

The POISE Archives

P:1 Gifts

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Also in the series

The POISE Archives

P:2 Expansion

Prologue

April 1981

‘The child will need to be cared for here – there can be no question. She shall be brought up as one of us. She has, to my knowledge, been given no protection so it can only be a sign that there was a great spirit already within her that she has survived this past three moons.’

‘But she is not one of us. We do not know her history, her ancestry.’

‘She must stay. She is of too few years to complete the quest, but we can help return her guardian spirit to her which will suffice for the moment. The soul raft will journey to the Lower-world when darkness fills the sky. Send word to the people.’

The younger of the two men, Sly Wolf, stood up from his cross legged position on the floor and respectfully exited the large reindeer skin tent. The elder, Silver Light, remained sitting in the centre of the large circular yaranga, watching over the body of the sleeping girl.

The child could have been no more than 5 years old as she lay on the pile of animal skins in the centre of the tent. Mud and slime caked her bronzed skin and long black hair making it difficult to see the full extent of the cuts and bruises covering her emaciated body.

A Chukchi fishing party had found her earlier that day on the shore of Lake Cheko, alone, exhausted and with no indication of how she had arrived there. Two members of the party abandoned their plans for providing food for their families to carry her back to their village where they delivered her to Silver Light, their elder Shaman.

The child, clearly in need of food was given nothing but water in the hours leading to sunset. Silver Light never left her side. He neither ate nor drank, but meditated to the beat of his drum rocking back and forth and regularly emitting unnatural sounds from deep within him.

As sunset grew near members of the fishing party and other men and women from the village entered the yaranga. Some of them carried small intricately decorated boards, of similar size and shape but unique in design. The holders of the boards took their position around the girl forming a symbolic raft. Four men sat on either side of her with Silver Light at the bow, guiding, and Sly Wolf at the stern, steering.

This soul boat would enable the crew to move from the consciousness in which they currently existed into their other equally comfortable consciousness, where they would find the child’s Guardian Spirit. The remainder of the villagers took their places inside the skin walls of the yaranga.

Holding long handled paddles in their hands and placing their decorated spirit boards on the ground beside them, they embark on a journey into the Lower-world where spirits in the form of animals, plants and dragons are experienced as real.

The ritual to retrieve the child’s guardian spirit would take all night, perhaps more than one, but was considered necessary for her survival. The villagers sang their support. The search was on to locate the guardian spirit of the girl, and the journey would not be over until they had found it.

Three nights of singing and drumming passed before the end of the journey was marked by Silver Light ‘blowing’ the child’s guardian spirit back into her chest and her head, and then rising to dance.

Although travel into other consciousnesses had ceased during the day to allow for more mundane but essential duties to be completed, it was resumed again at night and all involved were exhausted. They returned to their own homes to rest and share stories of their journey with their loved ones.

Silver Light named the child 'Sky Seer' because of the unnatural sky blue colour of her eyes, and the Chukchi continued to care for her in their community, and raise her as one of their own.

Her native language was discovered to be English, but she had no memory of her real name, her family or where she was from.

The village council had met the day after the journey to the Lower-world to decide what should be done with the girl. Silver Light was well aware that the authorities should be contacted and informed of her whereabouts, but the council feeling was unanimous: the child was too special to send into care, she must remain in the village.

Twelve years passed. Sky Seer had grown into a beautiful young woman. Silver Light considered her his daughter, and was impressed by her ability to quickly gather a lifetime's worth of spirit helpers in just a few short years. As pleased as he was with her development as a Shaman however, all was not well. His own spirit helpers, and in particular his guardian spirit, a Snow Leopard he called Cloud, warned him of something hidden in her. They warned him of a darkness: a darkness being manipulated in some way by a greater power.

Whether it was his own feelings for her or whether there was interference from another source was not clear, but Silver Light was unable to accurately understand the messages that Cloud was giving him. He sensed malevolence. He sensed danger. He sensed an imminent end.

Ultimately, he was powerless to act for the protection of his village or of himself.

The six by eight foot private vault was in total darkness. Made of solid steel reinforced concrete the small vault-room housed a dozen thin, saucer-sized black discs, equally spaced in the shape of an ellipse and set into the marble floor tiles.

A spark of light broke the total darkness and grew to a height of about six centimetres, hovering above one of the discs. Within seconds similar light sources appeared above each of the other discs and gently vibrated. Then an electronically modified voice filled the room, bringing an end to the eerie silence.

‘We’d agreed to keep communications to a minimum Verger, what’s so urgent we must speak tonight?’

‘My researchers have come up with some very disturbing calculations, calculations that will weaken the very foundations of our power throughout the world. We need to act now. Nerd, Matey, Ed, this falls into your hands. Communication is our greatest weapon.’

It had been a unanimous decision, back in the early years of The Key, for each of the members to select a code name for themselves which alluded to their profession, but did not divulge their identity. The twelve members did not know one another, at least they were not aware of knowing one another in the outside world, and this was deemed by the group to be for the benefit and protection of all involved.

The voices themselves were not only electronically disguised, but were passed through a universal translation programme. Each member could speak in their native tongue and be understood clearly by all.

‘and what exactly is the nature of these disturbing calculations?’ continued the member referred to as Budgie.

‘There has been a marked increase in the cosmic vibration. Energy is rising exponentially and although we are still a safe distance from what Redfield referred to as his ‘Critical Mass’, we are approaching it much more quickly since this most recent depression than I am comfortable with.’

‘A depression, by definition should keep the people down, that’s why we created it in the first place. Are you telling me our plan has back-fired?’

‘Yes Riesling, that’s exactly what I’m saying. A significant percentage of the population are waking up to the fact that their thought patterns have an influence on their actual lives. The depression has served to push them towards this belief out of desperation. The Olympic Games too have inspired the people to be the best they can.’

‘But surely, only when people have hope can they create the positive thoughts and vibrations that can shift the universal energy’

‘That’s what we thought, but it seems we were wrong. Many are finding themselves in a position where blind faith in themselves and their abilities can be even more effective than hope. They are willing to give creating a better future a shot and they are finding that it works!’

‘How has this happened?’ asked Budgie.

‘Many more people are out of work, they have more time on their hands, and access to books has never been so easy. Authors like Redfield, and Rhonda Byrne are primarily responsible. They are putting the truth out there to the masses. It should never have been allowed. You should have heeded my words at the time.’

‘What’s done is done Verger. The question is what are we going to do about it now?’

‘As I said Chance, communication is our greatest weapon. We fight the power of their word with the power of ours.’

‘There might be something else we can do.’ came a new voice.

‘McCormick? What do you have in mind?’

‘My agents have located the legendary ‘Karmic Source Stones’, and have retrieved them from their resting place of millennia.’

‘You will need to explain the significance of this to me, and to the rest of the brotherhood McCormick.’

‘Of course Verger. The stones, there are twelve of them, are supposedly the source of all balance in the Universe.’

‘Supposedly?’ enquired Chance.

‘Well, it has never been proven, but legends always have a basis in fact and my intelligence leads me to believe that they are what they purport to be.’

‘Continue then McCormick. We are all intrigued.’

‘Thank you Verger. The Stones hold the essence of the 12 Karmic Laws: Neutrality, Agreement, Lesson, Cause and Effect, Balance, Attraction, Connection, Expansion, Unfoldment, Empowerment, Possibility and Love. According to the legend they have been left untouched since the beginning of time.’

‘I didn’t think you bought into the concept of time McCormick.’

‘I don’t Chance, as you well know. I believe that time is just an illusion and that everything happens simultaneously. The majority of this brotherhood however do not live in the now as I do, and so it is easier for me to explain about the Stones by using the concept of time as you understand it.’

‘Don’t patronise us McCormick, just get to the point.’ It was Nerd who was getting irritated.

‘The point is that with these stones in our possession we can mess with the whole balance of the universe. The fact that the masses have finally cottoned on to the idea that they can change their lives just through their thought processes will not matter in the least. We can break the laws of

Karma itself. The whole thing will just stop working. The Universe will be in total chaos. It will be as devastating as switching off gravity.'

'And with chaos taking hold we will be able to take back the power we are losing?' asked Budgie.

'I approve in theory McCormick, but am sceptical about these stones. Where are they now? How are you going to obtain them and do we have the ability to manipulate something so fundamental to the Universe?'

'The Stones are already in my possession, I have secreted them in three separate storage facilities. I have also recently acquired 'ancient' documents which detail what can be achieved by just using some of the stones.'

'And you're happy to just give these stones to our cause?'

'I believe it is what is meant to be, Verger. It will mean the greatest of power for us all.'

'Then let us take a vote. All those in favour of securing the stones on behalf of The Key show your approval in the usual manner.'

The lights on ten of the twelve discs grew to double their height and then returned to normal.

'Nerd, Matey, you do not approve. May we hear your views?'

'Yes Verger,' replied Matey. 'Chaos is a dangerous thing. I fail to see how any of us can hope to maintain any kind of power with the world in total chaos, and until we know more about these Karmic Source Stones I believe we should take the greatest care.'

'Point taken and I agree we need to know more. Can we say then that we will study these stones and keep them under our protection until such time as we know how to best use them. Another vote Gentlemen!'

This time all twelve of the lights grew to twice their height before returning to normal.

'Then it is left to you to deliver the stones to the vault, McCormick. We will meet again once you have accomplished this task.'

'The Key is turned...' stated McCormick

'...the power secured' continued all the other members of the brotherhood.

The lights in the vault extinguished simultaneously and silence once again filled the room.

Monday 3rd September 2012

‘... the power secured.’ *Right, not ‘til I take out some insurance.’*

Simon Mitchell sat behind his immense office desk and reached for the antique style black telephone. Pressing the numbers on the circular dial he sat back in his chair and waited impatiently for a connection.

The Managing Director of the pharmaceutical corporation’s stature was in proportion with his desk; had he been standing he would have towered above every employee in his organisation. At 210cm or six feet eleven inches tall, weighing a healthy 240 pounds, his muscular physique was impressive for a man who appeared to be in his late fifties.

Drumming his fingers rhythmically on the desk he did not have to wait too long before hearing the sound of a younger man’s voice.

‘You have verified the authenticity of the documents Herr Schneider?’

‘I have, Herr Mitchell.’

‘And the ritual?’

‘The ritual is sound and will require only five of the Stones. They must be transported carefully and must not come into physical contact with any living being. You should be able to perform the ritual without any evidence being left to indicate their use.’

‘Good. That is how I’d hoped it would be. Leave the transportation arrangements to me. I will put three of my most trusted people on it immediately.’

Simon Mitchell replaced the receiver in its cradle and turned to the slim dark haired woman sitting quietly in the armchair on the other side of his desk.

‘You will fly out on Monday evening. I will ensure your tickets are booked and you have clear instructions before the weekend. This is what we have been waiting for Delia. Our time has come.’

3

Sunday 9th September 2012

It had been a long few days, and the week ahead looked as if it was going to be every bit as harrowing. Emma Dalton, as ever a picture of elegance, reclined in her Flybe Premium Business seat on board the BAE 146 as it began to taxi along the runway at Heathrow airport. Determined to make the most of this brief opportunity to relax Emma had kicked off her camel suede classic court shoes and loosened the button on her Armani jacket.

Her mind wandered over the events of the last few days. Cocomo had been a success, she was well aware of that, but she had not realised just how much of an impact she had made in the

corporate world until Robert her Bank Manager had suggested that she might consider franchising the business.

It was all happening at a rate much faster than Emma had believed possible, her head was full of financial projections, legal implication and internal debates about whether she wanted the change at all. She felt as though her feet had hardly touched the ground in months.

Emma's business, a powerful blend of image consultancy, life coaching and counselling was the love of her life. The life affirming work she had been doing with her clients over the years had attracted celebrity attention and consequently a rapidly increasing caseload. At thirty four she had found little time for romance or friendships. She was however still close to her mother, and it was her mother, Sapphire Dalton, that she was on her way to visit now.

At every important stage of Emma's life she had turned to Sapphire: when her father was killed, when she started her small business working from home, when she gained her first big contract. Emma's need was not for support or even guidance as she was a very independent woman, but she wished to keep her mother involved in her affairs, to share something that was so important to her. Her most recent visit had come when she had expanded the business and been required to move from her home town of Norwich to London, and right now the issue was the franchise.

Turning down the offer of a drink from the young male flight attendant, Emma buried her fiery red pixie cut hair into the comfortable complementary pillow and slept peacefully for the short flight into Norwich airport, blissfully unaware of just how much the next few days were going to change her life.

The Brazilian air was thick and warm, as Lord Rory Broadfield lay sweating on the small double bed with his Fedora placed over his face and his boots still on. A determined expression was

hidden under the hat as he dreamed that he was Indiana Jones racing through the jungle leaping from truck to truck, saving the world and winning the heroine's heart.

His tan leather waistcoat looked dusty and worn, and the linen shirt and Chinos were a far cry from his usual pure wool jumpers and Italian scarves. All in all he looked more like his childhood idol, Alan Quartermaine, than an English Lord.

On the dresser beside the bed lay his wallet, an old and well used travelling alarm clock and an empty bottle of caçhaca rum.

Lord Rory groaned. His head felt as though immense hands were mercilessly pressing down on it from all angles. His mouth was dry and he was sure that if he dared to move his stomach would deposit its contents before he could make it to the bathroom. *I'm getting too old for this game* he thought to himself.

After several minutes of debating whether getting up would be worth the effort, he tried to turn over and discovered to his surprise that he wasn't alone. Next to him in the bed lay naked a young Brazilian woman who must have been at least 30 years his younger.

'Bom dia Meester Rory' she said brightly, clearly not suffering in the way that he was.

'Bom dia er... er...'

'Yara, you forget so soon?' Yara was taunting him as she headed for the en suite bathroom wrapped in an off white bed-sheet to get dressed.

'Sorry. Yara - er, of course, how could I forget. Did we er, go on a date?'

'Oh you are funny Meester Rory, you ask for my services for evening, but after dinner we come back here and you pass out. I stay so you are not alone in case you wake up, but now it is morning and I have to go'

'Oh, I see. Well um, thanks. Do I owe you anything?'

Yara had emerged from the bathroom in faded jeans and a white, cheesecloth off the shoulder blouse.

'Funny man Meester Rory. All settled last night. Adeus!' and with that she kissed him on the cheek and hopped out of the room putting on her red strappy three inch heel sandals en route, leaving Rory to wonder what on earth had gotten into him.

With an immense effort he raised himself from his bed and walked to the bathroom. He looked at himself in the full length mirror as he downed a large glass of water. *Not exactly a great catch,* he thought, *but I never imagined I would have to pay for someone to keep me company. What the hell happened?*

The last thing Rory could remember was leaving The National Museum in Rio de Janeiro where he had spent the afternoon with an old alumni reminiscing about days at The Ruskin School in Oxford. He was sure he had left alone. Well, fairly sure.

Rory looked around his room through bloodshot eyes. It was clean and simply decorated. He was holidaying in the village of Ouro Preto, and through the open window he could smell traces of iron in the air from the nearby mines and hear the sound of the local bus pulling up at the station opposite his room.

As an artist of some renown in England, the creation of Rory's latest collection of arcane sculptures had taken their toll on his health. It was for this reason that as soon as his own exhibition at The Serpentine Gallery had officially opened, he had negotiated with his agent to get away for a week to rest.

He had chosen Ouro Preto in order to see first-hand the soapstone figures of Aleijadinho and to reconnect with an old acquaintance who had just been posted to the National Museum in Rio. Enlisting the services of a chaperone had not been part of the plan, and was certainly not his usual behaviour. If only he could remember.

5

Monday 10 September 2012

It was a glorious English day. The leaves were beginning to turn brown but had not yet fallen from the trees. There was the wonderfully refreshing smell of recently cut grass, and the air was crisp and clean. None of this natural wonder was appreciated though by most of the walkers moving briskly through Hyde Park that particular morning.

Passers- by chatted on their mobile phones whilst bustling along, presumably to work. There were young couples walking with arms around each other's waists who clearly had eyes for nothing but each other. There were several more senior ladies and gentlemen sitting on the park benches reading or just enjoying the view.

The Park had noticeably fewer joggers this morning. *Was Olympic fever dying out so soon?* And then there were the three teenage lads on skateboards who didn't seem to mind that others might not want to listen to their music or jump out of their way as they rolled by at speed.

As the boards and their skaters flew around the elegant but stern looking woman in her mid twenties wearing a black fitted three quarter length coat, the air around them turned cold. Without warning two of them collided into each other, leaving the third to plough into them both and somersault over their stunned bodies landing flat on his back. Bloody noses and moans of pain and embarrassment followed, whilst the woman in the black coat walked on, unaffected by the commotion.

Perhaps a little over dressed for such a lovely day, Delia Penn was feeling the cold, she *always* felt the cold. Immaculately presented and carrying a black Mulberry suede satchel, she walked determinedly on her leopard print stilettos with Tang, her Siberian Husky at her side. Her jet black hair which was swept up into a French pleat and held in place with a silver athame finished off the image of a young but no-nonsense executive.

‘All is in readiness Tang. I fly out this evening to pick up the package for Mr Mitchell.’ Delia spoke to her dog with perfect diction as if expecting a response, but the beautiful wolf like animal just looked at her attentively through his sky blue eyes: eyes that were identical, should anyone have taken the time to notice, to those of his mistress.

As Delia approached the Albert Gate conservation area leading out into the busy Knightsbridge streets she inhaled deeply, and with a satisfied but weary sigh, reached down to free Tang by unbuckling his black diamond studded collar. As she did so the collar evaporated. She rested two fingers on a silver ring on the middle finger of her right hand. The bulky ring had a large black obsidian stone in the centre and was surrounded by diamonds and smaller black stones on a silver band. It was totally out of place with her otherwise co-ordinated and elegant look. The instant that the ring was touched the dog faded away as if he had never existed and Delia left the park alone.

6

Tuesday 11 September 2012

Sapphire Dalton was a young looking 58, smart, sophisticated and perfectly at ease seated alone in the lounge area of the Hotel Nelson, looking out over the River Wensum. Wearing cream trousers and matching blouse with a Burberry woven peplum jacket which complemented her long strawberry blonde hair, she sipped her Cappuccino waiting for her daughter to arrive.

Emma made her entrance at exactly 11am. Heads turned as she made her way across the lounge to join her mother. Emma had this effect on men and women alike whenever she entered a room. She used to hate the attention but had learned to accept it as being essential for the image of her business, and so she just pretended she didn't notice and greeted her mother warmly with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Hello darling, how did the meeting go?”

‘A lot of fuss about nothing really, it’s all sorted now. How are you Mum? Sorry I haven’t been able to spend as much time with you as I’d planned. I’d barely got off the plane when I had a call from the Norwich office with yet another crisis. They seem to know when I’m in the area.’

Emma placed a Harrods carrier bag on the empty chair next to her mother. ‘Love the jacket by the way! I’ve got something here that will go with it perfectly.’

Emma took a gift wrapped package from the carrier and watched with anticipation as her mother opened it. The framed leather cross-body bag was striking but paled into insignificance when compared to the smiles of both women as they took pleasure in the giving and receiving of the gift.

‘It’s lovely Emerald, thank you.’ Sapphire always insisted on calling Emma by her full name. ‘Now tell me, what is so important that you have to come away from the Big City when you are so busy?’

The waiter approached the ladies and Emma ordered another Cappuccino for her mother and one for herself. ‘I just wanted to get your opinion on the franchising of Cocomo. I’ve put together a list of all the pros and cons but you always manage to see something I’ve missed, and it’s a big step.’

‘How do you feel about it sweetheart? Your Dad always used to say if it feels right – go for it!’

‘It feels like it’s the right time Mum.’

‘Then do it, what more is there to say? If it feels right just picture it as being yours, and you will already have created it.’ Sapphire hesitated. ‘He is very proud of you, you know.’

‘Yes, I know he would have been. I’m not scared to make a decision Mum, but I wish he was here.’

‘He is Honey, he is. I speak with him most evenings. He has been watching over you from the other side for years.’

‘It’s a lovely thought Mum, but you know I don’t really believe in all that stuff.’

‘Believe it or not Honey, it doesn’t matter to me, but it’s the truth. He’s there by your side whenever you need him to be, and he couldn’t be happier with how things are going for you. If it’ll make you feel better let’s have a look at that list.’

Emma took her Filofax from her Gucci canvas and leather tote bag, and the two women began to peruse the pages of reasons why and why not Cocomo should be franchised.

Two hours, three Cappuccinos and a Danish pastry later they sat back content that they had made a decision, the same decision Emma would have made if she had taken her Dad’s advice and just gone with her feelings.

The lounge around them had filled with men and women on business lunches, couples having clandestine meetings, and a group of young girls that looked as though they were starting really early for a Hen Night. *Really, on a Tuesday!* Emma thought.

She sat back in her chair and reviewed her decision. She would go forward with the franchise. She would personally train the four other Therapist/Managers she currently employed in her branches in Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham and Norwich to assist her to establish the new structure and share the delivery of training to the yet to be identified franchisees. She would start small with two new units under each trainer for the first year and expand from there.

‘So that’s decided then, the Knightsbridge site will become the model for all the others, and I can keep my flat above. At least I won’t have to set up home again. I still have boxes to unpack from the last move.’

‘Wonderful, well that’s business out of the way. How about we take a walk along the river and you tell me what has been going on in your personal life?’

Emma sighed, she knew her mother was concerned that there was no man in her life, but she was just too busy. As they left the hotel and strolled leisurely along the tree lined banks of the River Wensum, Emma tried to put her mother’s worries to rest.

‘It’s not that I am anti-men Mum, it’s just that none of the men I have met have fitted with my lifestyle. I need a man who has a life of his own so that I can have the space I need to run the business, but I also want a man who will be there for me when I need him to be. A bit like Superman without the Clark Kent bit.’

‘And about as impossible to find I should think! Oh Emerald, I do worry about you. I don’t think you know what it is you are missing. To have the love of a good man....’ Sapphire’s bright blue eyes suddenly looked sad.

‘You still miss him terribly don’t you Mum?’

‘Of course I do. Your father was everything I could have ever wanted, and we were so happy. I just want you to find that happiness too.’

‘One day Mum, I will, I promise.’ But Emma knew as she said it that this was an empty promise. She had already resigned herself to the fact that she was married to Cocomo and she would have to make the most of it. After all, it really was a good life. Wasn’t it?

Tuesday 11th September 2012

Lord Rory Broadfield had just finished picking at his breakfast of cheese, ham and French bread which had been delivered to his room. The coffee had been most welcome, but he really didn’t

have much of an appetite this morning. He glanced across at the clock on the dresser. Under an hour to catch the bus to get to the airport, he really needed to start packing.

Having lived out of his suitcase for most of his stay there was not a lot to gather up. He showered, packed the few simple toiletries he had brought with him, put on his last clean white tee shirt and a pair of faded jeans, making the most of this opportunity to dress casually. He gathered up the alarm clock and wallet, and then looked around the room to see if he had missed anything.

Sticking out from under the bed he noticed his sketch pad. *What was that doing there?* He grabbed it quickly and threw it on top of the clothes in his case, annoyed that he had nearly left it behind and scolding himself for being so disorganised. As he went to zip the case up something made him pause. He threw back the case lid and sat down on the bed picking up the sketch pad as he sat.

Flicking through its pages of sketches of Aleijadinho's Prophets he came to four beautifully drawn images of Yara. Finally, it was coming back to him. He had paid for Yara's services, yes, but as a model. The sketches showed a very mystic look about her, something that Rory had missed in her that morning through his hung-over vision. He remembered that he had planned to sculpt his next piece from the sketches on his return to England. Rory's shoulders let go their tension and he sat back, happy to have filled in that blank in his memory.

He was just starting to relax slightly when another glance at his clock sent him once again into a panic. He hurriedly placed the sketches back in the case and within 15 minutes Lord Rory had left the guest house and was on his way home.

Wednesday 12 September 2012

08:15

The air conditioned 3rd floor cellular office of DEFRA's Science and Climate Department looked empty at first glance. Only a thin twist of steam rising gracefully from behind the high backed leather chair and a pair of shoeless feet lazing cross legged on the window sill gave any indication of occupancy.

The lively banter of The Chris Evans Breakfast Show filled the airwaves of the compact, glass encased workspace, lifting Ash's spirits as it did every weekday morning. The small DAB digital radio was hidden under a pile of papers on an antique Victorian desk that looked incredibly out of place in this otherwise modern office.

The Apple I Phone on the desk buzzed and vibrated, putting an end to the relaxed atmosphere. Richard Ashford casually pushed against the wall with his right foot to spin the chair gently and expertly back under his desk, being careful not to spill his morning cup of Brodie's breakfast tea.

His white shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbow revealed muscular and tanned arms as he reached across the desk to turn off the radio and press the phone's speaker button. Before he could achieve this however, his attention was caught by the appearance of an attractive, slightly plump woman tapping on the other side of the closed glass office door, with the corner of her mobile phone.

The vibrating phone on his desk stopped and he beckoned her in, subconsciously assessing her with his soft brown eyes.

'Er, excuse me Mr. Ashford; I just wanted to bring you the morning's post. I'm Sam... Sam Knight. That was me by the way, on the phone. I was trying to find you.'

A man who appreciated women in every sense, Richard Ashford was not one to make a quick assessment based on a first impression, but he could not help noticing her long wavy blonde hair and pretty bluish grey eyes.

He eased his fingers through his own collar length tousled black hair, raised himself to his full 6 foot 4 inches, straightened his tie which rested between two unfastened buttons, and strode around the old walnut desk, holding out a friendly hand. 'Well, it's good to meet you Sam Knight'.

Sam, feeling suddenly in awe of her new boss, fumbled with an armful of white and manilla envelopes trying to offer her hand in return, but only succeeded in dropping several of the files and her phone onto the floor.

Being used to having this kind of effect on women, Richard Ashford placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and joined her in squatting by the door to retrieve the paperwork.

‘It’s Ash Lass, please. Let me give you a hand’ he spoke in a gentle and reassuring manner, ‘What’s happened to the guy who usually delivers me mail? Not that I’m complaining.’

‘Oh, he was in earlier, but he left your mail with me. I’ve been recruited as your new assistant, didn’t they tell you?’

‘Na, but that’s nothin’ unusual.’ Ash was used to being the last to know about changes in the administration side of his work and had learned to just go with the flow. As long as they left him alone when it came to the operational side he was happy. Ash offered his hand again to help Sam stand, and the files were eventually placed in a clear patch on the walnut desk.

‘Maybe there’s something here that will bring you up to date.’ said Sam as she nodded towards the post and looked disapprovingly at the chaos that was Ash’s desk. In an attempt to re-establish an air of professionalism she added ‘There seems to be a couple of new case files. I have ... had...put them on the top of the pile. There’s the latest hurricane research, confirmation of a meeting for Friday afternoon with a Mr Foulter, and a message from a Craig Drummond to say the panels have arrived and he will be over at the weekend.’

Ash seemed pleased. ‘That’s brammer news lass! We’ve been waiting on those panels for months.’

Although Ash was only one quarter Scottish, with an equal share of Polish and a fifty per cent English ancestry, he regularly dropped in the odd Scottish exclamation or expletive and was quietly proud of his mixed heritage.

‘I’ll not be needing anything for a while now Lass, so why don’t you take an hour to settle yourself into your new work station. We can catch up a bit later. Great boots by the way!’

Sam smiled, bashfully. ‘Thanks, I will. In the meantime Mr... Ash, can I get you anything? Tea, coffee, a pair of shoes?’

Nice recovery, thought Ash, she and I are going to get on just fine.

‘Never underestimate a man in plaid socks Lass. I do some of my best work barefoot’ he replied.

As Sam turned toward her adjacent cellular office Ash briefly let his attention settle on a framed photograph standing on his desk of a woman and child at the beach. His mind drifted back four years to the month after the photograph had been taken. Ash’s sister Susan had been killed in a hit and run incident whilst on holiday in Majorca. His niece Kara and brother in law Craig had been in the car at the time, but were unharmed. The driver of the other car had never been apprehended and as far as Ash was concerned the investigation had been a farce.

The accident had led Ash to choose to dedicate the foreseeable future to supporting his brother in law in bringing up his young niece. Ash had previously been posted overseas with the RAF and had been highly recommended to MI5 for work as an undercover operative. His choice however,

to take a position as an investigative journalist with DEFRA allowed him to be based in London and close to his family. It was a decision he did not regret.

Choosing to ignore the pile of post, and instead turning to his computer he opened up his e-mails. Of the twenty or thirty incoming messages Ash went straight to the encrypted files that had been sent through from Personnel. As expected the files detailed the transfer of Miss Sam Knight from Organisation and Methods Department to work with him on placement for the next six months.

Sam would work as Ash's personal assistant but would also observe and report on the investigations being carried out, particularly those that involved his undercover work.

Ash could feel the tension building in his jaw. He was annoyed. He had just begun to get his teeth into this new role. His undercover work for DEFRA had proven very useful over the past six months, and the assets he had developed were starting to pay off.

It was true that being assigned to investigate unexplained occurrences, sounded more like something out of The X Files than a regular job, and he had not exactly come up with anything earth shattering in the time he had been in post, but the thought that the government might pull the plug on his operation was infuriating

9

Wednesday 12 September 2012

08.15

Delia Penn felt her pulse race and her usual cool temperature rise as she passed through the arrivals gate of Terminal 1. She began to wish she had abandoned her usual three quarter length black coat in favour of something lighter.

It seemed as though Heathrow security was on high alert. There were far more airport security personnel present than she had ever seen before. Haughtily she strode her way along the corridor, determined to reach the exit without being stopped.

‘Madam, please step this way’ came the firm voice of a female security officer. Delia could see that commuters were being stopped and their bags searched. There must have been some kind of scare, but why were they searching bags on the way out of the airport? *Most inconvenient.*

It was imperative to her plan that the parcel in her bag remained untouched by human hand until the appropriate moment later that evening. She could not risk contamination, there was too much at stake. How should she play this situation? Should she act surprised, pretend she had not heard, or just comply quietly?

Her nature pushed her towards an aggressive response, but she managed to keep it in check, instead she stood perfectly still, and without turning to face the voice, focussed her mind on the security officer. Closing her eyes and placing the fingers of her left hand over her obsidian ring, she stood perfectly still.

There was a moment of complete silence. Delia relaxed her shoulders. Then the voice came again. ‘Madam, yes you Madam in the green track suit, please step this way.’

Letting out a subtle sigh, Delia opened her eyes and walked on with a satisfied smile on her face. *Nearly there, just a few more yards.*

More relaxed now, she took the time to look around her. To her right she could see two other officers examining in detail the contents of a sketchbook that had been taken from a tourist in his mid fifties. Delia could hear them accusing the man of transporting pornography. He was sweating profusely under his Fedora and protesting his innocence, claiming to be an artist. Again, she smiled. Today was going to be a good day.

Turning back to face the exit, she felt that she had been hit in the face by an unseen wall. Searing pain ran through her head. Her legs gave way and she collapsed on the cold, hard floor. The contents of her bag were scattered over the walkway. Her lipstick rolled under the feet of a commuter who was oblivious to the commotion beside him. Her mobile phone slid just out of reach and she heard herself scream ‘No!’ as she reached desperately for her now horizontal bag.

Several people on their way out of the airport walked past the scene as fast as they could, too wrapped up in their own lives to either notice or care about her predicament. A red headed woman in an Armani skirt suit was the first to offer assistance, calling to alert a member of airport staff and making her way toward the incident.

Delia watched helplessly, the pain in her head still immobilizing her, as the red headed woman, having checked that Delia was fully conscious began to collect up the scattered contents. Her rescuer gracefully squatted beside the bag and paused over the silk scarf which was protruding from the opening. The scarf was soaked in a deep blue coloured liquid, and a puddle had started to form under it.

‘Looks like something’s broken I’m afraid’ she said as she gathered up the scarf. ‘What is this? Calligraphy ink?’ Emma Dalton held up a now sodden package leaking blue liquid.

Delia feigned a smile as the woman collected up the rest of her belongings. Still stunned, she could not help but notice the grace of her Good Samaritan, and how she was taking great pains not to spill any of the liquid onto her own clothes.

‘Thank you Miss, Yes – something like that.’ she said as she started to get to her feet.

‘Please don’t try to get up. That was a nasty fall you had. A Paramedic has been called. They will need to check that you are OK’

‘I really am absolutely fine. I just tripped.’ insisted Delia, knowing full well that it had not been any act of clumsiness that had caused the fall. ‘Thank you again but there is no need to fuss.’ Delia had her fingers over her ring once more, and watched as the woman fully accepted her explanation, handed back the bag, and just walked away as if nothing had happened.

Less than a minute later, before the airport’s Paramedic had arrived on the scene, a shaken and distraught Delia stepped into a Taxi and gave directions to her office.

10

Wednesday 12 September 2012

09.05

Ash was still feeling concerned about the risk to his job when a flashing red light on the computer screen brought him out of his self indulgence. Entering his security code to unlock the message and reaching for his shoes at the same time, he watched as information appeared on the screen.

Location: Heathrow Airport. Terminal One

Time Elapsed: 35 minutes

Event: Unknown

Current situation: Widespread and instantaneous collapse amongst staff and commuters. Estimated casualties 50+. Perimeter established. Health and Safety Commission advised and en route.

Officer assigned: Ashford, Richard

INVESTIGATE SOURCE AND REPORT

Closing his computer down with one touch of the keyboard Ash made for the door.

‘Catchin’ up will have to wait Sam, I’m headed for Heathrow Airport. I’ll keep you posted.’
Maybe, he thought as he made his way out to the street to flag down a taxi.

11