me.

Anastasia's favourite place was R&D. She spent a lot of time in there, getting up to heaven knows what with Auntie Lingoss. And she liked Peterson, as well. I often saw her trotting along by his side, bombarding him with questions. I didn't think anything of it – he was good-natured and easy-going and everyone liked him, so why wouldn't she?

And then, one day, he came to talk to me.

He got rid of Rosie Lee by simply holding open the door and telling her she could finish early.

I rather enjoyed her struggle. Yes, she wanted to finish early – she always did – but she also wanted to know why he was here. The struggle lasted longer than I thought it would but finishing early eventually won the day. Grabbing her bag, she disappeared.

Peterson put up the red light outside, signifying we weren't to be disturbed, and came to sit down, staring at me over the desk. I stared back, my conscience comparatively clean. I hadn't been in post long enough to have majorly screwed up. Yet.

'Max, are you happy?'

Whatever I'd been expecting, it wasn't that. I blinked. 'Yes, of course I am. This is my happy ending. Why would you ask? Oh my God, am I ill? I'm dying, aren't I, and they've sent you along to tell me.'

'No, of course you're not dying. Well, no more than anyone else.'

'What, then?'

'I want to ask you something which could change your life. Please don't be offended or upset. If you say no, I promise that will be the end of the matter.'

I stared at him. What the hell was he going to say?

'The thing is, Max . . . the thing is . . . we've been spending a lot of time with Helen. Anastasia. Well, she's been spending a lot of time with us.'

'Is she being a nuisance?' I said. 'I'll have a quiet word if you like.'

'No, no. Far from it. The thing is, Max . . . Just after you left last year, Dr Stone told us – Felix and me . . . We'd been trying for some time and nothing was happening . . . There were some tests and . . . Well, it's just not going to happen.'

He ground to a halt, staring at the floor.

I said softly, 'Oh, Tim . . . I'm so sorry.'

'Yes. Well. You know.'

'Have you had a second opinion?' I said. 'I'm not sure I'd believe everything Stone said. Not after recent events.'

'Confirmed by Dr Salt and I do believe her. I have to ask – does she terrify you?'

'Oh God, yes. She was banging on about my bowels the other day and I told her not to worry because they opened every time she came near me. I don't think she saw the joke.'

‘No. Anyway,’ he said, still staring at the floor. ‘We’ve grown to be very fond of her.’

‘Dr Salt?’

‘God, no – concentrate, Max. *Helen*. And we think she quite likes us.’ He played with a pen on my desk. ‘I don’t know what your plans are – for Helen, I mean, but . . .’ He put the pen down and looked at me. ‘We wondered whether it would be possible for us to take her on. Perhaps for a little while – to see if everything worked out – and then maybe a more permanent arrangement. But, of course, if you and Leon . . .’ He made a gesture and resumed staring at the floor.

I didn’t know what to say. I had to say something. The longer the silence lasted . . .

‘Tim, I’m going to ask you something and I don’t want *you* to be upset or offended.’

‘All right.’

‘This isn’t just because she’s named Helen, is it? She would be Helen Peterson.’

‘No, I promise you it’s not. Honestly. Actually, it’s a little bit painful, but that’s the name she’s chosen and I’ll get used to it. As will you.’

I wondered if he knew she’d talked to the cigarette lady. Change the subject, Maxwell.

‘Does Lingoss know you’re here?’

‘Oh yes. She’d be here too but she’s too nervous, so she’s taken Helen and Eddie to work on the Roman turtle experiment. Max, if you can’t bear to part with Helen . . . if she’s part of your life now . . . We understand completely. It just occurred to us that the longer we left it, the more difficult it might be, but I think she really likes being with us and we talked about it – Felix and I, I mean – and if it’s possible, we’d like to consider adopting her.’

In times of crisis – make the tea. I got up and switched on the kettle. It switched itself off because there was no water in it – thank you, Miss Lee –

so I came to sit back down again.

How did I feel about this? I'd noticed how much time she was spending with them but it hadn't really registered. Had Leon noticed? How would he feel about it?

'I have to talk to Leon.'

'Of course.'

'I don't know what he'll say.'

'Neither do I.'

'Although I suppose what we want isn't really important, is it? It's what Anast— Helen wants and what's best for her.'

'Max, please – Felix and I – you're brilliant parents, you and Leon. The challenges you've overcome with Matthew – there's no way Felix and I could do such an amazing job, and you might feel she should stay with you because of that and we would understand, I promise you, but we would very much like . . .'

He stopped and stared at the floor some more. 'I'm making a really bad job of this, aren't I?' He forced a laugh. 'Good thing you know me well.'

I smiled. 'We've been together a long time.'

'Since your first assignment.'

'You peed on me.'

'Actually, I think I've peed on you several times over the years.'

'That's very true, but you never forget your first.'

He flashed me a sad smile. 'What a long time ago that seems. We were different people then. Did you ever imagine our lives would turn out like this?'

'Actually, I never expected to survive past my third assignment.'

'None of us expected you to survive past your third assignment.'

Silence fell. Eventually, I said, 'I'll speak to Leon. Can you give me a couple of days?'

'Of course,' Tim said, getting up to go. 'Please take as long as you want.' He paused awkwardly. 'I should have made a better job of this, but thanks

for listening.'

I did talk to Leon. And we both sought advice. I talked to Dr Salt – who was surprisingly helpful. Dr Bairstow talked to Leon, offering himself as a sounding board.

And then, in the presence of all four of us – me and Leon, Tim and Lingoss – we put the idea to Helen (as I must remember to call her) and she startled us all by bursting into tears.

Shit. I looked at Leon who looked at me.

'Hey,' I said, groping for a tissue. 'If you don't want to do this, that's fine. No one's going to force you to do anything. Are we?' I appealed to Lingoss because I couldn't look at Tim.

'Of course not,' she said, and her voice was perfectly normal. I don't know what the effort must have cost her. 'We'll just go back to the way things were. I hope you'll still want to help with the turtle thing.'

Helen blew her nose. 'No, it's . . .' She looked at me. 'I didn't want to hurt your feelings. You and Uncle Leon.'

'Sweetheart,' he said, because I couldn't speak. 'That's not important. It's what you want. Now – everyone tells the truth in this family, you know that. Would you like to live with Uncle Peterson and Auntie Lingoss?'

She hung her head. 'Yes. Yes, I would. Do you mind?'

'A little bit,' I said, because we would and I didn't want her to think we wanted to be rid of her. 'We'll miss you a lot. But we'll see you every day and I hope you'll come and visit us at the cottage when you can.'

She nodded and blew her nose again. Hard.

I braced myself for *Where does phlegm come from? Why is there a 'g' in phlegm? And a 'ph'? Is it because of Flemish people? Would they be upset if people called it 'flem' with an 'f'?*

And so Anastasia Koslova became Helen Peterson.

EPILOGUE

Life moves on. For everyone. Some good, a surprisingly small amount of bad, and, of course, masses of History.

Nearly two years had passed. For me and Leon, it was as if the universe finally expended a little effort in ensuring, if not a happy ending, then at least a happy breathing space. We were content in our lives. Leon finished building his bridge over the stream and we had a formal opening ceremony with a couple of bottles of cider. We both sang 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' and one of us might have fallen over.

One autumn I painted the best thing I'd ever done. A whole explosion of reds and golds with a tiny touch of brilliant green in the foreground for contrast and Dr Bairstow – invited to Sunday lunch with Mrs Brown – bought it on the spot. I'd have given it to him, but Leon donned his business-manager hat and the two of them haggled amicably over the roast beef I had not been allowed to cook. Dr Bairstow hung the painting in his office and I stare at it every time I'm being bollocked for whatever thing has gone wrong now.

Matthew did well with the Time Police. We saw him quite often and he would talk for hours about the Time Map. Well, no, not hours, obviously, because this was Matthew, but trust me, if you ever find yourself opposite *anyone* talking about the Time Map, it will seem like hours. Days, even.

Young Helen blossomed in the care of Peterson and Lingoss. Flora grew and thrived. As Peterson said, she'd obviously taken one look at her parents and come to the conclusion that survival would depend on her being the sensible one of the family. I couldn't help but grin watching Markham with her – she could do no wrong in his eyes. On the rare occasions she did and Markham had to morph into stern-parent mode, she would fix him with huge, tearful eyes and say, 'No, Daddy, no,' and that was pretty much the

end of the matter for him.

I took things quietly – for me, anyway – and my time lag did slowly subside. With the aid of Treadwell's medication, which, astonishingly, turned out to be perfectly legitimate, and very cautiously at first, I began to jump again.

I started with our illegal Christmas jump – although now we were all senior officers it wasn't actually that illegal, but we liked to think it was. And, after that, I was able to participate in one or two other jumps that particularly interested me. And, without telling a soul, Markham and I took a quick trip back to Clerk and Prentiss to reassure them without giving too much away. Slowly, things returned to near normal, which was just as well since we had a very crowded schedule. I was careful not to push it, though.

A combination of Mrs Brown's influence and Jack Daniels' report meant Thirsk and London left us alone to get on with things and, possibly because of that, we clocked up a number of spectacular successes which kept Kal happy, and if she was happy then so were we. One day I will recount the story of the last days of Carthage, or how Doggerland sank beneath the waves. Or how Sykes faced down Sawney Bean. Even the afternoon I spent in Leonardo's workroom. Everything I touched was golden.

The status of Dr Bairstow and Mrs Brown's personal relationship continued to be the focus of much speculation. A number of bets were laid, although how anyone will produce enough proof to enable them to collect their winnings is a bit of a mystery.

One night, down at the Falconburg Arms, Elspeth and Ian were burgled. They awoke to the sound of an intruder. Ian told Elspeth to stay put and she ignored him obviously, following him downstairs armed with a snatched-up umbrella.

They discovered a very young and inept burglar trying to rifle an empty till. Ian spent the night talking to him and – long story short – was approached shortly afterwards by an organisation whose aim was to prevent young boys crossing that fine line between high spirits and criminal

behaviour. Three or four young men now owe the non-existence of a criminal record to Ian Guthrie. Although, as he said, after Markham, everyone else was easy.

Tim assumed more responsibility at St Mary's while Dr Bairstow fought our corner in London or Thirsk. Lingoss more or less ran R&D – thus preventing further damage to the fabric of the building. Well, mostly. One of Mr Strong's potting sheds suffered a direct hit from an oversized and under-designed arbalest. A bit of a disaster, but as Professor Rapson pointed out, no one had been in the shed so no harm was done, and it was the old question of torque versus tension again, but he did think he knew where they'd gone wrong this time.

With all the new people coming in, accommodation became an issue and others were offered the option to live out. Van Owen – who had started to smile again – and Polly Perkins rented a cottage together in the village. Their relationship was gentle and unspectacular and, I rather thought, full of a quiet contentment.

Evans remained at St Mary's. His promotion helped reconcile him to not following Lady Amelia. And because they were both aware of the value of remaining friends and not spoiling what had gone before, their parting was both affectionate and amicable. And, I suspected, a little sad. He cheered up when all the new St Mary's people started arriving, and despite everything everyone said to the contrary, he was convinced one of the new trainees had smiled at him.

'She was smiling at me, dummy,' said Cox. 'I was standing behind you.'

Evans looked down at him. 'She wouldn't even have seen you if I was close by.'

Cox huffed indignantly. 'You're not that big.'

'I meant she'd be dazzled by my very presence. She doesn't even know you exist.'

There followed vigorous discussion and a chair was broken. Other than similar minor disagreements, though, the prevailing atmosphere at St

Mary's was one of peace and harmony.

Seems almost too good to be true, doesn't it?

I said so to Leon one night in our cottage as we listened to the rain hammering down outside and we were snug and warm inside, sitting by the fire watching the flames dance and drinking wine.

Matthew was home for Christmas. His next term with the Time Police would be his last. He would return to take his exams in the summer, but then what? Leon and I had been gently enquiring as to his plans for the future but Matthew was being irritatingly vague. Anyway, at present he was upstairs doing the things teenage boys do in their bedrooms. Leon had warned me always to knock before entering.

'All this,' I said, gesturing around. 'Our lives. Everyone's lives. Everything's going so well. It just seems too good to be true.'

Leon smiled. 'I rather think it's because the previous chapter of our lives has come to an end. I suspect this is the moment we hand over the baton to the next generation, don't you? From now on we stand back, dispensing comfort and sage advice while all the young people rush off and enjoy excitement and adventure.'

'Yes,' I said, snuggling closer. 'Although I was rather hoping for a bit of excitement and adventure tonight.'

He dropped a kiss on top of my head. 'And you shall have it. Twice if my back holds out.'

I laughed. 'Sounds good though, doesn't it?'

'What does?'

'And they lived happily ever after.'

'Until the end of their days.'

'The end of their long, happy and peaceful days.'

'When nothing bad ever happened to them again.'

'Day after day of peace and quiet.'

Matthew stuck his head around the door. 'Have you got a minute?'

'Which of us did you want?' I said, sitting up and reaching for my wine.

‘Both of you, actually.’

‘Well, here we are,’ said Leon. ‘Are you coming in or are you going to peer around the door all night?’

Matthew closed the door behind him and perched, somewhat nervously, on the arm of the sofa.

‘The thing is . . .’ He stopped. ‘You have to promise me you won’t be cross.’

‘I’m too old to be cross,’ said Leon.

‘And I’m too drunk,’ I said, completely forgetting to set a good example to my offspring.

‘Oh, that’s good,’ he said.

Silence fell.

‘Yes?’ prompted Leon.

‘Yes. Well. The thing is . . . Mum . . . Dad . . .’

He stopped again.

‘You need to get a move on, son,’ said Leon. ‘Remember I’m ancient and your mother’s ancient *and* inebriated. You have a very narrow window of opportunity here.’

‘And besides,’ I said, ‘we’re just off to bed to spend a while contemplating our peaceful and problem-free future.’

‘Oh. Well, I don’t know what you’re going to say. Well, I do, but hear me out first.’

‘Chance would be a fine thing,’ I said, knocking back the last of my wine. Not my best move ever because that meant I had a mouthful of really good wine when he finally came out with it.

‘Mum, Dad – I want to join the Time Police.’

NOT THE END

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