



***THE
SOMMERVILLE
CASE***

Julien Evans

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For Annabel

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Also by Julien Evans: Fiction:

Madeleine's Quest
Chalk and Cheese
Flight 935 Do You Read?
The Damocles Plot
It's Not As Simple As That

Non-fiction:

How Airlines Fly
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CHAPTER 1

MY NAME IS HARRY CHADBAND. Most friends call me 'Chad'. My ex-wife calls me other names but I can't repeat them here—you might be of what they say is a sensitive disposition. That's my second ex-wife, of course. My first ex-wife doesn't call me anything on account of she's no longer with us. She was killed in an RTA. The driver of an artic was texting his mate and not looking where he was going and drove 40 tons of truck into my first ex-wife's sports car. He came out of prison a while ago. He came to see me to apologise. I wouldn't say we were friends but he phones sometimes to ask how my son is.

As a kid our son used to get a bit muddled. To him I was 'Chaddy'. He's over twenty now, Malc, and never gets muddled up these days, so now I'm 'Dad'. We get on well, which is just as well since he works for me. He gets on better with my second ex-wife than I do. Just to let you know—I wasn't cheating on my first ex-wife when I met number two. We'd already split up. I was sad when she got killed.

I run Arrow Tec Investigators. It's my own business.

We're not huge. Besides me and Malc there's Penny. She does all the admin stuff, sometimes in the tiny office we rent in Leighton Buzzard, but usually at home. She's a single mum with twin daughters eight years old. Age-wise Penny's exactly halfway between Malc and me. Malc says if I've broken up with Suzie I should ask Penny out but I think she fancies him. I don't ask her about her private life cos it's none of my business. Malc probably has—he's more direct than me. Her twins are fantastic, really gorgeous. Rachael and Katie. They'll cause lots of trouble when they're older.

Malc's got a girlfriend called Anne-Marie. She's a black girl, beautiful but a bit full of herself. She runs her own chain of cake shops. She calls them 'patisseries'. The cakes are nice though, especially the Viennese slices. Malc lives with her in her nice big house. He's got his own flat but he rents it out. I pay him a good wage but the rent from the flat helps quite a bit.

I started Arrow Tec four years ago with the redundancy money I got when Holmyard Electronics booted me out. I worked in the research labs, processing statistical data from experiments in stuff like electron orbital distortion in pseudo-aromatic conductors. No, I didn't know what it meant either though my job was pure number-crunching. Boring, but it paid okay.

After Holmyard I found another job soon enough, doing statistics for the Home Office. One statistic I noticed was the amount of money the police spent on overseas investigations, much more than doing the same work in Britain. The police often seemed to use British private companies for abroad stuff. The fees paid were very

generous, taxpayers' money of course, but perhaps it was easier than dealing with foreign police forces and investigation companies.

I happened to get personally involved in one particular case. I won't bore you with the details but I was in a team sent to Slovenia to look into a money-laundering scam. It wasn't difficult to winkle out the bad guys. We set a trap and they dived right in. So I thought, I could do this myself and charge the Home Office less than they were currently spending.

So that's how Arrow Tec was born. People don't use the word 'tec' these days, meaning 'detective', but they used to. I think it sounds cool. The 'Arrow' bit came from the name of my plane. I spent a chunk of my redundancy money on a Piper Arrow. It's a bog-standard American spam can but it's a good way of getting round Europe independently of the airlines. It's basically a Cherokee but with a bigger engine, extra fuel tanks and retractable landing gear. It can take four adults and their bags and fuel for a four hour flight, say around five hundred miles with decent reserves. I've got an Instrument Rating, which means I can legally fly on the airways in all weathers and use the big airports if I have to, just like the airliners.

My Arrow is based at Deansfold, half a dozen miles north of Aylesbury. The airfield was built during the war and abandoned by the Ministry of Defence in the 1960s. Most of the airfield is derelict now but part of one of the runways has been resurfaced and some new buildings and hangars put up for people who want to base their planes there. My plane is registered as Golf Tango Whiskey Whiskey Whiskey. It originally belonged to a

bloke who made a lot of money setting up websites, which is where the 'www' bit of the reggie comes from. I get lots of jokes from Air Traffic Control about 'I'll have a double when it's your round' and stuff like that. They say 'double' rather than 'treble' cos usually planes identify themselves on the radio using their last two letters. So my plane is 'Whiskey Whiskey' to ATC.

Whiskey Whiskey is two-tone blue with silver trim. Very smart. It's got an autopilot so flying it is easy. I do about 200 hours in it each year, partly work and partly fun. It's not cheap to run but the dosh comes out of the business account. Even the fun stuff is 'legitimate expenses' when I do my tax returns, as in 'fact-finding tour' or 'client meetings'.

A lot of my work is abroad now, mainly Europe but sometimes further on. Last year I had to go to India to investigate a dodgy politician. He had been awarding contracts funded by foreign aid to people willing to give him a kick back. I also did a job for a rich Russian, watching what his brother was up to in St Petersburg. I had to spend a lot of time in the five-star Florentina hotel on the river bank, all expenses paid. I've stayed in worse places. It was too far to fly in Whiskey Whiskey so I took the airlines, first class of course.

My next job is closer to home, France in fact. The client is Cynthia Sommerville, a posh lady who lives in Great Witham, a little village near Banbury. Her husband, Hugh, spends a lot of time in France and Cynthia wants me to find out what he's doing there. Reading between the lines it's what the Frenchies call 'cherchez la femme'. Cynthia obviously suspects he's doing more for international

relations than he's supposed to. Apparently he's a construction manager of some sort. They're tarting up a golf course near Sainte-Maxime on the Riviera and he's in charge of the project. So I'm flying Whiskey Whiskey down there in a few days. I've got accommodation booked in a hotel in Saint-Maxime. I'll hire a car when I land. Using my usual discreet methods I'll find out whether Hugh Sommerville is being a good boy. Or not.

I might take Penny and the girls to Sainte-Maxime with me so they can have a little holiday—she deserves it. Also Penny speaks good French, which might come in handy. If there's a prob getting accommodation at short notice I'll let them have my room and I'll find somewhere else to stay. I probably won't need Malc but if I do he can fly out on the airlines himself. He's involved in another project at the moment. He's good with computers so he's helping to set up a vetting program for a security company in England. He also helps me with my music website, which I'll tell you about in a minute.

Despite the world's financial problems we're doing okay at Arrow Tec just now. I might even have to take on another person to help with the workload. I've actually had to turn potential clients away—not a smart thing to do if you're trying to establish a reputation. There's an ex-copper I know who would fit nicely into our set-up.

Cynthia Sommerville was very persuasive. She was one of the clients I thought I'd have to turn down. She offered to pay more but that's not the way I operate. She'd come to the office to ask me again. It went something like:

'I'm really sorry, Mrs Sommerville, but I don't think we have the capacity to take on your case at the moment.'

'If it's a question of money—'

'It's not a question of money.'

She nodded. 'I see.'

'There are other companies who do what we do,' I said. 'I can put you in touch with one of the more reputable ones if you like.'

'Yes, maybe that's what I'll have to do. It's quite important. And sensitive. I can't remember if I told you before but Arrow Tec was recommended to me by a friend you did some work for.'

'Who was that?'

'Marjorie Entwhistle.'

'Ah, yes. I'm glad everything worked out well for her.'

'You saved her marriage. Possibly her life.'

I nodded. Cynthia looked up at me. She was sitting at my desk and I was standing by the window. She looked different from the first time I met her. Posh clothes and so on like before but a bit wearier this time. A very good looking lady but . . . not a happy one.

I sighed. 'Look, Mrs Sommerville—'

'Cynthia.' She smiled. It was the smile that did it.

'Give me a day to think about it . . . Cynthia,' I said. 'If I can rearrange things to fit you in I'll give you a call.'

'I'd be so grateful, Mr Chadband.'

'Chad.'

She held out her hand. 'I'll look forward to your call.'

As it turned out another client cancelled his contract a day or so later so I phoned Cynthia to say 'yes'. I discussed it with Malc and between us we came up with a work plan. I wouldn't be tailing Hugh Sommerville every waking hour in France so if I took my laptop I could do

other work while I was there. Cynthia was happy to let Penny and the girls have my room with her paying but I said no, just pay for me wherever I happen to be staying myself. She seemed to be grateful for that.

At least my divorce settlement is sorted out so now there's more time available to do other things. It's a big worry off my mind. My second ex-wife's declared intention was to take me for every penny I'd got. I think she even scared her own solicitor with her . . . what's the word? Rapacity? Rapaciousness? I think you know what I mean.

I had to admit to my affair with Suzie, which is why things didn't look so good during the hearing, especially as the judge was a woman herself. In my defence I said my second ex-wife had begun to try to control my life and I'd got fed up with it which is why I found another lover. My second ex-wife then launched into a tirade which surprised everyone in the court, including the judge. Luckily she did not share my second ex-wife's vindictiveness so I wasn't cleaned out.

Also my second ex-wife has no legal claims on any profits I make in the future. At the moment Arrow Tec is my main source of income and is doing well. But my music website is making a profit too. It started as a hobby but now I'm running it as a business. It's called eXeFo, with the 'X' and 'F' as capital letters. The guy I bought Whiskey Whiskey from helped me to set it up as part of the deal.

The website name is a clue as to how it started. On some music tracks with looped chorus endings the fade-outs finish too quickly. So what I do is to use my music processing software on my computer to sample the

repeated bars before the fade and then reloop it more times. Hence Extended Fade-out, or XFO. I play keyboard in a band called 'Rollback'. You won't have heard of us but we're quite well known in the Vale of Aylesbury area. We mainly play oldies from the sixties and seventies but sometimes we throw in our own stuff. For rehearsal and recording we use a studio built by Ron Kennedy, our lead guitarist. He converted an old barn on his property. When we rerecord oldies I do the mixing on my computer. We do it all legally, of course. We pay our dues to the copyright owners.

Download sales of our eXeFo versions are picking up nicely. Our eight-minute version of 'Suspicious Minds' sells pretty well. The twelve-minute version isn't so popular. Obviously some folk think you can have too much of a good thing.

This eXeFo stuff is relevant to what I'm telling you about Arrow Tec cos it also works as a cover. If I'm snooping around I can bluff my way out of a tricky situation by making up a story and giving any challengers an eXeFo business card. As in:

'Why were you taking my photo?'

'Apologies, chum. I'm actually trying to get a shot of the building behind you. It'll be the artwork for one of our download compilation albums.' Actually, with my OmniVis phone this particular problem shouldn't arise. Maybe I'll give you more details later.

So, the website's doing okay. Besides the extended tracks I'm also recording my own music and messing around with it. I manage to flog a few of my own efforts. If the website really takes off I'll have to think about how

much of my time goes to eXeFo and how much to Arrow Tec. I like doing both.

CHAPTER 2

AT LAST! Sunshine! We've just burst out of grey cloud into blue skies. We all look out of the windows. Below us is southern France. There's another layer of cloud below but it's scattered so you can see the ground in the breaks. In fact on our left side is Montelimar, on the Rhone river. It's a good landmark cos the river splits in two just west of the city then joins up again a bit further south.

We left Deansfold around 10 o'clock this morning UK time. Although it's early August the weather was grim—windy, rainy, low cloud, more like late October. We were on instruments a couple of minutes after getting airborne. I flew manually for a while for practice then plugged the autopilot in. It's got a speed lock for climbing and descending as well as a height lock for level flight so it takes most of the workload. I can't feed the nav system into it so I have to tweak the heading bug when necessary to follow the yellow line on the GPS display. It's not difficult really.

Penny is sitting in the copilot seat. She's not bothered about flying Whiskey Whiskey herself so when she's in

the plane she's usually happy just to watch the world go by and take photos. Today we've been in solid clag most of the time so she's been reading her Kindle—a book about the suffragette movement, I think she said. She's not really political, though. Feminism isn't high on her list of priorities. Sometimes in Whiskey Whiskey Penny does the radio but it's not strictly legal as she hasn't got a rating. I don't think anyone's too bothered about that. As I told you before, she speaks good French, which is really handy cos in France ATC tend to use their native language at the smaller airports, and some of the bigger ones too. You seem to get better service than if you speak English.

Rachael and Katie are in the back seats. They've been watching a DVD with their aviation headsets plugged into the player adaptor. I've built in a toggle switch so they can talk either to each other or to us over the intercom. It's spring-loaded to the 'off' position so we don't hear them laughing if they're watching comedies.

We took a detour to cross the Channel at Dover rather than a longer crossing from Worthing to Le Havre. In a single-engined plane you don't want to spend a lot of time over water in case the engine fails. We wore lifejackets as a precaution. Plus, I've got a life raft which inflates itself if required. Our cruising height was Flight Level nine zero—that's 9000 feet on the standard altimeter setting, so even if the engine had quit over the Channel we'd probably have made it ashore.

From Boulogne we routed down the west side of Paris for a landing in Orleans to clear Customs and Immigration and refuel. Penny's fluent French was very helpful for

dealing with officialdom. We had a nice lunch at the airport then set off again. The weather was a bit better but above two thousand feet we were back in cloud. So it was back to the Kindle and the DVD for my passengers and minding the shop for me. The wind was abeam so our groundspeed was a knot or two below our true airspeed after allowing for drift. Not too turbulent, though.

But now the sun is streaming in. The Kindle and DVD have been switched off and Penny and the girls are taking more interest in the world below. I'm glad that the weather forecast was correct—the prediction was that we would clear the front in this region. It means I can stick with plan A, routing to Marseille and then east along the coast to La Môle, the airport tucked into the mountains a bit to the southwest of Sainte-Maxime, which is just across the bay from St Tropez. If the weather was crap down there I'd have had to do an instrument approach into Cannes for landing, which would have added complication and expense.

As is often the case, something happens to you in your day to day life which triggers an idea for a song. Today's weather, for example. The theme could be 'Out of the grey, into the blue.' It could be a romantic thing or a general feeling. Or the pessimistic opposite, 'Out of the blue, into the grey.' So the song could start sad and end happy. Or vice versa. Or happy—sad—happy. Or sad—happy . . . you get the idea.

I take my phone out of my pocket and make a note of the new theme. I'll do a bit more work on it when I've got some free time. But hang on a minute. Hasn't someone already done something like this? Yes, of course. Mick

Jagger and Keith Richards. 'Blue Turns To Grey'. Great song. I would need to make sure my own effort was sufficiently different.

'Whiskey Whiskey, volez directement Sierra Tango Papa,' we hear in our earphones, bringing me back to the task in hand.

Penny thumbs the transmit switch on her control wheel.

'D'accord, directement St Tropez,' she replies.

It's ATC clearing us direct to the St Tropez VOR, which is a radio beacon. It means we don't have to go all the way to Marseille before turning east. That'll save another few minutes and a bit of fuel. The cloud's gradually thinning out and I announce to my passengers that whoever spots La Môle airport first wins a 10 euro note.

'Which side will it be on?' asks Katie.

'Could be either,' I tell the twins. *'Depends on the final routing.'*

'Just remind me of the plan for the rest of the day,' says Penny.

'Well, hopefully the hire car will be ready for us to pick up,' I say. *'They said they would leave the paperwork with GenAv, the handling agent. As soon as the plane is secured we'll drive straight to Sainte-Maxime, to your hotel. I'll drop you and the girls off then go on to my hotel. It's only a couple of hundred metres away.'*

'I hope your hotel is as good as ours. I still feel guilty that you're paying for it.'

'No need. I got a special rate.' Not true, I had to pay full whack but Penny has earned a bit of a treat for all the work she's done for Arrow Tec and I don't want her to feel uncomfortable.

'You're starting the surveillance job tomorrow?' she asks.

'Yeah. I'll go over to the golf club tomorrow and take a look around. I've seen some photos of Hugh—Cynthia's husband—so hopefully I'll spot him on the site.'

'What exactly is he supposed to be doing there?'

'Site Construction Manager is his official title. They're doing some sort of extension and refurbishment of the hotel and club house and Hugh is running the show.'

'Whiskey Whiskey, dites-moi quand vous voulez descendre.'

'D'accord,' replies Penny to ATC. Then she flicks her transmit switch to forward intercom, so I can hear what she's saying but the twins can't.

'So Cynthia thinks Hugh is playing away from home,' she says.

'She thinks Hugh found a girlfriend soon after he started work at the golf club,' I tell her, also using forward intercom. 'He was spending most of his time here and only getting home once or twice a month.'

'So what made her suspect?' asks Penny.

I grin at her. 'Female intuition, she told me. Is there such a thing, Pen?'

'Oh yes, deffo. I knew my own husband was finding amusement elsewhere even though he was trying to act normally. He was surprised when I challenged him cos he'd taken such pains to keep his affair under wraps.'

'Didn't you once tell me you knew his mistress?'

'She was one of my best friends. I never suspected it was her. She was better than Angus at hiding things.'

'So when you found out—'

'She got expelled from the sisterhood.'

'Serves her right. Did you get your revenge?'

'Didn't need to. Angus dumped her. Then he tried to get back with me.'

'And you replied . . .'

'I told him I would cut off his balls with a bread knife if he ever set foot in my house again.'

'Ouch!'

The GPS says we're thirty-seven miles west-northwest of the St Tropez VOR, which means about thirty to run to La Môle airport if we want to make a direct approach. There's hardly any cloud around now so there's a good chance of getting straight in. I ask Penny to get descent clearance.

'Whiskey Whiskey, pouvez-vous accepter Victor Fox Romeo?'

Penny looks at me quizzically. I nod.

'Oui, monsieur, c'est bon pour VFR,' she transmits.

VFR means visual flight rules. It means we have to take responsibility for traffic separation and terrain clearance ourselves. I'm happy with that.

Marseille ATC clears us to descend without restriction. I bring the throttle partly back for a cruise descent and I remind the twins to tell me about any planes they spot that I haven't seen. The rate is one euro per plane, I tell them. Overflying airliners don't count.

'Suppose I see a plane and tell you but you've already seen it but haven't told us,' says Rachael.

'No payment.'

'But suppose you haven't really seen it but you're just pretending so you don't have to pay.'

'You'll just have to take my word for it.'

I wait for another comment challenging my integrity but all I get is: 'Okay.'

I'm the first to spot the runway as we fly over a crest but I won't spoil the fun for the girls. The airport lies in a valley ahead and just to the right of the nose. Over the forward intercom I say to Penny:

'Tell them field in sight. Requesting visual approach right hand patten for runway two four.'

ATC instructs us to contact La Môle and Penny repeats the request on the Tower frequency.

'Whiskey Whiskey, affirm, annoncez right base.'

Well, it's nice that the 'right base' bit is in English—I know what that means! It's the part of the circuit pattern just before turning onto final approach.

I knock out the autopilot, bring the throttle fully back and push the prop lever into fine pitch.

'I see it!' Both the girls call out at the same time and Rachael points out of the window as the runway slides past on the right side.

'Okay, five euros each,' I announce over the full intercom.

Penny twists round in her seat. 'Didn't you see it before Katie?' she asks Rachael. 'It was on your side.'

'We saw it together.'

'I just knew to look out at the right time,' says Katie.

Penny turns back again. She looks at me and smiles. 'Another "twin" moment,' she says mysteriously over the forward intercom.

'What do you mean?'

'I'll tell you later.'

I shrug. 'Okay.'

Then over the full intercom I say: 'Thank you for helping me spot the airport, girls. Now, quiet please, everyone, no chatter, so I can concentrate on the arrival and landing.'

Penny reports our position and I drop the landing gear. I ask my passengers to make sure their belts are tight for landing and do the checklist. It's a bit bumpy now in the lee of the hills as I bank right onto final, but the viz is excellent, even though I've got the sun in my eyes.

'Whiskey Whiskey, final,' transmits Penny, pronouncing the word in the French style.

'Whiskey Whiskey, permis d'atterrir, vent deux sept zero, quinze.'

Penny acknowledges and confirms the landing clearance to me. 'Wind two seven zero, fifteen, they said.'

'Yeah, I got that.'

It's about seven knots of crosswind, not too bad.

My landing's not bad, even though I say so myself.

'Why did the right wheel touch the runway first?' asks Katie as we taxi in towards the general aviation parking area.

'Crosswind from the right.'

'Okay.' Luckily she doesn't require more enlightenment about crosswind landing technique so my weary brain is relieved of a minor burden.

Penny's French is helpful as I organise fuelling and tie down. It's best to at least partly fill the tanks so condensation doesn't build up inside them while the plane's parked. Penny helps me put the cover on and secure the straps. It protects the engine and the cabin from the elements. The tie down straps attached to

anchor points under the wing will stop Whiskey Whiskey being blown away in a strong wind.

On Penny's mobile we summon the GenAv agent to pick us and our bags up and within a couple of minutes we see the Citroen MPV heading towards us. The driver helps me load the bags into the boot and we drive off to the terminal, me glancing back to check that we've put Whiskey Whiskey to bed properly.

CHAPTER 3

MY HOTEL'S OKAY, the Ferréol, not too expensive, so Cynthia will be pleased. It's a Novotel and it's half way up a hill. My room's on the fourth floor. It's got a view of the bay with St Tropez on the other shore. Penny and the twins are in the Hotel Allegro, closer to the centre of town. We all had dinner there last night then I walked back to my place. We've fixed it so that Penny can use the Nissan hire car when I don't need it.

Penny and the girls are going to spend the day settling in and perhaps sunning themselves on the beach for a while. I'm just finishing my breakfast then I'll start getting on the Terrasse Golf Club from the internet. I've already checked out CWC before I left England. That's Carding Wells Construction, the company Hugh Sommerville works for. There's nothing special about them as far as I can make out. Cynthia previously told me that Hugh's been working for them for them about eight or nine years, usually in the UK but sometimes abroad, like this job. Besides a room at the hotel, he's apparently got a flat in Sainte-Maxime, which Cynthia has stayed in

once or twice when she's been visiting him. She couldn't tell me the address of the flat but she remembered it was on the other side of the town from the Terrasse, half way up a hill.

The first thing I needed to know was details of Hugh's mobile phone. After Cynthia gave me the number I used the Fone-Watch app on my own phone to locate Hugh's phone. Nothing doing. Of course you need the person whose phone you're tracking to allow Fone-Watch to interrogate it for the system to work. The default mode on most phones is 'permission denied' so it requires a positive input from the phone's owner to allow access, which Hugh obviously hasn't done. That doesn't mean he's got something to hide, of course. It's just as likely he's had no particular reason to override the default.

No prob. There are other ways of solving the problem which don't require the phone owner's compliance. There is an organisation that specialises in phone location using triangulation. In a nutshell, the organisation uses equipment that measures distance and bearing of any mobile that's switched on by processing its response to signals sent to the phone from nearby transmitter masts. The system is used by police forces and security services around the world. I'm not going to reveal the name of the organisation or how the system works as those of us who have recourse to it have been asked to keep this info out of the public domain, for obvious reasons. So I'm going to refer to it as PTS, for Phone Tracking System, but that's not its real name. I'll be able to use 'PTS' to check where Hugh's phone is any time I want.

There was a delicate point in my negotiations with

Cynthia. Sometimes you have to be careful what you say:

'Are there any . . . special instructions . . . when I'm watching him. What should I be looking for?'

But I quickly found out Cynthia is not the sort of lady to beat about the bush.

'It's another woman.'

'Right.' Surprise, surprise.

'I suppose you're doing that all the time,' said Cynthia.

'It's not unusual.'

'I suspect it's someone he's met down in Sainte-Maxime. I'm pretty sure he's been . . . how can I put it . . .'

'Offering her more of himself than a gentleman should,' I offer.

'Quite.'

Cynthia called me again just after breakfast for an update and I told her what I was planning. The conversation moved on to practicalities and then, almost as an afterthought, she told me she was flying out to Geneva so she might get to see me in France.

'Will you come down to Sainte-Maxime, then?'

'No, that wouldn't be wise, in case Hugh catches sight of me. I've got to spend a day or two in Geneva but if it's not too difficult to arrange I'll try to get down to St Tropez for a break before I go back home. I could meet you there.'

'That would be nice. Are you working in Geneva?' My question was more to do with showing an interest in the customer rather than needing info.

There was a pause. 'Yes, sort of.'

'Okay.' I didn't need to know more.

Another pause. 'You do police work sometimes, don't you?' asked Cynthia.

'Yeah, sometimes.'

'Well, that's what I'm doing in Geneva.'

'You're not a police officer though?'

'No. I work as an interpreter. Have you been following the Reinier Mentinck case?'

The name rang a faint bell. 'Remind me.'

'He's a Dutch official.'

'Yes, there was something about him in the news. Can't remember exactly what.'

'He's been kidnapped by a terrorist group.'

'Ah yes, now I remember.'

'Anyway . . . I have to . . . no, it's not relevant to what you're doing for me. It's not important.'

'Okay.'

'So, where was I? Oh yes, if I can get down to the Riviera I'll drop in and we can meet up. Your PA's with you, isn't she?'

'Yes, and her two kids.'

'Great. I'll take you all out for dinner.'

'No, I'll take you out. I'll pay for dinner out of what you're paying me.'

A laugh came down the line. 'Fair enough.'

'Do you want me to fix accommodation for you in Saint Trop?'

'Better leave it just now in case I can't make it.'

'Okay.'

We finished the call and then I set my little brain to dealing with more immediate matters. Like the Site Construction Manager at the Terrasse Golf Club and his

alleged floozie. The PTS indicated Hugh Sommerville's mobile was at the club so that's obviously the place to start the investigation.

The Terrasse is a nine hole course—there's not enough level ground between the hills for a full-sized course. Par 34 the website says. That means I'll get round in about 50. You're right—I'm crap at golf. I didn't bring my own clubs cos we were a bit limited for space in Whiskey Whiskey, four of us plus bags. I'll hire a set of clubs when I get there. It's only a mile or so to the golf club from my hotel, a gentle climb most of the way so I'll walk it for a bit of exercise.

The course is laid out roughly northeast-southwest in a sort of valley. The website photos show picturesque mountains all around. The hotel and clubhouse are at the southwestern end of the valley at the end of the access road. As you approach the premises the hotel stands to the left of the clubhouse, which is a separate building. The hotel's not that big, thirty-two rooms according to the website. It used to be a country house of some sort apparently, three storeys high. The clubhouse looks more modern in design. I note the extension work being done on the hotel at the end away from the clubhouse. At the moment the new walls have reached just above ceiling level on the ground floor. On the website it says they're going to just about double the hotel's capacity. Obviously golf's becoming a big thing round here. I've heard it said that Saint Max is the poor relation of St Trop, but what I've seen so far looks pleasant enough, except the roads are clogged with traffic. But that's probably true of every seaside town in the world during the months of summer.

Perhaps the Terrasse extension is part of a local strategy to tart up Saint Max so it can compete with its more upmarket counterpart across the bay.

During my walk to the club I gave some more thought as to how I was going to play this job. Basically there are two approaches. I've heard them called overt and covert. In my own mind it's Close In or Remote. Close In, you make actual contact with the target. You invent some credible story as to why you're in the area so they don't realise they're under surveillance. This method gives you the advantage that you don't have to worry about being seen by the target and you can engage them in actual conversation. On the other hand you have to put a lot of effort into keeping your cover intact. On one case I bugged it up purely by getting a couple of details wrong. Besides damage to my reputation I also got a couple of broken ribs when the target chose a robust way to show her displeasure—the lady had a couple of large chaps give me a pasting. To rub salt into the wound (or in this case the bruises) the client refused to pay.

The Remote method of surveillance avoids the problem of blown cover and being beaten up by the target's stooges. But of course you can't talk to the target so you lose out on information and you have to be careful that if you are spotted it doesn't look like you've been watching them.

For Hugh Sommerville I think do a hybrid. I'll pose as a holiday maker coming to the club for a casual game now and then on an ad hoc basis. If I need background, Penny and the twins are my holiday companions. But I won't try to get close to Hugh. I'll bump into him 'accidentally' at the

club once or twice but away from the club I'll stay out of sight. Cynthia says he's got a room in the hotel so all I need to do is discreetly follow him if he leaves the premises. If his floozie also stays at the hotel it might make it more difficult to keep tabs on them.

I check in at the clubhouse Reception. There are a few other people in the room in small groups. At the desk a pretty dark-haired girl smiles at me.

'Bonjour, monsieur.'

'Bonjour, Mam'selle. S'il vous plaît, puis-je parler anglais?'

'Of course. How may I help you?'

I tell her I phoned earlier to book a round of the course and sort out club hire.

'Ah, yes, Mister Chadband. We have arranged everything for you.' She picks up a walkie-talkie and speaks into it in French. A male voice replies through the speaker.

The receptionist smiles at me again. 'Marcus will bring you your clubs in a minute. Are you playing with a partner?'

'No, I'm on my own. Can I take a look around before I play? I'd like to see the hotel in case I want to stay here sometime in the future.'

'Of course. Just come back for your clubs when you're ready.'

'Play with us if you like,' says a voice behind me. I look round. There's a couple of chaps sitting at a table drinking coffee. One is a heavy set man, paunchy, grey hair, ruddy face, looks late-fifties. His mate is younger, fortyish maybe, thinner in build.

'We're starting in about ten minutes, when we've finished our coffee,' says the older man. His accent is northern, Yorkshire perhaps. 'You're welcome to join us.'

I grin at him. 'Yes, that would be great. Thanks very much. But I have to warn you I'm no ace with a golf club. You might get a bit impatient when I keep missing shots.'

'You can't be worse than me,' says the younger man. 'Ten years I've been playing but I never seem to get any better.' Another northerner by the sound of it.

I hold out my hand. 'Chad.'

'Mike,' responds the younger man, getting up from his seat and shaking my hand.

'Vernon,' says the other, struggling to rise. He's obviously not the most mobile of men. I motion him to stay seated.

'Thanks, fellahs,' I say. 'I just want to take a quick mosey around. Never been here before. That okay?'

'Fill your boots, lad,' says Vernon. 'We'll set off when you're ready.'

I nonchalantly wander out and turn right towards the hotel, walking past the main building towards the new construction area. There are half a dozen men wearing hard hats working on the building. A cement mixer is rotating in one corner, one of the workmen staring mindlessly into its mouth. Two others standing on the scaffolding are laying out what looks like electrical cable. I walk round all three sides of the site. One or two of the men turn to look at me but no-one challenges me. There is no sign of Hugh Sommerville. Obviously I can't ask anyone if he's around cos they'd want to know why I'm asking.

I retrace my steps and turn into the lobby of the hotel. The place is in good nick as far as I can tell, nothing out of the ordinary, modern furniture. I smile briefly at the young male concierge then turn left to enter the corridor that will lead to the extension. Set in the wall at the end is a large window. Presumably the wall will eventually be knocked down when they join the old and new parts of the building. Through the window can be seen the work in progress.

I turn to go back to the lobby and happen to notice the sign on the door of one of the nearby rooms. 'Directeur de Construction'. There's no name to go with the title. The door is closed. I resist my temptation to see if it's unlocked. I call Hugh's mobile number and hear it ringing from inside the office. If he answers it I'll walk quickly away and say sorry, wrong number, quietly of course so he won't hear my voice through the door. That way it's unlikely he'll phone back. But Hugh's phone soon switches to voicemail so I ring off again. So either Hugh's in the office and not answering or he's somewhere else and has left his phone behind. This is not good news. It could mean he's got another phone that I don't know about and which I can't trace. I make my way out of the hotel again, muttering curses.

Back in the clubhouse my new friends are getting ready for their game. My set of clubs is brought to me by an Arabian looking chap with a wide grin.

'Merci, Marcus,' I grin back at him.

'Pas de quoi, monsieur. Enjoy your game.'

Besides my clubs, the Terrasse has supplied us with trolleys, which we now trundle out to the first tee.

'Perfect day for it,' says Mike, looking up at the cloudless blue sky. 'No wind.'

'Aye, you can't blame the weather if you play bad,' responds Vernon.

We've decided we'll just do nine holes, then have lunch at the club.

Vernon is the best player, close to par most of the time. Mike and me usually need an extra shot or two. He's probably a tad better than me.

I get some background as we go round. My guess about accents was correct. My new friends both live in Roundhay, 'the poshest part of Leeds' according to Vernon. There's apparently a club called the 'Likely Lads' that they both belong to. It's a sort of social thing. Besides golf, club members do stuff like fishing and shooting and riding horses. A bit non-PC—no women allowed, though Mike says once a year they arrange a posh dinner for the womenfolk. A sub-group called the 'Elland Boys' support Leeds United football club. Vernon's an Elland Boy but not Mike.

'Me dad used to take me to the footie in the Don Revie days,' says Vernon. 'Best team in the country in them days. They'll be back up there one day. What team do you follow, Chad?'

'Tottenham.'

'Well, someone's got to,' laughs Mike.

'Poor sod,' agrees Vernon with a wheezy chuckle. 'What's your line of work, Chad?'

'Music,' I say. I give them a spiel about eXeFo and Rollback.

'That's interesting,' says Mike. 'Music's my thing as

well.'

'Yeah?'

'Yes. I'm a professional player.'

'What instrument?'

'Cello and string bass. I sing a bit too.'

'What sort of stuff?'

'Anything. Freelancing for orchestras. Jazz bands. I teach as well,' says Mike.

'He's bloody good on the bass,' says Vernon. 'I've heard him do some great solos in the jazz clubs.'

'Well, if I need a non-electric bass on my own recordings I'll know where to come,' I tell them.

We play another hole or two. Apart from an embarrassment in a bunker I don't disgrace myself too badly.

'So, how many Likely Lads are there here now?' I ask.

'Five altogether,' says Mike. 'The others have gone sailing today. We'll meet up for dinner later. You're welcome to join us.'

'Where are you staying?'

'San Trop.'

I nod at them. 'Thanks for the offer. I'm staying in Maxime with my friend but if I need a night off I'll give you a call.'

I hand Vernon one of my eXeFo business cards and he gives me one of his. It says: 'Vernon Mackelden, Senior Editor, Sentinel TV Productions'.

'What sort of productions?' I ask him.

Vernon scratches his face. 'Current affairs mainly. Historical things too.'

'So you as editor sort out which material goes into the

programmes,' I say.

'Aye, pretty much. I started off as a reporter but now I spend most of my time slouched in front of a computer. Which is why I'm the shape of a sack of spuds.'

'Who broadcasts your stuff?' I ask.

'The people who pay us to make the programmes, basically. The BBC, commercial channels, anyone.'

After the ninth hole we amble back to the clubhouse. Vernon has the best score—he went round in 39. Mike took 46 and me 48. Could've been worse. That bloody bunker!

We hand over the trolleys and my clubs and head to the restaurant for lunch. No sign of Hugh Sommerville. I can't risk another nose around. People might get suspicious.

We talk a bit more about music while we eat. Mike's been properly trained but tells us the bass playing brings in more money than the cello. I admit to them that the furthest I got with proper lessons was Grade 6 on the piano. We discover areas of overlap. Like me, he goes in for composer competitions.

'Got to the long list on the Chinavia once,' I tell them. Chinavia is an aerospace company. You've probably flown in one of their Galleon airliners. There's thousands of them in service. Chinavia sponsor music competitions and other artistic enterprises. And a football team whose name I refuse to mention because they're a London rival of Tottenham.

'Long list. That's pretty good,' says Mike. 'What category?'

'Retro pop.'

'Not bad. That's a tough category. I've gone in for Orchestral Jazz a few times. Got a recommendation twice. Do you sell your stuff?'

'Bits and pieces. You?'

'Ditto.'

I stray into hype territory, disguising my real work by making out my main source of income is working as a session musician. If only—those guys make serious dosh.

'Sorry, Vernon, this must be a bit boring for you,' I say.

'Well, I've heard it from Mike a few times. I don't mind. I like jazz myself, the big band stuff.'

My mobile pings. It's a message from Cynthia. I make my apologies for rudeness and read it.

*Arriving geneva tomorrow. Probably be there 2 days.
Hotel room booked in st trop after that. More details later.
Cyn*

I send 'OK' then rejoin the conversation. Vernon and Mike are still talking about work.

'How long?' Mike's asking.

'Five years, maybe six,' says Vernon. 'Maybe do part time for a while.'

I gather they're talking about retirement dates.

'Do you enjoy producing programmes?' I ask Vernon.

Vernon pouts and nods his head, wobbling his jowls. 'Aye, most of the time. But I might go back to reporting before I pack it all in, just for old times' sake. There's fun to be had sniffing out a story. Takes me back to when I were a lad.'

'Did you cover any famous stories?' I ask.

'Aye, one or two.'

'Which ones?'

Vernon pouts again. 'I was in Westminster when Thatcher got booted out. Diana's funeral. The Tsavo kidnap.'

'Tsavo,' says Mike. 'Couple of tourists, wasn't it? Kidnapped in a game park.'

'That's right. Kenya. Two Brits got nabbed by a gang of Somalians. Sentinel sent me and my team out there to get the details.'

'I remember,' I chip in. 'The UK government sent in the commandos to rescue them.'

'Aye,' says Vernon. 'Good guys—no losses, bad guys—three killed, the rest captured. Result.'

Vernon's words trigger a thought in my mind. Something Cynthia mentioned.

'Wasn't there a high profile kidnapping in Geneva recently?'

Vernon nods. 'Yeah, some official, wasn't it? Got nabbed by a jihadist group or something. I think they've still got him.'

'What did the kidnappers want?'

'Can't remember,' says Vernon. 'I'm not covering that story.'

'Where could I find out about it if I wanted to?'

'Google will probably tell you all you need to know. You interested?'

'Got a friend who works in Geneva,' I say evasively. 'Just idle curiosity.'

Vernon digs out his own mobile. 'Hang on a mo, Chad.'

I'll text Zainab. She's one of the seniors at Sentinel. Ask her to send me a summary from our data base.'

'It's not really that important,' I say.

'Rubbish,' says Vernon. 'You've whetted my reporter's appetite.' He starts tapping away on his phone. Mike and I rerun the morning's golf expedition, discussing mistakes and frustrations.

My Yorkshire friends have room for raspberry savarin but I'm trying to stick to my diet so I nibble Brie and crackers with my coffee. The conversation stays with golf and then wanders into sailing. Vernon and Mike will join the other Likely Lads in a couple of days for a sail round the bay. They invite me along.

'Very kind. Might take you up on that. Have to ask my friend, of course. She might have other plans.' And I might have to spend the time spying on naughty Hugh—if I can find him.

Vernon's phone pings. 'It's from Zainab. She's sent me Sentinel's report on the Geneva kidnap. Do you want me to Bluetooth it to your phone?'

'Okay.'

CHAPTER 4

WE PART COMPANY outside the clubhouse. The Likely Lads have offered me a lift back to Saint Max but I've turned them down. I tell them I want to walk back for exercise. Which is partly true. Actually my plan is to scout around for a vantage point near the club where I can keep an eye on things.

I walk down the access road about 100 metres, waving to Vernon as he drives past. Then, on the right side I notice a footpath going off into the trees. There's an old wooden signpost with a few numbers in faded paint pointing up the mountain. There's maybe half a dozen buildings dotted around in the wooded area above where I'm standing, small houses or chalets, perhaps holiday homes. In front of one or two of them I can see cars parked so obviously there must be some sort of road access to them going up another part of the mountain.

The path zigzags up the mountain and after a short distance the trees are dense enough to block off the view of the houses higher up and the golf club below. It's a warm afternoon and I find myself sweating as I gain

altitude. Occasionally I take a swig from the bottle of water I'm carrying. No-one's passed me on the footpath. After ten minutes or so I find a spot which might be suitable for my purposes. There's a break in the foliage and I glimpse the golf club a couple of hundred metres below.

I walk downhill away from the path a few metres, picking my way through the undergrowth. Yes, this should do nicely. There's a wide tree trunk which would shield me from the eyes of anyone walking along the path to a certain extent, but not completely. For future vigils—if I need them—I'll bring along a folding chair and an artist's kit. Anyone passing by taking an interest in what I'm doing will see me dabbing a paintbrush on a canvas depicting the landscape below. Actually it's a good subject for a painting. Below and beyond the Terrasse Club you can see the town of Saint Max and the surrounding hills, the sea and in the far distance across the bay the St Tropez headland. Glittering water, lots of sailboats and motor yachts criss-crossing. My skill at painting just about matches my skill at golf so any casual observer won't be too impressed by my efforts.

For now I'll hang around a while and see what I can see. I find a fallen tree trunk to sit on and bring out my 12x pocket binocs. I scan the Terrasse hotel and construction site. There are now only two men working on the site as far as I can make out. Perhaps the others are taking an afternoon coffee break. It's a sultry afternoon and everything's quiet and peaceful.

I put down the binocs and find my phone. I open up the document Vernon beamed to it.

Sentinel Report 127/13

Kidnapping of Reinier Mentinck

Overview

On the evening of 16 June Dutch official Reinier Mentinck was apparently abducted from his hotel room in the Parkinson Hotel, Geneva. The following day a communication was sent to the Swiss authorities stating that Mr Mentinck was being held by a group calling themselves Al-Montaqan. They demanded the release of certain named political prisoners currently being held in captivity in Israel and a ransom of \$2 million.

The Kidnap

Late in the evening of 16 June Mr Mentinck's wife (Sabine) at home in Amersfoort, Holland, answered a call from her husband's mobile phone. A voice which she didn't recognise told her that Reinier had been captured by a group of political activists and she should notify the local police and await further instructions.

Sabine Mentinck immediately phoned the Parkinson Hotel to check the veracity of the group's claim. The hotel confirmed that Mr Mentinck was not in his room. Hotel staff also reported the disappearance to the Geneva police. Subsequent calls made to Mr Mentinck's phone were not answered. Tracking procedures were initiated

and the phone was found apparently abandoned on a train travelling from Geneva to Frankfurt, Germany.

Reinier Mentinck

Mr Mentinck is a Dutch official working in the Department of Defence in the Dutch Government. He is employed as an advisor specialising in weapon development monitoring procedures. Previously he served as an officer in the Royal Netherlands Army, reaching the rank of Major.

The Kidnappers

The group claiming to have captured Mr Mentinck styles itself 'Al-Montaqan', an Arabic word meaning 'avenger'. Very little has been discovered about this group by western security services. The group seems to be a recent formation. Its website was set up earlier this year, featuring mainly anti-western slogans and calls to jihad. There are no photographs on the website though there are hyperlinks to political activist groups located in Iraq, some of whom are known to be associated with terrorist organisations. The Al-Montaqan website hosting service is based in Pakistan. The only contact with the kidnappers is via this website.

I've been glancing up from time to time to check what's happening down below. There are now four men at the construction site, three wearing yellow hard hats and one bareheaded. I pick up the binocs.

It's him! The one without the hard hat is Hugh, talking to two of the others. You can see the hotel car park and access road from my vantage point but I didn't notice any vehicles arriving or leaving. Hang on a minute, though. Was that pale blue Volvo estate there previously? Did Hugh arrive in that?

The men are well out of earshot of course so I can't hear what they're talking about. Once or twice Hugh points to something on the site and the workmen nod. I presume they're talking French. It's unlikely they would bring manual workers over from England. I'll check with Cynthia next time she contacts me.

There's nothing suspicious going on down on the site and after a few minutes Hugh walks away and out of sight. To his office? Off for a tryst with his girlfriend—if she exists. Who knows? I watch for a while longer but there's nothing more to see. The men are back at work. I put the binocs away and look at my phone. Where was I? Oh yes . . .

The Iran Sanctions Summit

Mr Mentinck was attending the meeting as a representative of the European Strategic Defence Organisation (ODSE). The meeting had been convened to draft a new agreement between the western powers and the Government of Iran in regard to alleviation of sanctions as a response to the cessation of further nuclear fuel enrichment programs in Iran.

Security at the Iran Sanctions Summit

Security at the summit was provided by the Swiss Police and a small contingent from the French Counter-Terrorism Force. Apart from the Mentinck kidnapping no other major untoward incidents were logged by the police during the ten days of the summit meeting. There were a few non-violent political demonstrations outside the government department building in which the summit took place. Representatives at the meeting all carried photo-biometric ID cards.

Security at the Parkinson Hotel

Several summit representatives stayed at the Parkinson Hotel. Security was provided by the presence of three Swiss police officers maintaining surveillance outside the building. There was no security presence inside the building.

The Validity Assessment

Western authorities are still trying to determine whether the kidnap is a political or criminal incident or both. As stated above, the Al-Montaqan group is seemingly a new entity. There is indecision among the security services as to whether the political motive is genuine or merely a cover for criminal activity. The Pakistani government has been cooperative but has stated that they have not yet been able to establish the identities of the persons who set up the website. The website cannot be shut down as currently it is the only channel of communication between

the kidnappers and the authorities.

Reward for Information

The Dutch Government has offered a reward of 100,000 euros for information leading to the capture of the kidnappers and release of the hostage. Several responses have been received but none so far has been deemed to be genuine.

Response of the Authorities to Deadlines

The initial deadline for compliance with the kidnappers' demands passed on 31 July. The kidnappers threatened to kill their captive unless their demands were met by 31 August. They also increased the ransom to \$3 million. Negotiations are apparently still ongoing. The authorities have requested the media to tone down reporting on the kidnapping so that—

The phone rings and the screen changes to the 'accept call?' page. It's Penny.

'Hi,' she says. 'Where are you?'

I tell her what I've been up to, instinctively looking round about to make sure nobody's earwiggling but there's no-one there. I reverse the questioning.

'We've been very busy,' says Penny. 'Sunbathing and shopping. I'm so glad we came down here, Chad. It's just lovely. I feel my batteries being recharged. The girls seem to be enjoying themselves too. They've met some other Brit children to play with on the beach. I'm sitting in a

waterside cafe overlooking the beach, drinking a white wine spritzer and reading my Kindle. Luxury!

'Sounds okay.'

'What's happening tonight?' asks Penny. 'Are you eating with us? Do you want me to book a table? There's a nice looking fish restaurant on the front near our hotel. What do you think?'

'Sound great. Seven thirty?'

'Not later than that, Chad. I don't want the girls staying up too late.'

'Fine, Pen. Sort it out will you—hang on a tick—Hugh's just showed up again. Call you later.'

I ring off and swap phone for binocs. Hugh is back on the site, talking to one of the workmen. There's a brief conversation then Hugh smiles and nods. He turns round and walks over to the car park. I was right—he's getting into the blue Volvo. The car backs out of its slot and drives away along the access road. Well, I can't follow him this time of course but I least I know what car he's driving. Shame I can't quite make out the number. I'll try to get it next time and see if that gives me any useful info.

Right, what does the PTS say? Has Hugh taken the office phone with him?

CHAPTER 5

'YOU CHOSE WELL,' I say.

'Best place to eat in Sainte-Maxime, I was told,' says Penny.

'Damn well ought to be at these prices,' I observe.

'Cheaper than St Tropez by all accounts. Anyway, my turn to pay.'

'No, Arrow Tec will pay. Legitimate business expenses.'

Penny smiles at me. 'You're not so bad as a boss.'

'You're fired for insincerity,' I grin back.

'What does Baleine Blanche mean?' Katie looks at her mother quizzically. It's the name of the restaurant we're dining in. Katie is sitting opposite her sister, between me and Penny. I can tell which twin is which cos Katie's hairband is sparkly whereas her sister's is plain red. Red for Rachael, see. Otherwise they're wearing identical pink dresses and silver shoes.

'White whale,' answers Penny.

'Why?' asks Rachael. 'Are there any white whales round here?'

'Not that I know of,' I chip in.

'Don't be silly,' says Katie. 'Of course you don't get whales in the . . . in the . . .

'Meditrain Sea!' say both girls simultaneously. It's uncanny, I think to myself. Like the two twins can read each other's thoughts.

'It's Mediterranean,' corrects their mother.

'What does that mean?' asks Katie.

'It's just a name, stupid,' scolds Rachael.

'Well, maybe it's not just a name, stupid,' fires back Katie, sticking out her tongue.

'That's enough, girls,' says Penny. 'Katie is right. It's not just a name. It means "in the middle of the land"'.

'What land?'

'Lots of lands.'

'What lands?'

Penny lists the countries bordering the Med but she's only halfway through when the twins' attention begins to wander. I briefly remember the days when Malc, my son, went through the asking-questions-but-not-listening-to-the-answers phase that all kids go through.

A movement catches my peripheral vision. Bingo! It's Hugh Sommerville! With a woman! It looks as if they've just come into the restaurant. They're both dressed smart casual. They're being shown to a table by the M^{aitre} d'.

Close up, Hugh looks just like the photo Cynthia gave me. Mid-thirties, I'd say. Cheerful, roundish face. Full head of brown hair. Hint of a double chin. Perhaps a tiny bit overweight but generally a picture of health. Open neck black shirt and cream suit.

His friend—or is it girlfriend—looks the same sort of

age. Long, straight, chestnut hair, tanned skin. Calf length lime green summer dress. Slim. Good looker.

So, it's good news—and bad news. The good news is that I might have unearthed Hugh's bit-on-the-side. The bad news is he hasn't got his mobile with him—when I checked a few minutes ago the PTS indicated it's still at the Terrasse.

I resist the urge to spill the beans to Penny. If the twins overhear they might start looking round to see who I'm talking about. At this stage Hugh doesn't know who I am. He hasn't even met me. It might be to my advantage that I know who he is but he doesn't know me. I can stay in 'Remote' surveillance mode for a while. I watch for a moment or two longer as they take their seats. They don't especially look like lovers. No simpering looks or momentary caresses. Maybe they're just being careful. If they are having an illicit fling they wouldn't want the general public to know about it.

I look away again—don't want them to think they're being scrutinised. If the chance comes up I'll get a piccie. Have I already told you that my phone is an OmniVis? You won't know about them because it's a special piece of surveillance kit. You won't see them advertised on the internet except on specialist websites. It looks like any other smart phone but it's got an extra camera lens on one edge, so you can point it at right angles to the subject so it looks like you're taking a picture of something else. Damned pricey, the OmniVis, but useful in situations like these.

At our table Penny is sitting quietly but the girls are chattering to each other. Rachael turns to her mother.

'Can we go to the hotel to get the iPad?' she asks.

'Why?' says Penny. 'Your dessert will be here soon.'

'So we can watch "You The Star"' says Katie. 'It starts in ten minutes.'

'Well, I don't think it's good manners to watch a TV programme while you're eating in a restaurant. People nearby might object to the noise.'

Katie sighs the weary sigh of a child lumbered with a dumb parent. 'Mum, we'll use our headphones. No-one else will be able to hear.'

Penny looks at me with raised eyebrows. 'Where did I go wrong?'

I grin back at her and shrug.

'Alright, girls,' says Penny. 'You can get the iPad but you can't watch it till you've finished your meal. Then you can take it to the bar if you want and watch it there. On the headphones. Don't want to upset other people, do we?'

'But suppose we miss the beginning,' says Rachael. 'We want to see the voting for last week's finalists.'

'Use the delay,' I suggest. 'You know how to do that, don't you?'

Both the twins look at me in wonderment. Then they look at each other.

'The delay!' they say to each other in unison. They turn their heads to grin at me.

'Thanks, Chad,' says Katie. 'If only Mum was as clever as you.'

'Actually, she's cleverer than me,' I tell them. 'That's why I chose her to work for me. Your Mum's a very smart lady.'

The girls look at Penny, obviously not entirely convinced I'm right about that.

'Right,' says their mother. 'Go and get the iPad and come straight back.' She hands Rachael the room key card.

'It's a talent show, I take it,' I say when the girls have left.

'Yes. The girls are big fans. All kids their age are, I suppose. I daren't tell them I think it's a load of hype. They'd kill me if I suggested that the winner was probably chosen by the producers before the programme was even run.'

I laugh. 'Yeah, you're right, Pen. If ever I said things like that I'd get "Dad, you're so cynical" from my son, Malcolm.'

For the last few minutes I've been throwing the odd glance over at Hugh Sommerville and his dinner companion. I lower my voice and lean closer to Penny.

'Tally ho,' I say.

'What?'

'Hugh and his tart are here. They arrived not long ago. Table near the window. He's wearing a light suit and she's got a green dress on.'

Penny is switched on enough to know not to immediately look over.

'Did you know he was coming here?'

'Nope. Pure chance.'

'Definitely him, is it?' she asks quietly.

'Yep. Looks like my work is half done, Pen. I've found out who his floozie is. All I need is evidence that they're more than just good friends and we're there. DCO.'

'Pardon?'

'Duty carried out.'

'Oh, yes.' Penny looks troubled.

'What's up?' I ask.

She shakes her head. 'I know it sounds daft but I was half hoping that Cynthia was wrong. It would be nice to know that there are at least some men who don't go round chasing other women as soon as the wife's out of sight. If Hugh is doing an Angus then Cynthia is going to be unhappy.'

'Maybe she'll do to Hugh what you threatened Angus with.'

Penny smiles sadly. 'I'll lend her my bread knife.'

'Anyway, I'll ignore the insult,' I say.

'What?'

'Not all of us behave like that as far as women are concerned.'

Penny briefly rests her hand on mine. 'Sorry, Chad.'

'Mind you, I've managed to get through two wives so far,' I acknowledge. 'So maybe I'm not the best example of constancy.'

'Well, all things considered—'

Penny breaks off because the twins have come back to the table just as the waitress appears with our desserts.

A quarter of an hour later we're in the bar. When we left the table I took a pic of Penny and the twins on my OmniVis, although the phone camera was in 'side' mode of course so Hugh and the woman were in the frame. Now Penny and I are sipping coffee. I've chosen a table where I can keep tabs on Hugh. The girls are sitting at an adjacent table, watching the iPad with their headphones

on.

'What about our stay in the Allegro?' asks Penny. 'If you get the evidence quickly will you want to go back to England straight away? Would you want me and the girls to go back with you?'

'Not necessarily,' I say. 'You can stay on anyway, regardless of what happens. You're on holiday, remember. If I go home early and you can't get a flight back I'll come back and get you in Whiskey Whiskey.'

'That'll cost a penny or two.'

'Legitimate business expenses . . . again!'

'That's very kind of you.'

'Anyway, I might stay on myself. I allowed two weeks for this job, remember. I little R and R wouldn't do me any harm.'

'Also,' says Penny, 'isn't Cynthia coming down here for a visit?'

'Yes, I think she wants to do that . . . uh, oh . . . ' I sigh.

'What's up?' asks Penny.

'Take a look behind you.'

Penny waits a second or two then nonchalantly turns her head. There are now three persons at Hugh's table. A man has joined them. He's perhaps a little older than the other two, with thinning hair. He shakes hands with Hugh, who has stood up to greet him, leans forward and down to kiss the woman on both cheeks and then sits with them, looking around as if to summon a waiter.

'So, DNCO,' I say, a little wearily.

Penny decodes the acronym. 'Duty not carried out.'

'Maybe he's Hugh's boyfriend,' I suggest with a smirk but the humour falls flat.

'I'm off to powder my nose,' says Penny. She looks at her watch. 'We'll head back soon, Chad, if you don't mind.'

'No worries,' I say. 'We'll have a chat about tomorrow and then—'

I'm interrupted by my phone ringing. I don't recognise the number. It's another mobile by the look of it.

I press the 'accept' icon and raise the phone to my ear as Penny leaves the table.

'Is that Chad?' Yorkshire voice.

'Yes.'

'Hello, Chad, it's Vernon. We played golf this morning.'

'Hi, Vernon, how's it going?'

'Great. Sorry to trouble you. Me and the boys are sailing to St Peyre in three days' time. Thought you might like to join us if you're not doing anything else. How about it?'

I think quickly. I'll obviously have to spend the next day or so doing more surveillance on Hugh. A lot depends on what I find out and how quickly I find it. Perhaps it'll need several more days.

'Thanks, Vernon,' I reply. 'I'd like to do that if I can get away. I've got a couple of things to attend to over the next few days so I can't say for sure.'

'Musical stuff, is it?' asks Vernon. 'Isn't that your line of business?'

'Yeah, partly,' I respond vaguely, without going into too much detail. 'Though really I'm on holiday, as I said earlier.'

'What about the missus? She want to come?'

'She's a work colleague,' I say. 'She's got her two kids

with her.'

'Oh yes, I think you mentioned that this morning, now I come to think of it. Well, bring them all along. There's plenty of room. It's a big boat, thirty-five feet I think they told me.'

'That's very kind of you,' I say. 'Can we make that a provisional "yes", to be confirmed later.'

'Brilliant,' says Vernon. 'I'll set it up.'

'Thanks. Where did you say you were sailing to?'

'Place called St Peyre. A few miles up the coast. There's a marina there. We'll have lunch there.'

'Sounds good, Vernon, thanks again. I'll call tomorrow.'

After hanging up I do a bit more thinking. A new plan is germinating in my brain. Yes, that might be good fun. I'll suggest it to Penny when she gets back.

Oh no! Hugh Sommerville has just taken a phone out of his pocket and is making a call. The bugger's got two phones!

CHAPTER 6

YOU COULDN'T SAY I've had a fruitful day. I'm sitting on a collapsible canvas chair in the clearing among the trees on the hill overlooking the Terrasse club. I've got my artist's easel set up, but rather than paint I'm using charcoal to sketch the view. Penny's French was handy when it came to hiring the kit from a local craft shop.

The weather is cooler today with a thin translucent cloud cover muting the colours so it would probably look more normal for anyone watching to see me doing a monochrome reproduction of the scene. I've got the perspective wrong but as you can imagine I'm not too fussed about that.

Hugh's phone is still at the club. Or at least the one I can trace is. The question is: why does he need two phones? Or was he using someone else's phone when I saw him in the Baleine Blanche? I suppose it's not unusual for people to have a work phone and a separate private phone. Maybe Carding Wells don't want the expense of his private calls on their account if the phone belongs to them. Perhaps Cynthia can shed light on that

the next time I call or text her. On the other hand maybe it wouldn't be a good idea to tell her about the second phone. There's no point in upsetting her more than necessary, because she'll probably take it as proof that he's secretly communicating with his mistress. If that's what Hugh is doing, he's probably set up a divert system so calls to the first phone are sent to the second phone without the sender knowing about the diversion.

In five hours seated in my lonely spot on the mountain side I've seen six people—including four working on the hotel extension, none of whom were Hugh Sommerville. No sign of the blue Volvo either, or the woman in the restaurant. While I was eating my packed lunch two people walked up the hill on the path behind me, a man and a woman in their twenties I would say. Hikers by the look of it. They threw a friendly 'bonjour' at me and went on their way without stopping.

When Cynthia called just after lunch I kept quiet about Hugh's two phones. She was calling for an update. I told her about what we'd seen in the Baleine Blanche restaurant. Cynthia didn't know who the woman or the other man might be.

'I don't know where Hugh is today,' I told her. 'His car's not here. I hope you're not wasting your money.'

'Early days yet, Chad. Let's stick at it a while longer. Maybe he's at the flat. If only I could remember the address.'

'A thought, Cynthia. How often do you phone each other when he's away?'

'It varies,' came the reply. 'Every few days. Usually me phoning him.'

'And I suppose you ask him what he's up to?'

'Yes, but I get non-committal answers. "Just the usual", he'll say, or "same old same old".'

'And he tells you in advance when he's coming home?'

'Yes, he gives me a few days' notice so I can cater accordingly.'

'Tell me, when you call him, you always use his mobile number?'

'Yes.'

'And does it always connect straight away?'

'Sometimes there's a delay. It rings, then there's a break, then it rings again normally. I suppose it's something to do with the French mobile network he's using.'

'Could be,' I said. More likely the divert system operating between Hugh's two phones, I thought to myself, but I didn't mention this to Cynthia. 'So we carry on as before, then. Is that what you want?'

'Yes,' came Cynthia's response.

'Okay,' I said. 'I'll probably have to go in to "Close In" mode. Fix up another visit to the club to play golf. At least the Volvo's an indicator of when Hugh will be there.' I changed tack. 'Are you still coming down here as per your original plan?'

'I'm hoping to, yes, but I might be stuck in Geneva for another couple of days.'

'I met a TV producer at the club the other day. He got me some info on that kidnap you mentioned.'

There was a long pause. For a moment I wondered whether I'd lost the signal. No, four bars said the phone.

'Well, that's why I'm here, Chad,' said Cynthia

eventually. 'I was a friend of Reinier and my phone number was obviously in his list of contacts. The police told me they wanted to speak to everyone in the list to see if anyone could throw any light on what happened.'

'So they asked you to come to Geneva? Couldn't they have called you at home in the UK?'

'They wanted to speak to people personally, especially those who knew Reinier well. They paid the air fare and accommodation.'

'How do you know him, then?' I asked.

'I work as an interpreter. I met Reinier once or twice at international conferences and I've been friendly with him ever since. Must be over three years now.'

'So is Hugh a friend as well?'

'They've met once or twice when Hugh's been with me at conferences. We've been out a couple of times as a foursome.'

I searched my memory. 'That'll be Sabine, then. Reinier's wife.'

'Yes. You've heard of her?'

'Yes. She was mentioned in the Sentinel report I told you about.'

'Nice lady, Sabine. You'd like her.'

'I take it you weren't in Geneva when the kidnap occurred.'

'No,' said Cynthia, 'I was at home. First I heard about it was on the news. Quite a shock, as you can imagine.'

'Is there anything new about deadlines and negotiations and so on?'

'Not that I've been told. Even if the good guys are making progress it's unlikely they'd broadcast it to the

public. They wouldn't want the media poking their noses in. I suspect they haven't got very far, though, which is why they've asked people back again, to see if they missed anything first time round. The police asked us not to discuss the case with outsiders. That's why you might have sensed reluctance, Chad, when you asked me about it.'

'Fair enough,' I said. 'Well, good luck with all that. But why do you need to be there four days? Wouldn't just one more interview with the cops have been enough?'

'They're asking everyone to make themselves available in case new gen comes up and they need to cross-check. The Dutch police might want to talk to us as well. I don't mind. The hotel's nice and I know a few people here so it's like a mini-holiday.'

'Good. No more questions then. It's the PI in me, I suppose.' I paused a while and then said: 'Cynthia, can I ask a favour?'

'Try me.'

'Can I take the day off the day after tomorrow? I'll reduce my fee by one day so you're not paying for service you're not getting.'

Again Cynthia paused. 'Yes, if you want, Chad. Is there something you have to do?'

'It's not essential,' I said. I went on to tell her what I'd arranged with the Likely Lads.

It was Vernon, of course, who'd come up with the original idea. If you remember, he called me when we were in the Baleine Blanche, inviting me to go sailing with them.

I did a bit of thinking and worked out a new plan. I like

sailing myself, and I've done it a few times with friends, though I've never had any training. Penny's never been sailing so she would probably like a go. Vernon told me they've paid for a fully qualified skipper on the boat but the Likely Lads will get a chance to sail it themselves under the skipper's supervision. So I thought, why not let Penny and the girls go for a sail, and in return, I'll take the Lads up for a flight in Whiskey Whiskey.

So the plan is: we'll all meet early at the St Trop marina, where Penny and the twins and two of the Lads will set sail for San Peyre, about twenty nautical miles to the northeast. Should take them about four to five hours if the wind is as forecast. The yacht's got an engine, of course, if the wind isn't being cooperative. Meantime three of the Lads will go to La Môle airport with me so we can get airborne in Whiskey Whiskey and fly to Cannes airport. There we'll take a taxi to the marina at San Peyre, where we'll have lunch with the others. Then, for the return, I'll take the Lads who sailed out in the boat back to La Môle in the Arrow while the boat returns with the others to St Trop. If the weather is as good as the forecast we'll all have a great day out.

Tomorrow will be more mundane—another Hugh-watching day, assuming he shows up. I'll do nine holes at the Terrasse then stay on for lunch. If Hugh turns up I might contrive a way to meet him. Cynthia deserves more value for money than she's currently getting, even though she's said okay to me going AWOL.

CHAPTER 7

IT'S A NICE LOOKING BOAT, I must say. Standard rig, roller reefing jib and slab reefing main by the look of it. Navy blue hull, ten metres or so, white deck and cabin. It's moored stern-to-pontoon in the Royale Marina, which is chock-a-block with boats, but you'd expect that in every marina on the Riviera during the summer months. The name Mikado is emblazoned in gold paint on the stern.

There are seven of us standing on the wooden pontoon and two in Mikado's cockpit aft of the cabin. It's just after seven thirty in the morning but of course the mid-summer sun is already quite high. The twins don't look like they've fully woken up yet.

'Cover your mouth when you yawn,' chides Penny. 'I've told you before.'

'But why?' asks Rachael.

'It's good manners,' says her sister sarcastically, presumably mimicking their mother.

'Also, you don't want to swallow a French megamoth,' I add.

'A what?' say both twins together.

I wink at Penny. 'They're massive. They seek out people yawning and fly right in.'

I get an identical suspicious look from both girls.

'You've just made that up,' says Katie.

'Megamoth,' says Rachael. 'That's just stupid.'

'Alright,' says Penny. 'Megamoths or not, just behave yourselves.'

Could be a song there, I think to myself:

*You're shouting lies, your mouth is wide
You'll soon feel megamoths inside.*

Maybe not.

There would have been ten of us altogether but Vernon explained that Dominic, one of the Likely Lads, is indisposed.

'Silly beggar threw two bottles of Merlot down his neck last night. He's barely alive this morning. He'd probably spend the whole day heaving up if he were bobbing up and down on this boat.'

Assuming you didn't have a hangover you couldn't ask for a better day or a better way of passing time than messing about on a boat—or a plane, of course. The sky is cloudless and the wind a light southeasterly, five knots now, increasing to ten or twelve later, according to the forecast I got off the internet while I was munching breakfast. So the sailors will have a beam wind for both out and back, which will make life easy. Once out of harbour they probably won't need the engine at all.

Apart from Vernon and Mike, the two Likely Lads who did make the gig are Casey and Roger, who are in their

mid-to-late thirties, I would say. Casey is a tall, gangly fellow who works as a traffic manager for Northern Railways. Roger is shorter, stocky and almost bald, a football coach, he tells me.

'So you'll be a Likely Lads Elland Boy?' I query.

'Aye, that'll be me. The original, you could say. I get to Elland Road quite a lot to train the youth team.'

'Poor sod supports Tottenham,' Vernon tells Roger, pointing a derisive thumb at me.

'Ee, I'm sorry, lad,' replies Roger, giving me a pitying smile. 'I hope you get over it soon.'

'Mind you, we all hate Arsensal,' chuckles Vernon. 'So maybe we can all be friends.'

In Mikado's cockpit Casey is talking to a pretty young woman, in her twenties by the look of her. She has a sort of serious look on her wide face. As she chats to Casey she often flicks her short black hair behind her ear with her hand. She seems to be giving Casey a briefing—she's doing most of the talking and Casey is nodding as he listens.

I suddenly work out who she is.

'She'll be the skipper, then,' I say to Vernon.

'Aye, Valerie, she calls herself. Grand lass. This is her boat.'

Vernon goes on to say that Mikado's French captain is a university teacher. During the summer holidays she charts the boat to anyone who might want to use it. If they're experienced sailors she lets them take the boat out without supervision. Others, like the Likely Lads, are happy to pay the extra to have Valerie run the show. This will be their second outing together.

There follows a discussion about who is sailing and who is flying. It's soon decided that Mike and Roger will be my passengers outbound and Vernon and Casey for the return. The sailing party board the Mikado and the fliers watch the boat being made ready for departure. Under Valerie's supervision the mainsail cover is removed and stowed. We hear the sound of the starter and the engine rumbling into life. Valerie switches on the electrics and checks the depth meter and transceiver mounted externally on the aft cabin wall beside the hatch entrance. On another bracket she mounts the GPS receiver and attaches its power supply. She and her crew are wearing automatic lifejackets, including the twins, who have retreated inside the cabin and disposed themselves full stretch on the bunk seats. Looks like they're already asleep.

Valerie seats Vernon at the helm and tells him to keep the tiller central during the departure procedure. Her English is good, if accented. She must have already noted Penny's language skills cos now she gives instructions in French to Penny, who replies, 'D'accord' and moves to the port decking abeam the cabin. Holding onto the guard rail she looks over the side. To Casey, Mikado's skipper calls in English, 'Watch the fenders on the right side, please, make sure they don't tangle with the next boat.' Casey nods and does as asked, matching Penny on the other side of the yacht.

Satisfied all is in order, Valerie moves forward to the bow, skilfully manoeuvring herself past Penny. She turns and calls back to Roger and me, asking us to cast off the boat's mooring lines from the pontoon bollards. Vernon

hauls the lines aboard and then takes up his position again at the helm. The weight of the lazy line securing the bow pulls the boat slowly forward.

Clear of the other moored boats, Valerie releases the lazy line and quickly returns to the cockpit. Vernon gives way and the boat's skipper takes the helm, left hand on the tiller and right hand on the throttle mounted on the side of the cockpit. Standing on the pontoon, Mike, Roger and I hear Mikado's engine revs increasing as Valerie advances the throttle. The boat picks up speed and heads north out of the marina into the bay.

The two remaining Likely Lads and I take a leisurely walk back to my Nissan, parked in the marina car park. We're in no tearing hurry. It'll take Mikado four hours or so to get to San Peyre. By contrast, Whiskey Whiskey will do La Môle to Cannes direct in fifteen minutes or so, although I'll probably break off from the direct routing to give my friends a chance to handle the controls. As long as I keep out of controlled airspace while we're swanning around ATC won't mind what we do.

It takes half an hour or so to drive to the airport at La Môle. I lend my passengers my iPad during the journey so they can take a look at my presentation on the basics of light aircraft handling so it's not a complete mystery when they get their hands on the controls. (If you're interested you can find the presentation '**How Do We Fly The Plane**' on the **Steemrok Home** page.)

When we get to the airport we park the Nissan and I leave Mike and Roger in the cafe while I do the inevitable paperwork in the briefing room. We'll be on a Visual Flight Rules plan, of course, so I don't need to specify a route.

Fortunately the 'paperwork' is mostly paperless these days. I can do all my preps and file the flight plan on my iPad. The acceptance comes back two minutes later. I print out a copy of it on the briefing room printer, which I can hook up wirelessly to the iPad. Computers have their uses!

The weather forecast is excellent. CAVOK for the whole Riviera region say the reports. That means cloud ceiling high or absent and visibility good. Southeasterly wind, ten to fifteen knots. Touch of crosswind at both La Môle and Cannes but nothing to worry about. Looking out of the briefing room window I can see that aircraft here are departing on runway zero six, which points northeast.

I've only got my flight bag to carry so I don't need a GenAv car to take me to Whiskey Whiskey. I go through security, don my hi-viz jacket and walk along the apron towards my Arrow. It's just as I left it, of course, so I remove the cover, detach the tie-down straps and remove the chocks, all of which I stow in the baggage compartment.

I visually check the contents of the fuel tanks and inspect Whiskey Whiskey internally and externally for airworthiness. All looks good. I call GenAv on my mobile and ask them to bring out my passengers. We'll start off with Mike in the pilot's seat and Roger behind. I'll be on Mike's right side, in the copilot seat. It's good practice for me to occasionally fly from the right seat, left hand on throttle, right hand on control wheel instead of the other way round. Mike will be able to see the instruments better as they're installed on his side of the panel. Whiskey Whiskey has full dual controls, including toe brakes both

sides. Once Mike has had his fill he'll swap seats with Roger so Roger can have a go. We're wearing lifejackets as we'll probably be out of gliding range of land some of the time.

I check my watch. Nine forty-five. Mikado will be well on the way to San Peyre by now. The Arrow's engine starts nicely and is soon warming up. I power up the electrics and set the radios and nav system.

We taxi out and just before the runway I manoeuvre Whiskey Whiskey into the run-up bay for engine checks. I set the park brake and advance the throttle to 2000 revs. I check the prop pitch control and both ignition systems. I throttle back and turn towards Mike for a final briefing as he's going to be handling the control wheel for take-off. I'll do the throttle and rudder inputs.

Checks complete, I call Tower to announce we're ready for departure. My French being what it is I'll do all the radio in English and hope the occasional 'bonjour' and 'merci' will suffice for establishing a rapport with the air traffic controllers.

'Roger, Whiskey Whiskey,' replies Tower, *'behind the landing ATR42 line up and wait.'*

The landing aircraft is a small twin-engined airliner. We watch it approach, wings rocking slightly. It sweeps past, lifts its nose a little and touches down with a puff of tyre smoke.

'Nice landing,' I comment to my passengers over the intercom. Sitting behind us, Roger is also wearing a headset so he can hear what's going on.

I taxi onto the runway and position Whiskey Whiskey on the centreline.

'You have control,' I tell Mike.

'Whiskey Whiskey cleared take-off, wind one one zero, eight.'

I acknowledge the clearance and advance the throttle to fully open. The Arrow accelerates and within a few seconds the airspeed indicator quivers into life. I dab the rudder pedals to keep the plane running straight.

Forty knots, fifty, sixty . . .

'Rotate,' I call over the intercom.

Mike pulls the control wheel back and Whiskey Whiskey lifts its nose in response. The runway drops away below us.

'Nose to climb attitude,' I say, 'just like the picture.'

Mike's effort is not bad, just a tad too high. I get him to correct and reach down to retract the landing gear.

'Nicely done, sir,' I tell Mike. 'You'll get another go later. For the moment I have control.'

'You have control.'

Mike could probably handle the climb out but there's a little roughness in the air as the wind undulates over the terrain so it's easier for me to do it. I ease the throttle back until the manifold pressure shows 24 inches and pull the prop back to 2400 revs for climb power. Initially we follow the valley straight ahead and then, once we're comfortably above the terrain, I turn southeast towards the sea and engage the autopilot in speed lock mode.

'What a view,' says Roger from the back seat.

He's right, of course. You get a bit blasé about these things when you've experienced them a few times. We're creeping away from the curve of surrounding mountains and crossing the beach a couple of miles south of St

Tropez as we head towards the sparkling deep blue Med.

As the altimeter reaches 3000 feet I switch the autopilot to height lock and Whiskey Whiskey dips its nose accordingly. I ease the throttle and prop back to stabilise our speed at 110 knots. It's slower than the Arrow's normal cruising speed but we're not in any hurry to get anywhere and it'll be comfortable for my student pilots. Also there's a military danger area about fifteen miles off the coast which we'll need to keep well clear of. I tweak the heading bug to 080 degrees and let everything stabilise. I knock out the autopilot, check we're in trim and hand over to Mike for some straight and level. There's a good horizon so it won't be too difficult for him.

While Mike's doing the business I turn round to face Roger. I remind him over the intercom to keep watching out for other aircraft that I might not have seen.

'And another small task,' I say to him. 'Can you text or call the Mikado on your mobile and get a position report?'

'Will do,' says Roger.

I've got the VHF selected to Marseilles Radar so I can hear what's going on but I won't talk to anyone on the radio till we're inbound to Cannes. The controllers can see where I am on their radar and check my height from my transponder read out. If they need to contact me they'll know I'm on the frequency cos I'm squawking the conspicuity code.

Mike's doing nicely at straight and level so I get him to do some gentle turns left and right. He quickly gets the hang of applying a little back pressure on the wheel to maintain height while the wings are banked.

'I've got the position report,' says Roger over the

intercom.

'Smashing,' I say. 'Hang on a tick.'

I reengage the autopilot and grin at Mike. 'Nicely done! Now, keep your eyes outside for traffic while I work out where the boat is.'

On the GPS I construct a new waypoint based on the co-ordinates Roger relays to me. It puts the Mikado about five miles east southeast of Fréjus. I turn Whiskey Whiskey's heading bug to point our nose at the rendezvous point. We're about eight miles from the boat. Say five minutes. I knock out the autopilot and bring the throttle back to start a gentle descent.

As we approach the coast the density of sea-borne traffic increases. There are plenty of sail boats and power boats large and small on headings paralleling the coast in both directions. I drop down to five hundred feet then raise the nose to level off, adding a bit of power to hold the speed. Any lower and we're illegal. I turn ten degrees right so Mike can get a better view of the armada.

'Call them on your phone,' I tell Roger. 'Tell them to start waving.'

'There they are,' says Mike after a few moments. 'Ahead and a bit left.'

I slow down and drop a bit of flap. We cruise past the Mikado. All six of them are waving. Looks like Penny is at the helm. The twins are jumping up and down. I waggle our wings in response then crank Whiskey Whiskey into a left turn so Mike and Roger get a good view as we circle the yacht. They both take photos and videos and wave back at the sailors.

Two orbits, another waggle of wings and then I swing

round to point out to sea again. I retract the flaps and start a climb.

'Okay, lads,' I tell my passengers, 'you can swap seats now.'

Mike takes off his headset, undoes his belt and clambers over and between the front seats into the back. Roger moves forward to take his place, not an easy thing to do in the confined space of a Piper Arrow's cabin. During the process I can feel the centre of gravity shifting around but it's not enough to warrant retrimming. Roger settles himself in the pilot's seat, fastens his belt and dons the headset.

'Comfortable?' I ask him.

'Aye.'

I hand over control and we run through the same sequence that Mike did. Roger slots into the routine as quickly as his fellow Likely Lad. Nothing much to choose between them. Maybe Roger's got a slightly more sensitive appreciation of attitude and control response.

I take control, reengage the autopilot and point Whiskey Whiskey towards Cannes, about twelve miles away to the north. We drop down to 2000 feet and I check in with Nice Approach, who control the airspace round the Nice and Cannes airports. I tell them my intentions.

'Roger, Whiskey Whiskey, squawk four three three six. Proceed direct Luxus. Expect runway one seven at Cannes.'

I read back the clearance and dial up the new squawk on the transponder. I find Luxus on the GPS. It's a waypoint on the coast a mile or so to the east of Cannes airport. I turn Whiskey Whiskey's nose slightly right to

point to it and run through the approach checklist.

As the coast draws near Nice Approach hands me over to Cannes Tower, who clear us to position downwind for the landing runway. They tell us we're number two to another light aircraft which is a few miles ahead in the pattern.

Roger and Mike are again marvelling at the view as we overfly the Gulf of Napoule. Two small islands float past the right wing. We note the arc of submerged sand bank changing the colour of the sea near the coast. The downwind leg of the circuit points north towards the mountains, routing between the airport and the city, which slides by on the right side as we ease down to circuit height.

I lower the landing gear and do the checklist. The aircraft ahead of us is on base leg, easily visible as it turns onto final. We follow it round the pattern.

Tower clears us to land in turn and a couple of minutes later Whiskey Whiskey reacquaints itself with terra firma.

My passengers bombard me with expressions of gratitude as we taxi in.

'My pleasure,' I tell them.

We're only here for a few hours so there's no need for cover or tie-downs after we've shut Whiskey Whiskey down and we've got enough fuel for the return with comfortable reserves. I ask Roger to chock the nosewheel to guard against brake failure while we're away and then we make our way to the crew reporting point in the terminal. Mike says he and Roger are happy to pay the landing fee and I'm happy to let them.

CHAPTER 8

IT'S A SHORT TAXI RIDE to the San Peyre marina. The Likely Lads have booked a table at L'Ancre, a waterfront restaurant near the marina. We check in with them to confirm the arrangement then saunter towards the berth allocated to Mikado. There are plenty of boats coming and going but through my pocket binocs I can easily pick out Mikado just beyond the end of the harbour wall about three hundred metres away from where we're standing. It looks they're under low engine power, head into wind. Vernon is on the tiller and Casey and Valerie are lowering the mainsail. The jib is already furled. Mainsail down and secured, I watch Valerie swap places with Vernon for the approach.

Mikado yaws left towards the shore and picks up speed, then swings right to enter the marina. Approaching the berth Valerie throttles back and calls out instructions to Vernon and Penny, who are on lookout duty. The twins are in the cockpit, taking in the sights and sounds. Valerie engages reverse to get the craft moving rearwards then selects neutral and lets Mikado drift stern first into its

berth, occasionally swinging the tiller for directional adjustments. Once again there are boats moored either side. As Mikado nears the pontoon Valerie gives the engine a burst of forward thrust to kill the speed. At her call Casey throws the mooring lines ashore and Mike and Roger catch them and wrap a couple of turns round the bollards. A marina assistant hands Valerie the rope attached to the lazy line which she'll use to secure the bow. I've got my camera out to record the scene for posterity.

Twenty minutes later we're all sitting round a long table outside the restaurant, studying menus and wine lists. The Likely Lads are on lager and Penny goes for a white wine spritzer. She allows Rachael and Katie to order Coke. I notice that Valerie, like me, is sticking to water.

'How was the trip?' I ask Penny.

'Fantastic. What an experience! Valerie let me steer for some of the time. And the girls too.'

'You are a good sailor,' smiles Valerie. 'Your daughters too.' She turns to me. 'We were thrilled when you circled us in your plane.'

'Showing off, really,' I comment. 'But fun too.'

At my bidding, Valerie tells me a little about her background. She teaches and researches physical chemistry at the University of Marseille. Her fiancé is a professor of Mediaeval French there.

'And Vernon tells me you're a musician,' she says to me.

I launch into my spiel about eXeFo and give her one of my cards. There is no danger of Penny and the twins spilling the beans about Arrow Tec. Penny knows to keep

stumm and as far the girls are aware 'Mummy works for Chad, who works in a music studio.'

Well, today might have worked out as planned, up to now anyway. But yesterday was not quite as fruitful. Hugh bleeding Sommerville has obviously been abducted by aliens. No sign of him or his car. To make matters worse the PTS isn't online for some reason so I don't even know where his stupid phone is.

I played the nine holes at the Terrasse, going round in one shot less than my game with the Likely Lads. Progress of a sort, I suppose. I stayed for lunch and stooged around for a while. Nothing, although there were men working on the hotel extension. Eventually I decided that I would have to do a little prying. My excuse was the sign saying (in French) that the company doing the work was Carding Wells Construction of Buckingham, England.

I casually wandered over to the girl at the golf club reception.

'Excuse me, mam'selle.'

'Yes, sir?'

'I'm curious as to why it's an English company building the hotel extension. Why not a French company?'

The receptionist smiled.

'I can't tell you. Perhaps Monsieur Fermier can help you. He's the manager. Shall I page him?'

'Don't go to any trouble. It's not important.'

'It's no trouble.'

When the manager turned up a few minutes later, holding out his hand in greeting, I realised I'd seen him once or twice while I'd been at the club. A rotund, cheerful

looking man, he smiled as he approached.

'Good afternoon, monsieur, Gérard Fermier. What can I do for you? How do you like our facilities?'

'Forgive me speaking English,' I apologised. 'My French is nowhere as good as your English.'

'Don't mention it. Would you like a coffee? Or a cup of tea?'

I chose coffee and offered the appropriate compliments about the Terrasse. The manager turned to his receptionist.

'Paulette, deux cafés, s'il vous plaît, dans mon bureau.'

'Oui, Monsieur.'

As we walked to the manager's office I steered the conversation towards CWC, Monsieur Fermier nodding as I spoke.

'Well, Mr . . . Chad . . . it's all about money, like everything these days.'

'You mean, Carding Wells were cheaper than French companies?'

'Quite so. Our labour costs are higher than the British. Socialists say that the workers of other countries are overworked and underpaid. Economists here say that French workers are underworked and overpaid. I think you'll find there are plenty of foreign firms working in France while unemployment here goes on rising. Politics, I suppose.'

'So are the workers on your extension site Brits too?'

'No, they're local, but they're working on British terms. They have to sign away their rights under French employment law.'

'Does it cause resentment?'

Gérard nodded. 'A bit. But of course working hard for low pay is not as bad as not working for no pay.'

'But did I hear that you've got a British manager?'

'Yes, Monsieur Sommerville. Have you not met him? He sometimes plays golf himself.'

'No, I haven't met him. Is he here today?'

'Not today, Chad. At least I don't think so. He's not on site all the time. He goes home to England some weekends. Sometimes he's away during the week too.'

'Suppose you need to contact him? What if there's a problem on the site?'

Gérard pouted. 'There is a . . . contremâitre . . . I don't know the English word. He supervises the workers for Monsieur Sommerville.'

'Like a foreman?' I offered.

'Yes, that's it, a foreman. Henri, I think his name is. He's here today, I'm sure.'

'So you're not really involved, Gérard?'

'Not in the construction. My job is to manage the hotel and golf club.'

There was a knock on the door and the receptionist brought in two coffees on a tray. While Gérard added cream to his cup I eased the conversation back to the topic of interest.

'What does Monsieur Sommerville do in his spare time? Apart from playing golf? Has he got friends here?'

'I don't know him that well, Chad. I've been to dinner with him a few times in Saint-Maxime and he's been over to our house once or twice too. Yes, I think he's got friends here.'

'You mean, you've been to dinner at his flat?' I ask,

thinking I might get some useful information without appearing to be too nosy. 'Is that in town?'

'No, we meet for dinner at a restaurant. I don't know where his flat is.'

Of course, what I really wanted to know was who were the man and woman we saw Hugh meeting at the Baleine Blanche restaurant a few evenings previously. But there was no way I could start asking questions like that without revealing that I already knew Hugh's identity.

'Do you play golf yourself, Gérard?' I asked, attempting to show that I wasn't really interested in what the Construction Site Manager was up to.

'Yes. I just wish I could play it as well as I liked it.'

'Well, maybe we could do nine holes together before the end of my holiday.'

'That would be nice, Chad.'

'We could invite Hugh Sommerville . . . if he wasn't working, that is.'

'I'm sure he would be delighted.'

There wasn't more that I could ask without arousing suspicion that I was too curious. As we finished our coffees my eyes wandered round Gérard's office. On one wall there was a large framed document with names and photos. Its title was Personnel de l'Hôtel. I stood up and took a closer look. No picture of Hugh Sommerville but . . . yes, definitely! Long, straight, chestnut hair, tanned skin.

I tapped the glass and turned to face Gérard. 'This woman. I think I saw her a few nights ago when we were dining out.'

The hotel manager came over. 'Ah, yes, Madame Renouvin. She works here, at the Terrasse. She's one of

our chefs.'

I made a note of the name. 'She was with two men,' I said casually. 'One of them might have been her partner, I suppose.'

Gérard chuckled. 'I don't think so.'

'Why not?'

'Madame Renouvin does not like men for . . . close companionship.'

'You mean . . .'

'Sadly, yes.'

So all in all, yesterday was a washout. I'm expecting Cynthia to call today for an update. I don't think she'll be very impressed. Maybe she'll call the whole thing off.

'And you write songs, too?' Valerie is asking me now.

I nod. 'Yes, I've turned out a few.'

'Any famous ones? Ones I would know?'

'Probably not. Rollback sometimes play them at gigs. Other artistes have picked up one or two for album tracks. None of my efforts have troubled the singles charts yet.'

'Maybe one day.'

'Maybe. But to be honest, I like doing studio work better. Arranging and producing. I think I'm better at that than composing.'

'I shouldn't really admit this, but I'm a fan of Cliff Richard,' says Valerie, a little ruefully.

'I won't hold that against you,' I reply. 'I've got some Harry Webb tracks on my iPod.'

Valerie wrinkles her brow. 'Harry Webb?'

'The name Cliff was born with,' I tell her, temporarily lapsing into pub bore mode. 'His early stuff was okay and one or two efforts in the seventies.'

"Miss You Nights",' says Valerie. 'I like that. And "Voice In The Wilderness".

'Ah, yes. we've done a rerecording of "Wilderness",' I say. 'I'm not so keen on the song, but there's a nice little guitar riff at the end. In our version I've looped the riff three more times. So you get four riffs before the final chord.'

'What is a riff?' asks Mikado's skipper.

We spend another few minutes talking about the technicalities of pop music. I remember that I've got the eXeFo version of "Wilderness" on my mobile so I Bluetooth it across to Valerie's phone.

Over coffee I find myself chatting to Penny.

'I think I might have bored Valerie to tears, waffling on about arranging pop music.'

'You've certainly bored me with it a few times,' smiles Penny. 'Having said that, I think the twins enjoyed it when you let them play with some of the kit in Rollback's studio. Except that now they both want to be pop stars when they grow up. They watch all the talent shows on TV.'

'Do they always think exactly the same way about everything?' I ask. 'I remember you mentioning "twin moments" several times before.'

'Ninety per cent of the time they do,' says Penny. 'Although violent arguments are not unknown in our house. But sometimes, it's uncanny, like telepathy. Like when they spotted the airport at the same time when we were approaching La Môle.'

'Even though it was on Katie's side of the plane?'

'Rachael's side,' corrects Penny. 'But that's a typical example. Rachael probably saw it first but it's like the

thought registering what she'd seen in her brain instantly transferred to Katie, so she looked in the right direction herself. All in a fraction of a second. Sometimes they'll both start singing the same part of the same song out of the blue, even though there's nothing to trigger it.'

'You are talking about telepathy?' says Valerie, overhearing our conversation.

'Yes,' says Penny. 'How do you explain thought transference, which is what seems to be going on here?'

Valerie pouts. 'Perhaps by physics,' she offers.

'What do you mean?'

'Well,' continues Valerie. 'What is thought? What is happening in your brain when you are thinking?'

Penny and I look at each other and shrug.

Valerie smiles at us. 'I don't mean the philosophy. I mean—what is actually happening in the brain cells?'

'Er . . . pass,' I mutter. It's the 'I don't know' response you hear in TV quiz shows.

'Is it something you know about?' asks Penny.

'Maybe a little,' comes the reply from Valerie. 'My work involves looking at electron orbital changes when there are outside influences.'

It brings back memories of my job at Holmyard Electronics.

'Electron orbital distortion in pseudo-aromatic conductors,' I blurt out.

Valerie looks at me, surprised.

'You are familiar with this? You know about the Holzmann displacement in pi-bonded rings?' asks Valerie.

I immediately admit my lack of comprehension so that

I am spared further humiliation.

'If the brain is acting like a computer,' continues Valerie, 'using algorithms to process and respond to data then that means electrons are passing along nerve channels.'

'Yes . . . '

'So,' continues Valerie. 'Whenever electrons flow, they set up electric and magnetic fields.'

I nod politely, and wonder if Penny shares my view that we should start talking about something else, anything else in fact.

But Valerie is in full flow. 'If one brain is generating these fields then maybe another brain nearby can pick up those fields and turn them back into thoughts.'

'But why would that only happen in twins?' asks Penny. 'Why couldn't everybody do it?'

It's Valerie's turn to shrug. 'Maybe because their brains are almost identical, like their bodies.'

I decide to make my own input. My knowledge of physics doesn't go much beyond the practicalities of aircraft engines and electrical systems in aircraft and music studios. I can change a spark plug and mend a fuse.

'If the brain sets up an electric field,' I say, 'shouldn't you be able to detect it with sensitive instruments?'

Valerie winces. 'Yes, that is a problem. I don't think anyone's ever detected these fields. So perhaps there's another explanation.'

I'm saved from further speculation about the detection of thought generated electric fields by my phone ringing. It's Cynthia, and she's communicating by more easily understandable processes involving microphones and

radio signal transmitters and receivers.

I start off with my rather negative report on Hugh Sommerville sightings, or rather lack of them. But Cynthia has more concrete information.

'Hugh is in Como.'

'Italy?' I say in amazement.

'Yes. Or at least he's been spotted there.'

'Who saw him?' I ask.

It turns out Cynthia got a phone call from a lady who acts as a housekeeper in Moltrasio, a town on the west shore of Lake Como. Moltrasio is six kilometres north of the city of Como itself. The building the housekeeper works in is a holiday home which is divided into two parts, one part for renting out and the other used by the family who own the property, who happen to be friends of Cynthia. The housekeeper said she spotted Hugh at the market in Como, getting into his car. She called Cynthia to ask if the Sommervilles were staying in the area and if so, why they weren't using the villa in Moltrasio.

'Is the housekeeper sure it was Hugh she saw?'

'No, not one hundred percent.'

'So what do we do?'

'For the moment it's probably best that you stay in Sainte-Maxime, Chad. Hugh's bound to turn up again before long. The contract's got at least another year to run and I'm sure he would have told me if he was leaving the job.'

'So maybe his girlfriend—sorry Cynthia, that's a bit insensitive of me—maybe he's spending time in Como when he's not at work. Obviously if he wasn't supposed to be there he wouldn't stay in a place that you've used

before in case he was seen.'

'That's right,' says Cynthia. 'And don't have any qualms talking about girlfriends. I'm pretty sure that's what he's up to. Otherwise, why wouldn't he tell me he was going there? And why wouldn't he use the villa we normally stay in?'

'Unless it's innocent after all and the villa happened to be booked up by other holidaymakers,' I offer.

'No,' says Cynthia. 'Or rather, yes and no. Teresa—that's the housekeeper—said the rented part was in use but the private part is empty at the moment.'

'And Hugh would have used that part if he wasn't trying to avoid being seen? Is that what you normally do when you're there on holiday?'

'Yes. We started off in the rented part when we first visited Como several years ago. But as we got to know the Meazza family—they're the owners—they began to offer us the private part when they weren't using it. We still paid for the accommodation but its facilities were better than the rented part. Signor Meazza allows favoured customers to use the private part.'

There's a pause while I gather my thoughts.

'Okay,' I say. 'So you want me to stay put for the moment?'

'Yes please, Chad.'

'And what about you? Are you still planning to come down here?'

'I don't know. I'm thinking now I might head for Moltrasio and spend a couple of days there. Teresa has said Signor Meazza will let me stay in the private part of the villa so I'll probably do that.'

'So you'll go searching for Hugh there? Will you hire a car?'

'Probably not. The boat service is very good between Moltrasio and Como so I'll spend the time looking around Como on the off chance that he might show up. If I don't see him I'll decide whether to head for home or come down to the Riviera.'

'Suppose you happen to see him?'

'I'll walk up to him, smile sweetly and ask what the hell he's doing.'

'Suppose he's with a woman?'

'Ditto, plus I'll scratch her eyes out.'

'Unless there's an innocent explanation.'

'Unless there's a convincing innocent explanation,' corrects Cynthia.

'We have a problem here,' I say.

'How come?'

'Well, I thought the whole purpose of what we're doing is putting him under surveillance by someone who doesn't know him—me, in other words. Suppose he sees you in Como?'

'You're right, of course.' I hear a sigh. 'Alright . . . I'll do my sleuthing in disguise. Blonde wig, sunglasses, something like that.'

'Well, if that's how you want to play it . . . you're the customer.'

'Let me give it a bit more thought, Chad. You stay in Saint Max for now and I'll let you know what I decide to do next.'

'Okay,' I say. 'One thing, did the housekeeper happen to identify the car Hugh was using?'

'She didn't say.'

'Okay, well here he's driving a light blue Volvo estate. Do you know it, Cynthia?'

'Yes, I've seen that car when I've been down there visiting. He's hired it locally.'

'Do you happen to know its number?' I ask, thinking that maybe that's something I should have found out from Cynthia at the start.

'Sorry, Chad, no.'

'Alright,' I say. 'I'm thinking. If I see Hugh here he can't be in Como at the same time.'

'Absolutely, Chad. If you set eyes on him I'll come straight down by train.'

'Right, Cynthia, I'll keep you posted.'

'Thanks, Chad. I appreciate what you're doing.'

'Well, I'm having a nice holiday so maybe I should give you a rebate. But rest assured I'll put max effort into finding the elusive Hugh Sommerville.'

'Thanks. See you soon.'

CHAPTER 9

IT'S TWO DAYS since the San Peyre day out. Yesterday morning I spent a while up at my lookout above the Terrasse, pretending to sketch the scenery. No sign of Hugh Sommerville or the blue Volvo. His phone is still in his office, according to the PTS. It's beginning to look like it's there permanently. I walked down to the waterfront and had lunch with Penny and the twins, trying to be cheerful but really just getting fed up with the whole thing. The twins were thrilled because they'd seen a famous film star walking along the beach.

'Who was it?' I asked.

'Only Toby Fradianis,' came the reply.

'Oh,' I nodded. 'I don't think I've heard of him.'

The girls were astounded. 'Surely you've seen Toby Fradianis,' said Katie. 'He was in "It's Not As Simple As That".'

'And "The Damocles Plot",' added Rachael.

Penny laughed. 'Don't worry, Chad. I'm as bad as you. I've never heard of him either. But I'm allowed to be behind the times—I'm their ancient mother.'

Today I'm back at the Terrasse. To relieve the tedium of inactivity I invited the Likely Lads to meet me for nine holes. I'm lunching on my own at the club but Vernon and Mick are coming along later. While I'm waiting for my Croque Madame and salad to turn up I recheck the text I got from Cynthia earlier this morning:

Now in moltrasio. Blonde wig suits me i think. Feel like a spy. Exciting isnt it. Havent seen hugh or car. Teresa hasnt seen him either. Will prob spend another day here then train to cannes or st trop. If you—

'Bonjour, Chad,' comes a voice from behind. I turn round to see the smiling face of Gérard Fermier. He's walking towards my table with . . . Hugh Sommerville! I quickly switch off the message page on my phone.

I stand up to shake hands and Gérard makes the introductions.

'I told Hugh you were looking for golf partners,' says Gérard.

I nod. 'Yes, are you busy this afternoon, Hugh? There's a couple of friends coming over. We could do a foursome.'

Hugh winces. 'Sorry, Chad, no can do. Not today, anyway. I've got work to do here. Maybe another time.'

'Did Gérard tell me you were manager on the construction site?'

'Correct. I get a fair amount of time off though, so there's occasionally time available for tennis and golf.'

Now I've been forced into Close In surveillance mode by circumstances it's time to start gathering info. But, like I told you before, caution is required. I can't really ask:

'Have you been to Como recently?' without giving the game away. Instead I invite Gérard and Hugh to join me for lunch. Gérard declines but Hugh agrees and sits down at my table. Gérard takes his leave and the waitress comes over to take Hugh's order.

'So do you stay on site?' I ask. 'Or have you got your own place?'

'Both,' says Hugh. 'I've got a room here but I've also got a flat in Saint-Maxime.'

Where you can entertain your girlfriend, I think to myself.

'Do you get home much?'

Hugh nods. 'Yeah, every couple of weeks. Bit of a pain but it keeps the wife happy. You married, Chad?'

I give Hugh a brief resume of my two failed excursions into matrimony.

'So you're single and fancy free,' says Hugh with a grin.

'Well, single, anyway,' I say ruefully.

'Any kids?'

I tell Hugh about Malcolm and ask him the same question.

He shakes his head. 'No. It's not that we didn't want any. They just didn't turn up. I think the missus is more upset than me about it. Maternal instinct and all that. That's why I try to get home when I can. Stops her going paranoid.'

'What about adoption?'

Hugh wrinkles up his face. 'Cyn—my wife—brought it up once or twice but I'm not really keen on bringing up someone else's child.'

'So has she got over it?' I ask.

'No,' says Hugh. 'I don't think so. She's not as happy as she used to be and I think it's because she hasn't had kids. I suggested counselling but she said no.'

'So there's nothing you can do?'

'No, I don't think there is. She'll just have to get over it.'

There's a pause while the waitress brings Hugh's baguette.

'So, does your wife go to work?' I ask.

'She keeps busy,' says Hugh. 'She works as a translator and interpreter. She speaks about a thousand foreign languages. She does voluntary work as well, helping out at a local centre for mentally disabled people. She does speech therapy there.'

The conversation changes tack and I give him the gen on eXeFo, handing him one of my cards.

'So you're here on holiday?' asks Hugh. 'On your own?'

'No with a woman who works for me, and her kids.'

Hugh gives me an impish smile. 'So you've got someone to keep you warm at night?'

I shake my head. 'She's a lovely lady,' I say, 'but we're not in a relationship.'

'A chap needs a woman in his bed,' says Hugh.

'You're okay,' I offer. 'You've got a wife.'

Hugh nods slowly. 'Yes . . . I've got a wife.'

'Does she ever come out here to stay with you?'

'Yes, she's been here once or twice.'

'Have you got friends here?'

'Yes, a few. Brits, and locals too. I meet them socially, playing golf and tennis, meeting for dinner, that sort of thing. So at least I'm not stuck on my own.'

'How long will the job last, Hugh?'

As we sip coffee Hugh runs through the planned schedule for the hotel extension. It seems the task is about half completed. The construction work will be finished by the end of the summer and the interior work over the coming winter. There will be a grand opening ceremony next spring so the enlarged hotel is ready for the next high season.

'So do you know what your next job will be?' I ask.

'Not for sure,' replies Hugh. 'Possibly China. Carding Wells are trying to break into the market there.'

'Do you prefer working abroad?'

Hugh shrugs. 'Not fussed, really. Money's usually better and less tax.'

'What would your wife say if you had to work in China? Would she go with you?'

'Don't really know, Chad. She knows Mandarin so she could get work there, I suppose.'

'What about her voluntary work?'

'She'd have to give it up. Unless she stayed at home while I was working overseas.'

I decide to risk a little provocation.

'But who would keep you warm at night?'

'Chad!' grins Hugh. 'What are you suggesting!'

The conversation moves onto safer ground and Hugh tells me a bit more about his past. There's nothing remarkable about it. I find out that he and Cynthia have been married for twelve years. If there were complications in the relationship he wouldn't reveal them to a stranger, of course. All in all I'm not much further along than before Hugh showed up.

Hugh looks at his watch. 'Well, back to the grindstone,'

he says.

'What's it like, working with locals?' I ask.

'Usually better than working with Brits,' laughs Hugh. 'Better educated, usually.'

'And Gérard says you've got a deputy. So you can take time out and let him run the show, I suppose.'

Hugh nods. 'Yes, Henri, my foreman. Excellent fellow. To be honest he could probably take over from me. I can leave him to his own devices if I want to take a break. He's never let me down yet.'

'So you get to see other places while you're down here? Like a tourist, travelling around and so on.'

Hugh looks at me with narrowed eyes. Have I overstepped the mark? Does he think I'm prying?

'Sometimes,' he says after a pause. He gets up from the table.

'Anyway, Chad, nice to meet you. I expect I'll bump into you again. How long did you say you're staying?'

I stand up to shake his hand. 'Leaving next Wednesday.'

'Okay. If you're up here at the Terrasse and I'm here we can play a round of golf perhaps. Or maybe tennis at the Saint Max club.'

'Thanks.'

'Right, well, I'll love you and leave you. Did you say you've got some friends coming here later?'

I tell Hugh about the Likely Lads and he walks off to his office. I wait a few minutes then follow him out of the building and saunter along the access road. I fish my OmniVis out of my pocket and take a few piccies with it, landscape shots, but with the side lens active so that

some of the frames will include Hugh's blue Volvo and its registration plate. I've also got a couple of VC9 homing beacons in my pocket. They're brilliant. Tiny, cylindrical in shape, about a centimetre in diameter and a centimetre deep, you peel off a backing strip and then you can stick them just about anywhere to keep tabs on something or someone. Removing the backing activates the transmitter which sends out a brief radio signal every half hour for three to four days till its battery runs down. An app on the OmniVis picks up the signal via the mobile phone network and gives you range and bearing. But it's too risky to try to fix a VC9 into the wheel arch of the Volvo. Hugh might be looking out of his window and wondering what I was up to. That could ruin everything. Bugger!

CHAPTER 10

PROGRESS AT LAST! Yesterday I found out where Hugh's flat is. As Cynthia told me, it's on a hill to the northwest of the town, on a road parallelling the coastline. After my game of golf with the Likely Lads yesterday I hung around the Terrasse and saw Hugh standing by his car, chatting to one of the workmen. I finished my coffee, discreetly glancing through the entrance from time to time. When Hugh got into his car I casually got up from my seat and went out to the car park, fiddling with my phone as I walked to my own car so Hugh wouldn't think I was watching him.

The Volvo headed downhill to the town centre and crossed the river on the D25 bridge. At the Avenue George Pompidou he went right and zig-zagged uphill along various minor roads for about two kilometres and turned into an underground car park under a block of flats. Definitely up-market—spacious accommodation, each flat with a wide balcony giving a view across the bay. Cynthia had told me she thought Hugh's flat was on the second or third floor. I drove past the block for a hundred

metres or so, found a parking spot, waited ten minutes then got out of my car so I could stroll back past the flats. I reckoned I could risk a glance or two towards the building on the off chance that Hugh was sunning himself on his balcony so I could identify which flat was his. I was wearing my wide-brimmed Australian hat and sunshades so hopefully Hugh wouldn't recognise me if he happened to look down as I happened to look up. There were a few people relaxing on their balconies but as far as I could make out without staring too long, none of them was Hugh Sommerville. I continued past the building and returned to my car via a circuitous route so I wouldn't run the risk of being spotted again if by chance Hugh was looking out of his front window.

In the evening I dined with Penny and the girls at the Allegro and then later I took my leave and walked back to Hugh's apartment block. I was wearing a baseball cap and thick-framed glasses with clear lenses to make myself look different from my earlier appearance. There weren't many people in the streets above the town. As I approached the flats I walked without hesitation unto the underground car park. There was a barrier to control cars going in and out but no restrictions for pedestrians. I had some night vision goggles in my pocket but the car park was well lit so I didn't need them. I came to a halt a few metres away from the blue Volvo, got out my phone and pretended to do some messaging on it, with occasional glances to check there was no-one else around. If challenged by anyone I would pat my pockets and pretend I'd left my car keys indoors and would have to go and get them. There were two security cameras, one of

which looked like it might include the Volvo in its field of view, so I would have to do the job quickly and as unobtrusively as possible, hoping that no-one was paying too much attention.

Satisfied I was alone I took out two VC9s and removed their backing strips. Then I walked over to the Volvo and without bending down immediately stuck both of them close together in the car's right rear wheel arch. The adhesive is very effective—it'll stick to any surface, clean or dirty. I don't know what the material is but you can even stick them onto oily surfaces. It's very unlikely Hugh will discover them. They're black so they'll blend in with the surroundings. Even if someone was to inspect the wheel arch closely they'd probably assume the objects were part of the wheel arch lining attachment points. Worst case scenario—Hugh finds the VC9s, wonders what they are and removes them. They look like small round pieces of plastic with no distinguishing features. He would have to break them open to see the internal components. As he has no reason to suppose anyone's trailing him he would not think there was anything suspicious about them.

Back at the Ferréol hotel I opened the VC9 app on my phone and checked the reception history. Both transmitters had sent a signal ten minutes after activation, as designed. The system piggybacks the mobile networks so as long as the transmitters are within about three kilometres of a mast the network will send the data to any mobile set up to use them. The clever bit is that the VC9s use the car's metal bodywork as a booster aerial so the signals are strong enough to be picked up by the

mobile network.

Today after breakfast I checked my phone and saw that the Volvo had moved to the Terrasse. As always, I was impressed with the accuracy of the VC9s. On the enlarged map display one was indicating a position about fifty metres downhill from the actual car park while the other one thought it was in the Terrasse Reception. At least I don't have to spend any more fruitless hours up a hill, perched over an easel, overlooking the club. The VC9s will show me where Hugh's car is.

I haven't been wasting my time today. I did a Skype call with Malcolm to check that everything was okay at with Arrow Tec at home. There were a few minor items to sort out but by and large everything is ticking along nicely. Malcolm is off to Barbados for a week, doing some checking on an expat Brit who has relocated there. Malc's assisting a buddy of his in the Greater Manchester Police Force. The Brit is an ex-con and the Barbadian Government think he's involved in a drugs ring in the island. They asked the British police to help, making use of their knowledge of the ex-con's past. All expenses and Arrow Tec's fee are being met by the Manchester bobbies.

'So, a paid holiday, eh? Lucky sod!' I said to Malcolm.

'Not at all, Dad. Strictly work. I'll have my laptop with me so I can keep in touch with anyone who needs to contact Arrow Tec. Though maybe there'll be time to sink a few beers at a beach barbie and take a catamaran trip.'

'Well, I hope it rains non-stop.'

'No need to get jealous, Dad. You've spent the last week or so swanning around in the Riviera.'

'And Anne-Marie has given you permission?'

'No need. She's coming along too.'

'Nice! Give her my love.'

After the Skype call I started working on a new idea for a song. Actually it was something Penny said that got me thinking. As you've probably gathered by now, she's a pretty capable sort of person. A single mum bringing up two kids and working at the same time. I rarely hear her complain about anything but now and again you can sense a sort of weariness. You'll see her just staring into space with a faraway look in her eyes. If you talk to her she instantly snaps out of it with a friendly smile sent your way. Sometimes I feel quite protective. I've never said anything to her but I've made a resolution that as long as she's working for me I'll make sure she never gets brought down by life's vicissitudes. The pay rises I give her always exceed the rate of inflation and I always give her time off whenever she asks for it, which is rarely. I'm also putting money into a pension fund for her but she doesn't know about that. If and when she leaves Arrow Tec it'll be a nice bonus for her.

Last night she made a remark that though she was happy with life it would be nice to meet a man. I can't remember what triggered the conversation. We were sipping liqueurs in the bar at the Allegro and the girls had gone to bed. I told Penny that I was planning to walk back to Hugh's apartment block to plant the VC9s.

She nodded and said: 'You don't need me to come with you, do you? Maybe a couple walking together would look less suspicious. Also I could keep an eye out for anyone watching while you're doing the James Bond stuff.'

'No,' I said, 'I'll do this solo. You get a good night's sleep.'

Again Penny nodded. 'I feel guilty, Chad. I haven't really done anything useful while we've been down here.'

'You're not here to be useful,' I said gently. 'You're here on holiday.'

'But you've been working. Don't you need a holiday too?'

'Let's say this is a working holiday,' I said. 'It's not been arduous. A bit tedious at times, hanging around watching out for Hugh Sommerville, but that goes with the job. But I've had fun too, flying and playing golf with the Likely Lads. And eating out in nice restaurants.'

'The day out sailing to San Peyre was lovely,' said Penny. 'The girls loved it too. They might be cheeky at times but they really like you, Chad. They admire you.'

'You're doing a good job, bringing them up on your own.'

Penny paused, then said: 'It would be nice to find a man one day, someone to share the load. Someone more reliable than Angus.'

I thought for a second or two. I don't normally like to ask my friends personal questions but maybe the moment required it. 'Are you seeing anyone at the moment, Pen?'

'Sort of. It's a chap I met through a dating agency. Divorced, few years older than me. We've been out a few times. He seems okay, but there's no . . . spark. Not yet, anyway.'

'As Solomon Burke sang: "Everybody needs somebody".'

'What about you, Chad. Are you still seeing Suzie?'

'Well . . . yes.' I didn't want to say anything more.

The conversation petered out then. We said our goodnights, Penny pecked me on the cheek and I left the hotel to make my way to Hugh's place to plant the bugs on his car.

Now I'm sitting in my room at the Ferréol, thinking about what Penny said. Finding someone to share the load. In a song you could make it part of the chorus. What about:

*When you're a lonesome girl/You need a tender man
To share the load*

For the fade-out you could just repeat the line a few times. Actually, now I come to think of it, you could do a jokey version, using various permutations of the words for an extended fade-out:

*When you're a tender man / You need a lonesome girl
To share the load
When you're a lonesome girl/ You need a tender girl
To share the load
When you're a tender man/ You need a lonesome man
To share the load
When you're a lonesome man/ You need a tender load
To share the girl*

And so on. I'm thinking of a slow tempo, country sound, steel guitars and maybe harmonica. I'll float the idea to my fellow Rollbackers next time we meet for a jam. If they're in agreement we could work it into the next album, which is going to—

Ding! New message alert on my mobile, triggered by the VC9 app. I tap on the 'View details' icon. The app says the Volvo has moved to a new location. Any displacement greater than 100 metres from the previous location triggers the alert. When I expand the map I find the VC9s are telling me they're just under six kilometres from the centre of Sainte-Maxime, in a small residential development near the coast, where it curves south at the western end of the bay. The houses are on the south side of the main D559 road. On the other side is a large sports complex, the Sport-Arena. Looking at the map's satellite view, it's got tennis courts, a swimming pool and a running track.

A few minutes later I'm driving southwest along the coast road towards the point where the VC9s say they're located. There's a discrepancy of about seventy metres between them. The Sport-Arena is a good landmark as I approach. I turn left off the main road and right into the road which bisects the two VC9 indications. The houses are chalet bungalows with small gardens and upper floor balconies. Upmarket sort of area, I would say.

And yes, there it is. Hugh's Volvo, parked in the driveway of one of the bungalows. I drive slowly past and continue to the end of the road, turn left and park on the right side. There are several other cars parked at the roadside so my Nissan does not stick out as an intruder. I lock the car, don the Aussie hat and sunglasses and stroll slowly back the way I came. There's no obvious spot I can sit and watch the Volvo without drawing attention to myself and I can't keep walking up and down the road, which would look just as suspicious to the neighbours, let

alone Hugh Sommerville if he happens to be looking out of the window.

So, what I'll do is walk past the house, wander around for ten minutes out of direct sight then back past the house to where my Nissan is parked. If there's nothing happening I'll drive down to the coast and find somewhere nice for lunch. The VC9 app will tell me if the Volvo's on the move again.

I'm about a hundred metres from the house on the return pass when I see the front door open. I quicken my pace to get a closer look. It's a woman. Chestnut hair in a bun, tanned skin, elegant summer dress. It's the chef from the Terrasse! Madame . . . what's her name? The lady who prefers girls to men, according to Gérard Fermier, the club's manager. Is the bungalow her home? What's Hugh Sommerville doing there?

As I get closer, Madame Whatsit walks past the Volvo onto the pavement and turns towards me. She seems to be on her own. There's no sign of Hugh. She's wearing sunglasses so I can't see her eyes. She switches on a brief smile as we pass and murmurs, 'Bonjour', which I reciprocate. There's a whiff of perfume in her slipstream. I continue for another fifty metres or so and then stop, pretending my phone has rung. I conduct an imaginary conversation, casually turning round to watch Madame Ren . . . Renovation? Something like that.

When she's about seventy metres away I start to follow, still talking to no-one on my phone. The chef lady turns right at the end of the road and walks downhill, towards the coast. I conclude my pretend conversation and stay in her tracks. She continues down to the waterfront and

turns right along the promenade, eventually coming to a stop outside a restaurant, where she stops to check the menu.

A waiter comes outside and he and Madame Renoir (I don't think that's her name but it'll do for the moment) start a brisk conversation, during which he motions her to sit at an empty table. Judging by their rapport she's a well-known customer. There's plenty of laughter and occasional touching.

The restaurant's quite busy but there are a few unoccupied tables. I plonk myself down at one of them and pick up a menu. I'll stick to salad today to offset all the French haute cuisine I've been stuffing down my gullet recently. But I'll wash it down with a nice cold beer—or two.

Wouldn't it be great if Hugh Sommerville showed up and gave her a lover's kiss, which I could photograph using the OmniVis side lens. Will he be joining Madame Renoir for lunch. If he doesn't, what then? What does it mean? Is he being super cautious, not wanting anyone to spot him if he's her lover. But how can he be her lover if she's a lesbian? Or is she bisexual?

But if Hugh does turn up, is it safe for me to sit here? He's seen me close up, so he might recognise me even with hat and sunshades. Would he think it too much of a coincidence that I happened to choose the same venue as him for lunch? No, an emergency bail out would be better. If I'm halfway through my meal I'll just get up, leave a bit of dosh on the table and scarper.

Ah! My Caesar salad and Löwenbräu. Smashing!

Forget about Hugh & Madame Chef for the moment and enjoy lunch!

CHAPTER 11

WELL, THAT WAS A WASTE OF TIME. Nothing! Madame Renoir finished her lunch and wandered off along the prom. Hugh hasn't showed up, which presumably means he's still at the bungalow. I'm still wondering whether to follow the chef lady when my phone rings. It's Cynthia.

'He's here!' she says a little breathlessly when I answer.

'Pardon?'

'Hugh . . . he's here in Como. I saw him not ten minutes ago. With a woman.'

'But Cynthia, his car's here. The Volvo. He drove it to his girlfriend's house this morning.'

'Girlfriend?' There's a slight edge in her voice. 'Another one?'

'Well, maybe not. She's allegedly a lesbian.'

'Chad . . . what's going on there?'

I give Cynthia a quick resumé of the recent past. I hear the occasional 'uh-huh' as I run through the sequence of events.

'Well,' says Cynthia, 'his car might be in France but his

body is definitely here in Italy. As I said, with a woman. And she doesn't look like a lesbian.'

'What does a lesbian look like?' I say in a lighter tone. 'The one I've been watching looks very attractive. To me, anyway.'

'Chad, be serious. I saw them in a cafe and they looked pretty close. Not actually snogging but certainly more than just friends.'

'I take it Hugh didn't see you?'

'No. I was in blonde mode. I was just going into the cafe and happened to spot them. It was definitely Hugh. I immediately spun round and left again.'

'So you didn't try to scratch her eyes out,' I joked.

'Sorely tempted, Chad. But reason prevailed. I knew it would be better if they were caught together in a more intimate situation, preferably with a camera so we could get photographic evidence.'

'So you want to continue surveillance?'

'Yes. Are you happy to do that, Chad? Will you come to Como?'

'Of course, Cynthia. You're the customer. You call the shots. But are you sure about Hugh? Why is his car here? You don't think he's got a double, do you?'

'Not impossible, I suppose.'

'Perhaps you weren't in the cafe long enough to get a good look. Maybe you just saw someone who looked like Hugh.'

'Well, now I'm having my doubts, talking to you about it. What should I do, Chad?'

'Where are you staying?'

'In our friends' house, in Moltrasio.'

'And Hugh's not staying there, obviously.'

'That's right. If he's in Como to meet this woman he wouldn't stay somewhere where he was known.'

'If he's actually there.'

'Yes, if he's actually there. And if it's Hugh, and not a lookalike.'

'Let me give it some thought, Cynthia, and we'll see if we can come up with a plan. I'll call you back.'

After we ring off I start to marshal the facts. To start with, where's Hugh Sommerville? The fact that his car's here doesn't mean he is. Maybe the chef lady has been driving it for some reason. Cynthia's sighting is not definite, by her own admission. But previously her friends' housekeeper also saw him, so unless there happens to be a lookalike in Como, which is unlikely, the chances are that the man they saw was the genuine article. So more surveillance required. Had my son Malcolm been available I could have sent him on the job while I kept watch in Sainte-Maxime in case Hugh Sommerville reappeared. But Malc's shooting off to Barbados so it looks like it'll have to be me that heads for Italy. Another mission for Whiskey Whiskey then.

I switch on my laptop and find the website giving details of Italian airfields. Yes, there's one at Como. It's 380 metres above sea level, which would knock a bit off the Arrow's performance, and there are mountains, the Italian Alps, to the north. And at 740 metres the runway's not the longest in the world, but Whiskey Whiskey should be able to get in and out okay. The airfield lies on the southwest side of the town on high ground, alongside a ridge of smaller mountains. Could be tricky in poor viz or strong

winds. Lake Como itself stretches away northwards. The website says there are also floatplanes operating from a base on the lake shore near the town.

The route looks reasonably straight forward. From La Môle fly northeast to Nice, follow the coast as far as Albenga, then inland to Voghera, Saronno and Como. You probably haven't heard of the intermediate waypoints—they're radio beacons, so I can follow the route even if the weather's not much cop. The bit between Voghera and Saronno crosses the Po river about 30 miles southwest of Milan and the Ticino a bit further along. The journey is about 200 nautical miles in total, say an hour and a half in Whiskey Whiskey, depending on wind. So I wouldn't need that much fuel. Even if I took Penny and the girls I could keep the total weight down to a reasonable level.

Terrain wouldn't be too much of a problem for most of the flight. There's some high ground west of the Gulf of Genoa between Albenga and Voghera, but after that the terrain is pretty flat until approaching Como itself. If the weather was too bad to get into Como the best bet would be to divert back to Milan Linate. It's a bit further away from Como than Malpensa but it's a lot cheaper to land there.

When I call Cynthia back I suggest that I fly into Como the next day so I can resume surveillance duties.

'On your own, or . . . '

'I think Penny would love to see the area,' I interrupt. 'I don't think she's done the Italian Lakes.'

'I'm sure she would,' says Cynthia. 'By all means bring her and the girls.'

'Can you arrange accommodation for us?' I ask. 'Shall we stay with you at Moltrasio?'

'There's only two bedrooms available in the private section at the moment. The third is being used as a storage room. If you bring Penny and her daughters . . . '

'Yes, I see what you mean. What about the rental part?'

'No, that's in use. American tourists, I think Teresa said.'

'She's the housekeeper? The one who previously saw Hugh?'

'Yes. But I can try to find somewhere for you in Como even if there's nothing in Moltrasio. I'll pay, of course.'

'If you're putting up Penny and the twins then I'll pay for my own accommodation.'

'Well, we'll discuss that when we meet. Is there anything else we need to arrange?'

'There are minor complications,' I say. 'How good is your disguise? If Hugh sees you he'll correctly assume you're there to spy on him so he might tell the woman he can't meet her for a while.'

'So it'll be up to you to watch him then, Chad?'

'Yes, but because I've met Hugh myself the same problem arises. He'll think it very strange that a random stranger he bumped into at a French golf club suddenly shows up in the same town as him in Italy. So I'll have to work in Remote mode.'

I hear a sigh on the phone. 'That bastard!' says Cynthia bitterly. 'The grief he's putting me through so he can have a fling with another woman.'

'Or two,' I add, before cursing myself for my insensitivity. Keep your fat gob closed, Chad.

'Or two,' chimes Cynthia, voice quiet.

'Sorry,' I say. 'Tactless of me. But don't worry, we'll catch our man.'

'Yes,' agrees Cynthia. 'We'll catch our man.'

CHAPTER 12

'SO, WHAT'S THIS HOUSE LIKE?' asks Penny.

'Cynthia says it's very nice,' I reply. 'All mod cons and satellite TV. It's about six kilometres from Como so you can drive in or take the ferry service or—'

'Whiskey Whiskey, direct Como approved,' interrupts Air Traffic Control in our earphones.

Penny presses her transmit switch to acknowledge. She doesn't know Italian and nor do I so we're using English on the radio, although there's plenty of chat on the Milan area frequency in the native tongue. Makes me a little uncomfortable cos you can't build up a mental picture of the traffic round you when you can't understand what they're saying and Whiskey Whiskey is not equipped with the transponder interrogation kit that shows you where nearby aircraft are. Perhaps it's about time I installed an interrogator. They're getting cheaper and better all the time. I'll definitely look into it when we get back to the UK.

We're about twelve nautical miles southwest of the city of Milan, cruising at Flight Level seven zero, which is

7,000 feet on the standard altimeter setting. The weather is unsettled—layered cloud occasionally obscuring ground features but viz pretty good when clear of cloud. We've been dodging showers since leaving La Môle and blasting through the less malign ones. The twins have been watching DVDs, with the occasional 'look at that' when a clear patch reveals something of interest on the ground we're flying over.

We've brought all our things with us as we don't know how long we'll be staying in Italy. Cynthia will meet us at the airport. She's already organised a hotel and hire car for me. We'll drive to Moltrasio and get Penny and the girls settled in, then I'll drive back towards Como to the Reggia Hotel in Cernobbio, where I'm staying. You probably know that Lake Como is like a big inverted 'Y' shape, with the city of Como at the southern tip of the western branch of the lake. Cernobbio is another town lying on the western shore of the western branch, about halfway between Como and Moltrasio.

I estimate our chances of getting into Como at about 75 percent. Based on weather reports from Milan Malpensa airport, off to our northwest, the cloud should thin out as we approach the Como area. The two probs are firstly, there are no instrument approach procedures for the airport and secondly, as I've mentioned before, high ground lurks immediately to the west and north. So it's got to be a visual approach. If we can't see the airport as we get near I'll have to maintain height and get ATC clearance to divert back to Milan Linate airport. Then it's a case of waiting for an improvement in the weather, hopefully without having to stay overnight in Milan,

which'll cost a penny or two.

When we do eventually get to Como, the next question is: how do we find Hugh Sommerville? It's a bit annoying that the bits of kit I've deployed so far haven't really helped. The phone tracker proved that he leaves his phone, or one of his phones, permanently in his office at the Terrasse golf club. The VC9s show precisely where the blue Volvo is but tell me nothing about the location of its driver. I don't mind letting on to you that I'm losing enthusiasm for this case. We've somehow got to keep wandering round Como on the off chance that our quarry will show up again. Adding to the difficulty, we've got to make sure Hugh doesn't spot me or Cynthia, cos then he'll know he's being followed. For checking out restaurants and cafes Penny will be our best bet. Hugh hasn't set eyes on her but she's got an accurate idea of what he looks like from studying the various photos I've shown her.

'Look, girls,' I say over the intercom. 'Over to the left.'

The twins turn their eyes where I'm pointing.

'Wow!' comes the response.

In the distance the Alps rise up to their snowy peaks. They're partly obscured by grey and purple bands of cloud nestling against their flanks, slicing the mountains into horizontal layers. Penny and her daughters spend a few minutes oohing and aahing while I arrange my charts for the approach to Como. We're passing the radio beacon at Saronno, so there's about twelve miles to run to Como. In our chunk of sky the cloud has all but disappeared although the viz is a bit hazier in the late afternoon sun. But I think we'll get in okay.

Penny asks for descent clearance and cancels our Instrument Flight Rules plan so we can proceed visually under our own navigation.

'Whiskey Whiskey, IFR cancelled, descend at your discretion, contact Como on one three five five two, ciao.'

The closest mountains are now ahead of us as we sink lower, southern flanks sunlit and eastern sides cloaked in blue-grey shadow. Penny is taking photos.

Como airport is happy for me to make a straight in approach on runway three two, which points northwest. There are no runway or approach lights, of course, but I have no trouble spotting the airport from three or four miles away. It's a fairly basic airport, Como. There's no Air Traffic Control, just an information service, so pilots are under their own steam. It's only open during daylight hours. The radio is handy for hearing what other people are up to. At the moment I seem to be the only aircraft on the frequency but that doesn't mean there's no-one else around. For a start, there'll be the tourist flights operating from the floatplane base, which is only a mile or so from the airport.

'Everyone strapped in?' I check as we line up for landing. Even though my rate of descent is normal the approach path looks a little steep because the runway slopes uphill.

'Whiskey Whiskey, wind calm,' says the Tower man in accented English. *'Runway three two clear.'*

It's a good one, stall warning sounding just before the squeal of tyres brushing tarmac.

'Nice landing, Chad,' says Katie as we slow to taxiing speed.

'Thank you, ma'am,' I respond, smiling to myself. A satisfied customer!

'Yes,' agrees Rachael. 'Both the wheels touched the ground at the same time.'

'But the front wheel afterwards,' observes Katie.

'That's how you're supposed to do it,' says her sister.

'I know that! Chad's already told me.'

'Unless there's a crosswind,' the girls add simultaneously, another 'twin' moment.

The discussion on landing technique peters out as I taxi in. Over the radio I call for refuelling and look for a parking spot. There are no marshallers so it's do-it-yourself. As I cut the mixture and the prop flicks through its last compressions to a stop we see a car drive up, a dark maroon Audi saloon. It pulls up alongside, the driver side door opens and an elegantly dressed, auburn haired woman gets out. It's Cynthia Sommerville.

'Chad, lovely to see you,' she smiles as I clamber down from the wing to greet her.

We exchange kisses and when Penny and the twins have stepped off the wing onto the ground I complete the introductions. Cynthia has already met Penny once before, when she came to see us at the Arrow Tec office in Leighton Buzzard the time she was persuading me to take on the case.

We start to make plans for the evening. I come up with a new arrangement for transport.

'It's going to take me a while to put the Arrow to bed,' I say to Cynthia. 'Why don't you take Penny and the girls to Moltrasio?' I suggest. 'Then if it's not too much trouble you could come back for me. Or else I could get a taxi to

the Reggia hotel and meet you lot later somewhere.'

'No, I'll come back for you,' says Cynthia. 'We'll book you into the hotel then go back to the house in Moltrasio for dinner.'

I load the suitcases into the Audi and then the others drive off, leaving me alone with Whiskey Whiskey. I tidy and lock the cabin, put the cover on and do the tie-downs and chocks. The tranquillity is disturbed the growl of a diesel engine and a fuel bowser rolls up, driven by an old man in grimy overalls. His English is very limited and my Italian is non-existent so we communicate in smiles and written notes. He pumps 90 litres of aviation gasoline into Whiskey Whiskey, half in each wing tank.

It's a pleasant two hundred metre stroll to the check-in office in the warmth of late afternoon. The office block is a simple single storey wooden building. Only the tower rises to a second floor.

There are two young personnel on duty, a man and a woman, both in smart uniforms. Occasionally the man conducts brief conversations with other aircraft in Italian, keying a desk mike, so I assume he is the flight information officer I spoke to earlier on the radio. For arriving and departing aircraft I would imagine he climbs up into the tower to check the runway is clear.

The female officer and I complete the inevitable paperwork and I dig out my credit card to pay for the landing fee, parking charges and fuel. I pay for two nights initially, with the option of extending if required.

There are no catering facilities at Como airport apart from vending machines. I treat myself to a cappuccino, which isn't bad, and a chocolate bar, sitting outside in the

sun. Before long the maroon Audi reappears and I load my bags into the back.

The road zigzags down from the airport to the city centre and then follows the lake shore northwards to Cernobbio. As we leave Como I see a floatplane on our right side just getting airborne from the base and another further away in a descending right turn, approaching the touchdown area. All very pretty and picture postcardy.

The Reggia hotel is sited at the edge of a small recreational park, about two hundred metres inland. It's elegant and well-appointed, four storeys high, with pale cream stucco walls. Four stars, the website claims.

Cynthia helps me to check in. Italian is obviously one of the four million languages she speaks. I suggest we talk tactics over a drink in the bar before driving to Moltrasio for dinner with the others. So while she heads to the bar to order the drinks I go up to my room on the second floor to dump my bags. The room's alright, with a balcony facing the lake.

Ten minutes later I'm back downstairs and slaking my thirst with a chilled Löwenbräu while Cynthia sips a Chardonnay.

'What puzzles me,' says Cynthia, 'is why he's shuttling between Saint Max and here. Unless it's because his girlfriend lives here.' There's a slight acidic emphasis in her tone when she says 'girlfriend'.

'Yeah, he must be keen to keep driving there and back. How come Carding Wells don't seem to mind their employee swanning around Europe on company time?'

'Well,' says Cynthia, 'I don't think they're bothered as long as the work is completed on schedule and is up to

standard. Hugh's told me before it's allowable to organise deputies when he's on these assignments. Of course, we don't know how much of his time he's spending here. How far is it anyway, Saint Max to Como?'

I get out my phone and fire up Google maps.

'It's 470 kilometres, say 300 miles,' I tell my client. 'Google says less than five hours so the roads must be good for most of the route. He must be using a different car for his assignments.'

Cynthia takes another sip of wine. 'Assignations. A nice euphemism for doing what he's apparently doing. He could do the whole thing in a day. Drive here, shag his tart and then drive back.'

I look at her, surprised. The unladylike language seems out of character for a sophisticate like her. She's obviously bitter about hubbie's philandering. Shades of Penny and Angus. Can't blame her, I suppose.

'You think you're okay, staying in the Moltrasio house?' I ask. 'No chance of Hugh turning up there.'

Cynthia shakes her head. 'He'd be foolish to do that. He knows that Teresa drops in most days to keep an eye on the place and do the housekeeping chores for the paying customers. He couldn't run the risk that Teresa or the owners of the house might happen to mention to me that he's in Como.'

'Which is what happened,' I observe.

'Quite, although that was just a random event, Chad, if you remember. Teresa saw him in town, not at the house. So maybe he stays with his floozie when he's here.'

'You know the owners of the Moltrasio house pretty well, didn't you say?'

'Yes, the Meazza family. Nice people. They own several holiday lets in the Lakes region.'

'No point asking them if Hugh's using one of their other properties?'

Cynthia shakes her head again. 'No, he couldn't risk it, in case somehow the information that he was staying in one of their places got to me.'

'Plus, if he was in touch with them, they might mention to him that we'd been asking about him,' I say. 'Which gives the game away if we don't want him to know we're here.'

'It's a mess,' sighs Cynthia. 'Maybe I should just abandon the whole thing. Divorce the bugger and start again.'

'Do you love him?' I ask, aware I might be edging into territory that's too personal.

Cynthia pauses and looks away. Perhaps I've gone too far. I lift my beer glass to my lips, wondering whether to say something to bring us back to safe ground or to keep stumm and let the awkward moment pass.

'I don't know,' says Cynthia eventually, voice quiet.

I wait for further enlightenment but nothing else comes. I find myself thinking that Hugh must be an idiot if he's playing away from home when his wife is such an attractive woman. I suppose -

'It just seems wrong to give up, despite what I just said,' says Cynthia. 'Like I'm being lazy or something. Sometimes you have to fight for the things you want. So . . . we'll keep doing what we're doing for a bit, Chad. If you don't mind giving up more of your time and effort.'

'My pleasure,' I reassure her. And it's true, it is a

pleasure being in her company, even if the rest of the job is a bit of a pain.

'So what's the best way to play it?'

'Well, you and me are of limited use,' I tell her, 'because we can't risk Hugh spotting us. We can wander around Como incognito as far as possible on the off chance we might catch sight of him. As long as it's sunny then shades are useful for hiding half your face. I can stick my Aussie hat on and you could wear your blonde wig. We'll get Penny to drop into various restaurants and cafes. She doesn't need to order food each time. Just stick her face round the door, look around as if she's looking for someone, then out again.'

'Okay, what about Teresa?' asks Cynthia. 'Shall we ask her to tell us if she sees Hugh again?'

'What have you told her so far?'

'That Hugh is staying somewhere else for work purposes but he might pop into Como from time to time and I might be able to meet him there if it can be arranged.'

'So Teresa thinks everything is normal between you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, if she happens to let it slip that she's seen Hugh again I don't think it'll do any harm. The info might be useful to us. We just need to make sure it doesn't look as if we're asking too many questions about him. Teresa might think that was a bit odd.'

Cynthia empties her glass.

'Refill?' I ask her.

'No, let's go back to Moltrasio, Chad. I'm supposed to be helping Penny make a risotto for everyone.'

'Yum yum,' I acknowledge, finishing my beer.

'Penny seems a nice person,' says Cynthia as we walk to the car. She hands me the keys. 'How long has she been working for you?'

As we drive off I give my client a brief history of my PA's involvement with Arrow Tec and a bit of background. Angus gets a passing mention.

'So, do you often take her on holiday with you?'

'No, not often,' I reply. 'But she works hard and I couldn't run the business without her. So it's my duty to treat her to something special now and again. Everyone likes to be appreciated.'

'Duty . . . or pleasure?' continues Cynthia.

I look across. There's a playful glint in her eyes.

I smile back. 'Both.'

Cynthia nods. 'Yes . . . '

'I don't want her to think I take her for granted,' I add.

'I'm sure she doesn't think that,' says Cynthia.

I look across again. There's still a whimsical smile on her lips.

'Do you think . . . ' she begins, then breaks off.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'Okay.'

'I like the twins,' says Cynthia.

'Me too,' I concur.

'I wonder if their father ever regrets breaking up the family.'

'I know for a fact that he does,' I tell her.

'Hugh and I never had children,' says Cynthia. 'When we realised it wasn't going to happen naturally I

suggested adoption, but Hugh wasn't keen.'

'Yes, I remember him telling me that when we met at the Terrasse,' I say.

'Perhaps if we'd had children . . . ' Cynthia stops talking and I look across. She's got that sad expression in her eyes that I've seen before.

We're approaching Moltrasio and Cynthia starts navigating for me, dragging us from hypothetical speculation back to life's mundanities.

'Risotto,' I say. 'Looking forward to that.'

'Penny's recipe,' says Cynthia. 'She's a multi-talented lady.'

'Yes, she is,' I respond. We turn to look at each other and we're both smiling.

CHAPTER 13

TWO DEVELOPMENTS TODAY, neither of them very welcome. I woke up in a good mood this morning. Yesterday evening's dinner with Cynthia and Penny and the girls was good fun. I limited myself to one glass of chianti as I had to drive back to the Reggia hotel after the meal. The house they're all staying in is a bit larger than the standard villa you find dotted along the shore of the Italian lakes. As I've already told you, it's divided into two sections, half for the occupation of the Meazza family and half for paying guests. The two sections are completely independent, each with its own access. There is an internal doorway joining the two halls. In fact it's two separate doors fitted in the same doorway. Each can be locked by the respective occupiers.

The Villa Tranquilla, to give it its full name, has three bedrooms in each section but one of them in the private part is full of stored furniture and other stuff, which is why Cynthia had to sort out accommodation somewhere else for me. Of the two remaining bedrooms, Penny and the girls are sharing the bigger one and Cynthia is on her own

in the other. There are three living rooms and a kitchen on the ground floor and a medium sized terraced garden at the back, accessed by patio doors.

The rented part of the villa has been hired for the summer by a group of three American tourists, according to Cynthia, who got the information from Teresa, the housekeeper. But the tourists go off to other locations from time to time and Teresa says they're away at the moment.

So, having polished off Penny's excellent risotto yesterday evening we sat chatting for a while, then I drove back to Cernobbio in a contented mood. A slug of whiskey in the bar at the Reggia reinforced my bonhomie and I hit the sack a happy man.

And woke up ditto this morning. Breakfast on the sunlit terrace was going nicely until interrupted by the VC9 app pinging on my phone. Hugh Sommerville's Volvo has moved! When I zoom in on the map I see that's it's now back at his flat in Saint-Maxime. What does that mean? Has Hugh driven it there? If Hugh is still here in Como, who drove the car to his flat? The chef lady? I try to remember the Volvo's previous location. Was it the Terrasse club or Madame Lesbian's flat? I have been assuming Hugh is here in Como and haven't been paying as much attention as I should to his car.

While I was turning this stuff over in my mind my phone rang. It was Suzie and it was not good news.

Did I tell you about Suzie? I started going out with her while I was still married to my second ex-wife. At that point the transformation of my second ex-wife from attractive female companion to fire-breathing harridan

was well on the way to completion and Suzie was a welcome refuge from the marital storms.

We first met at a gig, Suzie and me. My band Rollback were one of the acts and Suzie Shine was another. Real name Susan Howdentrige, so you can see why she needed a stage name when she started her career as a singer. She was a divorcee when we started going out, two years younger than me. We never lived together but everyone knew we were a couple. Everything was fine until about six months ago, when Suzie told me we should take a break. Looking back, I think I'd been getting a bit lazy, not putting enough into the relationship to keep it healthy. I persuaded her to stick at it, promising her I'd be more attentive. But, truth to tell, we both knew the magic was gone. The last few times we've met Suzie hasn't let me share her bed. And, I'm ashamed to say, it hasn't really bothered me. But I couldn't really admit to myself that we were probably finished.

When the phone rang and the screen told me 'Suzie calling' it didn't stir any strong emotion apart from mild regret. I'd vaguely told myself I should call her just to see how she was but of course never got round to it. Now she'd taken the initiative.

'Hi Suzie, how's it going?'

'Okay, thanks. You?'

'Fine. What's new?'

'Where are you, Chad? What are you doing?'

I gave her a brief summary of my recent adventures, leaving out the sensitive details, and threw the same question back at her.

'Plenty of work. Got a new contract. BGM.'

'Not bad,' I said. BGM (allegedly the origin of the acronym was 'bloody good music') are quite a big Indy label.

'Doing Glastonbury as well.'

'I'm impressed.'

There was a pause and I could sense bad news about to come over the air.

'Chad . . . I have to tell you . . . I've found someone else. I'm really sorry breaking it to you over the phone. If you were in England I would have suggested a meeting. Seems a bit cowardly not telling you face to face.'

'Well, you've done the decent thing, letting me know rather than two-timing me. Do you want to tell me about your new man?'

'You don't know him. He's an officer in the Army.'

'Nice. How did you meet him?'

'At a party.'

Another pause. I couldn't stop myself sighing.

'I'm pleased for you, Suzie. Really.'

'Thank you. Can we meet when you get home? I'd like us to finish the relationship properly. I owe you that.'

'I'm okay with that.'

'You're not angry with me?'

'No.' It was the truth.

'I didn't want you to be hurt.'

This was the Suzie I originally fell for. Someone who considered the feelings of others. Unlike my second ex-wife.

'I'm probably the one to blame, not being attentive enough.'

'Perhaps we're both guilty of that.'

'Yes.'

'I hope you find someone, Chad. I don't think it'll be too hard. You're easy to like. Easy to love, in fact.'

'Nice of you to say so.' Momentarily my brain's music composition circuits burst into life. Potential lyrics for a song. Easy to like/ Easy to love.

'Will you call me when you get home?' said the voice in my earphone.

'I promise.'

'Thanks, Chad.'

'Good luck with the new fella,' I said. 'I hope he realises he's getting a lovely lady.' Strangely, I felt a brief pang of loss as the words came out of my mouth. What do they say: You don't know what you've got till it's gone.

We said our goodbyes and finished the call. For a while the complications of the Hugh Sommerville business were forgotten and I found myself reliving some of the good times I had had with Suzie. Another sigh. In a way, the air had been cleared. Sometimes in life a phase comes to an end. This was one of those times.

Now I'm sitting by the Reggia's pool, soaking up the morning sun. Thoughts about Suzie are being nudged aside by thoughts about Hugh Sommerville. I might need to change the plan we came up with yesterday after the twins had gone to bed, which assumed Hugh was still in Como. We had decided to deploy our resources separately. Penny would drop into various coffee shops and restaurants on the off chance of spotting Hugh. There was a discussion about Rachael and Katie. Penny said she didn't want to leave them on their own in the villa, even though they both had mobile phones. On the other

hand, if Penny took them with her on surveillance duty she would need to explain to them what they were doing. In the end it was decided a half truth would do the trick. The girls would be told that Cynthia was trying to find an old friend she had lost contact with who she thought was staying in Como and Penny was helping her. I fished out the photo of Suzie I'd been keeping in my wallet and gave it to Penny, who would tell the girls that the photo showed the lady Cynthia was looking for.

Now there's the Volvo to think about. Has Hugh gone back to Saint Max? Should I go back to find out? Or should I stick with plan A, wandering around Como in Aussie hat and shades, hoping for a glimpse of the target? Ditto Cynthia in blonde wig.

My phone rings again. 'Penny calling' says the screen.

'Buon giorno,' I say.

'Good morning, Chad. Sleep well?'

We swap pleasantries then get down to business.

'Cynthia's taken the boat into Como. The girls and I will be on the next service. Are you driving in or taking the boat? We could meet you at Cernobbio if you board there.'

'There's a complication,' I say. I tell her about the Volvo's new location.

'So Hugh might be back in Saint Max?'

'Could be.'

'So what do we do?'

'Stick with the plan for the moment, Pen. The three of us can look around Como separately and hope we see something.'

'We can't meet for lunch, I suppose.'

'No, in case Hugh happens to spot us. We'll compare notes when we meet back at the villa this evening. If you're not too tired we could send you back into town for dinner. Cynthia and I could look after the girls.'

'If you want me to, I'll do it.'

'Let's think about it and decide later. It's a bit of an imposition on you.'

'I don't mind.'

'Okay, Pen. I'll see you when the boat docks at Cernobbio. But have a good look round the boat before it gets here. If Hugh happens to be taking the same boat into town from wherever he's staying I can't risk being seen. Give me a call if it's all clear. If I don't hear from you I'll assume that you've spotted Hugh on the boat, in which case I'll either take the next one or drive in.'

* * * * *

IT ONLY TAKES a couple of minutes to walk to the jetty. There are about ten people waiting for the ferry. The first craft to approach is a hydrofoil, which whooshes past without deigning to pick us up. Overhead a Beaver floatplane is heading north along the shoreline, no doubt full of trippers. I do like the comforting growl of old-tech radial engines.

The next boat heads towards the boarding stage at a more sedate pace. It looks rather elderly in appearance, white-hulled with a tall black chimney and the centre cabin extended in width over the gunwale, as if occupying the space where paddle wheels would once have been housed.

'Chad! Chad!' At the rail on the upper deck Rachael

and Katie are calling out and waving. Penny is standing behind them.

The boat yaws away from its direct approach and I hear the props being reversed to kill the speed. At the passenger entrance stands a crewman with a mooring rope. The skipper is leaning out from the wheelhouse, looking down to gauge the distance between the hull and the jetty. Raised lettering on the hull tells us the craft's name is Torino.

The boat slows to a stop a metre or so from the jetty and then edges sideways to close the gap. Presumably it's equipped with bow and stern thrusters to make manoeuvring easier. The crewman throws his line over a bollard and takes up the slack as the boat gently bumps against the boarding stage. Then he grabs the line passed to him from the young female officer waiting onshore and uses it to help her drag the gangway onto the boat for the use of passengers getting on and off.

A few minutes later we've cast off again and we're on our way, Torino's bow pointing south towards Como, ten minutes away by ferry. The twins have gone to the stern end of the upper deck to watch the wake. Further forward, Penny is sitting next to me. She's looking attractive in her T-shirt and jeans, her blonde hair streaming backwards in the breeze, Ray-Bans shielding her eyes from the bright sun.

Evidently I'm not generating the same response in her. She's smiling at me, a hint of mockery on her face.

'What?' I challenge.

'That hat doesn't suit you.'

'I got it in Melbourne. It's very fashionable.'

'The baseball cap would be more you.'

'Well, I happen to like this hat,' I tell her. 'Anyway, it's part of my disguise in case Hugh Sommerville is lurking.'

'Okay, we'll let it go this time.'

'You're so generous.'

'Indeed.'

I tell Penny about the Volvo and ask her what she makes of it. Usually I can work out stuff on my own but sometimes if you're not too sure about something it's helpful to chew it over with someone else.

'You think you may have to go back to Saint Max?' she asks.

'If I do that it dilutes our resources here,' I reply. 'There'd be only you and Cynthia on surveillance.'

'And Teresa, the housekeeper.'

'True.'

'Has the Volvo moved again since you last checked?'

I dig out my phone and fire up the VC9 app.

'Nope. It's still at his flat.'

'Maybe the chef lady drove it there.'

'But why? We know it's very unlikely she's Hugh's lover.'

Penny shakes her head and shrugs.

I sigh. 'Do you know, if it wasn't for Hugh bloody Sommerville this would be a damned good holiday.'

'It's been great, Chad,' smiles Penny, briefly resting her hand on my arm. 'But . . . '

'But what?' I ask.

'Logically it would make sense for you to go back. In Como we haven't got a clue when or where Hugh will show up, if he shows up at all.'

'Whereas when he's in Saint Max we know where he works and where he lives,' I say, following her reasoning, 'so there's a better chance of spotting him.'

'Yes, and we know he's got to be there some of the time cos he has to work at the Terrasse.'

'The problem is . . . if he is having a fling, is it in Como or Saint Max?' I shake my head. 'I wish Cynthia would drop the whole thing.'

Penny turns to me. 'She's nice, isn't she?'

'She'll do.'

'I think she fancies you.'

I raise my eyebrows. 'Where d'you get that from? Don't tell me . . . '

'Yes, female intuition!' laughs Penny.

'If she fancied me she wouldn't be bothered about her hubby playing away from home.'

'She's got scruples,' suggests Penny. 'She wouldn't be unfaithful even if Hugh was.'

'And how do you know that? Intuition again?' Or do you discuss these things?

'Not directly. But you pick up clues from what people say.'

'Now I remember why I hired you. Your powers of perception.'

'Don't be sarcastic!'

There's a break in the conversation and I briefly wonder whether to tell Penny about my earlier conversation with Suzie. Probably best not to. I can rely on my PA not to spread gossip but I'm not sure I'm ready to share my thoughts yet, not until I've mulled it over myself.

Ahead of us the Como city skyline is rising against the

backdrop of mountains. Katie and Rachael are now at the bow end of the deck, taking in the sights and sounds as we approach the docking terminal. I hear the engine revs drop a little.

'Well, I think you're right, Pen. It's probably better if I head back to Saint Max. You and Cynthia stay here and we'll just have to see who sets eyes on Hugh next.'

'When will you go back?'

'Might as well go today.'

'Will you take the Arrow?'

'Yes.' I look at my watch. 'I'll have a coffee and cake in Como, then taxi or ferry back to the Reggia to pick up my stuff and plan the flight.'

'We'll miss you,' grins Penny.

'I should bloody well hope so!'

CHAPTER 14

HOORAY! Cynthia has given up! Got the news this morning. I'm pleased she's pulled the plug on the whole episode but I also feel a bit guilty. If I'd found out more about Hugh's shenanigans she might have got better value for money. All that remains is tying up loose ends and then drawing a line under the Sommerville case.

As you know, I flew back to Saint-Maxime on my own two days ago to check up on Hugh's Volvo, which the VC9s told me was shuttling between the Terrasse club and Hugh's flat. I followed it myself a couple of times at a discreet distance. Hugh was the only occupant and the only time he stopped or deviated from the route was to drop into a petrol station. By chance I happened to find out which flat was Hugh's in the apartment block cos he appeared on the balcony as I casually strolled by. At no time did I see him with Madame Renoir or any other woman.

Cynthia phoned this morning and I began the update, but she cut me short.

'It doesn't matter, Chad. I'm giving up.'

'You want to finish the surveillance?'

'Yes. I've lost interest.'

'In the case?' I ask, 'or in Hugh? Sorry, Cynthia, that's a bit personal.'

'Yes, it is, Chad.'

There's an embarrassing pause—embarrassing for me, anyway.

'But, if I'm truthful, the answer is . . . both.'

'So, where do we go from here?'

'Are you going to stay in Saint Max or come back to Como? What about Penny and the girls?'

'Let me give it some thought, Cynthia. How about I call you back later.'

'Okay, and you'll need to tell me what I owe you.'

'I'll do some sums.' Since the phone call I've gone over the Sommerville case in my mind. The sense of relief that the wild goose chase is over is tempered by the feeling of frustration. I rarely let my customers down and I hate to admit defeat. It's not just altruism. I don't want my reputation for getting results to be tarnished. Bad for business.

On to practicalities. I take my laptop down to the Hotel Ferréol public lounge and over morning coffee start an Excel spreadsheet to work out the fees that Cynthia will be paying. I won't charge for the accommodation for Penny and the twins in Saint Max, or the running costs of Whiskey Whiskey. For a moment I consider charging travel mileage at the standard car rate but then I remember that Cynthia has fixed up a room for Penny in Moltrasio for no cost, so the mileage gets deleted by way of compensation. I'll also take out the day I spent

swanning around in Whiskey Whiskey with the Likely Lads. That was fun rather than work so it would be wrong to make Cynthia cough up for my time. All in all I'm not going to make a huge profit out of this job, but that's the way it goes sometimes.

Right, what am I going to do about my PA and her daughters? Bring them back to Saint-Max? Take them home? We've been away about ten days and I allowed two weeks for the Sommerville job. There's no pressing need to get back to England in a hurry. Most of the Arrow Tec admin stuff can be done from here on the laptop. Malcolm will be returning from Barbados in a couple of days so he can take care of any stuff that needs a personal touch. He's done rather better than his old man, successwise. This was his latest text:

Result. Bad boy caught bang to rights + a couple of others. Celebration last nite. Headache this morning. Home tomorrow. Have u caught the shagger in flagrante. When r u home. Malc

Well, maybe I should convert the working holiday into a non-working holiday. The easiest option would be to head back to Como and join the others there until it's time to go home. Perhaps Cynthia would let Penny stay in the Villa Tranquilla for a reasonable rate. I'll see if I can get a room in the Reggia again, or some other hotel if they're full.

I go to Reception to tell them I'll be leaving after lunch. I'll give the Allegro a call too. Although Penny checked out from her hotel when I took her and the girls to Como it

was on the understanding that they might be returning.

I spend half an hour planning the flight back to Como. It's easier this time, of course, cos it's just a repeat of the first flight and the weather's still CAVOK.

I drive the Nissan to the Terrasse to say my goodbyes to the manager and staff. Guess who's having an early lunch! Hugh bleeding Sommerville! He calls me over.

'What have you been up to?' he asks with a grin.

Trying to find out what you've been up to, I'm tempted to reply.

'Nothing important. MTAs,' I tell him.

'Eh?'

'Multiple trivial activities.'

'Been playing golf? Haven't seen you here recently.'

'Not much,' I reply. The PI in me kicks into life. The case is over now but . . .

'How's work, Hugh? Been busy?'

'Not too bad. Fancy joining me for lunch?'

I nod and sit down at his table. Obviously I can't talk to him directly about Como cos he'll wonder how I knew he was there and Cynthia probably doesn't want him to know we were spying on him. But I can try a new angle.

'Did I see you in the Baleine Blanche the other night?' I ask.

'More than likely,' replies Hugh. 'I eat there quite often. Why didn't you come and say hello?'

'I was about to,' I say. 'Then I got an urgent phone call and had to leave.' A bit weak, but plausible.

'Nothing serious, I hope,' says Hugh.

'Just business,' I reply vaguely. 'Anyway, I think you had a lady companion with you. You wouldn't have

wanted an intrusion.'

'Probably Manon, she works here. We often have dinner together.'

'Good looking lady. What does she do here?'

'Chef. Dab hand in the kitchen. Bit bossy to the underlings but she turns out good nosh.'

'I'm not so keen on bossy women myself,' I chuckle.

'Me neither,' grins Hugh. 'When Manon's car broke down she practically ordered me to let her use mine till hers was fixed.'

So that explains why the Volvo was at the chef lady's flat. A new thought crops up.

'How did you get around then, Hugh? Have you got another car?'

Hugh looks at me and pauses. Maybe he doesn't want me to know more. Then he smiles.

'The hotel's got a couple of cars for the use of staff when needed.'

'Why didn't your chef use one of them?'

'She often brings her own supplies to the Terrasse. Doesn't trust the distributors when it comes to delivering food, in case the quality doesn't come up to scratch. So she needed the Volvo's extra space.'

Allowing you to drive to Como without me able to trace you.

'I expect you're glad you don't work in the kitchen then,' I say. 'With Mrs Bossyboots ordering you around. Pity her poor husband, eh?'

'Oh, Manon's not married,' says Hugh.

'Divorced then?'

Hugh grins at me. 'She's not the marrying sort, Chad.'

'Oh, I see.'

Hugh lowers his voice. 'To be honest, I think she swings both ways. Not that I speak from experience, I hasten to add. Scuttlebutt, you know.'

'But okay as a dinner companion?'

'Absolutely. I like her. She's good company. Interesting stories. She's met a few celebs in her time and she's happy to gossip about them. Whether the stories are true or not, we'll never know.'

'So, will you get to go home soon for a visit, Hugh?' I ask, changing the subject. The info might be useful the next time I speak to Cynthia.

'Yes, I hope so. There's a few things—'

He's interrupted by his phone ringing. Hugh apologises to me and accepts the call. I overhear his side of the conversation.

'Hi there . . . yes . . . no . . . really? . . Delta what? . . right . . . okay . . . okay . . . right, I can't talk now . . . I'll call in a few minutes . . . okay, bye.'

'Sorry about that,' says Hugh with a quick smile as he switches off his phone and slips it back in his pocket.

'Problems?' I ask.

'Minor stuff,' says Hugh. 'What were we talking about?'

'Your next visit home.'

'Ah, yes. It'll be nice to get back . . . when did you say you were going home yourself, Chad?'

'Four or five days.'

Hugh nods. His demeanour has changed a bit since the phone call. A frown crept onto his face while he was on the line and now he seems slightly distracted, not quite with me.

'Four or five days,' he repeats vaguely. 'That'll be nice.' Although he hasn't finished what's on his plate he puts his knife and fork together, dabs his mouth with his napkin and stands up.

'Look, please excuse me, Chad. Got a couple of things to sort out. Might see you before you go home but if I don't . . . nice to have met you and safe journey home.'

I stand up and shake the offered hand. Hugh walks briskly out of the restaurant, waving acknowledgement at the waiter as he goes.

I sit thinking for a few minutes as I finish my Salad Niçoise. Then I take out my own phone and call Cynthia. I recount what I heard Hugh say over the phone, mentioning how his mood darkened during the exchange.

'Strange,' says Cynthia. 'What's this Delta thing, then?'

'And who was he speaking to?' I answer. 'And why?'

'And we still don't know what was he doing in Como . . . no, that's all finished now. Although if I do find out he was seeing another woman I don't think I'll be able to forgive him.'

'I hope it all works out for you, Cynthia.'

'Thanks, Chad.' Her voice is quieter now. 'I'm not sure what the future holds. Not that that should concern you, of course.'

After a pause I say, 'So what now, Cynthia? Presumably you won't need the services of Arrow Tec any more?'

'That's right, I won't need you any more.'

For some reason her last words make me a little sad.

'Shame I wasn't more use,' I say.

'You did your best. Have you worked out how much I

owe you?'

'Yes, give or take.'

'What's Penny going to do? Is she going back to Saint Max or back to England?'

'No, I'm bringing my plane up to Como this afternoon. We'll finish our holiday there. Is it okay with you if Penny and the girls stay with you till it's time to go home? I've already rebooked a room for myself in the Reggia.'

'That would be great, Chad. I'd love to see you again before we part company.'

The sadness evaporates. She sounds like she means it.

'Okay then,' I say. 'We'll need to pay you or the landlord something for the Moltrasio accommodation.'

'We'll see about that when you get here. Call me when you get to the airfield. I'll pick you up.'

'Look forward to it.'

'What shall we do for dinner tonight if you're coming back?'

'Anything you like.'

'Okay . . . shall I ask Penny if she minds if I take you to dinner in Como? Just the two of us?'

'Sounds like a plan.'

CHAPTER 15

'HOW'S YOUR STROGANOFF?' asks Cynthia.

'Fantastic. How's your risotto?'

'Ditto. Starvation rations next week. Even up the calorie intake.'

'Difficult, though,' I continue, 'with Penny serving up her delicious grub.'

'You said it. I've learnt a thing or two, watching her in the kitchen.'

We're in the Lupo Argento restaurant, on the Como waterfront. It's a balmy summer evening so, like most of the other diners, we're seated outside in the courtyard behind the main building. Apart from the angry buzz of the odd two-stroke scooter we hardly hear the sound of the traffic passing along the road skirting the shore in front of the restaurant.

Cynthia's wearing a posh red frock and dangly earrings. Are they diamonds? There's also a touch more make up around her eyes. Yes, Mrs Sommerville, you look okay to me. It's not just me either. I've noticed one or two of the other male diners sneaking admiring glances

at her. Their partners are pretending not to notice, of course, but I can imagine one or two scenes erupting later in the evening:

'You should be ashamed of yourself, ogling other women like that.'

'Which woman? Didn't notice anyone special.'

'The woman in the red dress.'

'Red dress? No, didn't see her.'

'Of course you didn't. And the Holy Father doesn't believe in God.'

And so on, all in arm-waving Italian, of course.

The flight into Como went well and Cynthia picked me up as planned and ran me to the Reggia so I could get showered and changed. Then she went back to Moltrasio herself to do the same. Later on she collected me in a taxi which took the two of us into Como for our evening meal.

During the first course we went over the case, summarising what we had found out, which was less than either of us were hoping for. Hugh using another car instead of the Volvo had been explained. I told Cynthia about her husband's two phones, which momentarily perked up her interest before it subsided again.

Now we've moved on to other topics, looking ahead rather than back. The weather's holding up nicely. With luck we'll have sunshine until it's time to go home. While we were driving to Cernobbio from the airfield, Cynthia told me Penny is planning a few excursions for the twins, mainly ferry rides to the lake's other tourist attractions.

'I may join them on one or two of them', says Cynthia now, picking up the earlier conversation. 'It's such a lovely area.'

'You may as well, now the case is closed,' I say. 'Have you decided what you're going to say to Hugh if and when you see him?'

There's a pause before she answers as the waiter tops up our wine glasses.

'Sort of. See what you think.'

'Go on, then.'

'Well, I'm going to turn defence into attack.'

'Meaning?'

'Pretty much the truth. I'm going to tell him that Teresa happened to mention to me he was in Como. I'll say I was angry he hadn't thought to tell me and so I had to come here myself to see what he was up to and ask him why he hadn't told me he was here.'

'Sounds reasonable.'

'He hasn't really got a leg to stand on. He didn't tell me he was here and he didn't stay in the Villa Tranquilla when he could have done, which to me looks like he didn't want people to know he was here.'

'Suppose he comes up with a plausible explanation.'

'Then I'll apologise.'

'And if he doesn't?'

'I don't know. I haven't thought it through yet. We've never been in a situation like this before.'

I take a sip of Merlot. 'Do you want to stay together?'

'My heart says yes, my head says no. Or possibly the other way round. As you can see, I'm in a bit of a mess.'

'How long have you been together?'

Cynthia's brow wrinkles as she works out the answer. 'About fifteen years . . . no, sixteen. We started going out when we at uni.'

So she must be mid or late thirties, I calculate. About ten years younger than me.

'Where did you go to uni?'

'Exeter. I was doing modern languages and Hugh was doing civil engineering. He was in the year ahead of me. We lived together for a while, then got married a couple of years after I graduated.'

'And no problems till now? Sorry, I'm getting personal again.'

Cynthia shakes her head. 'Nothing major. I think our biggest disagreement was over kids. As I told you before, I wanted to adopt and he didn't.'

'So are you working full time? You're a translator, aren't you?'

'Yes, but I do a lot of work from home. Occasionally I'll get asked to work abroad, maybe ten or twelve times a year.'

'Like Geneva?'

'Yes, like Geneva. I was contacted by the BGTS . . . sorry, British Government Translation Service. They're part of the Foreign Office. I often get assignments from them.'

I cast my mind back to earlier conversations. 'So, something to do with Iran, wasn't it? The Geneva thing?'

My dinner companion nods. 'Yes. They were discussing easing of sanctions if the Iranian Government stopped their nuclear programme. I was translating for various officials on both sides.'

'What language do they speak in Iran?'

'The main official language is Farsi. It's similar to Urdu.'

'Doesn't mean much to me,' I say. 'Bit of a philistine,

me. I have trouble with English sometimes.'

Cynthia smiles. 'Horses for courses, Chad. I have a knack for languages but I couldn't fly a plane.'

'Yes, you could,' I tell her. 'Most people can, if they've got the motivation. I doubt if most people could excel at foreign languages as you obviously do. We Brits aren't much good at that sort of thing. When we're abroad we assume everyone speaks English.'

'The Americans are worse,' smiles Cynthia. 'If foreigners don't understand them they just shout louder in English.'

'Yeah, I've heard them,' I agree.

'Actually, that's not strictly true,' says Cynthia. 'There are some superb American linguists in my line of work. Better than me, many of them.'

'How many languages do you know?' I ask her.

'I've never really counted. Some I know well, others I just get by.'

'Did I hear Hugh tell me you spoke Mandarin?'

'"Passing acquaintance" would be more accurate. I'm not an expert, not by any means.'

'I've often wondered—How do they type Chinese characters on a computer keyboard?'

'Most of us use a standard QWERTY keyboard,' replies Cynthia. 'But with special software that converts pinyin into Chinese characters.'

'What's pinyin?' I ask, wishing I hadn't started on this line.

'It's a way of phonetically representing Chinese sounds using latin script. So you type in "B-E-I-J-I-N-G" for example and the software turns it into Chinese

characters.'

'How do you do it the other way? Chinese into English?'

'You have to know the sound of the characters. You just type the pinyin phonetic equivalent. The software turns it back into Chinese so all you have to do then is check that the two characters are identical. Then you translate the pinyin into English.'

'I'm glad I asked,' I say, trying to sound amused rather than sarcastic.

'Bit esoteric, isn't it?' smiles Cynthia. 'But like everything else, the more you do it the easier it becomes.'

The waiter reappears to bring us our dessert. We've both plumped for the zabaglione with almond biscotti.

'Another thousand calories,' observes Cynthia wryly. 'I think I'll need to jog round Lake Como a couple of times to burn it off.'

There's a break in the chat for a couple of minutes. The only sound is the murmur of the other diners' conversations and the clink of metal spoons against sundae glasses as we consume the zabaglione.

'So, what's happening tomorrow?' I say eventually. 'Do you know what Pen has got planned?'

'I think she's taking the girls to Bellagio on the ferry.'

My phone pings. It's the VC9 app, telling me the second transmitter has died, a day after the first one. They did well, exceeding the expected endurance by a fat margin. Both of them expired in Sainte-Maxime, according to the app. Who cares? We don't need them any more.

'Bellagio,' I say, restarting the conversation. 'Are you going with them?'

'Maybe, if Penny doesn't mind. I'll stay here another

day or two, then see if I can get a flight home from Turin or Milan. When are you going back to England, Chad?

'A few more days. Then Whiskey Whiskey will speed us home.'

'How long will the flight take?'

I give Cynthia a summary of the plan I'm thinking of following for the flight to England. The main factor will be safely finding a way through the mountains. It'll have to be visual conditions. In bad weather the minimum safe altitude would be too high for the Arrow.

'I've never flown in a small plane, Chad. Helicopters, yes, but nothing like your Whiskey Whiskey. Maybe you could take me up some time.'

'It would be my pleasure.'

'So, are you going to Bellagio with the others tomorrow?'

'If you are, then so will I,' I say.

Cynthia smiles and opens her mouth as if to speak, then changes her mind.

'What?' I prompt.

'Nothing.'

CHAPTER 16

THIS MORNING I LEFT the Reggia early so I could have breakfast with the others before the boat trip to Bellagio. It was while we were eating that the phone in Cynthia's handbag rang. She was at the table with Katie and me and the bag was hanging from the back of the chair she was sitting in. Penny was in the shower and Rachael in the lounge watching TV.

'It's Hugh,' said Cynthia, checking the screen. She looked up at me. 'Shall I take it?'

'Your decision,' I said unhelpfully.

Cynthia nodded, tapped the screen and lifted the phone to her ear.

'Hello, Hugh . . . yes . . . yes . . . wait a minute, I'm going through into the other room . . . '

For a moment I carried on shovelling muesli into my mouth, pondering the significance of Hugh's call. Then I took out my pen, grabbed the shopping receipt Penny had left on the sideboard, turned it over and wrote: tell Hugh you'll call back in a minute.

I took my message to Cynthia's bedroom and held it up

for her to see. She nodded and gave me a thumbs up.

' . . . no, she didn't . . . ' Cynthia was saying, ' . . . but just a moment, Hugh, can I call you back . . . there's someone at the door . . . I don't know . . . I'll call back in two shakes . . . okay . . . bye.'

A minute later we were both sitting on her bed. I'd brought my own phone to her room and I was explaining the set up I'd thought of.

'We link the phones on Bluetooth,' I said, 'then, when you call Hugh back we'll use the X-Groove app on my phone to record the conversation. Then we can go through it later on to see if there's anything useful in it.'

'Good idea,' said Cynthia. 'What's the app called? Maybe I've got it on my phone already.'

'X-Groove,' I repeated. 'I doubt if it's on your phone. It doesn't just record, it encrypts the recording so you can't hear the playback without decoding it, which requires a password. Useful in my line of business.'

We checked Cynthia's phone but there was no app of any sort for recording calls she made or received so I set up the Bluetooth link, fired up X-Groove on my OmniVis and left her alone to ring her husband.

Now we're on the ferry Garibaldi zigzagging across the lake at a pace that's best described as leisurely. Another sunny day, a little hazy, but we can still still marvel at the spectacular mountain scenery all round us. It's not the fastest way to get from Moltrasio to Bellagio, which lies at the tip of the spit of land that divides the two southern arms of the lake. The boat has to drop in at several intermediate stops on both shores of the western arm. We could have gone into Como and taken the fast hydrofoil

service but a democratic vote favoured the stopping service as we were in no particular hurry. The three adults voted yes, Katie abstained and Rachael voted for both options. Cleverly averting a scene, Penny persuaded Katie to accept Rachael's unconventional approach to the democratic process.

The upper deck is about half full of passengers. The twins are obviously suffering from spectacular-mountain-scenery fatigue—they're a few rows ahead of us, playing a game on the iPad. Penny and Cynthia are sitting next to each other, chatting. I'm on the other side of Cynthia. I've just put my earphones on and plugged them into my phone. I tap the X-Groove icon and select the conversation we recorded earlier via Cynthia's phone.

C: Hi . . . it's me . . . sorry about that.

H: That's okay. Where are you?

C: Moltrasio.

H: Why? What are you doing there?

C: Looking for you, Hugh.

H: Looking for . . . why? What made you think I was in Moltrasio?

C: Teresa saw you in Como and I wondered why you didn't tell me you were here.

H: I didn't think I needed . . . why didn't you just phone me if you wanted to know where I was?

C: I thought you . . . if you had work here why didn't you stay in the Tranquilla?

Pause

H: How did you find out I wasn't staying in the villa?

C: Teresa told me.

H: Hang on, Cyn. We spoke not two days ago. Why didn't you tell me then that Teresa had seen me . . . are you—

C: Why didn't you mention it yourself?

Pause

H: Well . . . there was no need. I had a job to do—

C: But if you were working there you could have stayed in the villa. Teresa told me the family part was available so I'm curious you didn't use it.

H: It wasn't . . . appropriate . . . I had to—

C: Why . . . where was the job?

H: Chiasso.

C: Where's that?

H: Just over the border with Switzerland. About six kilometres from Como. I was staying in a small guest house. Saved the border crossing hassle.

Pause

C: So what was the job, Hugh? Something for Carding Wells?

H: No.

Pause

C: So . . . ?

H: Why the third degree, Cyn? You don't sound very friendly.

C: I'm not sure you're being honest with me, Hugh. The last time we spoke and I asked you how work was you gave me a non-committal answer. There was no mention that you weren't working in Saint Max. It struck me as a bit odd that—

H: It was no big deal. You don't tell me everything you're doing and I don't expect you to. You know—

C: So what is the job? Who are you working for?

Long pause

C: Are you still there, Hugh?

H: Yes, I suppose I'll have to tell you. The reason I didn't mention it before is that I'm . . . it's . . . not one hundred percent kosher.

C: What do you mean?

H: I'm moonlighting for an Italian company.

C: Why, Hugh?

Pause

H: Good money.

C: But you're getting good pay at Carding Wells, aren't you?

H: The Italian job paid a lot more.

C: What was it?

H: A marshalling yard.

C: A what?

H: It's where they assemble freight trains. It's like a big depot where freight wagons are sorted . . . they come in on various trains and then they get reallocated to other trains depending on the destination. We were helping to build a new control centre.

C: So how did you get the Italian job?

Pause

C: Hugh, how did you get the job?

H: Why are we having this discussion now, Cyn? Can't it wait till the next time I'm home?

C: No.

Pause

H: I was contacted by someone I know in the business. He told me about it. Happy now?

C: No, not really. Are you doing something illegal?

H: Look, Cyn, I don't think I—

C: So which company was it, the Italian company?

H: I'm not at liberty to say. And I must say, I'm a bit disappointed by your tone, Cynthia. Don't you trust me?

Pause

H: Thanks for the vote of confidence.

Pause

H: Look, that's it, Cyn. An acquaintance told me we could make good money doing this job in Chiasso but it had to be kept quiet . . . the contract with the Italian company was set up by a corrupt official in SBB—that's Swiss Railways. I had lots of time off doing the Terrasse job in Saint Max so I thought, why not.

C: I'm not impressed.

H: There's nothing to worry about. Our bit is done. We've been paid. End of story.

C: Why have you got two phones, Hugh?

H: What!

C: Why have you got two phones?

H: How did you . . . I needed two . . . one for work, one for private calls. Lots of people have two -

C: Why didn't you tell me both numbers?

H: No need. There's a diversion system. If you call me on the number you already have it'll get through to whichever phone I'm using. Saves you the trouble of having to remember two numbers . . . but how did you know about the two -

C: Do you always have both phones with you?

H: Not always . . . but—

C: Why not?

H: Sometimes I leave one of them in the office in Saint

Max.

C: Why?

Pause

H: What's the point of this? Why the hell does it matter where my phones are?

C: Because if they're tracked, people can find out where you are.

Pause

H: Okay, it's the same reason I told you before.

C: You didn't want anyone to know about the Italian job?

H: Exactly . . . but how did you know about the two phones?

C: I . . . er . . . someone said . . . I told a friend that sometimes when I phone you it sounds like after you picked up there's a delay before the connection is made and I wondered why. The friend told me that the call was probably being diverted to another phone.

H: Well, yes, it is being transferred . . . I just told you that.

Pause

C: So you're finished in Switzerland? The railway job?

H: Yes.

C: So you're just doing the Carding Wells work in Saint Max?

H: Yes.

C: Is that where you are now?

H: Yes.

C: Who was the woman I saw you with in the restaurant in Como?

H: What! What are you talking about? What woman? I didn't -

C: I saw you, Hugh. A few days ago. She was pretty, long

black hair. She was wearing a turquoise chiffon scarf.

Pause

H: Oh . . . I know who you mean. It's a friend of the man who got me the job in Chiasso. They were staying in Como. We sometimes had lunch, the three of us, but that day -

C: What's her name, Hugh?

H: Donna.

C: What's the name of the man who got you -

H: Hang on, Cyn, I'm getting a bit fed up with this . . . that's a point, what were you doing in Como? Spying on me?

C: Yes.

Long pause

H: I see.

Pause

H: Why?

C: I thought you were being unfaithful to me.

H: Well, you're wrong and I'm angry that you suspect me. We're going to have to talk about this next time I'm home.

C: I think we are.

H: Are we done with the questions?

C: Are you telling me categorically that you're not having an affair?

H: Absolutely. I'm not having an affair.

Pause

H: Well, this isn't so good, is it, Cynthia?

C: I'm not sure I believe you.

H: About what?

C: About the whole story.

H: I've told you everything there is to—

C: What was the name of the man who got you the job in

Switzerland?

H: I can't tell you.

C: Why not?

H: I promised him I'd keep his identity secret. If he was found out he might end up in jail.

C: What's to stop you ending up in jail, Hugh?

H: That's up to you, Cynthia. No-one else knows about this. If you spill the beans I might be in trouble.

C: Well, that's nice to know.

H: Look, let's start again. For some reason, you thought I was seeing another woman. But now you know that I was keeping quiet about my movements because I was doing a job that had to be under the radar. Now you know the truth you can stop worrying about it. Let's just put it all behind us.

Pause

H: What do you say, Cyn?

Pause

C: I'm thinking about it.

H: Fair enough . . . I'm going home next week. Will you be there?

C: Yes.

H: Okay.

C: Okay.

H: I'll call again in a couple of days. Are you staying in Moltrasio till it's time to go home?

C: Probably.

H: Well, enjoy your stay . . . I still love you, you know.

C: Uh huh.

H: Bye.

C: Bye.

I take my earphones off and turn to Cynthia. 'So, what do you think?' I ask her.

Cynthia shrugs. 'I wasn't thrilled to hear about the dodgy contract with Swiss Railways.'

'But maybe he was telling the truth about not being with another woman.'

'And maybe not . . . what about this Donna creature?'

'The girl friend of the friend?' I say.

'Yes. When I saw them together they looked closer than just friends.'

Cynthia rests her hand on my arm. 'Why are we doing this, Chad? It's in danger of becoming an obsession.'

'You're right,' I agree. 'The natural nosiness of a PI in my case.'

'And the natural paranoia of a scorned woman in my case.'

The Garibaldi heads across the lake again, next stop Bellagio. Penny joins in the discussion about when and where we'll have lunch. The twins are taking more of an interest in the boat's progress as it approaches the landing, pointing out to each other items of interest on the shoreline. Their iPad has been tossed carelessly onto the seat next to their Mum. An idea occurs to me and I ask Penny if I can borrow the iPad for a moment.

I hook the tablet up to the internet and Google 'marshalling yard control centre chiasso switzerland'. All the results seem to be in German, apart from one or two in Italian. I tap Cynthia on the arm and show her the screen.

'How's your German?' I ask her.

'Not bad.'

'Would any of these links give us info about the rebuild Hugh was talking about?'

Cynthia takes the iPad off me. 'Let me see.'

Over the Garibaldi's PA we hear announcement of our impending arrival in Bellagio. I hear the engine revs drop a little. Penny starts to gather up the twins' bits and pieces to drop into her bag.

Cynthia is flicking through the pages on the iPad screen. She expands one of them, her brow furrowing.

'Interesting,' she says.

'Go on,' I respond.

'Well, there actually is an Italian company contracted to do a rebuild of the control centre. NuovoMondo Construction.'

'So Hugh might have been telling the truth about that.'

'No, he lied.'

'How do you know?'

Cynthia points to the screen. 'It says here the contract was cancelled last year and is unlikely to be reinstated until the economic situation in Europe improves.'

'But the Swiss aren't in the Eurozone.'

Cynthia shrugs. 'They can't be immune from the general malaise though. Hence the cancellation.'

'So,' I start, 'if Hugh was lying about that . . . '

' . . . he might have been lying about other things.'

We look at each other for a second. Then Cynthia smiles.

'And do you know what, Chad? I couldn't give a damn.'

CHAPTER 17 - CYNTHIA

'CAN I WEAR NORMAL CLOTHES?' I ask Chad.

'Of course, no need for helmet and goggles,' he laughs.

We're getting ready for the flight to St Moritz in Chad's plane. I'm really looking forward to it. I've never been in a small plane before so I don't know what's involved. Hence my question about clothing.

'Whiskey Whiskey has got all the mod cons,' continues Chad. 'Well, a cabin heater for winter ops, anyway. For air con in the summer I hold the door ajar. On the ground, I mean, not in the air.'

The plane's called Whiskey Whiskey because the last two letters of its number are W and W. The first letter is G, which is Golf in the special alphabet pilots use. Chad's plane is made of metal, he's told me, and weighs a ton and a bit with four people on board. It cruises at about 150 miles per hour and its wheels fold up when it's flying.

Today's plan was hammered out yesterday evening, when we came back from our day out on the lake. After lunch in Bellagio we took the ferry across to Lenno for a

look at the beautiful Villa Balbianello. I'd seen it before but Penny hadn't, and she said she loved it. The twins got a bit bored and Chad didn't seem all that fussed about the gardens—the three of them spent most of the time larking around and telling each other jokes. They all seem to get on pretty well and I think Penny's feelings for Chad are a bit more than friendship. Nothing overt, of course—that doesn't seem to be her style. But there are little signs now and again. Chad, being a man, can't detect them. But he seems very protective to her and her daughters. I love the girls. Considering the family break up they seem remarkably well-adjusted. Sometimes when they cheek their mother she lets them get away with it, usually when she's tired. Once or twice I've found myself wanting to ask them to show more respect but it's none of my business so I keep quiet. They're a lot better behaved than some other girls of that age I know.

It was actually me who got the ball rolling. I told them about the little red train that goes to St Moritz from Poschiavo. The track twists and turns as the train winds its way up through the mountains and you get some fantastic views. It's about a three hour drive from Moltrasio to Poschiavo, which is across the border in Switzerland, but well worth the effort.

Chad then mentioned the airport at St Moritz, which he'd been to before. He said if the weather was good it was an easy airport to get into. The only problem, apparently, is that it's very high up, one of the highest in Europe. At that altitude the plane's engine couldn't give you normal power, Chad said, so you had to be careful when you took off. He did some calculations on his

computer to check that it would be safe to carry passengers.

So we came up with a master plan. In version one, Penny and the twins would drive the Audi to Poschiavo and pick up the Bernina Express train to St Moritz. Chad and I would fly to St Moritz, where we'd all meet up for lunch and a look around. Then Penny would fly back to Como with Chad and the twins and I would take the Bernina train back to Poschiavo and drive home in the Audi. That way, Rachael and Katie would get two rides on the train.

But then complications blew up.

'I want to fly back from St Moritz to here,' said Rachael.

'So do I,' said Katie.

'That's okay,' said Chad. 'You two can come back in Whiskey Whiskey and your Mum can take the train back with Cynthia.'

'But I want Mum to be with us,' said Rachael.

'So do I,' said Katie.

'But then Cynthia would be all on her own,' said Penny. 'That wouldn't be fair, would it?'

'I'll stay with you, Cynthia,' Katie said to me.

'So will I,' said Rachael. 'Cynthia and me and Katie can fly back together.'

'But then Mum would be all on her own,' said Katie.

We three adults exchanged wry smiles. Chad took a deep breath.

'Look girls, flying in the plane is fun, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said the twins simultaneously.

'And so is travelling in the mountain train, isn't it?'

'We don't know,' said Katie.

'We haven't done it yet,' said her sister.

'It's lovely,' I told the girls. 'It's great.'

'What about this, girls,' said Chad. 'One of you can fly back with me and Penny. The other one can train back with Cynthia. What do you think? Then no-one gets left on their own.'

The twins looked at each other, as if communicating by thought. Then they turned to us.

'We don't have—' began Katie.

'—to stay together,' added Rachael.

'So who's doing which?' asked Chad.

'We haven't yet decided,' said Rachael.

'We'll tell you tomorrow,' said Katie.

And there the matter rested. Penny and the girls set off just after an early breakfast for the drive to Poschiavo. Chad and I indulged in the luxury of a later breakfast, after which I tidied up and picked up a magazine while Chad sat at his laptop doing his flight preparations.

Having checked the sartorial requirements for today's flight I turn back to the magazine but I can't really concentrate on it. My mind is going over yesterday's conversation with my husband.

I feel the matter hasn't been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. The worst aspect is I can't crystallise my feelings towards Hugh. I'm sad that I feel I can't trust him any more, even if he's telling the truth about not having an affair. He's been too evasive. In recent months I've noticed a subtle change in his demeanour. As if he's become distant emotionally as well as physically. We've never had this problem before, even though he's worked overseas many times during our marriage. Perhaps not

having children hasn't helped. All he's got to come home to is me, and maybe that's not enough any more.

Perhaps it's partly my fault. Have I taken him too much for granted? Could it be that he thinks I'm not making enough of an effort? But he's never said anything that would make me think that way. Deep in my soul I know I'm shying away from the question I'm afraid to ask myself. Do I still love him?

I've been faithful to Hugh ever since we started going out. My only transgression was kissing a man whom I'd grown very fond of—a work colleague. Adrian was married too. It was all a bit *Brief Encounter*, if you've ever seen that soppy old film. Although we did meet once or twice we never actually crossed the line. Neither of us actually suggested that we go further but I certainly thought about it and so I suspect did he. I never told Hugh about the liaison that never was, of course, and now I just have the occasional memory, still tinged with sadness. I realised later that I had actually fallen in love with Adrian. It took a long time to fall out of it again, even though I never stopped loving Hugh.

Strangely, Chad reminds me a little of my almost lover. I would say Chad's in his mid forties, a year or two older than Adrian would be now. On the surface, Chad seems to have a slightly frivolous attitude to life but I think that's a mask. I think he's a more serious person than he likes people to think. Adrian was the same. He was an editor, specialising in scripts that had been translated into and from English. He'd have us in stitches with some of the spoof edited scripts he cooked up, delivered in funny voices. A bit non-PC, some of them, but a good laugh.

Adrian was also a music fan, like Chad. He wrote his own songs and played them in folk music clubs in the Oxford area. I dragged Hugh to a couple of his gigs but my husband was never a fan. Chad plays in a band, specialising in old pop music it seems. He also records new arrangements of old standards. He played me a version of 'Suspicious Minds' that went on for several minutes more than the original. I expressed admiration but I don't think I'll rush to put a copy on my iPod.

I think Chad's as disappointed as I am that we never found the evidence that we were looking for. It was obviously a blow to his professional pride that the job wasn't completed. He was almost embarrassed when he presented me with the bill. He'd clearly decided not to charge me for some of the expenses he'd incurred. In a strange reversal of expected roles, the client, me, was adding items that the supplier, Chad, had redacted from the list. We eventually struck a compromise and sealed the accord with a glass of wine.

'I'm not always this useless,' Chad told me. 'I did better with Marjorie Entwistle.'

'That was more clear cut,' I reassured him. 'The evidence was easier to gather.'

Marjorie Entwistle was—is—a good friend of mine. I met her at the Oak Tree Centre in Banbury. It's a facility for disabled people. Marjorie is a professional carer and I do occasional voluntary work there when I'm home. Marjorie suspected she was being stalked by a man but he was clever enough to hide his tracks. Her husband thought she was being neurotic and the police weren't much help. She admitted to me once that she had thought

of suicide. Her friends, including me, were very worried. We took it in turns to keep an eye on her to make sure she didn't do anything daft. Then she hired Arrow Tec and they quickly caught the stalker and assembled enough evidence to send him to jail. Which is why I called the same company when I suspected Hugh was up to no good.

This job with the Italian company that Hugh told me about. I'm confused. It obviously isn't a complete fabrication, as I discovered when I checked the website, which means he couldn't have dreamt it up on the spot. That means he must have had his cover story pre-prepared. But why would he do that? Was it a precaution in case I found out about his excursions in Italy, which of course is what actually happened. Maybe he thought using a genuine scenario would satisfy my curiosity if I checked it out on the internet. But what about the cancelled contract? Did he think I wouldn't bother to probe that far myself? Did he even know about the cancellation? He doesn't know German so he would have had to have found out the information from other sources.

And the big question. If Hugh wasn't meeting another woman and if he wasn't working on the railway job, what was he doing in Como? He's been lying to me about something and I don't think I can forgive him for that. If I force myself to face the question that I've been hiding from, I would have to say . . . probably not, not any more. Which leads on to . . . what should I do about it? Perhaps a new—

'Well, it's all looking good,' says Chad, bringing me back to a brighter world. 'The viz is better than yesterday

and the wind's calm so we should have a good trip.' He's closing down his laptop and grinning at me. 'Are you all set to go?'

I smile back and say: 'Yes, shall I call for a taxi?'

But before I can pick up the phone the doorbell rings.

It's Teresa, the housekeeper, and she looks a little flustered. It seems she was doing some cleaning and tidying next door and noticed a puddle of water under the washing machine.

'I've called the plumber, Signora,' she tells me, 'but he says he probably can't get here till tomorrow. Do you think Signor Chadband can take a look at it? I'm worried in case there's a flood.'

'Of course, Teresa,' I say. 'I'll bring him round straightaway.'

A few minutes later the three of us are in the kitchen next door. Chad has pulled the washing machine out from its housing to reveal the source of the leak, the flexible pipe supplying water to the machine. Water is dripping from the pipe at around a drop a second.

'It's not the connector,' Chad tells us. 'It's the hexagonal nut where the copper feed pipe is taken off at the T-junction.' He looks at me.

'Are there any tools in the house?' he asks. I translate the question into Italian for Teresa.

'Si, si,' she nods. 'I'll show you.'

Five minutes later the panic is over. Chad has tightened the offending nut with a spanner and checked that it's watertight. Teresa has used an old towel to mop up the mess.

'Shall I push the machine back?' he asks me, 'or does

Teresa want it left out for the plumber to check?'

The housekeeper and I have a little conversation and I give a summary to Chad.

'Teresa says leave it out. She'll get the plumber to check that everything's okay and she'll phone Signor Meazza to tell him what we've arranged.'

Teresa is clearly happier now. She smiles at Chad and rattles off a sentence or two of Italian. He probably understands the 'molte grazie' part.

'Can we leave you to it?' I ask Teresa. 'Anything else we can do?'

'No, Signora. Off you go. I've got a bit of work to do but it won't take me long.'

Chad and I return to our part of the villa and I call for a taxi and put the kettle on for a coffee while we're waiting.

'Penny for them,' says Chad.

I didn't realise my distraction was registering on my face. Something I set eyes on in the rented part of the villa is troubling me. It's buried itself in my subconscious so I can't identify what it was. It's very frustrating. Should I go back round there for another look around while Teresa's still there?

'Nothing really,' I say, answering Chad's question. I tell him my misgivings.

'Better make it quick if you're going back,' he says. 'The taxi's on its way.'

'Yes, forget it,' I say. 'No point in worrying about something when I don't even know what it is.'

'Very wise,' says Chad. 'Anyway, it might come to you later on. Then you can decide what to do.'

The taxi turns up five minutes later and off we go to the

airfield. There's a bit of paperwork for Chad to do in the office and then we walk out to the plane. The weather is perfect and we can see the mountains all around pushing up into the clear blue sky. It's going to be a nice day, and I can put Hugh and other worries out of my head.

The Arrow only has one door, on the right hand side. Chad gives me a life jacket to put on and installs me in the front left seat, where most of the dials seem to be, and then inspects the plane externally. In front of me the steering wheel occasionally moves left or right or forward or backward as Chad tests the control panels on the wings and tail. Earlier I had a quick look at the presentation he's put on his iPad to brief passengers on basic flight control in case they want to have a go. Strangely, the most important thing seems to be the earth's horizon rather than the dials on the dashboard. You use it to judge whether the nose is too high or too low and to check if the wings are tilted. If the wings are tilted the plane turns in the direction of the lower wing.

Chad told me there might be a chance for me to take the controls if I wanted to and I said I'd let him know. As it's my first go I might just enjoy the view. Chad said that the mountains sometimes roughen the air but with slack winds today that shouldn't be a problem. I hope he's right, though I did check he had a sick bag handy just in case.

Chad climbs into the right seat and checks my seat and harness for security. On the dashboard lie two headsets, but we won't put them on till the engine's running, he says.

Now he's checking things inside the plane, using a flip-card checklist, talking to himself as he runs through the

items.

'The engine's old technology,' he says. 'Chunky engineering, heavy and slow-revving, but very reliable.'

'I'm pleased to hear it,' I murmur.

Starting the engine seems like starting a car, by twisting a key. In front of us the propeller spins, slowly at first, then more quickly as the engine springs into life.

We put our headsets on and verify we can hear each other on the intercom. Then it's another set of checks from the flip-cards. I think Chad's now setting up the navigation system, punching switches on what looks like a big fancy version of a car's sat nav.

'Couple of points to remember,' I hear in my earphones.

'Yes?'

'Lookout. Most important. We're under visual rules so it's see and be seen. If you spot any other planes point to them and say "traffic".'

'Okay.'

'Keep your hands and feet well clear of the controls unless I've handed control over to you.'

'Okay.'

'If you're talking to me and I hold up my hand, it means stop talking because we're using the VHF to communicate with air traffic control.'

'Okay,' I say again. I'm not sure what VHF means but I get the gist of what he's talking about.

'Tell me how the door controls operate if we have to evacuate.'

I repeat the instructions he gave me earlier.

'How and when do you inflate the life jacket?'

I pass this little test to Chad's satisfaction. It's dawning

on me that operating a plane is a lot less casual than driving a car. The life jackets are a precaution in case the engine stops. We'll be flying along valleys and Chad has already told me that if there isn't an area flat enough to land on we might end up ditching in a lake. I hope he's right about the reliability of the engine.

Now Chad is apparently talking to the controller. It's an esoteric exchange. The only words I can definitely pick out are 'runway' and 'Whiskey Whiskey'.

Not all my new surroundings are incomprehensible. The lever under the dashboard that looks just like a handbrake set vertically turns out to be just that. I've noticed that everything is labelled, every dial and every control. Even the catch on the handbrake says 'Park Brake'.

Soon we're taxiing out to the runway. The engine power control is different from a car. It's a hand-operated lever with a black knob on the end, set in a sort of quarter-circle housing sticking out from the middle of the dashboard. There are two other levers next to it, one with a red top and one with a blue top. When Chad pushes the black lever forward the prop turns more quickly. Perhaps later I'll ask what the other levers do, but not now.

We stop as we approach the runway and Chad picks up the checklist again.

'There are two ignition systems,' Chad tells me. 'We have to check both of them, and the prop pitch control.'

'Uh huh,' I nod, feigning comprehension.

With the handbrake on, Chad sets the engine to high power and I feel the plane shuddering in the blast of air coming back from the propeller. The engine must be

pretty powerful. Chad operates various controls and seems satisfied with the responses. Then he moves the black lever back and the prop slows to low revolutions, so you can almost see the blades as they spin round.

Another checklist, then Chad tells me we're ready to go.

'Want to do the take-off?' he asks.

'Thanks, Chad, but I'd rather watch you do it.' It's not just cowardice on my part. I want to take in the sights and sounds without the worry of miscontrolling a machine I know nothing about.

'No problem,' grins Chad. 'Next time, eh?'

'Yes,' I say, 'next time'.

'We're using runway one four, which points southeast, over the low ground. Once we're at a safe height we'll bring it round to the north and fly along the lake.'

'Okay.'

'All set?'

'Yes.'

Another exchange on the radio. I can make out 'runway' and 'wind calm'.

Chad steers the plane onto the runway using the foot pedals, which, I seem to remember he told me, turn the nosewheel left or right. In front of us a dotted white line stretches along the middle of the runway.

'Whiskey Whiskey taking off, runway one four,' says Chad. I assume this message is going out over the radio.

Chad pushes the engine power lever fully forward. The plane accelerates quickly along the dotted line, like a sports car. After about ten seconds or so my peripheral vision detects Chad pulling the steering wheel towards

him. The plane's nose lifts and the runway falls away below us.

I'm impressed. The view is absolutely stunning. The plane tilts to the left as it climbs and now the left wing tip is pointing down to the town of Como, which slowly rotates beneath it as the nose swings round until the plane is pointing to the lake. The town looks different from how I imagined it would be.

'We'll climb up to seven thousand,' says Chad. 'That'll put us well above the terrain. We'll be following the valleys anyway.'

I suddenly realise that his hands are no longer on the controls. He's writing something down on a clipboard and fiddling with the switches on the navigation system. He looks across and notices my consternation.

'The autopilot's plugged in,' he grins. 'Speed lock.'

I smile back, reassured.

'Traffic,' he says, pointing over to the left. I look where he is pointing. It's a yellow plane with floats, a bit below us, flying in the opposite direction. About half a mile away, I would guess. 'One of the seaplanes from Como,' adds Chad. 'Keep an eye out—there'll be others.'

We fly past a little town perched on the flank of the mountain on our right hand side.

'Brunate,' announces Chad. 'Look, you can see the funicular going up to Brunate from Como.'

I take a few photos as we fly along the east shore of the lake. On the opposite shore Chad points out Cernobbio and, a minute or so later, Moltrasio. I notice the plane's nose dropping a little, and the engine note decreasing. Chad's adjusting the various engine levers.

He draws my attention to the altimeter in front of me.

'Seven zero,' he says. 'That's seven thousand. The autopilot's in height lock mode.' He looks at me. 'Tell me if you want to fly it for a bit.'

'I'm happy just watching,' I say.

He puts on a big grin. 'Good fun, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

He looks at his watch. 'The others should be on the train now.'

On the right side we can see the other arm of the lake angling towards us. The two stretches of water meet at the Bellagio promontory and Chad drops the right wing so I can get a view of the town we visited yesterday. Very pretty.

'The direct track to St Moritz from here is northeasterly,' Chad explains, 'but that would take us directly over the mountains so we'll keep heading north towards the end of lake.'

As we overfly Sorico and leave Lake Como behind us I see another small area of water ahead. Lake Mezzola, Chad tells me. Over this lake Chad adjusts the autopilot and Whiskey Whiskey drops its left wing and turns to the left to follow the valley. I notice another plane on our left side and point it out to Chad.

'Helicopter,' says Chad. 'Good spot, Cynthia. You saw it before I did.'

It's absurd. I get a frisson of joy from this throwaway compliment from Chad, like a child being praised by a parent or teacher. I mentally shake my head and tell myself to get a grip. What's triggered it? The novelty of the situation? The altitude affecting my brain?

After a few minutes we turn right again to follow the valley. Chad seems to be busier now. He's talking more on the radio and pushing switches on the navigation computer. The air's a bit bumpier here but it's not too uncomfortable.

'We're in Swiss airspace now,' Chad says, 'about six minutes to landing. Straight in approach to runway zero three via Maloja.' Earlier he showed me a map of the area round the airport so I've got a reasonable idea of what he's talking about.

We continue along the valley, overflying a sequence of elongated lakes, the mountains surrounding them reflected in the mirror-flat blue-green waters. There are a few sailboats dotted about but their almost invisible wakes are confirmation of lack of wind on the surface.

Chad's flying manually now, left hand on engine control and right hand on the steering wheel. He mutters some sort of incantation to himself, presumably a memorised check list. He turns to me.

'Straps tight for landing?'

'Yes.'

There's another little lake ahead, with a town on its left shore. Chad points to it as we fly past.

'St Moritz,' he says. Then he points ahead through the windscreen. 'We're number two in the landing sequence.'

There's the runway, straight ahead, and I can make out the other plane. We're coming in at a slight angle, presumably to avoid the hill on our right side. It's strange that the altimeter still says seven thousand feet even though the ground is passing underneath much closer. But then I remember Chad telling me the airport is nearly

six thousand feet above sea level, one of the highest in Europe. Also, because the air is thinner our speed is higher, which accentuates the effect.

We're lined up with the runway now, and gradually descending. We float over the end. Chad pulls the engine control back and I notice the plane's nose rising as the ground approaches. We touch down on the back wheels and then the front wheel drops gradually onto the runway.

'Game over,' grins Chad as he steers the Arrow off the runway. 'Time for lunch, methinks.'

'Thank you, Chad,' I say. 'That was lovely. Next time we do it perhaps I can have a go.'

'I'll hold you to that.'

CHAPTER 18 - CHAD

IT'S A COUPLE OF MILES from the airport to the town of St Moritz so Cynthia and I take a taxi. Penny has called to say their train will be arriving in ten minutes so our plan worked out well, timing wise. The taxi takes us to the station, where several trains of bright red carriages are standing. We make our way to the arrival platform. The tracks seem narrower than standard and with the backdrop of mountains the overall effect is of a large toy trainset.

Penny's train pulls in and comes to a stop and hordes of tourists step out of the coaches down onto the platform. Penny sees us waving and walks towards us, Rachael holding her left hand and Katie the other. Or possibly the other way round. They're identically dressed and I've forgotten the headband code of the day. I mutter my memory lapse to Cynthia before the girls are in earshot.

'Katie gold, Rachael green,' she mutters back.

'Hi girls, how was it?' I call out as they approach.

'Lovely,' says Katie.

'We saw a glacier,' says her sister.

'Two glaciers,' corrects Katie.

'It was fantastic,' says their mother. 'Stunning views. The track twists and turns as it climbs. I've taken tons of photos.'

'We saw rivers going in two directions,' adds Katie.

'It's called a watershed,' says Rachael. 'That's the place where they keep the water.'

'I couldn't see a shed,' says Katie.

'It's not actually a shed,' explains their mother. 'It means a hill where water flows away in different directions. I don't think there was a shed there.'

'There were lots of bridges,' says Rachael.

'And tunnels too,' adds her sister.

We walk out of the station and head towards the lake. Cynthia has phoned a waterside restaurant to book a table for lunch.

'It's a lovely spot,' she tells us, 'a bit away from the town, so the prices are a bit better.'

We walk over a bridge crossing a small inlet and then towards the Alp da Staz hotel standing by the water's edge.

There's a table ready for us under a large parasol. Looking out to the lake we have a good view of the town on our right side where the shore curves round. We order our lunch and then Cynthia and I seat ourselves either side of Penny so she can show us the photos she's taken from the train while we wait for our food. The twins have found some swings to play on a few yards away.

Penny's pics are impressive. Maybe I'll get to try the Bernina Express myself one day. I like travelling by train but I'm not a fanatic, unlike Ron Kennedy, our lead guitar

in Rollback. Ron's got a share in a restored steam engine which he gets to drive occasionally at Didcot station. I've been there a couple of times with him. They've done up part of the station as the old Great Western Railway so it's got a nostalgic feel to it, if you like that sort of thing. I did get inspiration for a song there once, though I think there might have been a bit of Chuck Berry's Johnny B Goode hovering in the background.

*I see the engine steamin'/ I hear the whistle blowin'
The giant wheels are turnin' now/ Looks like you're
really goin'
The guard is getting in his coach/ His green flag not yet
furled
He doesn't know he's stolen you/ He's snatched you
from my world*

Ron and the others weren't too impressed and maybe they're right. I suppose you could bring in the twists and turns of the Bernina Express as a metaphor for the twists and turns of fate. More work required, methinks.

After lunch we take a stroll along the waterfront, the twins chasing each in circles round us or wandering at their own pace ahead of us or behind. Cynthia is enthusing to Penny about her flight.

'Well, why don't you fly back with Katie?' asks Penny. The twins have already decided that Katie would fly and Rachael would train. 'I've flown in that thing loads of times so I don't mind if you want another go.'

'I'm tempted,' replies Cynthia, 'but I'd also like another ride on the Bernina train. It's a while since my last trip.'

I look at my watch. 'Well ladies, shall we make our way back to the station? You've still got that three hour drive ahead of you when you arrive in Poschiavo, Cynthia.'

'Okay.'

We have a quick coffee at St Moritz station and then wave Cynthia and Rachael off as their train pulls out.

Penny, Katie and I stroll up the hill to the town centre for a look around, not that there seems much to see, then hail a taxi to take us to the airport.

No problems getting away from St Moritz in Whiskey Whiskey. Weather still perfect, even though we're heading into sun for the return flight, which calls for extra vigilance spotting conflicting traffic. I switch the autopilot to height lock as the altimeter reaches eight zero and lean the mixture out until I've got just less than max exhaust gas temp indicated. That means max fuel economy.

Penny's sitting quietly in the right seat, taking the occasional photo. I look back to see Katie stretched out over both back seats, dozing. Well, she did have an early start and she's probably had her fill of beautiful Alpine scenery.

There's no significant wind so the expected flight time is just under half an hour, much the same as the outbound. Although I'll probably use runway three two for landing as it slopes uphill and therefore reduces landing distance. Also it's down sun so the flare will be easier to judge. That means an extra couple of minutes flying half a circuit pattern.

There are still floatplanes flying up and down the lake as we drop towards the downwind leg, but no other traffic apart from us going into Como airfield as far as we can

make out. I get no reply to my radio transmissions announcing arrival but that's not a problem as there's no formal air traffic control. It's obvious the wind is light and in this settled weather the altimeter setting won't have changed more than a hectopascal or two.

Penny stirs Katie into wakefulness for the landing and I bring the Arrow round onto final and lower full flap. The air is smooth as glass and it's easy to do a gentle touchdown. After we shut down I suggest they book a taxi and wait for me in the little office while I refuel Whiskey Whiskey and put it to bed.

It's as we're approaching Moltrasio in the taxi that Katie suddenly calls out from the back seat, where she's sitting next to her mother. In the front seat I twist round to see what's the matter.

'You okay?' asks Penny.

'It's Rachael,' says Katie.

'What about her?'

'She's not happy. Something's happened.'

'How do you know?'

'She . . . I just know,' says Katie, looking a little distressed.

Penny's expression reflects the concern on her daughter's face.

'Do you know why she's not happy, Katie?'

'No.'

I look at my watch. If the train has run to time the others would have arrived at Poschiavo not long ago. They should now be in the Audi on the drive back home.

Penny looks at me and shakes her head. She rummages in her handbag for her phone.

'I'll give Rachael a call,' she says, tapping the keys.

'I'll call Cynthia,' I say, getting out my own phone.

There's silence in the taxi as we approach the Villa Tranquilla.

'Voicemail,' says Penny, looking grim. 'Hi Rach, Mum here,' she says into the phone. 'Give me a call when you get this message. Love you, bye.'

'I've got a text message from Cynthia,' I say. I read it out:

Hugh wants to meet me. Will give u details later. Hope u arrived safely. Cyn x

I call her number but my phone too goes to voicemail. 'It's Chad,' I record. 'Got your message. Safe journey home, bye.'

CHAPTER 19

PENNY'S PHONE RINGS and she leaps across the room to pick it up.

'Rachael? Where are you? Are you alright? What's happened? . . oh . . . Cynthia. Is Rachael okay? Where are you?' Penny holds her hand to her heart, clearly distressed but relieved to hear the voice of her daughter's companion. She normally copes well with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune but for the last two hours or so she's been hovering on the edge of breakdown, distraught, pacing round like a caged animal. She was convinced Cynthia and Rachael had been involved in a car crash. I feel uneasy myself, remembering the shock when I was told my first ex-wife had got mown down by an eighteen wheeler.

I try to get the full picture from Penny's inputs. 'Are you being threatened? . . Why not? . . When are you coming back? . . Can I speak to Rachael? . .'

Penny takes a breath and throws me a desperate look. The strained exchange continues. 'Where are you? . . Who are the people you're with? . . When are you coming back? . .

Where are you staying? . . .' As she listens, Penny shakes her head and the tears well up. 'I love you, darling. Are they still listening? Whoever you are, please don't hurt my daughter . . . or Cynthia . . . hello? . . hello? . . '

In slow motion Penny switches off her phone and places it on the table. She blinks rapidly and wipes away the tears.

'They've got Rachael and Cynthia,' she says distractedly.

'Who?'

'She wasn't allowed to say . . . they were waiting for them at the station and told them to get into a car . . . they're keeping them for a few days . . . we mustn't tell the police or they won't let them go . . . oh, Chad, it's awful!' Now Penny can't hold the tears back and I go over and hold her, letting her sob on my shoulder.

'It must be Hugh,' I say. 'Who else would do it?' I pick up Penny's phone and check the caller list. The last item tells me 'number withheld'.

'Yes, it must be Hugh . . . but why?'

'Mummy, it's okay. Rachael's okay.' Katie has just come into the room.

Penny instantly brightens up and wipes her eyes.

'What do you mean, Katie? Has Rachael texted you?'

'No . . . but she's alright.'

Penny goes over and hugs Katie. 'How do you know, darling?' she asks.

'She was unhappy for a bit but she's not so unhappy now.'

'Oh, I do hope you're right,' says Penny. She takes a deep breath and sits herself at the table. She stares

ahead, eyes red-rimmed.

'Is Rachael coming home now, Mummy?' says Katie.

Penny forces a smile. 'Not tonight, darling. She's going to stay with some people for a while.'

'Why?'

'For a little holiday.'

'But she's already on holiday.'

'Yes . . . this is a different holiday.'

'Where?'

Penny looks at me pleadingly.

'Not too far away,' I say, taking on the chore of inventing answers.

'Who are the people she's staying with?'

'Some friends of Cynthia.'

'Why didn't she tell us?'

'I think it was all last minute, Katie. You know these things happen sometimes.'

'Mummy, are you sad?'

'No.'

'You look sad.'

'I wasn't sure if Rachael was safe but now I know she is.'

'Okay. Don't worry, Mummy, she's okay.'

'Thank you, darling.'

Our evening meal is subdued, despite forced brightness from Penny. She's got over the initial shock and seems to be taking comfort in Katie's reassurance that her sister is not in distress. I'm still not convinced by the apparent telepathy between the sisters, although I've got no explanation for the 'twin moments' I've witnessed. To me it's a matter of logic. Hugh Sommerville may have

abducted his wife and her young companion for reasons not yet known but it's unlikely he would do anything nasty.

We avoid further discussion about the matter until Katie's gone to bed.

'Why?' says Penny now.

'To get his revenge on her for finding him out.'

'Seems a bit drastic,' I say. 'Could there be some other explanation? Maybe he just wants to talk to her to work out their differences.'

'He could have done that without involving my daughter.'

'Well, despite his flaws, I wouldn't consider Hugh Sommerville to be someone capable of harming women or children,' I say.

'We'd better go along with what they say, Chad.'

'I agree, Pen. We won't tell the police.'

'Is there anything we can do?'

'Not that I can think of at the moment. Tomorrow I'd better go and pick up the Audi from Poschiavo. I'll take a ferry to Colico at the north end of Lake Como and pick up a taxi there to take me to Poschiavo. It'll be more relaxing—and cheaper—than taxiing all the way from Moltrasio. We'll just have to carry on as normal until—'

I break off because Katie's come back into the room.

'What is it, darling?' asks her mother.

'Can we go shopping tomorrow, Mummy?'

'Of course. What do you want to buy?'

'A present for Rachael.'

Penny blinks back the tears, evidence of a momentary relapse.

'What shall we get her?'

'A new dress. But just for her. Usually you get the same for both of us. But the new dress will just be for her. Special.'

Penny hugs her daughter and smiles up at me through watering eyes.

CHAPTER 20

THERE HAVE BEEN no significant developments in the last two days. Cynthia has phoned twice but the conversations were brief and no information was forthcoming. The gist was: if you keep quiet no harm will come to her or Rachael and you don't need to know anything more. There was no inflection in her voice and no coded bits of gen as far as I could detect. Penny and Katie have been into Como on the ferry both days and the mood has stabilised into stoic acceptance coupled with hope that Rachael and Cynthia will soon be released. I joined them today—the bustling holiday atmosphere and sights and sounds lifted our spirits a little.

Once or twice we've talked about what we should do once the captives are back with us. Penny always refers to 'when' and I try to do the same, reminding myself that 'if' is not the word Penny wants to hear.

'Do we tell the police what happened, Chad?'

'We'd need to be sure there were no repercussions, Pen. Also, it depends on what Cynthia and Rachael want to do. I don't think we can make decisions until we see

how the land lies.'

'When you say "repercussions", do you mean "threats"?'

'Yes.'

At Penny's suggestion, I've brought some clobber over from the Reggia hotel so I can stay in Cynthia's room at the villa until she shows up again. I think Penny feels more secure with an ugly old git in the house looking after her and Katie.

The American tourists must have turned up during the night. This morning there's a car parked in front of the rented part, a large black Mercedes estate with tinted windows, very Hollywood. This morning they were probably sleeping in. Unlike us, they didn't eat breakfast on the patio at the back of the house.

Now it's early evening. Apart from wandering round Como for a while we haven't done much today. I called Malcolm to check everything was hunky-dory with Arrow Tec back home. We've got two new potential clients, he told me, so that'll help keep the wolves from the door. He sent me the details so I could start doing some preliminary assessments. Later I changed course and started work on another music project. If you're a fan of sixties stuff you might have heard A Touch of Velvet, a Sting of Brass, an instrumental track recorded by Mood Mosaic. It's a punchy little piece but spoiled by a really wimpy ending. Even worse, some of the harmonisation is incorrect, especially on the penultimate chord. What I'm doing is splicing the intro phrase onto the end of the track in place of the suspect bars and then doing an extended fade out on this repeated phrase. Vast improvement, in

my opinion. If the other Rollbackers like it we'll rerecord it using my new arrangement.

I'm just tweaking the fade out rate when Penny comes into my room—Cynthia's room, I should say—holding Katie's hand. Penny looks concerned. I take off my headset and turn to face her.

'Katie, tell Chad what you just told me,' she says.

'Rachael's in the house, in the next door part,' says Katie.

'How do you know?' I ask. As a sceptic, I don't like to bring up the subject of telepathy.

Penny must have read my thoughts. 'Tell Chad, darling.'

Katie holds out her phone. 'She texted me.'

I take it from her and look at the screen.

Im in the house next door. Sinthias with me. Their r 4 other peeple 1 of them is a women. Dont tell anyone dont tell the police. If u tell anyone they mihgt hert us. If no ones wotching im going to unlock the inside door. Im ok and sinthias ok. Is mummy ok. Dont reply.

CHAPTER 21 - CYNTHIA

THE TROUBLE STARTED two evenings ago. Some time after starting off on our journey back to Poschiavo on the Bernina train I got a text message from Hugh, saying he wanted to meet to discuss something urgently. He said he was now in the Como area and asked where I was and—foolishly, as it turned out—I told him.

When we arrived at Poschiavo station, Hugh was waiting for us. He was accompanied by a man and a woman. I recognised her as the woman I had seen him with in a restaurant in Como a few days ago. Mediterranean complexion, tall, good figure, long black wavy hair, dark eyes. What was her name . . . Donna? Strangely, I got the feeling I'd met her before but my memory wouldn't tell me where or when. The man was heavily built, cropped hair, military bearing, wearing sunglasses. Hugh and the woman seemed surprised that Rachael was with me, holding my hand. They briefly looked at each other but said nothing.

Hugh turned to me and grinned. 'Hi Cyn. Nice to see you. Have you been to St Moritz? It's a spectacular

journey, isn't it?'

The false jollity left me cold. 'What do you want, Hugh? Why are you here?'

'I just need to talk to you. We need to discuss our future.'

'This is neither the time nor the place,' I responded. 'I'm here on holiday with my friends and right now I'm driving back to Moltrasio. If you're staying in the area we can meet up tomorrow or the next day and we'll talk then. You've got my number.'

I started to walk towards the car park, still with Rachael in tow, but the other man blocked our path.

'Excuse me,' I said. 'You're standing in my way.'

The man stood his ground and turned to look at Hugh. My husband was still grinning but the friendliness was false.

'I'm sorry, Cyn, but you have to come with us. Your car has been taken away.'

I looked at the vehicles in the car park but it was impossible to make out whether the Audi was still there. I turned to look at my husband again.

'Hugh, what's going on?'

'I've told you. Who is the little girl?'

'She's the daughter of my friend.'

'She'll need to come with us as well. You can look after her.'

'Please ask your friend to step aside, Hugh,' I said. 'If you've removed my car for some reason I'll get a taxi back to the villa.'

Hugh spoke to the other man. 'Jack, can you explain the situation to Mrs Sommerville?'

The man was still standing in front of me. I couldn't see his eyes because they were hidden by the shades. His face was expressionless.

'Lady, you have to come with us. Like Mr Sommerville says, you have no choice. It would be better if you came quietly. We don't want to make a scene.'

The man's tone was American accented, and it was not friendly. My initial feeling of irritation was shifting to one of concern. I tightened my grip on Rachael's hand to give her the reassurance I was missing myself.

'Very well, Hugh. I'll come with you, but only if you allow me to call Rachael's mother so I can arrange for her to collect her.'

'No,' said Hugh. 'That's not possible at the moment. Maybe later.' He spoke to the other man. 'Jack, will you look after Cynthia's phone for her, and the little girl's too, if she's got one.'

The man held out his hand. It was large and calloused.

'Your phones, please.'

I quickly examined my options. Running away was not feasible, especially hanging on to Rachael. Screaming for help might work but there weren't many people nearby. It might also terrify Rachael, especially if 'Jack' tried to shut me up. For better or worse, I decided to go along with Hugh's demands. I looked down and smiled at Rachael.

'Let's give our phones to Jack,' I said. 'He can keep them safe for us.'

Rachael now looked frightened. 'I don't want to give him my phone. I want to go home. I want to see my Mummy.'

'It's okay, honey,' said the woman, addressing

Rachael. Her accent was also American. 'You'll see your Mommy soon. Nothing bad's gonna happen. Please give Jack your phone. He'll look after it for you.'

Rachael looked up at me, eyes watering. 'Cynthia, why do they want my phone?'

'Let's do what they say,' I told her, getting my phone out of my handbag. 'They won't hurt us.'

'No, sweetie,' said the woman. 'We won't hurt you. Look, give Jack your phone now and later he'll let you use it to call your Mommy. Okay?'

Reluctantly, Rachael handed her phone to 'Jack', who put it in the same jacket pocket he'd put mine.

'The cellphones,' said 'Jack' to Hugh. 'Do you want them—?'

My husband nodded. 'Good idea. At a convenient moment.'

I wasn't too happy to hear that last exchange but luckily the meaning escaped Rachael.

'We've got a car waiting,' said Hugh. 'I'll explain what's happening when we're on our way.' The false smile flicked on. 'Shall we go?'

Hugh's car was parked in the station car park, as was the Audi. I considered challenging my husband's assertion that it had been removed, then thought better of it. No point in causing any more upset.

We all got into a large black Mercedes estate car with tinted windows. It was arranged as a six-seater. In the rear part of the car Hugh and the American woman sat facing Rachael and me. 'Jack' slid into the driver's seat and started the engine.

The Mercedes turned right out of the car park, which

meant it was headed back towards Lake Como, initially at least. It brought me a little comfort. We three adult passengers looked out of the windows, careful to avoid eye contact with each other. I now sensed discomfort rather than threat in Hugh's demeanour, and indifference from the American woman.

'Are we going back to Moltrasio?' I asked Hugh, more in hope than expectation.

'No.'

'Where then?'

'Somewhere else.'

'Why have you made us come with you?'

'I'll tell you later.'

'Not good enough, Hugh. I want some answers.'

'You're not in a position to demand anything,' said my husband, unsmiling.

At Tirano the car took the road towards Sondrio, so we were still pointing towards Lake Como. The American woman began fiddling with her phone and Hugh stared out of the window, furrowed brow showing him deep in thought.

Maybe he was thinking along the same lines as me. For some reason—which doubtless would become apparent later—Hugh and his 'friends' had decided to abduct me. What they didn't anticipate was Rachael accompanying me. Which brought complications for my husband. Before very long Penny would report her daughter missing to the police, who would conclude either that I had abducted Rachael or else we both had been abducted by someone else. Hugh Sommerville would be interviewed by the police in both of these scenarios.

Logically, then, he would have to get in touch with Penny before she started a 'missing person' procedure.

'Right,' he said, looking at me. 'I'm going to let you talk to the girl's mother.' Obviously Hugh had reached the same conclusion as me.

'What about me,' came from my fellow captive. 'Can I talk to my Mummy?'

'Yes,' said Hugh, 'but there are some rules we have to be clear about first.'

'What rules?'

Well,' began Hugh, 'you must only tell your Mum that you are safe and well and we're looking after you. You mustn't say anything else.'

'But I don't know who you are anyway. Are you a friend of Cynthia?'

'Yes . . . sort of,' came the reply.

'Can I tell Mummy I'm in a car?'

'No.'

'Can I ask her if she's okay and Katie's okay?'

'Who's Katie?'

'My sister.'

'Yes, you can say that.'

'Why can't I say I'm in a car?'

Hugh didn't respond for a moment. Then he turned his eyes to me.

'Probably better if you start the ball rolling, Cynthia. Remember to tell them not to contact the police or it might delay letting you go. Then you can let the girl talk to her mother.'

'Alright.' At that moment the best approach for me seemed to be cooperation. Rachael and I didn't seem to

be in immediate danger and I couldn't see anything to be little to be gained by antagonising our abductors.

'My Mummy will be worried about me. Why can't I—'

'What's your name?' cut in Hugh.

'Rachael.'

'Well, Rachael,' said Hugh, 'I can tell you what's happening but you must keep it secret, okay?'

'Why?' Please, Rachael, keep your natural child's curiosity in check, I found myself thinking. These might not be nice people. We mustn't upset them.

Hugh took a deep breath. 'It's a Government project. We're actually Government agents.'

'What Government?'

'British . . . and American,' continued Hugh. 'We're setting a trap for some foreign spies.'

'What does foreign mean?' asked Rachael. 'Does it mean French people?'

In different circumstances the girl's reply would have raised a smile, but no-one was smiling now. My husband shook his head. 'I'm not allowed to tell you, Rachael. But not French people, no.'

'What sort of trap?'

'It's secret.'

'Why do you need me and Cynthia?'

'You may know the answer already, Rachael. What's Cynthia good at?'

'Speaking Italian.'

'Yes,' said Hugh. 'And lots of other languages too. Like the spies we're going to catch.'

'Can't the spies speak English?'

'No. When we listen to them on the phone we can't

understand what they're saying. Cynthia can do the interpretation for us.'

Rachael tilted her head, thinking. Then she spoke to me. 'Cynthia, why didn't you tell me you were doing this inter . . . inter . . . foreign listening for them?'

It was my turn to concoct a feasible cover story.

'Well, they didn't know if they would need me when the project started. They just told me to be ready.'

'Why can't I go home? You don't need me. My Mummy can collect me.'

'Because you'll probably be going home tomorrow anyway,' said the American woman, joining the discussion. 'If not tomorrow, then the next day. We're not allowed to tell your Mommy where you are but you'll see her very soon.'

'Promise?' said Rachael.

The American woman smiled. 'Promise.'

'What's your name?'

There was a pause. The woman looked across at Hugh, who merely raised his eyebrows.

'Marlene,' said the woman.

Or Donna, I found myself thinking.

'Can we phone Mummy now?'

'Yes,' said Hugh. 'Cynthia can talk to her first, then you. But remember, Rachael, if you break the rules we'll have to cut you off. Understand?'

'Yes.'

Hugh handed over his phone and Rachael told me the number.

'Put the speakerphone on, Cynthia,' said Hugh. 'We need to hear what's being said.'

Penny: Rachael? Where are you? Are you alright? What's happened?

Me: It's Cynthia.

Penny: Oh . . . Cynthia? Is Rachael okay? Where are you?'

I had to make an instant decision. Try to tell Penny exactly what Hugh and his . . . friends . . . were doing, even though their ultimate intentions weren't clear. But Hugh would have cut the connection immediately, of course, and they then might have punished us in some way for disobeying them. I was acting in loco parentis for Rachael and it was indirectly my fault she was in this predicament. The alternative was to go along with their demands and reveal nothing.

Me: We're both fine, Penny. We've been asked to help some people with a project.

Penny: Are you being threatened?

Me: We are being looked after. But it's imperative you don't inform the police or anyone else.

Penny: Why not?

Me: There would be repercussions. It might delay our release.

Penny: When are you coming back?

Me: Soon.

Penny: Can I speak to Rachael?

I caught Hugh's glance and he nodded. He looked at Rachael and put his finger to his lips, presumably to remind her about secrecy.

Rachael: We're okay, Mummy.

Penny: Where are you?

Rachael: I'm not allowed to say.

Penny: Who are the people you're with?

Rachael: I'm not allowed to say, Mummy. The people are listening to us.

Penny: When are you coming back?

Rachael: Tomorrow or the next day.

Penny: Where are you staying?

Hugh shook his head.

Rachael: I'm not allowed to say.

Hugh looked at me and signed to finish the call.

Me: Rachael, say goodnight to Mummy. We'll call again tomorrow if it's possible, Penny.

Rachael: Goodnight, Mummy. I love you and I love Katie.

Penny: I love you, darling. Are they still listening? Whoever you are, please don't hurt my daughter . . . or Cynthia.

Hugh reached over and switched off the phone.

'Good,' he said. 'If everyone cooperates, this will have a happy ending.'

As we continued on our way the tension eased a little. Thankfully the phone call seemed to have settled Rachael down. The early evening sun was still quite high so I could get a general sense of orientation, and from our rear-

facing seats I could see the signs on the other side of the road announcing the names of the towns we had just passed through. The road seemed to roughly follow a river. If my memory was correct this river would eventually run into Lake Como. After a while I felt the weight of Rachael's head on my breast and looked down to see that she had fallen asleep.

We passed through Sondrio, then Ardenno and Morbegno, the road occasionally crossing the river. The sun confirmed we were still making our way westward and I began to wonder if Hugh had changed his mind and decided to take us home. There was still no conversation.

Then Rachael came to. She yawned and her brow furrowed.

'Where are we?' she asked.

Hugh, looking out of the window, made no attempt to answer and the American woman was reading a magazine.

'I'm not sure,' I said.

Rachael looked across at the American woman. 'Where are you taking us?' she asked.

'Marlene' gave her a little smile. 'We're all going to stay at my house for a little while.' In my mind the American was now 'Marlene' rather than 'Donna'.

'Where's that?'

Marlene looked at her watch. 'Not long now. We'll have something to eat when we arrive. Do you like lasagne?'

Looking out of the window I saw that we'd arrived at Lake Como, but the road we were driving along was following the eastern shore southwards. So we weren't headed towards Moltrasio. The sun had not yet dipped

behind the mountains and the bright evening sky was silhouetting the mountains on our right.

We passed through Dervio according to the road signs and a few minutes later arrived at another lakeside town. Jack turned left off the main road and began a zig-zag climb inland, gaining height as we passed clusters of houses. The buildings thinned out as we turned back and forth and then disappeared, the road snaking its way through forest. A short while later the gradient reversed and we found ourselves rolling downhill, still twisting round hairpin bends. There was hardly any other traffic on the narrow country road.

So we continued, up hill and down dale, the car swinging left and right on the bends, passing through the odd village every few minutes or so. The ride was not comfortable and I looked down at Rachael to see how she was taking it. Luckily she seemed not too perturbed. In the soft evening light I caught the name 'Taceno' as we exited one village. I guessed we now were several miles from the lake shore.

Finally we zig-zagged up a hill and slowed as we approached the furthest house in a small cluster surrounded by trees.

'We've arrived,' announced Hugh.

The house was small, no bigger than a three bedroom English suburban property, with the standard shallow-pitched continental roof and windows with shutters. Like the others in the settlement it looked reasonably new.

Jack drove the Mercedes onto the paved driveway, stopped and set the park brake.

'What's this place called?' asked Rachael.

'Boston,' said Marlene.

In her innocence, Rachael did not challenge the absurd answer.

We got out of the car and filed into the house, me holding Rachael's hand and Jack bringing up the rear.

Inside the house Rachael and I were led into the lounge and I got the shock of my life. My jaw dropped. Standing by the window was a man . . . tallish . . . wiry black hair turning grey . . . long nose, long face . . . Reinier Mentinck!

'Hello, Cynthia,' said Reinier with a sardonic grin. 'This is a surprise, I must say.'

'What . . . aren't you . . . didn't you . . . ' I couldn't get the words out.

'Wasn't I kidnapped? Is that what you're trying to say, Cynthia?'

'Yes. I didn't realise you'd been released. Did they pay the ransom? I didn't see anything in the media.' I turned to my husband. 'Hugh, did you know Reinier had been released?'

My husband, looking at Rachael, said, 'No more discussion, Cynthia. Remember the secret mission.'

CHAPTER 22

CONSIDERING THE CIRCUMSTANCES, the meal wasn't so bad. There was lasagne enough for four. Marlene and I were happy with turkey slices and everyone managed some dressed salad. To prevent the conversation becoming strained I got Rachael to talk about her visit to Disneyworld. The others had the grace to chip in the odd question or comment. Perhaps they too realised that a quiescent Rachael was in everyone's interest. Jack, who previously had been the least talkative, began an earnest comparison about the various roller coasters to be found in various theme parks.

'Can I go on Facebook?' asked Rachael with the inexplicable jump of thought process I've frequently noticed in children.

'No,' said Marlene. 'We have to use a Government computer here and it can't run Facebook.'

'Can I watch TV?'

'Yes,' said Marlene. 'And I think there's some DVDs if you want to watch them. Come on, I'll show you where the TV is.'

After a minute or two Marlene came back into the room. 'She's watching "The Simpsons".'

Hugh's glance swept round the room. 'Right, people,' he said, 'there are some new complications. Like Rachael. How's that going to change things?'

'Why did we have to bring her?' asked Jack.

'We couldn't have left her,' said Hugh. 'You can't just abandon a young girl on her own in the middle of nowhere.'

So maybe my misbehaving husband hadn't lost all sense of humanity, I thought.

'Besides,' he continued, 'we couldn't take the chance of her telling her mother or the police what had happened to Cynthia—they would have started looking for me as nearest relative.'

'Reinier, what exactly is going on here?' I asked.

'Actually, it's us who should be asking the questions,' said Jack. 'Such as, why you and that British guy went into our part of the villa? The one Hugh met in France.'

The implication hit me immediately. 'How did you know about that? Did you see us? Did you have a security camera in there?'

'One or two. We watch the monitors here.'

'Teresa told us the washing machine was leaking,' I said. 'Chad and I went to look at it to see if it could be fixed.'

'Chad,' said Hugh. 'What was he doing in Italy? I don't suppose you hired him to check up on me? Is that what he was doing in France?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I thought you were having an affair.'

'Oh, he was, honey, he was,' laughed Marlene.

I sent a withering glance to Hugh but he had looked away, perhaps understandably.

'When are you going to release us?' I asked.

'When it's appropriate,' came the cold reply.

'Talking of which,' said Jack, 'can we afford to let them go? They know what we're doing. Or part of it, anyway.'

'Good point,' said Reinier.

I looked at him. How can you misjudge a person so badly? I'd always liked him when we'd met in the past. Obviously what I'd just heard was somewhat chilling. I was thinking of a suitable response when Hugh chipped in.

'Not a problem,' he said. 'Cynthia can't tell anyone what she's found out. If there was any comeback we'd just say she was part of the set-up.'

'Thank you,' I muttered, unable to disguise my sarcasm.

'What about the kid?' said Jack.

'How old is she? Eight . . . nine, maybe?' said Marlene. 'Hardly a credible witness. Anyway, it looks like she's bought that spy story we told her. So for the moment they're not a threat. Let's keep it under review.' She flicked back her long, dark hair. 'Onto more practical matters,' she said. 'Three bedrooms. Who's going to sleep where? Suggestions, anyone?'

'Marlene and I in my room,' said Hugh. 'The others can double up. Jack and Reinier, Cynthia and Rachael.'

I suppressed the urge to throw in a comment about my husband sharing a bedroom with another woman while

his wife had to share with someone else in the same house.

'I'm a bit worried,' said Jack. 'I know you said Cynthia and the kid can't foul up the operation but I don't think we should take any chances.' He looked at me. Without his sunglasses on his eyes were icy blue. Then he turned to face the others. 'Do we need the ultimate solution?'

'No,' said Hugh quickly, much to my relief. 'It won't come to that.' No doubt in the back of his mind was the calculation that my . . . disappearance . . . would turn police eyes on him. And perhaps he had a residual concern about my welfare.

'But we should keep it in reserve . . . just in case,' said Reinier.

Again I found myself wondering how I could have been so misled by the man I had considered a friend.

'Alright,' said Jack. 'We'll keep them with us until the operation is over. Then we'll decide what to do with them.'

'Okay,' said Hugh.

'What operation?' I asked.

Hugh and Reinier exchanged looks. Finally Reinier nodded. 'Over to you, Hugh,' he said eventually.

My husband sighed. 'Let's have a drink, shall we? Marlene, do the honours, will you?'

Going with the flow, I took a glass of wine and sat down on one of the sofas. Hugh and Reinier shared another sofa. Jack and Marlene dropped themselves into separate easy chairs.

'Well,' said Hugh. 'To answer the question you posed earlier, no, Reinier has not been released.'

'I don't understand,' I said. 'Unless . . . '

'Your "unless" is correct, Cynthia. We ourselves arranged the kidnap.'

I slowly shook my head in wonder. 'But why?'

'Why do you think?'

'I doubt it was for the release of political prisoners. Which leaves—'

'Correct again. The ransom.'

'Hey, guys, do we need to tell her this?' It was Jack joining in the conversation. 'We can't risk compromising the operation.'

'You're right,' said Reinier. He turned to me. 'You don't need to know any more, Cynthia.'

'Alright,' I said. 'But why did you bring me here? What have I got to do with it?'

Reinier looked at Hugh and Jack. 'I guess you can tell her that,' said the American.

'You weren't part of the plan,' said Reinier. 'I was staying in the Villa Tranquilla with Marlene and Jack. Hugh fixed it up for us. It was our . . . what's the English word . . . hideaway. Then we found out you were staying in the private part and we couldn't take the chance that you'd see me and recognise me so we had to move out, so we came here. This place is our back-up accommodation in case the villa couldn't be used for some reason or Hugh needed to stay in the area.'

'So in that case,' I said, 'why did you need to abduct us and bring us here? I didn't know anything about whatever it is you're up to.'

'You brought that on yourself,' said Hugh. 'We saw you and the Brit going into our place with Teresa. We saw you fiddling with the washing machine but we couldn't hear

what you were saying. There's no sound feed on the security cameras. So we didn't know if somehow you'd found out what we were doing. We didn't know if you'd seen anything in the house that could be tied to us.'

It was then that I remembered. I'd noted something in the rented part when Chad was sorting out the water leak but I couldn't put my finger on on it. But now the unexpected meeting with Reinier solved the riddle.

'The baseball cap,' I said. 'I saw it on the way out, hanging on a hook. Sabine bought it for you when you went to Australia. Great Barrier Reef. You wore it once when we met socially, you and Sabine and Hugh and me.'

'You've got a good memory,' said Reinier. Switching to Dutch, he said, 'I enjoyed the times we all went out together. Happier times.'

'Yes, and now I've remembered something else,' I continued. 'Marlene, I knew I'd met you somewhere before. You used to work as Reinier's assistant. Have I got it right?'

The American woman nodded. 'Right on the money, honey.'

'And now,' I continued, 'what are you doing now?'

Marlene smiled at me. 'I'm a good friend of your husband.'

'A good friend?'

'A very good friend.'

It was difficult, but I managed to refrain from using unladylike language to comment on the liaison between my husband and his floozie.

'So,' said Jack. 'Are we going to go back to the villa tomorrow or stay here till the drop? I know the plan was

to stay here but that was when there were four of us. It's a bit pokey here for six people.'

'I don't think there's enough food for six mouths,' said Marlene.

'But if we go back to the villa,' said Hugh, 'there's the danger of Penny or the PI finding out we're there. If we park the car they'll wonder who it belongs to and if we arrive by foot or by taxi we might be spotted.'

'Unless we go there after dark,' suggested Jack.

'Where would we put the car though? We're going to need it for the drop. We're more inconspicuous if we stay here.'

'I think Hugh's right,' said Jack. 'We go back there after the drop, grab a few hours shut-eye, pack up our stuff and vamoose.'

While the foursome were discussing their own nefarious plans I found myself pondering the consequences of our incarceration. I could tolerate a degree of discomfort myself, but I wasn't sure how Rachael would take it. My feeling of guilt intensified. If it wasn't for me that little girl would be safely at home with her mother and sister. There were other matters to think about, too, more mundane.

'We haven't got a change of clothes,' I said. 'Or nightwear.'

Marlene looked at me. 'I've got some spare knickers. You can use those.'

'What about Rachael?'

Marlene's smile bordered on a smirk. 'I've got some . . . skimpy knickers. Hugh likes them. The kid can use them.'

Hearing these words, Hugh had the grace to wince, but obviously couldn't bring himself to make any comment. My heart sank. For the first time since our detention my natural optimism was dented and I suddenly felt alone, friendless, an unusual sensation for me.

Reinier hadn't spoken for a while. Now he looked at me dispassionately. 'Cynthia, you'll just have to accept your situation. If you hadn't interfered you wouldn't be in this mess. If you behave yourself and don't do anything silly there's a good chance you'll get your freedom again. But if you let us down, well . . . '

Another arrow from an erstwhile friend. I found myself blinking rapidly and was afraid I wouldn't be able to control my emotions. But Reinier switched to Dutch and said, 'Don't worry. Things are not as black as you think. I'll make sure you're safe, you and the child. But you must respond to what I'm saying as if you're upset. Off you go. Start acting.' The last words were delivered with a convincing scowl.

It wasn't difficult to let the tears flow after what I'd been through, but I was careful not to overdo it.

'What did you tell her?' asked Jack.

'She speaks Dutch well,' said Reinier. 'There are some . . . strong words . . . that are easier for me to say in my native tongue.'

I took out a paper hankie, dabbed my eyes and sniffed.

'You don't have to be so nasty,' I said quietly. I saw that Hugh looked pained. Jack and Marlene seemed untroubled.

'Alright,' said Reinier, his voice still hard. 'Now we understand each other.'

'Cynthia, are you okay?' came a voice from the doorway. It was Rachael.

'Yes, dear, I'm okay. I just got a bit upset.'

The girl came over and hugged me. 'Don't get upset. I'll look after you.'

'Thank you,' I said, blinking back real tears.

'Have you finished watching TV?' asked Marlene, defusing a difficult moment.

'Yes, can I go to bed now?'

'Yes,' said Marlene. 'Let me find a toothbrush for you.'

'I haven't got a nightie,' said Rachael.

'Don't worry, sweetie, you can use one of mine tonight.'

So even Marlene wasn't completely heartless, I thought, as she led Rachael out of the room. Maternal instinct? My shaken faith in humanity was partly restored. Although of course her apparent generosity might be a method of ensuring that Rachael didn't run off during the night, by taking her clothes away. I hoped I would not suffer the same indignity.

Jack stretched and yawned. 'Right, I'm going to watch a bit of TV myself.'

Hugh turned to me. 'Sorry, Cynthia.'

I gave him a cold stare. 'I've got nothing more to say to you.'

My husband nodded. 'Fair enough. I'm off for a shower then.'

'Okay, lover,' cooed Marlene. 'But you're on your own this evening.'

I scowled at both of them, unable to think of a scathing comment.

'Now, anyone want more wine?' said Marlene after

Hugh had left the room. 'Jack and I are watching Flight 935. Anyone want to join us?'

There were no takers.

Marlene took the wine bottle off the table and went out again.

Reinier and I were now the only two left in the room. He looked at me sternly and said in Dutch, 'I'm sorry about this Cynthia. Really I am.'

I nodded, showing no emotion. 'That's two of you, then. Are there cameras here too?' I asked in Dutch.

'No. But the others might pass through as we talk. So the ploy now is . . . we're more friendly after my initial outburst, as if we're reminiscing about old times. Which maybe we will, one day.'

'Okay. Can you tell me what this is all about?'

CHAPTER 23

REINIER SIGHED. 'I'm sorry to admit it but I'm the instigator of the whole deal. All because of my addiction.'

'Addiction?'

'Gambling. I ran up some massive debts.'

'What were you gambling on?'

'Stock market, mainly. And casinos, too.'

'Did Sabine know about it?'

'I think she suspected. We had a joint account and it was difficult keeping a healthy level of funds in it when it was haemorrhaging out of other accounts. And, I'm ashamed to say, I was spending money on another woman.'

'A mistress?'

Reinier nodded and pointed his thumb towards the door.

Surprised, I lowered my voice. 'Marlene?'

'Yes.'

'Is that her real name?' I asked. 'Hugh told me her name was Donna, or something like that.'

'No, she's Marlene. Hugh was just being evasive, I

would imagine. There was no point in her dreaming up an alias as we'd probably forget and use her real name in general conversation, I suppose.'

'She was your assistant, wasn't she?'

'Yes. We started an affair about two years ago.'

'Did Sabine know about that?' I asked.

'No, I don't think so.'

'It doesn't sound like the Reinier Mentinck I used to know,' I said.

'It wasn't. I don't know why I went off the rails like that. But the upshot was that I needed to raise funds to pay off my debts. Although, strangely enough the plot emerged by accident.'

'What do you mean?'

'It was at a conference about eight, nine months ago. You were there and so was Hugh.'

I scanned my memory. 'Moscow.'

'Correct. The Anti-Proliferation Talks.'

'Yes. We were allowed to bring partners so Hugh came with me.'

'And I brought Sabine too.'

I searched my memory. 'Was Marlene at the summit?'

Reinier nodded. 'Yes, but only as my assistant. We'd already split up by then. I felt bad about my behaviour and so I stopped seeing Marlene. I suppose I thought it was a form of partial redemption.'

I forced myself to ask the next question. 'So when did she latch on to Hugh? Was it in Moscow? Or was it the other way around?'

'I'm sorry, Cynthia,' said Reinier. 'You don't deserve what you've been put through.'

'No, I don't,' I concurred. 'So . . . Hugh and Marlene . . .'

'Some time after we broke up I discovered by chance that she was seeing Hugh. I can't remember the exact details. I wondered if I should tell you as you were a good friend. But like a coward I convinced myself it was none of my business and I kept quiet. I'm sorry, Cynthia.'

The Anti-Proliferation summit had been set up by the UN to look at methods of preventing unstable or failed states acquiring nuclear weapons. Besides Iran, there was concern about Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, and one or two of the states in the southern regions of what used to be the Soviet Union.

Reinier was a frequent participant at these conferences. Ostensibly an official in the Dutch Department of Defence, it would be more accurate to describe him as an expert on nuclear weapons, his expertise garnered during his time serving in the military. Specifically, his speciality related to the systems used to arm and disarm these weapons. It suited the western powers to deploy non-American and non-British agents to monitor nuclear activity since they were less likely to arouse political hostility. Anonymity and secrecy were vital protections for officers involved in watching for potential components of arming systems arriving in suspect countries by dubious means. They were briefed not to divulge their activities to anyone who didn't need to know. Reinier once told me that I knew more about his nuclear expertise through my translation work than Sabine did.

'Ironically,' said the Dutchman now, still speaking his

native language, 'Hugh and the others don't know how much I know about nuclear weapons. They think I'm a low-ranking government official. Although she was my assistant, even Marlene was excluded from some of the more sensitive work.'

'So how did the plot start?' I asked.

'One evening, a few of us went to a night club in Moscow, a strip club actually, although of course we didn't tell our women folk where we were going.'

'Of course,' I murmured sardonically.

'Hugh was with me, and a couple of Americans, and a Chinaman too, if I remember correctly. Needless to say, much alcohol was consumed.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I seem to remember Hugh nursing a monumental hangover the next day.'

'Anyway, the tone of the conversation turned to how we were undervalued. Other than Hugh, we were all doing important work for our respective governments yet our pay was peanuts compared to the civil servants running our departments. It must be the same in all countries because the Chinaman agreed too. Jokingly, I suggested staging a pretend kidnap to force them to pay a substantial sum as a ransom. We all laughed and the conversation moved onto other things.'

'Hey, what are you guys talking about?' said a voice speaking English in an American accent. It was Jack, who had just come into the room.

'Just reminiscing,' said Reinier. 'I realised I had been too harsh with Cynthia, so I told her I was sorry and we started talking about old times.'

Jack nodded and looked at us for a second. 'Why are

you speaking Dutch?'

'No specific reason,' said Reinier.

'That's probably me,' I said. 'I started it. I like to practise foreign languages when I get the chance. Stops me going rusty.'

'Okay,' said Jack after a moment.

'Can I carry on speaking Dutch?' I asked.

'Yeah, I guess.'

'Thank you.'

The morning after the boys' night out, said Reinier in Dutch when Jack had left the room again, he was surprised to get a call from Hugh suggesting a meeting. The venue was a restaurant opposite the Kremlin and accompanying Hugh was one of the Americans they had gone out with the previous evening. The topic of the conversation was the kidnap idea. It was no longer a joke but an idea to be seriously considered, said Hugh. It wasn't difficult for Reinier to let himself be talked into joining the conspiracy—in the back of his mind was the need to find some money quickly to pay off his debts.

After the Anti-Proliferation summit ended the three men stayed in touch and gradually evolved a plan. The 'victim' would be Reinier, and he would be 'snatched' when a suitable opportunity arose. The trio would invent a fictitious Arab political faction who would be the alleged perpetrators of the crime. To lend credibility to the plot, the release of political prisoners from Israeli jails would be demanded, as well as the ransom.

'So how come you ended up in Italy?' I asked Reinier now.

'We needed a place for me to hide and Hugh suggested

the Villa Tranquilla, which as you know he'd used as a holiday home in the past.'

'So that's why Hugh kept visiting Como?'

'Yes, we needed to review developments from time to time and it only took Hugh a few hours to get here from his work in France. We needed to minimise any phone or internet communication to avoid interception.'

'So, is the ransom being paid?'

'Yes, at long last.'

'Who's paying it? Why did it take so long for them to make up their minds?'

'It's a game of cat-and-mouse, Cynthia. Or bluff and counterbluff if you like. Officially, governments can't be seen to negotiate with kidnappers because it makes them look weak. Behind the scenes it's a case of setting up a channel of communication and thrashing out a deal.'

'And what were you demanding? Money-wise, I mean.'

'Three million US dollars.'

'Wow! And have they agreed to pay it?'

'Not three million, but we've settled for a smaller figure.'

'Who's paying it?'

Reinier paused. 'They set up an organisation called Blauwe Burcht to deal with it. As you know, that's "Blue Castle" in English. I would think it's most likely officials from the Dutch government, though the US and the British would also probably be involved, given my nuclear background. They went through the motions of playing hard-to-get and to tell you the truth we began to think we weren't going to get the result we wanted. The abort plan was for me to pretend to escape and make my way back to friendly lines.'

'But then they changed their minds?'

'Yes,' said Reinier. 'A week or so ago, an offer of a million dollars was made by a different organisation, calling themselves Delta Nine Zulu.'

'Ah . . .,' I said. 'Delta something . . . I remember now—that's what Chad told me he overheard Hugh talking about at the Terrassa hotel.'

'We think that it was Blue Castle in a different guise, changing their name so they could publicly maintain the fiction that officially they would not give in to kidnappers.'

'So you asked for more.'

'Horse trading, Cynthia. We asked for two, they said a million and a half as a down payment and another half when I'm . . . ' (at this point Reinier held up his fingers in the standard "quote" gesture) ' . . . released. We said okay.'

I thought for a moment. 'Why does Hugh need the money?' I asked, directing the question more to myself than to Reinier. 'He's on a good salary with Carding Wells. My pay's not bad either. Between us, we're hardly hovering on the edge of starvation.'

The Dutchman pouted. 'Marlene perhaps? She has expensive tastes, that woman.'

'Does she always go for married men?' I asked.

'Well, you may be right there. The man she was going out with before me was married. Obviously it's not the sort of thing you can bring up in conversation. But I think she likes the touch of danger and the power it gives her, knowing she can expose her lover if she doesn't get her way.'

'What was her response when you dumped her?'

'It's embarrassing to say so, but I don't think she was very upset. I suspect she was ready to move on anyway. Maybe I wasn't . . . how shall I say it . . . meeting her expectations.'

'And how did she end up in the kidnap plot?'

'Via Hugh. I don't know whether he told her about it or she found out some other way. As I said, she loves a hint of danger. She's probably loving being involved.'

'Bit of a femme fatale, then?'

Reinier nodded. 'Les mots justes.'

There was a pause while we both sipped wine. A new thought occurred to me. 'Are you regretting getting involved in this, Reinier?'

'Yes,' came the reply.

'So can't you just walk away?'

Reinier shook his head. 'No, I'm going through with it, especially now they've agreed to pay. I still need my share of the ransom to pay off my debts.'

'Pity.'

'Yes.'

'What about Jack? Where does he fit in?'

'He's just muscle, really. When we agreed the plan we realised we needed someone who could organise the fake jihadist website and so on. We left that part of it to Spencer Wiseman—the American who was in with us. Part of the deal was that we should have a bodyguard to keep an eye on us. Probably a two way thing—making sure none of us did a runner and making sure no-one else tried to get to us. Hence Jack. Ex-US Marine Corps. You wouldn't want him on the other side in a fight, that's for sure.'

'This American, Wiseman, did you say his name was? He's not here, then?'

'No, not just now. He's been over once or twice, though. He lives in Los Angeles.'

Another thought. 'Are you all getting an equal share?'

Reinier nodded. 'A third for Spencer, a third for Hugh and a third for me.'

'What about Jack?'

'We haven't asked him. I think Spencer's paying him.'

'Where are we now, Reinier? What's the location of the house we're in? It's obviously not far from Lake Como.'

'Best not to tell you, Cynthia. You don't need to know.' Reinier looked at me earnestly. 'Look Cynthia, I'm not proud of what I'm doing but I'm going through with it. I'll do my best to make sure no harm comes to you or Rachael. We'll revert to English now. Remember our *modus operandi*. I'll be stern when I speak to you and you will respond neutrally. Don't be too sullen. I'll speak Dutch only when it's necessary and if I do so, respond as if I'm telling you off. Okay?'

I sighed. 'Very well . . . except . . . '

Reinier raised his eyebrows. 'What?'

'Won't the authorities interrogate you after your supposed release? You'll have to convince them the kidnap was genuine.'

'All rehearsed, Cynthia. We're not amateurs.'

Another sip of wine for both of us.

'Well,' I said in English. 'That's enough excitement for one day. I'm going to bed.'

CHAPTER 24

DAY THREE of our prison sentence. Yesterday was somewhat tiresome for Rachael and me, mainly due to enforced inactivity. We were not allowed outside although a brief, heavily censored phone call to Penny was permitted. At different times Jack and Marlene temporarily left the house, Jack's absence stretching to three hours or so but Marlene's much shorter. Listening to the conversations of our captors I formed the impression Jack's excursion was to check that there was no police presence at the Villa Tranquilla in case Penny had disregarded the instructions she had been given. Marlene's mission seemed more mundane. She arrived back with shopping bags full of food. Rachael was working her way through 'The Simpsons' and I had found a trashy Italian paperback to help pass the time. We'd been allowed to shower and borrow changes of clothes from Marlene's wardrobe while ours were washed so we felt reasonably civilised.

This morning was no different, but when Hugh and Reinier went into a huddle over their laptop mid afternoon

I sensed a new atmosphere, more tense, elation tempered with tension. Both men seemed agitated, talking in terse phrases. At one point Hugh let out a resounding 'yesss!' and thumped Reinier on the back. Watching from the doorway I caught the words 'verification' and 'override'.

Back in the breakfast room Jack and Marlene seemed more calm.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'Good news, lady,' said Jack. 'You'll be able to go home tomorrow, like we promised.'

'Is it the end of the kidnap plan?'

This question was ignored, but obviously Rachael had sensed the change in atmosphere. Coming in from the TV room she asked, 'Can I go back to my Mummy tomorrow?'

'Sure you can,' said Marlene. 'We've just got a few things to sort out first.'

Hugh appeared with a big grin on his face. 'It's on, chaps,' he announced. Behind him Reinier looked relieved rather than pleased.

'What form did the test take?' asked Jack.

'They fired a load of technical questions at Reinier.'

'To check he was the genuine article?'

'That's right,' said Hugh. 'They didn't want to part with their gold until they knew what they were getting in return.'

'You had the encrypter on, didn't you?' continued Jack.

'Yeah, and we did it all through the Al-Montaqan website. They can't trace it back to here.'

'So how much are we talking about?'

'Thirty-two kilos.'

'How many bars?'

'Sixteen two kilo ingots. At today's prices that's worth just over one point six million US dollars.'

'That'll do for me,' said Marlene with a wide grin.

'So, the pick-up arrangement,' said Jack. 'As planned?'

'Yes, basically,' replied Hugh. 'We've decided to use Orange rather than Scarlet. As you know, it's a half kilometre closer to Purple. The road's straighter there so we can spot any intruder vehicles that might encroach earlier than before.'

'And the transfer is still van to car at Purple?'

'Correct.'

'I'm puzzled,' I said. The others turned to look at me, clearly not expecting an input from this quarter. 'If you're purporting to be an Arab terrorist group, won't they think it's a bit odd, giving gold bullion away in Italy?'

'I don't think so,' smiled Hugh. 'Like everything else, crime is globalised these days.'

'Transfer times,' said Jack. 'Just remind me. Do they change using Orange?'

'Not significantly,' said Hugh. 'We plan to leave Purple at twenty-two twenty local.'

'Will me and Cynthia be with you?' asked Rachael, another unexpected interruption.

'Yes.'

'Why do you need a van?'

There was a pause. 'It's a special van,' said Marlene. 'To carry stuff for us.'

'Like gold bars?' continued Rachael.

Hugh gave his little prisoner a stern look. 'Now then, Rachael. This is secret government business, remember.'

We mustn't talk about it any more.'

'Okay,' said Rachael, putting an I couldn't care anyway pout on her face.

Later on tedium set in again. Rachael was now hooked on 'The Simpsons'. I asked for—and was denied—permission to use the laptop. Once again we weren't allowed to go outside for fresh air. None of the others left the house. From occasional snippets of conversation and some guesswork I pieced together what was planned for the evening. It seemed the gold was to be left in a vehicle at a specific location—Orange—and would then be driven by Jack to another location—Purple—where it would be transferred to a different vehicle, a car. My supposition was that the second vehicle was the black Mercedes estate we had driven to the house in. At one stage I innocently asked if we were all going together to the pick up point and then back to the villa. No-one replied directly but Reinier gave a gruff 'you may assume an affirmative answer' in his native tongue, as if muttering to himself.

Eventually boredom drove me to joining Rachael on the sofa to watch the television. Before long I found myself grinning and even laughing. Soon Rachael was asking me to explain some of the jokes and I found it quite a cerebral challenge to convert 'Simpsons' humour into a form easily digested by an eight year old intellect. At one point Reinier came over and stood behind us and soon I heard him chortling.

'They used to call me "Homer" when I was in the army,' he said, speaking English.

I made the connection. 'Nuclear power.'

'Yes. Well, I hope it was that and not because they thought I was a . . . what's the English word . . . bumbling incompetent.'

'So you had to pass an exam this morning,' I said. 'To prove you were the real thing.'

'Yes. Surprisingly detailed actually. Once or twice I had to admit I didn't know the answers.'

'Any ideas who they were, your inquisitors?' I said, looking round to face Reinier.

'No. The questions were written, not spoken.'

'In English?'

'Mostly Dutch.'

'Were they correctly written? Grammar and spelling-wise, I mean?'

'Yes, pretty well.'

'So the Delta-whatever-they're-called lot could well be Dutch officials.'

'Yes. Easily possible. And the most likely explanation, given the circumstances.'

'What's the timing for tonight?' I asked in Dutch. There were no other adults in the lounge at that moment, but natural caution was now controlling my thought processes. 'I know you're reluctant to tell me details but I'm just thinking about Rachael. She'll be ready for sleep by nine o'clock.'

'The plan is to set off about nine thirty. All of us, in the Mercedes. We drop Jack off two hundred metres away from point Orange—'

'Where's that?' I interrupt.

'Don't push your luck, Cynthia!'

'Sorry!'

'Okay,' continued Reinier. 'We drive to a location close to point Scarlet and wait. Jack walks to the vehicle with the bullion—'

'The van?'

'Yes. He'll check the van for cameras and bugs and if he's happy he'll drive it to Scarlet, then stop and wait for a while to make sure he wasn't followed. We'll be watching the area too. Jack'll transfer the bars to suitcases. Then, if everyone's happy we'll quickly drive over, pick him and the gold up and drive to the villa.'

'Well, I just hope Rachael sleeps through it all.'

'No reason why she shouldn't, Cynthia. It won't be very dramatic. Well, we hope that anyway. Just a couple of car journeys, not too long. Now, Marlene is looking at us from just outside the door. You must put on your being-told-off-by-Reinier face, okay?'

Reinier had harshened his voice as he delivered the last few words.

'I've told you already,' I said in English, slightly aggrieved. 'I'm just getting a bit fed up being treated like a child.'

'Well, don't behave like one,' responded Reinier, also speaking English.

'Don't tell Cynthia, off,' chimed in Rachael. 'You mustn't upset her. She's looking after me till I get back home to my Mummy.'

'Wise words, sweetie,' said Marlene, grinning in the doorway. 'You tell him. It's great, isn't it, that you'll see your Mommy again soon?'

A little later on Rachael went for a nap and Hugh came into the room. I'd got the impression he'd been avoiding

me, for understandable reasons. Possibly he'd been waiting for the right moment to face the music. Noting his apparent discomfort, I chastised myself for indulging in a tiny gloat of retributive satisfaction.

'Well, Cyn, what can I say?' was his opening shot.

'A grovelling apology would be a good start.'

'Okay, I'm sorry.'

'Followed by a full and frank explanation.'

'I think you know most of it.'

'I know you've cooked up a mad criminal conspiracy to extort money from the Dutch government. And you've been fornicating with that American woman. And lying to me about both.'

Hugh winced. 'Guilty on all counts.' He turned to Reinier. 'Can you leave us alone for a while? This might get a bit personal.'

When the Dutchman had left the room I said, 'So the next question is . . . why?'

My husband shook his head. 'Difficult to say. Perhaps a need to find excitement in my life.'

'Sorry I wasn't exciting enough for you,' I countered before realising my response was too self-pitying.

'I'm not blaming you, Cyn.'

'I'm pleased to hear it,' I said, trying to tone down the sarcasm. I went off on a new tack. 'Suppose I hadn't found out what you were up to. Would you have left me? Or would you have carried on two-timing me?'

'I don't know. I'll admit, there's a thrill in being able to go to bed with two different women.'

I couldn't think of an answer to that. I resisted the urge to ask who was the better performer. Partly through

cowardice, of course. I might have ended up with the silver medal in that particular contest. Another change of direction was called for.

'What are you going to do with your share of the loot? Half a million dollars, isn't it?'

'I'll find something to spend it on,' said Hugh.

'Including baubles for your mistress, no doubt.'

'It'll pay for a few creature comforts—'

'And a divorce settlement,' I interrupted angrily. 'I'll start proceedings as soon as I get back to England.'

'Wait a minute, Cynthia. You should be grateful we're going to let you go.'

'You would have had to anyway, Hugh. If Rachael and I had . . . disappeared . . . the police would have come looking for you very quickly.'

'Granted.'

'Alright. I assume you won't be contesting the divorce.'

'No, I won't.'

'I doubt you'd be able to, anyway.'

'Having said that,' said Hugh, 'there is the matter of you hiring a private investigator to spy on me. I could claim it as harassment.'

'Are you suggesting that that was unreasonable behaviour, given the circumstances? I might even include his fee in what you have to pay in settlement.'

'Wasn't much use, though, was he?' said Hugh with a sarcastic grunt. 'It was Teresa who found me, not him.'

'He did his best,' I replied. 'I'm not complaining.'

My husband narrowed his eyes. 'I assume your relationship with Chad was strictly professional. Otherwise that situation might have a bearing on the

outcome of any court case.'

I bristled. 'Your assumption is correct. The relationship was professional.'

'So, have you parted company with him now?'

I was about to divulge that as far as I knew Chad was still at the Villa Tranquilla but an instinct told me to button my lip.

'The arrangement is finished,' I said eventually.

There was an uncomfortable pause. Then I said, 'We'll have to sell the house. Or you'll have to buy my share. I don't want to live there anymore, not after all this.'

'Might take you up on that, dear,' grinned Hugh. 'I think I'm coming into money quite soon. Today, in fact.'

'Assuming the authorities don't find out the provenance of your . . . windfall.'

'How will they find out? We've already got a buyer for the gold. Very soon it'll be a substantial pile of electronic cash, which we'll transfer into various personal accounts.'

'Suppose they trace the gold?'

'No, we've prepared for that contingency. Reinier won't be . . . released . . . until we've checked that the gold is genuine and untraceable. Spencer Wiseman's got a chum who'll be handling that for us. For a small percentage the buyer will melt it down as soon as he's got it.'

'Suppose they refuse to pay you the other half million once Reinier's pretended to be released?'

'We were never expecting them to. It was just part of the bargaining game.'

'What's to stop me telling the police what you've done?'

Hugh sighed. 'You know why, Cyn. If you spill the

beans we'll just say you were part of the plot and you'd changed your tune to try to avoid punishment. Or maybe out of spite because I'd left you for another woman. And Spen— . . . our American friend . . . might be displeased too. He might decide to send Jack or another of his enforcers to . . . punish you.'

I nodded. 'Fair point.'

'I know Reinier's being a bit harsh with you at times, and Jack and Marlene probably aren't too fussed about your welfare, or Rachael's for that matter, but I've persuaded them you're not a threat. Once the job is complete Reinier will act out his release and make his way home, Jack will be off to the States and Marlene and I will carry on with our lives—'

'As man and mistress,' I interrupted.

'Well, once you and I are divorced, man and girlfriend.'

'Surely the authorities will want to question Reinier.'

'We've rehearsed that bit. Reinier's going to fake post traumatic stress syndrome so he can get away with confused answers. He's quite convincing when he's in character. Very believable.'

'What about Sabine?'

'That's up to him . . . and her, I suppose.'

'And me and Rachael?'

'The rest of us will be vacating the villa tomorrow. You and Rachael will be left there. You're on your own after that. No doubt the next time we'll meet will be in the solicitor's office, discussing the divorce.'

'No doubt,' I agreed quietly.

'So, it's sort of a deal, Cyn. You keep stumm and you won't come to any harm. Deal?'

I nodded again. 'Deal.'

'And maybe the divorce can be settled amicably.'

'That would suit me too,' I said.

'Good,' said Hugh. 'I'm glad we've cleared the air. Right, I'm going to make a pot of tea. Want a cup?'

Later I found myself pondering Hugh's comments about Chad. Yes, it was a professional relationship. However . . . it had to be said . . . I did enjoy his company. The dinner in the Lupo Argento restaurant in Como. The delightful flight in his little plane to St Moritz. Highlights in a life that recently had been rather short of them. I knew a bit about his background from talking to Penny, his PA. Twice divorced. First wife killed in a car crash. One grown up son, who worked with him. Music producer and arranger in his spare time. Good sense of humour, sometimes verging on the puerile, but serious when circumstances dictated. In a relationship with a singer, according to Penny. But she also hinted that maybe things weren't quite on an even keel there.

Although she hadn't directly admitted it, I was also aware that Penny herself regarded Chad as something more than a friend and employer. There was no way for me to know if her feelings were reciprocated. If they were, Penny hadn't mentioned it.

Suppose Chad was unattached. Suppose Penny decided she wasn't interested. Suppose he took it upon himself to ask me out on a date. I'm a free agent now, or soon will be, anyway. What would I say?

CHAPTER 25

RACHAEL SLEPT THROUGHT IT ALL—the drive to pick up the gold and then the journey back to the Villa Tranquilla, where we finally arrived just after midnight. I had no idea where the transfer location was. The night was clear but I wasn't allowed out of the car and as I couldn't see the only nocturnal celestial navigation feature I could orientate myself with—the Pole Star—there was no stellar guidance available. The black mountain peaks were indistinguishable from each other as we followed twisting little roads uphill and downhill. Seated in the rear-facing back seat it was impossible for me to see the car's satnav readout on the dashboard either. Frequently Jack switched off the Merc's lights and I found myself hoping his night vision was good enough to save us from plunging off a precipice. It wasn't until we were driving south along the west coast of the lake that I realised we were headed for Moltrasio.

There were four euphoric adults in the car and one—me—whose main sentiment was relief. On the floor between the two rows of seats in the back of the car sat

the three suitcases Jack had brought over from the van. At one point Hugh opened one of them to reveal the softly gleaming ingots inside. The four of them spent a long time congratulating each other and I had to ask them to keep the noise down to avoid waking Rachael, who occasionally stirred halfway to consciousness.

Jack stopped the car a hundred metres away from the villa and told everyone to keep quiet. Hugh got out of the car and walked the rest of the way. After ten minutes or so the mobile Marlene was holding rang twice and then fell silent.

'Good to go,' she said in a low voice.

Jack started the car, switched on the lights and drove the final few metres to the villa. The hall light was on in the rented part but otherwise the whole building was dark. As we got out of the Merc the front door opened and Hugh let us in. Reinier gently lifted Rachael and carried her inside and up the stairs. Hugh motioned him to deposit her on one of the beds. She murmured a few sleepy words as I covered her with a duvet. I gave her a kiss and stroked her hair until she was back in the Land of Nod.

The others invited me to join them in a celebratory drink but my mood was melancholy rather than joyful so I left them to it and went to bed in the same room as Rachael. Luckily the arrangement was two singles rather than a double so I did not need to disturb the girl. The air was a little stuffy so I automatically went to the window to open it. It was locked. I muttered a mild curse and climbed into my bed, mildly irritated that I hadn't had the chance to brush my teeth.

It's early evening now and the atmosphere in the villa has been like the last day of a holiday. The four adults have been packing bags and making preparations for departure. Along with the other bags are the three suitcases presumably still holding the gold ingots. From overheard conversation I gather that after dark, Jack and Reinier will be driving off in the Mercedes. Hugh and Marlene will go back to Sainte-Maxime in another car, my soon-to-be ex-husband clearly relieved that he no longer has to keep up the pretence of not being involved with her.

Of course no-one has left the house during the day but at least the windows have been unlocked, on the upper floor anyway, and hopper windows on the lower floor too, so a pleasant breeze kept the interior air reasonably fresh. Meals were snack foods eaten in the kitchen.

Rachael and I were briefed not to stand near the windows, where we could be seen, and presumably the downstairs windows remained locked to prevent us trying to escape.

As the day has worn on Rachael has become more unsettled. She's not been allowed to phone Penny and now she's visibly agitated. She walks over to the window and looks out, twisting her head left and right.

'Come away from the window,' calls out Marlene harshly.

'Why?'

'If you don't do as you are told you won't see your Mommy.'

'But you promised!' says Rachael, on the edge of tears. 'She's next door. Why can't I go back to her now?'

'You know why, Rachael,' hisses Marlene. 'It's because of the secret government work we're doing. Now move away.'

'I don't believe you,' wails Rachael. 'I think you're bad people who are doing something bad. Wait till the police find out.'

I step over and lead her away from the window. I put my hands on her shoulders, worried that Marlene and the others might be provoked into an unpleasant response. 'Don't cry, darling,' I say, 'you'll be back with Mummy soon.'

Marlene too comes over to stand in front of Rachael, her face stern.

'I'm telling you one more time, Rachael. If you behave yourself you'll be able to go next door to your Mommy soon. If you don't, we'll have to take you away with us when we go. So, no more complaining, eh, and no more talk of the police. Got it?'

Rachael sniffs. 'Yes.'

Marlene sighs. 'Good. Remember, it's up to you what happens to you.'

Another sniff. 'Okay.'

'If you tell anyone about us after we've gone, do you know what will happen to you?'

'No.'

'If you tell the police and they come to arrest us we'll say you and your sister and your Mommy and Cynthia made us take the gold. You would all go to prison. Prison is not nice, Rachael. Prison is full of nasty people who

would hurt you.'

'I don't want to go to prison.'

'We don't want you to go to prison either.'

'I want to go to the toilet.'

'Alright,' says Marlene. 'No tricks, mind. Come straight back here when you're done.'

Hugh, Jack and Reinier are in the next room. I can hear an earnest discussion going on. An American voice calls out. 'Hey, Marlene, come in here, will ya? We need to talk to ya.'

'No funny business from you either,' says Marlene to me as she leaves the room. 'We don't want to have to punish you or Rachael. Got it?'

I nod, but there's something else on my mind. The recent altercation has triggered a worrying train of thought. Suppose that the gang have no intention of letting us go. Is that what they're discussing now? Suppose the Americans are trying to persuade Hugh and Reinier it's too risky, that despite their threats we might report them to the authorities anyway. Suppose they're now planning to take us with them and get rid of us later.

If so, what can I do about it? I can't make a run for it and leave Rachael here. Anyway, I'm pretty sure all the doors are locked.

My natural optimism is under severe strain again. I'm certain now Hugh's lot will forcibly take us with them when they leave the villa. They may have decided they can't take the chance of releasing us, which means—

Rachael comes back into the room. She looks round furtively and puts a finger to her lips to signal for silence.

I raise my eyebrows questioningly.

'I found a phone on the table in one of the bedrooms,' she whispers to me. 'I've sent a text.'

'A text?' I whisper back.

'I've sent it to Mummy's number and to Katie's number. I've told them I've unlocked the door beside the stairs.'

A sense of dread fills me.

'Suppose Jack or Marlene find out what you've done?'

'They won't,' Rachael reassures me. 'I deleted the text after I sent it. I put the phone back where I found it.'

'Why did you—' I stop in mid sentence as Marlene has just reappeared.

'What are you two whispering about?' she asks.

I can't think of an answer but Rachael says, 'I was going to ask you if you had the Simpsons DVD here but I didn't know if you'd be cross so I asked Cynthia if it was alright to ask you.'

Marlene smiles. 'I'm not that bad, sweetie. We haven't got the Simpsons but I think there's a Harry Potter somewhere. Will that do?'

'Yes.'

CHAPTER 26 - CHAD

PENNY COMES INTO MY ROOM—Cynthia's room, I should say—holding Katie's hand. Penny looks concerned. I take off my headset and turn to face her.

'Katie, tell Chad what you just told me,' she says.

'Rachael's in the house, in the next door part,' says Katie.

'How do you know?' I ask. As a sceptic, I don't like to bring up the subject of telepathy.

Penny must have read my thoughts. 'Tell Chad, darling.'

Katie holds out her phone. 'She texted me.'

I take it from her and look at the screen.

Im in the house next door. Sinthias with me. Their r 4 other peeple 1 of them is a women. Dont tell anyone dont tell the police. If u tell anyone they mihgt hert us. If no ones wotching im going to unlock the inside door. Im ok and sinthias ok. Is mummy ok. Dont reply.

'When did you get this?' I ask Katie.

'Few minutes ago.'

The sender of the message is 'Unknown', with no number.

I look at Katie. 'Is it really from Rachael?' I ask. 'Not someone pulling a trick?'

Katie shakes her head. 'Rach always spells 'people' wrong. I've told her before it's P-E-O-P-E-L.'

'Okay,' I say, trying to work out what's going on.

'What do you make of it, Chad?' asks Penny. She's just received the same text on her phone.

'Difficult to say. If it's genuine, one of the four people is probably Hugh Sommerville.'

'What about the other three?'

I shrug.

'What shall we do? We mustn't tell the police, says the text. Shall we go round and confront them?'

'No,' I reply. I lower my voice so Katie won't hear. 'If they are baddies they might use Cynthia and Rachael as hostages. Things could get nasty.'

'So what shall we do?'

I shake my head. 'Let's think about it for a minute. First of all, is it a trap?'

'Why doesn't she want us to reply?' asks Katie. 'How will she know we got the message? How will we know if she's okay?'

'I'm sure Rachael's fine,' says Penny with a forced smile directed at her daughter. 'But we have to be careful. The people next door might be annoyed if they think we know about them.'

'Okay, Mummy, I understand.'

'Why don't you go and watch a DVD while Chad and I

have a little talk.'

'Can I go outside?'

Penny looks at me questioningly.

'Not just now, Katie,' I say.

'In case the people next door see me and try to get me?' asks Katie.

'Yes, it's better to stay indoors,' I tell her.

'Okay, Chad.'

When Katie has left the room Penny and I start working out tactics.

'What do we know so far?' I say. 'Let's assume the text Katie got is genuine. First question: did she send it under duress, or did the captors not know she sent it? Second question: who are the captors? As I said, if there are four of them, one is probably Hugh Sommerville. Who are the other three?'

'Could they be the American tourists Teresa told us about?'

'Let's ask her, Pen. We've got her number.'

'But she speaks hardly any English and my Italian is no better.'

'Give it a go.'

Luckily, the housekeeper is available to take the call. While Penny and Teresa are trying to communicate in a peculiar English-Italian mix I run over options in my mind. Do we ignore the warnings and notify the police? It's unlikely that Hugh and his gang are hardened desperados. Was my first worry about a hostage stand-off an overreaction? There might even be a logical explanation for what's going on, though at the moment I can't see it. If the police turned up, surely it wouldn't end

up in a shoot-out? But are Italian cops more gung-ho than Brits?

Did Rachael's captors tell her to include the warning in the text? If they didn't know she'd sent the text, why would she put the warning in? Had the captors previously threatened her and Cynthia with harm if the cops were called?

Penny rings off and puts down the phone.

'Teresa thinks the Americans are two men and a woman. Three of them altogether.'

'Any details? Descriptions?'

'I got the impression they were rather secretive, if I understood Teresa correctly. They would usually arrange to be out when she went round to do the housekeeping.'

'Well, it looks as if Hugh and the Americans have brought Cynthia and Rachael back to the villa,' I say. 'But why?'

'They must be up to no good,' says Penny. 'Otherwise they would have let Rachael come back to her mother.'

'We could contact the owners of the property. They might have more info. Can you remember who they are?'

'Teresa would know. Shall I call her back?'

I think for a moment. 'No, on second thoughts, leave it. If they think there's something dodgy going on in their property they might get the police involved, which we don't want at the moment.'

'What about Rachael unlocking the door?'

I scratch my head. 'Again . . . is it a trap? Are they trying to entice us next door to nab us too?'

'Or else it's Rachael using her initiative and the baddies don't know she intends to unlock the door.'

'Do you think they forced her to send the text?' I ask Penny.

'Gut feeling . . . no. I think she sent it without their knowing.'

'Using whose phone, though?'

Penny silently shakes her head.

'Got to be careful here,' I say after a moment or two. 'If I can get access to next door via the connecting door, what do I do then?'

Suddenly a new thought occurs to me—not a very pleasant one.

'Cynthia,' I say.

'What about her?' asks Penny.

'Suppose she's in on this . . . part of the set-up.'

'You mean . . . plotting something with Hugh?'

'Could be.'

'But what about that phone call you recorded . . . Hugh and Cynthia . . . they sounded hostile to each other when she challenged him about what he was doing in Italy.'

'Could have been pre-scripted to fool me.'

'Why would she arrange to kidnap Rachael?'

'Maybe that wasn't part of the original plan. Rachael just happened to get swept up in it.'

Penny considers for a minute or two, then shakes her head. 'No, Cynthia's sound. I'm sure of it.'

'Don't tell me . . . '

'Don't knock it, Smartypants. My intuition is usually correct.'

'Well, I hope you're right. I'd be disappointed if Cynthia turned out to be a bad'un.'

I half expect Penny to make some comment about me

fancying my client but instead she just shrugs.

'I just want to get my daughter back safe and sound,' she says finally, tears in her eyes.

'Maybe they'll let Rach go soon,' says Katie, who's come back into the room. 'Don't cry, Mummy. She'll be okay.'

Penny forces a smile and wipes her eyes. 'Yes, darling, I'm sure you're right. We'll work something out.'

'Perhaps I could just knock on the front door,' I offer, 'and ask them to let me in to talk about releasing Cynthia and Rachael. See if we can come to some arrangement, all friendly like.'

'They probably wouldn't answer, would they? They won't want people to know they're there, especially as they're harbouring two hostages. Even if they did answer, Hugh would probably recognise you from Sainte-Maxime and wonder why you were here in Italy. He'd think you were after him or something. He might turn aggressive. We don't need that.'

'You're right,' I say heavily after a few moments.

'Shall we unlock our door, anyway?' says Katie. 'Then maybe Rach and Cynthia can escape. Then we can look after them.'

'You might have something there, Katie,' I say.

'But suppose the gang then come through to our part,' says Penny. They might . . . ' She looks at her daughter and stops herself saying anything that might frighten her.

'Okay', I say, ' . . . how about this? We call for a taxi now so you and Katie can get away, maybe into Como. I unlock our connecting door and leave it open and wait here in case Cynthia and Rachael manage to get out.

Then we'll jump into the Audi and vamoose as quickly as poss.'

'Suppose the gang try and stop you?'

'If Cynthia and Rachael get through without being noticed I'll lock the door behind them and then we'll all make a dash for the car. If they're being chased by the baddies I'll throw the keys to Cynthia and then block the path of anyone who tries to follow, so hopefully she and Rachael can get away.'

'Maybe the gang won't care if Rach and Cynthia get out,' says Katie. 'They told us they were going to let them go, didn't they?'

'That's right,' smiles Penny. 'I'm sure it'll all work out okay.'

'If you don't hear from us in an hour or so, Pen,' I say, 'then contact the police.'

'Okay,' says Penny, picking up her phone. 'I'll ring for a taxi now.'

'Meantime I'll check that I can open the connecting door on our side.'

No problem there—the lock releases easily and the door can be opened. We're relieved to note that there's no squeak from the hinges. The other connecting door is closed of course and there's no way to know if it's locked or not.

The taxi shows up five minutes later and Penny and Katie get in. I wave them off from the hallway, careful not to step outside in case eyes from next door are watching.

So, we're all set. The Audi's parked out the front and I've got the keys in my pocket. My phone's charged. Our connecting door's open and I'm sitting nearby.

I pick up my Kindle and start to read but my mind can't really take in the words. It keeps looking for other solutions to our predicament but can't find any. I force myself to think more positively. Let's assume we sort this all out successfully. Cynthia and Rachael get out or get released and the police pick up Hugh and his mob and charge them with whatever it is they're doing wrong. Cynthia and Penny show their gratitude to me by treating me to a champagne dinner.

I suppose it's all over for my client and her husband. I doubt if any amount of marriage counselling could clear that mess up.

Cynthia and Penny. Two lovely ladies. Now Suzie's dumped me I'm not being caddish by thinking about the merits and attributes of other females. Penny. Attractive, reliable, capable, more intelligent than me. Two fantastic daughters. Do I take her too much for granted? Should I be paying her more salary? More compliments? I'm not sure if she's a free agent. She did tell me she was going out with a bloke she met through a dating agency. Is that still on? The fact that I don't know the answer to that either proves I'm respecting her privacy or else taking insufficient interest in my employee's welfare, depending on your point of view. When this Sommerville business is all behind us and we're back in Blighty, should I ask her out on a date?

Cynthia. Attractive . . . no, very attractive. Sophisticated, but not full of herself. Like Penny, sometimes a bit sad. For the same reason, I suppose—the unreliability of men. And in Cynthia's case, regret over not being able to have children. Another woman brighter

than me—all those languages she speaks. What does she think of me? Just a hired hand to keep an eye on her errant husband? Something more? Perhaps I should ask her out on a date. But maybe it's too soon after the split with Hugh. Her emotions might be all over the place. Having said that, she doesn't seem like the type to fall to pieces, even after the trauma of a broken marriage. There's a certain strength of will—

The other door's opening! My mind races back to the real world and my body tenses. The door movement is painfully slow. That could be a good thing—it shows that whoever's opening it is not panicking.

Wider, wider. It's Rachael, on her own. She silently enters the room and closes the far door behind her.

I motion her to keep silent and take her to the lounge at the back of the house. It's now dusk outside and the room is gloomy. I draw the curtains so no-one can see in and switch on the standard lamp.

'What's happening?' I whisper. 'Did anyone see you?'

'No. They're getting ready to go,' whispers Rachael back. 'I think they're leaving tonight.'

'Is Cynthia with them? Is she alright?'

'Yes, she's okay.'

'Does she know about the door?'

'Yes.'

'So she might escape?'

'Yes . . . Is Mummy and Katie okay?'

'Yes, they've gone into town. They're waiting to meet you.'

'Okay.'

Of course I'm pleased that Rachael has got out but now

there are new complications. How long before the gang find out she's missing? Should I drive her to Como immediately and abandon Cynthia to her fate? Would Hugh or one of the others punish her for complicity in Rachael's escape?

Or should I wait a little longer and hope that Cynthia too can get out without them noticing straight away?

I'll give it five minutes then take Rachael to reunite her with her mother and sister. If we've already left Cynthia will have to decide whether to make a dash for it.

Still whispering, I say to Rachael, 'Right, wait upstairs in your bedroom. You can put the light on if you want. Don't make any noise. If Cynthia's not here in a few minutes you and I will take the car to Como. Okay?'

'Okay.'

'Good girl.'

I've just reseated myself when the rented part door starts to open again. Another frisson of apprehension tenses my body.

It's Cynthia. She's through the door and starting to close it again.

But a voice calls out. 'Hey!'

Cynthia slams the door closed but it's wrenched open again and a burly looking man reaches through the doorway and grabs her arm.

'Ow!' shrieks Cynthia, struggling to get free.

'Lady, you stop wriggling or I'll have to blow you away,' shouts the man. He's got an American accent. In his hand there's a pistol, a Glock by the look of it. 'Now, get back in here.' He looks at me. 'You too, buddy, get your ass in here. Pronto!'

I'm in no position to argue. I follow Cynthia through the doorway into the other half of the villa. The American man closes the connecting door behind us and locks it. We go into a room in which there are several suitcases and bags stacked in the corner.

I hear another voice and look over to see Hugh Sommerville. He doesn't look pleased.

'You!' he growls. 'I'm getting a bit fed up with you interfering in my life.'

'What's going on?' This from another man, tall, long face. Beside him there's a woman, tanned, striking, long black hair. Even as I watch she opens her handbag and pulls out a gun, chrome-plated, smaller than the Glock the other man's waving around.

Hugh shakes his head and faces his wife. 'Not good, Cynthia. We don't need this. The deal was you were going to stay put until we left. We might have to take you with us now. We can't trust you any more.'

Cynthia's still rubbing her arm where the muscle man got hold of it.

'I noticed the connecting door was unlocked so I looked to see if the other door was unlocked too. When I found it was I thought I'd take the chance to take my leave a bit earlier, that's all.'

'Take your leave?' says the burly man scornfully. 'Run like a frightened rabbit, more like.'

'You would have done the same,' says Cynthia. 'Anyone would.'

The man nods. 'Yeah, I guess I would. But look, Cynthia, don't pull a stunt like that again, eh? We've all been getting along pretty good these last few days. Let's

not spoil it, eh?' He turns to me.

'What do they call you, Buddy?'

'Chad.'

'Oh, yeah. Your name has come up in conversation now and then. Private eye, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Spying on Hugh?'

'Yes.'

'Because he's been having fun with Marlene here?'

I make a note of the name. 'I'm not at liberty to discuss the case,' I say, hoping I don't sound too cocky.

'Well, you're not at liberty, that's for sure,' chuckles the man.

The long-faced man joins in. 'Let's all calm down,' he says. 'We don't need guns, Jack.'

'Reinier, guns guarantee that no-one messes around with us. So, if it's all the same to you . . . '

Jack. Reinier. Two more names to file away. Reinier. Rings a bell, but I can't remember why.

'So what's going to happen now?' I ask.

They all ignore me. The woman is still holding her gun. She turns to Hugh.

'Does this change anything?' she asks.

'Well, let's talk about it,' says Hugh.

'We've got a problem, people,' says Jack. 'This guy . . . what are we gonna do about him?'

'I don't know anything about what you're doing,' I say. 'And I'm happy to keep it that way. So I'm not a threat to you. Why don't you let me and Cynthia go?'

Jack wags his gun at me. 'Cynthia . . . she's not a problem. Well, we hope she's not a problem. Even if we

let her go she knows if she goes running to the cops after we've gone we'll tell them she was part of the deal. So, omerta guaranteed. But you . . . '

He turns to the others. 'Hugh, Reinier, Marlene, what do you guys think?'

A brief discussion follows, not a very comfortable one for me. I get the impression that Reinier is not keen on any violence and Marlene is coldly indifferent. On the other hand Hugh and Jack seem keen to examine ways of ensuring my silence. At one point the word 'disposal' is to be heard.

'Alright,' says Hugh. 'We leave as planned. We take these two with us and then decide later what we're going to do with them.'

'I'm okay with that,' I say. 'But why not let Cynthia go? As you just said, she can't do you any harm.'

'Well,' says Jack, tapping the barrel of his Glock against his chin, 'if Cynthia's a good girl we might let her . . . take her leave . . . after a while. You, on the other hand . . . well, we'll just have to wait and see.'

Reinier. I've just dragged it out of my memory. Kidnap victim. Snatched by an Arab terrorist group. What the hell is he doing with this lot? Has he been released? I suddenly have a black thought. Not for the first time, either. Cynthia! She was questioned by the police about the kidnap. Is she part of whatever's going on here? Is the whole thing a set-up? But why?

I've always thought I was a pretty good judge of character. But that's twice now I've had my doubts about my client. Time to put it to the test.

'Hugh,' I say. 'You can drop the pretence now. I know

that your lovely wife is involved in this. What exactly is her part?'

I look at Cynthia and see her jaw gaping. She slowly shakes her head in disbelief. If she's acting she's pretty damned good at it.

'Damn! You found out,' grins Hugh. 'We hoped you wouldn't realise.'

But Reinier and Marlene momentarily look as bewildered as Cynthia. Well, we've got that one cleared up then.

'Sorry, Cynthia,' I say with a smile, 'but I wasn't sure. I am now. You're in the clear.' But the damage is done. The narrowed eyes and withering look mean I'm no longer on her Christmas card list.

'Hey,' says Marlene. 'Where's the kid? Where's Rachael?'

'I'll take a look,' says Jack, quickly leaving the room.

'Do you know where Rachael is?' Hugh asks me. 'Did she get through to your part?'

'I don't know.'

'Cynthia, did she get through the door before you?'

'I don't know either.'

'It's not going to be good for you or your detective if Rachael's gone missing,' says Hugh.

'I can't help you with that,' says Cynthia.

Jack comes back into the room, agitated. 'She's not in the house, not in this part anyway. And the connecting door's closed and locked on the other side. The girl must have done it.'

He comes over to me. 'What's your name again, feller?'

'Chad.'

'Okay, Chad. I'm going to give you ten seconds to tell me where Rachael is, then I'm going to put a bullet through your foot. Do you read me?'

'We don't need that,' says Reinier.

'Well, maybe we do,' says Jack scornfully.

I quickly run through various answers in my mind. Being a coward by nature I'll have to find something to say that avoids lumps of metal tearing out chunks of my flesh.

Cynthia rescues me. 'Yes,' she says. 'Rachael went through the door just before me. We told her to lock the door behind her and wait for us.'

'Thank you, Cynthia,' I say. The response is a black look.

'So is she still in the villa?' asks Jack.

'I honestly can't tell you,' says Cynthia. 'She might have waited or she might have left the house.'

'Is there a phone in your part?'

'Yes, but it can only take incoming calls.'

'What's the number?'

'I don't know.'

Jack points his gun at my foot. 'Where's your phone, feller?'

'In my pocket.'

Jack holds his hand out. I give him my mobile, which he drops onto the floor and crushes with his heel.

'Right, where are we now, people?' says Jack. 'Do we need to find out if Rachael's still in the house?'

'I can't see she's a threat,' says Hugh. 'It's unlikely she'd leave the house on her own and she can't talk to anyone without a phone. Plus, Marlene's persuaded her that

telling anyone about us not a good idea.'

'I agree,' says Reinier. 'Leave her alone.'

'No, I'm uncomfortable with that,' says Jack. 'I think we'd better get her back if she's still in the house.' He fixes me with a cold stare. 'Looks like you and the beautiful Cynthia and Rachael will be us for a little while longer. Marlene, if the connecting door is locked, use your gun to—'

Jack's cut off in mid sentence. There's an almighty crash and three men in military fatigues burst into the room. One of them is carrying a sub-machine gun, a Kalashnikov AKS by the look of it.

'Everybody, hands in air,' he shouts in heavily accented English. 'You put gun down,' he says to Jack. He swings his weapon to point at Marlene. 'You, you also put gun down.'

'Who the hell are you?' asks Jack. One of the intruders strides over and smashes his fist into Jack's face. The American buckles and collapses onto the floor, blood frothing from his mouth.

'Everybody, sit on floor, hands in air.'

We do as instructed. Judging by the looks on their faces the others are as frightened as I am. A stream of blood from Jack's jaw drops onto the beige carpet. Are these good guys or not?

'Everybody, stay still. You move, we kill.'

Probably not good guys then.

CHAPTER 27

IT'S DIFFICULT TO DEDUCE ANYTHING about the newcomers from their appearance. They're identically dressed in fatigues. The one shouting threats at us is the tallest, with a thin face and swept back dark brown hair. He's also the one who rearranged Jack's face. At his side is the gun carrier, shorter in stature, round face, crew cut reddish hair. The third man has much darker skin, dark eyes and thick black hair. The three could be from anywhere.

The tall man seems to be the leader. He stares at Reinier. 'You are Mentinck,' he says, a statement rather than a question.

'Yes,' comes the quiet reply.

'You must come with us. Get up. You others, give me your phones.'

As the Dutchman gets to his feet the three intruders start a conversation in a language I can't identify. Jack groggily stands up and he and Hugh hand over their mobiles. The dark complexioned man gets Marlene's phone from her bag.

'Where is yours?' the tall man asks me. I point to the shattered pieces on the carpet.

'You,' says the tall man to Cynthia. 'Where's your phone?'

'I took it off her,' says Hugh. 'But it's not here. It was broken so I threw it away.'

More talk in the foreign language. It looks like they're no longer bothered about phones. The dark complexioned man nods and walks over to the pile of bags in the corner of the room.

'Where is gold?' demands the tall man.

'What gold?' says Hugh.

The man with the gun steps over and clouts Hugh with the butt of the Kalashnikov and Hugh collapses in a heap, spark out.

'You tell me where gold is,' shouts the tall man, 'or I kill womans.'

'The suitcases,' says Reinier, 'the brown ones.'

The dark man opens one of the cases and pulls out an ingot. Another unintelligible conversation follows. It means nothing to me but I notice that Cynthia is frowning, alarmed. She starts speaking to Reinier in a different language, presumably Dutch.

'Hey, woman, shut up,' says the ringleader, 'or my friend's gun will be your new lover. You understand me?'

Cynthia nods silently.

Reinier starts talking. 'Do you need me for . . . nuclear purposes?'

'You come with us,' says the tall man. 'You help us. If you help us we let your friends go.'

Reinier briefly looks at Cynthia, who almost

imperceptibly shakes her head.

'Okay,' says Reinier, 'but you have to tell me what you want. I don't carry all my knowledge here.' He reaches up and taps his head. 'It's stored in a cyberspace facility. I can access the data using my computer.'

The ringleader looks long and hard at him. 'Okay, you bring computer with you. We go now.'

'Okay,' says Reinier, 'but I can only download the information if there's a wireless link or ethernet link. I have to go through a security procedure. At the moment the link will only work in this house. It takes two or three days to set up access from a new location.'

The ringleader pulls out his own gun. He holds it under Reinier's chin, pointing upwards. 'If you are tricking me I blow your brains out. You understand me?'

Reinier nods, but it's difficult with a gun barrel pushing up his jaw. 'What data do you need to know? I can download it here and then I'll go with you wherever you want to go.'

The ringleader puts his gun away and gets out a mobile. Now we hear a one-sided discussion in the strange language. The tall man briefly talks to his dark skinned accomplice, who takes out his phone and taps at the screen. It looks like he's taking notes from what's being said. Again, it seems Cynthia is taking a close interest in what's going on. The phone conversation resumes. Once or twice the man checks his watch. Frequently we hear 'da' and 'nyet', which I seem to remember is 'yes' and 'no' in Russian.

'Okay,' says the ringleader, swapping his phone for his gun again. 'You must get informations on the . . . ' He

motions to the dark skinned man to show him his phone screen. Some words pass between them and the accomplice takes the phone over to Reinier.

'You want information on the DH106 primer, is that correct?' asks Reinier.

'What it says on phone,' comes the reply.

'What sort of device is it intended for?'

'What?'

'What sort of . . . bomb . . . will it used in?'

'For all bombs,' comes the reply.

'Okay', says Reinier, 'but that means we need to download a lot of information. It could take some time.'

'How long?'

'About an hour maybe. But if you tell me what sort of . . . device . . . we only need the information for that device.'

The ringleader dials on his phone again. I look around while the conversation is in progress. Jack's face has stopped bleeding but he doesn't look very happy and his jaw is already swelling. Hugh is still out for the count. Marlene and Cynthia just look frightened. Anytime their arms droop from the 'hands in the air' position the man with the AKS motions them to raise them again. Reinier is still standing, hands raised, looking tired.

'You,' says the ringleader to Reinier. 'You put your hands down. You listen to phone.' He hands the mobile to the Dutchman.

The one-sided conversation is now in English so at least we're getting half the picture.

'Yes . . . the DH106 will work on that type of equipment . . . yes . . . no, we would need a filter for the verification circuit . . . no . . . no, a type twenty-two multi-frequency .

. . correct . . . yes . . . yes . . . yes, I have to download the data from the cloud . . . for the type twenty-two it would take about ten minutes to download . . . no, it has to be here . . . yes, that's correct . . . okay . . . yes, I can do that . . . okay . . . ' Reinier holds out the phone for the ringleader. 'They want to speak to you again.'

Back to Russian. Then the ringleader looks at his watch and signs off. He starts talking to his accomplices. Again I note an anguished look from Cynthia directed towards Reinier. She risks a couple of words in Dutch.

'I told you, we shoot you when you talk,' shouts the ringleader. He turns towards the man with the AKS and barks instructions. The gunman lifts the barrel and points it at Cynthia. Briefly I consider trying to deflect the barrel. Or should I try to talk them out of it?

'Wait a minute,' I start. The barrel swings towards me and I immediately regret my chivalrous intentions. But it's Reinier who rescues us.

'No,' he says in a firm voice.

'What?' says the ringleader.

'These people are my friends,' says Reinier. 'If you hurt them I won't help you.'

The tall man considers for a moment, then nods. 'Okay. Get your computer. Get the informations. Quick! Be quick!'

'Can we put our hands down?' I ask.

'Yes. If you do any bad things we shoot you.'

The dark man goes off with Reinier to get his laptop. They reappear a few moments later. While the Dutchman is doing whatever it is he's doing on the computer, Hugh groggily comes back to consciousness. Automatically he

raises his hand to his head and winces. 'Ow!'

'You! You shut up!' shouts the ringleader. 'You make noise we kill you. You understand me?'

Hugh nods painfully.

Reinier closes his laptop. 'Okay, we've got what we need.'

'Good. We go now.'

Reinier sweeps his hand towards us. 'When we get to destination I'll need to phone these people to check they're okay,' he tells the ringleader. 'If they're okay I'll help you with the primer.'

'Yes, that's okay,' comes the reply.

'So they'll need a phone.'

'No, they can't have phone. Faisal will be here with them. They use his phone.'

'Suppose after that he shoots them.'

'He doesn't shoot. He is man of honour.'

'But how can—'

The ringleader sticks his face about two inches from Reinier and hisses. 'Enough! No more time. We go now. You do bad things or talk more, we kill you all. We kill everyone. We can do another plan without you.'

More rapid talking in Russian. The man with crew cut hair hands the AKS over to 'Faisal'. Then he and the ringleader walk out of the room, propelling Reinier in front of them.

CHAPTER 28

THE SENSATION OF FEAR is steadily subsiding into boredom. We're all seated now and Faisal seems quite happy with nothing to do except sit in an easy chair resting the Kalashnikov on his lap. If we try to talk to each other he bellows, 'No talk! You talk, I kill!'

Jack seems to have regained his fortitude. 'I need the john,' he says.

'No talk!' responds Faisal.

Cynthia starts talking to our captor in the language we heard earlier.

'You piss there,' says Faisal to Jack, pointing to a corner of the room. 'You do bad, I kill woman.'

Jack slowly stands up. His jaw looks a right mess. He makes his way over to the corner.

Me, I'm trying to work out the implications of Cynthia knowing the language the baddies were using. Presumably Faisal must realise she probably understood everything that was said. Would he be bothered by that? Not that there's much she or any of us could do about anything she heard.

As Jack comes back he winks at me, points to himself and mutters, 'Diversion.'

'No talk!' comes the automatic warning.

I stick my thumb up in acknowledgement of Jack's suggestion but quickly raise it to scratch my chin in case Faisal has noticed the gesture. I'm sitting closest to the gunman so Jack's choice of accomplice is logical.

Hugh's sitting next to me, still not one hundred percent recovered by the look of him. The two women are seated next to him, with Jack at the end of the line. When I judge I'm ready for action I look over at Jack and raise an eyebrow. He does a 'thumb up' and converts the motion into a rubbing the nose gesture.

Jack raises both his arms and yells, 'Aaahh!' The others jump in fright, even the groggy Hugh. Faisal goes to lift up the AKS but I'm already on my feet and aiming my fist at his face. The impact is excruciating but I think Faisal is more damaged than me. He screams in pain and starts to lift his arms to his face. Then he remembers the gun and reaches for it but he's too late—I've already snatched it. Jack comes over, quickly moves behind Faisal, puts his arm round his neck and pulls. There's a sickening gurgling sound and then a crack and our captor goes limp.

'Is he dead?' asks Marlene, shock registering on her face.

'Well,' says Jack. 'His neck ain't joined to his spine no more.'

Cynthia looks horrified at what she's just witnessed. She lifts her hand to her face and a muffled 'Oh!' escapes her lips.

Everyone's on their feet now, except Hugh, who tried standing up but flopped back into a chair, rubbing his lacerated scalp. Gradually all eyes turn on me. Jack's gaze drops to the sub-machine gun I'm holding.

'Well, buddy, guess we're all on the same side now, eh?' he says.

'You reckon?' I say, trying to assess the new situation. 'Not long ago you were threatening to put a bullet through my foot.'

'Alright, what about a truce?' suggests Jack. 'Okay, we planned to screw some cash out of the Dutch government but nobody got hurt. We looked after Cynthia and the kid.'

'How about it, Chad?' says Hugh. 'In a way the whole thing's over. Nothing can be traced back to us. How about we join forces?'

'The gold's still here,' says Marlene. 'We can split it between us and vamoose. Chad can get a share too . . . and Cynthia.'

'I don't want any of your ill-gotten gains,' hisses Cynthia. 'There's something—'

'I'm really sorry, dear,' interrupts Hugh. 'I realise—'

'Save your breath,' says his wife coldly. 'I was about to say there's something more important to consider—the men who took Reinier, I think they're terrorists.'

'What language were they speaking?' I ask. 'Was it Russian?'

'A dialect of Russian,' replies Cynthia. 'Either Ukrainian or Byelorussian. Not sure which. Not one of my strong suits, those variations.'

'What did they say?'

'They needed Reinier to prime some sort of bomb for

them. The primer is the detonator if I'm not mistaken.'

'A nuclear bomb?' I ask, remembering what we heard earlier. I can hardly believe what I'm suggesting.

'Yes, but they didn't reveal if it was a fission bomb or a fusion bomb.'

'What's the difference?'

'I'm not a hundred percent sure,' says Cynthia. 'I've learned a bit about the subject during my translation work at nuclear conferences. I think it's a matter of degree. Fission bombs aren't as powerful. They use uranium or plutonium. As I recall they need conventional explosives to trigger them. Fusion bombs use some form of hydrogen and you get a much bigger bang. But they need a fission bomb as a detonator, I think. Or it may be the other way round.'

'So you're saying these guys have got a nuke?' says Jack, open-mouthed. 'That is not good.'

'I think, yes, they've got one and they need Reinier to help them set up the detonator.'

'Jesus Christ!' mutters Jack. 'Did they say where or when they plan to use it?'

'They were worried about time being short, I think. The bits I heard were sketchy,' replies Cynthia. 'They said they've got to complete whatever they're doing before night closure.'

'That doesn't tell us much,' says Hugh. 'Lots of things close at night. Christ, my head hurts!'

'There was a reference to somewhere called Linate,' says Cynthia. 'I don't know where that is.'

'Now you mention it, I think I heard that, too,' I say. 'It's

one of the Milan airports. And some airports close at night.' I'm beginning to get a bad vibe about this.

CHAPTER 29

A FEW MINUTES LATER we're in the Audi, heading south to Como, where we'll talk to the police and hopefully meet up with Penny and Katie. When I say we, I mean Cynthia, Rachael and myself. We left the others discussing how they were going to divvy up the gold and whether Reinier should get his share if he survived whatever the Russians had in store for him. As we approach Cernobbio we pass two police cars speeding in the opposite direction, lights flashing but no sirens wailing. I stamp on the brakes and the Audi screeches to a halt.

'Sorry, girls . . . those police cars? Shall we catch up with them and tell them what we've heard?' I suggest.

'They might be going to Moltrasio to arrest Hugh and the gang,' says Cynthia. 'Maybe Penny alerted them.'

A new thought comes to me. I pull over to the side of the road, undecided. 'Those officers might have their hands full right now,' I say. 'Maybe it would be better stick with plan A and go to the police station in Como.'

'Okay,' agrees Cynthia. 'Let's do that.'

I pull out into the road again and resume the dash to Como.

The Russian thugs. They must have arrived at the Villa Tranquilla by road transport and departed by the same means, no doubt. Not a helicopter—we would have heard that. A motorboat perhaps? Unlikely, if they were pushed for time—they'd have to switch to road transport at some point and that would waste precious minutes.

There was no delicacy in the way the bad guys gained entry to the villa. When we left the building the front door was lying flat in the hallway, wrenched off its hinges, locks smashed. So no way could Hugh's lot stop the police gaining access if that's what was happening now. I like the idea that Cynthia's husband and his accomplices might soon be languishing in a prison cell.

'I think the Russians set a trap,' says Cynthia now.

'You mean, tricking Hugh with the gold?'

'Yes. When Rachael and I were held captive at the hideaway, Reinier told me how they'd set the whole kidnap thing up, using a fake jihadist website to communicate with the authorities.'

'He told you?' I query. 'Why would he do that? Didn't the others mind him doing that?'

'We spoke in Dutch. I think he regretted being part of the operation.'

Cynthia tells me that payment of the ransom was under negotiation but then a different group offered them a pile of gold to settle the matter straight away. She now reckons this second group had acquired a nuclear device for terrorist activity and needed an expert to help them activate it.

'So how did they find Reinier?' I ask.

'Through the fake website, I suppose. It was in the public domain, after all.'

'And the media had already reported that the ransom demands had come from this website.'

'Exactly,' says Cynthia.

'How would they have known Reinier was a nuclear expert, though? I don't remember seeing that in the stuff I saw.' I'm thinking about the report one of the Likely Lads got for me when we were in Sainte-Maxime.

'Insider knowledge perhaps,' says Cynthia. 'The Moscow anti-proliferation conference perhaps. There are probably spies at these various summits.'

'So they set up the ransom payment and somehow traced Hugh's gang back to the villa.'

'Yes. I wonder how they did that?' ponders Cynthia. 'Unless the gold led them there. I remember Jack was worried about it being traceable, maybe bugged or something. They took plenty of precautions, swapping vehicles and so on.'

'Maybe the Russian lot were cleverer than Hugh thought,' I offer. 'Maybe they kept out of sight but they saw everything and just followed the Merc back to the villa without anyone noticing. Once they knew where the gang were they could just wait until when it suited them to make their move.'

'But they're in one hell of a rush now,' says Cynthia. 'Why didn't they burst in earlier?'

'Perhaps they wanted to wait till it was dark. Perhaps their bosses suddenly decided to bring the operation forward. There's no way for us to know.'

A new thought occurs to me. 'Cynthia, we definitely heard them say "Linate", didn't we? I hope we're not on a wild goose chase.'

'They said it twice, Chad. From the context I gathered it was a place name. I didn't know it was an airport. So what do you think they're up to?'

'Well,' I say. 'Let's go over what we know. They've probably got a nuclear device of some sort and they need Reinier to help them detonate it. They talked about Linate and they talked about night closure and they were worried about time. If Linate closes at night then a logical deduction is that they're going to set the bomb to explode tonight at Linate airport.'

We stop talking for a moment, both shocked by our own supposition.

'Presumably they would use some sort of time delay,' says Cynthia eventually, 'so that they would have a chance to escape themselves before it detonated. How long would they need to get clear?'

'Unless they're suicide terrorists, of course,' I say. 'In which case they might do it straight away.'

There's another pause. Then Cynthia says quietly, 'God forbid.'

But now I'm beginning to worry. Will the police believe our story? Will they take action or will they dismiss us as cranks? There's another problem too. On the Audi's back seat next to Rachael there's the Kalashnikov we borrowed from the deceased Faisal. How would we explain that away if the cops decided to check out our car? Perhaps we should stop somewhere and get rid of it.

If only we could talk to people by phone it would all be so much easier, and save time too. But Hugh's lot took Cynthia's mobile and Rachael's, and mine was smashed to bits by Jack. We've already tried the mobile Faisal had on him. When we switched it on Cynthia noted that the screen font was in Cyrillic script. She deciphered that okay but didn't know the security code, of course. I suggested the factory defaults 0000 and 1234 but no joy. So for the moment we're incommunicado. How on earth did we manage in the days before mobile phones? I voice my concerns to Cynthia.

'If the police don't take us seriously then no-one's going to chase after the baddies,' I say. 'Unless . . . how about this . . . I drop you and Rachael off at the police station, you do the talking and I go on to Linate on my own to see what I can do. The benefit of that is that you and Rachael stay out of . . . ' I pause, trying to find an alternative word for 'danger', in case Rachael is paying attention.

'I understand,' comes the quiet reply. 'But if you should come to harm, I would . . . ' But this sentence too remains unfinished. Cynthia rests her hand on my arm for a moment and gives it a squeeze.

We drive in silence for a minute, the lights of Como getting closer.

'If we're right, Chad, why would they choose Linate?' Like me, Cynthia's obviously still thinking the unthinkable.

'Because bringing a bomb into an airport near a city would be a good way of attacking the city.'

'You mean, fly it in?'

'Or bring it in by road, pretending it's an item of freight.'

'So is Linate closer to Milan than the other airport . . .

what's it called . . . ?'

'Malpensa.'

'Oh, yes, I remember now.'

'It adds weight to what we've deduced,' I say. 'Here's the whole thing. These guys have acquired a nuke and now they want to blow up a city with it. We don't know what their motive is but that's not relevant. They need an expert to help them set it up. They find out about Reinier's kidnap so they organise a payoff to get access to him. That's how they find out he's in Italy.'

'Which is why they chose Linate for the attack.'

'Yes, it's near to where they know Reinier's being held, it's much closer to the city centre than Malpensa and it's used mainly as a centre for non-airline traffic—bizjets and cargo flights and so on.'

'God, it's awful, Chad. I hope we can stop it.'

We follow the shore road into town and stop briefly so that Cynthia can get directions to the police station from a pedestrian.

'Have you forgiven me?' I say, looking at her as we continue on our way.

'Pardon?'

'I accused you of being in cahoots with Hugh and Reinier. Am I forgiven?'

Cynthia smiles back. 'I'm thinking about it.'

'Bugger!' I let out, momentarily forgetting we've got a young girl in the back of the car.

'What's up?' asks Cynthia.

'I discounted the idea that they used a chopper to get away. I wonder if they had one waiting somewhere on the route to Linate.' I look at my watch. 'They might already

have arrived.' I manage to stop myself uttering another 'bugger!'

'What about your plane?' says Rachael from the back. 'Can it fly in the dark?'

I briefly turn around, a big grin on my face. 'Rachael, you are a star!'

'You're not going to fly to Linate?' asks Cynthia, astounded.

'Try and stop me!'

'But Chad—'

I hold up my hand. 'It's decided.'

We arrive at the police station and Cynthia and Rachael get out.

'If everything's okay, just give me a thumbs up,' I say. 'Then I'll be off.'

'Are you sure—'

'Chop! Chop!'

I wait, engine running. A minute goes by, then another. C'mon Cynthia, time's awasting! Suddenly she reappears. She runs over and to my amazement, opens the passenger door and jumps in.

'What—'

'I'm coming with you.'

'But—'

Cynthia flashes a brief smile. 'Chop! Chop!'

CHAPTER 30

'CYNTHIA, WHAT'S HAPPENING?' I ask as we drive off.

'Penny and Katie were there so I left Rachael with them.'

'Did you tell the cops what we know?'

'Yes. They looked at me as though I was mad. That's what you were worried about, wasn't it? They started asking questions and said I would need to make a statement. It was obviously going to take some time to convince them. So then I thought, if I went with you, I could talk to the airport on your plane's radio. They'd probably pay more attention then.'

'Well, that would be really helpful. They'll speak English, of course, but to have you explain things in fluent Italian would be tons better . . . except . . . '

'You don't need to say more, Chad. I know what I'm doing. If by bad luck it all ends in a blinding flash then . . . so be it.'

We look at each other for a moment. Cynthia gives me a little smile and then reaches over to kiss me on the cheek.

'When this is all over,' she says, 'maybe . . . '

I nod. 'That would be nice.'

In less than five minutes we've arrived at the airfield. It's all dark of course, no activity. I get out of the car and walk quickly over to the wire mesh vehicle entrance gate. It's locked, but as a customer I've been given the entry code, which I tap into the keypad, illuminating it with the car key light. The lock releases and I push the gate open, then return to the car. There's enough light to see where we're going and to silhouette the ghostly shapes of the aircraft parked on the apron. As we pass the little office block a security light comes on, no doubt triggered by a motion sensor.

We drive up to Whiskey Whiskey and I stop the car. Usually I'm very methodical about preparing my Arrow for flight. Tonight it's more like the movies, where pilots jump into planes, start the engine, taxi out to the runway and take off in one continuous sequence, no checklists or engine test.

It's not quite the same now, even with the need not to waste time. I unfasten the cover and bundle it in a pile behind the plane. I grab my torch from the cabin and instruct my passenger to get in and strap herself in while I visually check the fuel levels in both wing tanks. I'm guessing that Como to Linate is thirty nautical miles or so, not much more than ten minutes in the Arrow. I twist off the caps and shine the torch in. Both tanks two thirds full. Loads of fuel.

I don't like starting the engine without checking the oil tank contents and the fuel filters for contamination but there's no time for that. It hasn't rained for many days so

it's unlikely there's water in the system.

As always, the engine starts without difficulty and soon the electrics are warming up. I switch on the nav lights, the instrument panel lights and the Garmin GPS. No time to program a route but the default page is a basic map. It's all I need tonight.

On goes the landing light and I ease the throttle forward to get rolling. The wind is a light westerly but I'll take off on runway one four. That'll give me a slight tailwind component, which isn't helpful, but it's more than offset by the downhill slope. Plus runway one four points in the general direction of Milan Linate airport.

I fast taxi towards the runway, engine against brakes. Not very efficient, wasting fuel and increasing brake wear but I want the engine to warm up quickly. I do a magneto check while moving and get Cynthia to read the before take-off checklist. Clever girl! She's put her headset on without me asking.

I line and push the throttle wide open. The Lycoming winds up to full power and Whiskey Whiskey quickly accelerates. I lift the nose and the runway drops away into the dark.

Airborne! Gear up! I drop the nose a little and select flaps up. Then I throttle back and bring the prop back to climb revs. Plug in the autopilot, speed lock, one twenty knots, gentle climb on the altimeter, heading one seven zero, just east of south. Who needs GPS tonight? Ahead is a shimmering carpet of lights—the city of Milan. We're over low terrain now so three thousand will do for cruise altitude. I turn to grin at Cynthia sitting in the left seat, an exaggerated attempt at reassurance. In the dim light from

the instrument panel I get a beaming smile from her. Fantastic! What a great moment! Except that right now there are a bunch of bad guys who might be about to commit an atrocity with a nuclear weapon unless somebody stops them.

'We'll be talking to Milan in a moment,' I say to Cynthia over the intercom. 'There'll be a bit of argy bargy cos we haven't filed a flight plan. Maybe you can explain the situation to them in Italian and see what their response is. We could suggest they do a thorough security search at Linate airport.' I brief her on how to use the transmit switch on the control wheel in front of her and remind her to release the switch when she's finished talking so we can hear the response.'

'What if they ask where we're going?'

'Tell them we can land anywhere in the Milan-Turin area. Linate as first preference as it's the closest now and we might be able to identify the baddies if we happen to see them.'

'Got it.'

I switch the VHF to Milan Arrivals. There's quite a bit of radio traffic so I have to wait half a minute for a break in transmission.

I press my transmit switch. 'Milan, this is Golf Tango Whiskey Whiskey Whiskey.'

Something's wrong. I'm not hearing what I say in my earphones. Which means my message probably isn't being transmitted. I check my microphone lead is properly plugged in and try again. Same result.

I ask Cynthia to try the transmit switch on her side and just announce our callsign to Milan Arrivals. But no joy.

Bugger! Looks like a transmitter failure. I switch the mike selector to the second VHF set and try again. Nothing doing. The problem is that on Whiskey Whiskey both radios use the same transmitter amplifier circuit, and that must be where the fault lies. I check the circuit breakers and switch both radios off and on again. Nope, didn't fix it. The intercom is working fine but not the transmitter. So we're now mutes. We can hear but we can't speak.

'Did you pick up a mobile at the cop shop?' I ask Cynthia.

'Sorry, Chad, I didn't think to.'

'I'm as much to blame. I should have asked you to get one.' I sigh, and change the transponder code to seven six zero zero so Milan can see what the problem is.

Major rethink required. We may as well carry on to Linate and land there. Hopefully Air Traffic Control will see where we are and keep other planes out of our way. Once we're down we can tell people what we know. With luck we'll even get there before the baddies. Assuming that's where they were headed of course.

'Aircraft squawking seven six zero zero, Milan has radar contact,' we hear in our earphones. *'If you read Milan squawk ident.'*

'That's a relief,' I mutter, pressing my transponder's 'ident' button.

'Aircraft squawking seven six zero zero ident, we see you at altitude three thousand. If you are not at this level, squawk six five four three.'

'He's confirming the height read-out from our transponder,' I explain to Cynthia.

'Aircraft squawking seven six zero zero, Milan copies

you at altitude three thousand. If you are landing at Turin Caselle, squawk three four five six. If you are landing at Milan Malpensa, squawk three four five five. If you are landing at Milan Linate, squawk three four five four. If you are landing at another airport, squawk ident.'

Like an automated phone answering menu, I think with a sardonic smile. I switch our transponder code to 3454.

'Aircraft squawking three four five four, Milan copies you intending to land at Milan Linate, standby please.'

Now there's a non-stop flurry of radio calls between Milan Arrivals and other aircraft who have had to wait for our exchange to finish. While we wait for further instructions we note the shimmering lights of the city of Milan sliding past on the right side, our dark wings blocking out those below nearby. I see Cynthia peering out, mesmerised. I wonder if, like me, she's thinking that perhaps the glittering metropolis—and we ourselves—are about to be annihilated in a nuclear fireball.

'Aircraft squawking three four five four, Linate is using runway three six. You are cleared to descend at your discretion for ILS or visual approach runway three six. Listen out now on Linate Tower frequency one one nine decimal two five. If you hear no transmission from them within two minutes, squawk seven six zero zero and come back to this frequency.'

'ILS means instrument landing system,' I explain to Cynthia, changing the VHF frequency. 'It's a guidance system for bad weather approaches. We don't need it this evening. We'll do a visual.'

'Okay.'

'Aircraft squawking three four five four,' comes a new

voice, a female. *'This is Linate Tower. You are cleared to land runway three six. If you hear this transmission squawk ident.'*

I press the 'ident' button. For a moment I find myself noting how attractive a female Italian voice sounds when speaking English. I immediately chastise myself and bring my mind back to the job in hand.

'Aircraft squawking three four five four ident, Linate copies you have received landing clearance for runway three six. Wind two six zero, zero four.'

We're not making life easy for the controllers, interfering with the normal flow of traffic. The next exchange we hear is the Tower Controller instructing an aircraft inbound to Linate to break off his approach and hold over Lima India November, which is the radio beacon at the airport.

I run through the approach checks and reset the prop and mixture. I knock out the autopilot and pull the throttle back to start down. The runway is clearly visible ahead and left. I turn a little right to join the downwind leg.

Another aircraft comes on the frequency.

'Yankee Alpha Hotel Sierra Echo taxiing for runway three six.' The English is heavily accented.

'Roger, Sierra Echo, continue to holding point Alpha One.'

'Sierra Echo, will be ready on reaching.'

In abbreviated form the pilot of this aircraft is saying that he can accept take-off clearance as soon as he arrives at the runway.

'Roger, Sierra Echo. Your slot starts at time four three.'

'Linate, we have night closure restrictions for

destination.'

Cynthia and I exchange glances. My blood suddenly runs cold.

'Okay, sir,' says the controller. *'Can you accept a re-route? You might get an earlier slot on a re-route.'*

'Affirm. We accept re-route.'

'Yankee Alpha,' I say over the intercom to Cynthia. 'That's an Afghanistan registration, I think.' I can see the aircraft taxiing out. It's either a Boeing 737 or an Airbus 320.

I ease out of the descent at 1000 feet above ground level, add a touch of throttle to hold the speed and ask my passenger to check seat belt for landing. I'm abeam the runway now and can see that Sierra Echo is a 737, plain white, no obvious markings, no logo on its tail.

'Yankee Alpha Hotel Sierra Echo, copy new clearance,' says the Tower Controller.

'Go ahead, please.'

'Milan clears Yankee Alpha Hotel Sierra Echo to Echo Golf Lima Charlie, Punsu Four Delta Departure, Upper Alpha Four One, Upper Mike Seven Three Three, Flight Level Three Eight Zero.'

The white 737 reads back his clearance and says again that he is ready for take-off.

'Echo Golf Lima Charlie,' I repeat grimly to Cynthia. 'That's London City airport.'

'Oh Chad! Do you think they're going to take a nuclear bomb to London?'

'Are they the bad guys, though?' I say. 'Maybe they're completely innocent, going about their lawful business. Suppose we've got it wrong?'

'Even if they are the baddies, there's nothing we can do about it, is there?'

'Oh yes there is,' I say. 'Hold tight. This'll ruffle a few feathers.'

I bank steeply left and head towards the north end of the airport. Even as we turn we hear the 737 being cleared to line up on the runway and take off.

'Sierra Echo, roger,' we hear.

We flash over the runway at right angles to it and I slacken off the turn a little. Out of my right window I can see the piercing beams of the 737's landing lights aligning with the runway. The Tower Controller has noticed what we're doing, either from a radar display or by looking out of the window.

'Aircraft squawking three four five four, I confirm landing runway is three six. I say again, landing runway three six.' Understandably the controller sounds surprised at what she's seeing. She probably thinks I'm mistakenly manoeuvring for landing in the opposite direction. She's right, of course, except that the change is intentional on my part. She now has a conflict developing which could end nastily if not prevented.

I drop the landing gear and half flap, easing back on the power to resume descent. Quickly I run through the landing checks. As I roll out of the turn runway one eight is clearly in view ahead. I straighten up on the centreline and drop full flap. Also plainly visible are the lights of the 737, accelerating along the runway towards us. I hope he can see my own landing light.

'Sierra Echo! Stop your take-off!' we hear, the controller's voice frantic. *'I say again, stop your take-off!'*

Acknowledge!

I touch down on the runway but I'm fully prepared to steer off into the grass if the 737 ignores the desperate instruction from the Tower Controller.

But whatever the ultimate intentions of the 737 crew happened to be, good sense prevails now and we hear the airliner's engines howling in reverse thrust and see the wing spoilers pop up. They're stopping!

CHAPTER 31

THINGS ARE ALMOST BACK TO NORMAL, though it's probably true to say that life will never be quite the same again for Penny and the twins or for Cynthia Sommerville or me. Or for Cynthia's husband for that matter. Most of the changes are for the better. Certainly things are looking up for Rollback. Here's the email I got from Ron Kennedy, our lead guitarist, earlier today:

MegaFonic contract terms attached. Three album deal, minimum 40 tracks. We'd need to write some new material, about 10 tracks. But what about touring? I know you're not keen. The contract says we could use one or two subs if we wanted, but they would pay less. Are you happy with that? I've modded the Oh Ethyl Alcohol lyrics a bit and changed the chords in the chorus (now E/D). What about this:

*I'll never drink again/ There's an earthquake in my brain
And my eyes are rimmed in red/ From the storm inside
my head*

*Chorus: Oh Ethyl Alcohol/ I need you for my soul
Help me to rock and roll/ Ease my pain*

I won't trouble you with the rest of the song. You're probably more interested in the denouement in the Sommerville case. I'll give you a summary.

We were right about most of the stuff we deduced. In the white 737 the authorities found the two guys who had so rudely invited themselves into the Villa Tranquilla, together with Reinier Mentinck and three other men, all ex-military weapons experts. Our guess about the helicopter turned out to be correct—subsequent investigation discovered it had been waiting for them in an industrial area in Grandate, a small town a few kilometres south of Como. The chopper took them directly to Linate, where the 737 was waiting for them, ready to start engines. The airliner was kitted out as a bizjet. But one unusual piece of equipment in the cabin was not the sort of thing you'd usually find in an office: a tactical nuclear weapon. It was a 1970s Soviet device, we were subsequently informed, designed for airborne delivery, one of the many items of ordnance that went missing when the USSR broke up. This particular weapon was especially nasty. Although not as powerful as the warheads on intercontinental missiles, it included a chunk of cobalt, which would have vastly increased the radioactive fallout. If it had been detonated at London City airport it's likely the whole of central London would have been uninhabitable for several years. Under questioning, the bad guys said that they planned to land the 737 at

London City and then scam before the device blew up. They're now in jail in Italy awaiting trial for a list of offences as long as your arm. Ditto Hugh Sommerville and Reinier Mentinck. And the two Americans. I wonder what happened to the gold.

They weren't actually Russians, the terrorists, and the 737's Afghanistan registration was a red herring. The aircraft turned out to have had a chequered history. It was originally owned by an American CEO who sold it to a leasing company, who leased it to the Afghanistan government, who reregistered it. At some stage it ended up in Zimbabwe, which became the base for the bad guys to launch their attack from. When they found out Reinier Mentinck's location they chose Milan as the airport to take the 737 to for the first phase of the 'attack London' plan. I didn't get that bit quite right—they chose Linate rather than Malpensa because the plane would be less conspicuous there in its 'anonymous' bizjet paint scheme, rather than because that airport was closer to the city centre.

The bad boys were found to be Kebrynskan separatists who wanted independence from the Russian Federation. According to media reports, Kebrynska used to be one of the smaller Soviet Republics bordering the northern coast of the Caspian Sea. Dissidents in the region were not happy when Kebrynska joined the Federation. I'll be honest with you—I'd never heard of the place before either. After our little adventure in Italy the whole world knows about it. So ironically the terrorists achieved part of their aim—to publicise their grievances.

The late not-so-lamented Faisal—whose spinal

column Jack rearranged for him—was reported to be a Libyan revolutionary but it was as yet unknown as to how or why he got himself involved with the Kebrynskan separatist faction.

Why attack London? It just so happened that the Russian President was in England's capital city attending a political conference and the Kebrynskan terrorists wanted to wipe him out. So the two objectives were the most potent protest the world had ever witnessed coupled with the elimination of a hate figure.

Of course, the western powers are now worried that the separatists or like-minded people might try similar stunts in the future. So no doubt airport security will be tightened again, which will be a pain for travellers.

Cynthia and I were arrested and interrogated by the Italian police, the British police, the Russian FSB security forces and the CIA. It wasn't too difficult to establish our innocence and we were soon released. While we were being questioned by the British police they played us part of the recorded exchange between Reinier Mentink and the Dutch intelligence service. Here is the English translation:

Q: Okay . . . the kidnap scheme . . . was Mrs Sommerville part of the plan?

A: No.

Q: But her husband was?

A: Yes . . . I've already told you that.

Q: Mrs Sommerville told us you saved her life when the terrorists were talking about killing her and the others . . . how did you do that?

A: I didn't understand what they were saying but Cynthia . . . Mrs Sommerville . . . indicated to me that there was something wrong.

Q: How did she know that?

A: Cynthia speaks many languages. It sounded to me like the terrorists were speaking in Russian so there was a chance Cynthia would understand what they were saying.

Q: So . . . she spoke to you?

A: She said, 'Great danger.'

Q: That's all?

A: The terrorists wouldn't let her speak any more. But later Cynthia just shook her head when I looked at her . . . she looked very worried . . . I deduced that she was trying to get a message across.

Q: That they were going to kill you all?

A: Yes, that's what I thought she was indicating.

Q: So what did you do?

A: I said I would not cooperate unless they agreed not to harm them . . . I told them I would need to phone Cynthia before I set the primer to confirm she and the others were still alive.

Q: And they agreed?

A: Yes . . . they said I could call her en route to London.

Q: Why did you do that?

A: Cynthia used to be my friend. I was regretting the whole thing and I wanted to make amends.

Q: She said you told her about the kidnap plot when you were holding her in captivity . . . is that true?

A: Yes.

Q: And you say she wasn't part of that plan?

A: No . . . like I said, I've already told you that.

Q: Why did you tell her about it?

A: Same reason . . . I was ashamed of what we were doing. I felt I had to explain why I was doing it.

Q: Why didn't Hugh Sommerville or the Americans stop you telling Cynthia about the plan?

A: They didn't know I was telling her . . . we spoke in Dutch.

Q: So . . . the terrorists had nothing to do with the kidnap plan?

A: No, absolutely nothing.

Q: Okay . . . why did they need your expertise?

A: They had a type DH106 weapon primer and they didn't know how to configure it.

Q: The DH106 is a British component, isn't it? Why did they need a British primer for a Soviet device?

A: The Soviets copied the DH106 for their own weapons. Anyone familiar with the DH106 could have configured the Soviet version.

Q: And the terrorists didn't know how to do this?

A: No.

Q: You said earlier you tried to prevent them doing what they intended. Can you tell us how?

A: It was difficult . . . if I'd refused outright to do what they said they might have killed us all there and then, so I decided on a delaying tactic.

Q: How?

A: I told them I couldn't remember the exact procedure and would have to download it onto my computer—which was true.

Q: So where did the delay come in?

A: I pretended I could only download the procedure in a

secure location. I told them if they made me take the computer away it would take a day or two to set up a new secure location.

Q: And that wasn't true?

A: No, I could have downloaded it using encrypting protection via any wi-fi network.

Q: Why did you do that?

A: Two reasons, really. To buy time and to let Cynthia Sommerville pick up what was going on, assuming she could understand what they were talking about. I thought she might be able to get word to the authorities somehow.

Q: Okay . . . did the terrorists tell you what time they wanted the bomb to go off?

A: They said they would tell me later. They said we would be using the time delay . . . the DH106 can be set with a time delay.

Q: To give them a chance to get away after landing but before the bomb went off?

A: Possibly. They told me they would use a time delay but I thought they might be suicide bombers . . . that they might trigger the bomb as we were coming into land or as soon as we had landed.

Q: How could they have done that if you'd set a time delay?

A: Well . . . the DH106 has an override to trigger instant detonation if required.

Q: At what stage would you have actually configured the primer? Sometime during the flight?

A: I wouldn't have done it.

Q: No? Why not?

A: I couldn't have the deaths of thousands of people on

my conscience . . . and the destruction of a city.

Q: But the terrorists would have killed you if you refused to cooperate.

A: Yes . . . but they would probably have killed me anyway after I'd set the primer.

Q: If the plane had taken off but you didn't set the primer and then it was shot down . . .

A: Yes . . .

Q: Would the bomb have detonated?

A: No.

Q: What about radioactive contamination?

A: Minimal, I would say.

Q: So . . . you would have prevented a major catastrophe by refusing to set the primer?

A: It would have been a small comfort before my demise.

Q: Right . . . when the take-off was aborted, why didn't the terrorists kill you then?

A: I thought they probably would . . . there was a violent argument and one of the terrorists pointed a gun at me . . . there was nothing I could do.

Q: Why did they change their minds?

A: I don't know. The two pilots came back and joined the argument . . . from the body language and tone of the conversation I deduced they'd decided to give themselves up.

Q: Surrender?

A: Yes . . . the plane was surrounded by fire trucks and police vehicles. One of the terrorists opened one of the doors and let armed officers enter the plane . . . it was all over.

The British police asked us if we thought Reinier was being truthful and we told them 'yes'. Given that he was going to do whatever was necessary to stop the big bang, not to mention saving our lives, perhaps the authorities will go lightly on him when they come to sentence him.

More annoying was the interrogation by the media. We were flavour of the week and quickly got tired of the relentless requests for interviews. Poor old Penny got roped into the circus too, but she made sure the twins were kept out of the limelight. Luckily I'd kept the business card Likely Lad Vernon had given me. In desperation I gave him a call and he used his contacts to control the media attention. In return, Penny granted him an exclusive interview with her and the girls for his production company.

There were some benefits, of course, including the publicity gained for Rollback. Besides the contract with MegaFonic, which we had been trying to land for ages, we were invited to do a TV show. Ron and the rest of the band were happy to do a promotional tour but not me, as you probably gathered from the email I told you about. Although I could have left the running of Arrow Tec to my son Malcolm I like doing the PI stuff myself and I'm too old to live the rock-star lifestyle . . . aren't I? Mind you, Mick Jagger . . . Paul McCartney . . . Eric Clapton . . .

The publicity deluge was a double-edged sword for the Arrow Tec Detective Agency. Along with genuine proposals for new assignments came a torrent of junk emails which clogged up our inbox. In the end we had to temporarily suspend our website until the storm died down. After talking it over with Malcolm, we've decided to

take on two new operatives—Nick Scott, the retired copper I think I mentioned to you before, and Harriet Tomlin, who's already qualified in this field and wants to work in southern England after relocation from Scotland. In the past we've had to turn away clients who needed a female PI so the new hire will fill the gap. If the extra admin workload is too much for Penny, we'll also bring in an assistant for her.

Whiskey Whiskey was grounded at Linate airport pending repair of the transmitter amp. Turned out it was a broken connector pin. The engineers did a temporary fix, soldering in a bypass but it looks like I'm going to have to bite the bullet and replace both the VHF's with new equipment. The new radios will have completely independent transmitters and receivers so there'll never be a repeat of what we went through on the night of the bomb.

Cynthia wanted to go home as soon as the Italians let us go. As you can imagine, it was quite emotional saying goodbye, but we agreed we'd meet again in Blighty.

Penny and the twins stayed on in the villa for another day (with repaired door) while I waited in Linate for the radio repair and then Whiskey Whiskey took me back to Como. The flight home to England was spectacular, to start with anyway. We routed northeast up towards St Moritz again and then zigzagged generally northwards along valleys through the Alps into southern Germany, stopping at Stuttgart and later Charleroi for refreshment and fuel. Our arrival at Deansfold airfield had somehow been anticipated by the media so there was another barrage of questions to fend off before we managed to

escape. Penny invited me back to hers and the four of us had a delicious Chinese takeaway washed down with Merlot (Penny and me) and fruit juice (Katie and Rachael). I stayed overnight (in the spare room).

There was considerable speculation in the media about the terrorist plot, mainly what-ifs. What if the 737 had succeeded in getting airborne from Linate and Reinier had primed the cobalt bomb? The outcome would have depended on whether or not the Italian police believed our story and passed the information on to the security services. If they did, they would have had a nightmare scenario to deal with. An aircraft carrying a dirty nuclear bomb was flying northwest across sundry European cities on its way to England. What to do? Shoot it down? But where would the wreckage, tumbling earthward from thirty-eight thousand feet, have landed? Would the bomb have exploded in the air? On the ground? On the other hand the authorities could have decided to take a chance and let the 737 land in London and hope to neutralise the terrorists before they could detonate the device. But suppose the baddies had gone into suicide mode? The general opinion was that a shoot-down was the most likely response, rather than let the aircraft continue on its deadly mission.

Later reports in the media suggested that the FSB were on the trail of the bad guys and closing in on them in the days before the incident. There was also speculation that the terrorists knew they were being tailed, which is why they were racing the clock to complete the operation.

On a brighter note, there was the matter of the reward. Or should I say rewards. The Dutch government kept to

their word and offered us 100,000 euros. An Italian entrepreneur who lived near Linate donated a similar sum. A group of businessmen of various nationalities who owned residences in London added just over three million pounds to the kitty, but it was decided the media didn't need to know about their top-up. We added it all up and divided it by five: Penny, Rachael, Katie, Cynthia and me. A good chunk of mine will go to a charity promoting women's education in the developing world. A small chunk will pay for Whiskey Whiskey's new radios and a few other improvements.

Several publishers approached us proposing that we write a book about the Sommerville case. At first we prevaricated. Cynthia wasn't sure she wanted her dirty laundry aired in public again after the previous exhaustive scrutiny of her private life in the media. But then she had a change of heart, telling us that her story might give comfort to other wives whose husbands had deceived them. She gave the project the green light and Penny was chosen as author rather than me cos she writes better than me. So she'll get some dosh from the publisher's advance and from royalties if the book sells. I believe that they're now talking about a film. Who would they choose to play my part?

We had the champagne dinner, the two ladies and I. We let Malcolm join us too. We chose a quiet restaurant in Oxford to elude any paparazzi who happened to be on the prowl. One of the best evenings I've ever spent!

Stop press: both Cynthia and Penny have asked me out on separate dates. What to do? They're both brilliant and beautiful and fantastic and lovely but I'm not such a

cad that I would two-time them. Cynthia or Penny? Penny or Cynthia?

I'll let you know!

THE END

Also by Julien Evans: Fiction:

Madeleine's Quest

Chalk and Cheese

The Damocles Plot

Flight 935 Do You Read

It's Not As Simple As That

Non-fiction:

How Airlines Fly

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