

CONEXUS: CRIME FICTION AND THE STATE OF THE NATION

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ABSTRACT

Conexus: Crime Fiction and the State of the Nation consists of two parts.

The first section is the novel, *Conexus*, which is a practice-based exploration and illustration of crime fiction as state-of-the-nation social commentary. The second is a critical discussion of the requirements of a state-of-the-nation novel that reflects the contemporary, globalised world, and how crime fiction contends with these needs.

Conexus follows a range of characters in parallel threads that converge onto a single physical location in Gloucestershire. Ainsley Griffin, a technology journalist, his partner, Chelsey, his grandson, Sundance, and a range of other characters gradually become aware of each other through their use of IT as they investigate a series of undiscovered murders that began with a sophisticated network of paedophiles in the 1990s. The murderer chooses each new victim through the random last act of communication of the last victim, and controls their lives through surveillance hacking before murdering them.

The critical underpinning of the thesis discusses the concepts, theories and controversies surrounding the concept of a nation (for example, following the legacy of Gellner's work, Hroch, and the explorations of Bhabha), emphasising the importance of state control through jurisprudence, of communication technology, and of physical locations and boundaries over the past two hundred years. The relative importance and impact of these concepts is seen to have changed dramatically with the rapid explosion of information technology in the twenty-first-century, requiring a very different approach to literary explorations of a nation. A number of crime novels from the past 25 years are analysed in conjunction with *Conexus*. The locations and boundaries are discussed with reference to the uncanny implications of the physical as discussed by Freud. Approaches to the incorporation of information technology into crime fiction are explored, and the success of this integration is compared to other literary works. In summary, the suitability of the crime novel as portrayal and summary of the culturally and socially significant trends of the time is assessed.

Keywords: Crime fiction, state-of-the-nation, Information Technology, IT, communication, localisation, boundaries, jurisprudence, social commentary, Val McDermid, Mark Billingham, Stav Sherez, Matthew Blakstad, William Hertling, Jeffrey Deaver

Author Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed Date8th July 2019.....

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Harriet, you are in this novel. You picked me up when I was down. I know I'm not beaten.

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Conexus

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#1 Killing Helen

June 1996. Father and his business acquaintances. The Tudor House, Gloucester. I am thirteen and Father says that I have lessons to learn which will be valuable when, as his only son, I take over his business. A dozen children, from six years old up to my own age, wait on the tables, kitted out in party outfits. The older girls have put on high heels and some of the boys wear make-up. I'm tall and I wear a suit, like Father's. I stand by the wall and watch and listen. Replete, drunken men take kids into private rooms. Father gets angry if the kids drink, but they struggle less that way so the men take drink in with them. I stand at an open door and watch as a man called Raymond undresses a girl flushed with her first glass of wine. She sucks his cock until he's erect, his hands in her hair, and then he bends her over and she cries while he fucks her. He turns and watches me watching him and smiles. I get hard. Afterwards he gives her a fortune: two five pound notes, and one for me.

November 1996. My second party at the Tudor House. Many of the men and some of the kids are the same. I help with serving food and then Raymond and Father take me to a room and I perform, the same way I remember the girl performing. I suck Raymond until he comes into my mouth. Father holds my mouth closed until I swallow. They bend me over the bed and strip down my trousers and pants and Raymond holds me down while Father takes me. I cry a little, like she did. He tells me that I have been buggered and never to let it happen again without my consent. My old lesson was to do what Father says. This is my new lesson.

December 1996. I serve food with a new girl called Hope. She is twelve and she is nervous. She says she's never been a waitress before. I smile and tell her she'll get paid good money. When Father asks me to choose—one of the girls or one of the boys—I choose Hope so she will get her ten pounds. When my turn comes Hope kicks and slaps at me, so Father and Uncle Alex hold her down. I don't make her suck me, because I don't want to delay. I want to fuck her. I can tell that she knows and that she doesn't blame me and I want her not to fight because I don't want Father and Uncle Alex to hurt her. When they pull her legs apart and I push inside she bleeds and I come, faster and harder than I ever came lying on my bed at home. Afterwards, they laugh at me for coming so quickly and Father makes me suck Uncle Alex. I swallow without being asked.

March 1997. It's my birthday and Father tells me he has another party and this time he asks me if I want to come. Secretly I want Hope again. He says I have choices now. Hope isn't there and Father seems angry with me for asking for her. He picks a girl called Helen for me but she's too young and I don't really want her. I tell Father and Uncle Alex and Raymond and everyone to stay outside and I drag her into the room and close the door. She tries to fight me away until I take out my birthday knife and then she pees on the floor. I hold the knife at her throat and make her suck me through the tears, but she doesn't really know what she's doing. When I'm ready I want to see blood again, like with Hope, and I push the knife into her neck as deep as I can and I come and I come. When I open the door Raymond is waiting. He probably wants his turn but when he sees the girl he shouts, and calls for Father, and drags me over to the bed with him. The sheets are soaked with blood. Raymond is whispering 'God help us' over and over and he takes her hand and I see her lips move.

Then Father pushes past and Uncle Alex takes me out of the room. I hear Father say that he'll make arrangements. I'm angry that I didn't hear what she said to Raymond.

Zero

It was the most beautiful vale in England according to the guidebooks. Tanya had been seduced by this small clearing with its musical brook, lush meadow-grass, bracken, bluebells, and wild garlic. Now, peering out of her tent into the low evening sun, she felt that she deserved her punishment for her part in making it ugly. Makeshift constructions of wood and blankets nestled in among the birch, the oak, and the rowan. Across the clearing, she could hear chatter from one of the home-made tents; Phil and the others were smoking weed and playing poker. She slipped out, crept round to the back, and crouched behind the rhododendron bushes. From there she knew she could make it to the thicker woods.

By the smouldering campfire was a jerry can of petrol and a heap of protest banners: 'Don't Pave Paradise', 'No Arcades in Arcadia', 'Bypass the Bypass', 'Say No to Norman'. This last referred to Norman Castle, MP and owner of Severn Vale. He was using his influence to push through plans to drive a by-pass through the vale and build a mall, here in these amazing woods, serving the urban sprawl of the Cheltenham-Gloucester conurbation down below.

She put her hand against the smooth bark of a silver birch. Castle's men had roughed up some early arrivals, before the police had given Castle a friendly warning. After that they'd bribed, picking people off, threatening them then giving them cash 'for a train ticket' until there were only a handful left. They'd lost and it was time to go.

She no longer believed in the decaying camp. In the camp, Phil had become more violent and abusive with drink and drugs. From outside, anonymous, hate-filled texts and emails poured into her phone every day. Whoever sent them, they'd won. Facebook, Twitter, texting, sexting, emails. She'd got the first on the day they'd arrived. Faintly abusive but playful, taunting her for joining the camp. A few days later, another, and then another and another, escalating. Nearly two months later and she received two or three an hour.

She'd given up blocking because whoever it was seemed to have an endless stream of identities. The messages were graphic descriptions of how she and her friends would be violated, raped, tortured. Sometimes the writer would include things he couldn't know: things about her childhood, her friends, her possessions; as if he could read her mind. She'd wondered whether her lowlife brother and his mates had anything to do with it.

She picked her way through the bracken in the rough direction of the road. The only sound was birdsong—blackbirds, finches, the rattling of a woodpecker somewhere close by and the shrill piping of a nuthatch; no suggestion of anyone following. She breathed more easily. From here she could see the big house. She didn't care if they saw her now. If she cut across towards it then she could scramble through the hedge to the road.

Her phone buzzed. If she didn't open these messages, they sat on her phone eating away at her. It was too humiliating to show them to anyone, and in any case once she'd read them they disappeared, untraceable, until she wondered if she was imagining them—until the next one arrived. Now she

stabbed them open with bitten fingernails as soon as she could, almost anticipating them, to make them go away.

The track on Tanya Wilson's phone showed him she was on the move. He'd been expecting it—had timed the messages to reach a climax in the afternoon so she'd break to his timescale.

From his vantage point in the midst of the lime trees he could see her now. She had slowed down, and found a path parallel to the road. Looking for a way through the thick hedging and barbed fence. She stopped and took out her phone. He slipped the large duffel bag off his shoulder, dropped it beside him and took out his tablet. Touching the tracker app opened a screen and the number she was dialling lit up. It was the number he'd hoped. Some things have to be left to chance.

She crouched down. His system would pick up the phone conversation and transcribe it onto his screen. He'd been training it to Tanya's voice for weeks now. A slight delay and the words started to fill his screen.

* Emily? It's Tanya.

* Tanya. Are you okay. - you need help.

* Im leaving the camp Emily. On my ow- m on my way to the car now. Can we meet.

* Are you safe. Can you make it to Ch-t-n-am. The Region Arcade. Under the Wish- Fish Clock.

The voice recognition was struggling with the unknown voice, leaving small gaps, but it was clear enough for him to follow.

* Regent Arcade. Fish Clock.

* Wishing Fish Clock. You cant miss it. Its all stars and Eeth Robinson. It's broken.

Once he'd done with Tanya, Emily would make a perfect target.

* I'll find it. About an hour, okay.

* Be careful, Tanya.

* Emily. I'm pregnant.

He smiled. Emily was the first person she'd told. He'd have known if she'd told anyone else. Of course, he'd known for weeks. There was a short hesitation.

* You want me to come and meet you.

* No. I'm fine. Regent Arcade. Wishing Fish Clock. Got it.

The birds were quiet. It was colder but the sun was still shining through, over by the road.

He stepped out in front of her as she stood up. Saw the recognition in her face. He was well-known, even liked, he thought, in the camp. A big, lumbering, smiling man who calmed things down when people got heated. So *understanding*. Calm, calm. But he did get excited—on the inside he did—and he was excited right now, *charged* with anticipation.

She gave a small, tight smile. 'I'm leaving.' She held up her car keys. 'No need to throw me out, I'm going.'

He stepped forwards and held is hand out. 'Give me your phone.'

The phone was still in her hand and she clutched it to her breast.

'Never mind, Tanya.' He spoke reassuringly.

The use of her name stopped her in her tracks while he fished in his bag for the baton. He pushed it out towards her, into her stomach, pressing her back

forcefully so she didn't have time to react, until her back came up against an oak. He pressed the button and the sound of electricity arcing spat out. He relished the surprise on her face, and the gasping for breath, and her whole body stiffened, as if in orgasm, and she went up onto her toes before crumbling, beautifully down to the floor.

He checked her pulse, at her throat, and then lifted her eyelids. Alive, unconscious. He took the syringe out of the bag and pressed it into her forearm. She'd stay under for an hour or two this way. He unzipped the length of the duffel bag and doubled her over, face flat against her knees, into it. A perfect fit. He knew all about Tanya Wilson, from her Netflix favourites to her waist size.

He zipped up the bag and shouldered it—fifty-two kilos, the size of a fallow deer—and set off on his practiced route to the cottage.

1

Ainsley Griffin's wristwatch alarm pulsed him awake at 5 a.m. The cold had kept him up for most of the night. It felt like winter was coming early.

The kettle was on before he remembered what day it was. Friday, 27th October. Last day in London. He drank the thick, black coffee and mopped up the bitter taste with the last slices of dry bread. His second-line-of-defence clock alarm went off back in the bedroom. He grabbed it and aimed to throw it into the open bag, and then changed his aim and tossed it into the bin instead. He wouldn't be a slave to time anymore.

He was living out of one bag now, half-full of essentials at the foot of the bed. The last thing to carefully pack away—the only thing that really mattered to him—was his network: router, two desktops with three screens between them, two laptops, printer, Raspberry Pi, and a toolkit of gadgets, which wouldn't have looked out of place in a hacker's workshop.

In the corner his main desktop was running, speakers muted. One screen showed games and tournament results from the latest World Youth Chess Championships—a prelude to the proper World Championship match starting in London in just a fortnight. He glanced across the games, and noted three of theoretical interest to look at later. The other screen streamed news channels; all he needed to get the gist of the breaking news was glances at the ticker tape and channel-hops between BBC and Sky News. Slightly more up to date was the Twitter feed. Sifting out the celebrity and pop stuff, there was a good selection of potential stories, old and new.

#Cropper verdict

#MissingMia

#Alternativefacts

#Sheepcircles

#Electrochallenge

Nothing that interested him professionally.

He mulled the trends over while he shaved in cold water (gas cut off a day early), and dabbed cream onto bloody cuts, waiting five minutes for the blood to congeal before putting on a white shirt and pale lemon tie.

He'd made a good living writing articles for major newspapers and magazines, and more recently for top-rated websites, on the cutting edge of science and technology in society. He tried to get the science right. Some editors had accused him of playing up the social impact but he'd been proved right many times: from antibiotic resistance, through big data, crowd funding, and drones, to zero-point quantum computing (something that was gathering pace even faster than he'd predicted, but hadn't hit the mainstream yet).

Cropper, Mia, Alternative facts, Sheep circles, and yet another viral challenge.

Almost everything in the list was something he'd weighed up and considered:

Cropper was an MP who had beaten his wife over the head with a tyre iron, stabbed her eight times, and then tried to use the Pistorius defence—he'd believed she was an intruder.

Mia was new—a nine-year-old girl disappeared from her own bedroom in Sunderland at 4 p.m. the previous day. Nothing for him there.

Alternative facts had been interesting when Trump first hit the political scene. Ainsley had written something about the memes that it generated and the danger to democracy that they created. He felt that he'd been right again.

Sheep circles were aerial photographs of sheep in weird positions. It just showed what statistics and random motion could generate.

Vladimir Putin had retweeted *#Electrochallenge* with a short video of him undergoing said challenge for charity.

By the time he started on his second coffee his cloud storage was synchronised and showing an alert. Someone had accessed it since last night. He stared at the screen and then at his hands, palms up, trying to make a conscious decision about what to do. He'd had to contend with hacking, and Trojans, and spam, and every other aspect of low-level cybercrime out there, but no-one had ever hacked his personal storage before. In his business, everything had to be state of the art. He was a natural target, if only for the kudos a hacker would gain from infiltrating his systems. He tried to think through consequences.

If someone had full access to his cloud storage, but had made no attempt to keep it hidden from him, then they'd either have destroyed everything or laid a trap. Fingers fumbling, he set up his toolkit laptop and ran two pieces of software—one to check for malware of any kind, and the other to look for differences between last night's status and this mornings.

After an anxious ten minutes, both had completed. No known viruses, and only a few extra kilobytes of data added. His software had isolated the extra file and confirmed that it was just text.

In his bedroom, surrounded by comforting hardware, he clicked through into his files, ordered by date. Everything looked normal except that, at the top, was a pdf file simply titled *AinsleyGriffin.pdf*. He selected and opened it. Just three simple lines of text:

www.gorevid.hu

userid: AinsleyG

password: whitepebbles

Gorevid wasn't a site he knew, but 'gore' was a tag that told him what to expect. His business partner, Chelsey Bell, had written articles about it. If this had turned up in his in-box then he'd have deleted it and run a virus check, but someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make him take it seriously. To hack his personal storage and to send this by pdf, tailored to Ainsley was quite a feat.

He clicked the link and it opened to a video that showed grainy, unconvincing footage. Two figures in a windowless room, lit by spotlights that made the details even harder to see. One figure was a woman lying face up on a table, arms strapped so that her palms were face up on either side of her face. The other was a man, naked, who walked around the table as if sizing the woman up. There was no sound. He'd studied video footage before, analysing the ways in which people tried to add realism. There was something unselfconscious about this one. The man picked up a small object. When he leaned closer towards her it became clear that it was a syringe. He injected something into the woman's thigh. Her torso twisted, struggling, and then her body sagged back to the table. What followed, whether real or not, was enough to make him take it seriously. A large rod, at least as long as the people themselves, and narrow enough to fit comfortably into the man's hand, was

inserted between her legs and slowly pushed inside. Far too far inside, so that it was either a trick, or CGI, or a genuine snuff movie. He closed it down, his hand shaking, and picked up his phone.

‘Chelsey?’

Chelsey Bell wasn’t only his business partner, but also the closest person he had to a friend. He might even miss her. People in the media were ambitious. Most of them were cocky, sassy, smart-mouthed. A lot of them worked hard. Some were good at their jobs. Chelsey could mix with them in a way that he couldn’t, but she cared, too. She wasn’t out for a quick fix in the X-factor world. She respected people, and she earned respect. Maybe they’d work together remotely when he left, but she was young and he was out-to-pasture. She didn’t need an old, insecure father-figure cramping her style. She told him in one of her drunken night calls, that half the men she met, including some married and older than Ainsley, had asked her out on dates, but she’d turned them all down with the old ‘don’t mix work and pleasure’ cliché.

Her sleeping patterns were so random she could still be awake from last night, have got up an hour ago, or be expecting to sleep in until mid-afternoon. She answered quickly.

‘Geez, Ainsley, it’s five-fucking-thirty in the morning.’

He could tell from the tone of her high-energy New York accent that she was moaning because it was expected of her.

‘I’ve got something for you to check out.’

‘Something that couldn’t wait until a decent time of the day?’

‘Busy day.’

‘Yeah. Still. Wait I need to put something on.’ There was a short pause and the rustling of clothes. ‘Can’t believe you’re going.’

He didn’t want to talk about this. Not with her. ‘Only Gloucestershire. They even have email, I understand. Look, I need you to look at some weird shit, Chelsey.’ He realised he was still shaking and wondered whether he was having some sort of heart attack. A glance at his fitness tracker told him his heart rate was steady. ‘Really, really weird shit.’

‘You sound fucking freaked.’

He told her about the hack and the pdf and the video.

‘Fake, fake, fake. You know that.’

‘They hacked me.’

‘A script kiddie could hack you.’

He waited.

‘Okay, that’s not true.’ It was a standard insult. It’d take a lot more than readily available hacking tools to get into either of their systems. ‘Send it to my personal email, right?’ They each kept several email addresses, not all of them known to each other. ‘I’ll upload it to an isolated machine. And make sure you run another full check on your machine, idiot. I can’t believe you opened this thing.’

‘Okay, okay.’

‘A couple of hours and I’ll be down at *Gebaro*’s. Buy me a donut.’ She pronounced it the way that American’s spell it. ‘I’ll tell you what I’ve found, right?’

She disconnected.

For Ainsley one more night in the house was a night too many. The bare boards and emptiness made it even more of a reproach for a life spent alone. Forty-nine years old. Other men had families. Even time spent here with friends would have been something to remember fondly. Instead he'd embraced his loneliness. He'd worked. When he'd first moved to Neasden he'd joined local groups. He'd joined the local chess club, because he'd always played in clubs as a boy, and in tournaments at university, but the standard locally had been too low. He'd played correspondence chess, for a while, and more recently on the internet, consolidating his isolation. He'd tried a book club—but the only books he'd found interesting were science fiction and crime. He still went to pub quizzes occasionally, making a team of one. He knew Chelsey would have gone with him, but he'd have felt like a charity case. He wondered whether he could drive up to Gloucestershire tonight rather than wait for the morning. Perhaps they'd have a good chess club.

On the tube to see her, he ran through the article that he'd post today. He'd managed to wangle a visit to the National Cyber Crime Unit, and interviewed several middle ranking officers. It was the sort of thing he'd built his reputation on—Big Brother in your own home. How criminals, corporations, and Government could put Trojan code into your phones and laptops, and increasingly your smart home and kitchen gadgets, and watch your every move. Short of being alarmist, strong on facts, scary and threatening enough to frighten and thrill Middle England and maybe educate them into waking up to the perils of modern society.

Art Garfield, owner of *Slice* café, ex-horn player with *Myth and Meaning*, sat eating poached eggs on toast in the upstairs room. He liked to get in early and make his breakfast here, before Zoey, his only full-time staff, came in to serve, or Sundance opened up his business in the back. It gave him thinking time. He poked about at the runny eggs and pushed bits of toast into the yolks, humming and tapping out songs as he thought.

Income from the basic coffee and cake business was down and rates were up, but that was what you expected in austerity Britain, especially when your preferred market was the impecunious student and artist. But he still made a profit because whatever Sundance did in the back room brought him business, too.

Art had rented out the big upstairs room to Sundance's business at cheap rates, on the understanding that Sundance would help him turn Slice into a hub. He'd always wanted the place to have wifi and laptops on request but he'd never been able to make it a selling point until Sundance came along. Sundance gave advice on what to buy, how to set it up, how to market it to the customers, and even hosted the whole thing on these big servers in return for which he paid a negligible rent. He said he made the internet *personal* for the customers; which was ironic given that Sundance made a point of not divulging anything personal about himself. He'd put a Help-chat app on each laptop, and without ever leaving the back room, without ever actually meeting the customers, he solved their tech problems, and they came back for more coffee and cake afterwards.

Art wasn't really sure what Sundance's actual business was. Customers thought that somehow Slice was responsible for the tech help, and after a year

even Zoey had never met the man who rented the upstairs room. Not that she was the curious type. Art saw him every few days, and they never discussed Sundance's personal life. He had free access to all Slice's network, but then the servers belonged to him and the whole thing was designed and managed by him, so that seemed a small price to pay. Sundance had tried to explain to Art that access and data were currency these days. Art felt that the deal was so good he must be losing out somehow.

Today they were going to have to talk. A month ago a customer had been in asking questions about speed and reach and connectivity and a whole range of things that Art should have known because it was his system. Questions that Art had been unable to answer. And then this guy had sat in the corner, fingers flying over the keyboard, screen turned away and darkened if Art went anywhere near. The customer had been back a few times since, and Art was starting to worry. After all Government Communications Headquarters—Spy Central—was only a few miles away. If Sundance was straying into areas he shouldn't, then Art would get the blame. If a customer was using the system for criminal activities, then Art would get the blame. He'd read articles in the paper about cybercrime—hacking, piracy, identity theft, all sorts of fraud—and during these breakfast thinking times he had started to realise that Slice's servers and wifi were just *too* good. Over-specified. It had slowly dawned on him that there wasn't much difference between being a figurehead and being a scapegoat.

Chelsey Bell had been up half the night, listening to Alice Coltrane albums and trawling through websites that Ainsley would not have approved of, although he

surprised her sometimes with his dark-web savvy. They were both freelance, but the reality was that he had all the publishing contacts, and all her paid work came through him. On the other hand, to catch the best stories in the tech world you needed contacts deep in the web and that was where Chelsey excelled. She spent a lot of time leaving bait out there on the forums.

There were a lot of sites that she wouldn't go into, but she generally knew where they were and what they were from the shape and the traffic, and the gossip. Sites for organising vigilantes, sites for gore fans, hard-core porn, terrorist organisations, bestiality, and paedophile networks. No fetish or dark obsession uncatered for. Any interest, no matter how extreme, would find a community to share it with.

Last night she'd switched between Singles chatrooms, a room for future technology gurus (which was buzzing with gossip about what would be previewed at the next big Tech conference, in Hamburg, next month), and a couple of dark sites. Gore sites weren't illegal in most countries, although some of the content was borderline. They traded in member-shared content that showed real-life horror, the more graphic the better, from drug-related executions to fatal traffic accidents. Legal or not she switched to one of her anonymous browsers, TOR, or Tails, or I2P, when she went exploring. Every choice in the dark web was an opportunity for someone to pick up personal information and use it against you.

She'd spend as much of the day as she could working from home, which meant she could leave questions and ideas out there, but still take naps if she wanted. She had one two-year old laptop in the corner, which she kept isolated from the net. The only secure computer is a disconnected computer. It was the

oldest piece of tech that she had, but up-to-date enough to deal with new software and processes.

When Ainsley called she'd only been asleep for an hour. Used to all-nighters she decided to get up. She was dressed and ready to go by six, slung the old laptop over her shoulder and headed for *Gebaro's*, her local café.

She often breakfasted here. The owner, Toni Gebaro, lived above the café and kept hours as irregular as Chelsey's. If you texted her from the door she promised to be down in five minutes and open up. Chelsey was pleased to find someone else already there so she wouldn't have all Toni's attention to herself.

Toni was in her late twenties, slim, dark-haired, and put off men with a feigned business-like indifference. Chelsey had spent many midnight hours drinking coffee and facing male-dominated London with her, and she knew that beneath the professional demeanour was a passionate and ambitious woman. They flirted, too, but Chelsey didn't like to lead her on too much. Today Toni wore harlequin trousers with a white shirt designed to look as though someone had poured pots of primary coloured paint all over it.

'Hey, Chels. How's my favourite genius?'

'Too early in the morning for that.' She covered her eyes. 'Too early for those clothes, too. You joining the circus?'

'Hey that's what love-struck girls do when they get rejected, innit? So what d'ya want? Americano and croissant?'

'I'll feel better when I've got something inside me. And don't take that the wrong way. I'll have a mocha and fried bread with tomatoes. And ketchup.'

'God knows how you keep that figure. 5 minutes.'

Chelsey settled down with the laptop facing the wall. From what Ainsley had said she didn't want anyone seeing this video inadvertently. *Gebaro's* wifi wasn't nearly as fast as her own, but she'd rather use a public system and not leave too obvious a trail, or risk spreading anything onto her own system. She downloaded Ainsley's email, set up some diagnostics to see whether she could trace the original, and then moved on to the URL.

www.gorevid.hu

The Hungarian extension would just be to confuse and misdirect, but she made a note anyway.

Without running the video she ran some basic analysis on the specs looking for unusual words or names. There were two options: the video maker had sent it to Ainsley, for reasons that seemed very obscure right now; or someone else had sent it to Ainsley, presumably in an attempt to expose the maker. This meant that there were two possible sources to look for—the sender and the maker—but the odds were against finding anything. The website had been set up, and the video uploaded to it, as one-off original events. It was possible that the source video was online somewhere, too, hidden in the real, private member gore sites. The more she thought about it the more plausible this seemed. It would have been no good to send Ainsley a link to such a site as he wouldn't be able to get in. Members were heavily vetted, so giving him a temporary membership wouldn't have been easy either.

Hidden in the specs she found the phrase W0Od 0wl. It could have been a random letter combination hidden in the middle of a chaotic string of letter and numbers. One of the 'o's in 'Wood' was a capital, and the O for 'Owl' was a zero, but it was the only significant element in the whole set up. There was no

reason for it to be hidden in the technical detail unless it was the perfectly innocent name of some video software producer. She ran a few searches on the name and found hits on the bird, which she scanned and discarded, and on woodcarving in Central Europe. Nothing to suggest a technical connection so she would have to dig further. Wood Owl might be a member on a gore site, but that wouldn't help much.

Toni brought her fried bread and tomatoes, to which she'd added basil leaves in a heart shape.

'Wocha working on?'

Chelsey had helped her out with tech problems, and Toni always showed an interest. Chelsey pushed her head forward and pulled a sad face.

'Something horrible.'

'Share. Can't be that bad.'

'Somebody sent my mate a snuff video. I'm checking it out.' She tried a mouthful of tomatoes and gave a thumbs up. 'These are just what I needed. Top chef!'

'Snuff as in ...'

'As in dead. As in somebody killing somebody. Probably—hopefully—fake. I haven't watched it yet but I didn't want to do it at home. Do you mind?'

'Jeez, you're into some shittarola. Just stay here in the corner, keep the volume down, and don't get too excited.' She winked. 'And let me know if it's any good.'

'It's really not ... never mind. Thanks, Tone. I owe you.'

When she finally ran the video she found that Ainsley's description had been effective and efficient. Her initial thought was that the video was too poor

quality to be fake, but there were plenty of people out there capable of a double bluff. There was no way to be certain, but she could improve the odds and began searching for tell-tale digital themes, repetition, and uncanny movements. Most important was the sense of reality that she got from it. It appeared to be a fixed camera view of someone, probably male, walking up to a naked, noticeably female, figure strapped to a table. The male figure was of less interest. There would be no reason to fake his movements. The female figure moved—realistically—several times with small twitches of the head, enough to show long hair falling down the back off the edge of the table. The injection, and the relaxation, were exactly as Ainsley had described. Chelsey caught the flow of movement rather than the detail. At some point, the man injected the woman again.

Chelsey had skipped through the whole thing several times after her first, real-time, viewing of 23 minutes and 42 seconds. At the end—a part that Ainsley hadn't even reached according to his description—the man picked up a newspaper from off-screen. The action was fast and blurred. The paper was pushed towards the camera until only the date showed. The video was less than a week old.

Her verdict: a damn good fake. She had spoken to people on the net who could do this sort of thing easily. She had reservations—the poor quality and the way it had been sent to Ainsley were atypical—but the whole thing was likely to be someone trying to fool the famous science journalist, much as spiritualists had tried to convince Harry Houdini back in the day.

Ainsley's life had changed six months ago when he'd first met Piers Cornwall. The solicitor had sent him a letter asking for an appointment on business connected with the recent death of one, Margaret Howard. He hadn't heard from Margaret since 1986, when she'd been Ainsley's first proper relationship, aged seventeen. He'd got a temporary job at the Evening Telegraph in Coventry and he'd been asked to be a personal dogsbody for a big-shot national journalist visiting from London. He'd spent most of his time buying coffee for the celebrity—Alex Gaveston. On the first day, by way of getting to know the city and Ainsley, they had played chess with giant pieces outside one of the sports shops in town. Gaveston had turned out to be a fair player and hadn't minded losing. For the rest of the week Ainsley had taken notes while Gaveston did vox pop interviews by the statue of Lady Godiva. One of the interviewees had given him her number and Gaveston had been nice enough to give him time off to buy her coffee.

They'd gone steady for about three months. He'd seen little of Margaret's family. There had been this sister, Claire, a wraith with long blonde hair, and a father who was always in the back somewhere, drunk and shouting, but rarely came out to see Ainsley. Their mother was gone; he never found out whether dead or run away. Margaret wouldn't talk about it.

He recalled standing in the road outside her house in the Radford district. A bedroom light was on, and a pale ghostly face—likely Claire—had been pressed to the window, hands against the glass. Margaret didn't come to the door. Her father appeared, armed with a cricket bat. The man was too drunk to stick to the task of beating him otherwise he might have been killed. They said nothing, just stared at each other and then he swung the bat. The first blow hit

his leg, which buckled beneath him. There were several more blows, fended off with an upraised arm that resulted in a broken wrist. Scrabbling frantically he'd hobbled into the road when a group of students, heading for a night out, had shouted out and the man had given him one last crack, the only one to land on his head, and slammed the door shut. Ainsley remembered through the pain thinking of his old Hotspur comics: the Wolf of Kabul and his trusty sidekick, Chung, with the deadly 'clicky-ba'.

He'd suffered a depressed skull fracture, but fortunately hadn't needed surgery. Two weeks in hospital, brooding, and no visit from Margaret. The police weren't sympathetic, taking the view that anyone beaten up at night in Coventry was at least partly to blame. He wouldn't say who had beaten him—afraid that Margaret would suffer more at the hands of father—and the students who had called the ambulance had been drunk and uncertain where his assailant had come from or gone to. When he'd finally returned to Radford, he'd found the house empty and neighbours clueless as to where the Howards had gone. He'd searched but he'd never seen Margaret again.

Meeting Cornwall had brought all this back and more. Margaret had died of cancer. She'd left a letter for Ainsley Griffin, signed and witnessed by Cornwall himself.

'Alex Gaveston gave her my name.'

'Gaveston?' It was a name Ainsley had never expected to hear again. He'd not expected the famous journalist to remember a 17 year old gopher from a week in Coventry.

‘He’d followed her up while you were in hospital. He knew some, but not all, of the story. She was so very sorry she’d never contacted you, Mr Griffin. She was ashamed, I think. Of what happened with her father, of not being able to warn you, and of not telling you about the child.’

A lifetime of loneliness: short, fractured relationships, parents who had both died when he was his thirties, and no other family, no prospect of change, and suddenly he had a daughter.

‘Your daughter—Hope—was taken from Margaret by her grandparents and given up for adoption. We believe she was given the surname Carnaby, after the village in which she was born.’

The letter had given Ainsley apologies and a short history.

Cornwall gave his own personal testimony that Margaret had a tough life. As Ainsley had guessed, she had been abused by her father, her baby was taken away, and she turned to drugs and went through a series of often violent relationships. Towards the end of the ‘90s she got religion, and someone found her a rehab that actually worked. When she’d finally got her life together, around the Millennium, she’d tried to trace her daughter, known to her only as Baby Howard, possibly Carnaby. She discovered that the baby had been in a Children’s Home in Gloucester, but the agencies said that she didn’t want contact. It was a brick wall, and it had hurt her, and left her with a dilemma. Should she try to find Ainsley and tell him, or not? In the end, when the cancer came, she had decided that he deserved to know enough to make the choice himself and left the matter with Cornwall.

Now, meeting Cornwall again on his last day in London, Ainsley was hoping for better news. The solicitor was a precise, thoughtful man. Ainsley

judged him to be in his seventies, but not the sort to contemplate retirement.

They shook hands warmly.

‘Any news, Piers?’

The office was as old fashioned as Piers—a Victorian vision of a solicitor’s rooms with a windowed panel by the door through which a bespectacled, middle-aged woman could be seen sorting papers. The walls were wood panelled and lined with bookshelves, and a clichéd aspidistra stood in a Grecian-style urn in the corner by an oak partner’s desk. A pen stand in the shape of a stag’s head, with inkwells on each side, stood to one side, and incongruously a lap top lay closed in front of Cornwall.

‘Well. Not good news, but a surprise.’

‘So she won’t see me?’

On Ainsley’s behalf, Piers had repeated the request that Hope make contact.

Piers shook his head. ‘Stranger than that. She denies being Hope Carnaby.’

Ainsley tilted his head. ‘The agency gave her records. She’s the same woman that Margaret found; the same woman that refused to meet her?’

Piers flipped open the laptop and clicked open a document, carefully angling it away from Ainsley. ‘She won’t meet but she sent a statement. She says that in 1998 she met Hope Carnaby and they swapped identities. They’d have been about 12 years old at the time. She claims that she isn’t your daughter, or Margaret’s. She has included blood test results that show her to be blood type AB. Margaret’s blood type was O.’

‘But I’m an AB. She could be my daughter.’

‘But she couldn’t be Margaret’s, Ainsley. It’s not possible. And if she’s not Margaret’s then how could she be yours?’

Ainsley turned it over in his head. ‘Why did she send her blood type? How could she have known that would be proof?’

They sat facing each other, lost in thought.

Finally Piers answered. ‘Maybe the agency knew Margaret’s blood type? AB is unusual so it wasn’t such a long shot.’

‘I’m going to talk to her.’

‘You can’t. They won’t tell us where she is and she won’t give permission, and, I’m really sorry, Ainsley, but *she’s not your daughter.*’

‘She knows something.’ Ainsley nodded slowly. ‘Look, I really appreciate all you’ve done, but I’m leaving London tomorrow. I’m moving to the Cotswolds. You told me that my daughter lived in a Children’s Home in Gloucester—at least up until 1998. It’s where I’m going.’

The old man stood up. ‘I wish, sometimes, that people could forget the past. I have plenty of dealings with people who let history control their lives. It never makes them happy.’

Ainsley stood, too, and moved to the door. ‘I’m sure you’re right. I’m sure I should let it go, but I just can’t do it, Piers. Thank you for all your help.’

‘Well, I do wish you luck.’ He reached out to shake Ainsley’s hand again. ‘I advised Alex against this, you know. Opening old wounds. But I’ve followed this story for over ten years now. If you ever find her, your daughter—the real Hope Carnaby—I’d very much like to know about it.’

‘None of your business. I’ve got a lot to do, if you don’t mind.’

Art stepped a little closer. 'Come on, Sundance. I'm not saying I don't trust you, but you said yourself, in the end, when it comes down to it, I'm responsible. Legally, like. I have to know what's going on. I've got to understand what goes on in my café with my computers.'

Sundance was an odd combination of dominating physical presence and geeky diffidence. Long jet black hair that he often wore in a bun, six feet three inches tall, and broad and solid musculature to go with it; at the same time he avoided eye contact, flushed with embarrassment several times in any conversation, and was passive-aggressive by default because he didn't seem to understand how his words would affect people.

'You wouldn't understand it if I told you.'

'Promise me two things, right? Will you do that?'

'What things?' Sundance finally looked up properly from his keyboard. 'I can't promise unless I know what.'

Art raised a finger. 'One: you aren't doing anything illegal.'

'I told you I wouldn't. I told you.' He looked away and flushed.

'So just say it now.'

'Look, sometimes to help people I have to bend things a bit. Not exactly illegal, but ...' He trailed off. 'How about I promise that if I want to do something properly illegal I'll tell you and explain why and you can make the decision?'

'I can make that decision now.' He shook the still raised finger. 'It's a no. Now have you? Done anything illegal, I mean?'

Sundance looked down. 'I don't know. It's not always easy to say. Like a Keep Off the Grass sign. If you step on the grass are you breaking a law or just pissing somebody off?'

Art held up his hand in warning but Sundance kept on. 'Look what if Captain America needs to save someone and has to break the rules? That happens, right?'

Somehow the Marvel Universe was a common language of discourse.

'You're not a superhero.'

'But you get the point?' Sundance picked up his empty coffee mug and pointed to the picture of a red, white, and blue shield with a 5-pointed star emblazoned across it. 'Steve Rogers has to break the rules sometimes. I'm just saying I promise that you can be my conscience.'

'That's the best you can do?'

There was the slightest of nods. 'So.'

'So what?'

'You said two promises. What's the other?'

Art shook his head as if to shake out the muggy arguments. 'Promise that nobody can come—is coming—in here and using our system to break the law.'

Sundance spun his chair from side to side, looking down at his feet, under the desk, not moving. 'Where's this coming from? It's easy to break laws on the internet, and it's pretty hard to check on what people are doing on our system. You wouldn't want me to have spyware installed, would you?'

The word spy reminded him of GCHQ a few miles away to the East.

'What do you mean? What would spyware do?' Art felt his stomach churn from black coffee and a sense of being out of his depth.

'What it says. It would let me spy on the users. I'd know what sites they go on, where they send emails, what their passwords are. Everything. So if they

did anything illegal, I'd know. Unless they used really good encryption, but that would be suspicious enough—at least you'd know something was going on.'

'Spyware. Is that illegal?'

Sundance shrugged. 'We have to abide by GDPR.' Art was non-plussed. 'Data protection and all that. If you take information about people then they have a right to know and a right to tell you to remove it from your system. If we did that a lot of people would stop using the system.'

'Oh.' Art bit at a hangnail. 'But you could do that? Just keep an eye out but not break the law.'

'Why are you so bothered, Art? What's happened?'

'There's just this guy. Asks questions about capacity and all sorts. Sits downstairs, buys something every 30 minutes, as if he's on a timetable. Covers his screen every time someone serves or walks past.'

Sundance nodded. 'Yeah. He's an IT lecturer at the university. He's not official, he's not done anything illegal—so far as I know. He buys coffee and cake, doesn't he?'

'You know him, then? He's a friend?' Art's insides calmed down.

'Not really, but I know people who are into this stuff. We've got the fastest, most advanced public system in town. Practically in the country. People look at the traffic and the speed of the hub and they see that what we've got is special. Okay, they might piggyback on our system to go places they shouldn't, or grab onto other users and follow them where they shouldn't. That's the internet. It's useless if you restrict it too much. This guy, he's not going to find out any more.' Sundance finally turned back to his screen, angled away from

Art; a screen full of windows that opened up the world of Slice's customers to him. 'Don't worry about it, right?'

Ainsley spent lunchtime briefing Chelsey on his ideas for future articles. She said right away that the video was inconclusive. Probably fake, but she needed more time. They lingered over lunch with not much to say, because he was leaving and didn't know how to say goodbye. In the end it was the briefest of hugs and a promise to be in touch when he arrived in Gloucester.

Back home, his equipment finally packed, he sat on the floor and opened up an anonymous brown envelope that had been pushed through his door a week ago. He'd read the contents several times already.

Over the months since he'd found out he was a father, he'd searched on subjects like 'missing persons' and 'finding adopted children' and the search engine's algorithms had eventually started popping up firms of private detectives on his browser. He'd hired Ingram Confidentials, straight off the internet to find his daughter. Long ago he'd had to choose between being avoiding leaving cyber-trails of personal information, and immersing himself in the internet so that he could report the technological consequences from experience. He was careful with security, firewalls, backups and the thousand other protections he could afford, but early adoption was part of his career path so he lived with a lot of risky software and websites.

This single brown envelope contained the findings, neatly submitted in numbered paragraphs. His meeting with Cornwall had only confirmed what the report already said in more detail.

1. In 1999, Hope Carnaby, then known as Elizabeth Shaw, was a 13 year old in Coventry, pimped out and kept compliant with heroin and alcohol by an abusive older man.
2. The original Miss Carnaby had been raped in St Nicholas' Children's Home in Gloucester, and when she was found to be pregnant she was taken to Coventry to give birth.
3. On birth, the child was taken away and Miss Carnaby escaped. She took shelter in a doorway where Miss Shaw found her.
4. Miss Carnaby was convinced that the Home would never stop looking for her and persuaded Miss Shaw that they might find it easier to solve each other's problems than their own. They swapped clothes and made a few changes to their hair, and were similar enough in appearance to think they could, at least, buy each other time, by swapping identities and giving themselves up.
5. Miss Shaw became Hope Carnaby. The other children in Gloucester knew immediately that she was not the girl who had left, but the adults didn't seem to care.
6. Miss Shaw believes that the original Miss Carnaby, daughter of the client would have been accepted by the pimp in Coventry. She was a young girl to abuse and to make money for him.
7. No trace of an Elizabeth Shaw that could be the client's daughter. She probably changed her name again.
8. The Coventry pimp died in 2001 with no surviving relatives.

There were photographs, too, of Elizabeth Shaw/Hope Carnaby outside her block of flats in Cheltenham, and walking in Cheltenham town centre. She was too thin to be healthy, and wearing skinny jeans, a tight white t-shirt, and a purple long-sleeved shrug in the best picture. From a distance she could have been thirty; from close-up she could be fifty. Almost certainly she was still on heroin. You don't get started at twelve and kick the habit.

There was an address and a mobile number. A few details were added with question marks, which Ainsley took to mean that they were uncertain.

She'd said that Ainsley's daughter thought that her baby was a boy. That the father had been no more than a child himself. Ainsley wondered how Hope had been persuaded to talk. They'd probably paid her. Maybe given her the drugs themselves. Ainsley's responsibility. He'd paid them, and now he was going to follow through.

Ainsley knew that if he didn't leave then he'd spend the night getting drunk. He had one suitcase. Everything else, including the majority of his precious IT equipment, was in storage or already in the removal van ready for the morning. A night in some characterless hotel room was still more appealing than this.

The read through the report had re-energised him. He plugged in his laptop and ran a search of cheap Gloucester hotels. He found a budget chain hotel, close to the docks, and booked in for the night, attaching a note that he wouldn't arrive until after midnight.

With uncharacteristic decisiveness he stripped the sheets from the bed and wrapped them around the laptop, and finally pushed the lot into the top of the suitcase and parked it by the front door while he made one last trawl around the house.

He felt lightheaded, exercising his new freedom. Each empty room made him feel better: the bare boards and walls, the uncluttered shelves, the clean, darkened fridge all reminded him of his own temporarily uncluttered life. He'd officially cut all his responsibilities here in London, and any new ones were to be his own choice, in the future, in Gloucester.

Outside, the streetlights picked out familiar landmarks of his middle years—elms lining the road, the footbridge over the main road rising at the end of the road, and the high rise blocks in the distance—but he barely registered them. He hauled the suitcase into the boot of his new Skoda, bought for his new life, set the satnav for postcode GL1, and headed North.

It's one in the afternoon and 'Sticky' Micky Wilson's got out of bed 'cos he thinks he heard someone knocking. Users turn up any time of day and night. He deals smack for Mike Massey. Massey passes it around the street dealers for Steve Jones. That's as high up the chain as Sticky ever wants to know about. He gets his cut, and Mike gives him a good deal on coke, for personal use. He drinks a couple of cans of lager to top himself up from last night.

His phone rings 'We are Family' which means his sister's texted for the first time in weeks. It's cool; he respects his big sister, even though she thinks he's a tosser. She's got out of Manchester and travelled. She's done anti-globalisation protests in Europe and camped out in Westminster Abbey, and now she's in some politician's estate down South. Good for her.

The text rattles him a bit. It just says **Help**. No 'x' at the end.

Sticky texts back **Sup Tan** 😞

He digs about under the kitchen sink for his stash. He's not sure what day it is. Time runs fast and slow for Sticky. He sticks his hand in a bucket full of shitty water. It takes him two minutes or two days to find the gear, he's not sure which. Mike's trusted him with more than he's ever had before—a hundred bags. He'll want £900 back, which leaves Sticky a small profit, or room to do deals for friends. He hopes Witchy Sarah comes round first. She'll try to talk him

into a deal for sex, but she's thirty-five and the smack makes her look fifty. He'd do it, but he needs the cash, so he'll try to get both. Then Ben, Harry, Char, Tony—all the smackheads. Later he'll go out on the street and do some big fat bags and a drop to Mike in Back Piccadilly.

No answer from Tan, and then another message, unknown number.

Tanya's not coming home, Michael.

Who u, he hits reply.

He gets a YouTube link in return. Nothing better to do than check it out. Some film or home footage of a woman tied to a table and a man doing all sorts of shit to her and then cutting her up. He's seen the Saw movies and he's played the games and this isn't all that gross in comparison.

That's your sister, Michael. They'll not find her.

Sticky does his third can and wonders whether he's got any Charlie left. He scans around the mess on the floor. Some fucker lying about his sister, but he could do with a hit. Bastard's are trying to do his head in.

There's a knock on the window and Witchy Sarah's looking like she might smash the glass.

'Fuckin' careful, bitch.'

He's got one bag of H on the table waiting for her. He opens the door on the chain and she tries to push in but can't.

'Soz. Twelve. That's the best. Quality stuff.'

She bangs the door anyway, and then she's whiny and wheedling. Already pissed to take the edge off. He puts the bag back on the table and she kicks the door, rattling the chain hard.

She yanks her top up, and the thing about Sarah is, she's got nice tits.

He lets her in.

She's on her knees as soon as the chains off, and two minutes later he takes the money as if he's doing her a favour and gives her the bag.

'You owe me. Nobody's doin' it that cheap anymore.'

Leave the dealing, Fuckwit. That's ur sister. Come to Gloucester station with goods and cash. I'll steer u right.

Sticky looks around. It's like, this guy knows he's just been dealing. He can't get his head around the rest, but Tan was in Gloucester, he thinks he remembers.

The next message just says **Gloucester. I'll be in touch** with a picture of his sister's body. No head or arms, but he recognises tattoos of a frog and a bee on the stomach. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

#2 Raymond

October 1998. Father treats me more carefully these days. He's a big guy but I'm taller than he is. Nobody fucks with me now. I can tell what he's thinking. He's proud, he's disgusted, and sometimes, he's scared.

The party never happened and, at least so far as I was concerned, the parties stopped.

Raymond came to the estate for business and pleasure a few months later. I couldn't take my eyes off him. It wasn't that he'd had his cock in my mouth. It was Helen. He'd taken away my pleasure. I was going to be the last person she'd ever see—her final connection to the world. And then he made her talk to him before she died.

I looked through his room when he was out hunting with Father. A Bible in his suitcase and pictures of his family. A briefcase full of business plans and company accounts. It didn't interest me so much—I'd begged Father to buy me a NeXT computer and I spent most of my time on the new technology.

He visited again and it ate away at me, and then I realised that Raymond had to take Helen's place. He had to die in front of me, the way that she should have. It was a few months more before I worked out how to do it. It was the right thing to do. He was weak. One day he'd let Father down, or me.

Father takes him shooting around the estate so it's easy to pick up a Winchester from the gun cabinet. I like the Winchester. It has that classic western rifle sound. I type out a suicide note for him, saying he can't live with his urges and the damage he's done. He comes into his room a little after midnight, full of whisky, talking to his wife on his state-of-the-art Nokia. Father insists that they all have them. When he sees me he ends the call sharpish.

I tell him I wanted to make it up to him. How sorry I am about Helen. I have a full bottle for him and help him undress, using my hands on his gym-toned flesh. He wants a blowjob but he's too drunk. At first he thinks the rifle is a joke. A fake cock. I wrap a pillow case around it and put it in my mouth for him, caressing the barrel. His real cock stirring. I put the barrel in his mouth and push his head back away from him. I see realisation in his eyes before I pull the trigger. The back of his head thuds into the headboard. I'd have liked to stay and watch but the noise was barely muffled by the pillow. It takes less than ten seconds to leave the room, and another twenty to reach the other side of my own bedroom door and then stagger back out as Mother and Father come running.

2

It took Ainsley three hours to drive the new Skoda from Neasden to Gloucester. The hotel was plastic and shiny and the layout was identical to all the others in the chain up and down the UK. Check-in, at this time of night, was even more streamlined than usual and by one-thirty he was sitting on the edge of a standard double bed checking his texts.

One from the bank to confirm his hotel payment.

One from Chelsey.

Changed mind on video. Too good/too bad. Checking out tech data to trace.

Also checking your cloud Cx

He was still betting on a fake. Someone was trying to hoax the big name science journalist.

Tomorrow he'd be settling in, and then his priority was to track down Hope Carnaby and any other connections he could make to his daughter or grandchild.

There wasn't much to go on. Apart from talking to her himself, his only other route forwards would be his grandchild. Almost twenty years old, now. Maybe he'd do some digging into Coventry and Margaret Howard's father.

The excitement of moving into a new home on Saturday morning had turned to frustration long before lunchtime, and a decision by teatime to stay another night in the hotel. Ainsley's furniture arrived on time, but the utilities seemed to have a policy of cutting you off before the requested date, and forgetting to connect you at the other end. Gas and electricity weren't sorted, despite long

hours on the phone, until late afternoon, and then broadband and television weren't enabled and gave him a Monday morning start date.

The house, on Anne Hathaway Drive in Churchdown village, midway between Gloucester and Cheltenham, was too big, but he'd been carried away by what his money could buy outside of London. Back in 2011 Ainsley had speculated on the future of bitcoins. Nobody, not even Chelsey, knew about this. They hadn't been easy to get, but he'd had spare cash and the desire to live according to his beliefs in technology. He'd bought £1000-worth of bitcoins in early 2011 at a price of less than £1 per bitcoin. It was hard to figure out exactly what they were worth now, but it was something over £3m. He'd sold half earlier in the year when the bitcoin bubble started to lose pressure. He'd left the rest because he still believed in bitcoin. Right now it felt like money he'd never had so he wouldn't miss it if it evaporated with the market.

The village was Cotswold, countryside, and yet convenient—he'd already spotted a likely Indian restaurant within walking distance. He told himself that once the teething problems were over he'd be happy here, and he almost believed it. Still, somehow he had a reluctance to move in. He felt dissociated from the world without his high quality internet connection. The signal for his mobile, and the connection that gave him, was pretty average, as he'd expected, added to his feeling of actual physical disconnection. He couldn't bring himself to spend the night there.

Waking up on Monday morning in the same cheap hotel room that he'd checked into on Friday, he had found a café recommended by TripAdvisor for breakfast and walked into the city centre to sit down to croissant and coffee and make some decisions. In the end he took his breakfast to go. He already knew

that this was the day to commit himself. To Churchdown, to searching out Hope Carnaby, his daughter and grandchild, and to a future.

The drive to Churchdown was getting easier. He was beginning to recognise the roads around the city. The house felt cold and empty when he got there. A letter in the hallway led him to believe that the promised broadband access would happen later that morning, and someone had pushed a Neighbourhood Watch leaflet through the door. He propped it on the shelf beside the door and tried to believe he wouldn't leave it untouched for the next six months. In an effort to make the house feel like home he made more coffee and sat down to plan his approach to Hope.

He wouldn't phone. She'd just refuse to see him. The map of Gloucester and Cheltenham that Ingram Confidential had thoughtfully included in their envelope had Hope's flat marked on Ashlands Road within a couple of miles of the huge doughnut of the Government Communications Headquarters. He'd interviewed one of the senior civil servants who worked there about five years ago—after signing the Official Secrets' Act, of course. The woman had been knowledgeable, polite, and helpful, and extremely firm about boundaries. She would talk about the Government's help in protecting businesses from cyber-attack, but anything that strayed towards politics or national security, even if it hadn't been intended, was dealt with openly and ruthlessly. He'd love to take a look inside, conjuring images of the very latest, Minority Report-style, tech.

With little to go on except a plan to be prepared to pay for information if she asked for it, he pulled the Skoda out of his drive mid-morning, and followed the satnav to Ashlands Road in the Hesters Way area. His image of Cheltenham was Regency—a famous promenade, huge houses—the urban

counterpart of Royal Gloucestershire, but then he knew that people came to London expecting Buckingham Palace, and half the time you got Tower Hamlets and Camden. From the picture he'd seen of Hope outside her flat this would be more Tower Hamlets than Chelsea. From a distance he saw the futuristic government building—like a flying saucer crashing into the hillside. He cruised past the barbed-wire fences and armed guards and then turned into the residential streets. He recognised the style of the houses and flats several streets away. There was a little cut-through opposite Hope's block, and where it emerged onto the road was a layby where he parked.

He pressed the buzzer for flat 12 and waited. A woman walked up the path with a toddler in a buggy.

'Who're you after?'

'Flat 12. Hope?'

She looked him over. 'Hope's gone up in the world then. Well, I ain't seen her for at least a week. She might be in there, but she's not been answering her buzzer.' She grappled the buggy through the door while Ainsley held it. 'Come in and knock on the door. You never know.'

The concrete steps smelled of urine, and pink and blue graffiti tags covered the walls. Someone had pissed a river down the steps, and he trod carefully, helping her carry the buggy up.

She pointed out flat 12 and he helped her up one more flight. He stood, alone, in front of Hope's flat. The door had mud streaks up to halfway and two clear boot prints. Ainsley knocked firmly and waited. He had no sense of movement from inside. In fact, he felt certain that the place was empty, but he knocked again and called, putting his mouth close to the opening.

‘Miss Carnaby? Hope? Are you there?’ He waited. ‘I just wanted to talk. I have some questions. Maybe some answers, too.’

He knocked again and listened to the sounds of the building. Clashing music from upstairs and downstairs. A baby crying. Someone was revving up a motorcycle outside. A door at the other side of the stairwell opened and an old man shuffled out and stared at him. He wore pyjama bottoms and a stained, white vest. There was a faint spider-web tattoo on his temple, which looked as though it had faded over the years.

‘She’s not there.’ He half coughed and half laughed, as if he’d said something both dirty and funny. ‘Not been in for a week or more. Now get on and stop making a racket on a Sunday morning.’

Ainsley stepped forward and offered his hand, out of habit, but the man turned to go.

‘It’s Monday, actually. You know her? I could make it worth your while.’

‘Aw, fuck. You sure it’s Monday? I got to be in town this morning.’

‘Anything you can tell me?’

‘Not so’s you’d notice.’ The door started to close and Ainsley grabbed the edge.

‘Anything.’ He took out his wallet and held out a ten pound note.

‘What’s it got to do wi’ you?’ He took the money and pulled the door a little wider open. ‘Noisy. In and out all times of day and night. Some of the whores,’ he gestured upstairs, ‘would just gi’ you a mouthful if you said a word against ‘em, but this one apologised. Said she’d try to keep it down. She brought me a chicken curry round last month.’

‘Unusual for her to go missing for a week?’

“suppose. There’s a boyfriend comes round. They both went off last week so they might be at his.’

‘Got a name? Or address?’

‘Nah. I stay away from that sort. You got something against her?’

‘No! She knows someone I’m looking for. My daughter. If you see her, tell her there’s money in it.’

The old man nodded. ‘There’s a soup kitchen thing in Gloucester that they go to. Run by them Muslims or something.’

‘Right. I could probably find that. Cheers, mate.’

‘Good luck wi’ it. I had a daughter. ’a’n’t seen her in years.’ He shut the door behind him and Ainsley heard a chain being attached on the other side.

Emily Stone pulled her mini to a halt in the car park, checked her text message and deleted it without reading. As if life couldn’t get any worse after Tanya’s disappearance, she was being cyber-bullied. The creepy ‘I can see you, there’s no escape’ sort of messages. Some of it was sexually explicit, some of it just weird. She’d thought it might be her nasty ex-boss from down in Bristol but on reflection it seemed unlikely. He’d never been good with IT. Whoever was stalking her had her phone number and her social media details. She had to accept that she’d been hacked and she’d put it on the back-burner until she had more time. There was always plenty to do.

In her late twenties, Emily had turned ‘kindness’ into an art form. She had a natural instinct for doing what other people would most like done. As a social worker she got taken advantage of in every way. Over-worked colleagues passed everything on to her, and as the new girl on the team she had to take it.

Today's job had come from nowhere. It had appeared marked urgent in her online calendar and she couldn't figure out who had put it there. She'd done a check around the office and nobody had heard of Rothleigh House. It had been authorised from above, and she had found details of the Rothleigh House residents on the system so she simply accepted the work and prepared as best she could.

The flats were neat with razor-edged lawn, bark-chipped borders and a purpose-built parking area. Even here in Gloucestershire, Emily was used to high rise blocks with addicts, alcoholics, victims of abuse, and sufferers from mental health problems all crammed in together, but this was a well-proportioned, cube-like building of soft-beige bricks. Her notes listed just six clients—three women, three men—alphabetical by first name and with three key words describing each. Social work was an equal mixture of admin and panic, and if she was to make a difference—and Emily very much wanted to make a difference—she had to be prepared. Back in Bristol the poverty was palpable; here she would have to adjust and understand a new set of needs; not their fault that they weren't the worst off people in the country—there was a lot of competition.

Rothleigh House was painted in neat black capitals on a white-washed wooden post by the path. She posted herself right up close to the front door and pressed the buzzer. No graffiti, no litter, nothing like home, although, she corrected herself, Gloucestershire *was* home now.

Her phone buzzed again. She took a quick glance and saw another anonymous text. This time when she thumbed it to delete, it refused to

disappear. This was getting very annoying. She slipped the phone back in her pocket and listened. There were noises from inside.

Usually residents in these community places had nothing in common but their inability to get on with other people. Six people meant six little worlds, each locked away day and night in their own room unless she was there to encourage them out. She waited patiently, until finally a dark outline could be seen through the frosted glass and then she heard the sound of latches being unfastened. Good to see they were careful.

A dumpy woman in her forties stared from across the threshold. Margaret, Lisa, or Caitlyn. Margaret, probably. Margaret, 43, long history of clinical depression, lofepramine with mild side-effects.

'Hello. I'm Emily. From Social Services?'

Margaret stared at her, nodding, not in acknowledgement but more as a nervous tic, and then made a little chirruping noise and turned and walk back down the hallway. Emily stepped across the doorway.

Her phone buzzed again and she found, not a text but a pop-up box she'd never seen before demanding 'READ ME'. Touching the screen she found the box expanded to show a message in blood-red 'DELETE ME AGAIN AND I'LL KILL U'. She stared, shocked. The messages she'd had so far she'd assessed as being immature. Often sexual. Sometimes complimentary about her appearance, and then descending into disgusting grubby scenarios. None of them had explicitly threatened violence. Some of them had been very precise about where she was so that she felt they must be from someone who knew her or, she'd seen it on a soap series, someone might have a tracker on her phone.

'Hello? Earth calling Social Services.'

A man stood in front of her. He was well over six feet tall, younger than she was, perhaps twenty, maybe younger, and wore round Harry Potter glasses, faded jeans and a black tee-shirt that said 'Special, Relatively' in white letters beside a picture of Einstein. His hands hung loosely by his sides in a stance that made Emily think of Barack Obama.

'I'm so sorry.' She waved her phone in the air. 'Rude of me.' She stuck the mobile back in her bag and made eye contact. 'Emily Stone. You were expecting me?'

He held his hand out and she gave it a quick shake. 'Yes. Well, in a way. I left a message last week saying that we hadn't had a visit for some time.' The mystery of the Rothleigh House job was cleared up. 'I'd hoped someone would come round. We don't get many visitors.'

'No, I suppose not. I'm sorry, are you visiting or do you live here?' Stupid question.

He smiled without answering. 'Let me introduce you.'

He led her down a grubby corridor. A door on either side as she walked in would be the first two flats. There were stairs on the right and a door at the back, with a frosted glass panel to let light into the corridor, which he pushed open for them; a communal room which was actually being used. She followed him into a room that she expected to look like a doctors' waiting room—unused hard chairs and low impractical tables. This room, on the other hand, had a sofa, battered but serviceable and occupied, and three armchairs, none of them matching. There was a balloon floating down towards them and a chorus of 'head it, Margaret' followed by silence as Margaret let it fall and they saw Emily in the doorway.

Her guide introduced her. 'This is Emily Stone, our new Social Worker.'

They stared.

'Are we in trouble, Miss?'

The voice was high pitched and the speaker was young. That would be Stanley, 22, severe anxiety, possibly post-traumatic but she didn't know what the trauma might have been.

'I'm just here to say hello. To get to know you all. Nobody's in trouble. Perhaps you can introduce yourselves? Or if you'd rather talk to me separately ... I've got a list of names, see, and they want me to help you all.'

Her phone buzzed in her bag. She ignored it, but part of her was aware of its malevolent presence.

Stanley, if it was Stanley, pointed to the man she'd followed in.

'Sundance helps us.'

There was general nodding and murmuring. She turned back to him.

'I'm Sundance. I help out here.'

'Sundance?' She repeated it to herself, disbelieving, her eyes briefly closed as if committing it to memory. 'I'm Emily Stone.'

'Yes. Yes, you said.'

The smile was genuine and his voice was soft.

'I wasn't expecting anyone but residents. There's nothing on my file about helpers.'

He smiled and nodded. 'I'm residential.'

'Go on, Sundance. Tell her.'

Sundance turned to the other man in the room. George, it had to be George, 34, Asperger's, learning difficulties, ADHD.

'Not "her", George. When someone is in the room we use their name, remember?'

'It's okay, George.' She gave him a big smile. 'Call me Emily, or Miss Stone. Whichever you feel comfortable with.'

George jumped up. 'Yes, George. Emily. Hmmm. Emily.' He spoke rapidly with little throaty noises between words, which made her unsure whether he was saying more than she thought.

As she watched her phone vibrated again.

Sundance gave her a little nod. 'Shouldn't you get that, Miss Stone?'

She blushed and was angry with herself. As if the harassment was her fault. She took a breath and made sure the anger wasn't directed at him.

'It's nothing.' Tight smile. Small nod.

He looked questioningly, paused, and then nodded to her notebook. 'Roll call?'

'I have six names. No-one mentioned you.' She looked at the names and back up at him. 'Sundance. It's an unusual name, can I ask if it's that your, um, real name?'

She left the question hanging, uncertain whether he'd be offended. Her phone beeped, startling her. It was impossible. She'd left it on silent. It was always on silent.

Sundance caught her surprised look and held it for a moment. 'What names do you have?'

She didn't want to push it. People changed names on the street. You couldn't be sure. She'd find out in the end. 'I've got George and Stanley.' She

smiled at each in turn. 'Then Margaret, Lisa and Caitlyn, and, er, Mr Chung? Danny Chung?'.

'That's right. You met Margaret.'

Margaret was back to staring.

He turned to a blonde girl, late twenties, thin with cheekbones that forced the top of her mouth into a wide arch, and nodded. Emily couldn't decide whether she was very pretty or very plain. 'Lisa. And this is Caitlyn.'

The last woman was in her early forties but dressed twenty years younger in skinny jeans and a tight tee-shirt. Caitlyn: a history of eating disorders, very bad relationships and severe depression.

'And?' Her phone beeped three times in succession.

'Danny doesn't live here anymore.'

'Okaaaay. And you've moved in? I'm sorry someone hasn't been doing their job, I think. I haven't seen any paperwork.' She bit her bottom lip. 'What happened to Danny Chung, do you know?'

Sundance's expression didn't change. Genial, calm, encouraging, but he didn't respond.

She wasn't sure how to read him. It was passive resistance; he just didn't answer. It made her nervous. 'I'm still not sure what you're doing here, Mr. Sundance'

He put his hand to her elbow without actually touching her and gestured to the door.

He steered her all the way to the outside door and out into bright sunshine where he stopped and turned a big smile on her.

'I didn't want to talk in front of the others. I'm afraid I've misled them a little. Last year. I had a bit of a meltdown. Found out things about my past and when I came here I changed my name. I came here as Danny Chung. It isn't my real name. The others call me Sundance. It was George who got confused with Chung and Dan. Now everyone calls me Sundance, and it's ... well it's better that way. Anyway, I told them I'm a doctor and they think I'm here to look after them, see.' He stopped and closed his eyes with an air of someone willing himself to carry on but finding it too difficult.

Emily looked down at her notebook. 'Why did you tell them you were a doctor, Danny?'

'Sundance. Please call me Sundance.'

While he watched she pointed her pen at each name in turn and neatly crossed out DANNY CHUNG and wrote, in small, elegant capitals SUNDANCE.

'You're very understanding, Miss Stone.' He glanced back into the house, from where they could hear someone, George she thought, talking rapidly. 'I am a doctor. I'm twenty years old but I had pushy parents. Finished a degree in IT when I was seventeen, and finished my doctorate last year.'

'But they think you're a medical doctor.' If Sundance had expected her to be impressed he was going to be disappointed.

He continued as if she hadn't spoken. 'I discovered that I was adopted. I started to search out my biological parents and—BAM—I was attacked. Online, I mean. Very *personal*. Someone didn't want me to find anything out. In fact I'd say someone wanted to destroy me, and they were very, very good at it. They harassed me, followed me online. Hacked everything I owned. Even my kettle.' He paused and took a breath.

‘Your kettle?’ She could see, now she was looking, that he might be an academic for all his youth. He had a curious mixture of anxious, nervous energy, and disconnection. He stared off into the distance as he spoke, as if she might not be there at all.

‘Whoever it was, they threatened to kill me, so I rebooted my life. I became Danny Chung. Danny Chung has been around for years. He has a perfect history, but recently I’ve used “Sundance” for pretty much everything. I’m worried that Danny will be traceable, especially now I’ve let the name be more active again. I wonder if you can keep it secret?’ He stood restlessly, full of nervous energy, repeatedly balling his fists.

A few weeks ago she’d have thought that he was another client who needed patience and understanding but now, she glanced down at her phone in her bag ... now she realised that what he was saying was possible.

He turned full-square to her and followed her gaze down to her phone. ‘Emily, are you in trouble? Are you having problems online, too? It’s like you’re afraid of your phone. If I’m right then we need to do something about it quickly.’

He towered over her. He’d become intense. He wasn’t the likeable, relaxed young man anymore; he was more like the addicts and alcoholics that she spent much of her time with. Unconsciously, she swayed away from him.

‘I’ve scared you. I’m sorry. I just want to say, if I’m right, I know a place where they have the equipment and know-how to help. Go to a café called Slice in Gloucester, use one of their laptops, log into the wifi, and click into the helpdesk. It’s free, and it’s secure, and confidential, and they can help, I promise.’

She rummaged in her bag and took out her car keys, stepping further away. She looked into his face and saw how sincere he was. He knew. Could he really have worked it out from today? Her phone buzzed insistently. The only other way he could know, she thought, was if he was the stalker. But her phone had buzzed and beeped and they'd been talking the whole time.

'I better go, Sundance.' She chose the name carefully. 'I appreciate all your help.' And then, because she thought perhaps she trusted him in spite of everything, she added, 'All your help.'

Sticky hasn't got a clue what to do. This bloke's been all over his phone for months, or maybe it was yesterday, or last week. It's doing his head in. He's tried calling Tanya and just got a dead line. She's his *sister*. She looked after him when they were kids. He feels it inside, like she's in his stomach kicking and punching and yelling, 'We're family for fuck sake. Get the fuck over to Gloucester.'

Ben and Tony come round together and he doesn't let them in. He can see the signs. They're desperate and not above beating him up for the stash. They'd be sorry later but what good will that do him? Charmaine comes round and she's the closest thing he has to a girl. He's had a few cans so he lets her in and gives her half price for a blowjob as per, even though he's too stressed to, like, really get it up. After ten minutes she's getting pissed off. He's barely hard and nowhere near coming.

She rocks back on her ankles. 'You taking the piss, Sticky? I could get fifty quid for this much action on the street.'

'Sorry, Char. Maybe if you show me your tits?'

To his surprise she pulls up her jumper and her bra. Maybe she's feeling sorry for him. Probably she just wants to get it over with. It does the trick and she wipes herself down with tissues.

'I want to deal, Sticky. You know I can do it. How many can I have?'

'How much you got?'

'Sixty.'

He reaches out and puts his hand on her breast, bra-covered now. He's fond of Charmaine.

Too stressed, too drunk, and he's making bad decisions. 'Cost price. Six bags.'

'Seven.' She squeezes him through his underpants.

'Fair deal.'

'Sticky?'

'Yeah.'

'You know I can get more out there than you can. Five more on sale or return?' She's rubbing him, and even though he's not feeling it, he wonders whether they could be in business together.

'Mike won't like it.'

'He won't know. Not where I sell.'

Char and Sticky went to school together. It's not like he trusts her, because you don't trust anyone, but he needs to get out. Down to Gloucester with cash in hand.

'Go on then. Back here tomorrow, and if you do well then maybe there'll be more.' It makes him feel good. Like he imagines Mike Massey feels. In charge. He's management, now.

Once Char leaves, Sticky makes a decision. Get more merchandise from Mike Massey. Sell it on quick, maybe with Char's help, so Mike won't even know he's gone for a few days. Build up easy money round Piccadilly and then take a train to Gloucester. Sticky Micky. Mike'll be steaming, sure, when he finds out, but he'll make it up. Mike'll understand. Mike has—had—a soft spot for Tanya when they were kids.

#3 Joyce

15th November 1998. It was Raymond's funeral today, and Father made us all go. Respect, he said. It's what, according to Father, keeps us together. Father talks endlessly without saying anything. He's always on the phone. 'Touching base'. I see that it doesn't matter what is said, it is the act of communicating that creates the connection. Mother introduced me to Joyce. Father says Raymond bought her; that Raymond had done her a favour by killing himself. If only he hadn't called her that night then she might have had a good life. My tutors say that one should do what one is born to do. They mean, of course, that breeding, and especially English breeding, sets one apart. I disagree. Father admired Thatcher and she had no breeding at all. Helen, Raymond, Joyce. If I kill her here it would, as Father says, be sitting on my own doorstep. I wrote her a card, quoting Hamlet: 'All that lives must die. Passing through nature to eternity'.

21st October 1999

As a treat for passing GCSEs Father agreed to take me to London. He wants to show me off, these days. He chose to take me to see Buddy at the Victoria Palace. An inspired choice. The show was great and, as planned, we 'accidentally' bumped into Joyce in the foyer. Father has been rather naughty with Joyce over this last year. I've helped in little ways. Once I'm in my room for the night, Joyce slips into his. She leaves in a taxi at around 2 am, and I'm waiting outside her flat when she arrives. She's nervous, edgy, a little drunk and smells of my Father. At first she thinks I'm there to confront her about the affair. She agrees to walk to the river with me but she's under duress, and then she

blurts out that she knows about Helen. Raymond did talk, it seems. I prefer her to disappear altogether, but there seems no way to do this now we're out on the streets. I feel unprepared, but I feel the happiness of freedom, too.

We walk and talk and I reassure her, playing the schoolboy. Even pretending to be infatuated with her, although she must be thirty. She tells me that she's going to leave the country, thinking that I'll be pleased the affair with my Father will come to an end. Before she came out tonight she wrote to a man in Hong Kong who was interested in buying her out of Raymond's business interests. She's thirty and she's trying to tell me that she's retiring. I stop her at Waterloo Bridge and tell her she must stay here. I tell her that if she doesn't do as I say then Mother and Father will know. I tell her that Raymond raped me and killed Helen and I can see she both does and doesn't believe and she's afraid. I make her kneel and take my cock in her mouth. There is something here that excites me. Perhaps it's her crying, but I think it is the conjunction of the mouth that dispenses such complex, yet awkward, information, being raped by the transmitter of DNA, the most compact, elegant bundle of information known. When I'm finished I try to calm her. She's trembling, afraid, ashamed. Not long now, I tell her.

As we step out along Waterloo Bridge I trip her, reach down and smash her head hard against the metal rails. No-one is around, and even if they were it looks like a woman falling down drunk and a boy, her son perhaps, helping her up. She's concussed. I take her keys and I tip her over the rails and walk quickly away. Back to her flat. I'm aware of how many ways this could go wrong. CCTV, chance passers-by, neighbours. But I ride my luck. I see she's emailed Tony Kwok. She wasn't lying; she's actually agreed to sell up to this Kwok and leave.

Thank God I got there first. I take down details of Kwok and wonder where I go from here.

3

On Tuesday morning the IT lecturer was sitting furtively on one of the sofas, adding to Art's anxiety. In the corner of Slice an attractive young woman tapped away at one of the café laptops. Art was trying to convince himself that his only interest was that she seemed to be using the café just as he'd always envisioned. She was a model of focussed concentration. Occasionally she took out her phone, swiped her fingers over the screen and made a few jabs, looking back at the laptop several times while she did.

Zoey was at the counter taking orders and making coffees and he was ferrying cakes to the tables. In the kitchen they had a work-experience girl, Alison, making the soup of the day. It was the only hot meal they did, and they made plenty because they had a deal with a charity that took the leftovers and handed them out to the homeless in the evenings. Zoey had argued against that. She wanted, at the least, for Art to charge cost price for the soup, but it was a principle he wasn't prepared to give up on. In fact, he'd asked Alison to make more today. Austerity wasn't going away and the numbers in King Square in an evening were rising.

The woman in the corner looked straight at him and gave him a little smile. He raised his palm to say hi and she mouthed something to him. Trying not to look too eager, he went over.

'Can I help? More coffee?'

'Um. Are you Art?'

He stuck his hand out. 'Art Garfield. The owner.'

She shook, briefly. 'This is an amazing place.'

‘Did you get what you wanted?’

She nodded. ‘Sort of. Someone said I should come here. Said that you’d maybe be able to fix my problem, but it’s not going away.’

‘What is it? If you don’t mind me asking?’

‘According to your help chat thingy it’s been hacked. My phone. Look.’ She turned the laptop to face him. There was a chat window open and the last line WAS CAN YOU SEE THE OLD ROCK STAR SERVING TABLES? THAT’S ART. ASK HIM TO BRING YOU UP. I NEED TO SEE YOUR PHONE.

He reached for the laptop. ‘May I?’

She nodded.

He typed in OLD ROCK STAR?

SEND EMILY UP.

He turned an apologetic smile to her and tried out her name. ‘Emily?’ She nodded. ‘Do you know him?’

She nodded. ‘Looks like it.’

He leaned a little closer as if telling her a secret. ‘Okay. Upstairs, against the back wall, there’s the loos, but then there’s a door saying Staff Only next to them. Press the buzzer and he’ll let you in.’

Ainsley was also up and about in Gloucester on Tuesday, walking past the end of the Via Sacra not 10 metres from Slice while Art was talking to Emily. He had a very short list of places that provided support and shelter for the homeless, the addicts, the alcoholics, the abused and the abusers, and the just plain damn unlucky. Gloucester didn’t seem to be a great place to be down on your luck.

Nobody would talk about specific clients so his phone calls asking after Hope Carnaby had come to nothing. He’d asked about St Nicholas’ Children’s

Home and found that it had closed down in 2002, along with White City, the equivalent Home for Boys in the city. He'd have to hit the internet, and maybe search through archives. It was the last known home of his daughter after all. For now he was on his way to a Methodist Church, not far from the Docks, where the minister had some involvement with a soup kitchen.

Reverend Steve Byrne was one of those active Christians, full of restless energy and eager to please. He mentioned God once, when asked about Hope ('God bless her') but seemed to pick up on Ainsley's vibe quickly and spoke in mostly secular, often political, language after that. He had the remnants of a Northern accent.

Ainsley felt his only chance was honesty so he explained his reasons for looking for Hope. He showed Rev Steve the picture he had.

'Problem is, Mr Griffin, that none of our guests have *routines* as such. We run the kitchen on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday every week and for some of them it's potluck whether they happen to walk past on the right day.'

'But you know her.'

The minister took the picture, held it up, and nodded vigorously.

'She's not a regular, Mr Griffin. I know her friend, Dave. He's in every week. This girl comes in maybe once or twice a month, that's all. I didn't even know her name was Hope.'

Ainsley took the picture back. 'Seen her recently?'

'I'm sometimes a bit too inclined to trust people, Mr Griffin. You say you want to ask her about another woman? Your daughter? Why aren't you asking me about her instead?'

‘It’s complicated, but from what I know Hope is the last person who knows where she was, and that’s nearly twenty years ago. My daughter ...’ He knew the truth would sound lame but he sensed that lies and half-truths wouldn’t go down well with this man. ‘My daughter changed her name back then. When she met Hope. They ... swapped names. So her name had been Hope Carnaby, and perhaps she changed it to Elizabeth Shaw or perhaps not.’

The Reverend seemed to weigh this up, looking at it from different angles, before making a decision. ‘It’s such an unlikely story I think I believe it. But surely our Hope is a long shot. I mean, I supposed you’d remember something like that, but would she be able to give any detail after all this time?’ He glanced back at the picture in Ainsley’s hand. ‘She can’t have been very old.’

‘Twelve, or thirteen. They were both about the same age. Will you help? Have you seen her in the last week?’

‘I’ll keep a look out, that’s all I can say. And I’ll ask Dave. He should be along today.’

‘Any chance I could see him?’

Again a pause for consideration. ‘You can’t come in. They’re very vulnerable people and we spend years building up trust. You have to be properly vetted, you see. But if you’re here at about one-thirty, and if he’s turned up, I’ll ask him if he’ll talk to you. I can’t promise anything, Mr Griffin. If he says “No”, you have to respect that.’

‘I wouldn’t want to compromise what you do here, Reverend. I’ll be here and if he doesn’t turn up or won’t talk then I’ll have to look elsewhere, won’t I? Thank you, though. I really appreciate your talking to me.’

As he walked back up Westgate Street, towards The Cross aiming for King Square, he thought about his need for connections in this new city. The Reverend Steve was the sort of man it would be good to have as an ally in his new home.

He'd heard that another religious group, Muslim like Hope's neighbour had said, sometimes served food and drink in King Square in the evenings. It seemed a good bet that people who knew Hope and Dave might hang around there during the day, too.

Ainsley had seen worse high streets—either Gloucester was doing better than most or the long recession was easing off. Around one in ten shop fronts were closed down, some boarded over. There were a few freestyling cafes (Muffin Shop, Fat Eddy's) and closer to the centre were the big name chains of coffee shops and fast food services. A group of men in second-hand hoodies and well-worn jeans smoked outside a betting shop, and a rival bookies advertised the odds for Champions' League football matches across the road. A few doors further down, a seaside-style amusement arcade lured in youngsters—an academy for the hard-core betting down the road. Pound shops clustered together, and Ainsley was reminded of his basic economics training: there was a balance to be had between competition and keeping similar businesses in one place to lure the customers into the area. The Cross itself was dominated by banks and mobile phone outlets.

A busker was playing clarinet by the entrance to the Square and when he turned by Debenhams into The Oxbode he knew he'd come to the right place. A man sat cross-legged on the pavement outside the big department store. He looked around fifty with thick beard and woollen hat and had a blanket spread in

front of him with a few seed coppers thrown in. He could see a small group at the edge of the Square sitting drinking from cans which they slipped under heavy jackets between gulps. A woman sat with them, black hair askew, round and plump, with a long black dress.

He started with the woollen hat, and threw a pound coin onto the blanket.

‘How you doing?’

‘Thanks, man.’

‘No problem.’ Ainsley squatted beside him and held out his hand to touch fingers. ‘I’m Ainsley. Tough times, eh. You from round here?’

‘Glen.’ The hand that reached out was filthy and nail-bitten. ‘Coupla months. Better than Folkstone.’

Ainsley laughed. ‘I reckon it is. I’m new here myself.’ He took an educated guess. ‘Ex-army?’

‘Ten years. You?’

‘Not proper. TA when I was younger. Saw enough to really appreciate the real deal.’

‘You couldn’t spare a few quid. I haven’t eaten for ... since, er, Sunday, I reckon.’

Ainsley looked up towards the men on the Square and imagined it might be an expensive day. He knew that if he gave the man a fiver it would go on drink. On the other hand if he bought him a sausage roll and coffee from Greggs he’d show a lack of trust.

‘Don’t mind helping out a hero, mate.’ He took five pounds from his wallet and held it out with the picture of Hope Carnaby. ‘Don’t suppose you’ve seen this girl have you?’

He grabbed the money and the picture. 'Seen her, yeah.' He looked across to the square where a man with flat cap and walking stick had started shouting at the drinkers. 'Fuck, Archie.' He raised his voice. 'Leave it, man. You'll have the rozzers down here.' He turned back to Ainsley. 'Twat gets off his head and picks fights. This woman. Old-fashioned name. Helen or Hetty or summat.'

'Hope.'

'Right, Hope. She's a looker. She's comes down here and drinks sometimes, but last week she just walked past with another woman. I reckon she's a lezzy. Both of 'em. Not that I got anything against 'em, you know.'

'Last week? Not long ago then. And with a woman. Not with her boyfriend?'

'Last week or the one before. Recent like. Her boyfriend. Dave. Drugs her up just so's she'll fuck him.' He put his hand on Ainsley's arm. 'Sorry 'bout the language, mate. He's a cunt. Treats her bad and she knows it. Always rowing them two.'

'No idea where she'll have gone? Or anybody who knows her better?'

But Glen had turned back to watch Archie trying to start a fight on the Square. Ainsley eased the photo from his fingers and stood slowly, his knees painful from squatting.

'Well, thanks, Glen.'

Glen waved his hand vaguely. 'Yeah, yeah. Take care, man.'

He didn't think he'd get much out of the escalating fracas in the Square. Time for an early lunch and then back to the Reverend Steve.

Chelsey Bell was anxious about her new-found freedom. It was lunchtime out there in the City, but Chelsey sat on her bed, still in oversized pyjamas, and tapped away at her laptop. It was her favourite working environment. She was careful not wear anything revealing, not because she was afraid that her defences would allow a serious hack that accessed video, but because sometimes it was necessary to engage in a short video hook-up to prove her RW identity. Her network of online experts were careful.

Technically she'd always been freelance, but she'd had Ainsley Griffin watching her back from the beginning. She'd had to get away from her religious-nut mother back in Youngstown, Ohio. Six years ago, twenty-two years old, her mother had reluctantly agreed to her travelling around Europe for a few weeks, as if she could have stopped her. A grudging reward for a great college degree, before she started work at the local paper. During her degree in Technology and Media, Ainsley's columns had been compulsive reading for her. With only his name and the paper to go on she'd jumped plane at London and searched him out. She'd turned up at the paper, and waited outside asking people as they went in whether they knew him. Two days of vigil and he'd got the message and turned up and asked her what she wanted. She'd been awestruck. He was older without being old. He seemed to fit her stereotype of English—well-dressed if very formal, calm, a little stand-offish but not in a bad way. Looking back she knew now that she'd fallen in love with him the moment he'd walked up to her. She begged and flattered and simply clung on to him with sheer American will-to-win until he'd given up and read her work. Even then he'd refused to do more than give her occasional bits and pieces, but she'd ended up grateful that he

hadn't cossetted her. You don't make it in the business by relying on someone else to get work for you.

After the first week she'd thought he must be gay. She'd practically thrown herself at him and he'd just seemed embarrassed. He wasn't in a relationship and she knew from bitter experience that most men would hit on her if she so much as smiled at them. But Ainsley kept a distance. And then she'd seen him looking at her when he thought she was deep in concentration and she realised that he was different from all those other men. Maybe it was frustrating but it was also endearing. He was diffident. Unassuming. Timid. Professional in his work, which she realised was an act to overcome what he saw as his shortcomings. But with women he simply assumed he wasn't worth their interest. The diffident Englishman. Understanding, she had known that she could push the right buttons and move their relationship on, but she felt it would be manipulative. She'd wait. She'd waited six years and he was getting older, and now he was gone.

She'd thought she would cope—she lived and interacted mostly online anyway—but it was harder than she expected. Professionally, too, she was realising how much she depended on his judgement to see what was going to sell. This video appealed to her tech interests but she didn't have the knack of seeing the journalist's angle that Ainsley had. If it turned out to be genuine then they should report it, and crime reporters would be all over it. Crime and society reporters often asked for support over the technical issues, but they never gave credit. Ainsley would say it was the solid sort of work that paid dividends in the long run. They paid and they remembered you next time they needed similar work doing, and that should be good enough.

She'd decided to chase down any other meanings of "wood owl", or any lateral connections, that might give her a clue about the video. When she found what she was looking for it was in a translation. An academic Chinese research paper talked about the myth of the wood owl, and why it had sinister connotations in the orient. She searched Chinese websites for the appropriate characters, put them through translation software, and got an unexpectedly relevant hit.

In 2016 a man known online as Wood Owl had been found guilty of several counts of mutilation, desecration, and sexual practices with dead bodies in Hong Kong. Body parts were found in a large refrigeration unit in his flat. He'd been found out after a prolonged power cut in his block. The bodies in question were sometimes untraceable, sometimes known to have died of natural causes, but in many cases they were murder victims. The man had significant political contacts and it seemed to be only this that had prevented him being prosecuted for murder. He was in a secure mental facility in Hong Kong.

She found pictures of a man in his fifties, overweight, almost bald. A man who could be a Buddhist priest in a different context. A man who looked nothing like the man in the video. Added to that was that final scene in the video, showing a newspaper from just one week ago.

Supposing she'd found—in fact, she'd been led to—a link between the video and some crazy Hong Kong mass murderer. She had a fake-able snuff movie, and an easily plant-able piece of text. But it was all she had. Something nagged at her. Something made her think that this was real and she wasn't going to let it go. She added more notes, building into a new plan of action.

Firstly, she wanted information on Wood Owl and anyone he might have had links with.

Secondly, she believed that someone had died here, in the last week. It didn't match any murders, so there had to be a missing person. It wouldn't be easy to track them down given the quality of the footage, but it was worth a try.

Thirdly, she needed to tell Ainsley, and they'd have to decide whether to report this to the police.

What time and drink have done to relieve Sticky's anxiety has been undone by the constant nudges from his phone. Fuck, he'd get rid of the fucking thing if he could, but his clients know the number. And he'll be off soon anyway. It's not like he's been allowed to forget. There were new photos, too. Of Tan. Definitely of Tan. He's tried her phone again and again, but it's dead now.

Charmaine's come up trumps with the first bags. Next morning she's all over him, with a repayment plus 10%, plus some for herself, but she won't say how much. Anyway, she says, her own clients pay her more for her own services when she has smack to deal. She's all over him in other ways, too, her t-shirt off before she's even through the door. He's beginning to regret leaving. He and Char could clean up. He grins about that—they could clean up and then get clean. And then have some sort of life together.

He gives her ten more bags and goes back to Mike Massey with the proceeds. Mike never says a word about Char so she's being careful about her clients; he never says a word of encouragement or surprise at how quickly Sticky's dealing, either.

'Not heard from our Tanya, Mike, have you?'

Mike pauses with a slightly dreamy look. Sticky had the feeling that Mike Massey was her first, way back at school.

‘Not heard from the lovely Tanya for years, bro. Thought she’d gone down South.’

‘Yeah. Well, you know. She was always ambitious. It’s just, you know, she hasn’t been in touch for a bit and I was worrying. No reason why you’d know.’

Mike pulls his top lip down over his bottom and gives a grotesque smile. He puts his hand on Sticky’s shoulder. ‘You tell her Mikey’ll make sure she sees a good time when you see her.’

That’s it. Another hundred bags and some blow and he feels he’s as far into Mike’s good books as you can be.

After Mike, Sticky necks a few cans and puts on his dancing shoes to heighten the effect. He needs to fly high, because he’s about to take a big step. He’s done the hard bit; he’s put one over on Mike Massey and he feels elated. Now he needs to deal as much as he can, as quickly as he can. He’ll sell some at a loss, but he doesn’t care, because he’s taking the cash down to Gloucester with him. For a change the plan goes well. Cops all over the Gardens, but Sticky rides his luck. His regulars know the backstreets. He’s careful not to be seen by Mike’s eyes and ears. By the end of the night he’s got over five hundred quid in his pocket and he’s grounded. Got a plan. Off to find his sister. He’s convinced himself the guy on the phone was lying to him. She’ll be there when he finds this camp, and he’ll hang out and she’ll look after him, and the money’ll help the whole camp so he’ll be like a hero.

He's on the last train down South. Charmaine watches him from the corner and then heads off to tell Mike Massey. It's her big chance. She's moving in on Sticky Micky's territory.

#4 Tony Kwok



It took almost a year to research Tony Kwok. A health-nut and hypochondriac who was embracing traditional Chinese medicine, but didn't trust mainland China. It's the legacy of British rule. Father took over Raymond's business after Joyce died, but Tony was still interested in purchasing. Father's people talked to Tony's people. Both sides had everything to gain. I told Father that I'd heard Tony was looking for high quality Chinese medicines and, all helpful, I sourced something that he'd love. It was a small matter to look up poisons that are used in Chinese medicine. A much bigger job to work out how to make them. This is where the internet is proving to be my world. There are sites that cater for everything. You just have to be able to find them, and to be able to stay under the radar. Never reveal yourself. Switch identities regularly. These were my first

steps but I seemed to have a sixth sense. Chat rooms are perfect for making contacts. There are charmers and trolls and vanillas, but you can't always tell who is who. Often it is the little barbed comments that snake out and whisper in my ear. This one here, who seems so helpful, perhaps an administrator, is wheedling personal details out of people, or stalking, or addicted to virtual sexual abuse, or sensing the underage, luring and grooming, or one of a million little ways that have sprung up to control the unwary. Others, who spam the room with vitriol, turn into apologetic schoolkids when I kick them into a private room and start to reveal what I know about them. I found Dr Darkness. He claimed to be a doctor who knows about poisons. He claimed to have killed many times, and I believed him. He told me about home-made poisons like Belladonna, Aconite, and Ricin. Aconite—monkshood, wolf's bane. Fuzi, in Hong Kong. Not that I am likely to poison again—I prefer something more personal. I am grateful to Tony Kwok for setting the challenge that spurred me into this world.

4

Ainsley had spotted Slice, lured in by a sign that said SatoshiPoint. The toasted cheese and pickle sandwich had been perfectly adequate, but he'd found the place interesting because of the IT. His bitcoins nagged away at him, a source of guilt and uncertainty at the back of his mind. He'd never really wanted to be rich. He'd written about bitcoins. Not really a cash equivalent, but a tradeable commodity whose value swung from day to day. The whole point of bitcoins was to establish a system that was stable and independent of the political security of governments—a world currency that the new, non-national citizen of the world could use anywhere. The internet generation, no doubt, felt completely at ease with this, but he was acutely aware that what seemed to be £1.5 million today could be worthless tomorrow.

He had only vaguely been aware that there were places outside of London, and perhaps Manchester, that supported the currency. Sure enough, hidden away in the corner of Slice was a SatoshiPoint— a bitcoin ATM. He decided not to attract curiosity by using it, but he did mention it when he was served. The owner, Art, said that they'd had it for four years and only one person had ever used it. They kept it more for the cachet than for any real use that it got.

He connected to the internet and did a speed check and found it faster than anything he'd found, even in London. If he was still working he'd do an article on it. Maybe he would anyway. Or he could invite Chelsey down to look it over.

It had been a refreshing interlude, and although he wasn't expecting anything from Hope's friend, he felt optimistic when he left. The Reverend had made it clear that Dave wasn't likely to talk. So it came as a surprise when ten minutes after arriving outside the Methodist Church Steve leaned around the door and looked up and down the road, searching for him. Ainsley waved and he was beckoned over.

'Mr Griffin, you're in luck. Dave is inside eating, but he's talked non-stop about Hope this afternoon. He says he'll talk to you, but he's a bit out of it, if you know what I mean, so don't expect too much.'

'That's great. Really great. Thanks, Reverend.'

'Just call me Steve. Everyone does.' He half turned to go back inside and then looked back. 'Obviously it's down to Dave what he decides to tell you, but he's an addict. A vulnerable person. Easy to take advantage of. I wouldn't have tried to help if I hadn't trusted you, but still, we sometimes take advantage of people even with the best intentions.'

Ainsley knew what that was like. Any journalist does.

'I'll do my best by him.'

Steve nodded, as if to say it was all he could hope for. 'He'll be out in a few minutes. I'll point you out to him.'

When Dave did appear he was slurring, but in control. Mid-30s, a little overweight, slouched but probably tall if he ever stood up straight, with a heavy beard and beany hat. He had a suppressed energy that, in a different context Ainsley would have thought of as ambition and drive, but here seemed more likely the result of a chemically-induced high. Steve had said that most of the

clients didn't sleep rough. There was accommodation, but it was ghettoised. No way to get clean in that environment. The ones that came to the drop-in centre had a camaraderie, a shared culture and history and sense of no-future, which didn't stop them falling out, stealing from each other, beating each other up.

Dave walked over to Ainsley and parked his arse against the wall.

'Steve says you're looking for Hope.'

Ainsley nodded. 'He told me you might be able to help, Mr ...' He stuck his hand out.

'Dave.' Dave gave him a fingertip shake.

'I'm Ainsley. People say she met up with a woman and now they've both disappeared?'

'You're not the Bill. I can tell.'

'No. I'm not.' He offered no explanation and Dave didn't seem to need one.

'She's my Hope, right. My hope and salvation, I call her. This bitch with her attacked me.' He rocked back a little. 'Not that I can't defend myself, you know?'

Ainsley made small, non-committal noises, trying to keep him in the flow.

'She dragged Hope off before I could fight back. That's all.'

'Yeah. Where'd they go, Dave?'

'Got in a car. Big whitey-silvery Porsche. I mean I never seen a car like it. Hope knew her. We was near the house and she pulls up just in front and Hope says, "Oh. She's back." Like it wasn't expected but it wasn't, like, a bad thing. Like here, when you get garlic chicken one day, and then a couple-a-days later, there it is again.' He looked back at the Church. 'The food's really good here,

you know. You should try it. My nan used to make garlic chicken and all. You remember, don't you, the stuff you ate when you was a kid.'

'About Hope, Dave.'

'Yeah, yeah. So, like, she knew her. From school she said. But Hope never went to no school, so that's a fucking lie.'

Dave subsided, running out of energy.

'School. Maybe the Home she went to?'

'She never went to no school, I know that.'

'Did she talk about St Nick's?'

'St Nick's wasn't no school.' Dave shrugged. 'Probably where they knew each other from, though.'

'How long have you known Hope?'

He shrugged. ' 'bout, 'bout ten years?'

'Not from St Nick's then? You didn't know St. Nick's?'

'Not me, mate. There was rumours. Paedos and stuff. Hope said they was. She was raped, you know. Lots of times. You don't come back from that.'

'And you don't know where they might have gone?'

'Nah. Maybe they went to Cheltenham. Like, her place. She kept it nice. Hardly ever stayed there.'

Ainsley shook his head. 'They haven't seen her for a week.'

'Then St Nick's got her again, know what I mean? She come and took her away. You find her for me, mate. I love that woman.' Dave suddenly sounded tearful. 'We look after each other, right. You want to find them St Nick's bastards.'

Not so easy, thought Ainsley, later. It didn't sound like the sort of place people would easily admit to, though local police should at least have known the rumours. He'd take it back to Anne Hathaway Drive—home—and play with the idea.

Ainsley wanted to make one more stop before he headed back and he walked now, following the map on his phone, back through the centre, where Westgate becomes Eastgate and crosses Northgate and Southgate. On this walk, he spotted a glass-covered viewing point, where you could see down under the street to old Roman ruins. He paused and looked around, taking in the city and its history. The amazing gothic Cathedral, just out of view now behind the shop fronts. *Via Sacra*, *St Mary's Square*, *College Green*, *The Oxeboode* (whatever an Oxeboode was), and then as he walked along past signs back to King's Walk, there were Bingo clubs and indoor markets, an alleyway marked Shopmobility, which opened out into a concrete expanse of car park. This was where he was heading.

Across the car park was residential housing. Streets backed onto the car park; concrete bollards across the entrances to stop people creating their own exits. He followed the blue line on his phone, heading towards one of the openings, and stopped by the bollards.

He'd heard that there were hardened criminals in Gloucester who were terrified of this road. People who knew more than the police ever knew

The street was unremarkable: red-brick Edwardian houses, some rendered and painted white or cream. Low back railings, which reminded Ainsley of school; partitioned-off, tiny concrete front gardens, large enough only to hold grey wheelie bins and black bin bags. On the right was a large corner

house and then a cul-de-sac turn off. There was no street name until he reached the cul-de-sac, and turned round to find a 'Cromwell Street' sign, facing away from the town. A few houses past the turn there was a Seventh-Day Adventist Church and then black bollards allowing cyclists and pedestrians into a cut-through to the road parallel.

Ainsley looked at the houses opposite the bollards, numbers 24 and 26.

Every town in England has its Cromwell Street.

The gap in the houses was neat and new, bushes and grass lining a spacious pathway.

Fred and Rose West had been put away in 1994, and the Wests' pattern of abduction and murder didn't really make them an obvious link to the goings on at St. Nick's. But there was an overlap in time. And Gloucester wasn't such a big city. Perhaps he just wanted to see Cromwell Street for himself out of prurient interest.

He stared across the land that used to be number 25. Wondered where the cellar had been, where the victims had been buried, how many were unaccounted for. He considered walking through, just out of curiosity. He turned back—it would have felt like walking across a grave in a cemetery—his earlier optimism dispelled, and he was a little ashamed of himself for searching out the road.

Back home Ainsley made himself strong coffee and picked up his laptop and a notepad and biro. He had no sense of familiarity with the house. When he'd picked it out he'd been carried away at the possibility of owning all this space. Four bedrooms had felt like a luxury, whereas now he realised it was going to

be a responsibility. A large kitchen/diner, a lounge, a study, and a downstairs bathroom just gave him choices he didn't need. Eventually, he supposed, he'd settle into some sort of routine. The study was invitingly small and snug, like being back in his own flat, but in an effort to embrace the change he opted for the big, sparsely furnished lounge. When he had time he'd buy more furniture—for now he had a recliner sofa, a coffee table, and his old TV. He set about creating new habits, made himself comfortable on the sofa, and began his research.

He made handwritten notes as he went, searching on the history of the Children's Homes—St Nicholas' Home for Girls, and White City Home for Boys. The system of notebook and biro had been what he'd started with before laptops and tablets had ever been thought of and it suited his slow, methodical, pre-post-modern thought processes. He found a little about the establishment of a Gloucester Children's Home in 1863, which later moved and became White City Home. There was a website set up by an ex-resident giving some background from the 1970s and encouraging boys to get in touch on the associated forum board. The postings to the forum were sporadic; the most recent was last week, before that it was 5 months ago. Dated a couple of years before that he found a reference to St. Nicholas' asking if anyone remembered or knew the current whereabouts of a woman who had been there as a girl between 1990 and 1992. There had been no answers.

He began to take down names and e-mail addresses, starting with the site owner/administrator. Pretty much everyone who had posted here had at least attended White City, and a fair few would have been there in the period he was interested in. People tended not to give addresses, and many didn't give

their real names, but they were less wary about giving the names of people they had known there. He took on the task of writing down every name he could find, along with possible dates they had been at White City or St Nick's. Hope would have left by the time she was 13 he was sure, and she could have been there from as early as 1986 or 1987. The Homes took kids almost from birth, although it was more common for them to be fostered out up to school age, the point at which nobody wanted them anymore. So he was interested in, more or less, the whole period up until they closed in 2000. The early years would be his daughter and the last couple of years the woman who was still going by the name Hope Carnaby.

The original White City estate was built in the 1920s—the concrete white houses giving rise to the name. The Children's Home in Gloucester Docks had been moved there at the end of the war, and St. Nick's had been set up ten years later. Ainsley thought it might be useful to have a drive around the area. Lots of the houses had been torn down in the 90s and rebuilt as Housing Association. The Children's Homes had gone shortly after.

The most recent posting was the most interesting and relevant, posted by someone who called himself **Woodcutter**. It included a partial, numbered list of names—four boys' and two girls'—and an attachment containing a poor quality photograph of a group of fifteen children. The post simply requested anyone to fill in the gaps. In the white border someone had written, in black biro: "On the beach – White City and St Nick's trip to Weston-super-Mare, 1994". The boys' names were Roger Mortimer, Joe Sinclair, Joey Beecham, and Harry Clutterbuck. The girls' were Maddy and Tilly Carlin. The numbers were possibly the order of the children in the photo. Something to go on.

He printed out both the photograph and the names, and drained his coffee.

It was black and white and had lost much of the quality of the original in passing through a scanner. A group of three boys, early teens, arms around shoulders, two younger girls playing together in the sand (Maddy and Tilly Carlin), another girl a little apart—looking disinterested, her face turned slightly away, towards the sea—then five boys standing in a row, one in the middle with arms spread wide, playing the star turn, and four more girls, a similar age to the boys, dressed wearing bikini tops and long skirts, one pushing a leg through the side of the skirt.

One of these young girls could be Hope Carnaby. From the date, if she were there, then this would be his daughter, not the later, Coventry, import. She'd be about seven and his eye was drawn, over and again, to the girl apart. The two named girls were younger. The others seemed older than seven, although he was no judge. He favoured this lone girl, imagining that this was really his daughter. He tried to blow up the picture on screen so that he could see her face. She was skinny, fair-haired, her eyes focused on some distant point, or perhaps more likely unfocused. He could see himself, and Margaret, in the features, but realistically with little effort he could also see a young Keira Knightley, and Brad Pitt, and Chelsey, and Angela Merkel, and Julia Roberts and pretty much anybody. This girl, whoever she was, was seven years old and she could grow up to be anybody in the world.

He decided to make a night of it, buy in pizza, open a bottle of wine and research the names. He looked up local pizza delivery and ordered a padana with garlic bread from Glevum Pizzas. He'd noticed that Glevum—the Roman

name for Gloucester—was commonly used by local businesses. Wine was on the kitchen counter, hastily packed in London and not opened since he'd arrived. It had been a while since he'd gone three days without a drink. He settled down with a glass of white wine and found out his iPod. He never seemed to have time for music these days and snatched moments when he could. He wanted to wake himself up for the hours of research ahead and put on a playlist which mixed old tunes from his '80s' childhood with tracks from a variety of Jeff Rosenstock projects that Chelsey had introduced him to. He was well into the meandering lyrics of *Bomb The Music Industry!*'s "Campaign for a Better Weekend" when the pizza arrived and he switched to the kitchen table, laptop to one side and pizza to the other, and began to search.

The person who had posted the photograph seemed like a good place to start. It was a fair assumption **Woodcutter** was a White City boy and was in the photograph, too, presumably one of those named. Someone who was interested enough to have joined the forum and tried to contact old friends. The other prime targets would be the girls, Tilly and Maddy Carlin. Not a common name.

He tore chunks off the pizza hungrily, and clicked on Woodcutter's icon. A profile page opened, but it was largely unpopulated. The icon itself expanded into a drawing showing a scene from *Little Red Riding Hood*, the burly woodcutter, axe raised, standing over a cowering wolf in a nightdress. The "Age" had been filled in as "b. 1982", which would make the man older than Hope; about twelve at the time of the photograph. His "Occupation" was listed as "Survivor".

Ainsley was no hacker. He'd try the simple and straightforward approach. He composed a private message for **Woodcutter** while Rosenstock sang "The Shit that you Hate" and he sang along.

Could that be Hope Carnaby in the photograph? Been looking for her. Would love to talk.

If he made no progress, and it was a very long shot, it might be that Chelsey, or perhaps his detectives—for a hefty fee—could find out more. In fact, unless **Woodcutter** was extraordinarily careful he was sure that they could.

He pulled out a clean sheet of A4 and wrote down "Roger Mortimer", left space for notes and then wrote "Joe Sinclair", "Joey Beecham", "Harry Clutterbuck", "Tilly Carlin", and "Maddy Carlin" even-spaced down the left side of the paper.

None of them were particularly unusual names, but then there were no John Smiths either. He tried searches, combining them with locations, and with each other, cutting down the options. There were lots of genealogy lists from Gloucester, Massachusetts. He'd never been interested in the whole who-do-you-think-you-are genre. He found it incongruous that a fiercely independent and patriotic nation like the USA seemed so determined to find validity in linking family histories back to Europe.

The first serious hit he found was for Joseph Beecham, born 1987 and died in 2014. Beecham had been an orphan, brought up in Gloucester, suffered mental health problems, and died aged 27, cause not stated in the obituary. No parents or other kin were mentioned. Perhaps it reflected his state of mind that a dead man, now beyond his reach, was the first reference that he was

convinced referred to one of the people he was looking for. He wrote down the details and a tick beside the name.

Clutterbuck had stood out as a name he'd never come across before, but he quickly discovered that it was a relatively common name in the South West, from Worcester all the way down past Bristol and into Somerset.

He typed in "Joe Sinclair" as a combination, and "Gloucestershire". To his surprise the field was thinned dramatically. A mention from The Racing Post circa 1990, and a music shop owner in Birmingham from the mid-noughties came up. Nothing else came up until he found a passing mention of the name from 2016 in the Forest of Dean. The man was mentioned in an article on feral wild boar. He'd been walking his dog and had to run for his life. There was nothing to go on except for the town—Mitcheldean. The telephone directory site showed three Sinclair's in the area, none of them J, but he noted the numbers and determined to call them all.

His final search was for Maddy and Tilly Carlin. He had high hopes but found nothing. No Maddy, Madeleine, Tilly, or Mathilda Carlins in Gloucester spelled anyway he could find. That in itself seemed unusual. He tried specific sites that might pick up individuals in Gloucester. These women would be in their twenties. Prime users of social media. Something should come up over the last 10-15 years. More mystery.

Charmaine doesn't like Mike Massey. But she can't let likes and dislikes get in her way. She doesn't much like any of them, come to that. Not Ben, or Harry; especially not Steve. Sticky's been good to her over the years, compared to most. Helped her on her way a few times. But in the end he's a dealer and a

user and ... and he's not here and he might not be coming back. Not if he knows what's good for him.

She's avoided Piccadilly Gardens since the Manchester Arena bombing. She's heard that people leave flowers on the corner every day. The walk from her gaff to Piccadilly takes her past the Arena and she knows people who were there when it happened. She's never been inside. Maybe when the business gets going—she smiles to herself at the thought—she'll be able to afford it. When she gets her head together.

She turns into Back Piccadilly and looks out for Mike. He was a few years ahead of her and Sticky at school. She's never dealt with him direct, but she's seen him around and she's confident. On a high. About half way down the alley there's a passage and a doorway and as if by magic nobody sleeps there. The eye of the storm. She wonders if there's some sort of code-knock, and then she wonders if she's being way too melodramatic.

'Yeah.'

'It's Char. We was at school together. Mate of Sticky's.'

'I remember you. Cheetham Char. What you want?'

'Business.'

'Ain't no business here.'

'Sticky's done a runner.'

There's a click and she pushes at the door. Inside it's much nicer than out. Carpet for fuck sake. At the end of the corridor she sees Mike Massey, shaved head to cover his baldness, gaping overbite and sculpted beard. He gives her a nod so she walks in, trying to look confident. Business-like.

When she reaches him he grabs her by the arm and yanks her into a room with a desk, four plastic chairs, and a sofa down the back wall. He pushes her onto one of the hard chairs.

‘What the fuck you know about Michael?’

‘We went to school together.’

He backhands her across the mouth. ‘Don’t be smart, Char. Where’s he gone? You said you was mates and now you come running to me shopping him.’

Char wipes her mouth, expecting blood, but there isn’t any yet. She’s scared. Wishes she hadn’t come here, but no pain no gain and all that bollocks.

‘He sells me stuff. And sometimes I sell it on for him. Like subcontracting, you know. So I figure he must have told you that. Like I work for *you* really, don’t I?’

Mike sits opposite her. Close. She can see him thinking. Clocking how quick Sticky’s sold the stuff on. Blaming Sticky for bringing her in without telling him. Wondering what else she does for him.

‘Why’d you say he’s done a runner?’

‘Cos he has. He’s been selling round the Gardens all night and then he gets on a train, and he’s gone. Looking all round he was. Shifty.’

Mike takes out his phone and punches in a number. He lets it ring out and then pockets it.

‘Right. Where’s he gone?’

Charmaine feels like she’s over the worst. ‘I checked, didn’t I? Saw what train he took. Goes down to Birmingham.’

‘Birmingham. What the fuck’s he want in Birmingham?’

This is Charmaine's ace-in-the-hole.

'He's not going to Birmingham. He's going to see his sister in Gloucester. He told me when we was ... dealing earlier. Said she'd look after him and he's off.'

Mike leans over and strokes her face, his thumb digging a little too hard under her eye. 'Good girl, Char from Cheetham. Now get the fuck out.'

She stands up, wanting to say more, not sure if she dare. 'You going to need someone to replace him. Someone who knows the patch. I can do that. I been doing it anyway.'

He stands knocking the chair over backwards. 'I said get the fuck out.' And then when she reaches the door. 'Come back tomorrow afternoon. Four quick knocks.'

When she's gone Mike makes another call. There's nobody he trusts down South so he'll have to send someone after Sticky.

#5 Steve Long and Kelly

5th September 2003. Father thinks that University life is providing me with a distraction, but it is really providing me with the skills I need. He is happy that I chose to study IT and Business. He says it is the future, and for me he is right. Business will earn me money to follow my hobby. IT is the tool of my art.

Tony Kwok wasn't very good at internet security. I found a little bit of code online that gave me access to his emails. The last person that he emailed is the next step of the chain. I know from my business studies that Hong Kong has a tight-knit business community, and I find that Tony was right there in the centre of it. His last contact was Steve Long, who like all of them, is into import-export. He's a bigger player than Tony. In fact, Steve is a challenge. His security is tougher to crack than other systems I've worked on, and I realise I need more tools.

The network of forums (Father, I'm sure, would say 'fora') online is, practically speaking, limitless. Certainly I could travel in a straight line, using any geometric measure I choose, and never get to an end. I need tools to do this, or that, and the only thing stopping me is my ingenuity and finding the right provider.

Dr Darkness, so helpful with poisons, was contactable on ALittlePush.net. ALP, as we call it, is a community of people who recognise that you can accomplish big things—dark things—with a minimum of effort. Most of us claim to have committed murder, although I suspect some aren't telling the absolute truth. Nobody suspected the doctor. In fact, he said, he'd gained lots of sympathy for his failed attempts to save people. He'd set the parameters of the

group by defining his 'little push' to be just 2% more or less effort than would be expected in a situation. Below the radar.

I tell him about my challenge, hinting at murder although I don't think he believes me. He passes me on to some expert hackers. I'm very, very careful now. I use internet café's when I contact them, and always with a different username, randomly generated. They are just as careful. Like me they've grown up swimming in the ocean of the internet. Web 2.0 is the air we breathe. We trust nobody, but we recognise our own. We don't need shared history, just a common interest and a view of the future.

*I don't want to give up on this but I need some help and one of my hackers lives in Hong Kong. He goes by the name of **Wood Owl**, a bird of very ill omen in his native country. He scopes out the building where Steve Long lives and finds he's on the fourteenth floor. Perhaps I'm being too literal about the little push, but this gets me wondering how I could get him to fall. **Wood Owl** says I'm being too complicated. It's a market, he says. He's happy to do what's necessary, but there's a price.*

*This is the start of Deathdiaspora.net—a state of mind, a virtual nation. **White Bird**, that's me, and **Wood Owl**. The Democratic, Libertarian, Republic of Death—open to anyone with the will and determination. A Little Push was all it needed to get us started. Not only do we have our own history, we are making our own history.*

*October 2003. Right from the start I see Deathdiaspora.net as a living, growing thing. These are my people. Before we do a thing we're in double figures and growing, but it's not like there's citizenship. You are what you do. **Wood Owl** wants to get started. He knows I've killed and he wants a piece of that. He*

wants to share the experience, and that's dangerous, but if he gets caught that's his look out. There's no way to trace anything to me, even digitally.

We agree a system. Two deaths at the same time. Like that film *Strangers on a Train*, but so much simpler. He'll kill Steve Long for me, and I'll kill someone for him. I need reconciling to this. Is the person I kill part of my chain or his? **Wood Owl** is clear though. He's my weapon, and I'm his. I point him at the right place and time and pull the trigger.

He has no target but he's quite specific about what he wants me to do. He needs to see it. He wants video evidence and he wants blood and gore. I'll do what it takes. It feels like my only chance to tick Steve Long off my list.

We agree a date, giving me a week to find a target and plan the killing. I'm a perfectionist, I suppose. I buy one of the new JVC HDV recorders with the MiniDV cassettes. Father's money comes in handy at £3,000. I need a disposable human being. Well, plenty of those around.

When I'm not at university I've taken over the old gamekeeper's cottage in the woods and this seems the perfect place. Father is happy to have me out of the main house and Mother is usually too drunk to care. They'd have paid for me to take a town house in Cheltenham no doubt, or even in London, but I prefer the privacy. They give me an inexhaustible budget to kit the place out with all the IT equipment that I could possibly need.

It has a cellar accessible from stone steps in the kitchen to which I've added a sturdy door. The cellar and one of the bedrooms are my hubs, and I start building my network out into the town, and the country, and the world. I can hook into CCTV cameras which are springing up around the world. I'm working on gaining access to private and police networks. I can lie in the bedroom and

see traffic cameras in London, alleys behind strip clubs in Birmingham, or simply the High Street in Cheltenham. When I tire of this voyeurism I like to look at the record of my killings carefully documented and arranged on the wall in a trail, heading I don't know where. Helen, and Raymond, and Joyce, and Tony. Room for more—many more.

The trick is to get the victim to the cottage without anyone knowing. I considered a simple abduction but it feels so crude. I like to lure people. Tease them and tempt them. A simple competition does the trick. One click and you could be the winner of a golden ticket. I like the serendipity, too. It's like they're colluding with me. Thousands in the area get the chance. Only a handful of people are prepared to take the risks and grab the chance. Only the first wins the trip of a lifetime. It could be a man or a woman, old or young, black or white – **Wood Owl** and **White Bird** are equal opportunities killers. **White Bird** is the name I used for this operation. It's a folk-tale trope.

The winner gets the new digital HDV camcorder, picture included in the spam email. The winner is, Kelly. There was, of course a simple question to lure in the punters: 'What does HDV stand for?'—just add in your email and pick from one of three answers. Is it:

- a) Holographic Disk Vehicle
- b) Hard Drive Volume
- c) High Definition Video

Kelly is the third person to get in touch, but the first to agree to meet one of **White Bird**'s directors and have her video taken receiving the prize to be used for promotional purposes.

*She arrives at 4 pm precisely. Midnight Hong Kong time and I am confident that **Wood Owl** would be performing his part of the deal. I am firmly convinced that Steve Long is going to fall inexplicably from the rooftop of his building—but **Wood Owl**'s tastes are quite different.*

The cottage holds up well as the front for a small technology company. Kelly is in her mid-thirties, a little chubby, which will play up well on the video, short blonde hair, dressed as if she's come from the office, although she explains that she is actually on her way to work. She works behind a bar in Gloucester city centre and has dressed up to look good in my promotional picture. She's bubbly and excited and very likeable.

She is suitably impressed with my cellar full of IT equipment, but troubled when I close the door behind us. I have prepared some excuse about reducing interference, but on the spur of the moment I prefer to take out my knife.

The camcorder is already running and I am careful to stay out of the picture until after I have on my Wicked-Witch-of-the-West mask. I've rehearsed the scene to take exactly 12 minutes as requested, and begin immediately. I have no desire to hurt her, and so I dispatch her quickly, getting a kick out of the knife in the neck that I used all those years ago. The rest of the time is spent in butchery, exposing, cutting, and chopping. My mind is elsewhere, in Hong Kong.

The details are uploaded, encrypted, and sent to their instigator, and in return, at 10 pm I receive my confirmation from him. He's pleased, and he has sent a single photograph as proof of his own acts, showing a range of body parts, eyes, ears, nose, fingers, genitals, displayed as if in some surrealist

painting around a kitchen. On worktops, tables, balanced on door handles.

Steve Long is most assuredly dead.

5

Emily's second meeting with Sundance hadn't been any more reassuring than her first. The first thing he'd done, before even asking her to sit down, was take her phone, put it in a metal box, and close the lid.

'I do need my phone, Sundance. Technically I'm at work.' She glanced at her watch. 'I need to be in Stroud in an hour.'

'We need to talk properly. Without,' he glanced over at the box, 'anyone overhearing.'

He sat behind a desk littered with IT equipment, most of which she didn't recognise apart from two enormous monitors, a keyboard and a very fancy mouse. He motioned to a faux leather sofa to one side, so that the desk wasn't between them.

'Really? You really think someone's spying on me with my phone? That doesn't happen in the real world.'

'You keep getting messages, yes?'

She nodded.

'And this stalker often seems to know where you are?'

She looked down.

'He makes comments about people you've spoken to, or places you've just left?'

She gave the smallest of nods.

'People who get harassed often feel guilty, Emily. The longer they go without telling anyone the more they feel ashamed—they feel complicit. But you have to realise that's what he's relying on. Yes, Emily?'

She looked up at him. 'This person. He,' she shrugged, 'or she, I suppose, must be following me. I turn my phone off a lot these days, but when I turn it on again there are messages and it's like this ... person ... it's like they've been right there with me. I've been keeping an eye out for, you know, cars that might be tailing me, that sort of thing.'

'Turning your phone off doesn't stop him using it once he's in. He can activate it when he likes, so long as he can get a signal.'

'And the box blocks the signal?'

'It's not the only way. I could use a cell-blocker, but then he'd know straight away that something was wrong. This acts as a Faraday cage—it just looks like you're in a black spot, but it needs to have complete coverage, and you can't really carry it around with you.'

She squeezed her eyes tight shut in concentration and then looked back up at him. 'Suppose you're right. I don't get why. Why is somebody doing this to me? It's not like they want anything. They've not asked me to ... I don't know. Anything.'

'Normally—I mean not like there's anything normal about this stuff but it does happen a lot—normally it's just some kid, or pervert, who gets a kick out of messing with someone, especially women. Especially good-looking women.'

Emily watched him grow red as he spoke, starting at the cheeks and blushing right through to his ears.

'But in your case,' he stumbled over his words awkwardly, 'it's not that ... well, not just that.'

He tapped his fingers lightly and methodically on the desk as he spoke. Right hand and then left hand, working through the fingers in turn, two taps each. Working out what to reveal.

‘I’ve been following this man for some time. He’s done this before. He’s very dangerous.’

She tried to steady her breathing, to stop the fast, shallow breaths that were starting to develop and concentrate on the rise and fall of her chest, like she’d be shown in her anxiety therapy.

‘Dangerous how?’

‘You knew Tanya Wilson.’

‘Oh, yes. We were going to meet and then she never turned up. I’m worried about her. You know her?’

‘You were one of the last people she spoke to.’

‘Are you saying this happened to her, too?’

‘I’m sorry, Emily, but I’m saying that I think she’s dead.’

‘That’s stupid. The police would have told me.’ Her arms curled into her body, her head dropped, and her eyes close. ‘I’d know. She phoned me. Why would you ...? Ohmygod. Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.’

‘I’m sorry, Emily.’ He poured water from a plastic bottle into a mug and held it out. She seemed unaware, her hands to her face.

Finally, Sundance stood and walked round. He put his hand on her shoulder awkwardly, pressing too hard. ‘Have a drink. Come on. I’m sorry. It must be a shock, but ... I need your help.’

She looked up, and took the mug, struggling to hold it, her fingers taut and crabbed. Her hand shook as she drank. ‘She can’t be dead. Why would you

think that? The guy from the camp phoned me and said she'd left. Anthony. I told him to call the police if he was worried but I haven't heard anything.' She paused. 'She's pregnant. She's probably gone home or something.'

Sundance's hand still rested on her shoulder, as if he could send strength down his arm to her. 'The police wouldn't do anything. To them she's just one of thousands of people that go missing and nobody notices. Let me tell you how I know about Tanya. She was just an unlucky link in the chain. Before Tanya there was a woman in London, Chloe Huppert. She was downstairs and Art noticed her phone kept going off. She was upset and angry—told him it was broken—that it happened even when the phone was turned off. I had a look at it for her. I suspected hacking and she said it had started a couple of years before. She remembered it clearly because it was the day she'd been to a funeral for a work colleague. This colleague, Toma something.' He pressed a few keys on the keyboard and read the name from the screen. 'Toma Kasun. He was involved in supporting victims of modern day slavery and human trafficking in Leicester. The police said he died in a car accident. An unusual accident. According to the evidence he had hacked the controls in his car and the car, running in cruise control, 'self-accelerated' on the M1 motorway. He'd called Chloe from his car phone to arrange a meeting ten minutes before.'

It was a long speech for Sundance. Emily was slowly unfurling as he spoke.

'That's sad, but what has it got to do with this Chloe? Or Tanya?'

Sundance stepped away, back to the safety zone of his own chair.

'Anyone could have hacked Toma's car. It was internet connected. Our man would have had no problem. From what I know about him he'd have been

connected to Toma's phone when he died. He'd have had access to everything that was on the phone, and God knows what else. So Chloe was the last person he contacted, and then Chloe's phone was attacked the same way yours is. And the same way Tanya's was. I cleaned her phone for her, but it wouldn't have lasted long. Chloe was killed less than a year later. It seemed to be random. It was rush hour. She was on the platform at Holborn Tube Station. Apparently there was a surge of people onto the platform, trying to get there before the next train arrived. It was on CCTV. A few people injured, but somehow Chloe Huppert ended up on the tracks in front of the train. It seemed to be nobody's fault.'

'It's a conspiracy theory. This Toma dies in a car accident. A couple of years later the last person he contacted dies falling in front of a train. And you think somebody killed them. This stalker guy. You're saying he killed this slavery guy, and then he killed her, and now you think he's killed Tanya, and next he's going to kill me?'

'The last person Chloe texted on her phone was Tanya. This was this year. Eight months ago.'

'How do you know? About the last person she texted? And that Tanya spoke to me last?'

Sundance nodded. 'I was lucky. I left a trace on Chloe's phone when she was here. Just inactive code.'

'That's illegal, isn't it? I mean you can't just go around putting stuff on people's phones, can you?'

'She knew that I put something on her phone to check it out, it's just that I ... didn't take it off before she left. Then, when she died, I thought that maybe I

could have a look. Her phone was lost, see. The police never found it. But my trace still worked. I was able to download her contacts over the last couple of months. Of course, I didn't know then that those contacts might be in danger. I thought maybe one of them was the stalker, or even the killer, but nothing came of it. So then I had Tanya's name and I was ... worried I suppose. At the coincidence. So I kept an eye on her phone, too.'

'You can just go around "keeping an eye on people's phones", can you? I want to trust you, really I do, but ...' She didn't know how to finish that sentence. She felt both safe and afraid with Sundance.

'Look, this man is killing people. He's not just hacking people's phones, he's hacking their whole lives. He'll use your phone, your tablet, your laptop, your TV,' he waved his hands in the air, 'I don't know, even your watch or your toaster if he can, to follow: Every. Single. Thing. You. Do. He knows when you go to the toilet, when you go to sleep and when you have a bad dream. Worse—he uses all this technology that we carry around to kill us, too.' He thought for a moment. 'Hacking into Tanya's phone, it's ... kind of illegal, yes, but anybody out there who hasn't had their system cleaned up in the last month will be walking around with all sorts of passive trackers on their devices, some legal and some not, most benign, like the search engine that wants you to "allow" it to know your location so it can better target ads at you. All this is nothing compared to what this man is doing. He hounded Chloe, and Tanya, like he's doing to you, and to Tanya's brother.'

'Her brother?'

'Just before she disappeared she spoke to you on her phone, but at the same time she sent a text to her brother, Michael, in Manchester.'

‘And now his phone is infected?’

‘Same thing. I can track him. I know where he is. But if I tried to put any significant code on there then *he*’d know.’

‘And you think we’re in danger, because this Chloe, and then Tanya, died?’

He nodded, and leaned back in his chair. ‘I need to know who it is, Emily. He’s careful. If I’m too obvious then he’ll see that I’m onto him.’ He pointed to the box with her phone inside. ‘Even this is risky. He can’t be watching all the time, but it’s obvious he’s recording whatever data he gets. He’ll know that you’re here in the café, and suddenly your phone goes dead. I could have put a cell jammer on it, but then he’d know for sure that it was done deliberately. As it is he might just reason that you’ve lost your signal by accident somewhere.’

‘I want you to clean my phone.’

Sundance puffed out his cheeks. ‘It’s not impossible, although he’d re-infect before the end of the day. It’s very hard to stop. Even if you threw it away and bought another—any trace back to sites or emails you’ve used before and he’d be onto you. Even your work. You’d have to give up everything like I did.’

‘I can’t do this. I can’t. This can’t be happening.’

‘I don’t know what to say, Emily, except that I really think we can catch him. I have this tiny advantage because he doesn’t know that I’ve worked out the trail and got ahead of him. Tanya and Chloe and Toma.’

‘What about before?’

‘Before Toma?’ He nodded. ‘Maybe. Probably. It’s hard to be sure but I think this has been going on for a long time. He might have killed a lot of people.’

‘Does Tanya’s brother know? Have you spoken to him?’

‘Michael. No, I’m just following him. Not really legal, like you said. He’s still in Manchester, as of last night, but if I’m right our stalker’s killed in Leicester, and London, and Cheltenham, so that doesn’t mean Michael’s safe. He seems to be able to kill people anywhere.’ He checked his watch. ‘You’re going to be late.’ He stood and helped her up from the sofa. He gave her a brief, awkward hug. ‘We’re going to find him, Emily, don’t you worry.’

Before she went he took the phone out of the box and held it out. She reached out hesitantly and then withdrew and held open her bag for him to drop in inside.

Ainsley started calling at nine on Wednesday morning. He knew journalists who’d maximise their chances of catching someone at home by calling at seven or eight. They’d get their quotes but only from pissed off, irrational people who wouldn’t work with them again. Ainsley was always in it for the long term. To his surprise he got an answer first try.

‘Sinclair family.’ A woman’s voice, mumsy and harassed,

‘Hello, I’m looking for a Joe Sinclair but I don’t know whether I have the right number.’

‘No Joe Sinclair here. Is that a man or a woman?’

‘Joe with an “e”.’

There was a pause. ‘Brian has a cousin in Great Yarmouth called Joseph. I don’t know any others.’

‘Never mind. Thank you so much for your time.’

He crossed out the number and moved on. He'd done this many times before, enjoying the methodical routine. He'd tried to invest Chelsey with the same practices. She'd been a disciple, eager to follow the slightest hint of advice, but she was a strong, independent, young woman, and it wasn't really her way.

A man answered, muffled and with a broad Gloucestershire accent that he'd only heard in hints before. 'Dave Sinclair, Forest Logs.'

'Hello, Mr. Sinclair. I'm looking for a Mr. Joe Sinclair. I wonder if you'd know him?'

'Who's asking?' He pronounced it arse-king, long and slow.

This sounded promising. 'My name's Ainsley Griffin. I'm trying to find someone who was brought up in the Children's Homes in Gloucester. I was hoping Joe could help.'

'I d'aim he could.'

'You *do* know him?'

'Them Homes haven't been around for a long time, Mr. Griffin. No point dragging up the past, is there now?'

'Maybe if you pass my interest on to Joe he can decide for himself. I'd make it worth his time. I'd make it worth it for both of you.'

'Would you now?'

There was definite interest. Ainsley had been burned before by bringing payment into the equation.

'I'd need proof that the man I was talking to was the one I wanted.'

'How much are we talking, here?'

'It depends whether I get what I want, Mr Sinclair.'

‘I gotta be able to tell him something.’

Ainsley was weighing up the possibilities. Maybe the man he was talking to was Joey Sinclair. Or maybe he knew Joey Sinclair. Or maybe he’d bring along a friend to pretend to be Joey Sinclair if there was enough money in it. There was something about his manner and his quick acceptance that Joey would be able to help him that made him feel that he was talking to David ‘Joey’ Sinclair. Whether he’d get anything useful was another matter.

‘I’ll give him a hundred for his time. Up to another hundred for anything useful he tells me. How you split it between you is your choice. How’s that?’

There was a very brief pause. ‘I’ll bring him along, Mr. Griffin, and you can decide for yourself. Where d’you want to meet?’

‘I can come to you. I’m based in Gloucester.’

‘I’m working down in Mitcheldean today. I’ll break for lunch and you meet me outside the Library at 12. T’aint busy, you won’t miss me.’

‘And you’ll bring Joe with you?’

‘He’ll be there. Good bye, Mr. Griffin. I’ll see you then.’

Ainsley checked the time. He had the feeling he was being led, like Hansel and Gretel. The only question was whether there was a wicked witch or a house of candy at the end of the trail. Or both.

They’d both avoided the question of whether this was Joe himself, or if not how he knew Joe. Friend or relative? Whatever the answer, Ainsley felt he had an answer to another. He’d answered the phone with “Forest Logs” and that made him prime candidate for **Woodcutter**.

The best part of Chelsey's Hoxton flat was her view of Shoreditch Park. On Wednesday mornings an informal group of half a dozen or so pensioners met up for Tai Chi and general good-humoured chat. She liked to watch as they took up haphazard positions and then, as one, began their slowly-evolving, intricate patterns.

This morning her initial calls out to the net had garnered five positive responses. There were two creepy guys who responded to all her requests, and she asked herself for the hundredth time why she left them on her contact list. They desperately wanted to help but clearly knew nothing about the Wood Owl case. In the end, it was this eagerness to help, and Chelsey's confidence in her anonymity online, that kept her trying them.

She had contact from a couple of Japanese friends who knew both about the case and about Wood Owl mythology. They could fill her in on the cultural elements, but had no insights into Xinhai Qíng rén, the Hong Kong murderer.

The best response was last. A friend of a friend who she knew made forays into the darkest websites got back to her. She only knew his web handle, Dr Darkness, and that he claimed to be a real doctor. They had been in the same vicinity on the net before, but she'd never poked him.

If you want to know about Wood Owl—and I mean Wood Owl, not so-called Xinhai Qíng rén—send reply to Dr Darkness on this address.

The email address used was temporary and throwaway, and a quick look at the email history showed it to have been routed and rerouted many times. A careful user.

So-called?

Two minutes later—

Not his birth name. Killer fan. RL/VR blurred to him. What you after? Why?

Reveal as little as possible, but make it plausible. She wondered what might be in it for Dr Darkness.

Missing friend. Did Wood Owl have partners? Past history? European link?

Look after ur bros. Two things that can get you killed. The Republic of Death@Deathdiaspora.net. White Bird.

Explain?

But he was gone. Wood Owl, Deathdiaspora.net and White Bird. They meant nothing to her.

She made strong coffee with three sugars. It was still only 11 am and the Tai Chi pensioners were halfway through their morning routine. She wondered, idly, how they'd feel about having a young woman join in their weekly sessions. It had to be more healthy than caffeine and sugar.

She was wary of searching for combinations of the three names, or for that specific, odd phrase "The Republic of Death@Deathdiaspora.net" which sounded like a middle European anarchist group. Dr Darkness had said they could get her killed, so somebody might be sensitive enough to have set alarms around the net.

She always had a number of fake identities set up, and switched regularly but randomly between three Virtual Private Networks. It was expensive, but there were times when the consequences of getting security wrong could be devastating. Even life threatening. She shut down everything and rebooted on a different machine and through a different VPN.

She switched to Tails, one of the best anonymity browsers with every privacy feature enabled. Dr Darkness might just be spooking her for fun. The Dr

had a reputation for pranking, often maliciously, and it would explain why he or she had come out of the woods to answer her questions. These keyword searches might be exactly what he wanted from her, to try to ferret out her identity. People as clued up as the Dr were curious about other users.

She started with Deathdiaspora.net and found no 100% matches, only odd discussions, especially about the Holocaust.

Okay, that sounded relevant.

So 'The Republic of Death' might be some group bound together by a common interest in violent death. A virtual community, such as a gore site, would be most likely, but no such sites popped up. Not conclusive, though—many such sites were invisible to casual searches. This made sense but didn't get her any further.

White Bird gave her some more tantalizing glimpses. She discovered that it was a heavily used symbol in mythology, both positively (the Roman Caladrius, that flies away taking disease with it) and negatively (the White Bird of Dartmoor that foretells a death in the family) and everything in-between. If someone used that name then they weren't giving anything away. White Bird, folk tales, and mythology gave her the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen with various interpretations. The White Bird in Hansel and Gretel surprised her—a character she'd never noticed before. In fact, one that was probably left out of most retellings of the story. The White Bird, for obscure reasons, leads the children to the witch's gingerbread house. Chelsey couldn't figure whether the bird represented the witch, or some spirit, perhaps of a dead child, knowing that they would kill the witch, or just some mischievous demon.

The symbolism was all very well, but gave her no insight into who these characters were, who might have sent the video, or who was in it. She knew that it was often the unfocussed playing with ideas that gave her insight. She set in train some background programs to carry out more detailed analysis, going back and looking for links between the three key ideas and then turned her attention to the other side of the video—the victim.

She'd already run some missing person searches. Clearly if the video depicted a genuine recent murder, then no body had been found. There were several sites that gave good information on current missing persons, some run by the police, and others by charities. The downside of these sites was that most of them were regional, and as yet she had no region to work with.

She'd written down timings for the video itself, highlighting elements that might have some significance. The final shot of the date was crucial. Very little of the newspaper was shown and she hadn't had time to have look at it in detail, so she pulled up that section of the video and slowed it right down. It was a tabloid and she could make out some sort of football picture on the back. There were two points at which she could see any of the front page. The first was as the paper was picked up and twisted around, before he seemed to hold the top down deliberately so the front was obscured. She could see about half of a heading with the letters '**The Ci**'. This wasn't a national paper, which probably accounted for the care taken to hide the front page. It was almost certainly British. The words were in English and the picture had been soccer. Remarkably, a Wikipedia search suggested that the only British local paper called simply '**The Citizen**' was in Gloucestershire. For the first time Chelsey smiled. Firstly, Ainsley's recent move to the Cotswolds made some sense of

him being sent a video from Gloucestershire; secondly, she now had something more to go on with her missing person search.

Sticky's train gets into Birmingham New Street before midnight. He's out of it—coming down from the happy pill. Fell asleep on the train, and with the drink and all he's not sure where he is. The sign says New Street so he struggles out and has a look when his connection is. There's no information on the platform. No announcements telling people from the Manchester train to make their way to Platform 6b or whatever. Sticky, like all Mancunians, knows that Brummies are a bit, well, *behind* compared to Manchester, so he's not surprised. He heads for the escalator and goes up to the concourse.

There's a few punters around and he feels vulnerable. Cash in his bag. Not his territory. He stands in the middle of a wide lobby with stairs and escalators off to platforms on either side and feels, for a moment, like he's at the centre of everything. Everything is white and brightly lit. He imagines he's in The Matrix and a thousand Hugo Weavings are going to come pouring up the stairs. Shit. He's got to shake off the drugs.

There's a digital display headed Departures and if he stands just right and squints to block out the light, he can make out the destinations. Not so many this time of night and they're a long time off. Then he sees his train: Cardiff Central, stopping at Cheltenham Spa and Gloucester. 5.00 am. Fuck. This is supposed to be Birmingham, not fucking ... he caught the name Yeovil on one of the displays ... yeah, man, not fucking Yeovil. One of the biggest cities in the country. He checks his watch. Five and a half hours.

He's hopping from one foot to the other, like he can't keep still, but he's got nowhere to go. He's shit-scared now because he's thinking about Mike Massey and Tom Nolan. Tom was an Irish lad that turned tricks around Piccadilly. Rumour was that young Tom squealed when the police took him in. Told them what he knew about Mike, which wasn't much. The police raided Mike's place on Back Piccadilly, but there was nothing to find. It was, as Mike said, the principle of the thing. Tom ran all the way back to Dublin, where a couple of Manchester lads caught up with him and gave him the old sausage sandwich: cut his dick off, and forced him to eat it.

Sticky's wondering why he didn't remember about Tom when he ran. And then he thinks about Tanya and the phone messages. His optimism's gone, and right now, he's sure somebody out there killed his sister. Just his fucking luck. He's wide awake and checks the arrivals boards. No more trains from Manchester until gone 6.00 am. He'll be long gone. So even if Mike Massey knew where he was he couldn't do anything about it. And anyway how would he find out?

He's angry now. All riled up and energized. He's going to get to Gloucester and find Tan's killer and then, and then ... something. Something bad. Money in his pocket, Sticky heads out to the corner of Hill Street and Station Street to find a bar.

#6 Basement

*January 2004. The Republic is growing fast. Dangerously fast in a way. It is in my interests to grow Deathdiaspora.net, because my trail leads me across the world. Each citizen of The Republic adds to our strength and our power. Even so, we don't want to let just anyone in, and despite my careful security arrangements it's possible that law enforcement could identify some individuals. I certainly have. **Wood Owl**, for one. He'll get himself caught in the end. I won't be using him again, but he's more than earned his place in Deathdiaspora.net.*

***Wood Owl** was not very helpful regarding Steve Long's death. He turned it into a circus, which at least made it easy for me to corroborate that the murder had, indeed, happened. But he can't follow simple instructions—he is, in fact, insane. But he is also smart. Smart enough not to get caught; and smart enough to have insights. The instruction that he didn't follow was to ensure that he knew who Long had last communicated with before his death. I had made it clear that **Wood Owl** himself did not count. We had agreed that he was my tool, not a connection. Unfortunately he seems to have been too full of bloodlust to remember. No doubt he was equally unsatisfied with my own performance in killing Kelly. We bring our own desires into these things.*

*By great good fortune the Hong Kong police do the work for me. They find out that one Zikri Raja, from Malacca, Malaysia, had a meeting with Mr Long before he returned to his apartment. Poor Mr Raja is, 'the last person to have seen Mr Long alive', and so he's the prime suspect and his name is all over the Hong Kong newspapers and hence the internet. This put him out of bounds for a while as the next link in my chain. But if he is found guilty then the Hong Kong authorities will do my job for me. The chain continues. I used **Wood***

Owl; *why not use the Chinese government? Still, I would like to get back to the personal touch. Kelly's performance has given me new ideas.*

The basement needs work. My IT equipment is comprehensive and functional, but it's messy, too. There is no sure fire way of entering the internet without leaving a trace, and although you would need the resources of GCHQ to track me down, it is still possible.

I make a trip to a DIY store. Father would be so proud of my taking a practical bent. I buy basic tools, 100mmx50mm sawn timber and metal sheeting. I'm not good at this. The frame isn't as sturdy as I would like, but the metal sheets are my secret weapon. I intend to encase the new room in metal. It will be easier than plastering and it will enable me to insulate against prying signals.

The basement covers the whole footprint of the cottage, so that once I've walled off a third there is still plenty of room for my monitoring equipment. In fact, the new room, hidden behind shiny metal walls, is quite invisible to most people I would say. You'd have to measure the inside and outside to realise that I had a dungeon hidden here.

As I work I think about underground places. Real physical places, not like the Republic—which is another kind of underground. Most cities have them, don't they? Cities are built on top of their own history, and beneath a Roman city like Gloucester there must be centuries of old passages. I almost abandon the basement at the thought, but it will come in useful. I begin more research.

6

It took just over half an hour to drive from Anne Hathaway Drive to Mitcheldean Library in the Forest of Dean. He felt like an explorer: the Forest was dramatically different from the Cotswold hills that he saw rising up to the east of Cheltenham. There were dramatic crags and swooping valleys, covered at times from edge to edge with thick woods. The wild boar that he'd read about wouldn't seem out of place here. He'd watched Dennis Potter, and he'd read the stories about Fred and Rosemary West and Fred's activities in the Forest as if it was the backdrop to some American horror film. It was a step further away from civilisation and *his* England. He felt as though he'd been disconnected since he'd arrived in Churchdown and looked forward to sitting at a bar and having a proper conversation with someone.

Mitcheldean itself was tiny. He'd wondered about downloading a map, and assumed that he'd have to ask for directions to the library, but he couldn't miss it. The High Street consisted of little more than the traditional English village conveniences—a pub, church, a post office, the library itself, butcher, co-op and the modern add-ons: a Chinese takeaway, and a pizza and kebab shop. Parking was plentiful and at the side of the road. A week ago he wouldn't have believed that such places still existed.

Even before he parked he could see a solitary man, early-middle-aged and bearded, clutching a plastic, co-op bag, hanging around the library. He kept an eye on him. He was glancing up and down the street self-consciously. Dave Sinclair to be sure, imagining himself as some sort of spy. Guilty of something.

He held his hand out to shake but, but Sinclair just gestured with his bag-hand.

‘Dave Sinclair? I’m Ainsley.’

‘Yes sure.’

‘Ainsley Griffin, Mr. Sinclair. I see you’re alone, so I’m wondering about your name, too.’

The man muttered something that Ainsley couldn’t catch, as if thinking out loud. He looked up and down the street again.

‘You posted the photograph, didn’t you? And you’re in the photograph, too.’

‘You going to pay me, like’n you said on phone?’

Sinclair looked like he needed money, and he was the best lead Ainsley had. On the other hand he might not know much. ‘Let’s sit down somewhere. A hundred when we’re sitting. A hundred if you’ve got anything useful to tell me—that’s what I said, right?’

Sinclair passed the co-op bag from one hand to another, and back again. He fidgeted, side to side, shifting his weight. ‘ ‘N’ ya can buy me a pint ,’n all.’

Sinclair guided Ainsley past the pub he’d seen—The Bears—which looked derelict.

As if embarrassed by the state of his home town he waved a hand at it. ‘Them’s spwilin’ for a fight o’er it. He wants to turn it into ‘ouses.’

Further down the road was The White Horse, which looked only a little more prepossessing. Despite the cold, and threatening clouds, there was a group sitting in a flagged courtyard. Half a dozen men and a couple of women

were chatting, all with pints of ale—the men dressed in white with red braces and jingles strapped to their legs. Most had taken off brightly decorated top hats which lay on the ground at their feet. Both women wore white tops, black skirts and red pinafores. A banner saying ‘Mitcheldean Morris’ had been propped against the wall.

The bar was well-stocked with local, independent beers and Sinclair asked for the most expensive. It was still half the price of a pint in London. Ainsley followed his lead, deciding he needed to establish a rapport.

He manoeuvred them to a corner table with the drinks and passed a twenty pound note over.

‘You said a hundred. Up front you said.’

‘Let’s get something straight first. Are you Joe Sinclair?’

The man shrugged. ‘That much I’ll tell you. A lot on us changed our names after the Homes. Tried for a different life, like. I’m Joseph David.’

Ainsley drew on his pint with satisfaction and took out another twenty, trying to decide what to ask next.

‘At least I’m talking to the right person. You knew Hope Carnaby? She’s in the picture.’

Joe, or David, was nervous and Ainsley couldn’t figure out why until he leaned a little closer and lowered his voice. ‘Look. I’ve tried to get my life together. More’n some do, or can. I got work. I had therapy and they says to deal with the past, so I started up the forum. What you found me out from. Others did, too. I put the photo up when I found it. But I wish I hadn’t. There’s them that don’t want us remembering stuff about the Home.’

‘Have you been threatened, Mr Sinclair?’

Sinclair had finished his pint and Ainsley bought another, still nursing his own.

‘When I got the picture out, I looked at it, for like the first time in years. I couldn’t remember all the names, but there’s some was unforgettable. Had stories you won’t believe, Hope was one. She’d have been seven or eight in the picture.’

‘That’s what I figured. What can you tell me about her?’

Sinclair’s anxiety was showing. He was drinking fast and nervously. ‘She’d been to the parties, like it or not. All of us had. Nobody listened.’ He was trapped in a different place; his face twisted with the memories. ‘Hope was feisty. It made her popular. She fought. They took her to the parties and every time she fought the men loved it. Then one day she disappeared and it was rumoured that she’d been knocked up. I mean, I don’t know if it were true. She weren’t hardly old enough.’

‘She disappeared then. But she came back, didn’t she?’

‘I don’t know who told you that, but it were a lie.’

‘I thought ... I heard that she went to Coventry, but she came back and stayed at St. Nick’s until she was sixteen.’

‘Coventry. Ah, that’s it. She went right ‘n all.’ He laughed. ‘She went, and they said it were her come back, but it wa’n’t. This girl as come back, she were similar. Skinny, cute, but it weren’t her, and we all knew it weren’t. She said she were Hope and nobody complained. She went to the parties and she didn’t fight. It weren’t her.’

‘You keep mentioning parties. The kids from the Homes met up? Had parties?’

Sinclair was glassy eyed, staring into a too-clearly remembered past.

'Nobody listened. It's too late now. It carried on as long as I was there. I was about eight when I was taken to my first party. All these rich fellas, and one as played king.'

'Go on.' He knew, but he had to hear it.

'We knew what happened 'cos the big uns told us. It'd been going on for years. They scared us with it so as we thought it might be like ghosts and stuff, but it were true. We had to dress up and serve food. Girls'd be dressed in little skirts and bras. Boys in pants. First time I just served food, but I seen as what happened to the bigger ones. They'd be given drink or smokes. Boys and girls, doing disgusting stuff.' He formed a ring with his thumb and finger and simulated masturbation. 'That was normal. Right up front at the table. But sometimes they'd take one of us off into a corner and you'd hear 'em going at it. Like they were getting the littler ones used to the idea by letting 'em see what went on. End of the night they'd give you money and tell you to keep quiet. Tell you there was more next time we come, if we were good. We'd compare how much we got. Some kids never got picked again. I don't know how they chose. If you went back you had to do everything they asked, and you got paid more.'

'Jesus Christ. Nobody ever told the police?' Ainsley was thinking of Yew Tree, and Saville, and political hush-ups.

'Some tried. They went to the House Father, but I reckon he were in on it. Happen that's how they picked you, if they thought you'd keep it shut, but Hope was never going to go quiet. She must have told a copper 'cos one time we went there was a bloke and they made sure that we all knew he was a policeman and that Hope had made him come to see us. She was crying while

the king told us. This copper sat and watched, and then he took Hope off to the corner and made sure she knew what was what.' His eyes glistened.

'And when she came back from Coventry?'

'She never did. I told you. This girl comes back. Says she's Hope, and there's some similarity, but anyone who knew knows it's not the same girl. They started her on the parties again, but she weren't the same. She'd always kicked and screamed. Some of 'em liked that. But the new Hope, she just did what she was told.'

'Maybe she was drugged, or she'd had the fight beaten out of her.'

'Happen she was drugged. There were plenty about. But unless drugs can change the shape of yer nose and yer eye colour, I'm saying it was a different girl.'

Ainsley watched him drink his pint, letting him come back to the present in his own time.

'You never saw her again? The real Hope?'

Sinclair looked sly and checked out the rest of the room again. 'Now, here's the thing. Last week these two women come marching up to my cottage. "Joey," they say, and I tell 'em I'm David. But one of 'em is in charge. She knows full well who I am, and she's tekkin' no nonsense from the likes of me. She says, "Don't you remember, Joe? Don't you remember Hope from the Home?"

'I'm shocked. At first I don't know which one she's talking about, but then she makes it clear that she's bought this other girl—this Hope—out to the Forest to see me. And I can see that it's the second Hope. So I nod my head and I say, "Yeah. Hope."'

‘Where did they go, Joe?’

‘The other woman left. Took off in her big silver car. She told me I had to look after Hope for a while and to keep in touch through my website. She said to call her Elizabeth.’ He drank what was left of his second pint. ‘She’s not a woman you argue with.’

‘So Hope’s in your cottage?’

Sinclair nodded.

‘And you’ve no idea who the other woman was?’

Sinclair put his hand out. ‘I want the rest of my money. And another hundred.’

Ainsley counted out a hundred and sixty into Sinclair’s palm and showed him there were more twenties in his wallet. ‘Let’s hear what you’ve got to say. And I want to see Hope, too.’

Sinclair nodded again, stuffing the notes into his pocket. ‘She didn’t know I recognized her. And Hope won’t say a word. But this woman ‘at says she’s Elizabeth—it were her. The one that used to fight. I never let on that I’d recognised her. To be right with you, she scares me. I hardly know why I’m telling you, ‘cos I think she’d, ya know,’ he drew his finger across his throat, ‘soon as look at me. I reckon she blames us all for letting it happen.’

Ainsley handed over the rest of the money and stood up. ‘Come on then.’

‘Where?’

‘We’re going to your cottage to see your guest.’

Ainsley insisted that he drive the two of them to Sinclair’s cottage, barely five minutes away on the road to Drybrook. He wasn’t about to let him out of his

sight now. He'd finally met someone who had actually met his daughter, and he was going to get every last drop of information from him.

'She scares easy.'

Ainsley nodded. 'So long as she doesn't run. I'm not going to hurt her.'

He was directed through the village, blighted with estates, and a sharp turn up a narrow hill, barely wide enough for his car. It opened out a little and a small group of bungalows crowned the summit. Sinclair pointed vaguely.

'Number three. Park anywhere on the road.'

As he let them in a woman's voice called out, rich and slurred and welcoming.

'Hey, Joey. You should be at work.'

Ainsley was surprised. 'Joey?'

'Always knew me as Joey, didn't she? Can't get her to remember I'm Dave now.' He raised his voice. 'Visitor.'

The houses were mid-twentieth century, cheap and small, no doubt built to give the next generation the chance of staying in the Forest at an affordable price. Ainsley guessed at two bedrooms. Sinclair had looked after the place though. It was neat and tidy, papered in warm Autumn colours and the open-plan living space had a thick orange carpet. At the far end, in a corner by a window, was a desk with an ancient PC; here, close to the door, a two-seater sofa faced a big screen TV. On the sofa was a woman, recognisable from the photos he'd been given back in London. On the low table in front of her was a half empty two litre bottle of cider. Another, empty bottle, lay on the floor.

She was half standing by the time Ainsley had crossed to the sofa.

'Fuck, Joey. No fucking visitors. We agreed.' Hard and tight now, but still slurred.

Ainsley cut in before Joey could speak. 'Sit down. I'm here to help you, not hurt you.'

'I'm not taking no fucking orders from anybody. Who're you to tell me what to do?'

He stood calmly in front of her, not giving her space to stand properly, until she sat down and fumbled for her glass, half-full of cider.

'I'm looking for Hope.'

He watched as she struggled with the idea through the alcohol.

'Fuck off.'

'Elizabeth.'

She tried to stand again, but he blocked her and she curled up on the sofa, sipping her cider..

'I'm not here to hurt you, Elizabeth. Like I said, I'm looking for Hope.'

'Don't know who Elizabeth is. You know I'm Hope.' She gave a spiteful look at Sinclair.

'I know you call yourself Hope now. But I'm looking for the other one. The one that was Hope when you were Elizabeth.'

She stared at him and he wondered whether she was even going to speak again. She gave a burp.

'You're her dad, aren't you? I can see it.'

'She brought you here. Why did she bring you here?'

Hope shrugged. 'She knew you were coming. She told me. She told me there's bad people coming. From back then.'

Ainsley looked at Joey, who turned away. 'Make us coffee, Joey. Extra strong for Hope, right?'

'I'm alright.'

'We need to talk properly.' He sat down beside her. 'I need to speak to her. Do you know where she is?'

'Nah, you don't. You don't speak to her unless she wants to. And you don't really want her to.' She drained the glass and started to pour another, unsteadily.

He took her hand to stop her and she shook it off violently, spilling cider across them both.

'Fuck. Fuck you, look what you done.'

'Hope. Tell me what you know.' He took her hands and held them, keeping the glass steady. 'Who are the bad people?'

She struggled against his hands. 'Let, the fuck, go. Need a drink.'

He let go and she pushed him away so that he stumbled against the table. He caught himself and stepped forward to grab her again, but she'd taken a drink and sat back down

'Him. Him from the parties. Him and his whatchacallits. Comrades, she said. Him and his comrades coming to kill everybody. She says she'll stop 'em, but she needs time. All that time. I thought it was all over, Joe. It's never over, is it? Why's everybody coming now?' Joey was standing watching her with three mugs of coffee balanced in his hands. 'Why they comin' now, Joey?'

Joey placed the mugs on the table. 'It's alright, Hope, yeah.' He sat down beside her and put his hand on hers. 'Like you said, she'll stop 'em. If anybody can, she can. You said that.'

He passed her a mug and she took it and brought it to her mouth and then stopped, as if disgusted by the idea of coffee. Joey looked up at Ainsley.

‘You saw that photo. The trip to Weston. We was survivors already by then. Little Hope hadn’t been to the parties, but there was plenty going on in the Home anyway.’ He looked at the trembling woman beside him. ‘Before your time. Even when I was a nipper, maybe six or seven years old, we used to sneak out on the streets. We’d hang around the pubs at night. Us young ‘uns, boys and girls, me and George and Tilly and Maddy—people’d send us through a window or a cat-flap to open the door, and we’d kid ourselves it was ‘cos they’d locked themselves out, but they’d come out five minutes later with a handful of cash or car keys or summat. The older girls would hang around the park offering themselves, and there’d always be a few takers—no questions asked about age.

‘We heard when Cromwell Street was opened up. I remember thinking they might find people I knew. We’d always had rumours. People gone missing. People on the streets. But I never saw *him* at the parties. Fred. Our parties were a different class of people. Business men. Some regulars but more often up from London. Us kids, we were the hospitality, like.’

‘And the man who ran them? You ever see him again.’

‘Oh, aye. I seen him. King of the Castle they used to call him. Him and his cronies. A boy, too, a little older than us, but he made him join in anyway, wi’ the little uns and wi’ the guests.’

‘You know his name?’

Joey shook his head slowly. Ainsley didn’t believe him.

‘You’re scared?’

‘She said to stay out of it or we’d end up dead. She meant it.’

‘This King of the Castle—is that the man who raped her?’

‘There were a few in the end. I heard them joke about it. Who dare take on little Hope, cos she’d have their eyes out if she had half a chance. But it was only about a month and then she was gone. Pregnant, everyone said. They took her away and we figured she was dead.’

Ainsley leaned down to Hope’s eye-level. ‘What did she tell you? In Coventry.’

Hope was half asleep now. Ainsley held the mug of coffee up to her lips. ‘Just a few more minutes, Hope. I’ve got money for you.’

She looked up, half-focused. ‘She said it were the lad who got her pregnant. She said he had floppy hair and dead eyes and to stay away from him ‘cos he’d kill me. I saw him when I got there. He came to the Home sometimes. Dead eyes. He liked to boss us around. They called him Partyboy.’

‘One more thing. The others in the photo. I can’t find them. You mentioned George. George Beecham? And Maddy and Tilly. No sign.’

Joey cut in. ‘I heard George died. But I dunno. I was over in Cheltenham last year and I reckoned I seen him. I called out and he looked over but then he just turned away. I dunno. It probably wasn’t him. It’s been a long time.’

‘And the girls?’

‘Maddy disappeared from the Home. Her and another girl called Helen. Not at the same time. We never talked about them. They went to parties and never came back. Like they’d never existed, you know? Her sister Tilly, she was always a bit nuts, even before that. Like she threw herself into the parties. Took the drugs—even nicked them and brought them back to the house with her. She

had a bloke. Not married but like she changed her name to his. Both junkies. Her on the street earning enough for both of 'em.'

'In Gloucester? Could I find her?'

'They were on Cinderford Street, I reckon. Tilly and, er, wassisname? Lee, maybe? I don't reckon you'll get anything out of her, but if you was to ask around there you might find 'em.'

Ainsley took out five more twenties and handed them over. 'You earned it. Do what my daughter said. Stay out of it, if you can. And if you see her tell her I'm waiting for her.'

Simon holds open the car door for Ricky. They are long-standing business associates, having a quiet drink in a club off Oxford Street, central Manchester. They're in their late 30s now but they've been in the business together nearly twenty years. They keep themselves fit. Squash most days, and weights. The tailor-made dark suits and ties hide the muscles, but the eyes show a killer instinct. Simon's going prematurely bald so he shaves his head. Ricky, as if to distinguish them, wears long hair in a pony-tail. He fancies himself as part Vincent Vega and part Stephen Seagal. You wouldn't think they're were down on their luck driving a BMW M4 round town, but things are tight in Manchester since last Summer. Suddenly the police seem to have the low-down. It happened after they cracked the link with Spain. Steve Jones suspects a snake in the grass. Ricky thinks so, too. It pays to agree with Steve. Things are bumping along and Simon and Ricky, the business men, are getting sent out to keep the troops in line.

Eleven thirty pm Simon gets a call from Mike Massey. Mike is distinctly down-market, but Simon listens. Some fucker has absconded with a thousand pounds of Mike's, ergo Steve's, hard-earned. It's not much but Simon and Ricky have a deal with Mike's boss, Steve. They get paid a retainer, so long as they take some of the shitty jobs. Because they all know what Steve says: 'It's the principle. I'm a very principled man.' Ricky says they're working zero-hours contracts, but the fact is the retainer pays the Altrincham mortgage. They also get to keep whatever they recover. Certainly Mike Massey isn't going to take it away from them. And they're free to work for other employers, so long as Steve's business comes first. In return they teach the pond-life a lesson that they'll not forget. Mike won't see his money again, but he gets to tell Steve that there's been a problem but it's sorted, which is enough for him.

Simon and Ricky exit the club, pick up the car and set the sat-nav.

'You know *Birmingham*, Ricky?' He says "Birmingham" with a comic Brum accent.

'Been to the NEC, mate. Cheryl wanted to go to that Ideal Homes shite a couple of years ago. Ideal-fucking-homes.' He holds his hands out palms up. 'She wanted us to spend three grand on a coffee maker. To keep her quiet I bought her one from John Lewis for a hundred when we got back. It makes nice coffee, mind.'

'Classy girl, your Cheryl though.'

Simon hit the M6 and accelerated. With any luck they'll find Michael Wilson in Birmingham, deal with it, and be back by morning.

#7 Zikri Raja

November 2006. Zikri Raja, to my relief, has enough of an alibi to be allowed home to Malacca. I prefer to arrange his death directly rather than through the serendipity of the state. Not that Malacca is all that easy for me to get to, but *Deathdiaspora.net* has a long reach now. **Wood Owl** seems to have avoided identification by the police and, from our occasional internet hook-ups, he's learning his trade. No doubt still bloodily violent, but the aftermath of Steve Long's murder has made him more circumspect. He killed a young couple back in his own apartment. Took pictures, which he kindly supplied, but then cleaned up and disposed of the rubbish without arousing any suspicion.

I have a contact who is prepared to carry out the Raja murder. No charge, no quid pro quo. Like Raskolnikov, he simply wants to prove that he is better than the rest of humanity. *Deathdiaspora.net*, for him, is a Utopia. The ultimate Darwinian, or Nietzschean, state, beyond the reach of those with more mundane ideals. He calls himself **Übermensch**, of course, and gives little away. I approve of his circumspection. I don't even know whether **Übermensch** is based in Malaysia. I require only proof of the deed, and the next link in the chain.

It is **Übermensch's** very anonymity that makes me trust him so much (I use him for convenience, and on the balance of probabilities, but of course I don't even know this much). I have made a further request—that he tries to manipulate the chain in my direction. **Übermensch** says it will take a long time, from which I guess that he has to travel and to make such arrangements that he won't become a suspect. I'm happy with this. It makes such a pleasant change from **Wood Owl** and his thoughtless risks. It is some time since I have killed and, to be honest, it makes me edgy. I dream of Helen, as I always have, but I

also dream of Tony Kwok and Steve Long, who died without my presence. It bothers me in a way that I dislike about myself. It is a very special thing to change the world by taking a life, whether it is done by proxy or not, and yet I can't enjoy it in quite the same way. I don't wish to corrupt myself or my timeline by carrying out any unnecessary murders, although this would be easily done. My new basement project remains unchristened.

The Republic of Death network, not known by that name to any but the most trusted members, now has several thousand regular visitors. I must be clear: There are sites within sites, leading those who are inclined, through incrementally increasing stages of violence. Some of my fellows see it as a kind of game, trying to reach higher levels. Some of our citizens enjoy fake scenes, either animated or with real actors; others are tempted by real scenes, created by consenting adults, resulting in serious pain and humiliation to those taking part. Those of us who are adept can clearly distinguish these scenes, however well-acted, from the deeper levels, leading to the heart of Deathdiaspora.net. Close to our heartland are 'discovered' scenes, unintentionally filmed, or taken accidentally (by CCTV or other means), which show real non-consensual injury and death. But, deep in the centre dwell the true citizens—those who make a real difference; those who create the world that others want to live in. I know each one, although there are now thousands. We share our tales of murder and mayhem, through written narratives, or audio, or stills, or sometimes, if possible, videos of our exploits.

It is here that, eventually, over a year after our first discussions, Übermensch posts several stills of Zikri Raja. The face is familiar from the Hong Kong press. Raja is tied to a chair, naked, his arms behind his back, thick rope

around his ample stomach and a single, thinner rope around his neck.

Subsequent photographs show increasing numbers of deep cuts across his body, as if he has been slashed by a sword. It surprises me that Übermensch has stretched out the murder in this way. I had expected something swift and predatory. A single slash across the throat, for example, or perhaps a beheading in the style that Jama'at made popular last year.

Well, the job is done. The final shot shows Raja's body still tied to the chair by a dump near his home. The police branded it as a revenge killing for the murder of Steve Long. It seems that Übermensch had a logic to his method and had carried out a certain amount of skilful preparation. He had ensured that he timed the killing when there were a number of Hong Kong Chinese nationals visiting Kuala Lumpur, and the hacking was similar enough to traditional Triad killings for the police to conclude the business.

I have a new target. In York, only a few hours away.

7

Joey knew what Hope would be like after Ainsley had gone. She'd sit on the sofa, a blanket wrapped around her legs, and drink steadily. The coffee would go cold. At various points she'd want to talk, argue, abuse him, fight, get tearful, take him to bed, and be left alone—sometimes all at the same time. She'd do something stupid, and likely end up in a cell for the night if he didn't sit with her and try to keep her under control.

Meanwhile he needed to be working. It kept him from going the same way that she had. It was the one thing he had going for him; the little business he'd carved out. He got paid for cutting trees, and for chopping wood, and most of the time he got to take away the wood he'd chopped, too. He'd dry it out in his wood-stores in the back garden, and then deliver it to the middle classes on the other side of the river where wood-burning stoves had become the fashion.

Hope didn't understand this sort of commitment to routine. For her the only thing that mattered was how people treated each other. Money was an irrelevance. Despite living with emotional and physical abuse since her earliest childhood she didn't understand the way that people didn't care about others. She took drugs and drank to numb herself from emotions, and then she behaved as badly as the people she despised and hated herself all over again. Intuitively Joey understood this. They shared a past, and experiences, that neither of them wanted to have to remember. He made more coffee and sat down beside her.

'Go and get some more cider, Joe.'

'Drink your coffee and I'll think about it.'

She stirred, trying to get up herself. 'I'll get it myself.'

'She told you to dry out.'

Hope stood up and clutched the blanket to her to stop it falling to the floor. 'Yeah, right. Like that's going to happen.'

'She'll know. You want her coming back here?'

'Don't say that, Joe. Anyway give me a couple of days. Friday I'll stop. Promise.'

'You know we need to tell her he's been? She wanted to know.'

'If she comes back we'll tell, right.' She sat back down and put her hand on his leg. 'Come on, Joey. Don't be so stressy. Get us a drink and we'll chill out together.'

He moved away from her hand and poured her out the rest of the cider. He stood up.

'Where're you going now?' She patted the sofa beside her.

'I'm going to post on the St Nick's site. Just something so that when she looks she'll know. That's what she said to do.'

Later, he left Hope in bed asleep with a fresh bottle of cider on the floor at her side, and checked his emails. He got a lot of spam which he didn't even bother to delete. He'd been told that if someone wanted to put a virus on your computer then they'd send you an email and if you even clicked once it was too late. If he didn't know who'd sent something he just ignored it.

The email he did open was from an address he didn't recognise, but it had a subject line **Father – Instructions**. Inside was a phone number and the single word **soon**.

He felt a familiar anxiety. He was surrounded by people he'd thought he had left behind. People who would think nothing of hurting him. If Hope refused to phone, and she would, he'd be the one that got blamed. Anyway she'd be too pissed to have a sensible conversation.

He went back to the bedroom. Hope reached out, eyes still closed.

'Give us a cuddle, Joey.'

He gave her a kiss on the cheek, to keep her happy. 'You got to get up, Sweetie.'

'Lie down here.'

He stroked her cheek. He didn't know why he cared about her. She was nothing but trouble, but he understood her. He understood why she ran away from everything, back into her head, or bed.

'She wants us to phone her. Come on. Now.'

She turned her back to him and pulled the duvet around her.

He put his hand on her back. 'Look, I'm going to phone.' He took his mobile out of his pocket. 'I'll do the talking, but if she wants to speak to you, you got to make the effort, right.'

'Don't, Joey. I don't want to talk to her in this state.'

'I'm doing it.' He'd pre-dialled the number. 'It's ringing now.'

Dave allowed Hope the rest of the day to recover. He didn't know what she'd been told, but he'd been left in no doubt what he had to do and that it was his fault for letting her have alcohol in the house anyway. As if he could do anything to stop her. Firstly, he was to get all the drink out of the house. Second he was to deliver Hope to Gloucester early next morning.

He poured the last bottle of cider down the sink. He let her sleep until late afternoon and had a chicken curry ready for her when she woke up.

By next morning, he wouldn't have known she'd been on a binge. She was ready to talk to him.

'There's this bloke who works in Gloucester. You know that café near the Cathedral called Slice?'

'I don't go into Gloucester much.'

'It's halfway between the cross and the mission. You know. Well, this bloke works there. He's her son, but he don't know it.'

'So what does she want you to do about it?'

'I know him, see. He tracked me down 'cos of her, like that bloke yesterday. Thought I was his mum. He was nice. I wished I were his mum, really. I'd have liked a boy. Or a girl, but mostly a boy. A gay boy.'

They were sitting side by side on the sofa, this time both of them drinking the coffee. He squeezed her hand.

'It was a year ago, he just turned up. I was a bit off me head the first time and I don't know what I said, but he came back a few times. I didn't know anything really. I didn't know where his mum was and I wouldn't have said anyway.'

'Okay. So he just dropped it?'

'I told him what happened with her and me. Like it might help him understand why his mum had left him. He said he'd help me if he could, but he was only a kid, really. Not much he could do to help somebody like me.'

'So, you got to go and see him?'

'Today. She said you'd give me a lift. Right?'

‘You know how I’ve survived, Hope?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. ‘I’ve stopped being that person. I’m not Joey, I’m Dave, right? I’ve tried to remember the good stuff. Tried to remember my old friends like George and Tilly, and to think about other people and to be a useful member of society. I’ve got meself a job and I’ve earned money, and,’ he waved his hands at the room, ‘and I look after myself, and it’s not fucking fair.’

‘I’m so—’

He put his hand up to stop her. ‘It’s not. You and her coming here, bringing it all back, it’s not fair.’

‘We got...’ She paused as if she hadn’t decided how to finish the sentence. ‘We got to stick together, Joey. Dave. I don’t know what to call you. It never really finished, did it? Most of us have spent all our lives never trusting anybody; expecting everyone to take advantage. You know what? These last days staying with you, it just all built up, like I’m going to explode, because I don’t know how to deal with somebody who’s just being kind. I’ve been beaten up by every man I ever went out with, and I’ve just gone right back to them because I understand them. It’s all I understand. What you’ve done for yourself is amazing, with the computer stuff and having a job and everything, and I’m sorry it’s not fair, but I need to do this for me. So will you help me? Please?’

Dave parked his old van, with ‘Forest Logs’ on the side, in the Hare Lane car park, behind the Cathedral. He hardly ever came to Gloucester any more. Even to sell logs he preferred customers from Cheltenham, on the other side of the motorway. Some parts of town had too many memories for him, but this wasn’t somewhere he knew too well. Hope, even though she lived in Cheltenham, was

unable to stay away. The familiarity pulled at her, built up inside her until she had to come back. She'd asked him to avoid King's Square where she knew people.

They stood by the van dressed against the cold wind and the threat of rain. Dave wore fresh jeans and a thick, grey jumper; Hope had a full-length skirt, jumper, and jacket in blues and greens.

'Which way?'

She started walking. 'Come on. Through the Cathedral grounds is best.'

They passed the memorial of St John's spire, like the top of some long dead church swallowed up by the earth, and went through the gate. Dave stopped. The massive, gothic edifice towered over them and he remembered too many things at once.

'Come on.'

'Don't you feel it? But you weren't here that long, were you? House Father had a big picture of this place hanging up in the dining room. God's house and God's punishment. He knew what went on. He blamed us. Said we brought it on ourselves. Some of the men brought girls here and they turned tricks right against the walls.' He was shivering in the cold. 'They laughed at us because it terrified us, that God was here inside the walls, watching, seeing everything, judging us for not being strong enough, judging us for not fighting back.'

She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him forwards.

'There's no fucking God any more, Joey. You know that, don't you? One less thing to worry about.'

'There never was, Hope. There never was.'

They reached the main gate and turned their backs on the Cathedral and Hope pointed out Slice.

‘He works there. She said just to go and tell him.’

‘Tell him what?’

‘You had better come in.’

‘Are you in trouble, Sundance?’

‘Always. I don’t know.’

Art had been invited into Sundance’s hub for the second time in a week. The technology that Sundance seemed to wear like clothing made Art profoundly uncomfortable, but he recognised it as the price he had to pay for being on the inside. He certainly wouldn’t open up anywhere else. He couldn’t imagine taking Sundance to a pub.

‘To do with your visitors?’

‘Sort of. Emily yesterday, and these two today.’

‘Well?’

He never knew what would make Sundance take offence.

Art hadn’t been offered a chair, so he chose the one directly opposite the desk.

‘There’s a lot to tell you. It started before I came here. It’s why I came here really.’

Art listened. He was the closest thing that Sundance had to a friend. He told him about growing up as an adopted child with a Chinese father and English mother. He’d always known he was adopted, and he’d been led to believe, without ever being lied to, that he was a refugee, perhaps from Eastern

Europe. He'd always been bright, and his father was a lawyer and business man who arranged private tutoring for him until he died of a heart attack when Sundance was fourteen. In the same year, he'd been accepted as an underage student into Oxford University and thrown himself into the Computer Science course. Four years later he was already well on the way to a PhD when everything had all fallen apart after a visit from a journalist called Alex Gaveston.

Sundance had never heard of Gaveston, but it hadn't taken long to check his credentials. A well-known, highly respected journalist who had covered everything from the Winter of Discontent in the 1970s, through the miners' strikes in the 80s, to Cool Britannia in the 90s, the crash of 2008, and MPs scandals. A lifetime of covering big, bad-news stories. But this time Gaveston was reporting a tragedy on a different scale.

Gaveston told him things that, in retrospect, he'd have been better not knowing. He'd told him his origins. Sundance had never been curious about his real parents, thinking they were probably dead somewhere in the Balkans. Perhaps one day he'd get the 'Who Do You Think You Are?' bug and try to find out. But not now. There was too much to do. Too much to learn. He wanted to live his life, not pore over past history.

He was told his mother's name, and that she was raped and, most likely, murdered by his father. Gaveston's motives were a mess. He either didn't know or wouldn't tell who Sundance's father was. He was dying. He'd been involved in terrible things and never dared to speak of them. He wanted to make amends. He wanted people to know. He wanted to feel better. He wanted absolution.

Sundance had been sceptical at first. Until he was six he'd thought that he was half-Asian from his adopted father. His colouring suggested it, and he'd been brought up speaking basic Cantonese. And then, his mother had taken him aside and explained about adoption and that he'd been brought to them because of some terrible tragedy 'where his parents lived'. At the time, the television was full of resurgent unrest in Kosovo and he'd assumed that it was somehow related. Later he'd looked up about the Kosovo War, finding that the precursors had been coincident with his birth, and never questioned that that was where he came from.

He visited his mother in Guildford who reluctantly confirmed what she could of Gaveston's story. His birth mother was called Hope Carnaby and they had forms legally approving their adoption signed by Hope herself, although they'd never met her. They'd been told that she was very young when she'd given birth to Sundance. Gaveston and his father—his adoptive father—had known each other, and Gaveston knew that they'd recently been told they couldn't have children, and were looking into adoption. Gaveston himself had brought the child round to them, and they'd known immediately that they wanted to care for him.

Art cut in. 'The woman who visited this morning was called Hope.'

Sundance nodded.

'So ...'

'First, what Hope said this morning was that there's someone else in the game now. Hope isn't my mother, but I'm not the only one who thought she was, because she's been visited by a man who she believes is my grandfather. Someone quite well known in the tech world, it turns out. Someone who seems

to be pretty innocent in all this and is likely walking into it with no idea how much danger he might be in.'

'Danger?'

'Let me finish the story first. There's a little way to go yet. Despite Gaveston's belief that she was probably dead, against my mother's advice, I started to look for Hope Carnaby, and within a few days someone was onto me.' He settled back into his chair and put his feet on the desk. 'I had no reason to be careful. I had no idea what I was turning up.'

'What do you mean "someone was onto you"?''

'All my accounts hacked. My university desktop was taken over by a remote access Trojan. My university id was deleted and I had to fight hard to get it renewed. My home system attacked by a DDOS.' Art looked bewildered. 'Distributed Denial of Service. Basically zombie accounts from all over the world ...'

'Zombie accounts?'

'Hackers. They leave code inside computers until they need it. Then if they want to mount a DDOS, say, they activate the all these computers—zombie pcs—and they all send data requests to the target at the same time until it's overwhelmed. Someone declared war on me and I didn't even link it to my search for Hope at first.'

'Okay. This is hard to believe, Sundance. I mean, you're barely old enough to be a student and you're telling me you're an Oxford professor.'

'I'm telling you because you need to know. You wanted to know. You don't have to believe it. Obviously my name's not Sundance.'

'So. Go on.'

'I learned the hard way, about hacking, about the way the professional computer criminals work. Normally they're not all that good at this stuff. They're untrained coders and they write stuff that just about does what they want, but me—I'm good at this stuff. I was good then, but I'm much better now. I didn't cope too well at first. Every time I fought back something new would crop up. The university authorities didn't believe me. To them I was either lying or, perhaps worse, incompetent. How could I hope to be a world-leading IT academic if I let myself get hacked so easily. I had to leave. They said they'd treat it as a sabbatical if I got some sort of counselling. To be honest I had a breakdown. I spent a few weeks with my mother, but the harassment didn't stop.

'In the end, I took the sabbatical and I'll have to try to pick up the pieces one day. I wiped my old identity. Even my mother doesn't know where I am or who I am any more, but she's safe and that's the main thing. I check up on her sometimes.'

Art was leaning forwards, tapping the desk. 'The harassment has stopped?'

Sundance nodded.

'So how is it linked to this morning?'

'I chose Gloucester because I had tracked Hope Carnaby. My mother, I thought. Living in Cheltenham. I met her last year and heard her side of the story. Yes, that was Hope Carnaby you saw, but no, she's not my mother. This is where it gets strange.'

'Go on.'

‘Hope told me this amazing story of how she swapped identities with my biological mother on the day I was born. My mother had run away from a Children’s Home here in Gloucester. My father had raped her. This woman—this Hope—has recently been in touch with my mother. Or at least that’s what she says.

‘When I got here I knew I could run an IT business and that would be great cover. You let me rent the office and I bought the best equipment I could. I had two aims. Find out what happened to my mother, and track down whoever has tried to destroy my life online.

‘This time I was incredibly careful. You’ve no idea how many distractions I’ve put on the system so that it’s impossible to trace something back here. The software defences are state of the art, much better than anything you can buy off the shelf.’

Art stared at his musician’s hands, tracing the lines in his palms that he’d been told meant he’d live a long life and fall in love three times, the last time for ever. ‘I wish you’d told me.’

‘Can’t you see that people who know are in danger. I’m telling you now because you said I had to ... you know, if things got a bit outside the law.’

‘A bit outside the law. You’re talking Operation Yewtree meets The Net, Sundance. Or whatever your name is. Just tell the police.’

‘Tell them what? There’s not that much backed by evidence, anyway. I have no trail of proof to who is responsible. And as soon as I come out into the open it’ll all start again. Maybe worse. This guy kills people, Art.’

‘You don’t know that. You said this journalist thought your dad killed your mum and now you know it’s not true. Bad people, probably. But you don’t know he’s killed anybody.’

‘I don’t know if it is my dad, but I’m sorry, I do know he’s killed people.’

The story that Sundance had already told to Emily was retold. Toma Kasun, Chloe Huppert, leading to Tanya Wilson, and then Micky Wilson and Emily Stone. It was the mention of Emily that stopped Art.

‘She’s in trouble. I knew she was.’ He started to put it together as he listened. ‘They’ve had their online identities hacked? Like you did. I don’t remember this Chloe.’

‘Yes, you do. She was angry because her phone kept going off, and she thought it was broken. You tried to help her. You let her have a free coffee while I had a look at the phone.’

Art just stared at him.

‘When she died I did some research. It turns out she worked for the Corporate Social Responsibility Department of a big finance company in London and she’d come to talk to the protestors. Especially to Tanya Wilson. Tanya was a real activist and they’d met before. Chloe’s company had an interest in this big project going on the other side of Cheltenham. You’ll have heard of it—our MP, Norman Castle, wanting to build a mall in an AONB. Even though Chloe and Tanya were on opposite sides, they got on well. Her death seemed random, but the hack on her phone made me suspicious—and then her phone went missing after she died, and I was sure.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘Why on earth would I lie?’

‘Don’t play dumb, Sundance. You’ve built up this story and you’re smart enough to see that there’s a big hole in it.’

Sundance held eye contact; sitting back in his chair, not answering.

‘You’ve got to tell me everything, or how can I believe any of it?’

‘I’m not hiding anything ... important.’

‘It’s important to me. It involves me. You knew about Chloe and you got her to come here. Just like you knew about Emily and you lured her here, too. For all I know you got Chloe Huppert killed.’

Sundance looked away. ‘I didn’t know she was going to die. Or, at least, I wasn’t sure if that’s what he did, or when or how or any of the important questions. If I’d known, like I know about Emily, then maybe I could’ve done more to help her.’

‘How did you find her? What’s the connection?’

‘It wasn’t so simple. On the one hand, I had my own experience, and some tiny clues from the hacks on my identity. Tell-tale signatures. I couldn’t find this guy, but I felt I could recognise him if I saw his work. And then this place. It’s all set up perfectly to help people who are having serious problems. The word is out. You know that. You approved of it. We’re here to help, you said. I just wanted to target the right people.’

‘She just walked in?’

‘No. I had a few possible targets that I wanted to draw in. Word spreads on the internet. There are people who cyber-stalk for a hobby—Ratters we call them. They might be Black Hats, but more often they’re what we’d call Script Kiddies. They download off the shelf software and use it. They call their victims slaves. And then there are people who chase the Ratters. That’s a whole other

thing but you might call them Terriers. My father, if it is him, isn't typical. I don't think he's really a Ratter at all; he just uses some of the tools. But that meant I could start to zero in. Still, I was lucky with Chloe. She was the third person I'd checked out thoroughly. I used ads targeted on their tech, and chatrooms that they frequented, to lure them into getting in touch with us. The first two were just plain slaves. I fixed their problems and gave them advice on how to stay safe. It helps because the word gets out, but it also makes us a target. But as soon as Chloe turned up I could see the pattern.'

Art was intent. 'And you didn't tell me this because you knew you were putting us at risk.'

Sundance raised his hands. 'I felt bad. I'm ashamed. I'm sorry.'

'You should have told me.'

'I should have told you.'

'You really think Emily—and this other guy, Tanya's brother—are in real danger?'

'I think we're all in real danger. I could have done more to help Emily, but if I did that we'd never track him down.' His voice had dropped, almost to a whisper, as if he'd forgotten he was talking to someone else.

'I don't know. It seems like you're doing the best you can, but if she gets hurt ... well we couldn't live with ourselves, could we?'

Sundance was still faraway. 'This guy—he's smart, and committed to what he does. Suppose it really is my father. He might have started then, when he raped my mother. That means he's been getting away with it since before I was born, Art. How many people might he have killed? He could be the biggest

serial killer since Shipman, and like Shipman nobody even knows he's out there.'

'Except us.'

'Yeah. Except us.'

Sticky's phone goes off while he's looking for a pub. Just a text

Well done, Michael. First train from Birmingham. Don't miss it.

Oh, man. He shudders, and looks around. How does this guy know?

Nobody's followed him from Manchester, he's sure. Anyway why meet in Gloucester if he's in Manchester from the start?

And don't spend it all on drink.

Tough titty. He's gagging for a drink. There'll be plenty of cash left. He doesn't reply. He finds the first pub out of New Street Station, crosses the road and chooses the bar over the lounge. Brum's a foreign country to Sticky, but he's got the only currency that matters, burning a hole in his pocket.

He can see right away that there's no essential difference. By the station there's always a bunch of punters out for a night, looking for a good time. And homeless dudes outside in the street, begging for coppers and hoping not get a good kicking when the drinkers surface. Always sluts hanging round the bar, trying for a free drink and an easy john. He's got a fifty bags of smack and some blow, as well as the money, but of course it's dangerous selling off your turf. Bound to tread on somebody's toes.

There's a dealer hanging round in the corner, and they've clocked each other. Sticky wants to tell him he's just passing through. Not here for trouble. He finishes his drink, gives the guy a nod and walks out. It's gone one o'clock and

he needs somewhere to doss down. He thinks of going back to the station, settling down on some of the chairs, buying himself a coffee from the machines, when he sees a hell of a car cruise past the crossroads at the end of the road. This car he's seen before. It's not an ordinary car. It's the flashest car Sticky has ever even dreamed of. Of course, there's more than one BMW M4 in the country, but it's the coincidence. One day this car leaves Manchester. Two days later it's back and the stories about Tom Nolan's sausage sandwich hit the streets.

Sticky stands there at the side of the street as the car glides past, hoping that it doesn't stop. When it's disappeared he stands some more just staring, wondering whether it's going to suddenly back up to the junction.

He realises how exposed he is. He doesn't know Birmingham. In Manc he'd be up a ginnel and off by now. He melts into a shop doorway and thinks. Where will they look? The station. The pubs and clubs. The street, obviously. He sticks to the side, sticks to the shadows, hoodie pulled up. Marked out from the indigenous homeless by his backpack. He could try to make it to a hotel. He can see one down the road. But then he'd be stuck. They know where he is. He edges towards the station when he sees the car coming back the other way. By luck he's behind a gang of recycling bins as they go past. He watches them all the way to the junction he's just come out of where they stop. Maybe they've been asking questions.

Even in this light the car shimmers blue. He sees the two men get out, and it's confirmed. Like fucking rugby players, wide as brick shit-houses, one baldy, one pony-tailed. Fucking big guns for a small fish like Sticky. They stand by the car, talking.

His phone vibrates. And then again.

You have a problem, Michael.

Fucking problem. No kidding.

I want you to get close to them. Within 30 feet.

Got to be kidding. They'll tear his head off if they see him.

Now, Michael.

Micky moves a little closer, trying to judge the distance.

I've downloaded an app onto your phone. Open the app and wait until they leave.

He's crouched down, underneath a bridge against one of the supporting pillars. The car's across the road, so he reckons it can't be as much as thirty feet. He's not going any closer. There's a new app on his phone. 'Carcracker' it says. He taps it and watches it open up.

Ricky and Simon suddenly stand up straighter, clap each other on the shoulder and head off towards the station.

Micky's phone vibrates again.

That's it. You just hacked their car keys, Michael. Now use the app to open the door and drive the car away.

How the fuck's he going to do that? It isn't the first time Sticky's stolen a car, but in Manchester nobody would touch that car. Even the police would leave well alone. He stays out of sight of the pub and crosses the road so he can sneak up hidden by the M4. Crouching down low he checks his phone. It's simple to follow. He touches a button that says OPEN and tries the door. It opens smoothly, and he slides in.

He looks down the road, the way they went. They've reached the pub. Anybody in there would shop him. Especially the dealer. He'll remember Sticky, for sure. Both of them go in. He looks at the phone again and tries IGNITION. There's the slightest purr from the engine, and he's off.

#8 Komal Kumari

February 2008. York. Zikri Raja wanted to make a clean break with Malaysia. He was the sort of man who needed a home to go to, with comforts, and so he contacted business associates in England. He set up a number of video dates with daughters of these associates. Raja was 43 years old in 2006. The girls that he was vetting, to see whether they met his high standards, were between 14 and 22. It isn't clear whether he was prepared to wait a couple of years for the younger matches, but in any case he kept looking.

Komal Kumari was the most recent of his dates, on the very day that Raja was eliminated. She was 21 years old, and had graduated in 2007 from a university in her home town. She had not, I discovered, been allowed to attend a university away from home. I watched the footage of her date with Raja several times. It was, after all, my connection to Komal.

During the interview, her father sits beside her. Komal is clearly unhappy at the idea, even before Raja's podgy, well-groomed face appears on the screen. She fidgets, and is told off several times by her father for doing so. Raja seems completely unfazed by her attitude. She answers his question in single words, and his questions are, after all, not very open.

'How old are you, Komal?'

'21.'

'How tall are you?'

'Five feet and two inches.'

'What is your weight?'

'Eight stone and one pound.'

He appears to do a calculation on his notepad and then says, 'That's one hundred and thirteen pounds, yes?'

Her father smiles broadly. 'That is correct, Mr Raja. Is she not beautiful?'

'I wish her to stand so I can see her properly.'

And so on and so on. Raja seemed very pleased. Komal was embarrassed and furious. She had a first class degree in English Literature.

Arguably Komal's father could have been my target, and I was tempted by both, but strictly Raja had spoken to Komal, and so it went.

I followed Komal for fourteen months. She was allowed to work for her father as reception at his travel agent. He specialised in providing personalised package tours to India for second and third generation British Asians who wished to see the 'home country'. He considered Komal already old for marriage and he seemed to blame her for Raja's death in some obscure way.

Komal was smart. She had joined a network for British Indian Women which she originally logged into from university terminals, and then after university when I was watching her, from friends' houses, or in the library. This meant that she only connected once or twice a week. I became her BIW buddy, using an identity that I created carefully over the first week. My persona, Shernaz, was older than either of us—forty-three—and full of support and wisdom, but dead set against Komal trying to leave home. Shernaz argued that it was a matter of honour and culture that Komal support her family and try to win them around. I knew that Komal would agree, even though I didn't understand why.

In the end I wanted Komal to have an easy way out, and I had already picked another target—a younger girl yet, who she had spoken to on the BIW network.

I took a trip up to York, and arranged to meet Komal as Shernaz. Shernaz ‘just happened’ to be visiting on business (one of the reasons Komal respected Shernaz was that she ran her own business as an advisor to Asian women wanting to start up their own business in Britain).

I posed as Shernaz’s PA, giving Komal a lift to the Clifton area, which was easily within walking distance, where she was to meet Shernaz for a walk in the woods. Somehow she’d accepted this arrangement as perfectly natural, perhaps because it was easy for her to take a lunch break walk to meet an older, role model, woman. Her father accepted this as proper behaviour for a young woman. Unfortunately, records would show later, Komal had bought a rope, researched how to make a noose and the most effective way of hanging herself, and had already prepared a suicide note on line that morning. Her dear friend Kavya Ganguly, from the BIW, received the email just minutes before Komal released her hands from the branch and dropped to her death.

8

Chelsey's problem had been the timescale. She'd had the video for a week now and she'd run out of ideas for ways to glean more information from it, but the missing person angle was hard to follow up. Nobody had turned up dead and dismembered, and there were no big missing person cases reported in the press. Many people went missing for several days before they were reported, and unless minors were involved missing person reports often weren't taken seriously for a few days after that. If the woman in the video was one of Britain's enormous underclass of vulnerable people then she was going to be very hard to track down.

She'd left the whole question of the video alone for the whole of Thursday, feeling guilty that she hadn't got back to Ainsley. Instead, she'd reviewed the latest smartphone release, and a couple of strategy video games, and begun an article on what might replace the craze for match-em-up flash games. This last was the sort of speculative writing that she'd always been warned against, and the sort she enjoyed the most. Even at college she was told that predicting technology would lead to ridicule a thousand times for every once that you got it right—and then everyone would say it was luck, if they noticed at all.

She began to trawl the missing person sites—charities, local police forces, even looking for keywords on twitterfeeds—always focussing on Gloucestershire and surrounding counties. As expected there was very little to go on, and the people reported had usually been missing for months, or even years.

She switched to more general news sites and then to searching for any statement about someone disappearing or going missing. It was a long painful process with very few relevant hits. She'd been at it for nearly two hours when she found articles about Romany camps in Gloucestershire, and from there to a protest camp in Severn Vale. There was a blog by a self-styled camp-manager called Anthony.

The front page was PR. He talked about the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, about its environmental and historical significance (a Roman Villa had been partly excavated close by), and about the owner, Norman Castle, MP, and his intentions to build a huge shopping centre on the site. There was a quote from Castle to the effect that he was choosing the lesser of two environmental evils for the good of the community—shale gas fracking explorations had been done in the area and he'd hinted that if he chose he could exploit the mineral rights.

Once she clicked onto the recent blogs, she thought she'd been lured there by repeated uses of phrases suggesting that camp-members had 'disappeared overnight' or 'walked out never to be seen again', which he used bitterly to describe how the camp had gradually fallen apart. The number of protestors was down to single figures after, according to Anthony, a campaign of bullying and intimidation.

And then, in the last week, he'd posted about a woman who had disappeared. Out of character, one of the camp's most committed members, she'd simply disappeared from her tent without anyone seeing. Her car, parked in a nearby lane, was untouched, but then she did have a partner in the camp and might have left the car for him. Anthony clearly thought she was another

victim of the anti-protestor campaign, but they hadn't heard from her. He'd posted a picture of her. Tanya Wilson.

Chelsey knew enough not to get too excited by finding one possible solution to a problem, but it was her first break. She needed to chase up Ainsley and find whether he'd ever heard of the woman, or the protest site. Whoever had sent this to him had to have a good reason.

Churchdown was green fields criss-crossed with brown ramblers' paths, and rows of semi-detached Cotswold stone houses with smoking chimneys, and drivers who waved you on instead of cutting you up. Over-familiar with London, Ainsley was starting to wonder how anyone could cope with spending time out here. Most of his neighbours were either away all week, or only arrived back home late into the evening. Gloucester was on the edge of the commuter zone for west London. He'd checked and found the train to Paddington from Gloucester was just 2 hours; if he made the twenty minute drive to Stroud it was only around 90 minutes. It made him feel less trapped in the countryside.

On Friday morning he took a walk around his new neighbourhood. He was on the corner at the end of an offshoot of tarmac that seemed to spill out from the rest of the street and pool in his driveway. His only immediate neighbour had a car in the drive, but there was no sign of life. He wandered down the road, deliberately taking his time and looking around for the first time. There were bonfires in back gardens, glimpsed through side gates. He'd forgotten the time of year, although the nip in the air, like the burning aftertaste of a good whisky, was enough to remind him. In London there'd be fireworks on

most nights in the week leading up to Bonfire Night, but here everyone seemed to be waiting for the big day.

By the time he got back home he was much more well-disposed to his new habitat. Even walking in the London parks he'd never felt this level of connection to nature. Perhaps he'd made the right move after all. On the other hand he'd set aside the rest of the day for a trip to Gloucester. Sinclair and Hope had only given him a street name for Tilly Carlin and her partner, Lee, and a friendly warning to watch his back while he was there. Sure. He'd lived in London for thirty years. He could look after himself.

The online map convinced him that he could park in a part of Gloucester that he felt familiar with—the King's Square car-park—and take a fifteen minute walk up Barton Street to Cinderford Street.

With five minutes of leaving the car he felt like he was in a different city again. He was used to the centre of London where, despite the very different feel of different areas, you could walk for miles and still feel like you were in the centre of London. Here he walked down one of the 'Gates', Eastgate Street, and was at an inner ring road within a half a mile. Across the ring road and he was on Barton Street and looking for the turn-off to Cinderford Street.

Barton Street was busy. A long narrow road full of independent small shops: an off licence that seemed to distinguish itself with a pro-European branding, specialist hair products, a closed down beauty salon with peeling paint and black plastic tacked over the windows. The road had a feeling of community that he hadn't felt here before. A doctor's surgery stood right next to a chemist. Further down, One-eyed Jacks, was a thriving pub, only a few yards

from a halal butcher, and a defiantly British barber shop. At regular intervals the flow was punctuated by betting shops. Eventually he reached a corner with traffic lights and a tattoo shop, and Cinderford Street to his right.

The street was narrow with terraced houses pressing in on both sides. There was a combination of red brick, peeling white-painted brick, and every ten or so houses, crumbling pebble-dash. A few houses in, not distinguishable from a distance from the rest of the buildings, was another pub, The Thomas Pury Arms. It was as good a place to start as any and he was ready for a pint after his morning walk and the stretch up Barton Street.

It was one of those bars with only one room, the nominal bar and lounge areas separated only by the corner of the bar. The lounge was to the left with banquettes by the roadside windows, dark, but unidentifiable, wooden tables and a blackboard facing that suggested food was available to those who liked fish and chips or steak and ale pie. Straight ahead was the bar area, already populated with a dozen men, nursing pints, some standing at the bar, and some leaning against chest high tables in the same unspecified wood.

Ainsley chose the bar in the hope that someone there would know where to find Tilly Carlin. The barman was small and bald and older than Ainsley.

‘What you got?’

A hand waved towards to pumps on the bar. ‘IPA, lager, cider, beer. What do you want?’

He was technically in the West Country. In London he’d have a lager for starters, but here ...

‘Cider?’ He peered at the pumps. ‘Old Rosie?’

‘Fine choice. Not seen you about. We do a nice steak and ale pie if ...’ he waved his hand again, towards the lounge this time.

‘Maybe later. I’m looking for someone.’

‘Oh yeah. You po-lice?’ He pronounced it with two clear syllables, emphasising the ‘lice’.

Ainsley took cash out of his back pocket. ‘No, no. It’s more like a reunion thing. My daughter lived round here a long time ago, and she knew someone called Carlin.’ There was a blank look. ‘Matilda. Tilly. Tilly Carlin.’ The man’s eyes looked over Ainsley’s shoulder and back to him, but he still said nothing. ‘Maybe lives with someone called Lee?’

The Old Rosie was a satisfying yellowy-orange and tasted, alarmingly, of apple. He’d somehow come to believe that there was only a historical connection between cider and the fruit.

‘Tilly, right. Your daughter.’ He looked like he didn’t believe a word, but didn’t really care. ‘See yon chap with the hat and half a beard?’

Ainsley nodded. There was only one.

‘Him and his mates’ll know where Lee is, and if Tilly’s, you know. Available.’

Hat-and-half-a-beard was Dan. He wanted a fiver to phone Lee and ask if it was cool to send Ainsley round. No guarantees. Ainsley figured Lee for Tilly’s pimp. Dan was chancing his arm by asking for money, but he’d rather have these guys on side so he handed over the cash. Two minutes later he was given the house number. He thanked them, drained his glass, and told the barman he might be back later for pie. He felt rather pleased with himself, and pleasantly full of cider when he stepped back out into Cinderford Street.

Number 43 was no different from the others. The door was heavy, green and streaked with mud.

A tall, skinny youth, maybe in his early twenties and wearing a stained G-Star tee-shirt answered his knock, looked him over and when Ainsley said 'Lee', simply turned round and walked back down the corridor. Ainsley followed.

There were three more in dark room, curtains drawn; two sofas with bodies reclining, one sprawled on the floor, and skinny pacing. The heating was turned to high and the room stank of weed and lager.

'Guys says he wants you, Lee.' Skinny's voice was gravelled.

One of the heads on a sofa turned towards him.

'It's Tilly I'm looking for. Bloke at the pub said you'd know where I could find her.'

Lee stood. His head was shaved and he had a spider tattoo on his temple. Easy to remember.

'Who's looking?'

'Ainsley. Ainsley Griffin.' He held out a hand. A gesture of goodwill that he didn't expect to be accepted.

'She's my girl.'

'I just want to talk. Ask her some questions.'

Lee turned to his audience and twitched a smile. 'He just wants to talk. Seen her have you? Thought you'd try your luck. Costs to 'talk' to Tilly.'

Ainsley nodded. 'No problem. Twenty quid.'

Lee stepped right up to him. 'How much you got, Ainsley Griffin? You look like a rich man.'

'I've got thirty quid cash on me.'

Lee stuck his hand out, and Ainsley handed it over, pre-prepared in his back pocket. He knew not to handle wallets with people like this.

‘Fuck off. She’s upstairs. You got twenty minutes then I’m coming up to throw you out.’

Up the stairs a bed room door was half open and he could see a woman lying on the bed. All he knew about Tilly Carlin was that she’d been about ten in the photo from 1994, so she’d be early thirties now, and that she’d been wild and Joe Sinclair said she was a junkie.

‘Tilly?’

He stepped into the room. It was small, and the only light was blocked by him standing in the doorway. The smell of lager was stronger here. He could make out clothes strewn around the floor, but half a dozen pairs of shoes were arranged neatly down the wall on his left. As he entered he passed the open door and could see the bed to his right more clearly.

Tilly squinted at him through one eye. He’d interviewed girls on the game in London, but none of them had looked like this. She wore elasticated pyjama bottoms that were clearly designed for comfort, not seduction, and a filthy white t-shirt. Her hair was shoulder length, dyed a sort of brown-red, and tangled. She had the skinny, wasted look of the addict. As if he’d suddenly come into focus for her, she smiled, and he realised that she had the tapering jaw-line, small mouth, and wide eyes that a Hollywood actress would pay a fortune for.

‘Not seen you about, darling. You give Lee the money?’

He nodded. ‘I just want to ask some questions, Tilly.’

She rolled onto her front and looked back at him, in a parody of seduction. ‘I can answer questions and fuck at the same time.’

Ainsley pushed the door to, but stood by the wall.

‘You remember Hope Carnaby?’

As if by instinct, she was suddenly curled up against the headboard, hands across her chest. ‘Fuck off.’

‘I want to find her, Tilly. I’m not here to hurt you.’

‘I said fuck off.’ Her voice was higher and louder and Ainsley worried that the men downstairs would hear. ‘Did he send you?’

‘Who?’

‘Fuckofffuckofffuckoff.’ Her voice lowered and her head bent forwards.

He walked over and put his hand on her shoulder. ‘I’m sorry, Tilly. I know some of what happened. I want to find my daughter, and I want to ... expose the men who abused you.’

She flinched away from him and then turned and retched, but nothing came out.

‘I’ve seen Joey Sinclair, and this other girl who pretended to be Hope.’

Closer he could see that she was very drunk, but trembling, due a fix, trying to put it off. He put his arm around her, and held her head close to his shoulder.

‘It’s okay, Tilly. I just want to help.’

She sniffled and reached down the side of her bed, pulling up an open can of Skol. He had the feeling she wasn’t a brand follower.

‘You don’t know nothing.’

‘Tell me.’

‘He’ll find out.’

‘Who? Lee?’

'Twat. Course not. Lee don't know nothing, either.'

'Then who? How could he find out? I'm not telling. Not unless I get enough proof to have him sent to jail.'

'Fucking hell. Half the fucking police used to be there. Nothing you can do.' The beer was calming her down. She sipped more and he steadied the can for her. 'He knows everything. Big fucking brother.'

'What happened to your sister? And there was another girl, Joey said. Helen?'

'Aw, Helen was lovely. I liked Helen. He stabbed her.'

'You saw it?'

'She was lovely Helen was. Best friends wi' me and Mad.'

'What happened, Tilly? To Helen, and Maddy.'

'It was a normal party-night. Except he was there. I didn't know who he was then. He'd only been once before. He picked Helen, see. She'd not done it before and it was his first time on his own. He was young then.' She emptied the can, and searched out another from the floor. 'I was with this other bloke. Just following his instructions but I watching out for Helen, and then the boy goes in with her and all hell breaks loose.' She opened the next can, shaking her head from side to side. 'All fucking hell breaks loose. The King bundles everybody out, but my man hasn't finished and he's drunk and he pushes me behind the door and fucks me while we watch. The King and his mate, Raymond, they carry these sheets out between them, covered in blood, and I know she's in there. I cried, 'cos I know she's dead, and I'm thinking maybe she's the lucky one. I hardly knew when he'd finished with me. He goes and leaves me and then they come back in and the King's fuming when he sees me.'

Raymond took me back to the home. Gave me money and told me to keep quiet.'

She'd settled now, but time was against them. If Lee was keeping track, he'd be up here any moment to chuck him out. He'd been too intent on getting her to talk, but now he could hear voices downstairs.

'What's the names, Tilly. The King. Is he the one you're scared of?'

'Mandy ran off. Not seen here since. She was scared to death.'

'A name?'

'It was him she was scared of. Not the King of the Castle. The boy... the Partyboy's what he said to call him. He killed Helen, and I reckon he killed Hope. Maybe.'

'Names, Tilly.' He waited and got no answer. 'You know their full names?'

Footsteps on the stairs.

'Tilly?'

'When Hope went, Maddy'd had enough.'

Light flooded in, and then a shadow. Tilly was gone again.

He leaned close and whispered. 'Thanks, Tilly. Take care.'

When he turned, Lee stood at the door. Standing he was short but broad, crab-like with bandy legs and arms that hung like bows at his side.

'That's another twenty, I reckon, rich man.'

'You got all I brought. I'm going now.'

Lee didn't move and Ainsley realised he wasn't going to get out.

'If there's a cash machine close by I can bring some back.'

Lee stood aside and gesture for him to walk past. At the top of the stair he felt a hard shove in his back and tried to grip the smooth wall and then he

was falling, sideways and downwards, his shoulder crashing into the wall, his foot catching between the balusters and wrenching, then a kick to the head and falling and rolling until he landed in a painful heap against the front door.

Lee stood over him. He felt hands rummage through his pockets and his wallet pulled out. He thought perhaps his foot was broken. His shoulder and neck stabbed agonisingly and he moaned and felt a kick to his side.

The door was pulled open and he was tumbled outside. The door was slammed shut behind him. He lay. After a few minutes footsteps drew close and someone stepped out into the road to avoid him. He listened as they hopped back onto the pavement and walked away. Eventually he rolled onto his side and pushed himself up into a sitting position. Finally, he tried to stand, his left leg unable to take his weight, and somehow he dragged himself back down the street to the pub.

Sticky doesn't have a clue how to get to Gloucester. He drives as straight as he can for about two miles, following signs for Edgbaston. It's a name he knows from the cricket. He wonders whether it's the same place, because he didn't know they did cricket in Birmingham. He's more a football sort of guy. If it were Villa Park or St Andrews or The Hawthorns he'd at least know what teams they were, but cricket grounds are a bit of a mystery.

The car is the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. Everything he'd thought it would be. Smooth and powerful. He's worried that driving through Birmingham at two in the morning in a car like these he's sure to be pulled over. He should ditch it. Anybody would. But he sees himself, not Sticky the drug

dealer, but Micky Wilson, driving this beautiful machine and he can't do it, so he sticks to the limit and tries to look like he knows what he's doing.

After another mile he starts to see signs for The South and the M5 motorway. He could stop and use the satnav but he's feeling this trail behind him. They'll know the car's gone by now, and it won't take long for them to guess he's taken it. If they found him in Birmingham then they'll know he's off to Gloucester. He wonders whether they've got hold of Charmaine. They might have tortured her, though how the fuck they'd know to do that, and what she could tell them, he had no idea. For a second he's tempted to head back to Manc to try and rescue her, but common sense says he's well too late. Sticky's no hero.

He's watched this programme on TV where they hunt people down, and he knows how hard it is to go missing in Britain. He knows all the ways they can use to track somebody down. He can't believe they'd call the police on him, though. Too many questions.

Half an hour later, he sees the first major service station at Strensham. He needs a piss and it'll give him chance to work out the satnav. All it needs is for him to type in Cheltenham Station. He's been thinking. Once they realise he's gone they'll expect him to drive to Gloucester, but Cheltenham's just as good. Since this bloke seems to know where he is, then he'll know he's at Cheltenham not Gloucester and they can meet there. Right?

The satnav says 20 minutes. Fuck, he's almost there.

Back in the car he relaxes. Things are going well. He's got money, and he's driving the absolute shit. He's forgotten Ricky and Simon for now. Somehow, he thinks, this guy in Gloucester will sort that out for him.

Once off the motorway he's driving super-carefully. It's three a.m. now and any car on the road is going to attract attention from bored cops. The satnav takes him all the way to the station, where he pulls into a near empty car park. And parks in a twenty minute free waiting space.

He takes out his phone and there's nothing. He's still got hours to kill. If he dumps the car then it'll be found, traced and they'll know where he's gone. If he keeps hold of it, that's probably worse. He's doing flip-flops inside now as the anxiety kicks back in. Ricky and Simon, they're no amateurs. They've probably got a tracker on the fucking thing. He pulls out and drives it down to the far end of the car park, hidden away in the corner. Then he fishes coins out of his pocket and pays for a week. The machine takes notes, and he's got plenty. Twenty five quid. Expenses.

His phone's got Maps on it so he takes a walk towards the town centre, thinking this must be what Altrincham must be like. Even in the dark he can see that it's ripe. Big and fruity, and quiet, and full of juice. When it's over he'll get Char. If they haven't, you know, killed her. He feels guilty. Or tortured her. If she forgives him for not coming back for her. He'll get Char and they'll get rich in Cheltenham. It's obvious that if they can survive on the streets in Manc then they can make a fortune in soft, southern Cheltenham.

#9 Kavya Ganguly

February 2012. Kavya Ganguly! She is perhaps my first love. I only met her once in person, and it didn't end well, but I know her better than I know anyone else. The name, according to the illiterate sources, means Poetry, but the least bit of digging (and I've done much more than that) soon uncovers that Kavya is a lyrical style of Sanskrit full of metaphor and wit.

It's odd to think that I'm 29 years old and haven't considered the importance of relationships in my life. I'm not a navel gazer; I'm connected. I connect with people, in as much as I work them out, decide what they want, and want I want from them, and deal with them accordingly. Kavya wants to escape from the stifling patriarchy of her life in Leicester.

I have learned to enjoy my waiting and preparation so much that I have been reluctant to execute the final act. For two years I research Kavya Ganguly, considering every option, learning so much about her, and finally being able to interact with her without her knowledge.

This time has been about learning my trade all over again. Technology is sweeping through the masses, and bringing opportunities with it. I learn to hack mobiles, and Kavya is an early adopter. When she buys one of the new iPhones my whole strategy changes. Why rush into things when your target carries a mobile surveillance device with her? I am soon able to track her movements, and send untraceable messages. Hacking the camera doesn't have the impact I hoped. Most of what I get are pictures of the inside of a handbag. Once I know her haunts I am able to figure out the CCTV networks that cover her movements. Television's Big Brother house is a microcosm of the real world. CCTV is operated by public and private organisations, and often not connected

to the net. It's a project to connect to as many networks as I can, just in case. This involves a certain amount of travel, because physical intervention is often necessary. A simple wifi device clipped onto an appropriate wire, and suddenly I can see whole neighbourhoods. It's clear this will be a resource for the future, and if I connect to as many networks as possible now then no clever detective could ever link the CCTV hacks to my trail. Not that anyone will ever get that close.

Building Society, Greyfriars, Leicester:

July. 9.30 am. Raining. Kavya walks towards the entrance wearing a flowered, light-blue dress, holding a transparent plastic umbrella with pink elephants around the edge.

Cut.

Kavya is inside folding down the umbrella. She smiles and walks towards the atm. She takes her card from her purse, daintily, between the tips of her fingers and inserts it. Hands slightly splayed so her long fingernails don't touch the keys she taps, lightly and elegantly as if she knows her performance is being watched.

Just like that I have my first glimpse of Kavya and I have her PIN number all at the same time. Not that I would steal from her. Far from it. The next day her phone wakes her with a ping and a message calling her a slut and telling her to check her bank account. I have deposited £1000 as payment for the entertainment she has given me—untraceable, of course.

I spend a day setting alarms on her phone, with messages such as '20 minutes until Yama judges you' and 'November 4th 2012 05:00 RIP'. Nothing too clever.

It is such a sweet pleasure lasting over two years. I wake every morning and eagerly read the logs of her movements and watch video captures of her. And yet unless the deed is done it is all based on a lie, and so eventually I focus and plan and carry out the next step in the chain.

She is much freer than Komal ever was, her parents more accepting of the British part of her British-Asianness. At first Kavya tells her friends, although she doesn't understand what's happening. Stalking, bullying, hounding, threatening: none of this seems to describe it fully. Sometimes I send sweet messages of support, or gifts, or money. Her friends are shallow, thoughtless girls who say they wish they had such problems. Other times I send abuse, or pictures of her in bed, or Facebook comments about the death of her friend in York.

In 2011, she stops going out. I watch her in the street shy away from strangers walking towards her. She suspects everyone. She avoids eye contact. She withdraws from her family. She cries herself to sleep. She begs to the world for it to stop, knowing that I will hear. I have become her God. An Old Testament God to fear.

I give her a way out, like I did to Komal, but Kavya comes willingly, bringing all her technology with her. She follows my instructions to drive to a wood in Warwickshire—Hay Wood. She leaves her car and walks the last half a mile. Cameras, pre-set in the trees, monitor her. I wait until she is almost ready to give up and drive home. I watch the despair and the hope mingle together, and then send her a message. To her left is an oak tree with a cloth tied around it. Behind the tree is a flask full of home-made chloroform, knocked up in the basement. Plenty of Deathdiaspora.net advice on how to make it, but it took

several attempts, tested by self-administration to get it right. Bleach and acetone make it one of the simplest and least risky drugs to synthesize in a home lab.

She soaks the cloth, lies on her back, and drapes it over her face. I leave her for five minutes, based on my experimental data before I drive in from the other direction. I wear a mask, and I cut her systems off from outsiders before I get too close. Then I place her in my car boot, stripped, tied and gagged. Another ten minutes to remove all the cams and give her a second dose of chloroform. It can have dangerous side effects if administered for too long, but that hardly matters. Ten minutes later I am well on my way home and can hear her wake and start to struggle. I rather enjoy it.

The temptation to keep Kavya in the basement is almost overwhelming. Imagine having her there for weeks, months, perhaps years. I love watching her, but I am very aware of the dangers of these enslavements. Women taken and kept for years, in the end out of habit, out of sentimentality, out of cowardice. I promise her it will be quick, but when the moment comes she can't bear it. She sits in front of a screen in the basement and reads my message. All she has to do is take pills while I watch. She picks one up, shakily, but can't put it in her mouth.

Finally I go in there and we meet. I'm sad about this because I know that I can't control myself. When she tries to speak I put my finger to my mouth and shake my head. She cries steadily. I put bottles on the table. Whisky, vodka, gin. I carefully wipe a glass and pour. She drinks whenever I tell her to and then I force her over the table. It's been a long time because I can't trust myself; sex and death are too closely tied together. Memories come flooding

back, of Helen, and Raymond, and Father, and it's all I can do not to strangle her as I come. She's barely conscious anyhow. I'm disgusted at myself at I force more drink down her, this time loaded with drugs and anti-emetics. I lock the door and watch her, lying on the floor, barely recognisable as the woman I love. I leave her three days to make sure she's really gone.

9

Waking up back home Ainsley had only the vaguest recollection of how he'd got there. It was still dark outside. He remembered someone calling an ambulance from the Thomas Pury. Paramedics had come, given him morphine and, assessing the likelihood of a fractured tibia and broken ribs, had taken him the short journey to Gloucester Royal. The painkillers had made the rest of the day seem vague. There was a long wait at A&E. He'd been searched for weapons, which had seemed funny to him at the time. A triage nurse had failed to get much sense out of him. He remembered a phone call.

He sat up sharply and stifled a cry of pain. His chest and side ached. Under a buttoned up pyjama top he was wrapped around with bandages.

He remembered something else. 'Chelsey?'

Footsteps on the stairs and a familiar head popped round the bedroom door.

He tried to ease himself back against the pillow with the least pain possible. 'It was you.'

She still looked fabulous, even wearing his old dressing gown. She sat on the bed beside him, gingerly, reached down and resurfaced with a glass of water and a blister pack of tablets. 'Two every four hours. But ...' She reached down again and pulled out a separate tub and rattled it. 'You can take these others in between times if the effect wears off.'

He swallowed two gratefully.

'What do you remember, old man?'

‘Not a lot. I was out of it. They were ...’ he touched the bandages around his chest, ‘wrapping me up, and I was wondering how the hell I was going to get home and then there was a phone call ...’

‘Yeah, lucky.’ She paused. ‘Well not that lucky. Lucky the hospital is close to the station though. I was calling for a lift and next thing I know I’m helping you to your car—you need to pay me back for the parking, by the way—you’re snoring in the passenger seat and I’m driving you.’

‘I’m glad you’re here.’ He pressed the bandages slightly. ‘I don’t remember ... broken ribs?’

‘Apparently you’ve got strong bones. Heavy bruising round the chest, and a badly twisted knee. Six weeks, they say.’

‘Funny. They always say six weeks. I remember back...well a long time ago. In hospital with a fractured skull. Six weeks, they said.’

‘What happened, Ainsley? You either couldn’t or wouldn’t talk at the hospital.’

‘What time is it?’

She pointed at his bedside clock. Still night really. Nearly quarter past five.

‘I’m hungry. Haven’t eaten anything since lunchtime yesterday.’

‘Doctors said to take it careful. Drugs in your system. You might throw up if you eat too much.’

‘How about I come downstairs and we have coffee and toast and ... well that’s probably all I’ve got for breakfast, to be honest. I don’t know much, but I’ll tell you what I know.’

Ainsley never seemed to do anything when you were watching. Whenever she asked him what he'd been doing he'd say, 'Nothing much.' And then, when she asked what that meant, he'd give her a run down on his activities and she'd wonder how the hell he'd managed to do all that when she'd swear he'd not left his flat/office/bed for three days.

They sat and drank strong coffee, Ainsley's foot up on a chair, and Chelsey listened. She wanted to connect with him first, and she knew he'd want to get on with the job.

'So. How is it here? Gloucester, I mean.'

'I've not had much time to sit back and enjoy it, you know? It's ...' He sipped coffee. '...quiet, I guess.'

She laughed. 'You've hardly been having a quiet time by the look of you.'

'I mean. Well. When's the last time you talked to someone about, say, Europe, or immigration.'

He seemed serious so she thought back. 'Train station yesterday, before I set off. People were gathering for a protest march, about Brexit. Strange alliances. Half of them wanted to stay in Europe and the other half wanted us to leave without a deal.'

'So here ... nobody's interested. When I left London I thought I'd broken out of the bubble. Now I don't know whether this is the bubble. London is so connected. It has all this diversity. Here if they think about immigration it's about what might happen, one day in the distant future.'

'I get that, though. When I first arrived in London, I wondered why nobody cared about fundamentalist Christians, and gun laws, and abortion, and police abuse of racial minorities. It's not part of life here, the way it is back home.'

Ainsley nodded, slowly. 'We asked people to vote on something that they don't feel. It hardly impacts them, except through television and newspapers. They won't know what they voted for until it happens.'

'None of us do, Ains. Anyway. I didn't come here to talk politics. Tell me how you ended up in hospital.'

He briefed her the way he used to brief her on stories they had agreed to collaborate on.

Hope was out there somewhere, and she might know he was looking for her.

There was a woman, Elizabeth, who had been pretending to be Hope for twenty years.

Pretty much everyone he'd met had been screwed up by a paedophile ring from way back in the 90s.

At least one child had been killed. Others had disappeared.

One of the women who had known his daughter had talked about the King of the Castle and Partyboy.

His daughter had been raped as a child many times, and she had a child taken away from her. She believed that Partyboy was the father.

He set it out like a puzzle. Each piece clearly weighed and set out in relation to the others for analysis. Like one of the chess games she'd seen him play, and invariably win, online. When he'd finish they lapsed into silence while she thought. He'd given up London and his comfortable career there for his daughter, so her first question was direct and obvious.

'And you're sure about your daughter—Hope? She's alive?'

‘As sure as I can be without her coming to see me and handing direct proof. This woman, Elizabeth, seems to have nothing to lose by telling me. She seemed scared of Hope.’

‘That’s good news then, so far as it goes.’ She paused before deciding to move onto her own subject. ‘But what’s it got to do with the video?’

She could see from the way he looked at her that he was weighing up his answer. This wasn’t the first time he’d thought about it, he was simply deciding how much to tell her. ‘There must be another player. It’s not coincidence that the video arrived the day that I was due to come to Gloucester. It’s either someone we are already aware of, or someone we aren’t.’

‘Genius, Sherlock.’

‘The truth is always at the end of a series of tautologies, Chelsey. Who are we already aware of? The people I’ve met here really don’t seem capable of stealing the footage and hacking my cloud account. From what I’ve heard my daughter might be.’

‘And the murderer himself.’

He looked at her sharply. ‘Yes. Him, too. But why would he think to target me, and why would he incriminate himself?’

She drained her coffee. ‘Well if you want to go beyond tautologies ...’

‘There’s another possibility, too.’

‘Go on?’

‘I have a grandchild. Hope was raped and had a baby. He or she would be about twenty now, if the baby ever survived.’

They settled into silence, thinking about the consequences. He had a whole family. Chelsey was pleased for him, hoped that he’d find them, but felt

pangs of jealousy, too. Eventually she stood. 'More coffee?' She picked up both mugs and he heard the kettle heating up. When she came back he'd thought things through a little more.

'My grandchild is a stretch. Even if he or she knows her origins we have no idea what sort of person they are or whether they'd be interested. Hope is primary suspect for the video, because she might have motive for bringing me into this, but I don't understand why she's acting so secretively. The murderer, who may or may not be the man who raped her, might have done it if he knew I was coming here anyway.'

'I don't see why.'

'If he thinks I'm going to get involved anyway, coming down here, searching for Hope, then it's better that he makes a connection with me. Draws me in on his terms. Shows me he's in control. That he can infiltrate my systems. It seems to me that they're equally likely.'

'Right. Now I've got some information for you. Something to add to the pot.' It was her turn, after all her hard work on the video. She only had one thing to report, but it was a humdinger.

'I've found a link between the video and Gloucester. I think the woman in the film is Tanya Wilson, disappeared from a protest camp on the grounds of a local MP, Norman Castle.'

Ainsley sipped the coffee and screwed his eyes up at the bitterness. He heaped two more spoons of sugar and stirred gently. 'Norman Castle. Not my thing, politics. I've heard of him, but that's about it.'

Chelsey had her tablet out. Notepad bullet-points ready to update him.

‘Successful businessman. A family company called Quercus, which he owns and chairs. They own subsidiaries in almost every sector, mostly British. He wants to build a big shopping centre in one of your pretty Cotswold fields, and threatens that if they don’t let him he’ll sell it off to frackers—that’s what Tanya Wilson was protesting about. Elected as MP for Severn Vale in 2010. Plenty of charitable connections but he’s in bed with the more acceptable right-wingers—anti-Brexit groups and such, and rumoured to have connections to neo-nazi outfits.’

‘Norman Castle. The King of the Castle. Bloody hell. It’s plausible.’

‘You’re damn right, it’s plausible.’

‘There’s a lot to think about, Chels. How are you fixed? I mean coming up here to Gloucester. Don’t you have work to do?’

Just like Ainsley. Pushing her away.

‘This is about the most important thing I could be doing, don’t cha think?’

‘You should be out there earning money. Building your career.’

‘I’ve got three articles lined up with buyers, and about three more months’ worth of work offered. It’s ticking over. Apparently some big tech journalist ran off to the country and left a gap in the market. Anyway, my social life sodded off to Gloucester. If I hadn’t caught your work ethic I’d take a vacation.’

‘I don’t have much furniture. Christ, I don’t even know where you slept last night.’

‘I’m fine on the sofa. I’m fine. I’m here, and I’ll stay here while you need me. Let’s get down to work.’

They set up in the living room, Ainsley half lying, with his foot up on the coffee table, Chelsey sitting at the window with her tablet.

'It's nice here. You found yourself a good spot. Roomy, too.'

'Too big, I guess. I had these ... ridiculous ideas.'

She looked at him, wondering what sort of ideas he found ridiculous.

Wishing he'd say something about his feelings for a change. 'Go on.'

'You know. A new life. You said it. Work ethic. I love my work but I've put aside a whole of other things in my life. People things. I thought maybe I'd find my daughter. Maybe I'm too old for a young family and kids, but I've missed out on this woman's whole life. Let her down. She has a child of her own, probably an adult by now. Maybe I'm selfish, Chels, because even though I know I've let them down, and they've suffered because of me, I feel sorry for myself. I missed out on it all.'

'Yeah. I get that.'

'But you're not that sympathetic.'

'Does it show? I guess it does. Sometime way back stuff happened and probably through no fault of yours these people had terrible lives, but you've had every chance. People like you, love you even, but you push them away.' She'd said more than she should and less than she wanted. 'Anyway, now we've got a chance to do something good for these people, too.'

'I don't...I don't mean to push people away. I don't want to. I'm a hard person to be a friend to, aren't I?' He looked down at his leg. 'Fuck I hurt all over. You're right, we should get busy.'

'You threw up the painkillers.' She checked her watch. 'Another hour at least. You wouldn't tell the police who did this. You don't want to press charges?'

He shook his head and then felt his bruised chest. 'I can't see what good it would do. Probably get Tilly beaten up by Lee. They chucked me out and gave me a roughing up, and now they've probably forgotten about me. I'm ready to move on from that, at least.'

'That's what I thought. You should stay here and rest.'

'And what were you going to do?'

'What do you think's best?'

'We've done all the theorising. Now we need to find out more. A tactical feint. If we go to the camp that Tanya Wilson disappeared from then we might be heading right into enemy territory. If you'll drive my car then we'll both go. It's time to take action.'

Sundance had taken to keeping café hours once he'd set up above Slice. Saturday morning was busy down in the café, but for his business it was about catching up with admin and doing what he could to keep track of the people he'd set himself up to keep an eye on. Emily, Micky Wilson, and now his grandfather, the famous Ainsley Griffin. Famous might be saying too much, but in Sundance's circles he was known.

Ainsley Griffin wrote articles that were often prescient, without ever getting too fanciful. Most journalists just got the tech wrong, and overstated everything. Those who wrote for tech journals tended to ignore the big questions that Sundance, as an academic, found as interesting as the tech itself. What are the social implications? Are there ethical considerations? Is this idea taking us in the direction we really want our society to go in? Ainsley Griffin had written several articles for popular papers and magazines that Sundance

would have happily seen in academic journals. He'd been ahead of the game with the opportunities and dangers of nanotechnology. He'd set out ten big environmental dangers of technology some of which were still on the horizon, but others had started to appear since his article. He could hardly be accused of being ahead of the game with overuse of antibiotics when Fleming himself had warned of the danger in 1945. But he'd highlighted the possible dangers of microplastics five years before the 2008 International Research Workshop in the US had raised it as a serious issue.

It was hard to imagine Grandad Ainsley being caught by the average hacker, but if he didn't know what he was getting into then he might get himself killed. And if Sundance contacted him he might bring attention them both.

It was a problem to set aside for a while. The immediate issue was Micky Wilson. Micky Wilson was in Cheltenham, slowly heading towards Gloucester, and that could not be a coincidence. Sundance felt like an observer. There was nothing he could do but watch.

Severn Vale Castle was a misnomer as far as Ainsley could see. It wasn't in the Vale, the flood plain of the Severn, it was the other side of Cheltenham, driving through town and out on the Oxford road, rising up into the Cotswolds proper. And it wasn't a Castle, although it was owned by one. He'd done his research before they set off. The big house had been renovated in the 1930s when Norman Castle's grandfather had struck it rich. Now, Norman Castle MP played right wing, anti-immigration, pro-"English-born-and-bred" politics, but three generations back his family were Russian émigrés. The hypocrisy didn't matter to Ainsley. All politicians were hypocritical, but the job wasn't to live your beliefs,

it was to create a better society. He didn't believe that Castle wanted a better society, or indeed any society. Castle wanted wealth and power.

He spent the whole drive on edge, watching Chelsey test out her rusty driving skills on his Skoda. She struggled in too low a gear as they climbed the hill past the reservoir. Beyond the reservoir was a right turn onto a steep, winding B road and around the first corner, a layby with several cars spilling onto a muddy grass verge. Thick woodland came right up to the verge on both sides. Ainsley made out silver birch, rowan, beech, and oak. Filling up the gaps and making the place look impenetrable even in late autumn were spiky holly bushes. Two cars were parked on the grass verge, and each had wheels sunk deep into the mud. A Landrover was parallel parked, sticking out onto the road. Two men in uniform sat in the front and watched them drive by.

'Where do you want to park?'

'It looks like this is where they park for the camp, but even without the mud I think we'd get moved on by security.'

Chelsey had slowed right down as they browed the hill. Around the corner, to the left were private gates, with a long tarmacked drive up to a Jacobean manor house, with three ridged roofs, and tall thin chimneys. There was the yellow hue of Cotswold stone. She pulled in onto the tarmac to one side of the gates.

'What do you think?'

'You've seen the cameras?'

'We're not obstructing anything and I don't think we're even on their land.'

'Okay but ...' He reached over and flicked a switch under the steering wheel. 'Let's keep the carcams on just in case security comes out.'

Out of the car he took half a dozen photos until he was satisfied that he had enough evidence that the car was parked safely. Chelsey watched on.

‘My you’re careful today. Pity you weren’t more careful yesterday. Right, which way?’

‘Back to where the cars were parked, I suppose. I can’t imagine security are going to want us to walk into the woods though.’

The fast, low beat of a helicopter pulled them up. For a moment they thought that security were unbelievably efficient, and then it appeared over the woods and began a descent down by the house.

‘Interesting.’ Chelsey turned back to the gates.

‘It’s a pretty big one. Not the latest model. Robinson, I think. Someone’s got a lot of money.’ Ainsley had researched smaller models, and the possibility they might become cheap enough to compete against the car.

‘Oh my God.’

‘What?’

‘Look who’s just got out!’

Ainsley could see enough of the long black trench coat and half-shaved head to know he’d never seen this person before in his life.

‘It’s Pete Zyx.’ She saw his blank look. ‘Zyxology. The band. Forget it.’

‘Big name?’

‘They’re running very hot at the moment, and Pete is the wild front man.’

As Zyx was greeted and welcomed in, the helicopter left and another, smaller one, arrived.

‘Ah, now I do recognise this one.’

Toby Bresden, Cabinet Minister, was helped down.

‘MP isn’t he. Is he on the same side as Castle?’

Ainsley wasn’t a political expert, but he knew that Toby Bresden, with responsibilities for the impact of immigration control on business, should definitely not be seen in public with Norman Castle.

‘Absolutely different sides.’ He pointed up at one of the gatecams. It was flashing red. ‘They’re live and interested. We should get going.’

As they drove off the security Landrover came round the corner. It followed them all the way back to the main road. Coming in the other direction they passed a convoy of limousines with darkened windows.

‘I’ve counted five more helicopters, too. What do you think?’

Chelsey had been concentrating on driving. ‘Recognise anybody?’

‘Darkened windows. Could be some sort of political strategy meeting, with Zyx there as entertainment.’

Chelsey laughed. ‘Pete Zyx really isn’t that sort of entertainment. I don’t seem him performing for a bunch of politicians. He does love a party , though.’

By 4 am Sticky’s found a 24 hour supermarket. More of a petrol station really. It’s deserted apart from a woman on the tills who looks about fifty and wears a name badge that says ‘Maureen’, and noises in the back where they might be taking deliveries. He buys a six pack of salt and vinegar crisps and a litre of Cotswold spring water, reluctantly pays for a plastic bag, and sits out on a bench in the car park. It’s cold now he’s sitting still, and he wishes he had something stronger, or hotter, to drink. At least he thinks he’s safe from Ricky and Simon. He’s no reason to go back to the station, and even when they eventually track down the car, he’ll be long gone, lost in Cheltenham. His phone

buzzes, although he'd swear it was on a ringtone last time he set it. There's a text.

Michael. I can't help you if you insist on ignoring my instructions. I said Gloucester. Be here tonight at the Cathedral at 8 pm. Don't go back to the car. Don't use public transport.

Htf goin to do that?

Walk. Consider it penance. Cathedral. 8.

Sticky knows he's on a one-way street. He's put his trust in someone and something up ahead and he can't go back, at least not without seeing it through. If he can find out what's happened to Tan, then just maybe Mike Massey, with his soft spot for her, will find a way to let him back. Or at least let him live.

His phone tells him it's a 3 hour walk to Gloucester Cathedral, and to be honest he daren't do otherwise, but it does mean he's got time to kill. He reckons he'll hang around, get some coffee, finish his crisps, and then start walking. He can get a proper drink and some food when he gets to Gloucester.

He goes back inside and charms Maureen on the tills. Shivers and says how he's got a long way to go, and is there any chance of a coffee. She takes pity and takes him out the staff door where there's a hot drinks dispenser in a corridor with a stained brown carpet. He gives her a two pound coin for her trouble, but she seems to want to mother him and pushes it back at him.

'Sit out here while you drink it if you like.'

Her accent is unfamiliar. Rural and southern.

There's an open door through to a small staff room with three tables and not enough chairs to go round them and a boxy orange sofa. He wonders if

she's coming on to him. He's done worse things with men and women, but he's too tired and not desperate. He sits at a table.

'Thanks, Maureen. They told me Southerners weren't very friendly, like.'

'You not been down here long then?'

'Last night's train from Manchester.'

'Well don't get Southerners confused with Londoners.' She sat at the table with him.

'Aren't you bothered about folks coming in while you're out here?'

'Not at this time of night. And I'd hear the door. And Jerry's doing the rounds. He does a walk round the car park every couple of hours. Excuse for a fag break. He'll be back in a few minutes.'

He sups his coffee, all milk and sugar. 'I'm supposed to get to Gloucester.'

'Easy enough. Train'll get you there in ten minutes. Bus in twenty.'

'I was thinking of walking.'

She peers at him. 'You're not short of cash.' It's a statement not a question. 'Well, as you like, but it's starting to rain out there.'

'Fuck. I mean, flipping heck.' He checks his phone again. It's pushing on towards 5:00 am. 'Thanks for letting me sit in, you know. I best get out your hair.' He walks back towards the shop and turns at the door. 'If anyone asks, Maureen, best say I wasn't here.'

#10 Toma Kasun

July 2016. Toma Kasun was one of those nasty little men who rationalise their self-gratifying behaviour by telling themselves that it doesn't hurt anyone. I hate that dishonesty. Of course, we hurt people. It's in our nature to hurt people and get enjoyment from it. Virtually, Toma camped on the borders of Deathdiaspora.net—aware that somewhere there was something going on that he'd like to be a part of, but not nearly relevant enough to be invited in. My guess is that he saw Kavya while he was working. Lovely Kavya volunteered for some charity work while she was at school, and Toma worked at a charity that worked primarily with Eastern European immigrants who were applying for visas. Some of these were young women who had been trafficked to Britain and I'm sure that this is what attracted Toma to the job. He was too smart to be caught out by pushing these women into sex for favours, but he exploited them all the same. He lived a quiet life in Leicester, worked hard, and sent money back to his family in Croatia. He could have spent time with his family, or paid for them to visit, but I knew that he preferred his quiet time alone with his off-the-shelf software, hacking and ratting and spying for his own enjoyment without ever—and this was important to Toma—without ever letting people know they were being spied upon.

When I began my research into Kavya, Toma was one of the first people I connected to. He was deep in her systems. She'd volunteered for a while; more than likely he'd been her manager. Even a noob would have taken very little effort to find her on social media, to discover her school, her address, her friends, and her interests. He'd infiltrated her systems and had a lot of control when I stepped onto the scene. At first, I skirted around him. She was his slave

and I didn't want him to know he'd lost her until I was ready—and anyway it might be useful to have his easily traceable electronic fingerprints all over her.

Unfortunately, this couldn't last long. Toma would quickly realise I was there, and it was clear that Kavya was one of his favourites. At any one time he had between thirty and forty slaves—exclusively young women whose systems he'd hacked and who he could watch or tease or bully, anonymously, at any time. When he was bored he'd sell them on, which was how I found he was on the edges of my own world. Some of my fellow citizens of Deathdiaspora.net dabbled in this sort of thing, but on a more professional level. They wouldn't have touched Toma and his amateur ways.

I tried ejecting him from her system once or twice, to gauge his response. I could have kept him out, but he was useful, and I was growing to dislike him enough to want him close. He kept coming back, showing me what few skills he possessed each time, and so I created a new world for Toma. A sort of virtual Kavya for him. His system thought it was manipulating Kavya's, but in fact it was interfacing with a sockpuppet that I created. A Kavya within Kavya that I allowed to see out of Kavya's system sometimes. It was a little risky. He might see her in the real world and see she was not where he expected her to be. He lived not much more than a mile away from her, at different ends of the long Belgrave Road running into Leicester.

Of course, he was effectively in communication with Kavya when I took her. Their systems were entangled until I ejected him in Hay Wood. I already knew so much about him that I could act very quickly, but I wanted to devise something both fitting, and believable, for him.

I followed him, when I could, but I had another project. I was building a sort of sockpuppet of my own, a real life persona that would enable me to move around Gloucester more easily, based around the homeless and vulnerable. They're a community, a nation of their own, like my Deathdiaspora.net. I've done my research around Gloucester and found that there are tunnels, as there are in any old city, I suppose. There are always sewers, but also cities build on themselves over the centuries, so that old basements, and even whole streets get built upon, and if you can only access them, they give a straight but cramped route from one place to another. There are also purpose-built tunnels in a city like Gloucester where people have needed practical ways of moving about secretly. There's hundreds of years of political and religious intrigue underneath Gloucester.

One of the city centre church halls is built on the site of an old inn and there's a bricked-up cellar that gets into this little network. It connects into the sewers, too, with a little effort. It can take me up and underneath King Square, out towards the docks, or into the Cathedral catacombs.

While I built this new character Father and I finally became fully estranged. Father is old, but he shows little sign of slowing down, especially now he's a Member of Parliament supporting his 'lifelong commitment' to an independent England, separate not only from Europe, but from the 'leeching parasites of our subordinate UK states'. He's always been afraid of me. He's afraid of what he knows I'm capable of, and afraid of what I could tell the world about him, so he paid me off. He's still the old paedophile he always was, but he hides it better.

He gave me a few million of my own, not knowing that I am already more wealthy than he is from my internet enterprises, and we came to an agreement. He threw me out of the cottage, too, and gave it as a tied dwelling to a new full-time estate manager. He had no idea of the inconvenience this caused me. I was happy to be out of the estate and away from my parents, but the basement had been set up perfectly, both for my surveillance equipment and my hidden chamber. Before the manager moved in I sealed them both off so that he would have no idea that the rooms even exist. One day I will make better use of them. Part of our deal is that Father will not cut me out of his will, so I just have to wait. If he dies in unusual circumstances, to use his phrase, then his lawyers release his story, no doubt putting him in as good a light as possible. I'm not too bothered. I can cope with lawyers, especially the sort that Father hires.

Toma was confused when Kavya disappeared. She became a missing person. The police weren't interested. She showed increasingly strange behaviour, they are told. They have CCTV of her driving away from Leicester, perfectly willingly. Her car, when it was eventually found, was parked carefully in a lay-by. No sign of a struggle. She became one of the thousands of inexplicably disappeared. Run off with a lover, or simply headed to a big city to escape from a stifling life. Toma was concerned at first that he might become a suspect, and he was interviewed by the police because of her old connection to the charity. I made sure he was above suspicion by covering his electronic tracks. Toma, in fact, did the rest. He'd been scared, and he stopped his ratting activities and destroyed the evidence, or thought he had. He was naïve about these things, but nobody was looking.

My plan for Toma finally came together when he purchased tickets to watch the Anniversary Games in London. He'd been to the London Olympics four years before and was in the stadium on Super Saturday when Team GB won 6 gold medals. The Anniversary games were no Olympics, but Father appeared on TV. The interview was closed down quickly when his comments about Mo Farah took an unfortunate turn. Only Father could mess up a golden political opportunity with his particular brand of xenophobia. It's another thing he hates about me—I'm an equal opportunities killer. He'd pat me on the back if he knew about Toma, though.

I spent months conditioning Toma to the idea of buying cruise control for his car. He did a lot of driving between Leicester and London, and he had a Mercedes, yet to adapt to the latest tech. I started to flood his online ads with cruise control adapters. Items that I could hack into. I sent spam emails extolling the virtues of the technology. Safe driving, condoned by the police, impressing the girls. Things that would appeal to a man like Toma. I watched as he took the bait. He started to browse for second-hand DIY cruise control kits. I made certain sites unavailable to him and channelled him towards my chosen solution, Showfar, an easy-to-hack new brand, integrated with satnav, which would allow me to hack in and preset route cruise speeds for each road.

Leicester to London on 22nd July was always going to be busy. Usain Bolt was running, as well as all these true Brits. I hacked into the Showfar, set a high cruise speed, and overrode a few safety features.

A five car pile-up on the M1 motorway, barely makes the headlines. I followed the police investigation to make sure they were on the right lines. At first they deduced that either the control was faulty, or Toma had hacked it

himself. The implications of the control being faulty were too big to be left at that so they went through Toma's personal life. His files, his emails, his search history, his social media, and picked up my carefully laid clues. It took an extra nudge from me before they spotted the further connection to Kavya that I'd dropped back into his files. Once they picked it up they tracked it down with the dogged determination of the British police on the trail of an immigrant. No proof that he'd killed her, but as far as the police were concerned that case was closed.

Before he left he emailed Chloe. I truly left it to chance, but I couldn't have been happier.

10

It wasn't unusual for Emily Stone to work on a Saturday. Nominally, she'd take a half day shift, but the fact was that it would take a long, full day to get the work done. She'd made visits all over Gloucestershire—driven over 150 miles around the county—and talked to people who thought their lives couldn't get any worse. Except she knew better. In her experience there was no bottom to social deprivation, and most of the time all she could offer were kind words and misplaced hope.

From eleven in the morning until three in the afternoon her cyber stalker was back. He'd ramped up the pressure, just as Sundance had said he would. At two she'd been talking to a young mother, Jacqui, in Stroud. Jacqui had two pre-school children, another on the way, and the father of the-one-on-the-way was an addict, currently 'inside for robbing'. Before he was sent to jail he'd put everything in his own name so now Jacqui was struggling to keep her home. She wouldn't get benefits for at least another three weeks, and she'd already had two food parcels and they wouldn't give her anymore because the system has a limit. This was their second meeting and Emily liked her. She liked most of her clients. Jacqui seemed to be just a girl who had been pushed into bad choices. It didn't help that she was five feet nothing, had long blonde hair, and swollen breasts from feeding the kids. In Jacqui's neighbourhood that made her a target for all the alpha males, and the alpha males were drug dealers and petty criminals. In the middle of this litany, Emily's phone had rung and vibrated constantly. Messages suggested that she perform various acts with Jacqui for the sender's entertainment. She'd only had a fraction of her energy to

concentrate on poor Jacqui, not least because she had wondered how he knew what Jacqui looked like. She'd figured out how to disable the camera on her phone settings, and anyway it was always stuck in her bag. Sundance had said the stalker was smart—that she wouldn't be able to stop him doing just what he wanted online, and she knew she was out of her depth. At two-thirty she'd apologised to Jacqui, and made her some promises to check in with one of the local charities that would provide her with another food parcel.

She'd had one more visit, at the camp in Severn Vale. Tanya's protest camp. Severn Vale was a ghost camp. Only the camp leader, Anthony, and three of the most hardy protestors were left. This was her last visit because Felicity, one of Anthony's hangers-on had finally given up. Felicity was a thirty-eight year old on ESA benefits. She'd been refused benefits several times over the years, mostly because she insisted on trying to cope and earn a living. She'd gone from the trauma of the front line in Afghanistan, to serious alcoholism which had resulted in serious beatings and at least one unreported rape. In the camp she'd had to call Social Services in to make sure she continued to get benefits. Emily had sorted her out an address which enabled her to validate her claim. The camp had been good for her, given her a purpose, and Emily worried that she'd fall apart again when she left, but she'd been upbeat and ready to get back to what passed for civilisation.

By five o'clock she'd got back to the office where she'd spent an hour or two trying to reduce the virtual pile of paperwork. She'd had to reconnect with her phone, and all her online accounts, including the office systems, were open channels for the stalker. She was alone in the office, and afraid of the escalation. He sent a series of messages, one every ten minutes, first

apologising and praising her patience and beauty, and then becoming more explicit, describing her clothing, including her choice of underwear that day, and finally heated and increasingly violent messages about her body and what he would do to her one day. He insisted over and over again that he could do it at any moment, and he threw in facts, both old and new, about her, her background, her family, where she was right now, and how he'd watched her undress the night before. Sundance had said, 'He'll wait until he's broken you. The more you react the happier he'll be until he thinks you've completely submitted to his dominance. It might enrage him if you stay calm and ignore him, but it's the best strategy you have for now.'

Thinking about Sundance made her decide to extend her working day to one more visit. She'd go to Rothleigh House. She typed it into her calendar, and made some meaningful sounding notes on the client management database so, if he truly did have access to everything that she did online, then he'd not suspect she had any ulterior motive in going to Rothleigh. It was there in her caseload any way. Sundance had put it there.

Chelsey pulled into a dirt track and let the engine idle while they talked.

'I hope you're going to clean my car when we get back, Chels.'

'Just a bit of mud. We go back and have another look?'

Ainsley pointed out a green rectangle on the map on his tablet. 'The estate seems to take up the whole section between the A40 and these three side roads.'

'So we circle round the back.'

He nodded. 'We won't get a good view of the house, but there's some sort of building here.' He pointed again. 'It'll give us the lay of the land anyway.'

The back road was narrower, almost single track, and hedged in on both sides by trees. Chelsey slowed right down as if she wasn't sure of her ability to squeeze through. There were regular passing places with muddy tractor tyre prints.

'Okay, cottage on the right.'

The road opened out, as if someone had made space for whoever lived here, and Chelsey drove past until she was out of sight of the windows before she pulled over. The cottage was red brick, a small fenced garden with a drive up the right side and a rickety garage space. The rest looked serviceable. The roof was ridged in two directions and there were solar panels on the south facing aspect.

'Waddya wanna do?'

'I'm thinking an ex-gamekeeper's cottage. Does anyone have a gamekeeper anymore?'

'He might. Old Norman. Back to traditional values of land and servants.'

Ainsley eased his leg out of the car. 'Come on then. Let's go and see.'

They walked up the side drive and crossed in front of grubby windows. By the time they'd reached the porch the front door was open and a big man stepped out.

'Morning.' It was a relaxed, polished accent. Ainsley was six feet nothing and this man towered a good four or five inches over him. He had short, crew-cut brown hair and an outdoor physique.

‘Oh, er, hello. Sorry to bother you. We got a bit lost. Or at least I think we did.’ Ainsley looked him over. He felt vaguely familiar. ‘You live here?’

‘It’s a perk of the job.’

Chelsey cut in, accentuating her NY accent. ‘It sure is lovely, Mr ...’

‘So. Lost? Here?’

‘Kinda. We could try and turn round, I guess. But then we saw this lovely cottage and I said, “Come on, Ains, let’s go ask for directions.” You know guys don’t like to ask for help, but I guess I’m kinda nosey.’

‘And what are you looking for, exactly?’

‘Well, Ains here is showing me a bit of the old English countryside. Roman ruins, stately homes, wild woods, and all that. We wanted to head out towards Oxford, too, but then on the map we saw there was a big house hereabouts.’

‘It’s a private house. Mr Castle is MP for Severn Vale. If you want to see him he holds surgery, I understand, in town.’

Ainsley kept quiet. He was a little worried that Chelsey was overdoing it, but she was better at this stuff. He looked around while they talked. Two cameras hidden in the ivy along the front, which is how he’d known they were there. Hi-tech for a gamekeeper. When he’d stepped out he’d carefully closed the front door behind him so there was no way to see inside.

‘A real life Member of Parliament, ya don’t say! No chance he’d let us have a look around, even at grounds, then?’

‘I’m very much afraid not, Miss. He’s hosting a party this evening. It’s a very busy time—for him and for me. It’s part of the job for Mr Castle, hosting events for the rich and powerful. Perhaps if you contacted his Private Secretary.

Or if you found him on Twitter, he's very susceptible to those sort of engagements.'

'Well, sure thing, we might just do that.'

Ainsley re-engaged. 'And if we carry on down this lane ...?'

'Turn left at the end and when you get to main road, follow the signs to Oxford.'

This was only Emily's second visit to Rothleigh House. Sundance met her at the door. He stepped back when he saw her, and then regaining his composure he put his fingers to his lips and mimed holding a mobile phone to his ear. Emily pointed back at the car.

He nodded, still without a word, took her hand and walked her up the narrow stairs without taking her through the common room. The rooms had number pad locks on the doors and Sundance punched in six digits and let them in. It was typically small for this sort of sheltered housing. Room for a bed, bedside table, and comfortable chair. The table was barely big enough to hold his tablet and headphones. Like the smallest of student accommodation, that Emily remembered from her university days. As soon as the door closed behind them, he spoke.

'Is everything okay?'

To her surprise, she couldn't risk speaking without crying. She raised her fist to her mouth.

'He can't hear us in here. This room and my office are the only places I'd trust. Please, sit down.' He motioned to the one comfortable chair and sat stiffly on the bed facing it.

She focussed on the room, trying to ground herself, and smiled at her very unprofessional behaviour. Not only had she visited a client at his workplace, she'd failed to report his fake identity, and now she was sitting alone in his room, door locked behind them. About the only safeguard she had was that she'd logged the visit properly, but she didn't feel threatened, not by Sundance anyway. He was watching her and she could talk now.

'It's just been a tough day, you know?'

He nodded. 'I know what it's like. I saw that he was harassing you this afternoon.'

She almost laughed. "Harrassing". I've been harassed lots of times in this job. This is something else.'

'They say it's one of the worst punishments, being watched all the time. The old Panopticon.'

'Never heard of it, but yeah. You ever watch Big Brother? I think maybe it's the watchers who are being punished.'

He smiled and nodded, but she got the feeling he had no idea what she was talking about either, so she carried on.

'I just want to know, you know, that it's worth it. That you're getting some idea of who he is and where he is.'

'Yes.' He didn't look happy about it. 'I know where he's going to be tonight.'

'Tonight? Now?'

'He's meeting Tanya's brother in about two hours.'

'And you know where?'

He nodded.

‘And will you know him when you see him?’

‘Maybe. I know someone who thinks he will.’

Sticky’s not used to walking long distances and by the time he reaches Gloucester city centre it’s noon. He’s walked through suburbs that reminded him of a poor man’s Altrincham. He knows the difference. There’s plenty of gradation in Manchester. There’s the areas where the clean dealers live. Sticky doesn’t understand how they do it. They aren’t that different from him but they keep clean; they hold down proper middle class jobs and boost their income by dealing on the side. Teachers, for fuck sake. A step up you’ll get accountants and lawyers. Bigger houses, better cars. Then, a big step up from the lawyers, there’s the traffickers. Heroine, coke, whatever. They supply and keep the whole business going and people like Sticky do the dirty work. He doesn’t even know who these guys are except for odd names who might or might not be, and he doesn’t want to know. Maybe Mike Massey knows, but Micky thinks it’s above even Mike’s pay grade. Then you’ve got the footballers and pop stars and, these days, the TV personalities, now the Beeb’s moved in big time. Top of the tree are the footballers, of course. Funny how celebrity and secrecy build on each other.

Here, round Gloucester, he reckons they’re not even on the ladder. These houses are ordinary people who do office jobs, and retail, and the other shit that Sticky could never think of holding down. It gets him thinking about whether he really wants to set up down here with Charmaine. Maybe this whole Tanya thing is a hoax and he’ll find her and they’ll laugh about it, and she’ll be grateful to her little brother for trying to come down here and rescue her. Maybe

she'll help set him up somewhere down here, get him a job, and he'll have a nice little house like these.

He walks down little side roads as he gets closer to the centre. Past the mental health hospital and then the main Gloucester Royal Hospital, until he comes out by the station. He uses his phone to get a good overview and finds the Cathedral on the map, and then realises he can see the tower. He's close and he's got nearly 8 hours to spare.

Hanging round Gloucester centre, with money in his pocket and no deals to do would be great but he's anxious about Ricky and Simon hunting him down from behind, and the truth about Tanya waiting for him ahead. With this in mind he steers away from the station, where they might look for him, recces the Cathedral grounds and even goes inside. Feeling generous he puts a fiver into the visitors' donation box. It's over a decade since he went into a church, and then it had been a Hillsborough memorial service that his mates had dragged him along to. He remembers how good it felt to be not just in the right against the police, but doing it in support of a rival football team's supporters.

Gloucester Cathedral is like no church he's ever seen. It's like something out of a film: gothic and massive and incredibly old. It's been in films according to the signs. Harry Potter, for fuck sake. He said it out loud and earned disapproving glances from other tourists. Harry fucking Potter woz ere. He feels like carving it into some of the ancient wood. Makes him proud to be British. Tanya wouldn't approve, he knows that. She's anti-Brexit. Anti-British is how he sees it, but they'll sort that out when he finds her.

The images that he's been sent come back to him. Tanya dead, cut up, her tattoo clearly showing for identification. But everybody knows how easy it is

to fake things these days. Fake news. He's being taken for a ride by some twat who's stolen her phone, he reckons. Probably some geek who'll run a mile when he gets there and shows a bit of muscle. Maybe he should have told Mike Massey all about it and asked for backup. Then Ricky and Simon would be here on his side, instead of chasing him with a bloody machete—to be fair they wouldn't need anything so big—to cut his knob off.

#11 Chloe Huppert

February 2018. Too much work has made me feel quite dull. Deathdiaspora.net is a fully-fledged on-line nation now. We have our own mythology, a literature section built around folktales of killings that have been carried out in our name. Nominally it's there as a research library. It isn't always easy to kill, torture, or rape someone. Each instance is a unique event with unique problems to solve. Each member has his or her own needs. The library is able to suggest solutions. We have an origin story, too, which has little to do with the reality.

The Creator was White Bird, the story goes, and one day White Bird followed two children into the forest. They scattered breadcrumbs behind them, and White Bird followed, quietly watching, eating the breadcrumbs because it was hungry, until they ran out of breadcrumbs. White Bird watched them grow weak and thin, wandering in the cold, without food or water. They clung together in the night for warmth, but White Bird flew at them, chasing and chivvying them so they had to walk out, deeper and deeper into the forest. White Bird could have saved them, but it was a little afraid that they would catch it and eat it. When they finally lay beneath an oak tree and died, White Bird pecked at them, feeding off their bodies and growing strong.

White Bird gathered the creatures of the forest and said 'Some creatures have to die. That's the law of the forest. It is our duty to watch those who come near to our forest and decide who lives and who dies.' White Bird called the forest Deathdiaspora.net, and the creatures of Deathdiaspora.net look forward to the day when the whole world is forest.

The creatures of Deathdiaspora.net pay well for the services that I offer.

Before I get to work on Chloe Huppert I am distracted. Some Oxford professor is setting off all my alarms. He's trying to find someone special to me. Hope Carnaby. One of very few special names that connect to my past. She's supposed to be dead, but I've never believed it. Hope from St. Nick's. Hope of the party. Hope about whom Father tried to hide from me that she was to be mother to my child.

I hack the professor, of course, and I find out why he's looking. He's Hope's son. My son. It's a distraction to kill him, but I have to deal with it, and then, suddenly, he disappears. Completely. Off the net, no longer in Oxford. No physical sign. Clever boy. I set the problem aside.

I have Chloe Huppert in my sights for over eighteen months before I make any attempt to escalate. I mess with her, of course. I try out some new techniques on her systems so that she's feeding data back to me all the time, piggybacking on all sorts of signals. I want something appropriate. She's this big shot PR woman who thinks she can use the system. I can see the way she uses data flows, figuring out trends, picking out memes. Trying to figure out the energy flows of the crowd. I have to play the game slowly because she's pretty savvy. Three times she trashes her entire system and buys new gear to get rid of me. I'm sure that she's getting help, and the help is right here in Gloucestershire. She comes here, really close to me, and it freaks me out a little, but it turns out to be, more or less, coincidence.

Not that Chloe knows it's me, but she knows she's infected. She knows she's being watched. Her systems are so deeply poisoned that her usual IT support can't dig her out. Each time she upgrades everything: hardware, software, even changes her cloud ids. It's the best game yet, but all the time I

have this endgame in sight. She manipulates crowds and I want to use that against her without anyone ever knowing (except my fellow citizens, of course) what I've done.

The key is to know her routines. On a normal working day she always takes the same tube at the same time. I make sure I'm there a few times. I start a conversation with her, and over the next few days she smiles and nods at me in the queue. She's not what I expected from her pictures and her online chatter. She's from York, and still has the strong Northern accent. A Northern woman enjoying success in London, I expected blunt insensitivity, but in the flesh she's empathic, kind and smiley.

It's Tuesday and I smile at her and raise my hand. She edges across the platform to my side. It's busy, not unusually so yet, but I know it's going to get much worse. As we talk I move us closer to the edge of the platform. The next train is the 17:09, but the boards flicker and show it is cancelled. More commuters join the platform. The 17:11 and 17:14 are similarly cancelled and by now we're squashed together on three sides, holding ourselves firmly against the invisible fourth wall that is the track itself.

At 17:13 there is a commotion, which I know is a response to an automated tweet saying that Milano is on the platform. I've done my research. Milano is a London grime artist who is breaking into movies. He's not seen in public any more, but it's not impossible, certainly not to his fans, that he might appear at a London Tube station. Three cancelled trains and the ghost of a grime artist are all it takes to make the crowd uncontrollable. I can hear the 17:16, or more likely the delayed 17:09 down the tunnel. My hand is at Chloe's back, holding her away from the track, and then the crowd surge ripples out

towards us and my hand is suddenly not there. Chloe stumbles back, catches her heel on my foot and falls backwards. She has moments to look up into my eyes before the train arrives.

11

George Beecham got confused when Sundance wasn't there to set him straight. Sundance gave him the pills that made him think clearly. Before the pills he'd been someone else, but Sundance said he had to forget that person. Not to forget exactly, but to imagine it was someone he used to know but had gone. Died. It was still confusing because the one that had died, Joey, had the same half finger missing that George did. Joey had bitten it off. He'd bitten off his own finger, and he'd bitten off George's finger. George imagined that people thought the finger was still inside him, deep in his tum-tum, but George knew that if you waited and watched, everything came out again. Joey had kept it for a bit, but it had turned nasty, black, and mushy.

He'd done it to get away. He'd given them the finger! When he was little he'd lived in the nasty place, and the men had taken him and his friends to the parties, and he'd not known what to do. They gave him money but he didn't know what to do with that either. His friend Joseph had looked after it for him, but he didn't want it and he let Joseph keep it when he bit off the finger. Joseph and Joey had been friends because they had nearly the same name. Joseph was a bit older and looked after him, until Joey bit his own finger off and they took him away to the hospital, and then to the special school. A different special school where the parties had jelly and ice cream.

George still had nightmares about that place. He'd seen Joseph sometimes, later when they were both grown up. Sometimes they stopped and talked. Even though he liked Joseph, after they'd talked George had nightmares

about men wearing suits and boys and girls, like dolls, all dressed up and then taken into corners by the men and hurt, and the men laughing.

One day Sundance had found George when he was still Joey, having his dinner at the Drop-In centre in Gloucester with Reverend Steve. Joey had been telling Reverend Steve that he felt worse, that he didn't like the new people in his flat, who left needles around the place. Scarlett and Kosh. Scarlett had asked Joey if they could stay the night if they helped him tidy up, although Joey kept everything tidy already. They'd been nice and made him dinner, but now they'd been there two weeks and they didn't tidy. They left needles around, and they didn't wash up, and they borrowed Joey's money and didn't give it back. And the new support worker who came round was a man who wore a suit, and he hardly ever came anyway.

Sundance had been outside when Joey finished his dinner with Reverend Steve, and he'd known all about it. He told Joey that Scarlett and Kosh were like cuckoos making their nest in his flat, but not to worry—Sundance would sort it out. He'd made some phone calls and asked Joey whether he wanted to live somewhere else, somewhere better. Joey found it easy to trust Sundance even then. Sundance was wearing jeans and t-shirt, and he wasn't old enough to be a support worker. He'd brought Joey to Rothleigh House and shown him how nice it was and introduced him to Margaret, and then asked him again whether he'd like to live there. Then he'd driven George back to his flat and the police were there and he could see Scarlett and Kosh in a police car and he felt sorry for them. They let George take his stuff—his clothes, and his collection of train postcards, and his MP3 player—and he never went back. The only thing was he was George now, not Joey.

George had seen Emily arrive. He'd been surprised by Emily. She didn't wear a suit, and Sundance liked her, and she was here on Saturday. George had watched his favourite quiz show on television until Sundance had asked him to tell Emily his story. In Sundance's room he'd been asked questions.

'What have you been doing, George?'

'I've not done nothing, Sundance. Honest. I never touched her.'

'Is that true, George? You know what we said about being honest. So that we can all get better together?'

'I didn't touch her.'

'But you shouted at her, didn't you?'

George had nodded. Bobbed his head two or three times quickly.

'And why did you shout at her? The real reason. Remember?'

'Because I love her?'

Sundance turned to Emily. 'In the Home where George was brought up the older children were taught to take the young ones into bed, and to make the young ones clean their rooms for them. Tell Emily, George.'

'Mummies and Daddies. The big ones were the Daddies and they told the little ones that if they were going to be loved they had to do things for the big ones.'

'So George likes Margaret a lot don't you, George.'

George was bobbing again.

'And he forgets sometimes that, when you love someone, you care about how they feel, not about what they do for you.'

Emily had watched, fascinated by the way they talked together. George was probably 15 years older than Sundance but acted like a puppy around him.

She wondered how much Sundance was exploiting the situation. A Social Worker's thought.

'George? Can you tell me who taught you to play Mummies and Daddies?'

George looked across at Sundance, who nodded for him to answer Emily's question.

'It was Partyboy. He said we should stick together. He was a boy like us but his Daddy was the Party King.' He looked over at Sundance. 'Does she ...does Emily know about the parties.'

Sundance nodded.

'Partyboy told us that we should be like a secret club. Like a family. And that way we wouldn't mind so much when the parties came. He picked.'

'What do you mean when you say he picked?'

'He chose which of the young ones should go with which of the old ones. He'd make sure we did it, or he'd tell his dad, he said.'

'He watched?'

'Mmmm. Mmmm. Watched. And cameras. On the walls, there were cameras.'

Emily turned to Sundance. 'Nobody ever told? There's been no official investigation?'

'They weren't hiding from the law; they were above the law. There's a story of a police chief being involved. And then this Partyboy stuff ... I think the kids felt guilty. Complicit. I assume the cameras were real and the footage probably sold on the dark web.'

Sundance's tablet chirruped on the table and he stood, glancing over to it.

'Thanks, George. You want to play football tomorrow?'

George bobbed. 'If the weather's nice, yeah? If it isn't raining?'

'That's right. We'll all go. Maybe Emily can come, too? If you ask her nicely.'

George looked at her. 'You play football?'

'I could try, George.'

Sundance picked up the tablet and swiped across a few apps.

'Damn.'

She could tell from his voice that this was something serious. 'What is it?'

'I need to go find him. Tanya's brother. Things are moving.'

'I should come.'

'It's dangerous.'

'He's going to kill me anyway. I'd rather be looking for him than waiting for him to come to me.'

Sundance looked over at George. George was bobbing.

'It's okay, George. Nothing's going to happen to us.'

'Partyboy's coming.'

Sundance and Emily looked at each other. Emily took the decision.

'He might be, George. We don't know. That's what we're trying to find out.'

His head bobbed got faster and faster.

‘George’ll come. Coming to see Partyboy.’ He looked cunning. ‘Cuz I know what he looks like, see.’ He turned to Emily. ‘S right, isn’t it. You want to know if it’s him, and I can tell you.’

Sundance put his hand on George’s shoulder, steadying him. ‘You might not remember him, George. It’s been a long time.’

‘Yeah. Yeah, I’d remember. I know him. I seen him in town, anyway, sometimes. Sometimes, but he looks different.’

Emily stood up. ‘We’re wasting time. We’ll all go. We can go in my car.’

‘Park on Hare Lane.’ Sundance wasn’t happy to have three of them involved. He’d spent the whole trip trying to impress on George the need to keep very quiet and watch. Emily thought he was underestimating George.

The Hare Lane car park was close to the last signal Sundance had got from Micky. There were messages to Micky that he’d been unable to hack over the last couple of days. He was certain who they were coming from, but every week the stalker would change his protocols so that it often took a day or two for Sundance to figure out the details. He knew stuff was coming in, but he couldn’t read it. There had been a surge in texts over the last few hours, and Micky was on the move. He’d appeared in Cheltenham that morning, which had given Sundance quite a surprise, and then over the day he’d travelled slowly to Gloucester. This had been enough for Sundance to be on alert.

Several short texts had appeared and triggered his alarm system while he was talking to Emily and George, and Micky was suddenly on the move again. He’d been in a pub down by the Docks, but suddenly he was zigzagging around the town centre. First to the Methodist Church where he received

another message. Then to the Cross, then over to the station. Each little journey punctuated by 5 minute stops.

At the station he hung around for twenty minutes and then received another text and started heading towards Hare Lane.

‘Coming this way.’

‘There’s no reason he’d come here though is there?’ They’d been sitting in the car for half an hour now, Sundance monitoring his tablet. Emily had moved to the back seat beside George, holding his hand to keep him calm.

‘I’m guessing the Cathedral.’

‘Yeah, yeah. Partyboy loved the Cathedral. He brought us here. I don’t like it.’

‘We should go. You can stay here, George.’

‘How’m I going to see him if I stay here?’

Micky Wilson’s scaring himself. He’s come down. He’s not Sticky the dealer any more, he’s just Micky Wilson. He thinks he sees Ricky and Simon everywhere he looks. He’s not scared of this bloke he’s meeting at the Cathedral anymore. There’s no room inside him to be scared of more than one thing at once, and he knows what Ricky can do. Especially Ricky with his ponytail and Pulp Fiction charisma. To take his mind off it he’s found his way to the docks and is reminded about the old nursery rhyme ‘Doctor Foster went to Gloucester’ by one of the bar names. He spends the afternoon nursing a pint in there and treating himself to steak and chips for lunch. This forces him to use the bogs at least three times, urgently during the afternoon, but by five o’clock he’s ready for another meal and has the Ultimate Chicken Burger with salad. This time he

vomits. His stomach's not used to a proper meal, and he realises he's coming down. He's not had anything stronger than a lager for a couple of days.

Finally, his phone tells him he's got less than half an hour to meet his deadline and he starts to head back, feeling like shit now, past the old prison, and towards the Cathedral.

At 8 o'clock precisely he walks past Slice, which means nothing to him, and into the grounds. He enters by the main gate and walks slowly towards the big Cathedral doors, and then follows the path round to the right. He assumes that the man he's meeting will know exactly where he is. It's been radio silence up until the last hour. At the far end, past the Cathedral, there's a smaller gate and he can see three people on a bench close to it: two men and a woman. It's too dark to make out detail, but he's sure the man he's meeting will be working alone.

There's a noise from the Cathedral wall. An electronic beep, followed by the hiss of someone drawing his attention. It's still too dark to make out anybody. There are bright orange lights behind him, and small lamps further down the path.

'This way, Micky.'

He follows the voice, looking around for anyone watching as he does. The three on the bench are looking towards him. Behind them, coming round the corner of the Cathedral, two big men appear, walking in his direction, too. He feels paranoid. That could be Ricky and Simon, but how the fuck would they have found him?

He steps in towards the wall and sees that, just in front of it, there are spiked railings and a steep drop.

‘Jump, Micky.’

He jumps, and as he jumps the figure below pulls out a big blade. It’s more a sword than a knife, but he’s in the air, gravity is in charge now and he half leaps, half falls onto the blade.

Back in Birmingham Ricky comes out of the pub first and starts to scan the shop doorways. He walks slowly up the road checking doorways and it’s a few minutes before the absence at the junction hits him. The car’s gone. He steps back into the pub, sees Simon and steps out again, as if unable to comprehend that they are both here and the car isn’t. He takes Simon by the arm.

‘I know where he is, mate.’

He takes Simon outside and points to where the car should be. Simon goes ape-shit. He starts grabbing people in the pub, demanding that they tell him where the bastard who’s taken their fucking car has gone, and Ricky spectates, waiting for him to calm down. It’s Ricky’s car, after all.

‘It’s not a bad thing, right. We take a fucking taxi. At least we know where he is.’

They stand on the street outside the station and Ricky tries to force Simon to think and not just react.

‘The little fucker.’ Simon reaches inside his jacket and touches the blade in the pocket. ‘We kill him, right.’ He pauses. ‘How we going to find him?’

Ricky holds up his phone. ‘Remember, I showed you when I got the car, I downloaded this tracker?’

Half an hour later Ricky is sitting in the passenger seat of a minicab, giving directions while Simon sulks in the back. They reckon Sticky has a good hour's start on them.

The car's been parked for more like an hour and a half before they catch up with it in Cheltenham station and the trail runs cold. They give the driver a couple of hundred and tell him he's never seen them.

Ricky takes charge again and thinks it through.

'He was supposed to be going to Gloucester, right? That's what Massey said.'

'So?'

'So why does he drive here and not to Gloucester?'

'Cos he—'

'—I'll tell you why. Sticky's trying to play us. He figures a car like this'll be found pretty quick, so he drives to this shithole and takes the train to where he wants to be.'

The train timetable suggests he'll have had time to get to Gloucester and disappear, but these are the Manchester Mounties—they always get their man.

When they reach Gloucester they take care of the car first, parking in the hospital car park, where Ricky doubts that Micky would look. Then they troll around Gloucester for hours. Simon's sick of the place but Ricky won't let him give it up. It's reputation that counts with this job. They've pitched up in a likely pub in the centre of town and Ricky's on the verge of booking them into a hotel for the night when he gets a text. This phone's not for personal use so he takes it seriously even though it's anonymous.

Micky 8pm the Cathedral

They've circled the Cathedral God knows how many times during the day. It's only five minutes from the station.

'Who's it even fucking from?' Simon's on his third pint and settled in for the night. He's spotted a group of likely girls, passing through for a night on the town.

'Does it matter? Somebody who knows we're here and looking for Sticky. Massey? Jonesy? Come on, Si.'

Simon's in a dangerous mood, and even Ricky's a bit wary.

'Look I got the car back, didn't I? This one last thing and then we'll find a club.' He looks over towards the girls Simon's been eyeing up. 'Plenty more out there.'

They walk through back streets following Ricky's phone. In the dark, an odd sculpture looms to the right and then they enter the side gate and the Cathedral's in front of them. There's a bench with three people chatting. Witnesses they can do without.

Up ahead they see the target. He's weaving a little. Unsteady or unsure where's he's going.

'One either side, right? We lift him, walk him out of sight. Nice and steady.'

As they get closer, instead of running he turns and walks over the grass, towards the Cathedral, and then he drops down, not just to the ground but below the ground. They hear a muffled scream and speed up.

Ricky's fast. His phone doubles as a torch and as they reach the drop he sees the two figures below. One is thrashing around. The other lifts a blade and slashes across the neck. The killer looks up, grins, and opens a door. He has to

bend low to enter and then closes it behind him, entering into the belly of the Cathedral. Before Ricky can stop him Simon has vaulted over the steps. He pulls on the door but it's locked tight.

'Fuck.'

Ricky stays where he is, staring at his phone.

'What the fuck you smiling at?'

'Reckon he's dead? Sticky, I mean.'

'Shine your light.'

Ricky holds the phone low, over the railings and even in the dark they can see the ground is covered in blood.

Simon raises one foot. 'Fuck. These fucking shoes cost four hundred.' He takes out a handkerchief and tries to rub blood from the edges then realises the other shoe is right in the middle of a puddle.

Ricky's still smiling. He holds his hand out and pulls Simon back up, taking care to stay away from the shoes.

'So Sticky's dead, which is what we came for.'

Simon takes his shoes off. 'We'll need proof. And whoever just killed him isn't going to send us a picture, is he?'

Ricky holds his phone up. 'Got a pic. Enhanced, contrasted. Even in the dark this beauty got enough for us to find the bastard.'

'Shit, Ricky. You're the business with the techy stuff.' Simon genuinely admired Ricky's handle on gadgets and computers. 'Then we kill him, right?'

Ricky takes his own handkerchief, gingerly takes the shoes off Simon, and dumps them in a bin as they walk back the way they came.

The group sitting on the bench by the entrance have gone.

#12 Tanya Wilson

October 2018. Things are strange-looping back, like an Escher drawing in the multi-dimensional space that is the cyber world.

Chloe left me with quite a dilemma, because her last communication was with Tanya Wilson, and within a few weeks of starting my work on Tanya she turned up right here, protesting against another of Father's warped plans. I could wait until she leaves, but despite Father's best efforts it seems she's one of the die-hards. Tanya has real convictions, which is how she knew Chloe in the first place.

I realise that I need my cottage back. There's no point talking to Father so I take over simple-Pete-the-Gamekeeper's life. He had little left, and what he did have he didn't need any more. I keep him around for a while, locked downstairs, just in case I need him. He's a solitary fellow, put there purely to keep me out. I do believe Father's forgotten his existence, and no need to remind him. He gets paid monthly and I siphon the money off to Children in Need, which is my little joke.

Tanya is a slow and easy ride. She's so close, and not so connected by the standards of the day. I take the opportunity to develop some new skills, and while she's going nowhere, other factors are coming into play. I reactivate my basement, and I upgrade the equipment that I left down here. It's been less than a year but things move fast even though the word is that Moore's law has new parameters. No longer does the world double in efficiency and capacity every eighteen months, but the world of the hacker gets immeasurably more complicated even so.

The walk through the woods to the big house has overgrown, and I think that simple-P-the-G has been getting money for nothing. He told me, while he still could, that his only real duty was to patrol the woods at night. He had been the first to alert security about the camp that Tanya joined.

I set up cameras in the trees, simply for practice and to keep my kingdom properly controlled. Now that I've understood the underground world of Gloucester I start to think about the big house. The security system there is woeful and soon it belongs to me. I can walk in and out, invisible to the cameras and alarms, just so long as nobody in RL sees me. Once I'm in I find only the most basic of secret hideaways, but it's enough.

Downstairs one can squeeze behind one of the built in bookcases of the library and find, just a couple of yards in, hidden for decades, a fireplace. Unused for at least a century the bricks are easily loosened and I can enter into a space between the walls of the library. I had planned this far ahead by looking at plans of the house, and had worried that I might have to walk between the walls for some distance to make my way to the fireplace in the main hall. This would have been difficult for a man of my size. However, I can see that the space between the walls is actually much wider here by the fireplace, and that this fireplace joins to the main hall fireplace with only a thin veneer of bricks between the two. By removing a few bricks, I can squeeze into this hearth, too. Here, I set up more cameras and microphones, activated by a simple command from my basement hub, and begin surveillance on Father.

I wander the woods at night, knowing that no-one is there to stop me, and in doing so I visit the camp. I know it well from my connection to Tanya and her social media. I've also been following the official camp blog, its Twitter

account, its FB page and anything else I can get my hands on. I tell them that I'm the gamekeeper, and as gamekeeper I'm sympathetic to their cause. After all a gamekeeper needs an estate to work on, not some out-of-town mall. It gives me a chance to meet Tanya face-to-face. I don't care about the others. I don't need anything from them, other than that they stay out of my way. I don't want Tanya's successor to be a member of the camp. It would get too messy.

My decision to escalate comes from the Republic. Someone has posted a video which I deem to be unworthy of us. It is the sort of thing you can find on websites across the globe. A beheading. I'm sure it is real, but it has no finesse. It is an act carried out simply to post onto the site. It angers me, and I may yet take revenge on the perpetrator, but for now I decide to show them how it should be done.

I hunt Tanya, forcing her to break for cover by intensifying my trolling activities, and using an electric baton to subdue her. It's an exciting moment. One of the best. Packaging her into a bag I haul her back to the prepared basement. I had no particular plan except to show my countrymen how this is done. Each step depends on the response of the subject. In a way I think of each one as the temporary ruler of Deathdiaspora.net. The Kings and Queens. A bloodline, each one nominating a successor, and dominating my life until death, when the next takes over. Somehow Tanya stirs me. Kavya, I loved too much. Tanya I wanted to feel my control and mastery. She brought me back to the beginning in this way, too. I know that she's the beginning of the end because of Father.

Since he cut me off, Father has gone back to his old ways and I've observed him bringing in prostitutes, boys and girls, younger each time.

Threatening them and paying them off. He's drawn his old network of businessmen, politicians, and celebrities together again. Once they've spent the night at the big house he has them under his control, although one might equally say he's under their control. They become mutually reliant on loyalty and silence and they all prosper together. It has to stop.

The footage of Tanya is now online, and should be considered as an addendum to this record. Unlike other postings I've provided evidence of when death took place. It has been well received.

As a corollary I find a surprise. Tanya sent two messages as near simultaneously as I can distinguish, and so now I have a bifurcation. This is confusing. I have only a few days now before my plans come together and I very much want to tie up loose ends, so I must escalate. Concealment is no longer a priority.

12

Emily could only think of the dreadful scream as Micky had fallen. There was something final and terrified about the noise he'd made. She couldn't shake the belief that he was gone for good. Sundance had taken both her and George by the hand and almost pulled them back to the car after the two men had turned up.

She'd driven on autopilot, Sundance giving her directions back to Rothleigh House, and George chattering constantly, repeating himself, not making much sense.

'Hear him, Emily? Hear him? It's Partyboy, it is. Partyboy. It is. Tell 'em, Sundance...'

When they reached Rothleigh the place was dark. Without Sundance in the house it seemed that everyone had retreated to their rooms. He walked them into the kitchen, took out a key, and unlocked a high cabinet in the corner.

'Tablets, George.'

George nodded. In Emily's experience someone as wound up as George just didn't take the medication they needed voluntarily, but he trusted Sundance completely.

'Right. Now you'll feel tired soon, won't you? So let's get you up to your room. That's a lot of excitement.'

'Yeah. Yeah. You here that noise, Sundance! He squealed, didn't he? Didn't he squeal?'

'He did. I'm sorry we took you there, to the Cathedral, mate. There was nothing to see after all.'

Once George was in his room, Sundance turned his attention to Emily.

'You best get home, too.'

She nodded. 'He's dead, isn't he?'

'Maybe. Probably. That leaves only you.'

'That doesn't make me feel better.'

'You could stay here.'

'I can't. I mean, it'd be unprofessional.'

He smiled his crooked smile. 'Is that really a consideration here?'

'I need—something to hold onto, I guess. Normality. Routine. Rules.'

He nodded. 'How about if I sleep on your floor? I mean, you know, if you'd like. It'd be safer.'

She gave him a short, awkward hug. 'Please.'

Emily's flat was nothing like Sundance would have imagined. She was so careful and thoughtful in character, but even the short hallway had cardboard boxes strewn down the edges. The sitting/dining room had clothes on the sofa and bottles beside it. The far end was relatively tidy, but there was a mess of papers on the table. It led onto a kitchen which had a sink full of unwashed plates.

Before they entered the kitchen he took a small grey cube from his pocket and placed it on the table, pressing one side. A light came on. In the kitchen, she started to cry and he held her again, waiting for it to pass without speaking. Eventually the silent stream of tears passed.

'This isn't ...' She waved her hand around the room.

'I shouldn't have asked you to do this. It's too much.'

She flicked on the kettle, and he quickly picked it off the base.

‘Empty.’ He filled it from the tap and restarted it. ‘I’m so sorry, Emily.’

While she stood and watched, slowly coming to life again, he found mugs in the sink, washed them and put instant coffee in them. He began to work through the washing up until the kettle boiled.

‘You must be disgusted by me.’

He filled the cups and walked her through to the table, clearing a space among the papers. They sat down and he turned the chairs so they were facing each other, their knees almost touching.

‘You forget, Emily, that I’ve been through this, too. I know how it brings you down, and I know how you can start to feel responsible. Nobody, least of all me, is disgusted by you. In fact, I admire you for going through with this—for getting this far alone.’ He took her hand.

She forced a smile, and tried a stuttering breath. ‘He has pictures of me.’

‘It’s what he does. He invades every part of your life, as if he wants to own you—to drain you—before he kills. But we can beat him. He tried to get me, remember? And I’m still here.’

‘You’re a miracle.’ She leaned forwards and kissed him gently on the lips.

It was both the surprise and the gentleness that made him respond, and when they broke off she smiled properly.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t plan to do that. I don’t even know whether you’re single. And you’re only twenty years old. Oh God.’

‘I’m single. And I’m as old as you want me to be.’ He kissed her again, matching her gentleness, and broke off quickly. ‘I’m here for you, whenever you want me, but we have to make you safe.’ He drank coffee, establishing a

change of mood, and pointed to the cube, still flashing red on the table.

‘Assuming he’s checked his monitoring then he knows there’s something wrong by now. I’ve set up a jamming signal. This means he’s almost sure to escalate and we need to get you safe.’

‘Turn it off.’

‘I can’t do this to you, Emily.’

‘I mean it. Turn it off. Anyway you just said—if anything I’m less safe with this on. And we’re both out of touch if you leave it on.’

‘It might be too late already.’

She reached over to the cube and felt for the button. One whole side pressed in and the light went out. ‘There’s nothing in the bedroom.’

She had literally stripped everything out of the bedroom except for the bed. Not even a clock or a bedside table. It explained the clothes in the sitting room.

‘I undress in here. Do you think it stops him.’

He nodded. ‘It’s the best you could do.’

‘There’s nowhere else for you to sleep.’

‘I’ll clear a space on the sofa, don’t worry.’

She kissed him again, lightly.

‘I’ll be right outside. Call if you need anything.’

Standing by the door he looked back at her, turned away from him now, until she started to undress, and then he quietly closed the door between them.

She had thought she’d never sleep, but Sundance lying in the room made her feel safer than she had for weeks, and she slept deeply until six.

She dressed quietly and crept out. He was fully-clothed, asleep in a jumble on the sofa. She made coffee for them both as quietly as she could. When she looked back in the living room he was sitting up, head hanging, still exhausted.

She handed him a cup. 'Come on. Into the bedroom.'

They sat side by side, Emily talking while he revived himself.

'I've not really been processing stuff these last few days. Like when we first met and you said about being twenty and studying for a doctorate. I guess I ... well I didn't really understand what you meant by that. Everything coming at me was so weird that I couldn't believe it all. But it's true, isn't it.'

He turned to face her. 'I don't know how, but I was pretty lucky, in spite of everything. I was abandoned, but somehow I was taken in by this rich Chinese English couple. My mama told me I was adopted when I was six years old. I thought I was half Chinese.' He smiled. 'Ridiculous.'

'So your name ...'

'Isn't one I've spoken out loud for a couple of years. One day, I'll tell you, but even then ... it's not really my real name is it? At least I feel that my birth mother would normally have some input into that.'

'Anyway, my adoptive parents recognised the importance of new technology and indulged me at much as possible. Mama drilled me in mathematics, coding, Cantonese, and English, of course. I took GCSEs at the age of thirteen, A levels at fourteen and then Baba died. Mama pushed harder as if to make up for our loss, and I went to Oxford the same year. I wanted to study IT, but Oxford don't run specialist courses and Mama really wanted me to

go to Oxford, so I took Mathematics and grabbed every IT-related subject I could. From there I went onto my PhD, specializing in the technology.'

He told her his story, about his biological mother, about how the attack had caused him to break down, about how he'd now been told his grandfather was looking for him. The same as he'd told Art, but more honestly, not caring how he was judged.

Emily held onto his arm, squeezing, not sure whether she was comforting him or herself. She was fascinated by this story of his non-existent childhood. 'So they taught you all this stuff you know—about systems and hacking—at Oxford?'

'I learned enough to find out for myself, but it was only after the attack that I studied the dark side in depth. I realised that to survive this level of hacking, of what they call black hat hacking—that's the really smart, dirty type of hacking that sets out to destroy someone—you have to become a hacker yourself.'

'So you're one, too.' It was a statement, as if she'd already been coming to terms with the idea.

'Most people think hacking is just this criminal activity, but there are lots of variants. The clearest distinction is between black hats, red hats, and white hats. They are the serious hackers.' He sat up, the duvet around his waist, and raised three fingers, slowly bending down the first. 'One. Black hats are the hackers you hear about and assume are the only sort. They destroy for fun, because they think everything is fair game and that the true politics of the Internet are Anarchy. Black hats aren't usually single teenagers sitting in

bedrooms any more. They are organised groups, sometime state or terrorism sponsored.'

'Okay. Black hats are the bad guys.'

'White hats are the so-called ethical hackers. They test systems. They often work for the big corporations either salaries or freelance. They'll fix your problems, and they'll try to figure out a solution if there's some big virus attack under way.'

'Like the NHS thing last year?'

'Exactly. Black hats despise them because they've gone corporate—sold out.'

'And the other one?'

One finger left; he bent his middle finger down slowly. 'Red hats. They're supposed to be good guys, too, but they have no faith in the system. They're vigilantes. They act out of revenge, and a desire to punish. They are the black hats' worst nightmare and biggest enemy. There's a war going on. Red hats are just as ruthless as black hats and they'll accept collateral damage. They try to infiltrate the black hat collaboratives. They'll steal and ruin and they'll use physical as well as virtual violence. There are stories of red hats killing people to make an example. Red hats exist because there's no viable internet police force out there.'

'You're not a black hat. So which one are you, Sundance? White hat or red hat?'

In Mitcheldean, Dave and Joey and Elizabeth and Hope have been drinking together. Just the two of them because they can barely remember their names any more.

'Last time, Liz.' Joey laughed. 'Little Liz. S' nice name. You was never a Hope.'

'Wocha mean "last time"?''

'This is a party, right, to remember and then forget. After this there's no more. No more Hope and no more Dave, we're Liz and Joey, and we're not,' he raises his glass of cider, 'we're not this any more. We got to sort ourselves out. No more drinking. No more living in the past,'

'What if ...?' Liz is drunk enough, but she can take a lot more.

'What if, what if? We were kids. Nobody cares about us any more. No Bogey Man's going to come and get us. Hope said it's nearly over, right. She said forget it. And that boy you went to see. He'd got a look in his eyes, I can tell ya. A proper look.'

Liz drinks half a glass full. 'Don't tell me I can't drink.'

'We'll get you to a counsellor thing, right. You're going to kill yourself if you keep living like this; and I don't want to do this on my own.'

'Whatever. It won't work. I've done it before. It won't last.'

'It's different this time. This time you're Liz, and you've got me to help.'

'Yeah. Right.'

Number 43, Cinderford Street was holding one of its regular battles. Tilly Carlin kept to herself. People thought Lee was her man, and she kept him around for protection, because being on the game's never safe. Sometimes he came to

her bed, and she allowed that partly as payment for the protection he gave, partly because he supplied her, partly because if he was off his head then he was handy with his fists and she'd end up black and blue.

She hadn't liked that business last week with all the questions about stuff best forgotten. Lee hadn't done his job there. And then she'd heard him after doing the guy over. Don't matter what they've done, you don't do punters over. If it hadn't been for the questions, she'd liked the guy really. He'd not wanted to use her, and he'd stroked her, gentle like. It's just. Fuck. Partyboy. Who wants to remember *that*?

So Lee had come upstairs on Sunday and he didn't have any gear, and he'd been pissed at her for not having enough cash, as if he didn't take most of it anyway. She'd pushed him out the bedroom and dragged the table in front of it. Not that that'd stop him when he sobered up. He'd hammered at the door until the neighbours called the police and then she'd stood by him, even while she was going through fuckin' hell because he hadn't got the gear. Next morning he was still asleep on the sofa. She knew he'd wake up about lunchtime and start shouting for her to pick up some cans from the pub.

She picked up a knife from the kitchen and opened the front door wide. Then she tipped the sofa up from behind.

'Wharr...'

'You're out.'

He just lay there, tee shirt and underpants, trying to go back to sleep on the floor. She kicked him in the side.

'ckoff.'

She kicked him in the head, not hard but enough to spike his adrenalin.

He sat up and tried to focus.

‘Out.’

‘Leave me alone, woman.’

She pushed the knife against his throat. ‘I said get out.’

She half pushed, half rolled him towards the door, fists balled, still holding the knife, beating him around the head. Once he was out she closed the door and went back for his jeans and jacket. She took the money from his wallet and the house key from his pocket, and threw the clothes through the door.

Down the road she saw a silver Porsche parked, engine running. The woman inside stared at her and gave her a short nod before driving past, smiling.

While Emily was getting ready for work, Sundance made toast for them both and started to search for anything that might relate to what happened to Micky last night.

It was completely unexpected when he found something. This guy didn’t kill people and leave bodies to be found, and yet here it was, as yet unidentified, young male, 22-25, black hair, 5’10”. The bigger shock was that the body was found in Gloucester Museum. Multiple stab wounds. Time of death between 20.00 and 21.00.

They’d seen him outside the Cathedral, and they’d heard a noise that Sundance would have sworn was the murder itself taking place. But somehow the body had moved from Gloucester Cathedral, across the city centre. Someone had broken into Gloucester Museum, dumped the body during the night, and carefully locked up behind them without leaving any traces.

He sat on the bed beside her and gave her a clumsy hug. And then because he didn't know what to say, he said what he was thinking. 'I think you're the most beautiful woman in the world. And I'm in love with you.'

She pulled back and looked him in the eyes. 'When this is over, say that again, okay?'

He nodded.

'I'm supposed to go to work, Sundance.'

'It's dangerous. And there's another thing. They found Micky's body.'

He explained about the museum.

Her fists clenched. 'So how could that have happened? Might he work there, do you think?'

'Too risky. And there'd be CCTV of him, carrying a body, breaking in, or opening the door.'

They were whispering now, suddenly aware that just outside the door were phones and laptops, hacked and picking up sound and vision as soon as they left the room.

'What's he doing, Sundance. From what you've told me he's always hidden his murders. Either they look like accidents or just disappearances. Nobody even knows people have been killed, and then this.'

'He must want people to know. He's escalating. I've been reading about this stuff and sooner or later, according to the experts, killers always escalate. Whatever makes them want to kill, they need to do it more often to satisfy. Of course that only really counts for those who are found out. There might be lots of people out there who kill for no particular reason and with no particular pattern and never get caught, I suppose.'

‘And going back you think he killed this guy in the car a couple of years ago. And then the underground station woman last February—’

‘—and Tanya about eight months later, and Micky just a couple of weeks after. And this time he lets everyone know what he’s done.’

‘I don’t think there are any typical cases. Like when I’m visiting clients, it’s the first thing we do is to try not so stereotype. Just saying all serial killers escalate, doesn’t tell us why. He might even want people to think that.’

‘Maybe. You understand people better than I do. What would that mean?’

‘What if he knows we’re looking for him. I mean, you’ve been careful, but he knows I’ve been into Slice, and to Rothleigh. He might easily have seen us at the Cathedral last night. If he’s connected us, and even if he doesn’t know who you are he might have got nervous and want to get rid of us. It’s like he has a list and he kills people in order, so he had to kill Micky so he could work on killing us.’

‘There’s other people involved in all this.’

‘How do you mean? Involved how?’

‘I told you about my mother—my bio-mama—and that my grandfather is looking for me.’

She ran her hand through his hair, feeling the scalp beneath. ‘They’re targets, too.’

‘I think my mother is in the middle of all this. You don’t realise how hard it is to hide from someone, especially someone like me, but my mother is invisible. She was fourteen when she swapped identities. God knows how often she’s done it since. I’ve been searching for her for a year and yet she sends me

a message without ever revealing herself. I think my mother knows about the murders, and I think my grandfather appearing now isn't a coincidence either.'

'He knows, too?'

'The message was that he's here and he's searching for me and that we might all be in danger. If she wanted she could tell him where I am, but she didn't do that.' He pulled on his bottom lip, which made her want to kiss him again. 'I think she told me so I could make a decision about whether to see him, and to let me know that he might need protection.'

'Are you going to see him?'

'Today, if I can. I know where he lives, I just need to catch up with him.'

'If you want me to be there ...'

'I always want you to be here.'

'After work?'

'I'm nervous about you going off to work.'

'It's more dangerous if I break routine, surely? And I've got people who rely on me. Clients.'

'Just – stay in touch. Every hour. I'll be tracking you, too.'

'You and everyone else.'

Sundance got a lift into the centre of Gloucester, checking all his system links to Emily as she drove. Once they had separated she would be on her own, and with Micky dead there was nothing to stop her being targeted any day.

Overnight there had been a suspicious silence from her stalker. Sundance reasoned that he'd been busy dealing with the fallout of his latest killing and it might buy them a day, but the chatter had started as she drove.

Late for work today, Ms Stone.

You've been a naughty girl, I can tell.

Punishment coming soon, don't you worry.

<attachment 1: 0376.jpeg>

<attachment 1: 0378.jpeg>

The first picture was of Emily, at her bedroom door, brushing her hair and turned half back into the room. The second was a detail from the first— Sundance in the background, partially obscured by her body, tying his shoelace with his foot up on the bed and turned towards her in conversation, his face clearly visible. They didn't discuss it. Apart from dressing with the door closed in the bedroom, they'd deliberately made no attempt that morning to avoid her phone, seemingly dormant on the sofa. Sundance knew, too, that it would take no time at all to carry out an image search and find out who he really was. It really is impossible to hide from a determined hunter in the modern world.

'Be careful. No risks. Check in regularly and especially if anything unusual comes up.'

She kissed his cheek. 'Find your grandfather and call me.'

Walking the last few hundred metres to Slice, he realised that he'd been thrown back into the days when his identity was stolen. Every step he took, he worried that he was watched. It would take something special to have found him and hacked him already, but it was certain that his exact location was known up to the point Emily left and it wouldn't be hard to follow his progress through CCTV. By the time he'd reached Slice he'd made up his mind. The only solution was speed. They needed to find him and take him down within the next 24

hours, and they needed to do enough to destabilise any plans he might have for Emily in the meantime.

On days when the café opened before he arrived, he entered by the back door, a passageway from the Cathedral gates that connected the shops on the road. The kitchen door was open and he slipped up the stairs, deactivated his office alarms—set to respond to a different frequency each day—and locked himself in.

Sundance had the ability, or perhaps it was a weakness, to switch off from distractions and anxieties and focus. He needed to contact his grandfather and he couldn't decide how to do it. By nature he'd always chosen secretive options. He'd choose a side door rather than the front; he'd avoid having his photograph taken; he'd act anonymously online even before he'd changed his identity and hidden away. But he felt that Grandfather Ainsley would be all the more suspicious if he wasn't open. In the end he set up a new email account, just in case he'd already been tracked, and sent a message.

Ainsley,

Do you agree that hope is behind all our actions? Mother says you are looking for me. Go to Slice café this morning. Engage with the Art. Ask for Sundance.

He assumed that the man who wrote about the impact of quantum computers on cryptography would be smart enough to pick up the meaning, so all he had to do was wait.

Once sent he set up a fake delivery failure report so that anyone, Ainsley included, who tried to email the account would get a response from **mailer-daemon:**

Delivery to the following recipient failed permanently

@dancemail.com

Technical details of permanent failure:

The email account that you have tried to reach does not exist.

He'd see the message they sent to him but the sender would assume the account was dead. Then he texted Art to let him know to send his visitor up if they asked for Sundance. Art replied with some comment about hermits and messenger boys and having a business to run. But he'd do it.

While he waited Sundance read everything he could about Ainsley Griffin and did some deeper searches. He came across Chelsey Bell, whose articles he'd also read, but without connecting her to Ainsley. He quickly discovered that she had a much greater online presence than Ainsley, to the point that he wondered whether she was one of his grandfather's online personas. For someone like his grandfather it would be a simple matter to fake photos of a young woman.

When he got a knock on the door and looked through the entrance cam to see Art with Ainsley Griffin and a young woman, he recognised her from the photos. Chelsey Bell was a real person, with some significant skills. Presumably Ainsley was very close to her if he was prepared to bring her into this meeting.

He opened the door wide.

'Mr Griffin, Ms Bell. Please come in. Art could we get something from the café? Coffee? Tea? Cakes?'

It was Bell who answered. 'Geez, that's kind of you. Espresso for me please. And a slice of that big coffee and walnut that I saw when we came in. Ainsley?'

Griffin had walked in with a pronounced limp and made his way straight to the sofa. He was hardly listening, staring around the office, taking in all the gadgetry.

‘Get him an Americano, please. And two forks for the cake. Three if you’re going to eat it with us.’

Art stared at Sundance until he caught on and handed over his bank card, then saluted and left.

Sundance motioned them to the sofa, where Emily had been sitting, less than a week ago. He’d been preparing to catch this killer slowly and steadily for over a year, and suddenly it was all happening too quickly. He needed a change of gear.

Ainsley squeezed his eyes tight shut and then opened them and stared at Sundance.

‘You seem to know us both.’

‘I did a bit of digging while I was waiting. Not that there was all that much to find apart from your professional careers.’

‘And you think you’re my grandson.’

‘He looks like you.’ Chelsey gave them both a big smile. ‘This is exciting.’

‘I think so.’ Sundance paused. ‘I hope so.’

Ainsley reached out a hand. ‘So do I.’ They shook briefly. ‘Sundance?’

‘It’s what I’m called here. Call me Sundance. Sundance. For now, because there are people who I need to hide from.’

Ainsley nodded thoughtfully. ‘Hence your warning, which wasn’t really necessary, by the way. We’d already figured out the danger.’

Art knocked again, brought in tea and cake. He handed over the bank card before leaving. 'I gave myself a tip.'

Ainsley seemed to have come to some decision once Art had left. 'I'd heard that you'd been taken away from your mother at birth. Have you met her or your father?'

'I've searched for them, and I discovered that searching was a dangerous thing to do. Then she sent me a message and told me about you. I think that she intended that I warn you how dangerous it is around here.'

Chelsey had a mouth full of cake, but didn't let it stop her. 'Was that by way of a warning or a threat do you think?'

'Ms Bell how committed are you in all this? I mean if I'm in danger, and,' he gestured towards Ainsley, 'my grandfather is in danger, then associating with us probably puts you in danger, too.'

'Danger as in dead. We get it, but so far as we can tell all this happened a long time ago. Except for Tanya Wilson, of course.'

'If you know about Tanya then we really need to talk.'

'Yeah, dead. Eliminated. No longer a problem, right.'

Ricky is wearing a Bluetooth headset, almost invisible beneath his long hair. He listens for a moment.

'Fuck. Did I say I killed him? Did I?'

They have a complicated relationship with Mike Massey. Mike's hired them, so technically he's the customer. Or the boss. Except he isn't the boss. Steve Jones is the boss and it really isn't clear whether Massey or Ricky and Simon are the more indispensable to Jonesy. Ricky knows even Jonesy isn't

really the boss. There's always somebody higher up, but Jones is solid middle-management. Massey is low-level management and lacks the imagination to see further. Ricky and Simon are technical experts, freelance up to a point—the point being where they piss off Jones. Massey thinks he owns them, but he's vaguely aware that:

1. They have Mr Jones's ear
2. They'd kill him without a second thought if he pushed them too far.

Jonesy sometimes talks about the class struggle, and Ricky can see that.

He aspires. 'Did I say we'd killed him, Mr. Massey? You want to be careful making assumptions.'

He turns the phone speaker up so Simon can hear Massey's tinny response.

'So you didn't kill him?'

'Somebody did. Poor bastard. Blood everywhere. We were just goin' a cut his knob off. He'd learn his lesson. Probably be grateful to us in the long run. Anyway, this somebody got away with the money, too. So you owe us.'

'How the fuck do you work that out? You get cash from Steve and whatever you can get off the target. You fucked up, it's not my business.'

'Expenses, Massey.'

Simon is under instruction to keep quiet. This is the critical point of the phone call, and he's straining to hear, on the balls of his feet.

Massey's weighing things up. 'How much?'

'A thou.'

'Five hundred each. When you back?'

'We've got some business to attend to here first. We'll be there Saturday. Have the cash.' He cuts the connection and pockets the phone.

'Right, Si?'

'Depends on what we can get from this other bastard.'

First thing this morning they'd uploaded the picture from Ricky's phone. Micky wouldn't have been identifiable. He had his back to the camera and was slumped forwards away from them. The other figure, holding him up, backing with the body through the door in the Cathedral wall, had looked up and grinned at them as the photo was taken. Posing, Ricky said. Like he wanted to be found.

Even in the dark the face was well enough lit to give them hope of finding some look-alikes online, and then it was a matter of cutting down the possibilities. They'd picked up some darkened images of minor celebrities, because the law of averages says there are so many pictures out there you'll get a few hits, and they'd picked up the usual trawl of insecure Facebook pictures.

And then they'd got a local news article from two years before about the local MP and his son. There'd been rumours that the boy had been cut off. He'd stopped living on his father's estate. The rumours were denied by both sides. There was no question that the son's face was a match. Herrick Castle, public school. Quiet sort apparently. All they had to do was find him.

Ricky is feeling pretty pleased with himself. Simon has lost the edge he'd had last night. They'd gone clubbing and they'd picked up a couple of girls, taken them back to the hotel, and kicked them out first thing this morning.

Simon is relaxed, pleased with Ricky's piece of photo magic, and looking forward to creating some mayhem with Mr. Castle.

'So go on. What's the next step? We know who he is. How hard can it be to find him?'

'Patience, Si. Should be easy but remember he's a killer. Might even be working for Jonesy, or maybe some big Boss down here. He's not going to advertise his whereabouts, is he?'

'So what? You're saying we know who this fucker is but we're still screwed? Cos I'm not liking that, mate.'

'We'll find him. We know he's in town, and you don't get to be the local MP's son without being noticed.'

'Yeah, well I'm regretting kicking those two kids out now. I could have gone back to bed with 'em both while you look for the bastard.'

'Look, piss off into town and buy yourself some new shoes will ya? I need some peace and quiet.' Ricky taps away on his laptop. He doesn't like Simon to know he isn't very good at this. He's done courses. Cheryl's really proud of him. But he'd hated every moment. Big Ricky being shown up by spotty twenty year olds who could do this sort of thing in their sleep, wasn't what he was used to. They'd find this guy in ten minutes but Ricky could spend all day and miss that inspiration that comes so easy to them.

After an hour he's had enough, but he's hit on a plan that will sound good to Simon. They go to Daddy's house and snoop around. Apparently Herrick had lived in a separate house on the estate before he'd been thrown out. A couple of questions in the right place and they'd have him. Dangerous people have no need for this internet bollocks, and Ricky knows that he's dangerous.

#13 Micky Wilson

November 3rd 2018. Micky has been a different sort of project for me. Given my timescales I decided that he should come to me rather than spend all the time and trouble of dealing with him at a distance.

I have rather concentrated on Micky, but I've had to prepare Emily, too. She needs to be primed, ready for her end, and already she's proving to be the more complicated of the two. Perhaps because of my haste I've allowed her to seek out help. And who has stepped into the breach, the knight with shining electrons? Someone who I have gradually realised is the wunderkind who evaded me before. Danny Chung, the little lost boy searching for his mother. This scared me at first. He dropped off the radar, and that's impossible. He suddenly reappears right on my doorstep, helping out my next subject. He's onto me, clearly. I spend a little while wondering how, and then conclude it doesn't matter. By the time he and his mother, and Ainsley Griffin and the rest catch up with me it'll be too late. I'll be free of all this. I'll take my money, and send my records to Deathdiaspora.net.

I've realised that the only way to complete this chain, without leaving loose ends, is to go back to the beginning. It'll be a perfect knot of murders, with no beginning and no end. A Nexus.

Nothing ever goes smoothly with a subject and I've learned over the last twenty years to be both patient and nimble, always ready to change direction. In Birmingham, it's clear that Micky is spooked when this big BMW turns up. I deal with hacking the car and sending him on his way down the motorway and then I do some digging. I'm limited in how much data I can get through his phone, but I'm able to Bluetooth the car's controls and identify what I'm dealing with. The

car is a BMW M4, registered to an owner in Manchester. Micky's been followed, which doesn't suit my plans at all.

The owner is a Ricky Warbeck, a young well-off business man from Altrincham. It doesn't take long to find his gym and club memberships and then his mobile phone number. I decide to get rid of him, too.

Once I've arranged to meet Micky at a convenient place and time I leave it to the last minute and invite Warbeck along, too. That he's not alone is a little surprise but not important in the long run. Spiriting Micky's body away into the Cathedral catacombs and across town is simple and gives me the chance to lure Warbeck and his mate a little further. I have surmised that they are professional enforcers, so I'm happy to let them think they are the ones stalking me. It'll give me the element of surprise.

13

Sundance made the decision to tell Ainsley and Chelsey everything. If he'd misread the situation then it was too late to do anything about it. He needed all the help he could get, and he needed to do what he could to keep people safe. Especially Emily. Once Chelsey had mentioned Tanya Wilson, there was no need to hold anything back.

He told them what he could, about his own search for his mother, about Toma Kasun and Chloe Huppert before Tanya, and Micky the night before. In return he heard about his grandparents and how Ainsley had started this search, and about the video which they had deduced was of Tanya's murder.

It was the video that intrigued him most.

'Firstly why does he film this? And then how does that video make its way to you? Does he send it himself? If so why, and if not then who else has it and why get you involved?'

'We've asked ourselves the same questions, of course.' Chelsey was easy to talk to. Ainsley listened carefully, but spoke little. 'Ainsley thought it might be your mother.'

Ainsley spoke up. 'Suppose she knows what's going on but doesn't have enough information to take to the police. And she's scared. They're all terrified. Joey, Elizabeth, Tilly—they all suffered horrific rape and abuse from their earliest memories. Of course she would be, too. So she tracks down both of us. She maybe doesn't really trust us, but we're family in as much as she has one. She's secretive and smart but she needs help with this.'

‘Either that or she wants to take us all down together.’ Sundance had learned to be cautious and he wasn’t going to throw it away with any assumptions of someone’s goodwill—even his mother’s.

Chelsey looked at each of them in turn. ‘Both those things might be true. She’s got this huge advantage on us, in that she sought us out when we didn’t even know she existed. She could have done much worse, even killed us, without us ever knowing. We have to trust someone. Let’s start with each other and see if we can stretch it to her when the time comes, right?’

They both nodded.

‘The next person on the list is Emily, Tanya’s social worker friend. And my friend, too. She knows all this and we can trust her.’

‘I thought you said Micky was the target after Tanya?’

‘Two targets. Two messages at the same time. Her brother and Emily Stone.’ Sundance looked across to the big screen on his right. ‘Emily’s heading across town. She stopped off at her office and picked up some work.’ He mouse-clicked. ‘Probably going to the closest—in Longlevens.’

They looked blank.

‘It’s an area of the city. A couple of miles out of the centre.’

‘She shouldn’t be alone.’

‘I’m keeping a close watch. And she insisted.’

Chelsey stood. ‘You two need to talk and make plans. I need to get out.’ She turned to Ainsley. ‘I thought I’d go and see the vicar guy you were telling me about. Seems like a bunch of rough sleepers might be just the people who’d see and hear bodies being carted across town in the middle of the night.’

Ainsley started to get up. 'You shouldn't go alone. You're right about this Emily, but the same applies to all of us.'

She put her hand on his shoulder to stop him getting up and leaned over to give him a brief hug. 'Do you really think that that your grandson hasn't already got enough information to track me around town? I'd be surprised, with all this tech, if he hasn't hacked into the CCTV, too.'

Ainsley stared at Sundance. Sundance was staring down at his feet, and then gave her the briefest of nods.

Chelsey stepped out into the grey November afternoon and turned down Westgate towards the Methodist Church that Ainsley had described to her. It stood out: red brick with a ridged roof that spelled out English-city-centre-church to an American. She figured the Drop-In would be well under way so she just pushed open the door and wandered in. It took the Rev Steve less than a minute to clock her, wave and hold up two fingers which she took to mean he'd need two minutes to finish his conversation.

She'd decided not to tell him her connection with Ainsley. It was one way in, but then she figured she wouldn't learn anything more than Ainsley would if he knew everything would get back to him. She decided to play-act as a potential volunteer. If she ever motivated herself to move out of London then it might even be true.

'Hi there. Can I help? Would you like a meal?'

There were eight tables in the hall, as well as a suite of two more from where tea and coffee were being served. Each table had three or four people sitting at it, some with plates of curry and rice, others just with mugs of tea and

coffee. A hatchway in the wall to her right seemed to lead to a kitchen, and hot meals were being passed through.

‘Hey. You guys look pretty busy. Maybe I should come back another day.’

‘Never too busy to help.’ He stuck his hand out. ‘I’m Steve, Drop-In manager.’

She shook hands, more passively than usual, trying gauge his response to her. ‘I’m Chelsey.’ She tilted her head and grinned. ‘I know. American names, hey? A friend told me about this place. Said maybe you guys could do with some help?’

‘Ah you want to volunteer? Well look I have some forms in my bag. We’re always keen in principle, but we have to do checks, you know?’

‘Sure. Course. Could I maybe sit in the corner and watch a while?’

He grimaced, showing his teeth. ‘I don’t want to seem ungrateful but, you know, it’s policy. Only clients and vetted volunteers allowed.’

‘No, no. I get it. I wouldn’t want to be part of an organisation that didn’t take its clients safety seriously, you know.’ She tried to think of reasons to stay longer. She’d love to get to talk to some of these people. ‘You know I’m just moving into the area. Down from London. I did some volunteer work there. Helped out with publicity, too. I’m kind of in the writing business.’

‘We could always do with more publicity. And funds.’ He looked around. The atmosphere was quiet, but edgy. When someone did speak it sounded nervy. ‘Look, I’d normally break off and talk to you round the back in my office, but...difficult day today. Let me get you that application form.’

He headed off to the back of the hall behind the tea and coffee tables and picked up a briefcase. She sat at a table and waited, saying hello to the occupants. Two women and a man.

‘Seems like a nice place. Good food?’

The man looked up. ‘Lifesaver, you know. Absolute lifesaver this place.’

The women nodded in agreement.

‘Peaceful.’

‘Usually, usually. Guy got murdered last night. People are a bit nervous, you know.’

‘Somebody you know?’

They all muttered ‘No’.

‘Still, scary.’

‘Found him in the museum.’

One of the women spoke up. ‘Yeah, but they found blood down by the Cathedral.’

‘Not heard that. How’d he get in the middle of the fucking Museum? Pardon my French.’

She let them chatter among themselves.

‘It’s Fred West come back to haunt us.’

‘Dead or not, he never went away. People have been disappearing round here as long as I can remember.’

‘Them two girls I went to school with, Cheryl and Jackie. Not seen them in a long time.’

‘Remember the kiddies’ homes. All got hushed up, that did.’

‘Chelsey?’ Steve was there, handing over a form.

She stood, eager not to be seen as reluctant to leave, and gave the form a quick glance. 'No problem. I'll hand it back in here when I've filled it out, shall I?'

As she left she noticed someone else had come in and was getting a meal. Tall and wild looking, but stooped to make himself smaller. He looked like a caricature.

'You sure do a great job.' She nodded over to the newcomer. 'Are they all regulars?'

He looked around the hall. 'We get new ones, but they usually come back. Everybody here knows each other.'

'Rough sleepers?'

'A few. We're lucky here. The Church is built on an old pub, and the old cellar is our basement. I've put in five beds that I can put people up in if they're desperate. Legend is the pub cellar used to be connected to the Cathedral and Abbey by a tunnel so the monks could sneak out and have a drink without the Abbott finding out.'

She laughed. 'I love these old English stories. Must be a lot of work for you.'

He smiled. 'Like I said I can always do with more volunteers.'

'Great job.' She stuck her hand out and he shook it firmly.

'Hope we'll see you back here, Chelsey. Could you sign your name in the book on the way out? Then I'll remember to expect your application.'

Chelsey looked over her shoulder several times on the way back to Slice. This little visit had been more worthwhile than she could have hoped for, but she

didn't think the Rev Steve had bought her story—he was just too nice to call her out on it. Not only had he given her the key to the mysterious moving body, but she'd seen something that she was sure was significant. She just had to get back to Slice and share her news.

Sundance and Ainsley were on a second coffee and keen to tell her what their plans were, but she stopped them, hand up, palm forward.

'Me first.'

Ainsley cocked his head. Chelsey was used to being proactive. It was one of the things that made their partnership so effective.

'Two things. First, I know how he moved the body last night.'

'Go on. It's one of the things we've been discussing. Sundance thinks he hacked museum security, maybe city CCTV, too.'

Sundance shook his head slightly. 'I know there are a lot of downsides to that scenario, but it's feasible. What else is there?'

'Tunnels. I just heard a story that there were tunnels from the Cathedral to the Church where they hold the Drop-In. It may only be legend, but it makes sense.'

Sundance jumped in. 'Tunnels? All the way from the Cathedral to the museum?'

'It wouldn't have to be all the way, would it? Suppose you can get from the Cathedral to that church, then why not others. Or from there to the sewer system. When we walked past the city centre today we saw there are glass covered Roman excavations that form part of the museum. If they are connected, or even nearly connected and someone knows about them, then they could travel anywhere in the city by the network and pop out without ever

being spotted by CCTV, or anyone else. It wouldn't matter if he were dragging a body around.'

Ainsley was nodding.

'It's a better explanation. He hears these stories about one tunnel and sets out discovering it. Once in he's got it all to himself.'

'Maybe'.

Sundance was cautious, while Ainsley was as encouraging as ever.

'What about the second thing?'

'I saw someone I know at the Church.'

'You've only been here a day, Chels. How can you know anybody?'

'Our friend the gamekeeper. It was him, or his twin.'

'Didn't seem like his sort of thing, volunteering to help the homeless and unemployed.'

'He wasn't volunteering. He was getting a free meal. He was different. Beard, long straggly hair. But it all looked off somehow, like it was fake. Underneath it was the same guy, I swear it.'

Sundance stood up. 'Maybe we should go down there and have a look ourselves. A picture would be useful.'

'The vicar wouldn't be very welcoming, I don't think. He was already suspicious of me, hanging around talking to people. Plus, after this murder, they're scared down there.'

'Sounds like this gamekeeper is acting very suspiciously though ...'

'If it was him. Not that I doubt you, Chelsey, but we have to keep an open mind about everything.'

'I know, but it was him. If I'd had my camera hidden and on record...but I never thought I'd need it. Steve definitely wouldn't let us use cameras down at the Church.'

Sundance was pacing. 'You've seen this gamekeeper twice, Chelsey. You think he spotted you just now? He'd remember you, for sure.'

She spread her hands forward in an empty gesture. He noticed she wore no rings, fingernails cut close, all the better for typing with. 'No way to tell. I didn't see him come in, but he could have seen me then. If he did he didn't attempt to hide, but then he might have had faith in his disguise.'

'We should assume he saw you, then, and that he'll figure it's not a coincidence. That makes you as much of a target as the rest of us.'

'We just need to see the whole game.'

Sundance and Chelsey looked at Ainsley, sitting awkwardly to avoid pressure on his bruised ribs.

'We have at least one likely suspect. We have someone who seems to be pretending to be someone else, living where our suspect used to live. We have Tanya's murder less than half a mile away from the suspect's old cottage, and we have Micky's murder less than a quarter of a mile from where you saw him. We just need to doxx these two, Norman and Herrick Castle. Find pictures and connect them to the gamekeeper.'

'Norman's easy. Herrick's secretive.' Sundance had tried already.

'Must be pictures of him somewhere.'

'It'd be easier if we had a picture of this gamekeeper, then we could run an image search.'

‘There’s something really wrong here.’

Chelsey almost laughed. ‘You just figured that out, Ains?’

‘No, I mean...look when you play chess you don’t look to play the best move every time. There’s not enough time to work that stuff out. You play good moves and follow a pattern, and you watch how your opponent plays, too. You want to be able to guess the sort of good moves he’ll play, and the sort of situations he’s uncomfortable with. Every move you play is a question, and every move he makes is an answer that tells you a little more about him. Of course, your moves are answers to his questions, too.’

Chelsey had never heard him talk about chess before even though she’d watched him play online a few times. Sundance was leaning forwards, with the enthusiasm of someone who gave his interest indiscriminately.

‘So this guy is killing people in sequence. People linked together by sometimes random communication. He’s prepared to leave months—perhaps years—between his victims. It *is* a game to him. A pattern and an obsession. Like you said,’ he pointed to Sundance, ‘he might have been doing this for years. Maybe since the Children’s Home days. How many mistakes has he made, Sundance?’

‘Mistakes that give himself away?’

‘Maybe. Or like killing the wrong person, or even letting it be known that someone has been killed. There are either no bodies, or they look like accidents, until you know otherwise.’

‘Well, there’s the video. And there’s Micky’s body. I’ve been able to put together some sort of tracking to figure it out, but it’s hard to see how that could have been avoided.’

'He's been killing for maybe twenty years and no mistakes and then in the last week not only does he let the video slip, but he doesn't even try to hide a victim's body. And instead of a nice clean line of one victim leading to another he lets it split into two—Micky and your Emily. And he speeds up the killing. Three in less than a year.'

'He's accelerating,' said Sundance.

'No. He's reached the endgame. He's played this game, trying to play it as well as he can, for years and we know him from the moves he's played. But he's got a new objective. Chess again. Some players go for the King from move one; others simply try to put their pieces on good square, or take good squares away from their opponents; others might tease their opponents in—rope-a-dope. But if you have the instinct, at some point you sense blood. Your final objective is *always* your opponent's King, and when you're sure you've got it *then* you start to play the best moves and forget about the psychology.'

'So you think he's got a new objective now?'

'He's been drawing us in. He seems to be making mistakes, but really he's teasing us. Maybe he spotted how close you were getting. Or maybe Hope has spooked him somehow. I wish we knew what sort of game she's playing. I don't know how he intends to win this game, but he's moving in for the kill.'

There was a prolonged beep from Sundance's PC, and they all turned towards it.

'Fuck.'

'What's that?' Chelsey walked behind him to see the screen.

‘I’ve had this monitor on Emily. She’s supposed to keep in regular touch. She went to an address in Longlevens over an hour ago, and she has hasn’t moved or checked in since.’

Chelsey put her hand on his shoulder. ‘She’s a social worker. An hour isn’t that long for a visit, surely.’

‘We agreed she’d check in. I should have been watching.’ He stood up. ‘We need to get over there and check it out.’

The BMW cruised past the gates of Severn Vale and carried on half a mile until it reached a T-junction, where it carried out a neat three-point turn and started back.

‘Drop me off by the gates and I’ll snoop around, then pick me up same place in half an hour, unless I call you, right.’

‘The gates had CCTV, Si. I’ll drop you off round the corner from them and see if you can get in through the hedge, right?’

‘Whatever.’ Simon had spent the day hanging around the hotel room and needed some action.

As he drove away, Ricky could just make out Simon leaping over the small ditch that separated the road from the bushes and a barbed wire fence. It was gone eight o’clock and as dark as it was going to get. The trouble with Simon was he wouldn’t have thought out a story for when he got caught.

He drove up and down the road three times, in front of the gates, and then pulled in at the T-junction again. An hour had gone by and there was no sign. Contact was risky, especially if Simon had sound on. Even Simon was

smarter than that. He was about to text when his phone vibrated. Simon had finally got back to him.

Left at the T-junction, then the first left. I've found a cottage.

This better be good. You were supposed to check in after half an hour

It wasn't unknown for Si to forget the plan—or more likely to choose to ignore it. Ricky found the cottage easily enough, but no Simon. He figured Simon would have come at it from the woods so maybe he was out the back. It was then that he realised that if that were so Simon wouldn't have known the directions to the cottage. In fact, it was really unlike Simon to be able to give directions. He didn't drive for a start.

Ricky turned back to the car and found a rifle pushed into his face.

'Step backwards three paces and kneel.'

Even in the dark it was undeniably the man from last night.

'I was lost , Mr ...'

'Indeed. A lot of people getting lost around here these days. Now on your knees, Mr Warbeck.' He cocked the rifle. 'I think you know I'll do this so don't play games. Nobody's going to think twice about a rifle shot near the gamekeeper's cottage.'

Ricky sank forward to his knees, keeping eye contact. 'Steady there. There's no need for hostility. We're more or less on the same side.'

'Now close your eyes.'

Ricky kept them open. 'You killed Sticky. Well, you saved us a job, that's all.'

The rifle went off, the bullet thudding into the top of Ricky's shoulder, passing through and knocking him sideways.

Strong hands grabbed him and set him back on his knees.

‘Did I say talk?’

Adrenaline and pain competed, Ricky grasping at his left shoulder with his right hand.

‘Jesus. Jesus.’

The man had a walking stick in the other hand. He held it out and pressed the handle. A noose slipped out from the tip, which he slipped over Ricky’s head. Pressing the button again it tightened round his neck.

‘Now stand up and walk ahead of me, round the side to the back door.’

Ricky was a big man at six feet three, but this man had two or three inches on him. He didn’t have the physique, but he didn’t need it with Ricky’s shoulder in agony and bleeding, and a rubber collar on the end of a four foot long stick around his neck.

The back door led to a flag-stoned kitchen, and through a door in one corner what would have once been a pantry for hanging game now had wooden steps down to a basement. Ricky staggered down, expecting some dark cellar. Instead he was met by a clean, tiled room full of computers and monitors. Another door led to a similar room, about twenty feet square with cameras attached to the walls. In one corner, directly in front of them as they entered was a young woman, professional looking in blouse and skirt, sprawled across a sofa with hands and feet tied, apparently unconscious. In the centre of the room were two hard-backed chairs, and in one Simon was slumped, naked from the waist up, fresh blood across his chest.

At first Ricky thought Simon was dead, and then his head raised at the sound of approaching footsteps. As they got closer he realised why the head

shape looked different. Simon's left ear had been removed—hacked off. Simon raised a hand, and then his head dropped forwards again.

'Right. To business.'

#14 Ricky and Simon

November 4th 2018. These two aren't very smart, but that's just as well. I'm using a lot of mental bandwidth bringing all this together, and they are on my critical path. They are loose ends that might foul up at the wrong moment. They also give me an excellent opportunity to move on to my next target.

For a while I think they are too stupid to follow up on the photograph I allowed them, and then, after my other business, I notice they have finally started moving towards the house. It takes me a little while to find Ricky's associate, Simon, in the woods. I only have access to Ricky's phone, and he's clearly still in the car, playing it safe, so I can't track him. But Simon has a torch, a knife, and no knowledge of his surroundings, whereas these are my woods; I have infra-red cameras set around them and my electric baton.

As soon as he crosses in front of my cameras I know exactly which grid square of the woods he's in and I head out. It takes fifteen minutes to intercept him, hail him, and Taser him in his confusion. He's big and heavy, and it takes another ten minutes to haul him back to the cottage, tie him up, and set the basement cameras running. That my identity will be clear on the stream makes no difference now.

I throw water at him until he wakes up. My Deathdiaspora.net colleagues are full of interesting ways to wake people up, close them down, heighten pain, and inhibit pain. They often involve complicated mixtures of drugs, but ice cold water works as well as any of them. The drugs that are recommended on the dark net are too easily traceable, so I avoid them, but I do have a reasonable stockpile for emergency work, created by manipulating hospital records last

year. I used them on Tanya, to keep her awake and aware, and I have plenty left for what I have to do.

Simon loses an ear before he's fully woken. This is to ensure he realises what his situation is. If you torture people slowly, building up through gradations of pain, then you reinforce their will to resist, and at the same time you don't give them a clear decision point. They think, 'I survived that, so I can probably survive this.' It's both quicker and kinder this way. I make a quick, clean stroke with a garden saw, and I stand behind him holding a cloth pad to the wound. It's important to me that he texts Ricky himself, and I talk to him softly for several minutes, explaining what he's going to do and why. I release his hands when I'm ready. He's in agony, disoriented, literally unbalanced, and terrified. Once the text has gone I spend a few moments injecting him with morphine and then leave him to wait outside for Ricky. I don't even bother with his hands. He'll be too sleepy now. I notice that Miss Stone is half awake on the sofa and give her a little wave.

Ricky is a little smarter than Simon, and cautious. He sits in the car for a minute, just watching. Then he checks his gear. No torch, knife but probably no gun. He's bigger, too. He takes a few steps across the road and then stops, and I wonder if he's seen or heard me, but something about his posture makes me realise that he's simply thought things through. I didn't even try to force Simon to do anything as smart as putting the text in his own words. He was in no state to think for himself. It accounts for Ricky's caution, but then this sudden pause and turn suggests the full implication has just hit him.

I shoot his left shoulder to disable him and to bring him back to reality. I collar him and walk him down to the basement, where I sit him down and tie him

next to Simon. He too has a text to make. In fact this is really the point. There's only one place to go now. He's confused by the text I make him send. It's to no-one that he knows, and says nothing of any importance.

The girl on the sofa is awake now, gagged and tied. She's still lying down but watching, as if hoping I won't have noticed her. I give her my biggest smile, encouraging her to watch.

I kick-turn both chairs so that the men are back to back, their heads pressed together, and then I push the rifle muzzle into Simon's mouth and pull the trigger. The bullet takes care of both of them. It's important to me to use the right means to carry out my tasks. When people are close by, in the same room, then a knife or a bullet is more elegant than ingenious mechanisms.

14

Emily had dropped Sundance outside King's School, behind the Cathedral and was able to rejoin St Oswalds Road and head out towards Cheltenham. Her office was in a small industrial estate off the main dual carriageway. It was miles from the city centre, but given how much of her work was in different towns and cities spread around Gloucestershire it was helpful to be close to the major road network.

Everyone was too busy to pay her much attention. Suzy, her boss, dropped a few papers on her desk, mentioned a training session she might like to attend—not that there was ever time for training—and told her there were new jobs on the system to schedule.

There were always new jobs, and everyone always had good reason to try to allocate them to someone else. The truth was there were four of them to do the work of a team of six, and that the full complement of six would still have been two short of how many were really needed to do a proper job. Emily had made the decision early on in this team to take whatever work she was offered, and hope the rest of the team would be as conscientious. She'd worked in teams where blame was the primary motivator.

The harassment had stopped after she'd dropped off Sundance. It was the longest period she could remember going without calls or messages, or simply random ads or pictures, since they'd started. She tried not to relax. He was playing with her—trying to make her feel even more vulnerable when he started again.

The first new call was a house in Longlevens, one of the better parts of town, and only a five minute drive from the office. She decided to grab the job and carry out a preliminary visit. It was a job passed on to them by the NSPCC, which meant that the adult or adults involved might not be too welcoming, but they'd have been notified and agreed to a visit. 'Angie, anytime between ten and three' suggested a woman with a school age child, not working, or working evenings or nights. It might also suggest that the adult didn't want a visit while the child was at home. These sorts of visits could be as simple as suggesting strategies to help a mother deal with difficult behaviour, or lead to serious child abuse investigations. Well, she'd phone, visit, and find out for herself.

First calls might be made in pairs if they had the resources. In this case, someone had phoned to agree a visit and left the note, so she made the call, got an answering machine saying to phone back or call in between ten and three, and left her own update on the system to log and time-stamp when she was going on the visit.

She felt safer than she had in a long time. After all, Sundance had her back.

Chelsey followed satnav instructions from King Square car park with Sundance sitting anxiously by her side. Ainsley was happy to take the back seat in his own car. His ribs and leg ached and he sprawled uncomfortably with a seatbelt around his chest far too loose to have any value.

His knowledge of Gloucester was still sketchy, and at first he thought they were heading along Barton Street, back towards Cinderford Road where Tilly lived, but then they went past the smart modern buildings of Gloucester

Rugby Club and Kingsholm Stadium. He realised that they were heading parallel to Barton Street on one of the arterial roads that radiated from the inner ring road. The buildings gradually spread out, and became separated by trees, stark and leafless now. Once they turned onto Estcourt Road the city became suburbs with broad dual carriageways, middle class detached houses, and large parks and school playing fields, not yet sold off. They turned off again down Cheltenham Road with a University campus on the corner and headed further out of town. Suddenly they were in Longlevens and turned into Greyhound Gardens, which looked promising enough.

They parked close to the centre of the signal on Sundance's tracker app.

'This is only accurate to within 10 metres, but that should give us a house number at least.'

Ainsley was the last out and stood still gazing around him while Sundance and Chelsey wandered backwards and forwards to see if the signal strength was improving.

They'd parked outside a pub and Ainsley headed towards it scouting around.

Sundance called over. 'She's not likely to have spent 90 minutes in a pub, believe me.'

He ignored Sundance, deep in his own thoughts and walked round the side, where he saw the car park had recycling dumpsters labelled card, clothing, and small electronics. He waved to the others.

As they approached Ainsley waved at the electronics drop-zone. 'Do you know what sort of phone she has?'

‘Oh shit.’ Sundance looked down to his tracker and back up at the dumpsters several times. The signal strength was at a maximum

‘Would she dump her phone if the stalking got too bad?’ Chelsey tried to stick her hand into the chute. ‘I mean, I think I would.’

‘No. No way. She’s so committed to this. And it’s her only way of contacting me.’

‘Why didn’t you get her a burner phone? Something she could keep clean?’

‘No such thing with this guy. He’d be on it within a half a day anyway.’

Chelsey nodded towards the electronics dump. ‘Can you tell. Is it in there?’

‘Definitely.’ He looked at the other skips. ‘There’s no room to fit a body in any of these. He’s dumped the phone and taken her. He must have taken her car, too. It’s like him. He filmed Tanya. He wants to take his time. Micky was an aberration—a rush job—maybe because we were there, but he’s got Emily and he’s taken her back to wherever he’s killing.’

‘He could have killed the tracker if he’d wanted. Or destroyed the phone completely if he wasn’t certain whether it was software or hardware you used.’

‘Why would he? He wants to toy with us. It’s what he does.’

Ainsley shook his head and winced at the resulting pain. While they’d been talking he had his hand down the chute of the dump. Trying to feel blindly for phones. ‘He’s laid a trail hasn’t he? I mean from the beginning with these murders, he’s moved sequentially, never crossing himself, never repeating, moving forwards from one node to another along the social network.’

Sundance nodded. 'I like that, although I doubt whether it's the way he thinks.'

'Nodes in networks?' You're talking about the people he's killing here. Chelsey sounded angry.

'I'm just trying to get in his head. Like playing chess, remember? We said he's obsessed, but obsessives come with patterns. We know he started killing here, and that along the way he's killed people in London, and Leicester. Suppose he's gone a lot further, but it isn't as random as it seems. What are the chances of ending up back here if he leaves things to chance?'

Sundance looked as though he was about to answer but Ainsley cut him off.

'Rhetorical question. Low, right? Very low. He's tipping the scales, because he wants to kill closer to home. And why would he do that? It has to be more risky in terms of getting caught. He wants to follow the pattern, but he has a deeper pattern in mind. He's after someone specific. He's closing the loop. Creating an Euler Path.'

'Oiler Path?'

Sundance jumped in. 'Eighteenth-century mathematician who first started to study networks. Back when a network was just about roads between towns and bridges over rivers. E-U-L-E-R. What Ainsley is saying is that my father is coming to an end. He wants to finish where he started, killing the person who started this whole thing off.'

'His father,' Ainsley said.

'Sounds like the bastard deserves it. But what's the point? Why bring that up now?'

‘He’s not being careless. He wants us to follow him. He either doesn’t care if he’s caught so long as he ties up the loose ends, or perhaps we are some of the loose ends he wants to tie up.’

‘And,’ Sundance continued, ‘Emily’s phone would be a way of drawing us further in. He wants us to find it, not as a distraction but because it will help us get closer to him.’

As they spoke Ainsley kept pulling items from the dump. He’d found a way of pushing his hand down one side of the mechanism and reaching the very top items.

‘What make?’

‘Nokia.’

Two of the first five he pulled out and set on the floor by his feet were Nokias. All the phones were old models except for the second Nokia.

‘This looks hopeful.’

Sundance took it from his hand, scavenged paper from the floor around the dumpsters and wrapped it tightly around the phone. ‘The moment we move with this he’s likely to know we’ve found it. It’s the same dilemma Emily and I had. If we disable it he knows we’ve found it anyway, and we lose our connection to him. If we don’t then he knows exactly where we are and he’ll be spying on us – audio and video. At least, wrapped in paper the video won’t help him and the audio will be muffled and obscured. We need to take this back to my office and examine it carefully there.’

Sundance slid open a drawer from an array at the back of his office, and pulled out a plastic tray with compartments. He took out a small motherboard from the

tray and placed it carefully on his desk. Another compartment had a jumble of batteries and he clipped one of the cells into the mother board. He attached a wire from a USB socket to one of his desktop PCs. Finally he took the back off Emily's phone, took out the smart chip, and slipped it into the board.

A window popped up on a monitor. 'Mobile phone screen simulator,' he said. 'The board has some snazzy software to filter out any nasties.'

Beside the first window, a large screen version of a mobile phone screen popped up. They watched while he checked for anything recent on the chip.

Finally he opened a memo.

Take your time, Sundance. You've got hours yet, but Emily really needs to see you today. If you're quick you'll see her, but don't try to call. It's a game and I'm the only way in—here's a temporary pass. <https://Deathdiaspora.net/livestream0783>. Go quietly.

He turned to the others. 'Ever heard of Deathdiaspora.net?'

Neither of them had.

Ainsley noted that it wasn't the same site that the Tanya video was posted to. 'That suggests that he didn't post the original video.'

Chelsey cut in. 'Or that this URL isn't one he wanted to give out before.'

'This machine is as protected as it can be. I'm running a VPN and going through a string of onion routers. Let's click and see what's on.'

The website was no frills: a simple live video stream, currently with no content.

Ainsley took a drink of water and swallowed painkillers. 'I'd say we're a little ahead of the game. He said we've got hours. I'm guessing that means that he intends to run this video when the time is up.'

'And when is that, Ains?'

‘Maybe midnight? He says “Emily needs to see you today”. Sounds like he’s giving Sundance a deadline.’

‘This phrase about it being a game ...’

‘A link back to our gamekeeper. It’s him.’

‘But he certainly isn’t Norman Castle, MP. Too young by far.’

Sundance clicked through a few files on another screen. ‘I doxed Castle ages ago and anything new is added in regularly.’ He waved at the screen. ‘Everything I have on Norman Castle.’

There were hundreds of files, text and graphic.

‘Pictures?’

‘Here let me set up a slide. A picture every 3 seconds.’ He turned one screen to face Chelsey and Ainsley.

Pictures slid past, most of them of Norman in expensive dark suits, tall, thin and ascetic-looking, attending official events. He gave talks, for a fee, opened events, briefed media on his personal views, usually on immigration, policing, and foreign policy issues.

‘Stop!’ Ainsley held his hand.

‘See something?’

‘No. We need more personal stuff. We know from personal testimonies that Norman did a lot of bad things, but he isn’t our gamekeeper.’

‘Let me add some filters.’

Sundance typed away for a couple of minutes.

‘Okay, same thing, but this time we should only get pictures from his personal files, starting from the most recent. Nothing taken from the media. And

only pictures with between two and six people in. That should also cut out his more public functions, but we can play with it later.'

They watched silently as the pictures streamed past.

Ainsley stuck his hand out again. 'How far back are we now?'

Sundance checked his files. 'This is about eight years ago.'

'This man here. The one to Castle's left.' He turned to Chelsey. 'What do you think?'

'Could be. Younger and slimmer than the man at the cottage. As tall as Castle.'

'He's been in a couple of shots, in the background, around this time. Nothing more recent.'

Sundance blew the face up, drew a rectangle around it, cut it into a new file, and sharpened the image. He nodded, typed into another window, and then turned another screen round for them to see.

'Oh, that's him.'

'Herrick Castle, Norman's son.'

'According to the White City and St Nick's survivors, as much a victim as they were, but a killer, too.'

'And most likely my father.'

A crackle from behind Sundance made them turn round. The screen running the stream had burst into life. There was one large image in the centre and six more, three down each side, showing the same scene from different directions.

Sitting in the centre of a large brightly lit, concrete room a man was slumped on a wooden chair.

‘Thank God.’

They both looked at Sundance.

‘That could have been Emily.’

Someone stepped forward on the stream and threw a bucket of water over the figure in the chair. Simultaneous buckets of water were thrown in the other six screens.

Ainsley reached forward. ‘Middle right picture.’

In the background of this shot, showing the man in the chair from his left, and the full figure of the man throwing water, was a sofa, and on the sofa another figure was tied.

‘It’s her. We have to go.’ Sundance stood, but they watched in fascination as Herrick, more clearly visible now, picked up a wickedly serrated saw and walked behind the chair. In less than ten seconds he had pushed the saw down against the side of his victim’s head and with three quick motions had left the ear hanging loosely down. He made one final cut to tear it away from the head and then held the screaming man tight, pressing a cloth against his head.

Only Sundance watched the next few moments, the others turned away, Ainsley retching.

Sundance cut the livestream. ‘We have to go now.’

‘Where? He’s able to move around Gloucester through the tunnels. He must have had the house in Longlevens to lure Emily in. He’s got the gamekeeper’s cottage. He probably has other places, too.’

Ainsley answered. ‘I already said, he wants us to find him. He’s going full circle. I’m guessing he lived in Severn Vale as a child, when all the abuse was going on. Did you see the table in the top right stream? I’d bet money that it was

the one that Tanya was killed on. She was taken at the camp which is right there on the grounds. He needs somewhere secluded for this sort of thing. Somewhere that can be isolated. He let us see him at the gamekeeper's cottage, and he made reference to that in his message. If he's trying to close the loop then that's where he'll be.'

Hope Carnaby, as she once was, watches the watchers. She's spent a lifetime building up to this, making herself impregnable. Step by painful step she worked her way up, from helplessness, using her fear and anger, building defences, and planning revenge. So far as she knew back then, only she had escaped the horrors of the Children's Homes.

They had taken her to the drug den in Coventry and took her baby from her when it was born. She had learned from the beatings and sexual abuse used as punishment to stay silent. She had watched and remembered everything.

The same night she had given birth, drugged and weak and in no state to get out of bed, she was left alone and she crept out and ran. The next day she hid. She saw men she knew walking the streets, looking for her. Under a railway bridge in Earlsdon, she met someone as desperate as her and took her chance. She had taken Elizabeth back to the drug den and told her what to say.

She stayed with Elizabeth's Uncle Brian for a while, both of them pretending she was the real Elizabeth. He was constantly high or drunk and seemed to accept the situation, even when she stabbed him in the thigh the first, and only, time he had tried to rape her. She stole for him, and he provided a roof for her.

When she started calling into a local youth club and using the computers, she felt like she'd woken up. Overnight she found a purpose. She taught herself to code and wrote a code for victims of ongoing child abuse. In 1999 before apps and smartphones, the code hid in the background, only appearing after a certain user-defined set of keystrokes, and allowed victims to log incidents and keep records. She knew that the more detailed and accurate information, the more chance of being believed. She sent it out to charities and some of them even paid her for it. She didn't earn much from that first code, but she got herself noticed and was offered work, writing from home. She moved into her own flat at the age of sixteen, and changed her name again.

Sixteen years later she freelanced in computer security. She either tested systems herself, or occasionally arranged for third parties to test them, advised on operational protocols, and wrote patches herself, tailor-made to a client.

Behind the scenes her time had been devoted to finding out about the people she had been abused by, and those who had suffered alongside her. The two men who had taken her to Coventry had been dealt with early. One had escaped her, apparently committing suicide—shot in the head with a rifle—just a year later. The other she had compromised during the fall out from the financial crisis of 2008. He'd ended up in jail, lost his family and job.

She had tracked down her peers, only ever contacting them if she felt they were in need of something she could provide. This was rare. Drug addiction and alcoholism as a result of the traumas they had suffered were not in her remit.

This left only her parents, her son, and the Castles.

In 2010 she made some tentative moves to hook into the Castles, to build profiles of them and their systems, and she immediately came under a significant attack. Her security was good enough to shrug it off, but it scared her. She wondered whether they'd hired someone to shred her, but asking around her contacts nobody had heard anything.

The attacks came from all over the world, using classic black hat techniques, which meant that whoever was doing it was a skilled and experienced hacker using TOR, probably with connections across the globe, which made it strange that nobody had heard anything. She sat behind lines and lines of defence, confident that her core systems couldn't be breached and that nothing could be found to link her to her initial moves to test their systems. Each attack, starting with the obvious denial-of-service attack, gave something away about the attacker, and she watched and waited until he, or she, had run out of steam.

She knew he had some sort of connection to a dark web group, very deep below the surface, that she'd originally assumed was some sort of gore site, but the rumours were much worse.

By the time, she'd put everything together she was sure that the attacker was Herrick Castle, the boy. The boy who had raped her and fathered her child. She was terrified into inaction. She hadn't been afraid for a long time, but suddenly, knowing his identity, she remembered the things that she'd forgotten. All this time she'd felt sorry for the others, the ones who couldn't come to terms with their pasts and turned instead to drink and drugs, but now she understood them completely. Her whole life had been an act. She dropped off the net for months, even giving up contracts, but gradually the old Hope resurfaced. The

one from before Elizabeth, who had dealt with it all and found the strength to carry on.

She set the Castles aside. Revenge could take its time.

Using a mixture of traditional and social hacking techniques—essentially conning people into giving up useful information to enable the hack—she was able to trace down the most likely candidate for her son, and with more certainty, her parents. Satisfied that they were blameless, she started to put together a plan.

Between her son, now calling himself Sundance, and Herrick himself, her schedule had been forced forwards. She'd worked out his endgame, spiralling in towards Gloucester, towards her precious son, and towards his ultimate goal. She'd escaped from her one foray into his web community, Deathdiaspora.net, with enough information to start the process of bringing him down.

She'd lured her own father into the mix, unsure why, just knowing that it was time to bring him closer, and that he had skills she could use. She'd begun by tempting him into using her own private detective to search for her, and then sent him the Deathdiaspora.net video.

Tonight, so long as Herrick was stopped, she was prepared to die.

#15 Emily

November 4th 2018. *I untie Ricky and Simon and pull them to the edge of the room, propping them up against the wall so they sit side by side. It's a messy job, smearing blood all over the concrete floor, which irritates me, but I have not time or practical need to clean up. They have fulfilled their purpose and now I have only this woman to work on. She was awake and watching while I dealt with them, so I don't expect her to offer any resistance. I simply need to give her hope. I sit her up on the sofa and explain to her about the two men she's just seen me kill. I explain what sort of people they were, how many lives they've ruined. She reminds me a little of my Kavya—a delicate, caring soul.*

She's a wonderful listener. She nods sometimes as I talk to her, telling her about my father. I take little breaks to type this up as I talk to her. I haven't given her permission to speak and she seems to understand this without being told. If only I'd met someone like this long ago—someone so understanding. I want her to live, I really do, but I need her to die so that I can move onto him.

I remember watching her earlier with Sundance. I think of his cleverness. I am proud of him—my son, with whom I am dancing. These people are as much victims as I am, and I don't want to cause them more pain. When I come close, she trembles, but doesn't flinch. I put my big hand on her pale, slender leg and feel the familiar surge of excitement. In disgust at myself I turn and step away.

I decide to give her a chance, and I tell her this. She needs to believe it.

She seems to have understood about closing the loop. About making the right people pay. I untie her hands and I take out a phone, the same model as hers was, the sim cloned from her own.

I ask her to help in return for a chance to be with Sundance again. Slowly and carefully, to my own dictation she thumbs in the message and presses send.

Later when she's prepared in the bunker room, I point out my mural, the Bayeux Tapestry, of my murders. Each one documented, surrounded by pictures and what evidence I have to support the act. I leave her to read these, the only other person who will ever do so.

15

'You're doped up, Ains. Stay here and look out for us, and call the police if we're not back in ten.'

Ainsley was in that state of being more inside his own head than engaged with what anyone else was saying. He was out of the car before any of Chelsey's comment registered. 'You think I'd be safer here?' He looked across to the dark cottage down the road, and the blackness of the woods surrounding. 'Haven't you watched the movies?' He closed the passenger door, carefully, without making a sound. 'We're best sticking together.'

Sundance agreed. 'Okay, so he,' he nodded towards the cottage, 'probably knows we're here, and he might have set traps to take us all out at once, but I don't think so.' He turned to Ainsley. 'You're right. We're safer together.'

They'd parked further away than on Ainsley and Chelsey's first visit, just in case he had cameras outside the house, but Sundance was sure he'd have them throughout the woods anyway. 'It's what I'd do.'

The house was in darkness. They all knew this was irrelevant. He'd have infrared cameras, motion sensors, and alarms.

'We just walk in. Front door.' Ainsley pushed at the door, and was proved right. It opened smoothly.

Lights came on in the hallway. To the left was a closed door, and to the right an open archway leading into a long snug sitting room.

Stairs were ahead to the left, and further down the corridor a third doorway.

Chelsey pushed between them and opened the door to the left. It was dark even with the light from the hallway. She felt around the edges of the door for a light switch, but when she found it, it had no effect. An old four-poster bed stood in the middle of the room, and a figure was propped up on pillows. She stepped forwards. 'Hello?'

There was no movement. She stepped closer and held out her phone as a torch.

It was a man, his skin grey-white, eyes closed. She jumped back startled, and Ainsley stepped forwards.

Sundance circled round to the other side of the bed and took hold of the wrist. 'Old. At least seventy, I'd say. The real gamekeeper?'

Chelsey looked closer. 'How long ..?'

Ainsley and Sundance looked at each other. Sundance shook his head slightly, so Ainsley answered. 'It's pretty cold in here. He's not stiff so rigor has come and gone. Other than that, who can tell? More than a couple of days; less than—what, five days? I have the feeling things would smell a whole lot worse if it was longer than that.'

'We should call the police.'

'Not yet,' Sundance said. 'We've got no more than half an hour. There's at least one living person who needs our help and getting the police in can only jeopardise that.'

'We just leave him?'

Ainsley took her hand. 'Come on.'

The sitting room was light enough to see that it was empty. A door at the far end proved to be another outside door leading to a side path to the back

garden. Ainsley back-tracked and led them down the corridor and into a kitchen/diner. Lights came on as they entered.

‘He’s got everything automated. It’s creepy knowing he’s probably watching us ... listening too.’ She put her hand over her mouth.

There was an AGA range at one end, a porcelain kitchen sink, beneath the windows that looked out onto the darkness of the back garden. An oak table stood in the centre of the room, large enough to seat eight, but with only two chairs. In one corner a heavy cellar door was propped open, and stone steps led down into darkness.

‘The only way is down,’ said Ainsley. He sounded strangely cheerful—still high on the dose of co-codamol she’d given him.

To their surprise more lights came on as they entered the cellar. The room was the one that they’d seen in the stream. Sundance immediately ran over to the sofa in the corner, but there was only a blanket and, he thought, the lingering scent of Emily’s perfume.

Sharp right from the bottom of the steps, in the diagonally opposite corner to the sofa two figures lay slumped against a metal door. Ainsley and Chelsey stood over them.

Chelsey leaned over the closest and pushed its head gently to one side. She pulled back instantly. ‘These are the ones from the live stream. Shot through the head,’ she said matter-of-factly.

Ainsley checked his watch. ‘If the stream was live. That was barely an hour ago.’

Sundance stopped close by them, the blanket rough in his hand.

‘It’s definitely the same room.’ He gestured around the walls and they could see cameras from many different angles. He reached for the door knob, twisted and pulled, but this one didn’t open. He banged his fist against it, and it gave the dull thud of thick steel. ‘Why stop us now?’

‘He’s led us to where he wants us. These bodies—they’re a clear indication that we need to get into the next room, too. Maybe he thought he was making it too easy.’ Ainsley tried the lock, too, twisting it experimentally. There was no clear mechanism on this side of the door. He knelt, gingerly and examined around the lock. ‘There’s a hole under here. A small Stanton lock.’

Sundance took his phone out of his pocket, opened an app, and waved it in front of the door, then looked at the screen. ‘At least two electronic code locks, too.’

‘So we need another way in,’ said Ainsley.

Sundance banged the door again. ‘She’s in there. He wants us to know.’

As a social worker Emily came across abuse every day. In a way that she now thought of as very minor, she’d suffered it herself as a child. Like Sundance, she’d never known her father. Her mother had left him when Emily was three months old because, she was told later, ‘he’d gone back to using’. It was at her mother’s funeral that she realised that Mum had once been an addict, too.

Remarkably her mother had stayed clean right up until she’d died of pancreatic cancer at the age of thirty-eight, when Emily was twenty. In those twenty years her mother had only had one boyfriend, when Emily was six. He’d come in drunk one night, walked into Emily’s bedroom and started masturbating, grabbing her hand and pressing it around his ‘thing’. The next

morning Emily had told her mum everything and he'd been pulled out of bed and thrown out onto the street. They never mentioned it again until her mother was in a hospice, given only a few more days to live. Before she died she'd apologised to Emily for not reporting the incident to the police.

She remembered the helpless feeling of sitting at her mother's bedside, more traumatised by finally talking about the molestation than she had thought she was by the assault itself. It was the same feeling she woke up with, head aching and nauseous, in the strange concrete room.

Her hands were tied painfully tightly behind her back, and when she opened her eyes she saw bright light and the man who'd met her at the door in Greyhound Gardens standing several feet away, watching her. He simply nodded and turned away.

The next few minutes, culminating in the shooting of two men in front of her, brought back memories of her mother, and then even more strongly, memories of Sundance. Her training and experience of dealing with people took over and she began to think quickly, making simple decisions about how to behave. Most of all she knew that she'd do whatever it took to see Sundance again.

She assessed the tall, gaunt man who came and sat beside her as surprisingly vulnerable and damaged. She listened to his story, nodded agreements, and used what limited body language was available to her to suggest understanding and compliance.

When he touched her leg she could see the lust. He ran his hand up under her skirt, and then stopped suddenly, and turned away. Underneath the

terror and the disgust she felt a wave of compassion for him then, and understood how, in time, victims could become attached to their captors.

After he'd talked to her, and given her assurances that she was quite sure he had no intention of keeping, like an alcoholic swearing off the drink, he asked her to message someone. She understood this. It was the mechanism that Sundance had told her. The person she messaged would be the next person to die. Knowing who it was, she sent the message without a qualm.

He dragged the two bodies over to a steel door, and then pulled her to her feet. He cut the ties around her feet with the same saw that he'd used to cut Simon's ear, blood smearing against her leg.

'Sorry, Miss Stone. Emily.' He took out a white handkerchief and rubbed at the blood around her ankle, leaving only a brown stain on her calf.

He grabbed one of the chairs in his other hand and took her through the steel door and into a slightly smaller room. This room was smaller, crammed full of equipment. She thought of Homer Simpson, eating doughnuts in his nuclear control room while the power station went to hell. Half of the room had a bank of computers and screens. There was a clear space to the back wall behind the chair, and then racks and racks of storage holding electronics that she had no way of identifying, against the remaining walls. It reminded her of Sundance's office.

He placed the chair in the centre of the room, and wiped it down fastidiously. There was blood on the back. He picked a water sprayer from one of the shelves, and a bottle of something like washing up liquid, and scrubbed at the stain. A free-standing steel frame held a roll of pale blue tissue paper, and he tore off strips and dried the chair carefully.

He knelt beside her. 'This is your chance. If he finds you in time then you'll see him again, before the end. That's what you want, isn't it?' He put a finger to her lips, warning her not to answer.

He tied her legs and arms to the chair, firmly, but less painfully, this time, and then opened a storage locker in the corner of the room, and brought over a small package, which he placed in her lap.

'This is a box of explosive. It's ammonium nitrate based. Simple enough to make. If you work on an estate like this you have every right to buy enough to blow the whole place up a thousand times over. There's enough explosive in this device to destroy this room and everything in it. Just so that you know, when this bomb goes off it sends a signal which will trigger other bombs planted around the cottage, so everything will go. Nod if you understand.'

She nodded, biting her lower lip. Now it was nearly over her calm resolve was failing her and she started to tremble. He put his hand on her shoulder, almost kindly.

'You need to listen carefully, because this might save your life. Mine is nearly over. There are several triggers for this bomb. Once I've left the cottage I shall turn them on remotely. The first trigger is your voice, tuned specifically to your usual range of frequencies.' He smiled. 'The second trigger is your name. If anyone says your name then,' he pushed his fingertips together and then opened them out to signify an explosion. 'And, of course, there's an accelerometer. Effectively a motion sensor. If the package is accelerated—if it falls to the ground by gravity, or if someone attempts to throw it, for example—it will trigger. Finally, he has an hour to save you before midnight. Plenty of time for a bright individual like your lover, yes? Nod if you understand.'

At her final nod he returned to the steel door and locked it from the inside. He stood in front of her. 'We'll both find peace by the end of the night, dear Emily.'

He turned and without looking back at her he walked behind the array of computer screens. The lights dimmed and she didn't see him again.

Used to being in full control on the net, Sundance was beginning to realise he had little experience outside of the virtual world. He realised that it wasn't just his Grandfather's age that was singling him out as the leader, but the fact that he had grown up interacting with real people and real situations.

Sundance's first instinct had been to try to hack the door. Ainsley pointed out all the weaknesses of the idea.

'Okay he had a couple of electronic locks, but he's also got physical locks. It's very possible he's also just got a bloody big bolt across the inside. Why bring us this far and not even let us see inside? Everything else he's done has made it easy for us, so my instinct is that this isn't the only way in.'

Chelsey agreed. 'Any other way in would be back up the stairs. We really should call the police, now. We have three dead bodies.'

'No!' Sundance sounded panicked.

Ainsley touched him on the arm. 'She's right. They'll take a while to get here and we'll not stop looking, but the more people trying to find a way in the better. We've got half an hour before his deadline.'

'Chelsey, can you do it? Use 999, but don't let them keep you on the phone.'

Her approach was more abrupt than he'd intended. She called, told them she needed police and ambulance, gave the address and hung up, then turned her phone off. 'They'll be trying to contact me if I stay connected, right?'

Back in the kitchen they looked to Ainsley again.

He rubbed his forehead. 'There's no guarantee, but it seems to me that there are three options. In order of likelihood, the other entrance, if there is one, could be outside, downstairs at the far end of the house, or upstairs. Upstairs seems unlikely, but it isn't impossible that he could have stairs that are walled off from downstairs and lead directly into the cellar.'

Almost as one Sundance and Chelsey started with, 'Why outs...'

'Gamekeepers house, right? You kill wildlife and bring it in for the kitchen, often leaving it to hang for days first. It makes sense that you might have an external entrance to bring the game straight in without passing through the house.' He paused. 'But I may be wrong.'

It was dark and cold outside. Heavy clouds obscured what moon there was. Ainsley directed them to the southern side of the house, where he deduced that the second room would be underneath.

'Check close to the walls, first. Anything that looks like steps or a door. Sundance, you take the front, I'll take the side, and Chelsey take the back.'

Using mobile phones as torches they worked slowly along each wall. The front and side were covered with ivy and wisteria, and they worked as much by touch as sight. The front garden took little extra checking, and Sundance joined Chelsey after he'd completed a search.

Along the side was about three meters of vegetation; bushes and trees, before a well-maintained fence blocked the route. Ainsley could see little

beyond and followed the fence all the way to the back without finding anything. He could see Chelsey and Sundance quartering the garden methodically. Along the back wall was a gate, which opened on a latch. A padlock, shiny in his torchlight, lay on the ground beside it. Pushing the gate open he could see a clear path leading into the woods beyond, and to one side a small, brick bunker.

He headed back through the bushes towards the house, calling quietly until they stopped their searching and came towards him.

‘Back wall, behind the bushes. There’s an outhouse through a gate into the woods.’ He checked his watch. They’d been looking for less than ten minutes. The police should be here by now. ‘We’ve got twenty minutes. I think we have to assume that this is it.’

The outhouse door also opened smoothly. Dilapidated from the outside it was in good condition inside. Concrete steps, recently re-laid from the appearance, led back down and towards the house. Inside lights flicked on in front of them, and off again behind them as they followed the corridor. At the end of the tunnel, a door stood open.

Sundance made to step inside but Ainsley held him fast.

‘Remember the message? I think there’s more to it. It said ‘Don’t call.’ We knew Emily didn’t have her phone, so why did he need to say that? And ‘Go quietly.’ Let’s take it slowly. It isn’t too late for booby traps. I’ll go first. Step carefully behind me.’

They came out behind a bank of computer equipment, into a room lit with dim lights. As Ainsley stepped forwards the lights grew brighter. In the centre of the room, Emily was sitting, staring in their direction, shaking her head slowly.

Ainsley held his hand up to the others and walked slowly towards her. He saw the white package on her lap and pointed to it. She nodded, not speaking.

He cast around and saw the garden saw left on one of the shelves. Stepping slowly around her he picked it up and separated first, her hands, and then her feet. Each leg was tied at the ankle to the chair and the saw was awkward for cutting through the tape.

He whispered in her ear. 'Is it safe to talk?'

She shook her head.

Outside he could hear noises, people talking in the house above.

Delicately he tried to slice through the tape, catching her legs with the serrated edges, at which she gave involuntary flinches, but otherwise stayed still.

Finally, he reached for the package and she took his hands and slowly turned her head one way and then the other in a silent negative. She lifted it very slowly, and placed it carefully on the floor then embraced him briefly and motioned that they should all leave the room.

Ainsley checked his watch. 11.58 p.m. He made for the internal door, but she grasped at him in panic, and pulled them all towards the outside door.

Once out in the woods, she spoke to Sundance.

'What time is it?'

'Eleven fifty-nine.'

'Oh God. Those people in the house?'

Chelsey put her arm around her shoulder. 'You're okay. The police are here.'

‘The whole cottage is going to blow up.’

The cottage was bathed in arc lights, and they could see through the open gate and the vegetation, people moving about in the back garden.

Emily took Sundance’s hand and pulled him, running, towards the light.

Figures turned towards them and she shouted, warning them to get away from the house. Two men formed a wall, arms wide, to stop them, not heeding what they shouted, and in desperation Emily tried to skirt around them. As they were tackled they heard muffled noises from beneath their feet. The ground shook and then, as if a filter had been removed, the noise was present, all around them. All of them fell to the ground, a heavy body on top of Emily. She felt something hit them and the force rolled them over away from the house. She covered her head and waited for the noises to stop, only to be replaced by the crackling of fire. She looked up to see a plume of smoke rise up over the cottage.

She felt around for Sundance, and heard his voice, calling for her. They both stood. The two men lay still at their feet, having borne the brunt of the debris. Emily turned them over one at a time. One of them moaned and she leaned close, talking, telling him to stay still, checking him for injuries. His dark uniform was torn where debris had hit him, and she could see gashes and glass in his scalp. Sundance had helped the other to a seating position.

Chelsey was standing a few feet away, looking dazed.

‘Stand still.’ A torch shone in their faces. ‘Don’t reach for your pockets.’

A bearded uniform, walked towards them.

Chelsey stared at him. ‘We were too late.’

‘Step back away from the officers.’

They shuffled away. Sundance said, 'They're okay. Cuts and bruises. Glass.'

The sitting officer tried to stand. 'It's okay, Sarge. I'm fine. Derry's got a cut on the head. Might have broken a leg. I'll deal with him.' He stared at the burning cottage. 'Were they still in there?'

'Martin had just exited the side door. He's in a bad way. We need to get everybody further away. There might be more explosive material in there. Take Derry round to the front. You three follow me.'

Chelsey turned. There was no sign of Ainsley.

Ainsley watched as the others ran forwards. He knew with certainty where Herrick must have gone, and someone needed to try to stop him. He'd gone fewer than twenty yards when he heard the explosion. He didn't look back.

Hope had kept an eye on Norman for years, unable to believe that he'd managed to control his passions, aware that partly this was due to his son. Knowing their history it was easy to interpret Norman's apparent self-control as the result of his ongoing uneasy relationship with Herrick. Herrick was kept at arm's length, but at the same time given money and property whenever he wanted it. It was only in the last five or so years that Norman had tried to sever the ties, pushing Herrick out of the cottage, and settling a large sum of money on him. A close observer of Herrick, she knew he had other sources of income, and it was through careful forensic work following the money that she'd inferred the existence of Deathdiaspora.net.

She'd watched Herrick bring home the woman—she wouldn't use her name because she mustn't become attached—and then the two men. She kept hidden, knowing that all three would probably die, and knowing that he might have figured out that she was there watching from the slight interference she'd made to his camera system.

At nine p.m. she moved invisibly through the woods, arriving at the house shortly before the children were brought in by minibus. They were excited, chatting and giggling—promised money and presents—as she remembered she'd been all those years ago.

She lay in the mid-branches of an oak tree at the side of the house opposite the one that Herrick would approach from. She could see both front and back from here.

At eleven-thirty five Herrick ghosted up to the open doors, dressed in a boiler suit. She was taken by surprise because she'd been watching intently and yet he appeared as if from nowhere. Before he'd even reached the far side of the room she was by the door and able to see him slip behind the library bookcases. She desperately wanted him to make his move, to stop whatever was going on in the main hall. She could only follow at a distance. She had little equipment with her, afraid that he'd be able to detect her if she gave off any signals. She had a nervous moment when he retraced his steps along the narrow passage between the walls, and then he settled again in a hollow that she took to be by a fireplace. She could hear the hubbub of the party from here, already wilder than it should be. Children cried, and for a period of a few minutes there was relative silence broken two or three times a minute by a girl's cry and cheers from the men.

#16 Norman

Herrick Castle passes through the kissing gate that separates the gardens proper from the estate woods. He steals through the walled garden, along Butler's Walk, and to the entrance through the conservatory windows. In the afternoon, on the lawn in front of the windows, Pete Zyx had given a special performance in the gardens. Now he's getting his reward, mixing with the Lords and the lawmakers.

Herrick looks like a maintenance man of some sort and has a story about being called out to fix the heating in case he's stopped. Underneath his boiler suit he has more protective clothing, and in his bag he has a mask. The party is taking place in the main hall to the front. It's a party to celebrate the new anti-immigration legislation that Norman and his colleagues have fought so hard for. After all immigrants don't vote, and those that have been here long enough to vote, certainly don't vote for Norman.

In his little nook in the fireplace he can hear what is going on, and smiles to himself. It brings back memories. He flicks back through the video that his hidden cameras have already taken. The food is extravagant and the waiters and waitresses are young. Very young. The guests pick at desserts and drink champagne and brandy. He recognises them. A minor cabinet member. MPs from both sides of the House. Two—no three—television presenters. The police commissioner. Tapping forwards he sees his father choose a girl of perhaps eleven or twelve from the waitresses. He calls her over and gives her money. She looks nervous, but she smiles and thanks him. He holds her hand tight and begins to fondle her, her expression turning to fear and distress. Herrick knows this scene. He's lived it. He doesn't need to see it through. He goes fast forward

to where his father is beating the same girl into submission with a belt, the buckle striking her buttocks. The other men are watching idly. In the background a young boy sits on someone's knee and has the beating pointed out to him.

Now, looking at the scene live, he sees that resistance is all but gone. The room is dimmed, and the little pools of wall lighting show groups of near naked bodies, watching and performing.

He switches to the stream of the cottage. It's very close to midnight, and he's pleased to see Emily's chair empty now. The outside cameras show that police have arrived and are entering the cottage. He's sorry to see this. He isn't going to stop the explosion now, but it seems sure that there will be collateral damage. He's irritated by them calling the police. He hadn't expected it and this is his show. He's orchestrated everything—the writer, star, and director of his own film.

The bombs are the trigger for the final scene. When it goes off he feels the slight shudder and hears the muffled rumble. The lights flicker, and several figures in the room freeze for a moment, and then carry on, dismissing whatever has happened as inconsequential.

Herrick accesses the app he's looking for. The one that controls the heating arrangements for the manor. He's been manipulating it for a while now, accessing the sensors and feeding them false temperatures, making sure the gas had free flow through the system. Before he reached the fireplace he'd made a foray between the walls and accessed a gas pipe. He'd cut into the pipe and added a clamp on connector with a narrow pipe that he'd pushed through the wall, coming out beneath a table in one corner. Behind the wall he'd placed a coke can of his home-made explosive.

Satisfied that the time was right he touched the screen. There was a distant thump followed by a rain of plaster hitting the floor of the hall. Seconds later he felt the air pressure change as the build-up of gas under the table exploded. At the same time he pushed aside the flimsy divider he'd set up in the hearth and stepped round into the room, his oxygen mask in place.

The room was full of smoke, and the table, and sofa with matching armchairs to his right were already on fire. Two men and two children were lying on the floor, one of the children trying to stand up. The only door out was on this side, and he headed towards it, blocking the exit. He had a rifle slung over one shoulder and a pistol in his pocket, but his immediate weapon was a canister of oxygen which he flipped the lid off and threw into the flames furthest away from him. Immediately the flames roared up, eating up the carpet, licking up the walls. By now men at the far end of the room were recovering from the shock and making their way towards him, not yet realising that he wasn't there to help.

The flaw in his plan was that the mask made it impossible for him to speak to them, and removing the mask would make him as vulnerable to the smoke as they were. Instead he unslung the rifle and waited.

It was his father who was the first to come forward, sputtering, a paper napkin held to his mouth, trying to block the smoke. Herrick smiled and shot him through the leg.

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Hope called 999, gave them as little information as she could to get them there, and stepped out into the fireplace. Once he saw her she was sure that she'd be shot. The fire was noisy now. All around men were crouching behind tables, as far from Herrick and the flames as they could get. The flames had worked along the drapes on the opposite wall to where she stood. She had a vague idea from TV documentaries that at some point there'd be a flashover, at which point the whole hall would become one big fire and even Herrick with his protective gear would have to seek safety.

A shot rang out and she saw Norman fall to the ground, clutching his leg. She surmised that Herrick would rather see them burn than shoot them.

Beneath a table, to her left she could see three girls cowering. She dropped to her knees and shouted over the roar of the fire. One caught her movement and she waved at them to crawl over. The first one did. A girl in her mid-teens in a short black dress, her face black and streaked with tears. She wore no shoes and what was left of her stockings were torn and wrapped around her feet. She grabbed the girl's hand, gave her a brief hug and man-handled her into the corner of the fireplace, showing her how it twisted left-right-left and opened out into the library hearth where she could walk safely behind the bookcases and out into the room.

She shouted into her ear, 'Wait in the room. I'll get the others.'

In the seconds she'd ducked out of the room, she'd heard more shooting. The two girls who'd been under the table had been frightened into making the

dash across to the hearth and she just pushed them into the dark, shouting at them to turn right.

She looked across the room. The children had gathered together along the wall further down from the fireplace. She shouted at them, over and over. A shot rang out and she turned to see Herrick, still by the door, his boiler suit ripped off to reveal a jacket and trousers of some lightweight material that seemed to shrug the fire off. He was facing her, but the shot had been directed at Norman, dragging himself towards her and the fireplace. Bizarrely, Herrick saluted her and turned away. More shots rang out

Somewhere in the distance she could hear a loudhailer over the noise. It was too hot now. Simply touching the plaster edges of the fireplace burned her hand. Children started streaming past her, covering their faces with strips of clothing, and she realised that she had done the same, holding a piece of tablecloth to her mouth. The shots were continuous and she saw Herrick moving towards them. He was going to leave the way they were going. She pushed the last boy ahead of her and wriggled breathlessly through the wall. Out in the room she could see most, if not all the children she'd originally seen in the minibus earlier that evening.

Ten minutes of blind walking through the trees and Ainsley started to see light ahead. Flames. He wondered whether he'd turned full circle somehow, but then the trees thinned and he could make out the big house in front. He was at the edge of the pleasance at the back of the house. Flames were shooting up into the air from the other side, but here at the back the house looked untouched.

The noise was deafening even so. Over the roaring of the flames he could hear sirens.

In front of him a group stood on the lawn, but there was no sign of police. He edged closer. They were children. Nine altogether, grouped in twos and threes, all looking towards the house. Two lay on the grass with others kneeling beside them. None of them looked around until he hailed them.

‘Is anyone hurt?’

One of the kneeling girls stood. She was almost as tall as he was, probably the oldest there. She was soot-stained and her white blouse was torn, buttons ripped off. ‘They can’t breathe.’

He could already hear several of them wheezing, and one bent over retching.

He could see by the light of the fire that the whole right-side of the house, the North Wing, was aflame now. On the south side the woods came up closer to the house and there was a high fence. He dialled 999, asking for ambulances, explaining that they’d need to get past the fence on the South Wing.

The girl watched him. ‘She’s still in there.’

‘Who is?’

‘The woman who saved us. When the fire started and he came out and started shooting, she just ... appeared.’

He handed her his phone. ‘Keep an eye on the kids. The police or someone might call back. Make sure they know where you are. If anyone asks after me, well,’ he thought for a moment, ‘tell them I’ve gone to help out. I’m Ainsley.’

Even the back of the house was hot now. He stepped in and ran across to the only other door of the room. Suddenly clear-headed, as if the dry heat had burned the drugs out of his system, he put his hand against the door. It was hot but not too hot to touch so he pulled it open. The next room was full of smoke, and flames were pushing through a row of bookcases at the back. Slumped against them was a woman.

He took a deep breath, ran over, and started to tug at her. Her feet were wedged against a table, as if she'd been pushing the book case hard up against the wall. He heaved her up, feeling the sharp pain of his bruised ribs. Still holding his breath he got her half way across the room before he had to snatch another breath. He stumbled. The air was hot and the breath gave him no relieving intake of oxygen. One last time, he hauled at the woman, getting them both to the first room with the open windows and then fell to the floor again, too overcome to close the door behind them.

17

‘You really can go home you know.’

‘So you keep telling me. If you want me to leave, then I’ll leave, but otherwise I’m fine right here.’ Chelsey was getting exasperated with Ainsley.

He’d only been discharged from hospital for three days. It was barely a week since she’d seen him and his daughter stretchered past them to waiting ambulances on the sweeping drive in front of Severn Vale manor house. He seemed obstinately unable or unwilling to see that she was right where she wanted to be.

‘I don’t. Want you to go, I mean.’

‘Good. You need a few more days bed rest, they said. I’ll stay till then. Longer if you’ll have me.’

The doorbell rang.

Ainsley perked up. ‘I’ll get that.’

‘No you won’t. If it’s the police to take your statement then they can come up here, and they’ll have me to answer to.’

She’d made his bed up in the room he’d earmarked for a study. He lay back and started to doze.

He was drifting when she reappeared and put a cup of coffee quietly at the table beside him. He could make out whispering.

‘Sit here. He’ll be so happy to see you when he wakes up.’

He opened his eyes.

Sundance was perched on the end of his bed. Emily was sitting on the bedside chair. It seemed to him that they were always holding hands.

Emily took his hand. 'We've brought someone to see you.'

In the corner of the room, a young woman sat in a wheelchair.

She started to speak and burst out coughing, then stopped and took in noisy, deep breaths. She gestured to Chelsey, who wheeled her up close to his bedside.

She half-leaned out of the chair and whispered. 'Hello, Dad.'

Conexus: Crime fiction and the state of the nation

A critical analysis of the place of crime fiction in the modern nation

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1. Introduction

The starting point for this thesis was an observation that around 2010-2012 there seemed to be both a resurgence in, and a sort of confusion about, the English ‘state-of-the-nation’ novel. The first of a trio of articles on the subject, Mark Piggott’s ‘The State of the Nation Novel’ (Piggott, 2010), was prompted by Martin Amis’s announcement that he was writing a novella called *The State of England*, to be published in 2011.¹ Piggott ironically noted, ‘but as Martin Amis says, one should never set out with the intention of writing a state of nation novel’ (ibid.).

With the publication of John Lanchester’s *Capital* (Lanchester, 2012), Alex Preston produced the second of these articles—‘The way we live now? Follow the money trail back to Anthony Trollope...’ (Preston, 2012)—and Jonathon Coe responded with ‘Why are we obsessed with the state-of-the-nation novel?’ (Coe, 2012). Coe quotes BS Johnson’s opinion that the nineteenth-century panoramic social novel ‘cannot be made to work for our time, and the writing of it is anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant, and perverse’, and argues that Preston ‘would seem to disagree: “The state-of-the-nation novel is necessarily traditional,” he wrote. “Avant-garde difficulty would jar with its democratic aim of giving voice to a broad mix of characters.”’

In this thesis, I take a systematic approach that has resulted in a wide-ranging argument. I begin with the traditional state-of-the-nation novel, and I end with the specific crime novel *Conexus* that forms the creative part of this thesis, as an example of how crime fiction can be seen as a suitable replacement for the old tradition.

I start by describing key characteristics of traditional state-of-the-nation novels, giving examples, and exploring their purpose.

¹ In fact, Amis’s novel *Lionel Asbo: the State of England* came out in 2012 (Amis, 2012)

I then discuss in what critical ways the world has changed since those novels first took hold, with a review of what a nation is, using the works of Bhabha, During, Bennington, Hroch, and others. I argue that the very concept of a nation and the core elements of society have changed, and continue to change, resulting in four criteria against which to judge the value of a novel as state-of-the-nation. These criteria look at the novel in four different areas:

Communication

1. It explores how information technology is changing society, pulling the members away from the traditional factors that cohere them into a nation. This includes the individualisation of media outside of state or societal control.

Culture

2. It considers current affairs and issues in society. These issues might include specifics on matters of both state and culture such as class, distribution of wealth, the economy, education, entertainment, the environment, foreign policy and defence, gender, health, immigration, and race.

Boundaries

3. It shows how the competing factors of local order and global communication are influenced by the geographical specifics of location and setting. This includes how the state attempts to renew itself through its boundaries; i.e. how it deals with the margins of society, outside of the mainstream economic and social classes that have been in existence.

Violence and the legal system

4. It specifies the importance of the power structures enforced by the state through legal codes, and explores how they hold communities together.

I compare some modern state-of-the-nation novels that follow the traditional approach and assess them against this framework.

Having found the traditional approach lacking, I propose the ‘realistic, contemporary crime novel’ as a suitable alternative, discuss the crime genre in general, and specify what I mean by both ‘realistic’ and ‘contemporary’ in this context. In this section I use the works of Stephen Knight, Peter Messent, John Scaggs, Andrew Pepper and David Schmidt among others, and I introduce the exemplary novels of the thesis: *The Mermaids Singing* (McDermid, 1995), *Birdman* (Hayder, 1999), *Sleepyhead* (Billingham, 2001), and *The Intrusions* (Sherez, 2017a).

I discuss some critical theory behind each of the four requirements, using specific crime novels as examples of the theories, and considering to what extent they are able to satisfy these criteria.

Finally, I look at the novel *Conexus*, a crime novel consciously written to satisfy these criteria, and consider to what extent it justifies the original claim that crime fiction can be a relevant and appropriate genre for state-of-the-nation novel writing.

2. The traditional state-of-the-nation novel

There may seem to be an inconsistency in discussing the state-of-the-nation novel before really establishing what a nation is, but the state-of-the-nation label is applied to novels without clear reference to the meaning of its constituent terms. Such novels have a traditional style and structure. There are ‘non-traditional’ state-of-the-nation novels, and these do require a deeper understanding of the meaning of the phrase, which I shall return to in later sections. In this section, I will consider the history of these traditional novels, and their relationship to their age. At the end of Section 3: The modern nation, I

will produce a set of criteria which I argue the contemporary state-of-the-nation novel should satisfy to be effective in its aims, and then I shall look at two contemporary attempts to follow the traditional approach and assess them against these criteria.

The novel and the modern nation belong in the same historic era, each developing and evolving from the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries through to structures that are more recognisably modern by the end of the eighteenth-century. For the novel, one might note the development from *Don Quixote* published in 1605, through *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, and compare with the development of Tudor Britain into the early seventeenth-century, which predates the concept of the nation, but begins to put its structures into place. It is hard to be more precise than this. If *Crusoe* is something close to the modern novel, then it predates the French Revolution, considered by many to be the birth of the modern nation state (see K. Bhambra, 2007 p.106), by 80 years. Nevertheless, as noted by Ian Watt (2015[1957], pp. 35-59), certain factors are inherent in the success of both institutions: improving standards and prevalence of literacy, increases in education, gradually reducing costs as a result of improved technology, better communication and transport networks, shared narratives of history, and shared visions of the future. The first four of these enable the widespread consumption of the novel, while the final two are enabled and encouraged by the novel. The novel as a form of social critique, and ultimately as a view of the ‘state-of-the-nation’ came quite quickly—possibly as early as the late eighteenth-century with works by Fielding, Richardson and Sterne, although these are arguable—but certainly by the mid-nineteenth-century with Dickens, Gaskell, and Disraeli among many others writing Condition-of-England novels.²

² A term coined in 1840 by Thomas Carlyle in *Chartism* (Carlyle, 2002)

There is no clear definition or agreement regarding what constitutes a ‘state-of-the-nation’ novel. A novel sometimes grows into the term years after its publication, and the author may never have set out to write a book that captured the essence of the time in the way that it did. In order to get a clearer idea of what is generally meant, this section considers recognised examples, historical antecedents, alter egos, and a range of articles and discussions on the subject. Each heading below states a point that may be considered to contribute to a traditional state-of-the-nation novel.

The state-of-the-nation novel engages with a full range of contemporary social and political issues and it highlights social inequalities and change in the context of the nation

The ‘condition of England’ novel of the early nineteenth-century was the first genre that can be considered a precursor to the ‘state-of-the-nation’. Andrzej Diniejko gives a description of the objectives of these novels, which captures something of a popular definition: they

engage directly with the contemporary social and political issues with a focus on the representation of class, gender, and labour relations, as well as on social unrest and the growing antagonism between the rich and the poor in England. (2010)

This is a period-specific description, but then the term ‘condition of England’ is a period-specific term.

The state-of-the-nation novel has an air of comprehensive realism and depicts the nation anew, giving the people a fresh perspective on their way of life

In the mid-nineteenth-century the idea of the Great American Novel surfaced, and the ‘Great National Novel’ has been linked with state-of-the-nation ever since. Amanda Claybaugh examines this relationship in her 2012 article ‘The Great [National] Novel’

(Claybaugh, 2012), in which she gives some clear steers as to the ways the two types of novel are similar and different. She identifies ‘comprehensive realism’ as a factor in both types; however,

the state-of-the-nation novel offers a comprehensive account of contemporary society, but it does so in the service of quite different ends. State-of-the-nation novelists depict the nation in order to reform it (Dickens) or at least satirize it (Trollope). (ibid.)

In contrast, the Great American Novel, she contends, aims to ‘depict the nation so that its people might recognize themselves for the first time’ (ibid.). This latter is relevant especially to the Great American Novel as imagined by John William DeForest (2000)[1868], but needs modification, or at least a subtler interpretation, for the more established nations. Rather than Claybaugh’s ‘its people might recognize themselves for the first time’, it might be more appropriate to ask that a Great National Novel for a more established nation aims to ‘depict a nation so that a new generation recognizes ...’ or ‘depict a nation so that its people recognize themselves afresh ...’.

It is in this spirit of ‘depicting the nation’ that Claybaugh finds the Great English Novel, and argues that John Lanchester’s *Capital* (2012) is a prime specimen. I have generally considered *Capital* to be a modern state-of-the-nation novel following a classical, almost formulaic, model. Claybaugh, despite commenting that *Capital* is ‘certainly not great, nor even very good’, argues that it ‘responds to (the same) cultural anxieties’ as the Great National Novel in that it places England (or more accurately London) in the centre of world affairs. It asks the reader to look again at England and recognize it anew with a key role in the world, while at the same time dealing with social issues of inequality, class, race, and gender.

It observes national characteristics, as they relate to the contemporary situation, and as they relate to the broader, international context

The necessity for the nation to see itself with a broader role in the world is supported by

Martin Amis:

At the moment the US is the centre of the earth. English novels in the 19th century reflected our political pre-eminence, but then American fiction stepped in. A century from now the centre will probably be China. We're no longer proud as a nation and perhaps our fiction reflects this; we (English authors) are dissidents. (Quoted in Piggott, 2010)

In the same article, Piggott quotes John Mullan, who recognises the importance of change in communication technology to the effectiveness of the novel when he says,

The pinnacle of the Condition of England novel was the Victorian era and in a way you'd be mad to try and replicate it. When Dickens wrote *Hard Times* or Elizabeth Gaskell wrote *Mary Barton*, they were trying to describe a world to a readership who didn't know it existed. Now it's harder to reveal something new. (ibid.)

To summarise the points made by these commentators on what makes a traditional state-of-the-nation novel, it seems that it should satisfy at least a representative number of the following:

- **It engages with a full range of contemporary social and political issues**
- **It highlights social inequalities and change in the context of the nation**
- **It has an air of comprehensive realism**
- **It depicts the nation anew giving the people a fresh perspective on their way of life**
- **It observes national characteristics, as they relate to the**

**contemporary situation, and as they relate to the broader,
international context**

A novel that achieves at least a number of these aims has traditionally been regarded as state-of-the-nation, but in Section 3, this list will be replaced by a shorter and significantly different list, which, it will be argued, is more appropriate for the idea of the nation in the ‘Information Age.’³

3. The modern nation

Meaning of state and nation

To consider the effectiveness of crime fiction as social commentary, there needs to be an understanding of what is meant by social commentary, and what the context is for the society under study. It seems clear that both the content and the mode of communication of such commentary must depend on this context. For example, historically there have been literary works—Gaskell’s *North and South* [1855], Eliot’s *Middlemarch* [1874], Dickens’ *Hard Times* [1854], of many—that are categorized as ‘State-of-the-nation’ (or, specifically in England, ‘condition-of-England’), and which are seen as attempts to give a fundamental insight, a kind of shorthand summary, of the society in which they are written. This idea has persisted although, as will be discussed, the context of those original, nineteenth-century novels has changed dramatically. In *Literature – Nationalism’s other? The case for revision* (During, 1990), Simon During

³ There is no agreement on when the ‘Information Age’ began, or even whether we might still be defined as being in such a period. According to Merriam-Webster, the term was used as long ago as 1977 in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* to describe ‘the period of history ahead’ (MerriamWebster, 2019), and it was certainly used in an article by McGovern in the New York Times later that year (McGovern, 1977). It could be argued to have begun with the first computers in the 1940s and 50s, or the first microchip, or as some commentators argue, as late as the early 1990s with the Internet. For my purposes I will take the period to begin sometime in the mid-1960s, when Moore’s law was first observed.

argues that from the eighteenth-century on writing creates a new cultural space—the Civil Imaginary—that by the nineteenth-century is shaping and being shaped by the nation. Writing and the novel, through this space, has become a kind of nation in itself and the form has lived on beyond that which it seeks to describe.

Some contemporary novels such as *Capital* (Lanchester, 2012) and *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (Amis, 2012) have attempted to follow this template of the sweeping, overarching novel that picks up the spirit of the age underlying the general trends of society. In reviewing *Capital* in *The Guardian*, Theo Tait summed up the difficulties of attempting this approach in contemporary society:

...the recent fashion for neo-Victorian condition-of-England novels in the vein of *Little Dorrit* or *The Way We Live Now*—featuring a range of emblematic intersecting lives and at least one City villain—looks unlikely to produce any great works of art. These books seem basically programmatic and unoriginal, fatally in hock to the news agenda. It's depressing that both *Capital* and Sebastian Faulks's effort, *A Week in December*, feature such a similar cast of characters: one rogue trader; one Asian male suspected of terrorism; one footballer. Lanchester has an illegal Zimbabwean immigrant, a human rights lawyer and an eastern European nanny; so does Amanda Craig in her London novel, *Hearts and Minds*. Half an hour's state-of-the-nation brainstorming, you feel, might have produced these dramatis personae. (Tait, 2012a)

There is no single definition of the concept of nation, in part because nations are specific, concrete entities, which are always changing, and each nation views itself differently. Gellner believes that nationalism 'creates nations', and begins by stating that 'Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent' (Gellner, 1983, p.1). This requires an agreed view of the state (the 'political unit') and the nation (the 'national unit'). More directly, Gellner claims that nationalism is 'essentially, the imposition of a high culture on society, where

previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority (...) of the population' (ibid., p.57).

Gellner's views on nationalism and nations are widely held to be foundational as propounded by Brendan O'Leary:

This chapter seeks to provide a preliminary posthumous analysis of Gellner's legacy. It needs little justification since all worthwhile subsequent writing and research on nationalism will benefit from Gellner's work, whether they build on his presumptions or dissent from them. (O'Leary, 1998, p. 40)

There is also an acceptance that his theories don't easily reconcile nationalism and democracy, the subject of Alfred Stepan's essay 'Modern multinational democracies: transcending a Gellnerian oxymoron'. Stepan discusses the problems that Gellner's requirement for state-culture congruence creates, and notes that Gellner himself said that in multicultural states 'Men then had two options, if they were to diminish such discomfort: they could change their own culture, or they could change the nature of the political unit.' (Stepan, 1998, p.219). This leads Stepan to discuss federalism as a viable alternative to the nation state, contradicting Gellner's view as expressed by Peter Skalník, that there is no alternative to the nation in the modern world:

For Gellner, nations are expression of one certain phase of history and of one type of society, i.e. they *are* the modern industrial society. Nationalism creates nations. (Skalník, 2003 p. 210)

Gellner begins his discussion of the state with Max Weber's view (Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, 2015) that the state is the agency that has a monopoly of legitimate violence and claims that it is 'that institution or set of institutions specifically concerned with the enforcement of order' (Gellner, 1983, p.4). Here can be seen the introduction of two elements that are fundamental to both state and crime fiction – legitimacy and violence.

The state decides what is legitimate (and thus a section of society that uses violence with impunity from the law could be seen as *de facto* an element of the state). Any means of exploring the state must, by Weber's definition, consider these elements.

Gellner considers the nationalist claim that the nation is somehow predetermined, 'God-given' (Gellner, 1983, p.49), and that the nationalist cause is taking pre-existing cultures and returning the state to its former glory. He contends that, despite the nationalists' own claims, the cause 'sometimes invents them [cultures], and often obliterates pre-existing cultures' (ibid., p.49).

This leads us to an additional notion to add to the idea of legitimate violence, which is that 'culture' is a coalescing force in these definitions. Miroslav Hroch starts with a cultural definition of the nation as 'a large social group integrated not by one but by a combination of several kinds of objective relationships (economic, political, linguistic, cultural, religious, geographical, historical), and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness' (1996, p.79). This neatly allows for multiple views of what a nation is and whether an entity is a nation, by allowing us to pick and choose the 'objective relationships' (or 'nation-building processes') which are relevant in any given circumstance. Accepting this definition gives a list of highly significant factors that 'ought' to be explored in any social commentary. It also highlights the subjective element of national identity.

He does tie his definition down by insisting on three elements as 'irreplaceable', namely:

- (1) a 'memory' of some common past, treated as a 'destiny' of the group - or at least of its core constituents;
- (2) a density of linguistic or cultural ties enabling a higher degree of social communication within the group than beyond it;
- (3) a conception of the equality of all members of the group organized as a civil society. (ibid.)

It is this core conception of the nation, taking the idea of legitimate violence, and adding to it the cultural elements of Hroch, which I want to build on. These ideas start with the nation as it was from its eighteenth-century conception up to the late twentieth-century. A first step in taking these ideas forward into the twenty-first-century, internet-based world comes from Jean-Marie Guehenno:

[the nation] brings people together not for what they are but for the memory of what they have been. A nation has no definition but historical. It is the locus of a common history, of common misfortune, and of common triumphs. It is the locus of a shared destiny...A nation, in the European definition of the word, is first of all a place, that is to say, a territory defined by precise frontiers, as precise as the boundaries that mark the limits of the fields in the old countryside of Europe.' (Guehenno, 2000, p.4)

As the title of his book suggests, Guehenno argues that this idea of territory is of less importance with the globalisation of agriculture and industry, and that the rapid transfer of information in the twenty-first-century renders the geographical underpinnings of our legal and political systems irrelevant. The seeds of this change are contained in Hroch's element 2: 'the density of (...) ties enabling a higher degree of social communication within the group than beyond it.' The range and efficiency of modern information technology calls into question the effectiveness of these ties in keeping together a social group based on geography. Following the next sections on regional boundaries and their influence, I will bring together these elements into a more contemporary set of criteria for the nation.

Meaning of 'nation' with respect to boundaries

Regionalism and geography are often taken for granted in definitions of the nation, although Guehenno, in the previous quote, recognises that they are central concepts. To explore the importance of regionalism, it is interesting to consider whether examples

exist of nations that are non-contiguous, in the sense that parts of the nation can only be reached from the main landmass by passing through a different nation.⁴ This idea of locality will be discussed further as part of a consideration of the importance of communication technology to the nation, but it also highlights the idea of the border, or boundary.

In his essay 'Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation', Geoffrey Bennington highlights the role of the postal service in the development of the nation. He begins by noting that 'at the centre, the nation narrates itself as *the* nation: at the borders, it must recognize that there are other nations on which it cannot but depend' (Bennington, 1990, p.122). It is this that leads him, *via* the idea that nations are best studied at their boundaries, to the idea of 'post' in its various meanings. Although his linking of the prefix post- in 'post-structuralism' with the use of 'post' to mean delivery of messages seems *ad hoc*, the two words follow naturally from Latin and Greek derivations of the original Proto-Indo-European root 'apo-' meaning off or away from. They *are* linked, linguistically and culturally. By this round-a-bout route, Bennington introduces us to a definition of postal service, which he attributes to Eugène Vaillé:

[The post] can be defined as a regulated and usually governmental institution, which ensures, in conditions established in advance, both for the duration and price of transport and for its regularity, the transmission of the thought of the sender as he has transcribed it himself on a material support. (Quoted in Bennington, 1990, p.124)

There are many significant points about this definition. The post is defined as a 'usually *governmental* institution', run by the state. State control of communication seems to be

⁴Alaska in the United States only partly meets this criteria (as it is accessible from the sea), but Llívia (Spanish, but surrounded by France) and Nakhchivan (an Azerbaijani enclave bordered by Armenia, Turkey, and Iran), are rare cases. . Prior to the reunification of Germany, West Berlin could only be reached from West Germany by travel over East German territory.

a vital way of maintaining Hroch's three elements discussed in the previous section.⁵ In addition, Vaillé talks about 'the transmission of the thought of the sender', which takes much for granted. His claim requires that the sender has accurately identified his/her thought, and accurately transcribed it in the common linguistic and cultural vernacular of the community. Perhaps this was closer to the truth when the post was restricted to letters written longhand over relatively long periods of time, rather than in modern formats such as 'tweets' and other social media posts, or even the half-way house of the email. To carry out a sort of inversion of thinking, the definition of the post as run by the state could be turned around as an alternative definition of the state—that organisation that runs (or regulates) a postal service. The contemporary tech companies, such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter that run such electronic communication services do indeed act like separate nation states, as will be discussed in Section 5 on Information Technology. They have their own mythologies, their own cultures, and strive to create an organised membership based on a superiority of engagement. Their boundaries, physical and ethical, are much less clear than those of the traditional nation-state.

Finally, 'material support' is specified, which is no longer strictly the case. Modern 'postal services' have defined a spectrum between personal (1-1 or 1-few) communication, up to 'personal broadcast' technology such as Twitter or Facebook. These satisfy the original functionality of the postal service, but do much more besides. In fact, they satisfy little of Vaillé's original definition. They are not Government controlled, they transmit a version of the sender's thoughts and emotions (often through the emoticon) as they stand at that moment in time, and they have no 'material'

⁵ To summarise: a shared group 'memory'; linguistic or cultural ties enabling social communication within the group; a conception of the equality of all members of the group organized as a civil society.

substance. They feel transitory to the writer, like the spoken word, but they are recorded and verifiable.

It is central to During's idea of 'The Civil Imaginary', a development of literature which 'names prose writings which provide representations of social existence from the beginning of the eighteenth century through the period of the classic realist and [*sic*] novel and beyond' (During, 1990, p.142), that literature is first and foremost a communication.

Literature 'works *within* a society as part of the effort to know (and thus, in part and at several removes, to control) a particular social field. Being embedded within a society, it assumes and works on a set of social connections rather than promotes a national character.' (ibid. p.144). He notes that The Civil Imaginary, as a form of literature, took hold in the eighteenth-century, in the same timeline as the development of the postal service and the beginnings of mass literacy and mass communication. These things are both essential to, and formative in, the development of the modern nation.

Although During believes that this trend has continued, and that the modern novel (and in agreement with Bennington, the post-modern novel) is an extension of the Civil Imaginary, he doesn't aim to discuss the impact of modern communication, either on the nation itself, on nationalism, or on the novel.

Liminality

In *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha, writing on the essays by Bennington (Bennington, 1990) and During (During, 1990), places the boundary, paradoxically, at the centre of the concept of nation (Bhabha, 1990a, p.1). His discussion is concerned with exploring the cultural and societal aspects of the nation from the inside. He begins the introduction by saying that 'Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realise their horizons in the mind's eye' (ibid.). He accepts that

this might seem ‘excessively metaphorical’ (ibid.), but it chimes with the first of Hroch’s ‘irreplaceable’ elements: a ‘memory’ of some common past, treated as a ‘destiny’ of the group—or at least of its core constituents. He goes on to explore how national boundaries represent places of cultural transgression: ‘*in-between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated’ (ibid. p.4, original emphasis).

Bhabha adds to this the importance of *temporality* (Bhabha, 1990b). He argues that the novel is continually writing not only the current narrative of the nation, but rewriting its history, too. Nations (and nationalism) are founded on an idea of their own history. The members of the nation must believe that there is something fundamental, and core, to the nation that is unchanging. However, Bhabha observes that to preserve this illusion, this unchanging core must be constantly updated; otherwise, it becomes worthless as the cohesive factor for the current members.

This leads him to state that the nation is the ‘measure of liminality of cultural modernity’, that is to say that nations are continually changing, and yet their members see this change as a temporary state between a pre-change (pre-ritual) status, and a future (never-to-be-realised) status when the change is complete.

In extreme cases, this rewriting involves ignoring historical, inconvenient ‘fact’, or the complete converse of this situation when historical ‘fact’ is acknowledged for the first time. Examples of the former, sometimes lead to genuine examples of the latter. A long established case of nations ignoring facts might be the colonisation of landmasses such as North America and Australia by European powers. The European colonisers, in turn, fought for freedom from their ‘parent’ countries, and their descendants may hold this up as the justifiable birth of their nation, ignoring the history of their own domination of the indigenous peoples. In Europe itself, nations and those fighting for

independence from nations, have often ignored the earlier state of affairs. The twentieth-century state of Yugoslavia, with its complex interplay of predecessor and successor states is a good example.

These situations can arise for the convenience of current members of society who wish to either deny the behaviours of past generations, or embrace/accept them. More commonly, history becomes reinterpreted to fit into a narrative whose end-point is ever changing.

The novel, and the reading habits of the members of society, are part of the national identity in this respect. Novels set in contemporary society, literary or otherwise, literally help to create and reinforce the change that is the normal state of the nation. State-of-the-nation novel writers in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, such as Dickens, Eliot, and Disraeli, were engaged both within and outside of their literary lives in bringing social injustice to the consciousness of the powerful in society, and so played a very central role in shaping that society.

Bhabha's concentration on the margins, on the points where the nation diffuses into the non-nation, seems particularly appropriate to globalised society.

Myth and vision in England

As promised in 3.1, we are now in a position to put together the ideas of Gellner, Hroch, Guehenno, Bhabha, and others to produce a concept of nation that will inform the discussion on state-of-the-nation literature. The idea of a nation is concerned with the following elements:

Communication

1. History/myths around the founding and future of the nation;

Culture

2. Cultural ties (that inform decisions such as operation of the legal system);

Boundaries

3. Societal values, and their stability, around the physical and cultural boundaries of the nation. This highlights the liminal, ever-changing nature of the nation, and the relationship of that change with the core national values;

Violence and the legal system

4. The role of the state in providing a broadly acceptable, 'legitimate' framework for holding these factors together.

Before moving on to the novel, I will consider the case of 'England' in the light of these four elements. Because the subject matter of this thesis is English crime fiction, I wish to address the criticism that restricting the scope to England cannot explore the nation, because England is only one part of the United Kingdom. It has been noted that traditional state-of-the-nation novels are already subject to this criticism, being often set in London, and rarely concerning themselves with Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland. The discussion of nation incorporating Hroch's definition is entirely cultural, not requiring any international recognition of self-governance, for example, so that we are free to accept England as a nation if that seems appropriate.

There are then two parts to this question of England as a nation:

- (i) Is England identifiable as a separate nation from other parts of the United Kingdom?
- (ii) Is England sufficiently unified to meet the requirements as a single nation?

Hroch's definition gives us a cultural requirement of a nation to have shared myths and a shared vision of the future. The case of the United Kingdom and its member 'sub-nations' is a test of these ideas. It is unclear whether England has ever been a 'nation-state' in the sense that the ruling governments of England have always covered a greater geographical area than England itself (using whatever boundary definition of England

has been available at the time). There were periods of Anglo-Saxon England at the end of the tenth-century and beginning of the 11th, which began to define England in its own right, although parts of current England were occupied by Danes during this period. Between William I and the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the end of the Anarchy (1154) English kings held some lands in modern day France. In 1154 Henry II became King of England, but also of the Angevin Empire, one of the largest in Europe. Finally, at the end of the twelfth-century, Edward I incorporated Wales, which became part of a large Britain, although often still referred to as England. In 1707, the Act of Union formed Great Britain by integrating with Scotland.

Given this complicated history, it is hard to imagine ‘England’ as a nation during any of this period. The defining period of England, between say Alfred the Great (871) and Henry V (d. 1422) was a time when the language also changed: from Anglo-Saxon, to Danish, to Norman French, to Middle English. From the end of the War of the Roses (1485), a more clearly defined boundary appears, and the Tudor period is often seen as a watershed between Middle Ages and Modern (or Early Modern) (see Hutton, 2015 for an in-depth discussion).

Anthropologist Kate Fox talks about the question of a modern English identity (Fox, 2005) and explicitly defends her concentration on England rather than Britain, arguing that

- (...) Britain is purely a political construct, composed of several nations with their own distinctive cultures;
- partly because although there may be a great deal of overlap between these cultures, they are clearly *not* identical and should not be treated as such by being lumped together under ‘Britishness’(...). (Fox, 2005, p.21)

Despite Fox’s defence of English identity, a scan of news articles finds a great deal of confusion about the ethics of displaying symbols of national, English identity. At every

major football event, the press discusses whether the national flag (the Cross of St. George) has been ‘rehabilitated’ as a patriotic, rather than a racist, symbol. In 2004 Quentin Letts wrote an article, ‘The Madness of St George’, in the *Daily Telegraph*, which included a recent history of the flag:

The St George Cross has not always had a good press. With the Union Flag it was hijacked by the far Right during the 1970s and 1980s. Rat-faced youths with swastika armbands and skinheads would stick flags on the walls of provincial lock-up garages and strike clenched-fist poses. (Letts, 2004)

Football (Association Football), the “national” sport of the UK, has a role to play in the English cultural identity. The Football Associations of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, were the first four national football associations, formed in the nineteenth-century, and formed separate football leagues under separate national governing bodies. As a result, when the world body was created the individual nations were allowed to play as separate national teams by the world and European governing bodies (FIFA, 2018).

The state systems, especially the legal systems, of the nations of the United Kingdom also differ in detail. Laws are sometimes rather different, and the legal processes and their administration differ in many respects. For example, Scotland and England have different arrangements and basic rights, including the possible range of verdicts in criminal cases (in Scottish law there is a potential for a ‘not proven’ verdict), the age of legal capacity (16 in Scotland, and 18 in England), and the size of a jury (15 in Scotland, and 12 in England). Our final element of the national definition, the role of the state in providing a legitimate framework, does then vary between England and other nations of the UK.

Implications for the state-of-the-nation novel

In this section, factors that make up what we mean by a modern nation, taking into account global factors, have been considered and condensed down to the four categories from the previous section: Communication, Cultural ties, Boundaries, and Violence and the legal System.

The emphasis on communication has traditionally required localism—a tight geographical proximity which has shaped the regional boundaries of the nation. Where communication is made difficult through features such as mountains or rivers, boundaries appear between groups with different cultures and mythologies, which potentially result in separate nations; but in the Information Age, geographical barriers have no real impact on sharing of information. This has two results, which work together to weaken localism: cultural narratives spread across the globe; and people living in close proximity are no longer limited to a localised narrative.

Providing a cohesive force that prevents localised nations falling apart under the pressure of faster global communication is the idea of the state and its enforcement of order, ever changing through the translation of culture into jurisprudence. Enforcement of order requires that possibility of the imposition of physical violence, which characterises the state.

Traditionally, state-of-the-nation literature has aimed to have an impact on the nation on which it is commenting. In the nineteenth-century, the readership for such novels was a large proportion of those who were literate, and of those who had influence in society. In the twenty-first-century, social impact and influence is much more complex. Literary quality is a factor, but so is the inclusion of some specific ideas that catch the public imagination, and the impact of subsequent film adaptations. It seems impossible to judge the relative impact of such works as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* series, for example. There is also the cumulative impact of certain genres on large sections of the public (perhaps the impact of crime novels on popular views of the legal system, or of science fiction on the number of science and technology graduates). While commercial success and high levels of sales are no guarantee of social impact, it seems relevant to note that in 2017, the top one-hundred best-selling books in the UK included twenty-three crime/thriller novels, and only four 'pure' literary novels (including *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985), enjoying sales based on the recent television adaptation (Dugdale, 2017))⁶.

For a novel to explore a nation and its culture, it might be expected that it have something to say about each of our four elements of communication, cultural ties, boundaries, and violence and the legal system. To expand on each of these in the context of the state-of-the-nation novel, below is a list of how they might translate into attributes of the novel:

Communication

1. It explores how information technology is changing society, pulling the members away from the traditional factors that cohere them into a nation.

This includes the individualisation of media outside of state or societal control.

Culture

2. It considers current affairs and issues in society. These issues might include specifics on matters of both state and culture such as class, distribution of

⁶ To take a specific example, Ian Rankin's Rebus crime novel *Even Dogs in the Wild* (Rankin, 2015), sold 132,000 books in 2016 (its first full year of publication), and his *Rather Be the Devil* (Rankin, 2017) sold 135,905 in 2017 while, after Atwood's televised novel, the next literary novel on the list sold 110,788.

wealth, the economy, education, entertainment, the environment, foreign policy and defence, gender, health, immigration, and race.

Boundaries

3. It shows how the competing factors of local order and global communication are influenced by the geographical specifics of location and setting. This includes how the state attempts to renew itself through its boundaries; i.e. how it deals with the margins of society, outside of the mainstream economic and social classes that have been in existence.

Violence and the legal system

4. It specifies the importance of the power structures enforced by the state through legal codes, and explores how they hold communities together.

4. The traditional approach in the contemporary world

The traditional state-of-the-nation novel was discussed in section 1, where it was argued that it attempts to summarise the current state of the nation by satisfying many (or all) of the following conditions:

- **It engages with a full range of contemporary social and political issues**
- **It highlights social inequalities and change in the context of the nation**
- **It has an air of comprehensive realism**
- **It depicts the nation anew giving the people a fresh perspective on their way of life**
- **It observes national characteristics, as they relate to the contemporary situation, and as they relate to the broader,**

international context (see p.11)

The changes in the nation discussed in the last section have resulted in societies that are more complex, and are rapidly changing. In this section I will consider two contemporary state-of-the-nation novels, and show that although they meet these conditions, they still have not satisfied modern critics that they provide a valuable literary contribution to social commentary.

Two novels began this contemporary re-examination of the state of the nation novel: John Lanchester's *Capital* and Martin Amis's *Lionel Asbo*.

Let us consider them against that original list of things that make up a traditional state-of-the-nation novel in Section 2.

Engagement with a full range of contemporary social and political issues

Both *Capital* and *Lionel Asbo* address a range of issues in London at the time of their publication: immigration, capitalism, celebrity, and class, for example. J. Russell Perkin refers to *Capital* as a 'Dickensian Condition of England novel', and draws many parallels between Lanchester's approach and that of Dickens (Perkin, 2017). He observes that when Raymond Williams says of Dickens that 'He is able to dramatise those social institutions and consequences which are not accessible to ordinary physical observation', he could equally be talking about the opening paragraphs of *Capital*. In his review of *Capital* in *The New Statesman*, Leo Robson seems to agree with this view of the novel as engaging with social and political issues, saying that 'Lanchester is fluent in the relevant codes at every level of society and on every rung of the property ladder (...)' (Robson, 2012b). The inciting event of Lanchester's novel, the financial crash of the 2000s, enables him to look at its impact on a wide range of people of

different classes, different levels of wealth, and different ethnic backgrounds, and include the impact of political decision-making.

Amis, in *Lionel Asbo*, seems less concerned with these substantial, often political, issues, and more directed by popular opinion—on an undeserving poor, get-rich-quick, culture; as Theo Tait puts it, the book is ‘a full on indictment of a debased culture’ (Tait, 2012b). His main character is described as a ‘yob’ and a ‘lout’, based on outdated caricatures of English football fans, who has ‘vulgar’ views, owns banned dogs, and wins millions on the National Lottery. Tait sums it up as ‘(...)a familiar line of attack – against unearned wealth and celebrity, vulgarity, fake tits, feckless chavs, slipping educational and moral standards (and, by implication, footballers)’ (Tait 2012b).

Social inequalities and change in the context of the nation

Lanchester frequently describes male city-workers by the public schools they went to, highlighting the still-present very English take on social inequalities. At the same time he includes international characters such as Polish builders, and failed asylum seekers, and portrays the way he sees society mistreat them. His cast covers a wide range of characters related to current media issues such as immigration (the Zimbabwean traffic warden, Polish builders), celebrity (a young footballer from Senegal), and the gap between rich and poor (an au pair from Hungary). He uses London as a boundary space between the national and international by including a large number of non-UK citizens and exploring why they have moved to London.

Lionel Asbo also attracted negative comparisons with the nineteenth-century novel. Leo Robson in the *New Statesman* compares this novel to Dickens, or more accurately to ‘a pastiche of Dickens’ (Robson, 2012a). While this is a very negative review, Robson does credit *Lionel Asbo* with many of the aspects of a state-of-the-

nation novel, interested in social issues of race, class, politics, and criminality. Robson ends his review explicitly referring to the state-of-the-nation elements:

The state of much of the England portrayed in *Lionel Asbo* may be dreadful but it is there only as a reminder of the multifarious threats posed to the “congenial” society – with its blushing skies, singing kettles, babbling babies and fawning, boring couples.

Both novels have a strong local setting (in each case in London, although in the case of *Lionel Asbo* in a fictional borough of London). In the case of *Capital* this setting is put in some global context by the introduction of characters from other parts of the world. In *Lionel Asbo*, there is some sense of the criminal justice system, and its impact on society, although it is not a serious look at the issues. The character of Lionel is in and out of prison, and there is no sense of the system that puts him there. Both books attempt to deal with certain issues around gender, race, class, poverty, and immigration, as well as some less theoretical phenomena (the young football prodigy in *Capital*, and Asbo’s undeserved win on the lottery, for example).

Comprehensive realism

Do these novels exhibit a sense of realism? J. Russell Perkin believes that ‘[Lanchester] demonstrates an insightful humanity that lies deeper than superficial matters of grotesque characters or satirical exaggeration’ (Perkin, 2017), supporting the idea of a realist approach.

Lionel Asbo offers, according to Robson, ‘a portrait of positive virtues, of ideal living – of human potential, as skewed by Amis’ (Robson, 2012a). Robson’s objections to Amis’s book reflect its failure to be the nineteenth-century-style state-of-the-nation novel. The air of realism is lacking, and James Wolcott in his review in *The New Republic*, ‘The Yob that Failed’, comments that the comic pastiche that replaces it is ‘unfunny to the point of bafflement’ (Wolcott, 2012). Amis’s novel does not attempt to

create a believable atmosphere, but rather a highly satirical one, exaggerating every point.

Depicts the nation anew giving the people a fresh perspective on their way of life

Robson's earlier quote ends as follows: 'Lanchester is fluent in the relevant codes at every level of society and on every rung of the property ladder, **but vignettes don't add up to a vision**' (Robson, 2012a, original emphasis). He ends his review by arguing that, 'As a portrait of metropolitan decadence, the novel is all surfaces and stereotypes, all symptoms. The damning truth we yearn to hear has yet to be delivered' (Robson, 2012a).

That final line suggests strongly that he doesn't believe that Lanchester really has delivered a fresh perspective.

Despite bad reviews, *Lionel Asbo* has supporters for its success as a state-of-the-nation novel. Nicola Barker, writing in the *Observer* (Barker, 2012) calls it 'Clever and ignorant and topical and sad and cruel and ridiculous and breathtaking. It is a book of lovehate. It is a powershake.' It's clear that Barker was able to engage with the book and found that it gave insight—if not original then in some way powerful. It's a book that highlights and prioritises certain social observations, and so attempts to give the reader a fresh perspective.

Observes national characteristics, as they relate to the contemporary situation, and as they relate to the broader, international context

In his thesis on engagement with plot, Luke Brown is also critical of Lanchester's approach, and Brown suggests a reason:

John Lanchester's panoramic London novel *Capital* (2012) came out in the same year [as Zadie Smith's *NW*] and adopted a modern version of an old-fashioned style—

Thackeray and Dickens—which couldn’t do justice to a city with a much more diverse range of cultures. The characters are paper thin and aren’t meant to be. (Brown, 2014)

Brown’s observation is that this ‘panoramic’ style simply can’t do justice to a twenty-first-century city. The change in the nation between the nineteenth-century England addressed by Thackeray and Dickens, and the twenty-first-century England addressed by Lanchester demands a new format.

Neither *Capital* nor *Lionel Asbo* seem to satisfy the expectations of a state-of-the-nation novel for the twenty-first-century, and yet they are literary novels, specifically written by respected authors to satisfy many of those ‘classic’ requirements for state-of-the-nation. The reason for this failure could be found in the new criteria, set out in Section 2.5. They are certainly ‘comprehensive’, engage politically and socially, focus on the personal to explore broader themes, and yet, accepting their relevance to the state-of-the-England genre both Perkin and Robson consider that both novels fail to achieve their goals.

Perhaps the most significant missing element in the books is engagement with modern technology, and its effect on society. Other than having characters that use mobiles phones there is very little notice taken of the enormous changes in communication technology over the last few years. Both books could have been written in the 1990s with few changes.

Before turning away from the premeditated state-of-the-nation novel, it is worth mentioning another attempt to update the genre. This is a modern variant of the Classic approach, which I will refer to as the Stab after an observation attributed to Toby Litt in an article by Piggott:

I would argue instead that the real state-of-the-nation novels now are more focused than this. They don't do sweep, they do

stab. There's no reason why you can't have a state-of-the-nation short story. (Toby Litt quoted in Piggott, 2010)

The Stab novel aims to distil something in the essence of modern society by focussing on one important theme or issue. This may be because there is an assumption that this theme is the single most important factor, or that the theme allows an interplay of subservient themes. A strong form of this type of novel is Martin Amis's *Money: A Suicide Note* (Amis, 1984) which chose the rampant capitalism of Britain's Thatcherite 1980s, borrowed from the Reaganomics of the USA, as the key to understanding the London of that decade. More recently British novels such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (Smith, 2000) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (Ali, 2003) have concentrated on multiculturalism as the key ingredient. It is often the case that Stab novels are set in London, because single issues tend to have greater impact and concentration in the capital.

Finally, I'd like to consider whether there is something systemic about the Classical approach that makes it fundamentally unsuited to writing the twenty-first-century state-of-the-nation novel. In the table below I show the two sets of criteria side-by-side:

The Classical model (C)	The Information Age Model (IA) ⁷
1. It has an air of comprehensive realism;	Boundaries It shows how the competing factors of local order and global communication are influenced by the geographical specifics of location and setting. This includes how the state attempts to renew itself through its boundaries; i.e. how it deals with the margins of society, outside of the mainstream economic and social classes that have been in existence;
2. It engages with a full range of contemporary social and political issues;	Communication It explores how information technology is changing society, pulling the members away from the traditional factors that cohere them into a nation. This includes the individualisation of media outside of state or societal control;
3. It makes observations at a personal level which relate to broader themes of the elements of society;	Violence and the legal System It specifies the importance of the power structures enforced by the state through legal codes, and explores how they hold communities together;
4. It is original or insightful about these themes, their apparent importance, and their inter-relationship;	Culture It considers current affairs and issues in society. These issues might include specifics on matters of both state and culture such as class, distribution of wealth, the economy, education, entertainment, the environment, foreign policy and defence, gender, health, immigration, and race.
5. It highlights social inequalities and change, in the context of the nation;	
6. It observes national characteristics, especially as they relate to the contemporary situation;	
7. It depicts the nation anew giving the people a fresh perspective on their way of life.	

The main point of similarity between the two is given by Culture in the second column. This wraps up the Classical points 2, 3, 4, and 5 (C2-5) in highlighting the importance of current issues. C6 and C7 insist that the state-of-the-nation novel acknowledge an already accepted ‘localist’ definition of the Nation, which to some extent ignores the central role of communication. In comparing the two, we get an immediate sense that the Classical state-of-the-nation novel is unavoidably nationalistic in nature, while the Information Age approach allows, in fact requires, the writer to challenge the whole idea of the nation in which the novel is set⁸.

5. Crime fiction, law and order, and the state of the nation

Introduction and law and order

Having set the criteria for the possibility of success for a contemporary state-of-the-nation novel in the previous section, I will now discuss why I feel the crime genre is a natural place to look for an alternative to the more classical approach. In this section, I first consider the relevance of the crime fiction novel to the legal system as a cohesive factor in keeping the modern nation together.

I then introduce a selection of crime fiction novels, explaining my choices, which will be used in later sections to explore the other points of Communication, Boundaries, and Culture in the information Age model. I then use my own work, *Conexus*, as an illustration of a crime novel written consciously to meet the state-of-the-nation criteria.

⁷ As the importance of information technology is a key element that distinguishes this from the classical model, I will adopt this as a shorthand way of referring to this model.

⁸ It is accepted that many Classical state-of-the-nation novels have been critical of the culture of the nation in which they are set, without actually being critical of the nation itself, and certainly not of the idea of the nation.

Consider the statement that a state-of-the-nation novel should explore ‘the importance of power structures enforced by the state through legal codes, and how that holds communities together’. This statement is made against a background of understanding the importance of localisation to the historic concept of a nation. As has been argued, nations are held together by a state that has a monopoly on the legalised use of violence, and that violence requires proximity for its control. Novels that concern themselves with the legal code of a state, and how it is able to enforce that code, are uniquely placed to explore these concepts. Of course, many novels concern themselves with these structures without being considered crime fiction. In *Unwilling Executioner: Crime Fiction and the State*, Andrew Pepper starts his discussion of the relationship of the state with crime-related fiction in the 1720s when, he writes, ‘writers like Daniel Defoe began to approach for the first time the subject of crime and punishment in a self-conscious manner’ (Pepper, 2016, p.4). Such writers aren’t generally considered crime writers because their novels don’t concern themselves primarily with a crime, its subsequent detection, and punishment, but the true crime novels clearly had a head start in this respect.

By concerning themselves with crime, detection, and possible punishment, crime novels explore public attitudes to morality—what Mary Evans in her book *The Imagination of Evil* refers to as the ‘relationship of morality to the law’ (Evans, 2009, p.2). The attitude of the public to the morality of certain actions may become, for a time at least, out of step with the state legal system, if the legal system changes without

majority consent, for example, or if public opinion changes, perhaps because of high-profile cases.⁹

The crime novel has changed over the years, to reflect the state systems within which the stories take place. Peter Messent, in *The Police Novel*, refers to this process as ‘an ongoing serial enquiry into the state of the nation, its power structures and its social concerns’. He explains this in part by the way such novels trail the past behind them—their ‘special relationship to history’ (Messent, 2010, p.178). Messent highlights the police novel as subgenre because of the

institutional and systemic framework in which the police (and other law enforcers) work, focussing on the strength and importance of police fiction in the contemporary period in terms of its representation of the “state apparatus” that opposes criminality. (ibid., pp177-178)

Accepting for now that the crime novel can indeed give enough insight into the nation to be considered a potential source of state-of-the-nation writing, the rest of this section considers a selection of such novels. I consider them in the context of my own attempt at the realistic, contemporary state-of-the-nation crime novel.

Contemporary and Realistic

I want to define two terms, which have been used throughout this discussion when referring to crime fiction: realistic, and contemporary. Within the context of this

⁹ An example of the former might be the introduction of the ‘Poll Tax’ (properly known as the Community Charge) in the UK in 1990 (initially in Scotland in 1989). The public view of the morality of the charge, that required everyone to pay a fixed fee regardless of wealth or income, led to strong protests and the charge was replaced by 1993. An example of public opinion changing and resulting in eventual changes in law is the introduction of the fox hunting ban in 2005. A 2015 poll (YouGov, 2015) showed that public opinion still supports this ban even though the government has consistently argued for its repeal. In the past, communication of public opinion, which might lead to law change, was limited by the technology of the day to those within a close physical proximity, hence the cohesive properties of the legal system.

discussion, I have used ‘realistic’ as distinguished from ‘realist’ because I don’t wish the reader to confuse realist with the more general literary term. ‘Realistic’ needs the context of ‘contemporary’, and this is rather arbitrarily defined for my purposes, against the backdrop of the period of technological advance which has prompted this discussion:

Contemporary: written and set since the mass utilisation of the internet as a form of communication.

Realistic: set in (a fictional version of) the real world, with recognisable settings, social structures, geography, characters, and contemporary technology.

Candidate crime novels

In deciding which crime novels to use (alongside *Conexus*) to explore these ideas, two key factors have been considered—the time-period, and location. It has already been noted that contemporary will denote a period from around 1990 onwards. The narrative of *Conexus* contains one scene from 1986, and several murder scenes ranging from 1996 up to 2018, although the main storyline is set in 2018.

Geographically, most of the novels chosen have a similar national focus, determined by the national setting of *Conexus*, which is specifically England (rather than the broader UK as will be discussed later). The exact location(s) chosen to illustrate this focus will be part of the analysis in Section 6. In *Conexus* much of the action takes place in and around the Gloucester-Cheltenham conurbation, although other scenes are set in Birmingham, Leicester, Leeds, London, Manchester, and York, and three murders are committed outside of England (two in Hong Kong and one in Malaysia). These choices of time-period and location reflect the aims of the novel to explore England as a nation, in its contemporary setting, but with reference to its recent past and its global context.

In Section 7, on Information Technology, I have relaxed this need for national focus and considered two novels, *Steel Kiss* (Deaver, 2016a) and *Kill Process* (Hertling, 2016) that are set in the United States. These novels illustrate the use of technology in contemporary crime fiction very well, and it is representative of the globalising effect of Information Technology that I consider it less important to restrict this section to the same nation as *Conexus*. There are two other England-based novels included in this section—*The Intrusions* (Sherez, 2017a) and *Sockpuppet* (2017).

The novels chosen have not been chosen because they are (in my opinion) more suited to state-of-the-nation commentary than other crime novels, but rather because they cover the range of time periods between them and are good examples of specific issues such as location and use of technology.

In addition to these factors, the structure and pace of a crime novel will depend on whether the novel contains characters and settings that have featured in the author's novels before—whether the novel is a one-off, a first-in-a-series (often indistinguishable from a one-off), or a later novel in an established series.

For novels set close to the beginning of my chosen period I have kept to this restriction; however, for very recent novels it is harder to make a judgement on how effective a particular writer might be in illustrating the points. For this reason, I have chosen to include established series novels in the more recent choices (including *The Intrusions* and *Steel Kiss*). These are again novels used to illustrate points about the use of IT in crime fiction, so that the importance of established characters and settings is less important to the points being illustrated.

While not strictly on my list of requirements, I have tended to bias my choices towards commercially successful and critically well-received novels, and series.

Breadth of readership is an indication of the perception of the engagement of the novel

with issues that seem relevant to a wide section of society. In many cases, this sort of success is harder to judge for more recent novels, because not enough time has elapsed for a reflective critical assessment, or for a novel, or series, to gain popularity.

Despite all these restrictions, there are many novels to choose from in this time-period, and I relied on authors who are known for their perceptive, social writing. Val McDermid, despite being Scottish, lives in England and most of her work is set in England. She's been successful for over twenty years, and speaks out on issues of social inequality, as well as gender (for example her interview in *The Guardian* online (Ellis-Petersen, 2015)). Her most commercially successful work is the Tony Hill and Carol Jordan series, which has been televised and is set in a fictional, but accurately locatable Northern city, called Bradfield. The first in the series, *The Mermaids Singing* (McDermid, 1995), is set at the beginning of my chosen period, and I will discuss the novel in the context of its portrayal of jurisprudence in more detail later in this section.

Mo Hayder's books follow (and to some extent set) the trend for gory, British crime writing. Her Jack Caffrey series moves about England; the first two novels are set in London, with very specific and accurate descriptions of real locations. Later, Caffrey moves to Bristol, and the contrast between the two locations is a background to the novels. The first of the series, *Birdman* (Hayder, 1999), has multiple socially-relevant storylines, following not only the murder of young women who work as exotic dancers in a London bar, but the racist harassment of an innocent suspect, a case of historic paedophilia, and threads around the state of the National Health Service. The novel is set at the end of the 1990s, fitting into the general timeline of *Conexus*.

Mark Billingham, writer of the Tom Thorne series, is a social commentator through his writing and his alternative career as a stand-up comedian. He says that his Thorne character is 'the person I get stuff off my chest through. If he is banging on

about public transport or the health service, then that is probably me' (quoted in Wroe, 2012). The first in the series, *Sleepyhead* (Billingham, 2001), is again set in London. Billingham's London, like Hayder's, is geographically accurate, and includes a wide range of people, from the rich consultant who is Thorne's main suspect, to the young, hard-working but out-for-a-good-time woman, Alison, who is a survivor of the attacks. Set in 2001, many scenes revolve around hospitals, a common trope in crime fiction, which supports my exploration of the abject in my discussion of setting in Section 4.

As previously discussed, of my main crime novel choices, *The Intrusions* (Sherez, 2017a), is the only one that isn't the first of a series. Sherez's previous novels in this series (with main protagonists Carrigan and Miller), suggested that this one was likely to be extremely up-to-date in its observations on society. Moreover, Sherez has said that while his initial idea of the book was rather traditional, he realised that the way the crimes were carried out in the modern world would necessarily involve heavy use of IT (Sherez, 2017b). *The Intrusions* is again set in London, and this predominance of London settings does match with the predominance of London settings in the more traditionally minded British state-of-the-nation literature (Lanchester's *Capital*, Ali's *Brick Lane*, Smith's *White Teeth*, Amis's *Lionel Asbo*, and many others).

In addition to these texts—*The Mermaids Singing* (McDermid, 1995), *Birdman* (Hayder, 1999), *Sleepyhead* (Billingham, 2001), and *The Intrusions* (Sherez, 2017a)—I have included three additional examples of crime novels chosen specifically for their incorporation of contemporary IT. These three novels, along with *The Intrusions*, form the central structure of my discussion in section 7: *Steel Kiss* (Deaver, 2016a), *Sockpuppet* (Blakstad, 2016), and *Kill Process* (Hertling, 2016). *Sockpuppet* and *The Intrusions* are both set in England, the other two in the USA.

The choice of characters is very relevant, both to crime fiction, to the breadth of societal viewpoint, and to the question of engagement with jurisprudence. Typically, crime fiction characters fall into one of a number of roles:

1. Investigators
2. Suspects
3. Victims
4. Others, including:
 - a. Witnesses
 - b. Personal
 - c. Media
 - d. Incidental

Here Personal means acquaintances of the main protagonist who don't fit into other categories in their own right. These categories often overlap: investigators become victims or suspects, suspects are witnesses, and may end up being victims, etc.

The characters that are chosen to fulfil these roles will either reflect the existing mores of society, or challenge them. It is here that the class, race, age, gender, and sexuality of characters make a particular impact upon the reader. In twenty-first-century England, the choice of character in the role of Investigator, Suspect, or Victims, will have a different impact dependent on what section of society they are portrayed as inhabiting. Readers notice these decisions, and they will be seen to either support or criticise the way certain groups are treated in the real world. The male characters' attitudes to race, gender, and sexuality are often portrayed. In retrospect, it is possible to analyse these texts for trends in changes in societal attitudes.

Whether an author considers it realistic, or perhaps challenging, to cast women or ethnic minorities in roles of seniority is a clear statement about society. Similarly, the

incorporation of ethnic minorities in a range of roles is a reflection on society, as is the attitude of the Investigator characters to those characters. Investigators taking on a formal role in the police may challenge society's official and personal lines on a range of minorities.

It has been argued, by K. Tempest Bradford (Bradford, 2017), in her article *Representation Matters: A Literary Call to Arms*, that representation in literature is both challenging and of crucial importance. She not only argues that 'Representation is key to good writing', but also believes that 'All narrative has the power to impact culture and individuals in a positive way or a negative one.' Bradford quotes Justina Ireland on her own experiences as a young female, black reader, growing up without feeling represented in the books that she read, who coined the term 'An Apartheid of the Imagination'. The crux of Bradford's argument is that authors should strive for representation, and for realism in representation, but that they will always be criticised for doing so. It is clear that in writing a crime novel set in contemporary society, readers will relate to realistic representation. The danger is that they will also relate to stereotypical representation that reflects what might be seen in the media.

The novels discussed cover the last 25 years, and so one might expect to find changes in the choice of characters and the way those characters are portrayed and perceived by society.

***The Mermaids Singing* and its analysis of the legal system**

Returning to the thoughts about law and order at the start of this section, I intend to look at Val McDermid's *The Mermaids Singing* (McDermid, 1995), as an example of how the crime novel explicitly comments on the state of the legal system, and its relationship to the moral views of society.

Set in the mid-1990s, *The Mermaids Singing* is the first in a series of police procedural novels following the protagonist Detective Inspector Carol Jordan and her soon-to-be partner criminal psychologist Tony Hill. There are currently ten books in the series, the most recent, *Insidious Intent*, published in 2017.

It is worth taking time to explore, briefly, this subgenre the ‘police procedural’. Stephen Knight (Knight, [2004] 2010, p. 229) describes it as post-second world war crime novels that take advantage of an increased credibility of ‘detection by teams of technically-skilled and procedure-focused teams of police’. In fact, the police procedural is the dominant form of contemporary crime fiction, both in TV and in prose, only challenged by the forensic subgenre (which could be seen to satisfy a very similar definition with the words ‘technical experts’ replacing ‘police’). This real-life, team-based approach of the police procedural doesn’t mean to say that they don’t have a main protagonist. Of the crime novels featured in this thesis, not only *The Mermaids Singing*, but also *Birdman*, *Sleepyhead*, and *The Intrusions*, are police procedurals, based around one major police detective, but with several other police characters supporting (or sometimes hindering). Using the nomenclature of the previous subsection, the number of significant Investigators is usually relatively large in a police procedural, and the range of characters involved in the legal system is therefore quite wide. In contrast, the Private Detective is often a lone operator investigating the crimes (examples include Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, Travis McGee, V.I. Warshawski, and many others). On the other hand, the police procedural involves a team that is both supported, and hampered, by state involvement: a police team is under constant surveillance from the authorities (for example, Ian Rankin’s Rebus is frequently under investigation from Police Complaints, and one of the enduring characters in the Rebus series, Malcolm Fox, often works for the Complaints team). In addition, the police team

has more resources, but also has higher expectations: it is a trope of modern police procedurals such as Sherez's Carrigan and Miller series that the team are struggling for enough resources to cover the areas of the investigation they believe necessary.

The Mermaids Singing takes advantage of the police procedural approach to display social tensions, often deriving from political beliefs, and the state of current police thinking. Newly promoted Detective Inspector Carol Jordan is reporting on the specific case of a series of murders of men in the town's 'gay quarter' to misogynist Detective Superintendent Tom Cross who refuses to respect her opinions. A dynamic is created between 'modern-thinking' police officers, exemplified by Jordan and her boss, Detective Superintendent John Brandon, and the prejudiced thinking of Cross, and of Brandon's boss, Derek Armthwaite. Armthwaite is a right wing, old-fashioned police officer whose objectives are generally political. While Brandon believes in appointing a woman officer based on her merits as a police officer, the implication is that Cross would simply never do such a thing, and that Armthwaite would allow it begrudgingly for reasons of political expediency. Similarly, in the case that Jordan is working on, Cross and Armthwaite demonstrate their old-guard views on three points:

- i. They are insistent that the murders are unrelated (for political reasons they believe they should not admit to the possibility of a serial killer)
- ii. They are consistently homophobic in a case that directly affects gay men
- iii. They do not wish to allow for the introduction of expert 'profiling' advice (in this case from Tony Hill).

To be relevant to a state-of-the-nation analysis it is not enough that the novel reflects some aspects of the system of law, it is also important that these points are relevant and local to the society that they live in. *The Mermaids Singing*, typically for a crime novel,

is able to show how societal issues are caught up in a cycle: divisions in the community (reflecting those in the nation) affect the interpretation of the law, and are equally reflected among those community members that work within the police force. These divisions are also reflected in the media, and so promulgated through the community. The media in *The Mermaids Singing* is represented by pushy reporter, Penny Burgess, whose secret lover works in Jordan's team and leaks information. Burgess demonstrates views on the range of issues thrown up by the murders, but also with her views on the public right to know, and in this way she straddles the boundary between modern thinking and the views of the old guard. She believes that the murders are linked, and is supportive of modern approaches such as profiling. However, she also represents the public's desire for action and a quick arrest, which at times allies her with Tom Cross and his false arrest of Stevie McConnell. The moral and legal issues around LGBTQ+ issues are also shown in the community itself (through gay suspect Stevie McConnell), and in the murderer, Angelica (previously Christopher Thorpe), whose life has been one of continuous abuse from childhood, based in part on her gender identity. It is the confusion in society, reflected in the police, which brings together the portrayal of a society integrated by conflicts and consensus. The moral issues in society must be played out through the legal system that reflects the real legal system of England at that time.

6. Boundaries and locations: Crime, place, and the uncanny

Introduction

This section will explore the importance of setting to the crime novel. The majority of modern state-of-the-nation novels, as we've seen from those we've examined, are set in large urban areas (most often in London for the British version). This is an understandable decision, because heavily populated urban areas hold a wide spectrum of society, and give the author a strong core to work with in reflecting society. My discussion of setting is therefore concerned with its importance in crime fiction, and the possibility that the specificity of location is an important feature of crime fiction.

The detective novel has become increasingly globalized. Pepper and Schmid claim that 'in the last twenty years or so [it] has really mushroomed beyond the familiar scenes (...) (e.g., London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles), to become a truly global literary genre.' (2016, p.1). Pepper and Schmid are deeply interested in this globalisation, admitting that they are not so concerned with the local aspects of the genre. Žižek, in contrast, brings this globalisation back to the local: 'The main effect of globalisation on detective fiction is discernible in its dialectical counterpart: the specific locale, a particular provincial environment as the story's setting.' (Žižek, 2003, p.24) Žižek adds his own force to the general observations about the changing face of society in the Information Age in the same article:

Today, the exception, the eccentric locale, is the rule. The global stance of 20th-century Modernism asserted itself in the guise of cosmopolitanism or membership of a global Americanised culture; this is no longer the case. A truly global citizen today is one who discovers or returns to (identifies with) particular roots, who displays a specific communal identity. The 'global order' is in the end only the frame and container of this shifting multitude of particular identities. (ibid.)

The argument is that in a world where connectedness might conceivably contribute to relatively homogenous ideas and viewpoints, it is the specifically local that can help create an individual identity. In section 7, on the impact of Information Technology, this argument will be challenged with the view that global connectedness is a force that pulls homogenous societies apart, creating greater opportunity for individual identities. Nevertheless, it is the local behind the global that allows the crime writer to pass comment on the society in which the work is set. Pepper and Schmid argue that the role of the state is largely ignored in this reading, but that the state is central to the ‘historic development of crime fiction’, citing, as noted in Section 2 of this thesis, the importance of the state’s laws to the genre (2016, p. 4).

There is a tension in choosing a setting for a realistic novel. On the one hand, it must be completely natural and believable, so that the reader feels at home. This idea of feeling ‘at home’ is one that will come up later in consideration of the uncanny (or *unheimlich*) in relation to the crime novel. One way of achieving this sense is to set the novel in a real geographical location that may be familiar to the reader. By using real places, the writer creates a believable location for a story by default, although it becomes extremely important that the details are accurate. It is counterproductive to use a real setting and make geographical errors as the knowledgeable reader will be more distracted and disengaged than if the setting were fictional. On the other hand, the setting must be made original and unique, with key features that stand out for the reader¹⁰. In fact, concrete description of real locations brings out the individual character of a location, which is all the more striking and believable because it is

¹⁰In the real world this paradox arises frequently: someone may not have engaged with places in their immediate location, that others might travel for miles to visit, while conversely they may travel to foreign parts to visit equivalent landmarks elsewhere.

embedded in reality. As David Geherin says, ‘writers can make settings resonate in the reader’s imagination every bit as powerfully as the fictional characters they create.’

(Geherin, 2008, p.5).

The key to realistic fiction is the depiction of everyday reality. It is worth quoting George Eliot discussing Ruskin in her *Review of Modern Painters III*:

‘The truth of infinite value that he teaches is realism—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality.’ (Eliot, 2018 [1856], pp. 626-627)

The location and its believability in reflecting reality must add to this ‘definite, substantial’ element, and do so within the context of the characters. It adds consistency, because it is present in every scene, and in this sense is more important than any single character. Each character has a relationship to the setting, which necessarily becomes part of the story. A character may fit naturally into her surroundings so that the reader is unsurprised by the existence of such a character in this place, or be outside of his or her natural environment, in a way that will always add tension and create both character background and plot. An example of the character that fits in is Inspector Morse from Colin Dexter’s series set in Oxford (Dexter, 2002). Morse is an Oxford graduate who knows the city well and is able to move seamlessly between the world of the colleges and dons and the world of the criminal. Jack Caffrey, in Mo Hayder’s later novels in the series has moved from his childhood neighbourhood in London and is working in Bristol (Hayder, 2008 and later). He struggles to come to terms with the differences in culture, both in the police force and the city.

Real locations

While some writers (as already discussed, Val McDermid in her Carol Jordan and Tony Hill novels, for example) do create fictional locations that nevertheless evoke a very

close representation of the real world, there are specific and significant benefits to using real places. Real towns and cities are known to readers and carry with them unwritten histories and (cultural) memories which writers can make use of, both explicitly and implicitly, to further plot or to deepen thematic resonances. In our example novel by Mark Billingham, *Sleepyhead*, he makes use of the real layout of hospitals in London, and in *Birdman* Mo Hayder sets some of the action around Croom Hill, Greenwich, and Blackheath, calling to mind the network of green spaces and potential for isolation in the centre of London. Real locations also have unique attributes which might seem (to the reader) to be awkward or unnatural if they were incorporated into a fictional setting, but are easily accepted as part of a real-world location. For example, a fictional city that happens to have an underground system, or Roman walls, or a major University, can be seen as contrived to fit a plot, or simply an imitation of a real town, distancing the reader further from the real world.

At the same time, using real locations places obvious constraints on a writer. Readers demand accuracy so that buildings, streets, and journey times, for example, are generally fixed once a real town or city has been chosen. There are exceptions to this rule. It is common for a plot-significant, fictional building or address to be incorporated into a city, especially in crime fiction where events can be portrayed that might seem to damage the reputation of a place, and there are many examples such as Sherlock Holmes's famous address 221b, Baker Street. In this case, the address is very specific, the street really exists, but the number does not. At other times, the writer might deliberately leave details vague. Ian Rankin's famous Edinburgh detective, John Rebus,

lives in Arden Street, in Marchmont, Edinburgh, but the exact number has never been revealed in the books.¹¹

In crime fiction, plot is often dependent on very specific environmental issues such as visibility and the time taken to travel between places, and this places serious constraints on the writer. In fact, these issues become plot points in themselves: they might provide a suspect with the time to carry out a crime, or limit the number of suspects. A typical example is L.J. Ross's novel *Holy Island* (Ross, 2015) set on the eponymous Holy Island where tides make land travel to and from the main-land only possible at certain times of day, and sea travel is both noisy and visible. These restrictions provide a small number of suspects and force them into close proximity with the detectives.¹²

The uncanny nature of crime fiction

The importance of reality in the setting of a crime novel can be related to Freud's theory of the Uncanny (Freud, n.d. [1919]). It's in the very nature of the crime novel, with its violence and murder in the middle of everyday society, to deal with the uncanny (see Bloch, 1980). Freud describes the uncanny as follows: 'the "uncanny" is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar'. He considers the uncanny as something that 'undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror'. He considers a range of definitions and ideas around the concept saying that the uncanny is 'nothing new or foreign, but something

¹¹ In fact while working on his nineteenth Rebus novel, *Saints of the Shadow Bible* (Rebus, 2013), Rankin posted a picture of Arden street on his website with the comment 'Arden Street – top windows = Rebus's flat'. . The windows were identified as being number 17, Arden Street, so while the fiction has not revealed the location, real life has.

¹² The island setting is perhaps most famously used in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*, (Christie, 2010), where the characters are trapped during stormy weather, murdered one-by-one, knowing the killer must be one of them.

old and familiar—established in the mind that has been estranged by the process of repression’, comparing this with the view (that he attributes to Schelling), that it is something that ‘ought to have been concealed but which has nevertheless come to light’ (Freud. n.d. [2019], p.13).

This sense of the uncanny is heightened by setting the “terrible” happenings in real, familiar places. In *Anxiety (L’Angoisse)*, Jacques Lacan relates the uncanny to cognitive dissonance and anxiety:

the horrible, the suspicious, the uncanny, everything by which we translate, as best we can in French, this masterful unheimlich, presents itself through skylights, that it is as framed that there is situated for us the field of anxiety.
(Lacan, n.d.[1962-63])

In his seminar material *The Uncanny: Between Freud and Lacan*, Ehsan Azari Stanizai describes Lacan’s work as locating ‘the uncanny at the heart of his theory of anxiety’ (Stanizai, 2018). Peter Messent believes the ability to cause anxiety is central to crime fiction’s popularity, quoting Catherine Nickerson from her *Murder as Social Criticism* (Nickerson, 1997) as follows: ‘[the genre] represent[s] in a generally realistic style the most-anxiety producing issues and narratives of a culture’ (Messant, 2000).

This is rather a long link to trace, so to summarise:

- i. Crime fiction produces anxieties in its readers
- ii. The ability to produce anxiety is a significant literary factor in crime fiction as a genre
- iii. Lacan’s theories suggest that the Uncanny is at the heart of feelings of anxiety
- iv. The Uncanny in literature, and particularly the role of location and setting in the Uncanny, is a suitable subject for analysis in exploring crime fiction’s ability to explore the state-of-the-nation.

I will consider the uncanny to be a sense of both familiarity and strangeness at the same time, which creates a feeling of anxiety and dread. In the final section of his paper, Freud discusses how his ideas relate to the creation of this feeling in fiction, pointing out that

in the first place a great deal that is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life; and in the second place that there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life.

The story-teller has this license among many others, that he can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases. (Freud, n.d. [2019] p.18, original emphasis)

His argument is that this choice in the ‘world of representation’ is crucial in determining the uncanny effect, and that the strength of this effect depends on how convincingly the writer pretends ‘to move into the world of common reality’ (p.18). An event feels uncanny because certain ‘impossible’ things actually appear to happen. Examples given include imaginings of animations of near-human objects (for example, dolls, scarecrows, skeletons, and other dead body substitutes). Frank E Pollick, in *In Search of the Uncanny Valley*, shows that the obverse of this is also true: Pollick uses the clown to illustrate that in some cases the uncanny is achieved not by making inanimate objects appear human, but in making humans appear not quite human (Pollick, 2008). He identifies the painted smile as making the clown appear inhuman, because ‘the clown with a painted smile ought not to always look so happy for all its actions’.

The uncanny features heavily in horror and supernatural literature (for example, vampire novels from *Dracula* onwards make use of the near-human), but the crime writer also strives to create a sense of the familiar overlaid with dread. Many features of crime fiction relate to uncanny factors—death and the dead body, the human behaving

in an inhuman way (almost all modern crime fiction involves a human killer, often with little ‘human’ feeling about his or her actions), the distinctly familiar, real settings contrasted with events that ‘ought to have been concealed’. One way in which the crime writer evokes the uncanny is through the seemingly unstoppable adversary. These adversaries are often set aside as Other in some way, so that they look human but are placed in a category that attempts to separate the character from the rest of humanity (to set him or her aside from the human) through mental illness. Such characterisation may also be combined with a motivation that appears to us believable, and yet monstrous. Mo Hayder uses this device in her sixth Jack Caffrey book, *Poppet*, setting up the myth of The Maude, a supernatural, dwarfish creature that sits on people’s chests, scuttling around a mental hospital, before the detectives unravel the mystery and reveal the almost equally terrifying patient who is really behind the deaths (Hayder, 2013).

The psychopath-serial-killer is a standard trope that plays on these points. The killer looks like any other human being, but behaves in a way that suggests inhumanity. The explanation for this must stay in the bounds of reality, or the uncanny effect is lost, and so mental illness (psychopathy or some similar term) is called on. The reality of the setting makes these characters close to human, and therefore believable, rather than being what they are—fictional literary constructs. Perhaps the most famous of these psychopath-serial-killers is Thomas Harris’s Hannibal Lecter, first introduced in *Red Dragon* (Harris, 1981), whose place in popular culture was guaranteed when he later appeared in films and television series.

An important element of the uncanny for Freud is Der Doppelgänger, translated as ‘the double’. Here he simply means something that ‘is identical by reason of looking alike’, which he argues has long been associated with this idea of the uncanny.

We must content ourselves with selecting those themes of uncanniness which are most prominent, and seeing whether

we can fairly trace then also back to infantile sources. These themes are all concerned with the idea of a “double” in every shape and degree, with persons, therefore, who are to be considered identical by reason of looking alike;...’ (Freud, 1919, p. 9)

Realism in literature is always striving for a facsimile of the real world, but in the absence of other factors, this doesn’t necessarily evoke the unsettling sense of the uncanny. In crime fiction the setting of the novel, being a fictional approximation of a real world location, automatically sets up the preconditions for this ‘dread’ and ‘horror’ associated with the familiar. The location is a double of its real-world counterpart.

In the traditional literary, state-of-the-nation novel, the attempt at realism is, in all senses, genuine, but must fail because the novel is a novel, a written facsimile of that which it attempts to portray. The writer, who attempts to stick so closely to this realism, must do so by using literary tricks to evoke the senses and the memory, if anything driving the reader further from reality, while seeming to pull her closer. The crime writer strives for the uncanny from the beginning—something very close to realism, but knowingly different.

For a variety of reasons, often commercial, crime writers usually set the most significant events of their plots in altered versions of the real location. These decisions usually relate to the protagonist’s home, and the actual murder sites themselves. Real locations, especially homes and businesses, can be affected by their inclusion in a successful work of fiction—in the case that they are identified as a murder site this could have real negative consequences, partly because of the power of this uncanny effect. This *insertion* of murder sites into the real world map has a strange obverse parallel in the real world. Many infamous sites of real murders are *excised* from the community. Examples include the house at 25, Cromwell Street in Gloucester, where Fred and Rose West murdered many young women; 5, College Close in Soham where

Ian Huntley murdered two young girls in 2002; and 16, Wardle Brook Avenue in Hattersley where Moors' Murderers Ian Brady and Myra Hindley lived. This mix of the uncanny, crime fiction, real life crime, and location is brilliantly discussed in Gordon Burn's *Happy Like Murderers* (Burn, 1998). Burn has created a book about the real-life murderers Fred and Rose West, described by Joan Smith in *The Independent* as 'novelistic' (Smith, 1998). Central to Burn's narrative are the locations—Cinderford in the Forest of Dean, Gloucester, Pitville Park in Cheltenham, but most importantly of all, the house itself, 25 Cromwell Street. The house was worked on tirelessly by West, continually building, laying concrete, decorating and redecorating, so that he seems to have cared far more for it, and the tools he used, than for any human. Burn claims that West's last act before he gave himself up was to ask for his tools to be brought into the house.

To collect them and bring them into the house where they would be safe.

His house was his life. He just worshipped the place. He wanted his tools in the house where they belonged and where he was going he could picture them. (Burn, 1998, p.302)

All these real-life crime scenes have been bulldozed and the sites left empty.

Although the fictional insertion and the real-world excision are, in a sense, opposites, they have the same effect—they remove the site of the uncanny from society.

The uncanny locations of *Birdman* and *Sleepyhead*

Mo Hayder's *Birdman* (1999) is set in real-world London. Hayder gives enough information about Jack Caffrey's house, for example, to be able to narrow down the road that it is on. The garden goes right down to the rail track, and we are told that the young Jack and his brother Ewan wanted to build a platform in the tree. They argued about whether it should look south, 'so that he could see the trains swaying down the

line from Brockley station' (p. 55), or north, 'so he could look off down the track at the misty bridges of New Cross' (ibid.). This places the house most likely on Endwell Road or Millmark Grove, with Ewan's likely killer, Ivan Penderecki, across the railway line on the other of the two roads.

This level of detail, giving the reader clues, but not being specific, about a private address, is common in crime fiction. Similarly, we are given strong clues to the whereabouts of the 'Dog and Bell' pub where Bliss identifies future victims, and Harteveld's Regency villa. The Dog and Bell is given as an address in Trafalgar Road in east Greenwich (p.46) (there is a real Dog and Bell in Prince Street, less than two miles from Trafalgar Road). One victim asks Gemini to drive her from the 'north side of the Blackwall tunnel' to Croom's Hill, 'Blackheath end' (p.96). This again pinpoints Greenwich as the main location of the action, and identifies Harteveld's home, the murder scene, at the end of the journey, on Croom's Hill.

The nature of English society is too diverse to be represented by a narrative set in one city, and as a single novel *Birdman* doesn't address this. It does portray a great diversity of London society, from the very rich (Harteveld), through the upper middle classes (Maddox, for example, with his clubs and sailing), to the working classes around the Dog and Bell pub, and the criminal underclass, represented by Gemini. In this diverse society Hayder is also able to show the range of views from liberal (Rebecca, and to some extent, Jack, explored partly in their conversation in chapter 10) through to the misogyny and racism of Diamond.

Billingham sets *Sleepyhead* in London, brought to life by the use of real locations. Several scenes take place in the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, accurately described in chapter 1 (p.15) with reference to landmarks such as Queen

Square, Russell Square tube station, and Great Ormond Street Hospital. In fact, London's extensive network of hospitals forms an important backdrop for the characters and the investigation in this novel. Following the early scene at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery Thorne meets Anne Coburn at the Royal Free Hospital, and then they discuss the Royal London Hospital, where the surviving victim was first taken for treatment. This establishes the importance of hospitals and doctors very early on in the narrative. Thorne is described as uncomfortable in hospitals, inviting the reader to share that discomfort.

Hospitals and police stations are a natural location for the discussion of the Uncanny. Detection, especially detection from within an organisation like the police force, forces a person to live two separate lives. To deal with the uncanny everyday, the detective works within ritual and procedure, and this ritualization forces the outsider's perspective. Hospital workers deal with the same problem in the same way. Every day they deal with human bodies outside of the normal social sphere. They deal with bodies, not as human beings with intelligence and personality, but bodies as animals, as organic machines that go wrong and need fixing. The intensely ritualised and proceduralised world of the hospital helps to separate the two worlds and enable the workers to cope with this. In creating a world that is involved with death and sex, and is set in real locations around hospitals and police stations, Billingham intensifies the sense of the uncanny that the reader experiences.

As with the other crime novels discussed in this section, we are given several clues to Thorne's home address. After an evening dinner with the doctor, Anne Coburn, gate-crashed by her friend and Thorne's chief suspect, Jeremy Bishop, Thorne is described as taking a taxi to Kentish Town. The taxi journey is punctuated with

landmarks, including Archway Road, ‘Suicide Bridge’ (Archway Bridge, locally infamous for suicides), and Queen’s Wood before Thorne arrives at his flat.

Thorne’s flat is described as ‘tiny’ with cheap shag-pile carpet, neat and tidy except for the empty wine bottles. This description of the space plays again to the policeman’s abject nature. Thorne is an outsider, dealing everyday with issues that he finds appalling, and escapes into rituals and procedures that extend to his personal life.

The climactic scene of *Sleepyhead* plays out in a flat, which Jeremy Bishop rents for his son, James. This flat is inserted into a real location, described as ‘Easy to miss between a greengrocer’s and a shoe shop in a small street behind the busy Brixton Road’ (p. 356). This is typically both concrete and vague. Thorne, giving chase, drives down Acre Road, allowing the reader to follow his route so far. He gets pulled up for speeding just after turning onto Brixton Road, and then suddenly he’s at the address he’s looking for. We can immerse ourselves in the reality of ‘the busy Brixton Road’, imagining the flat just a few yards away, but we can never find it.

Neither *Birdman* nor *Sleepyhead* exploit Žižek’s observations about the eccentric locale discussed in the Introduction to this section. Even so, Žižek’s observations about the ‘specific communal identity’ hold just as true for London as for the less known settings used in contemporary novels. In fact, the novels do this despite their London setting. Neither build on the famous London landmarks that might be expected. Instead, they work with detailed smaller communities within the greater metropolis. Avoiding these landmarks, the reader might think that they could be set anywhere, but by being specific and concrete about their less celebrated locations, they draw us back to the reality of Britain.

7. Information Technology: first we practice to deceive

Introduction

In Section 2, communication technology was identified as the key factor in the size and shape of the predominant geo-political unit of any era. In *The Rise of the Novel* (Watts, 2015[1957]), Ian Watts posits several common elements in the development of communication, literacy, and the modern nation-state. The boundaries between nations, often disputed and changing over time, can be viewed through a lens of changing information technology.

Information Technology in the twenty-first-century removed limitations, which had competing effects: it made it easier for the state to send out its message, but it also made it harder for the state to control the messages that its members would receive. Early steps, such as the telegram and the telephone, enabled rapid communication, but in a limited, one-to-one way. As the century progressed this still had an impact as organised groups could then promulgate the information locally and by newspaper. Once mass media arrived with public radio and television, the opportunity for one-to-many communication changed things dramatically. Some states kept tight control of this initially (for example, in the UK, up until the 1960s, the only broadcaster was the BBC, the state broadcaster). From around the 1960s onwards, the increasing availability of one-to-many communication transcended these physical, national boundaries, and no longer reinforced the existing structures.

Information Technology and the crime novel

The novel was a form of literature entirely consistent with the Information Technology of the eighteenth-century (During, 1986). While it has reinvented itself continually, attempting to keep pace with social change over the following centuries, the difficulties in incorporating up-to-date Information Technology into a work of literature have

become greater over the last few decades. Information Technology now changes so rapidly, and changes society with it, that the lead-time for a novel from conception to final publishing can mean that its use of technology can seem out of date by the time it reaches the reader (compare this with the speed of change that will be discussed under Moore's law later in this Section).

Nevertheless, the pitfalls of failing to reflect significant social change of any sort, including technological, will result in a lack of realism. Sherez says

Most modern literary novels are not really that modern and, excepting the odd mobile phone, could be set in any decade of the second half of the twentieth century—but crime fiction has embraced technology and absorbed its narrative possibilities like no other genre. (Sherez, 2017b)

There are many examples of the importance of science and technology in crime fiction history. In Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes is conducting forensic science experiments when Watson first meets him (Conan Doyle, 2001, pp3-4), and in Edgar Wallace's 1905 story, *The Four Just Men*, Sir Philip Ramon is ingeniously killed by electrocution while using the telephone (Wallace, 2008). Modern examples will be discussed in the novels featured in the rest of this section: *The Intrusions* (Sherez, 2017a), *Steel Kiss* (Deaver, 2016a), *Sockpuppet* (Blakstad, 2016), and *Kill Process* (Hertling, 2016). The reason that crime fiction has embraced the technology may be related to the core of its social realism. If the reader is to believe in real characters solving real-world problems, then those characters have to behave authentically. Readers of crime fiction (and most specifically detective fiction) search for solutions and explanations; they are primed to look for unnatural behaviour. A character who looks something up in a book rather than on the internet, or is unable to contact a friend when social media is available, would be expected to have some sort of explanation, either character- or plot-based. There is no way out for crime writers

writing contemporary fiction. Other genre writers might concentrate on specific aspects of societies, making little reference to technology, but every aspect of crime is technology based. One solution, as noted by author Dan Fesperman in *The Huffington Post* is to avoid writing contemporary crime fiction (Fesperman, 2014). Fesperman's particular problem comes from surveillance, combined with modern software. First, he points to CCTV:

CCTV is everywhere now, especially all those locations you pass through when you're on the run— airports and train stations and even seedy bus terminals, gas stations, rest stops, convenience stores, fast food joints, ATMs (which you'd be a fool to use anyway)(...) (Fesperman, 2014)

He then he goes on to recognise the prevalence of higher tech:

And it's not just the government using drones. It's everybody and his brother, even in places as crowded as Manhattan. Most of them have cameras, and most of their operators are itching to post every last image on YouTube or Facebook, probably with an embedded message asking, "Would you like to tag our author's hero so that he may be immediately hunted down and killed?" (ibid.)

Fesperman's solution is to switch to writing crime and spy novels set in World War 2, acknowledging that you can't write a realistic contemporary crime novel without incorporating technology.

Technology since 1965 has followed an acceleration known as Moore's Law (or strictly speaking 'House's variation of Moore's Law') the first version of which was proposed by Gordon Moore in *Electronics* (Moore, 1965). This proposes that 'chip performance doubles every 18 months'.¹³ While this explicitly refers to the current method of delivering Information Technology, the silicon chip, the broad principle of

¹³ Here 'performance' means that both the speed and volume of information transfer capability doubles every 18 months, each step building on the last so that we have exponential growth.

accelerating technological change can be seen as starting much earlier in history. While the pace of change has been uneven, it is interesting to look back over the centuries: from word-of-mouth, to writing carried by foot, by horse, by pigeon, light signals, stagecoaches, canals, trains, the telegraph, the telephone, each new discovery building on the last and allowing improvements in transport and communication, either by speed, by complexity, or by volume. Moore's Law still holds in principle today, although the exact pace is a matter for argument, with some suggesting that the precise definition of Moore's Law means that it will inevitably slow soon (Simonite, 2016).

The substrate of this flowering of the Information Age is the Internet. The Internet allows globalisation on the current scale, and it is globalisation that undermines the localising nature of the nation. The Internet is also the perfect crime scene.

According to John Eck and David Weisbud, crime events occur in places where:

1. There is a motivated offender
2. There is a desirable target
3. Target and offender are in the same place at the same time
4. There are absent or ineffective 'intimate handlers'
5. There are absent or ineffective 'guardians'
6. There are absent or ineffective 'place managers' (Eck and Weisburd, 2004)

These final three 'absences' are defined by the authors. 'Intimate handlers' are responsible persons having direct influence over a potential offender; 'guardians' protect potential targets; 'place managers' control the places where crime takes place.

In the context of cyberspace all three "positive" conditions are met (motivated offender, desirable targets, in same place at the same time) all the time. And all three absences are met: offenders explore cyberspace alone, targets make uninformed

decisions without qualified guardians, and the vast majority of ‘places’ on the internet are uncontrolled.

This expands the world of crime in direct proportion to Moore’s Law. It used to be the case that crime, particularly violent crime, was a physical, local phenomenon, creating damage to the surrounding community, and investigated by local law enforcement. Improvements in transport, and basic communication (the telephone), expanded this somewhat enabling local criminals to leave the area and forcing law enforcement to cooperate beyond traditional boundaries.

It is worth stepping back a moment to look at the impact of these changes on one of the most common phenomena of crime fiction, the serious serial offender—most often a serial killer, but sometimes a sex offender. While it is the case that there are documented cases of multiple murderers (what in modern terms we would call serial killers) throughout history, there would appear to have been a large increase in such cases over the twentieth-century. The anonymity offered by modern life can be a result of densely-populated cities, and isolation and loneliness in the midst of large groups. These factors are strengthened by rapid communication, which enables people to experience virtual human contact (whether on television, or more recently on the internet). The rise of serial offending has inspired further technological advances in crime detection, such as DNA testing, and profiling.

The internet as crime scene provides a liminal space for transgression. While, obviously, criminal and victim are real people, living in real physical places, the criminal has no physical presence at the point where the victim is impacted. The ‘place’ that the crime occurs is virtual, and the jurisdiction responsible is debatable and complex.

In the following, I propose three different approaches to the successful inclusion of technology in crime fiction, giving examples of each¹⁴.

I will look at *the Intrusions* (Sherez, 2017a) as an example of the first strategy, Acceptance.

***The Intrusions*—A strategy of acceptance**

By taking a strategy of Acceptance of IT, the crime writer incorporates IT into the human story. The technology isn't the major factor in the story, but it isn't shied away from if it makes sense. One of our previous examples, Val McDermid's *The Mermaids Singing*, incorporated the latest technology in several places. McDermid mentions HOLMES, which is a real life staple of the British crime fiction novel (the Home Office Large Major Enquiry System), databases of car registration numbers (p.123/4), and statistical pattern analysis (suggested by Tony Hill as a way of trying to interpret the burn marks on a victim's body). The most advanced suggestion is the idea that the perpetrator might stave off the urge to kill again too soon by the use of advanced graphics software, videoing the torture of the victims, replaying it, and then heightening the impact with highly realistic graphical modifications.

The Intrusions is a more recent novel, featuring two police officers, DI Jack Carrigan and DS Geneva Miller, established in previous books in the series. It feels the pressure of modern technology more keenly than the earlier books. Sherez wrote on the *deadgoodbooks* website:

When I began to write *The Intrusions* it was a simple, serial killer story set in a backpackers' hostel in Queensway. But the

¹⁴ Originally I proposed four approaches, the fourth—Denial—being Dan Fesperman's avoidance strategy already discussed. This can hardly be added to the list of *successful* approaches. . A writer taking this approach will either find a setting that is far from contemporary society, choosing to write a historical or fantasy crime novel, or will simply ignore all but the most basic technology (the mobile phone, for example), and so fail to engage with social realism or significant current issues surrounding IT.

more I wrote, the more I realised I could not ignore technology and all its manifestations unless I was going to write what amounted to an historical novel. And I soon realised that far from being a problem, technology is a gift to crime writers. (Sherez, 2017b)

While technology becomes integral to Sherez's plot, it is completely natural. The plot is a typical revenge plot—a number of unconnected young people had happened to meet up when backpacking around the world and a young girl had died. Her brother considers that the individuals had been to blame for excluding his sister, who had learning difficulties, and decides to dispense his own justice. Sherez wonders how this would play out in the contemporary world, and writes the story consistently. The brother tracks his victims online. He suggests the Queensway hostel to them, and he bullies them anonymously and mercilessly online, pushing them to a point of desperation before he drugs and murders them. All these elements could have been played out in a different way if the book had been written in a different era. The technological techniques used, in particular the idea of RATting¹⁵, are common but relatively unknown among the general public.

Unlike crime fiction narratives that are more focussed on technology as the driver of the story, none of the main characters in *The Intrusions* are computer whizz-kids, with almost magical powers (so far as the mainstream reading public are concerned) over computer software and hardware. One minor character, the fifteen-year old Hugo, appears to be in this category, but his skills are opened up to the reader and demystified when he is taken in for questioning over the RATting of the most recent victim. This section of the book gives it its title, and shows the relationship of the state

¹⁵ RAT = Remote Access Trojan (sometimes A= Administrative, and sometimes T = Technology). These are a range of readily available computer virus tools which give the user access to, and effective control over, the victim's device (phone, tablet, notebook, desktop, etc). This process is known as RATting.

to the internet. Before Hugo's capture the Investigators only know that his account has been streaming video images of the victim Anna Becker. They are able to find his online name, PANOPTease, and that he is a compulsive "slave" trader.

The reader is shown how RATting forums work, and how aware the police are of them. They watch a screen full of victims, in real time, living out their lives unknowingly watched by cameras in their technology. Geneva Miller asks 'Why don't you stop them?' and is given an illuminating answer by cybercrime office DS Nielson:

Neilson laughed. 'It would require at least a week to hack even one account and trace it to a real-world address. It's too time consuming and as soon as we've cracked one system, the hackers will develop a better one. It makes more sense to watch what they're doing, learn their tricks and collect information. Everything you see is being recorded for later use.' (Sherez, 2017a, p.235)

Sherez is effectively showing us the internet as perfect crime scene, and demonstrating how the state has lost control. It can do little but monitor the situation, with no real hope of catching the criminals.

In this case, with a bigger crime connected, they decide on a sting operation and the workings of the darker technology are shown as they use the forum to contact PANOPTease and try to get him to buy access to two "slaves" by showing short clips of them (the women are actually police officers performing innocuous activities). He is naïve enough to give them information that allows them to find his address, but it isn't until they get there that they discover his age.

The 'incidental' exploration of the dark side of technology continues. The real murderer, Robert Brown, is not a technology expert—he is a Script Kiddie who buys basic off-the-shelf software and follows the instructions (often found on sites such as YouTube). He is not defined by his use of technology—it is a means to an end, and he has learned how to use it only enough to help him achieve his goals—but this approach

shows how easy the technology is to exploit. The traditional view of computer crime being carried out by criminal masterminds with extraordinary intelligence is shown to be false.

Social media use in real life is reflected here, too. Younger characters use it all the time, while the older ones are aware of it, and use it to a more limited extent. Carrigan gets the breakthrough clue to the case by scrolling through a victim's Flickr account where he finds over a thousand photos of her backpacking times. The photos, and the initial incident that triggered the murders, are across boundaries in South-East Asia, and specifically in Bali. The physical location of the first incident has two opposing implications. Without technology it would have been almost impossible for Brown to act on his desire for revenge; and without technology it would have been impossible for the police to spot such a geographically distanced location.

Carrigan attempts to access other social media accounts to make further connections, but they've been deleted. It is only by "traditional" police-work (looking through the photos one at a time) that he notices another victim in one of the photos and makes a critical connection. The incorporation of information technology, and its impact on communication, is explored further when Carrigan discovers the photograph was taken in Bali, and that they were there at the time a British girl was raped and murdered. He is able to by-pass the international boundaries by simply phoning the Bali police and asking about the case.

Steel Kiss—the focus strategy

The next technology-writing strategy that I want to discuss is Focus. A Focus strategy is one that concentrates on one particular element of technology. Unlike Acceptance, where the story is quite independent of the technology, but immersed in a technological

world, the Focused story is built around the technology so that without it the story would lose its impetus. In *Steel Kiss*, Jeffrey Deaver writes about a killer who uses the Internet of Things to commit murders (Deaver, 2016a). The Internet of Things refers to the way that many modern appliances—domestic, business, industrial—are remotely accessible through wireless connection to the internet. The ability to hack into an appliance gives the hacker some control over that object, and depending on its function, can give the hacker the ability to cause serious damage or murder.

The twelfth in his Lincoln Rhyme series, Deaver has no need to build characters or set up new scenes. In fact, the characterisation is quite functional with larger-than-life, easily recognisable templates. The setting is real-world New York with specific locations in the city providing a backdrop. *Steel Kiss* is a plot-driven crime thriller with little time spent on further character development, and a lot of focus on the idea of exploiting the Internet of Things to create murder weapons from everyday domestic objects. This double use of the everyday object as a weapon provides the perfect element of the uncanny.

Talking about *Steel Kiss* on radio, Deaver acknowledged that ‘My job really is to scare the socks off people’ (Deaver, 2016b). It is important that the technology he describes is believable, and in context. This means that the focus itself must be clearly and accurately described, and of enough interest to hold the readers’ attention for the whole book. It also means that the rest of the story must be technically accurate and that the technological environment is rich enough to sustain the focus.

Deaver has done a lot of research but doesn’t slow the pace of the story with technical exposition. At the start of the novel, he describes a death that looks like an accident, so that the reader is in a similar position to the police—uncertain as to whether a crime has taken place. In fact, the murderer is so effective at exploiting the technology

that he has to issue a statement telling the police that the deaths are his murders rather than accidents.

Because the main character, Lincoln Rhyme, is a scientist, his investigation into the killings gives Deaver the opportunity to inform the reader as Rhyme discovers more himself. He passes the information on to the police through his personal contact, Detective Amelia Sachs.

The Focus approach allows the author to concentrate research on a specific issue, not distracted by the complexity and interconnectedness of modern technology. Since the writer is aiming for a realistic assessment of contemporary society, the reader can be expected to have a practical/functional level of understanding—of social media, of the internet, of email, streaming, downloading etc. Writers, unless they have extraordinary knowledge of technology, can take their own, un-researched knowledge of the technological context to be similar to that of the reader.

Sockpuppet and Kill Process—immersion

The final strategy I'd like to examine is Immersion. A technologically Immersive crime novel puts the reader into the heart of the IT revolution. Typically the main character(s), and the criminal(s) are deeply immersed in the latest technology, which means that the writer has to have specialist knowledge, and be able to make that knowledge understandable and engaging to the reader.

Matthew Blakstad describes his main character, Dani Farr, in the *crimefiles* blog:

Sockpuppet's protagonist, the young hacker Dani Farr, is nobody's Miss Marple. She shoots from the hip, she's rude, abrasive, often arrogant to those who can't keep up with her technical brilliance. ... She's smart and remorseless and, most importantly, she has the techie chops to navigate her way through a series of crimes that are wholly digital. (Blakstad, 2016)

In fact, this description of Blakstad's Investigator is true of many more mainstream fictional detectives, from Sherlock Holmes onwards. It's critical to the genre that the detective has her/his own sense of right or wrong that may not always agree with the law (as discussed in the section on plot and the local enforcement of law). The writer has to pull the reader into the moral dilemmas that the detective faces, and pose ethical questions that face society.

Blakstad describes Dani Farr as a hacker, and to most people that would suggest a criminal, but Blakstad is using 'hacker'¹⁶ as a description of capabilities, not her job. In fact, she works for a small tech company, where she's creating her own version of Artificial Intelligence, which forms the basis of a social media chat room.

Blakstad's world is populated by those for whom technology is their livelihood and their passion. He goes much further than Sherez or Deaver. His characters spend all day, every day immersed in both using and shaping, and in turn being used by, Information Technology.

The plot of *Sockpuppet* is at the intersection between crime fiction, political thriller, and corporate espionage. Its relevance to state-of-the-nation is very clear, because it shows how intertwined these issues really are. The inciting incident of the novel is the state's intention to introduce digital identity legislation—requiring all citizens to sign up for a digital identity system in order to receive the benefits of the system. This relates to all the issues about nationhood that were discussed in Sections 2-4: the feedback between culture and legislation, the importance of communication technology, and the state's attempts to claw back local control over a geographical area

¹⁶ Hacker is a blanket term and there are many varieties. A common and useful classification by motivation can be found in Robert Siciliano's article *7 types of Hacker Motivations* (Siciliano, 2011).

against disparate online communities. Blakstad shows how much we should be concerned with all this by incorporating it into a political thriller, where digital identity legislation is the trigger for the crimes committed.

He writes completely in the jargon. This is post-modern, technologically astute writing, where the reader has to run (and possibly google) to keep up. Even the title, *Sockpuppet*, is internet jargon referring to a well-developed, fake, online identity, separate from the real world identity. There are two negatives to this approach:

1. It requires intensive knowledge and research on the part of the writer.

Overstating the capabilities of the technology in small, believable ways is not necessarily a problem, but going beyond what the knowledgeable reader sees as believable will seriously compromise the whole novel, as will small, real errors of understanding.

2. The readership of such novels can be limited. Characterisation may still be very strong, but readers must be prepared to engage with technical discussions.

A second novel in this category is William Hertling's *Kill Process*. Hertling doesn't describe himself as a crime fiction writer, but as a science fiction author, and a programmer. This shows in *Kill Process*, as it doesn't follow through on several crime fiction tropes. The novel hooks us in with a series of murders carried out by the main protagonist, Angie, a skilled programmer and analyst working at a high level in a social media company, Tomo, somewhat akin to the real-world Facebook. Although the murders she carries out use technology, in the same way that Deaver's killer does in *Steel Kiss*, this isn't a Focus piece of writing. In fact, we discover that Angie was in a seriously abusive relationship with her husband in which he isolated her and physically abused her until she deliberately drove them off a bridge, killing him and losing her

own arm in the process. She uses her role at Tomo to discover women in abusive relationships, and target and kill the abusers.

The murders become a secondary plot as she becomes disenchanted with Tomo's abuse of its position and figures out a serious way to create a new competitive social media organisation. She stops killing people because she simply doesn't have the time and energy while she goes through the process of developing her business.

Hertling uses all his technical and industry knowledge to describe the problems of setting up a tech company, both technical and business, and to make this part of the story both realistic and gripping. She doesn't stop breaking the law, but now, forced by the unethical business practices of her competitors, she breaks the law in less violent ways. When she needs more money she illegally hacks Tomo and creates a run on the bitcoin market, which enables her to generate enough cash to keep her start-up project going for a few more months. She hacks into Tomo's HR records to remove records of her signing a clause that would have prevented her from working for a competitor within a number of years of leaving the company. The corporate thriller element of the story comes back together with the serial killer element at the end when a hired assassin figures out her weaknesses and tracks her down. She hacks her own robot vacuum cleaner so that it responds to a specific frequency whistle. When she is tied down and tortured in her own home, she manages to whistle and the robot, pre-programmed to respond, heads into the room and shoots randomly, killing her assailant.

8. Five novels: Specific events and major themes

Introduction

In Section 4 the readers' expectations of the traditional state-of-the-nation novel (I have called these expectations the 'Classical' model) were compared to expectations of more contemporary novels that examine the society in which they are written (referred to as the 'Information Age' model), and it was noted that they had several things in common. Certain necessary characteristics of the Classical model¹⁷ were matched to the single element of Culture in the Information Age model.

There are clear differences between the stated requirements of the two models in this respect, most obviously the Information Age requirement that the localised issues grow out of the previously stated factors of jurisprudence, IT, and location, but also the Classical requirement that the issues should include those of social inequality, and should observe national characteristics.

In fact, the Information Age statements are intended to equate to a reframing that should coincide with the Classical model, where it is relevant to the observation of modern society. Each item will be considered in turn.

Social and political issues

The Classical model requires an engagement with a full range of contemporary social and political issues with the nation. The Information Age model only considers 'localised', 'current' issues related to jurisprudence, IT, and location. Here the notions of localised and jurisprudence narrow down the society under question to the nation, or

¹⁷ The need to engage with contemporary social and political issues, to highlight social inequalities and social change, and observe national characteristics as they relate to the current situation.

significant subset of a nation, that the Classical state-of-the-nation novel discusses. The Classical model specifies social and political issues, which is actually to say any issue that affects the nation at the current time. Jurisprudence, and location, cover a huge number of these same issues—anything to do with personal or national security, in particular—including any factor relating to boundaries, but there are other issues (for example education, health care, religion) that may not seem naturally to be included. The ubiquity and importance of communication, and the information technology that underpins that communication, ensures that all such issues are considered when they are current and relevant. The discussions in Section 3 suggest that changes in these factors are always associated with changes in information technology. This interpretation that allows the writer to engage with the issues in a contemporary, relevant way, engaging with genuinely current issues within the community rather than rehashing old arguments.

Social inequality

The second relevant Classical point is that a state-of-the-nation novel should recognise social inequality and change, in the context of the nation. This question of social inequality is again not explicitly addressed in the Information Age model.

Communication has significantly altered the levels of understanding around inequalities of all sorts in contemporary societies, and there are a number of competing issues around communication, the legal system, and inequality.

As experiences are shared on social media and other platforms, social inequalities become increasingly recognised. Experiences are shared, both in the knowledge that they provide examples of already acknowledged inequalities, and sometimes out of individual frustration. This latter mechanism can then generate a new awareness of existing, but previously unrecognised inequalities.

It is also fair to note that many commentators believe that technology is adding to the world's inequality. In their article *Is Technological Innovation Making Society More Unequal?*, Wim Naudé and Paula Nagler note that the UN Development Programme measures within-country inequality as being 'more unequal today than at any point since World War II' (Naudé and Nagler, 2016). While they accept that the main reason for this increase in inequality is 'policy and regulatory capture by and entrepreneurial elite', they then explore technological innovation as 'another possible cause.'

In particular, information and communication technology (ICT) advances—such as robotics, automated processes, machine learning, the Internet of things (IoT), “big data”, and artificial intelligence—are being blamed for making workers (primarily those with mid-level skills in medium-wage jobs) redundant.

These pulls, in both directions (recognition of inequalities, and generation of increased inequality), are taken up by many-to-many media outlets (traditional such as newspaper, television, radio, film, and new such as streamed content and social media) so that they rapidly become recognised issues in society. They are then debated in the context of necessary legislation, and further ethical and legal decisions made.

The argument is then, that all relevant issues of social inequality become social issues through their interaction with communication technology and the legal system.

National characteristics

The final point made in the Classical model is that there is a need to 'observe national characteristics.' The Information Age model doesn't ignore the importance of such observations, but it is based on a theory that these characteristics emerge through close communication and history (and that they often become apparent in the relationship between the society's ethical view on a range of issues, and how those views are

reflected in the legal system). Parrinder (Parrinder, 2006) believes that ‘novels are the source of some of our most influential ideas and expressions of national identity’, noting the close tie in between national identity and ‘its now rather unfashionable counterpart “national character”’.

The state-of-the-nation novel traditionally pays close attention to this, picking out recognisable stereotypes of the national character, often portraying them through the opinions they have on current issues. The Information Age model suggests that this explicit approach is unnecessary. By creating the conditions for observing society and its views on issues relating to IT, law and order, and location, the character of that society, and the things, if any, that might be considered to make up its national identity, will naturally unfold.

Social issues and the crime novel

The question of whether the crime novel is an expedient form for addressing ‘localised issues that are current in the society under scrutiny, growing out of the factors of jurisprudence, information technology, and location’ is still to be considered.

Reasons have already been given for considering the crime genre to be useful in analysing each of the elements in isolation. The question remains whether current issues are consistently raised within crime novels within the framework of these elements.

Knight is clear that not only does crime fiction raise these issues, but that it is fundamental to its mass appeal:

a genre whose effects and successes do not depend on profundities of style or moralising insight but which, rather, draws its popularity—and importance—from dynamic variations on compulsive patterns and from its own rapid responses to changing sociocultural concerns.’ (Knight, 2004, p. xii)

In fact, the third part of Knight's three-part work is all about crime fiction's continual renewal and diversification in the context of a changing society. He discusses the genre's recent concerns with debates on gender, feminism, race, urbanisation, the body, and many other issues.

Many crime novels do combat individual social issues, specifically targeting their characters or plots. Examples already discussed, include McDermid's *The Mermaids Singing* with its discussion of gender and sexuality. Deaver's *Steel Kiss* discussed in section 7 explores people with disability, and stars a detective paralysed from the neck down (and introduces a second significant character with a similar degree of paralysis), and in Hertling's *Kill Process* the protagonist, Angie, has been in an abusive controlling relationship, and subsequently lost her arm in dealing with the abusive partner.

One of the strengths of crime fiction already discussed, is its approach to providing as real a depiction of society as possible in which to insert the crimes that it introduces. It does this for commercial reasons, among others, drawing readers in to specific locations, and exploiting the opportunities for creating the uncanny *frisson*, but this also means it provides a backdrop of societal behaviour and organisation that reflects current issues naturally. Billingham's *Sleepyhead* creates a backdrop of hospitals within the British NHS system, and for reasons of accuracy has to depict the impact of poor funding and understaffing that is a dominant theme of British society and politics. Hayder's *Birdman* carries a secondary story, which follows through into the later novels, questioning how society should deal with child sex offenders. *Birdman* was published in 1999, a year before the events that eventually led to the introduction of the child sex offender disclosure scheme (often known as Sarah's Law) in 2011, and picked up on long term concerns that were often voiced in the media.

A further argument that supports the natural tendency of the crime novel to depict socially relevant issues, is that it is part of the appeal of the genre that it depicts events that shock the reader. In the last 25 years it would appear that explicit violence has become a commercial tactic—Amelia Hill’s 2009 article (Hill, 2009) quotes critics and writers in their belief that crime novels are becoming more graphic and that readers are demanding this change¹⁸. Chris Jenks defines transgressive as something that goes beyond boundaries of law or convention, something that violates or infringes. But he goes further than this; he points out that by this act, transgression holds up the law: ‘to transgress is to announce, and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention’ (Jenks, 2003, p.2). Crime fiction has always been transgressive, at least in the sense that it describes transgressive acts. It broaches taboo subjects (murder, sex crimes, child crimes etc), in everyday settings are a natural fit for crime fiction. To shock the reader requires the writer to depict familiar scenes in unexpected, and morally transgressive, ways. This in turn requires the events that take place to be relevant to reader’s society because in most cases the taboo is at the limits of the moral judgement of society.

9. *Conexus*: A conscious approach to the crime novel as state of the nation

Introduction

Conexus is a crime novel written to explore the conscious use of the genre as a form of social observation suitable as a contemporary form of the traditional state-of-the-nation

¹⁸ For example, Val McDermid is quoted: “There has been a general desensitisation among readers, who are upping the ante by demanding ever more sensationalist and gratuitous plotlines.” (Hill, 2009)

novel. In this section I shall consider aspects of the novel against the Information Age model already discussed, and in the context of the other crime novels analysed in this thesis.

***Conexus* and the importance of jurisprudence**

One surprising choice made in *Conexus* is that it isn't a police procedural. It has already been noted that the majority of contemporary crime novels (including *The Mermaids Singing*, *Birdman*, *Sleepyhead*, and *The Intrusions*) are in the police procedural subgenre, at least in the sense that the main protagonists are conventional police detectives working in a larger team of police officers. It was argued in Section 5 that this format, with its explicit involvement of state systems, is a particularly rich format for a potential state-of-the-nation novel to take. It enables the writer to show individual actors carrying out state policies of jurisprudence, while at the same time seeing the impact that this has on them as individuals. *Conexus* is explicitly not a police procedural, and law enforcement agents play a very minor role in the plot. The role of the detective is instead taken by a free-lance journalist, emphasising the importance of communication and the media and, moreover, a journalist who specialises in stories about the latest technology.

A major factor in this decision was that much of the crime carried out is around IT and computers, linking to the key factor about the importance of communication technology to the very concept of the modern nation. *Conexus* links physical crimes with on-line activity in a similar way to Sherez in *The Intrusions*. The serial killer researches and tracks his victims through complex IT systems, and the murders are able to take place across boundaries, both regional boundaries within England, and national boundaries. The killer has also been active, but his activities undetected, over a long period. This tends to detract from the value of the activities of the nation-state police

force, both in reality, and in fiction (where long passages about the workings of IT security code and its circumvention are not traditionally as entertaining as more physical description). This highlights a number of issues of contemporary jurisprudence: the difficulty of modern police forces in monitoring the activities of boundary-crossing criminals, the difficulties around awareness of crimes carried out online, and the current challenges around investigating historic crimes (crimes that have often been revealed as a result of improved communication among victims).

Such historic crimes sometimes appear to have been committed with the knowledge (if not the approval) of authorities (examples include the number of cases of paedophilia among priests, known to Church authorities, and cases investigated through police operations Yewtree, Ravine, and Hydrant, which exposed several cases of previous complaints against offenders being ignored). Crimes revealed many years after the fact, such as the Saville case (for a timeline see Halliday, 2014), may come from rumours released to the press, and the press having sufficient resources and interest to investigate, rather than through police cases. Another route is by police becoming aware of abuse as a result of a large number of victims contacting each other and then the police. Victims, and police, then make connections that had not otherwise been clear. In either case, the prevalence of information through mass communication is a major factor.

In *Conexus*, the historic crimes begin with a paedophile ring which includes a prominent businessman and politician, and also draws in other figures of authority. In one scene, survivor Tilly explains why nobody ever reported the crimes:

‘Fucking hell. Half the fucking police used to be there. Nothing you can do.’ The beer was calming her down. She sipped more and he steadied the can for her. ‘He knows everything. Big fucking brother.’

Real-life police operations, such as Yewtree, have included allegations against establishment figures including politicians and senior police officers. Knowledge of such operations and their revelations has a dual effect on victims—they may be more likely to come forward because they see something being done, or they may be less likely to contact police because they don't trust their involvement. In *Conexus*, the surviving victims of abuse at local Children's Homes have no trust in the police, which explains why they have not been involved before the main protagonist, Ainsley, is involved. Ainsley is tipped off to the abuse anonymously, and circuitously, by a survivor who believes he may be able to help her gain revenge.

The crimes take place over a period from 1996 to 2018, which enables the story to chart the different approaches to crime that are available over the period. The early murders take place in person. The murderer is excited by their very physicality. Later murders are sometimes by proxy or by automation, but the need for actual physical connection is never far away. Crimes of violence, and punishment for crime, are always fundamentally physical. I have claimed, in Section 5, that this is what underpins the importance of the legal system to the concept of a nation and its society, fighting alongside the specificities of location against the drive for globalisation of information systems. *Conexus* shows this tension over the period, with the murderer, Herrick Castle, torn between his desire for the visceral thrill of murder and his obsession with computers and following the apparently random connections that they give between people.

Herrick sets up a virtual community, which he thinks of as a nation, or republic, of like-minded members, who are all interested in death and murder. Describing how the community comes about he writes '*This is the start of the Deathdiaspora.net—a state of mind, a virtual nation.*', '*The Democratic, Libertarian, Republic of Death*', '*Not*

only do we have our own history, we are making our own history’, and *‘These are my people*’. These are all ideas that connect directly to the idea of nation discussed in Section 3. The members swap ideas and even swap murders. In the end, he manipulates these electronic connections to bring him back to the local area and physical, face-to-face murder, because his motivations connect him to his family, his childhood, and the local area.

Conexus and setting

Both categories of literature under discussion—the contemporary state-of-the-nation novel and the English crime novel—most often have their settings in large urban areas, and predominantly in London. The reasons for this have already been discussed, most notably that urban areas give a rich diversity of culture representing wide range of sections of society, and that the concentration of people heightens the effects of social issues (including crime) in large population areas, such as London. The downsides are that larger urban areas (cities) represent only a fraction of the UK population, and life there is not representative of the rest of the country.

Conexus starts with its protagonist about to move from London to a much smaller urban centre, the conurbation of Gloucester and Cheltenham, in a very rural part of England. This isn’t a retirement, although Ainsley can afford to retire, but a change in lifestyle prompted by the discovery that he has a daughter. It reflects a common practice in real life of moving from the capital, most often to regional cities, and most often to areas that are within relatively easy travelling distance of London (for example see the article *Number of Londoners abandoning capital hits 10-year high* by Booth and Barr, 2017).

There are few scenes in London itself—the opening chapter shows Ainsley in his house, and there are a few scenes with Chelsey in London. In each case, the location

is clearly set out: Ainsley lives in Neasden, and Chelsey in Hoxton (overlooking Shoreditch Park). Apart from London there are scenes in cities such as Manchester, Birmingham, Leicester, and York, as well as the main storyline taking place in Gloucester and Cheltenham. This variety of locations allows similarities and differences to be drawn between various large urban centres in England.

Gloucester and Cheltenham are chosen as the main settings for the novel because they form one large urban area (cut into two by one of the biggest transport/communication routes in England, the M5 motorway), lie within a very rural county, but have very different character and reputation from each other. Cheltenham (Cheltenham Spa) has a reputation for wealth and attracting the upper classes. It's probably most famous for its racecourse and the Cheltenham Gold Cup week. In contrast, Gloucester's background is that of a working city built up around the docks that serve the River Severn and its links to the Bristol Channel, the canal network, and to London. Gloucester is famous for its Cathedral and enjoyed a period of notoriety in the early 1990s as the home of serial killers Fred and Rose West.

There is a three-fold contrast here: Gloucester, Cheltenham, and the rural settings around them comprising of the Cotswolds (designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), and the Forest of Dean. This diversity of setting, which is fully explored in the scenes of the novel, allows a much more in-depth exploration of the breadth of English culture than a novel set in one city. These settings and the communication themes of the novel are also linked. Gloucester and Cheltenham are well connected to each other, by major roads and a train service, and to the rest of the country by the M5 and M4 motorways and the train services, which bring them into long-range commuting distance of London itself, as well as the River Severn.

Real locations are used throughout the novel. Ainsley's new house, in Churchdown, is on a real road in the town. The café, Slice, which is a key setting for several scenes is very specifically located at the corner of Via Sacra and Eastgate, just outside the main gates of the Cathedral. It is not a real café, but it has a very real location, physically in the centre of Gloucester life—commercially, culturally, and religiously. It is also within walking distance of the docks, which give Gloucester its individual character, and the railway station. The café provides a high technology hub for Ainsley's grandson, Sundance, to carry out his own investigations into the murders and the virtual trail that they leave behind, making it also a communications centre for the fictional version of the city.

This attention to the real-life detail of location is in part intended to enable an evocation of elements of the uncanny discussed in Section 6. This begins immediately in the novel with a scene (#1 Killing Helen) that involves a child's eye view of monstrous adults abusing children, followed by the involvement of the child, his murder of a young child, and his dismissive response to the acts around him. The use of children in this scene, combined with traits of sociopathy, link to the discussion around humans behaving in non-human ways discussed earlier (Section 6, p.356).

On p.65 of *Conexus*, Ainsley takes a detour walking from Slice back to his car, through the centre of Gloucester, to the setting of the notorious West murders—25, Cromwell Street. He finds that the house has been pulled down and the space between the remaining buildings landscaped to provide a cut through to the next street:

He stared across the land that used to be number 25.
 Wondered where the cellar had been, where the victims had
 been buried, how many were unaccounted for. He considered
 walking through, just out of curiosity. He turned back—it
 would have felt like walking across a grave in a cemetery—
 his earlier optimism dispelled, and he was a little ashamed of
 himself for searching out the road.

Ainsley's shame echoes that of the society that tore the building down and tried to forget that the Wests had ever been there.

Herrick himself is the 'other' that is close enough to humanity to scare us, but is somehow unrelenting and unstoppable in his commitment to objectives that seem inhuman to us. His goal seems to be to follow a certain thread of communication over the years and kill everyone who is unlucky enough to be caught up in it. He is often shown in unusual, and yet realistic, places. He frequents the homeless shelter and the Cathedral, and has found his way through underground passages in the city (that relate to some real life routes beneath Gloucester). He lives alone in the grounds of his father's large house and creates an underground space tailored for his interests in IT and murder.

The use of underground spaces in the novel is a physical manifestation of the worlds that live in parallel: the 'normal' world of English society, and the dark world of crime that carries on not just alongside, but interleaved with, the everyday. This shows explicitly the uncanny nature of crime fiction. Exploring parallel societies existing within one space is a recurring part of the novel. The virtual worlds of Herrick and Sundance (in particular), take place alongside the physical world; the worlds of vulnerable characters such as Hope, Elizabeth, Tilly, and Joey, carry on unnoticed by most people. The key characters in *Conexus* are the liminal ones, the ones that pass across the boundaries of these worlds. Ainsley and Herrick cross all the boundaries, their eyes open to each different world and its implications. Hope and Sundance have learned to pass between the worlds, too. Other characters are aware of some of the boundaries: the Rev. Steve forms a bridge between the vulnerable and the rest of society, Chelsey represents the large section of society that pass between the virtual and physical worlds with ease.

***Conexus* and IT**

Conexus is a novel structured around a series of murders carried out by someone with a deep knowledge of the virtual world and how to use it. Four of the main protagonists—Ainsley, Chelsey, Sundance, and Hope—are also IT professionals in some way or other, with Ainsley and Chelsey straddling the worlds of IT and media/journalism, reflecting the developments in society discussed in Section 7. Not all the characters have such a good understanding of technology—characters like Emily and Art only use technology on a casual basis, in the way that most members of society do. They are typical social media and one-to-one/one-to-many communicators. Others are vulnerable—the homeless and the victims of abuse like Elizabeth and Tilly—and make little or no use of the most modern technology at all. Elizabeth (the “fake Hope”) has to be contacted directly and physically by Hope initially and is then put in contact with Joe whose skills are sufficient to run a basic website and use email.

The variety of users and skills shown reflect the state of IT use in England. The state, and large organisations, find it convenient and effective to require the use of IT in many situations (for example the claiming of benefits, the payment of bills, and proof of identity) which further disenfranchise those people who most need support but don’t have the resources to engage with technology.

In Section 7, examples were shown of a number of different strategies that crime writers have used to establish different degrees of IT awareness in their novels. *Conexus* clearly engages with IT to a great degree and so it would be reasonable to ask which, if any, of these strategies has been adopted: Acceptance, Focus, or Immersion.

These strategies can be seen in increasing strength of adoption of reliance on technology for the plot, and assumption of technological knowledge by the reader. Although there could be exceptions, these strategies can be seen as nested. The

Acceptance strategy accepts that IT is a part of everyday life and incorporates it into plots where it seems that it would naturally be used in the real world. The Focus strategy also assumes a good general understanding of IT in everyday life, but makes a special case of one or two specific areas of technology. The writer might take extra time to explain in some detail technical aspects of IT that may be unfamiliar to most readers because they are critical to the plot and characters. The Immersion strategy would assume not just a general understanding but a very detailed understanding of many aspects of IT, and many of the characters would be expected to have this understanding as part of their professional lives. The impact of IT on the general population is also likely to be emphasised. In both books discussed under the immersion strategy—*Sockpuppet* (Blakstad, 2017) and *Kill Process* (Hertling, 2016)—the general use of IT is clearly linked to the plot, and the general public are directly affected by the work that the protagonists are involved in (different forms of social media in each case, but also political activism in the case of *Sockpuppet*).

The incorporation of IT into *Conexus* is intended to be organic, in the way of the Acceptance strategy, although the deeper understanding of IT shown by many characters may push it into the Immersion category. The use of IT by the murderer is seen to develop over the years with his need and the gradual improvement of the technology, but he never initially starts with the intention of using technology to murder—it is the best available solution for the problems he is presented with.

The use of specific technologies is prevalent. Many aspects of the Dark Net are discussed, including purchase of dubious (sometimes illegal) materials and hacking, specialist sites (so-called Gore sites) devoted to physical violence and death, different forms of hacking, identity changing, online stalking, and others. Any one of these, as a

major plot point, would tend to indicate the use of a Focus strategy, but the number of them suggests that this is an Immersion novel.

There are certain differences between the approach taken in *Conexus* and that in the other novels. None of the characters make their living as IT professionals, even though their understanding of the technology is critical to their work. They do not create code, or hardware, they simply use what is available as expert adopters. It could be said that Ainsley and Chelsey have a direct impact on the public in that, as journalists, they seek to explain the technology and its implications. Similarly, Sundance's original job was as a university researcher, and writing papers on the subject. Their jobs are chosen to emphasise the communication aspect of technology and that it has gone beyond the simple technologies of the past. The point being made is that anyone can make use of IT to some extent, but its potential has gone far beyond that of previous communication technologies so that the general user has no idea what they are involved in when they adopt various uses of the internet.

By following Herrick in his murders over a twenty year period, *Conexus* shows how the technology, and with it society, has changed over this period. He gradually learns how it enables him to cross national boundaries. His fourth murder, of Tony Kwok in Hong Kong, sees him use rather simple methods to kill the businessman from a distance, but this progresses to being able to contact an anonymous 'hitman' to carry out further murders, and finally to creating a dark net community that brings together many such people with similar interests. He sees this community as his true 'national' identity. They are a like-minded group with their own myths and aspirations that bring them together and give them common purpose as a society. This group, under the name *Deathdiaspora*, are outside their national laws, dealing across boundaries, but they always come up against the necessity for physical action within an acknowledged

jurisdiction, which makes them vulnerable. In this way, the novel sets out to show the tensions, for both law enforcement and law breaking, between location, IT, and jurisprudence.

***Conexus* and social issues**

Conexus was not specifically written to connect to any specific social issues as its main theme, other than the fact that it is a crime novel with a strong link to information technology. In order to explore the natural connections between crime fiction and social commentary, the aim was to write a crime novel that met the criteria of focus on law, setting, and IT, and to see to what extent it discussed issues that are considered of importance in English society.

It seems that by ‘brainstorming’ a list of issues first the writer is effectively neutering the value of the creative novel-writing process in exploring society for itself. The starting point for *Conexus* was the decision to show a serial killer’s progress over two decades. While this allowed me to show the progress of technology over the period, and how it had affected certain elements of society, it also limited the age range of my characters. The idea that Herrick was likely to have grown up with technology, rather than have already been an adult at the start of the period, led me to the decision that he would be a child at the start, and this led to the current issues around cases of historic paedophilia. As stories emerged about the progress of operations such as Yewtree (discussed earlier under jurisprudence), the decision to incorporate vulnerable children in Children’s Homes, and senior establishment figures, became an obvious reflection of real issues under discussion, and especially linked to issues of jurisprudence and social morality.

The natural flow of the story following an investigation into victims of the historic paedophilia also led me into illustration of the issues facing vulnerable people

under conditions of austerity. Ainsley has to engage with homeless people, alcoholics, and drug addicts who have been let down by the system. Many of these are suffering from symptoms of post-traumatic stress from their childhood abuse. Key characters here include Hope, Elizabeth, Joey, George, and Tilly, all of whom were victims of child abuse, as well as minor characters such as Glen (in Chapter 3), a veteran living on the streets, and Lee (Chapter 8), Tilly Carlin's pimp.

Here two issues come together very strongly: the fracturing of society into rich and poor that has always been an issue in England, especially in relation to the class structure; and the more recent impact of a political strategy of austerity.

In England in 2018/19, the intertwined concerns of immigration and Brexit are big political issues, so it was surprising to me that they didn't have more of an impact on the novel. They are mentioned twice. Norman Castle, Herrick's father and local MP, is described from Chelsey's notes:

Plenty of charitable connections but he's in bed with the more acceptable right-wingers—pro-hard-Brexit groups and such, and rumoured to have connections to the more neo-nazi outfits. (*Conexus*, p. 158)

This simply shows a commonly held view among the liberal anti-Brexit faction, that those in favour of breaking ties with Europe are often tied in to more extreme right wing groups¹⁹. The second occurrence is when Micky Wilson walks around Gloucester Cathedral:

Makes him proud to be British. Tanya wouldn't approve, he knows that. She's anti-Brexit. Anti-British is how he sees it, but they'll sort that out when he finds her. (*Conexus*, p.179)

¹⁹ Articles such as Polly Toynbee's *A right wing cult is driving Brexit Britain towards the cliff edge* explore this connection (Toynbee, 2018).

The vote on Brexit did not split, as might have been expected, on party lines. Traditionally the nationalist, Little Englander, approach has been associated with the political right—the Conservative Party and those further to the Right. In fact, many supporters of the traditional Left—the Labour Party—also voted to leave, representing an anxiety about the impact of immigration on jobs, and the media representation of the EU as taking away British ‘sovereignty’. Micky represents this more underprivileged class of voters.

This lack of space for such an important issue to the UK may reflect an important fact about society. Outside of the main cities, particularly London, many people don’t see much impact on their day-to-day lives. They engage with the political issue when confronted with it, and when national newspapers report on it, and they will have formed an opinion based on their usual news outlets, but for most people they will only really feel the impacts of the issues when the final event really takes place.

10. Summary and conclusions: the suitability of the crime novel as state-of-the-nation

In this thesis, I have covered a very wide range of subject areas because the objectives of my thesis began with a very broad subject, that is to say the state of the nation. I began with the idea that the traditional structure of the state-of-the-nation novel was inconsistent with the twenty-first-century nation. I re-evaluated what the nation is and what it has become, within the context of literature, concluding that a contemporary approach to commentary on the nation must explore four key areas, under the headings Boundaries, Communication, Violence and the Legal System, and Culture:

Boundaries: It shows how the competing factors of local order and global communication are influenced by the geographical specifics of location and setting.

This includes how the state attempts to renew itself through its boundaries; i.e. how it deals with the margins of society, outside of the mainstream economic and social classes that have been in existence;

Communication: It explores how information technology is changing society, pulling the members away from the traditional factors that cohere them into a nation. This includes the individualisation of media outside of state or societal control;

Violence and the Legal System: It specifies the importance of the power structures enforced by the state through legal codes, and explores how they hold communities together; and

Culture: It considers current affairs and issues in society. These issues might include specifics on matters of both state and culture such as class, distribution of wealth, the economy, education, entertainment, the environment, foreign policy and defence, gender, health, immigration, and race.

This model, which I have referred to as the Information Age model, highlights the need to understand the impact of communication and technology on society. My claim is that modern IT has a globalising effect that is attempting to pull nations apart, and that this is counteracted by the demands of the physical. Violent crime is still a local phenomenon, requiring physical proximity, and the state systems that deal with such crimes are local. This tends to hold the nation together.

These competing factors confirm Bhabha's recognition of the importance of boundaries to the modern nation. The nation, according to Bhabha, is continually changing, redefining itself according to modern myths, always aiming towards a vision of the future that is defined by stories of the past, but never getting there.

The final element of the model is the importance of culture—the current affairs and events of society that result from the continually changing boundaries. It is these

issues that have traditionally been the focus of the state-of-the-nation novel. The new model recognises their importance but also that the rapid changes in society need an approach that look underneath them, too, at the boundaries, communication systems, and legal systems that give rise to them.

This analysis led me to the crime novel as a genre that dealt, by its nature, with violence and the legal system, but also that I have argued has embraced issues of Information Technology, and which deals with people and events on the boundaries of society. I have written *Conexus* as an example of how a novel in this genre, that foregrounds IT, can naturally portray society and explore significant issues that it faces.

In *Conexus*, I have deliberately chosen elements of the novel to illuminate the factors discussed. I found as I progressed that boundaries and liminality fit well with the concerns of crime fiction. Specific, real locations draw the reader in, and the activities of criminals and detectives take place on the constantly evolving edges of society. By adopting a real-world approach in a contemporary setting, I found that, like Sherez (Sherez, 2017b), I felt compelled to incorporate a deep level of Information Technology into the story, as well as including characters that were affected by many of the ongoing social issues of the day (discussed in section 9).

To conclude, this critical analysis has set the scene for the novel *Conexus*, explaining the background to its approach in exploring the use of the crime fiction genre as an appropriate vehicle for the state-of-the-nation novel.

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