



Debits

Peter Thwaitese

Debits

A Rick Shore Mystery

By

Peter Thwaites

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Preface

'Debits' is the first in a series of mystery stories based on the diaries of Rick Shore. Rick is alive and well and lives in his much-loved bungalow in Worthing, West Sussex, on the South Coast of England. As well as enjoying the quiet solitude of his garden, Rick still enjoys the adventure of fishing from the local pier, but has yet to land anything heavier than a one hundred gram Bullhead which somehow became entwined on his line when reeling in one wet Sunday morning. Rick began his working life as a Police Cadet, easing his way gently up through the ranks to Detective Inspector, when he was selected for a transfer to the Flying Squad. Here he remained for several years before taking early retirement and settling down for

a quiet life and some good fishing. He now spends his retirement as a Private Detective working on mysteries that confound the local police force, more as a hobby than a job.

Rick was married for almost thirteen years, when regrettably he was divorced, leaving him to bring up three sons single-handed. The youngest of whom has only recently left home.

Rick is a deep thinking, quiet man with simple tastes and an easy manner, and loves to spend a quiet evening philosophising over some of life's adventures.

This story is dedicated to my three great sons, Jez, Jon, and Tom who will, no doubt, recognise their dad within the book.

Chapter 1

'One man's credit is another man's debit'

Life is beautiful and exciting. It should be explored to the greatest depth possible within every waking moment. It should be shared with the people you love, the people you work or play with, and the strangers today that will be your friends tomorrow.

Every new day heralded by the waking dawn is a precursor to new adventures, experiences and meetings, and is only ended by the setting of our sun.

Our home, Earth, is spinning in a vast universe of stars and moons and we share our existence with a million other homes spread as far as the most powerful telescope can see and far beyond. It is our duty and God given responsibility to sanction the development and

growth of our home, not in practical capitalistic terms, but as a meeting of thoughts, ideologies, and cultures. Blindly we use the freedom bestowed upon us by our 'maker' to disturb the intricate balance that exists within our home, and seemingly take delight in death, destruction and disease as we watch from the sidelines as our appointed leaders march ever forward into instability and uncertainty.

We are all human. At least this is something that we all share. We are all conceived as one. We are all entitled to a fair and equal share of this life, and all have a place reserved for us in this our home. From the moment of conception, however, the equality ends and the human race takes over. Your destiny is determined by your place of

birth, your parents, your religion, or race, and in spite of your God given right to a fair and equitable share, this is denied you.

We all have aspirations of a good life, whether on the basis of the number of possessions we own, the opportunities we experience, or the happiness that we bring to others. We set our goals, plan out our route and the journey begins. We encounter obstacles, heartache, and despair, but the goals are clearly defined and we continue onward. We share our experiences with friends and draw strength from those around us. Many of our goals are common, and together we achieve.

Ever since the dawn of civilisation, however, there has been a faction of the population who will strive to achieve the very

most by doing the absolute least. Generally these men, (and let's not forget the women, for whom the record is little better) inevitably have to resort to criminal acts in some form or another. Technological advances are being created at a formidable rate and with them the increased ingenuity of the crime and crime fighter. Complex and dedicated computer applications can analyse thousands of separate pieces of evidence in the same time that Sherlock Holmes and his faithful companion Dr. Watson would have taken to peruse the local newspaper.

Unfortunately alongside the inspired plot, there is always the injured party and in many cases the scene quickly turns to murder and destruction. Violence follows greed just as positively as night follows day. The offences

may have changed. The once only too regular sheep and cattle rustling; the dastardly stage coach hold-up; or the local highwayman with his pistol and black facemask. We now experience the more sophisticated computer based crimes, but the process is always the same. The villain, the plot, the caper, and then the victim. Maybe in conclusion, the capture.

It is often said that Switzerland lies at the heart of Europe. Geographically speaking, that's not quite true. However, the main route linking northern and southern Europe does run through the Alps. And three important European cultures meet in Switzerland: German; French; Italian.

It was once said in 1823 "No country in Europe is more interesting than Switzerland.

To the admirer of nature it offers scenes of grandeur almost unrivalled; to the observer of national manners, a people of great simplicity and firmness of character; while to the statesman it displays in a striking light the salutary effects of religion, freedom, and security of property; nor can the poet or painter find scenes more calculated to exalt the imagination.”

Unfortunately Switzerland has also been recognised as the money laundering centre of the world, with many secret bank accounts and locked vaults lying deep below the ground.

The country, however, has changed and is now much more open with its banking activities, much to the satisfaction of the European Union, that to which it is committed to join.

It is here, in this praise-worthy country

that the story really begins. Even surrounded by such wondrous beauty and friendship, an embittered, desolate and materialistic man was planning a fraud so clever it was breathtaking. He worked for one of the leading banks in Switzerland as the assistant to the much younger, and well respected manager. Although having worked for the bank for well over thirty years, he had seen this young university taught man promoted over him. This respected and coveted position within the banking fraternity was to have been the final stage before retirement. He had felt his life shatter and he was angry, very angry. He had dedicated his whole working life to the banking institution only to be past over by a much younger, university trained brat who was not even worthy to make his coffee. The bank

would be sorry.

Switzerland is a wealthy country. Many of the Swiss citizens have considerable incomes and are extremely astute. This bank was no different to any other and maintained a very high quota of wealthy customers looking for long term investments. As assistant manager, he had control of the investment and equity side of the bank's activities and it was his role to advise these particular customers on investments to ensure a comfortable retirement with a secure pension. Funds were also being set aside for family inheritances and future business developments. It was not difficult, therefore, to manipulate these very same funds in such a way that he could cream off enough to produce a good side income for himself and his own retirement. After all, he deserved it.

The scheme entailed that a number of bogus companies should be set up, many of which had their headquarters outside of Switzerland. One such company, 'Hansell Exports' was based in Bracknell, South London and was ostensibly a warehouse distribution organisation moving goods around the world. In reality it was one of a number of empty warehouses situated on one of the many industrial estates developed over the last few years on brown field land adjacent to the River Thames. Through his position at the bank, he managed to convince his wealthier clients to invest huge sums of money in this company with promises of high returns over the longer term. In reality he was simply transferring the funds into a private Swiss account held by his very own bank.

His activities went unnoticed for a while until one morning, purely by accident; a sharp computer hacker discovered what he was doing. The hacker, employed by a clandestine property company as one of a small team of men working on the plans for a major computer scam, was scanning the Internet for bank and investment transactions. During one of the scans he noticed that a regular sum of money was being transferred firstly to a UK company account here in London, and then almost immediately being transferred back to the same originating bank in Switzerland, this time under a different account name.

With a sense of pure logic (not usually found among computer experts), he determined the name and bank details associated with these transactions and passed them on to his

client. The planned scam would require a safe and untraceable bank account established outside of the United Kingdom. This would prolong the discovering of the stolen funds. Now that an account already established in a leading Swiss bank had been located, and if the owner could be persuaded to co-operate this would indeed solve a great deal of the preliminary issues that had been delaying the start of the scam.

The 'Cock and Ferret' is a public house dating back to the late eighteen hundreds, and still retains some of its old charm. With its urine stained brickwork, (and smell to match), broken and rotted window and door frames that appear to exhibit a disliking for glass in any form, and a bent and twisted sign, probably reflecting the minds of all who dare to enter

within. The building would not have seemed out of place in a remake of *Oliver Twist*, or *Jack the 'Ripper'*.

This haven of delight was an ideal location for any clandestine meeting with the interior endeavouring to keep pace with the passing of time, and obviously failing dismally. The dingy tobacco stained walls, tatty well-worn carpets, an excuse for a jukebox dating back to the late sixties, and a barman with the face of a bulldog chewing a wasp welcomed the intrepid visitor. Situated deep in the East End of London, with a lighting scheme designed by a one eyed miner, it was the meeting place for many crime syndicates recruiting temporary help, or the services of specialist technical staff. Forgers, locksmiths, and drivers, were just a few of the latest vacancies available

for a quick 'no questions' cash payment.

Tonight, in one corner of the cynically named 'Saloon Bar' four men were discussing the report given them by their computer expert. To get a contact in one of the leading banks in Switzerland was indeed a real and unexpected bonus, and someone that they could control into the bargain. This was a real boost to their plan and meant that now things could move forward. In fact it was such a boost to their morale that an extra round of drinks was called for. The next move would be for a member of the team to fly to Switzerland, make the acquaintance of their new team member and finalise the necessary arrangements for transfers, etc.

This was a major role, so the team leader's right hand man, known only as Sharp (he had a

well deserved reputation for being blunt and getting straight to the point), was selected as the most suitable member to make the journey. It was further agreed that this should be planned for the following Wednesday morning.

It was now getting very close to the 'off' and there was a real and distinct danger that if any of the team were seen to be travelling abroad at this time, their intentions may be discovered. Booking a last minute undetectable flight to Switzerland using the talents of their computer expert was of no difficulty, and scanning through both the booked flights to Geneva for Wednesday, and the Passport Office records for a close match for 'Sharp', they came up with the name Stephen Gorss.

Stephen Gorss lived in the picturesque village of Chiddingfold situated in the heart of rural Surrey. He owned a delightful detached thatched cottage where he lived with his wife of fourteen years, two young sons aged ten and six, and a rather daft dog, 'Biscuit'. Stephen was, by birth, a German, born in Munich during the late Nineteen fifties. He later qualified as a Chemist, and now working for a large pharmaceutical company here in the UK, travelled extensively throughout the world. His wife, Ingrid, also a fellow German by birth, held a very rewarding position as Head Mistress of the small village school and was well respected by the community.

This Wednesday, Stephen was due to attend a high level conference in Geneva. He had showered and prepared himself for the journey. Stephen always enjoyed sharing breakfast with his wife and children, as this was not very often possible. He enjoyed the benefits of his high position within the company, and the many opportunities that he had for visiting many different countries. He would never disguise the fact; however, that he relished the time at home and would not refuse any offers of early retirement, should he be so lucky.

Saying his goodbyes, he was set to leave his home for the airport when the telephone rang. Ingrid took the call "Stephen, Ihr Büro ist am Apparat" For some inexplicable reason she had reverted back to her mother tongue.

“Sorry Stephen” she apologised, knowing that Stephen preferred them to speak English whilst in the house “The telephone, it’s your office”

Taking the call, Stephen was well aware of the time, and explained that he would call them again once he had arrived in Geneva.

His short drive to Gatwick was to take him along a very pleasant route through some dreamy woodlands and wide expanses of still, cool lakes. Everywhere, he could see myriad’s of wild duck and even the occasional goose splashing around in the deep still turquoise blue water. It was to be a good day, the sun was sending down beams of warm radiant light on to all and sundry, and the whole scene appeared calm and at peace. Cocky, over trusting grey rabbits were skipping along the wide grass verges lining the shadow marked

lane with their white fluffy tails held high in defiance of any potential aggressor. Crickets could be heard cheerfully clapping the start of another fine day. Slowing to round a particularly tight left-hand bend, Stephen was confronted by a car parked to the side of the lane apparently showing signs of being in trouble. The bonnet of the car was fastened open, and the driver, a tall, fair headed man in a light blue suit, was unsuccessfully trying to catch the attention of any of the passing motorists.

Feeling particularly convivial, Stephen pulled over just in front of the parked car, and began walking back towards the now agitated driver.

“Can I help in any way” enquired Stephen of the driver as he reached the car.

"I haven't a clue as to what is wrong, the bloody thing just died on me as I got to this corner" he had obviously had enough.

"Let me have a look" Stephen said as he moved to look under the car's bonnet "I don't what I'm looking for, but two heads are better than one, ges?"

The hot greasy bonnet came down on the back of his neck like a kick from an irritated mule, and as his face smashed into the red hot cylinder head, Stephen felt the searing pain burn into his nose and mouth. His head began to pound as the pressure on his neck was intensified and as the pain became too intense to bear, his brain issued the instruction to shut down and his soul was released.

Stephen's spirit drifted heaven ward, leaving his torn and mutilated body draped across the

warm and sun lit road. He could once again hear the soft sweet singing of the birds, smell the countryside as it was wakening to the rise of the sun, and feel the warmth of the early morning rays. Stephen was at peace with all.

Quickly bundling the lifeless body into the boot of Stephens's own car, he drove it to the top of a long moss covered grassy bank that bordered one of the deeper sections of the lake. There was serenity in the lake that denied the terrible inhuman act that it had just witnessed and was about to shelter. Releasing the handbrake, he watched it slowly roll down the slope until it hit the clean water and then gradually disappeared into the depths. There was a climatic rush of air, streams of bubbles came to the disturbed

surface breaking into ever increasing rings that rippled their way across the still surface of the whole lake, as if to spread the sense of despair at this so unnecessary taking of life, and then silence. Even the wild fowl and local bird life seemed to respect the last act and fell silent as Stephen Gorss left this world, The first stage of the plan had been completed.

Gatwick Airport was as busy as usual and boarding the flight for Geneva was straight forward enough. 'Sharp' was soon on his way to Geneva Airport, booked in as Stephen Gorss. He satisfactorily passed through Customs and Immigration at Geneva and was soon on his way to meet the new team member who would be the vital link in the plan.

Taking a hired car from the outside of the

airport Gorss headed to the address that they had extracted, and it dropped him off just outside a small restaurant on the main street. The place was humming with customers, and it took him a while to acquire an empty table, downing a single malt whiskey and ice as he waited propped up against the doorway. Eventually a seat by the window became free and Gorss was directed to it by an attractive young woman in her early thirties wearing a smart two piece grey suit with tresses of long blond hair tousled around her shoulders. Sharp guessed that she was the restaurant proprietor.

The restaurant was traditionally decorated with low oak beams spanning the rough plastered ceiling, high panelled walls with framed prints of the many beauty spots within

the area, and groups of small rounded tables and high backed chairs. The waitress, a small insignificant type of girl, dressed in the traditional Swiss national costume, came over to Gorss to take his order. He ordered the pasta dish of the day, a half bottle of the house red wine, and sat back and waited.

Of all of the faults that Hans seemed to have, and he had a few, he was at least methodical. Every day, at precisely one o'clock, he would leave the bank and take his lunch in this very same restaurant. Once he had eaten the meal and downed a glass or two of white wine, he would then take an easy stroll along the bank of the River Aare before returning to the bank sharply at two.

The traffic along the main street was unusually quiet today and Hans had a spring in

his step as he strolled past the attractively displayed goods on sale in the many shop fronts that he passed. His latest client, a Gustav Belitin had, on the advice of his investment manager, invested two hundred thousand Swiss francs in a fine, sound, UK company 'Hansell Exports' reputedly bound for great things over the next ten years or so.

Crossing the street, Hans entered the small restaurant, was acknowledged by the waitress and took a small table permanently reserved for him against the rear wall. His usual order was confirmed and with a contented sigh he sipped at the glass of white wine passed to him by the wine waiter.

Sharp was not surprised by his appearance. Matching his written description almost to the tee, here was a small middle aged man, with a

slightly receding forehead, a small wispy moustache that seemed like an error rather than a statement, slightly over weight, and wearing a tight fitting pin stripe grey suit, white shirt and tie. Probably from the local golf club, although Sharp would have been amazed if this rather sad looking guy could ever play a round of golf.

Almost exactly thirty minutes later and Hans made his farewells, settled his account and made for the street. Likewise did Sharp maintaining a discreet fifty metres behind.

The route that Hans followed took them to a set of steps at the beginning of the river bridge and led them down to a small stone flagged courtyard surrounded by fruit and ornamental trees standing in hand made wooden tubs. At the far end of the courtyard, a

narrow, well kept footpath would take them along the banks of the river running behind rows of ancient river side cottages, many in the process of refurbishment and repair.

As Hans entered the footpath, Sharp caught up with him and tapped him politely on the shoulder. Hans, taken completely by surprise spun round and their eyes met.

Sharp was the first to speak "Hans, I've been waiting for you. We need to have a chat. You are going to help us with a small problem" "I don't understand" taken aback by this sudden approach, "I don't think I actually know you. You are English and I am Swiss. I am sure that we have never met"

“That is true, my friend, but we have a shared interest” Sharp was conscious that Hans may try to make a break for it, and so had grasped his arm.

“You are going to set up an untraceable account at your bank so that we can deposit some funds quickly and quietly”

Hans' face turned a whiter shade of pale, and he could feel his hands becoming sticky with sweat. “And if I don't?” he was afraid to ask.

Walking slowly down the path they reached a dwarf stone wall that at one time must have been part of a landing stage for small craft. Sharp sat down and indicated that Hans should sit beside him.

“Let's just say that we are aware of what you are doing and have no intention of

spoiling your party as long as you are prepared to help us” Sharp liked to get straight to the point.

“Exactly what do you mean?” Hans was beginning to feel uneasy.

“We know that you are defrauding a number of your bank’s clients by transferring some of their investments to your own account. Rather clumsily I might add.”

Hans shrugged his shoulders and looked away, towards the swiftly flowing river rushing behind them.

“In spite of your obvious naivety, we need your help in allowing us access to a bank account unlikely to attract attention here in Switzerland. In return we will not disclose to the authorities what we know of your activities” continued Sharp

“And if I don't co-operate?” Hans was not convinced that he should have asked that question but his ego was now ruling his brain.

“We would have little option but to notify the authorities of your activities. This, though, would unfortunately jeopardise our own plans”

“So you wouldn't be willing to do that?”

Hans felt slightly reassured.

“No you're quite correct, we wouldn't. You would just disappear”

Hans felt suddenly sick. There were so many dishonest people around. Wasn't anything sacred anymore? For God's sake he only wanted to rip off a few wealthy clients who had too much money anyway. Now to discuss a killing. And his own.

Hans had absolutely no intention of closing

down his scam and if all they wanted was an account that they could transfer funds to, then that was fine by him. After all, this could well be a further nail in the coffin for the bank, and certainly for the new manager.

A safe house in Switzerland where they could stay was another thing altogether and Hans decide that at this stage it would be best not to mention his new home. After all, this guy didn't seem to know anything of it.

The arrangements made, both men parted and made their separate ways back to the main street. Hans went on back to his bank, and Sharp headed back to the airport for his return flight home.

Since the increase in drug smuggling and the continuous threat of terrorist attacks, the Swiss guards on duty at the airport departure

lounges are particularly wary of all travellers, and make regular checks on passport and immigration documentation. Sharp entered the passport control area and passed his documents to the immigration officer on duty that day. Looking through the passport, Sharp was asked

“Guten Tag, mein Herr. Wie war Ihr Aufenthalt in de Schweiz?”

Sharp, feeling the pressure beginning to rise throughout his entire being pretended not to hear, and reached for his passport which was efficiently passed over to him. The officer shrugged and moved on to the next passenger. As Sharp turned to leave the immigration area, he inhaled sharply and slowly let the air escape between his clenched teeth, until he heard the officer call after him.

“Mein Herr! Ihr Handgepäck!” indicating a small travel bag that someone had left in front of the immigration desk.

Sharp gathered that this officer had beckoned him to collect his bag, but as it wasn't his, he wasn't sure what to do. If he ignored the officer completely, he may become suspicious. After all his passport stated that he was a German and should be able to understand what this officer had been saying. On the other hand it wasn't his bag to collect.

“Kommen Sie bitte hierher, mein Herr” The officer was beginning to lose his patience.

Why did this man continue to ignore him?

Asking the present passenger to wait a moment, the officer left the desk and collecting the bag, walked towards Sharp, who

by now was beginning to feel that he was about to be discovered and had already begun to plan his escape route. As the officer approached Sharp he was suddenly interrupted by a tall slim lady obviously considerably distressed about something.

Clutching at the travel bag, she proclaimed.

“Gott sei Dank! Sie haben meine Tasche gefunden! Ich habe sie überall gesucht” and took it from the bemused officer.

Sharp shrugged his shoulders as in approval, nodded at the officer and walked quickly along the boarding corridor.

In the United Kingdom it is extremely easy to obtain long or short-term rentals of almost any kind of building. It is very rare for references to be called for and even so, there is an abundance of organisations offering safe

addresses at competitive rates. The rental would often include for full secretarial duties, postal collections and various other services, some of which are never openly advertised.

Whilst the work in Switzerland was underway, back in the UK, in a small rented office housed in a new purpose built office block in the centre of Crawley, close to Gatwick Airport; other members of the same team were discussing their next move. Time was getting short; patience was beginning to wear thin and a decision had to be made soon. Several members of the team were already raising suspicions within their own work places that something was afoot and if they were ever questioned the plan would have to be scrapped. The basic idea, they had all agreed, was

sound. It had already been tested several times and it worked surprisingly well. In fact it never ceased to amaze some of the more astute members of the team that this particular scam had never been tried before. The matter that caused the greatest concern was in the establishment of a fall back plan. What if something went wrong? How could they be certain of an escape route? Nobody wanted to spend a lengthy time in jail, even if the the rewards were high. What was the point of becoming extremely rich if you are then confined to a twelve-foot square prison cell for ten years?

Gradually the answer was born. Take a hostage. Somebody high profile. Ideally somebody linked to the police force, or the government. That would almost certainly

guarantee their escape. The publicity would be immense if something were done detrimental to the safety of the hostage. A victim was about to be caught up in this web of deceit and developing violence.

It was Tuesday 8 June. A beautiful late spring day. The early morning pale blue sky dusted with light fair weather clouds gave all the indications of a fine, warm, and dry day ahead. There was a gentle South-westerly breeze blowing across the capital city, with small spirals of dust and fallen litter caught in tiny whirlwinds behind shop hoardings and some of the more expansive foyers.

The early morning commuter traffic was beginning to build, and thousands of city workers were making their busy way to the underground and main bus stations ready for

the journey to their place of work. The dark blue BMW saloon car pulled out of the basement car park and wove a path into the stream of traffic. The driver, a large bald headed man wearing an open necked sports shirt and light blue slacks, was already raising a sweat, with beads of perspiration racing each other across his forehead. His two rear seat passengers appeared to be less concerned at their plan of action, and gazed nonchalantly at the crowds already building on the pavements. They all seemed to be heading in the same direction. Like armies of forced labour marching to their camps. It seemed almost unreal. One of the passengers had a bulge under his jacket breast pocket, and it wasn't a tube of Smarties. To turn right at the next set of traffic lights, the car had to move across into the

outer lane, but was blocked from doing so by a small grey Ford van that had stalled, and failed to be re-started. The car came to an abrupt halt, and cursing loudly, the driver moved to open his door and get out. If necessary he would push the 'bloody' van out of the way.

"Sit back and keep your cool" From the back of the car. "The last thing we want is to attract attention. It will sort itself. For God's sake get a grip"

The driver shrugged, wiped his brow with the back of a shiny shirtsleeve completely erasing the ongoing Olympics, relaxed a little, and re-took his seat.

Sure enough though, a few moments later the van had been re-started and moved forward. It

was now clear for them to move into the right

hand lane. The filter light went to green and the traffic flow turned right and headed towards the City centre. Ahead of them, and to the left, stood the local College of Further Education, priding itself on the high standards of education it promoted across all curriculum areas and declaring that it was a 'Centre of Excellence'.

Pulling slowly into the kerb side just in front of a well worn minibus depositing students from a nearby residential block, the car came to a stop, and the occupants studiously watched the main entrance as hundreds of students were beginning a new day. About five minutes later and almost one

hundred metres ahead of them a highly polished royal blue Audi convertible pulled into a small row of 'dropping off' bays and came to a rest. The driver, a tall distinguished looking man wearing a custom uniform, arose from the car and walking around to the rear near-side, opened the passenger door to allow a young, very attractive girl to leave the car, and walk slowly towards the college entrance. The driver checked his departing charge once again, and cautiously moved out into the passing traffic.

She was your typical student. Her priorities were split between her studies, her social life, and attracting the local male population. By the way she was dressed, she had already determined her order of priorities, with the attraction of the male

population well out in front. She was dressed in a short sea blue cotton top that exposed the top of her well-rounded sun tanned breasts

held secure and to their best advantage by a designer bra. Her midriff was exposed from just below the breast line to the top of a pair of hipster Levi's that she could only have been poured into. Her trim sun tanned abdomen and well formed hips were the result of a serious keep fit training program that any potential boy friend would have difficulty in keeping up. However the prize for doing so was most certainly worth the effort.

Swiftly glancing around him, one of the men from the waiting car walked quickly and deliberately up to the girl and putting his hand on her naked shoulder whispered something in her ear. They both paused for a moment

before returning together to the waiting car. Checking his mirror, the driver indicated, and they too joined the traffic flow.

The majority of the heavier traffic tended to take the dual carriageway that bypassed some of the more congested areas as they worked their way Eastwards towards the Docklands area. The car, however, kept to the tighter streets that worked their way through London Bridge, Tower Bridge, and Wapping, until it came to a stop outside a large apartment block near Surrey Docks Farm.

A rather depressing looking building dating from the early nineteen fifties, the block displayed indications of gross neglect and probably hadn't been correctly maintained since it was built. The outer façade comprising pre-cast concrete pre-finished

panels was just about intact, but many of the old 'Crittal' style metal windows had long lost their struggle with the environment and were rusted through with many sashes missing altogether. Much of the glass that remained was cracked or missing, and some residents had resorted to sheets of plywood or even hardboard to keep out the rain and wind.

As soon as they pulled up outside of the block, Susannah realised that something was dreadfully wrong and had begun complaining, only to be faced with streams of abuse and a painfully short introduction to the affects of chloroform.

Over sixty miles to the South is a very pleasant country town called Arundel. Arundel is a popular historic town in West Sussex, on the South coast. Established over many

centuries along the shores of the River Arun, it is overlooked by the second largest castle in the country and is an extremely popular tourist attraction throughout most of the year.

At the locally renowned Chalk Ponds at Arundel, Rick had been trying his hand at fishing for trout. In spite of his general lack of fly fishing expertise, he managed to catch five good sized hapless trout obviously fed up with life and ready to throw themselves on any hook that happened to pass by. As luck would have it, on this particular occasion it was Rick's. After a good day's fishing, nothing beats a steak and chips meal, a quiet spot far away from the bubbling crowd and a glass or two of 'Cotès De Rhone' red wine. So booking himself for the night into a local

hotel seemed the ideal thing to do. Storing the trout overnight was a bit of a challenge, but Rick loves a challenge and after all what is a 'mini-bar' really for? He would be long gone before the source of the smell was noticed and traced to his room.

Following a good full English breakfast which included fried bread, eggs, bacon, mushrooms, black pudding, and tomatoes, he was ready to head home. Extracting the trout from the 'mini-bar', and beginning to regret that he hadn't gutted the fish when fresh, Rick settled his account and headed for the car park to the rear of the hotel.

The traffic was horrendous with a continual stream heading towards Chichester to the West. The only thing for it was to ease gently forward until someone gave way and allowed him

to cross the flow of traffic to join the queue heading east.

Easing out across the flow of traffic to join the opposite stream was a great deal more difficult than he had imagined with every one so pre-occupied with maintaining momentum that they all refused to give way. To add five seconds to their overall journey time was without question not even worth considering.

The only action that he could take was to make the decision to go and hope that the oncoming vehicle would stop. Part one of the plan worked successfully, only the difficulty now was to join the flow on the other side of the road. The longer he waited for a break in the traffic, the more irate the driver forced to a halt, became. Eventually the driver could stand it no longer, stepped out of his car and

with a most unpleasant look on his face headed for Rick. Fortunately, at that same moment, an oncoming vehicle obviously aware of the impending confrontation flashed his headlights, and slowed, giving Rick the opportunity he needed to join the stream.

Rick quickly sped away from the scene as fast as the traffic flow permitted, leaving the irate and now embarrassed driver standing in the middle of the road waving his fist and several separate fingers at him. Rick was completely stunned by the attitude of this particular driver, and whilst trying to clear his mind noticed through his rear view mirror that the same car had somehow joined his flow and was slowly gaining ground behind him.

Tucking his car in behind a large articulated lorry carrying a load of bananas

from South Africa, Rick could keep an eye on the following vehicle and wondered why it had in fact changed route. Two miles ahead and Rick would have to take a left turn into a narrow country lane and as he approached the junction he noticed that the same car had also begun indicating left, implying that he too would be taking the same turning.

Rick's pulse began to race and he could feel sweat building up on the palms of his hands as he gripped the steering wheel even harder. He de-accelerated, changed down through the gears and swung left into the lane. The lane was lined with tall beech trees on both sides with small breaks where farm entrances opened on to the tarmac. There were no pavements and where vehicles had pulled off the road to allow larger vehicles to pass, or to make a

temporary stop the grassy banks had been turned to areas of soft mud. Leaves and broken branches were scattered along the verges and as the sun struggled to penetrate the tree cover, shafts of bright sunlight formed dancing dust filled columns emanating from the banks.

The following car had also now entered the lane but was keeping a fixed distance behind Rick's. Thoughts of road rage and roadside violence began to fill Rick's brain and although not a timid man at heart, and most certainly not a coward, he was always loathe taking physical action against another person. He much preferred the diplomatic approach.

Rick accelerated away, leaving clouds of dirt and leaves springing into the air as if blown by a gigantic fan, only to see that the

trailing vehicle did likewise. Ahead Rick could see that a narrow bridle way left the lane and headed up a gentle incline towards a set of riding stables and he decided to take this turn. Slowing to a crawl Rick turned off the road and came to a stop some thirty metres from the lane. Switching off his engine he sat and waited.

The car behind had pulled into a small passing bay tucked neatly behind a row of distinguished Beech trees and had stopped. Rick could see slight wisps of white smoke coming from the exhaust pipe so deduced that the engine was still running.

Five minutes passed and neither vehicles moved. Several other cars entered and left the lane and a small group of horse riders cantered by his parked car. Then, without warning, the following car began to move slowly forward and back on to the lane. There was a moment when both drivers were looking at each other and Rick suddenly realised that this was not the same man who had confronted him earlier. As the car approached Rick, it gained speed and passed by the end of the bridle way and disappeared into the distance. The sound of the car fading away, until absolute silence.

It was then that Rick realised what a complete fool he had been. His imagination had taken complete control of his behaviour and had led him astray. Resuming his journey

home he contemplated that perhaps it was time that he retired. Before he went completely mad. Years of sorting other peoples problems, watching perfectly normal men and women destroy each other's lives and witnessing violence on a scale not to be easily forgotten, had affected Rick and although he never discussed it with friends or family he had had enough.

Unfortunately for Rick he was a worker. He would never be content to retire from work altogether and as long as he had the strength and ability he would never say no to a difficult or unusual case that required his help and experience. He had a need to be useful. He needed to be liked and befriended and he had a zest for fairness and equality. His mobile phone whistled into life, and

fumbling in the open glove compartment, Rick withdrew it and pressed 'OK'. It was his youngest son, Tom, who had recently purchased a 1992 vintage Volkswagen Golf GTI. Did dad know where he could get some cheap insurance? No dad didn't but given a couple of hours he would try to find one. The caller cleared, leaving Rick holding the phone and wondering if perhaps buying a mobile phone had been such a good idea after all.

Many areas within the districts of East of London are undergoing extensive and expensive redevelopment. Two such developments are Canary Wharf and St Catherines Dock, with their many high rise office blocks. The redevelopment work has opened the way for several high-class moorings for overseas visitors and Company owned leisure facilities

for potential clients. Part of the development scheme has also included for the renewal of the now redundant wharf side properties. The decaying warehouse units and old tea or coffee and diamond houses established in the past centuries to handle the growing imports from markets such as the West Indies and Africa. As these markets have been extinguished the many once attractive buildings have fallen into disrepair and were, until recently, areas where crime and disorder reigned uncontrolled. The development of the entire area has brought these same buildings back to life and now includes purpose designed modern office areas and attractive new coffee bars catering for the nouveau riche. Many of these new developments have included pedestrianised areas furnished with bench

style seating, attractive water fountains and picturesque flowering shrubs.

One such pedestrianised area is a small section of a much larger residential and office development close to the now famous Canary Wharf and was often frequented by office workers using the area as a shortcut to the nearest station on the Docklands Light Railway network.

This particular evening was out of the ordinary. The late spring sky was a sort of mottled grey, the sun had completely disappeared below the horizon, and through the hazy drizzle the nearby street lamps sent quivering streaks of amber light on to the wet cobbles below. There was a cold nip in the air and as he breathed out, small clouds of white steam were whisked away into the evening

air. Rick shivered and pulled his old trusted trench coat up around his ears. He was really too old for this sort of caper and it was about time that he settled down to a steady nine to five job with a warm office, warm secretary, and a warm cup of tea.

Rick was your normal sort of a guy, about five foot seven in height, a little over weight due to a liking of convenience foods and good red wine (even bad red wine sometimes), a rapidly receding hairline, and a close cut beard. This was, to be brutally honest, due to an unwillingness to get up in the morning often resulting in a shortage of time to shave. According to his three sons, whom he had brought up single handily following a divorce many years in the past, and loved dearly, he had a complete lack of

fashion sense and a sometimes-inconceivable love of life and all that existed around him. He was a good egg, and someone you could rely on at all times. Rick enjoyed life for what it was. A means of exploring the universe, the environment, and the relationships between people. He would never say no, even if it meant that it got him into deep water, (as it very often did).

Since Rick had officially left the force almost ten years ago, retiring on a reasonable pension, to keep the bailiffs from the door, he had accepted a number of strange assignments and this was turning out to be one of the strangest. He was not really sure why he was actually here.

That morning, whilst enjoying a relaxing spot of sea fishing from the local pier, (he

very rarely caught anything), but hey, that's not the point. It's the fresh air, the smell of seaweed, many fish and chip shops, and the sound of the wind whistling through the pier structure and the back of your neck that counts. Rick received a call on his mobile to attend a meeting at eleven o'clock in the offices of the local police.

The whole thing was to be kept very low profile. There was a general election coming up soon and this would not help the situation at all. The government were already in a sticky mess over some overseas project that had turned 'belly up'. A misinterpretation of security information apparently, but that was another story.

The daughter of the present Home Secretary, Peter Thompson MP, had been taken hostage

whilst arriving for college earlier this morning.

Susannah Thompson was a very high spirited teenager just about to celebrate her nineteenth birthday and did have a reputation for living the high life when out of range of her father. The past couple of years had been a nightmare for the Home Secretary with all sorts of rumours and innuendo's about one rule for some and other rules for others but somehow he had so far managed to remain virtually unscathed. Susannah was undoubtedly a bright student with a fine future ahead of her as a lawyer, but with her film star looks and impetuous nature whether she would ever achieve her career goals was debatable, and probably not actually what Susannah had in mind.

Witnesses had stated that a dark blue saloon car being driven by three well-dressed men had

pulled up outside the college main entrance.

One of the men had got out and walked towards the girl and it would appear that she got into

the car of her own free will. An hour later,

the Times newspaper received a note written on plain white copy paper, stating that unless

five hundred thousand pounds was left in a

waste paper bin at Canary Close that evening,

she would not be seen again. The note was

being taken very seriously and so the ransom

money would be paid. Adam Doubly, a senior

police detective would be in charge of the

'hand-over' and would, therefore handle the

placement of officers as required.

Adam had asked Rick to work with him on this occasion as they had worked very well together

on numerous stakeouts in the past.

It had sounded like a normal kidnapping and ransom to him when he was first asked earlier that day, but now he was not so sure.

Something didn't feel right. Years of first pounding the beat as a constable, followed by promotion to the flying squad, and now working as a private detective, Rick had developed a feeling, a sense of what was to happen, and it didn't feel good.

He had been told to position himself on the flat roof of a small office block in the centre of the new development area, where he was now standing. When the sun was low, the meagre street lamps and shuttered office

windows gave the dismal courtyard below him a rather depressing feel, surrounded by various office blocks and high rise flats.

He had time to contemplate and this was dangerous. Why do we keep destroying each other? Looking skyward he could make out thousands of stars emitting their light many years earlier. By the time he could see them they would probably have been burnt out completely, and staring into the darkness between them he could only surmise at the thousands of new stars that now existed and yet were presently unseen. Surely we can't be alone in this wondrous universe? Are the other populated planets destroying themselves as we are, or have they already learnt their lesson? What does it take to bring a halt to the violence and tragedy that so many people

have to live through every day?

His direct partner on this particular outing, Adam had drawn up the plans for tonight's little party. It was of the utmost importance that the hand-over went as smoothly as possible. Rick had been positioned high above the square so that he could observe the entire process. If necessary he would follow the pick-up man and recover the ransom money.

This had to be done as discreetly as possible so that they could also trace the whereabouts of the hostage. Adam made the decision to actually place the money himself. That way he felt that he could monitor the events actually at ground level.

Adam would be carrying a light blue holdall containing five hundred thousand pounds which, according to the instructions that they had

received earlier, was to be deposited in a waste bin near the fountain.

Nine o'clock was the stated pick up time, and it was almost five to. The weather had actually started clearing slightly, but there was still a nip in the air and the whole area had a heavy feel about it. Pools of water down in the courtyard were reflecting light from the one or two offices that remained occupied. Goodness knows what was going on in there at this time of night. Adam had just appeared from one of the alleys and was making his way to the drop off point. He looked particularly miserable, with his coat turned up high at the collar, walking across the square. Well, it was his tenth wedding anniversary and a celebration had been long planned. Rick imagined for a while what his

wedding anniversary would have been like if things had gone well with his marriage, but soon dismissed the thought as being too depressing. Still Adam should still be able to make it to the party after this was all over. Shouldn't be long now.

The tremendous blast that originated from the litterbin as Adam placed the ransom money blew Rick completely off his feet and he was thrown against the wall of the fire escape staircase as if he was a small lifeless rag doll. As he crashed into the damp brickwork with a muffled thud, he felt all of the wind had been knocked out of him and he slumped to the floor. His heart beating violently and his lungs gasping for air he felt the world spin. His entire body shuddered with the force and for a moment he lost consciousness.

Clouds of thick black pungent smoke and lightning flashes of bright orange flame exploded angrily into the air with lightning cracks of thunder, and the entire square was littered with thousands of shafts of blood spattered glass. The noise was almost unbearable and Rick still pinned against the crumbling brick wall but with his senses returning, felt that his eardrums would explode at any moment. Then, just as suddenly, silence descended like a heavy lakeside fog. It was haunting. There was nothing, only a deathly silence. A second or so later, as if orchestrated for the effect, there was an immediate break in the silence. Countless fire and burglar alarms set off by the explosion, combined with falling debris still finding its way explosively back to

earth brought Rick to his senses. Crawling to the edge of the small flat roof and looking unbelievably over the short parapet to where the litter bin had once stood only seconds earlier he was now staring into a furnace of burning tarmac. There was a hole the size of a small car and draped across the edge of the hole was a tangled mass of burning bloodstained clothes that all remained of Adam.

Absolutely stunned beyond all belief at the sight that he had just witnessed, Rick clawed his way up the face of the adjoining wall until he was on his feet, and cautiously peered back over the small brick parapet. The terrible destruction laid out below him took his breath away and for a brief moment he stared unbelievably into the night sky. He

froze with the sheer horror of it all. Almost undetectable a movement just inside his scope of vision, made him turn his head, and for only a split second he caught a glimpse of someone running from the square. Intuitively Rick spun round and headed for the fire escape door that was now reflecting in the pulsating red lights of the many alarms that had been triggered by the explosion. Making his way down the old steel staircase Rick was trying to develop a plan. First he had to get his mind around what had happened. The drop had been on time. There were no hitches at all. Everything had gone according to plan. So why kill Adam, and why destroy five hundred thousand pounds in cash? It just didn't make any sense at all.

The emergency services had begun arriving on

the scene. Blue flashing lights made the area seem even more sinister with long grey shadows moving around the devastated area. If he stayed around, very soon now, he would have to go through several unending hours of questioning by Adam's colleagues. It was far better, Rick decided, that his time be spent trying to solve the mystery and more importantly, find Adam's killer. After all, what could he tell them, he hadn't seen anything from his position on the roof that could possibly help the enquiry?

Pulling his collar even higher around his ears and clutching his old coat around himself, Rick made for a well frequented bar where he could get a drink without being asked too many awkward questions. In this particular area there were many narrow back

streets with rows of shops. Some quite successful antique shops serving the needs of the souvenir hunter, small intimate bars where courting couples could temporarily escape from their individual partners and pretend that they were still young and carefree, and dark, secretive book shops tucked behind blackened windows where the 'specialist book' could be obtained. No questions asked.

This particular bar was, however, situated in the centre of a row of worn out lock-up shops, many with boarded up or white painted windows. Even those still managing to survive the tough times were in a tatty state.

Paintwork was peeling and cracked, and many had broken windows that had obviously seen better days. One of the shops was trying to squeeze out an income selling fish and chips.

To think of eating anything after what Rick had seen was difficult but it was now biting cold and as long as you didn't look too long at the ageing, battered fish, the thick fat soaked soggy chips warmed you up.

The explosion had obviously burst open a nearby storm cloud, and the rain was absolutely throwing it down in sympathy. A North Easterly wind was doing its very best to make things even worse and succeeding well. Great pools of water were forming in the streets. A continual torrent was finding its way down the back of Rick's coat and he felt that if he didn't get into the dry soon, he was going to catch a serious cold. As he neared the bar, he could hear the taped music, and begin to smell the comforting odour of warm drink and tobacco that always seems to

emit from a bar or public house, no matter the standard or location.

The yellow light through the open doorway was cutting a shaft through the driving rain and every now and again, blasts of wind would drive the rain into the bar. It felt warm and safe as he entered the building, and shaking the rain off his coat he ordered a double scotch, no ice. He was cold enough, he didn't need help.

The bar was very nearly empty save for a couple of guys talking in one corner and a lone, rather plain looking woman struggling against all odds to remain vertical at the bar.

She is slowly loosing the battle, thought Rick, as he made his way to a secluded table, tucked behind a rather sad looking plant that hadn't seen sight of natural sunlight since it had been plucked from a local graveyard several months ago.

From where he sat, leaning on his seat, his back to the wall and facing the bar, Rick could see into the street, water running down the kerbs as though a nearby dam had burst, and the occasional passer-by struggling against all odds to keep dry. Why should anyone be out at this time of night, and in this weather? It was quite beyond Rick.

Given the choice he would be home tucked up with a good book and a glass or two of single malt

Throwing back the scotch Rick's mind began

to clear and the realisation of what he had witnessed earlier began to fill his brain. Ordering another double he removed his soggy coat, shook it, covering the table with spots of water, and clasped his glass between his cold wet hands. The meeting earlier this morning had been fairly explicit. The Home Secretary had received a note to say that his daughter had been kidnapped on her way into the college, and a ransom of five hundred thousand pounds was demanded for her release. Rick had felt at the time that this was a strange amount to demand. They could have asked for a lot more. Why didn't they? And then to deliberately blow the whole lot up; it just didn't make any sense at all. These thoughts were still spinning around in his head when a short, dark haired guy,

wearing a smart grey raincoat entered the bar. The rain following him into the building like a trusted dog, covering the floor with a layer of water that threatened to run into many of the dark corners of the room.

“God, what a dreadful night” he muttered as he approached the bar. “Make it a double brandy” and shook the rain from his coat before taking the glass from the sad looking guy loitering behind the bar.

Rick noticed that although this guy had a saturated coat, the rest of him appeared reasonably dry so guessed that he had run in from, maybe, a car parked fairly close outside in the street. The stranger took a drink from his glass and glanced around at the occupants of the bar, lingering slightly when he spotted Rick. Their eyes met and for a brief moment

Rick was sure that he had met this guy sometime before. Rick was also quick to notice that at this stage the woman had gone. The smallest flash of light, a sound like a firecracker, and a sharp searing pain was all Rick was aware of as the thirty-eight bullet tore through his shirt and into his chest. He saw the smoke stained ceiling come down to meet him as he hit the sodden floor and the lights went out.

Rick could painfully feel the warm stain making its way down his chest as his eyes began to focus on the world around him. He appeared to be in the boot of a car speeding its way along the narrow winding streets that lead down to the river. He could feel the car roll drunkenly as it took the bends far too fast, and heard the whoosh of water as it

ploughed its way through flooded sections of the road. The water trying desperately to get inside the boot with him. Eventually the vehicle stopped, reversed, and then silence except for a distant foghorn and siren that seemed to be miles away.

The boot lid was unlocked and flung open, and Rick was roughly manhandled onto the cold, wet granite quayside. Try as he did, he couldn't make out the identity of the two standing over him, but he thought he smelt some expensive perfume. A swift senseless kick in the small of his back from one of the kidnappers and Rick felt himself falling into darkness and with a loud splash that echoed through his entire body, he hit the icy cold water. Then silence again. As he struggled to get back to the surface Rick saw the car, a

dark blue BMW 5 series, pull quickly away from the quayside and head for the city centre.

The stinking river water was bitterly cold and breaking the surface between layers of flotsam and unpleasant smelling weed, Rick felt the strong ebbing tide begin to drag him along. With all of the remaining strength that he could muster, he made a desperate grab for a rusty set of landing steps barely attached to the quay side, and hung there desperately trying to get some breath, his feet still submerged and treading the filthy oil stained water.

It was now very dark; most of the lights had gone out. The rain had actually stopped and there was a bitterly cold mist that had started to roll in from the river. He could make out the shapes of numerous warehouses

fronting the river, some emitting shafts of dull white light into the night air. There was the familiar sound of the mast ties flapping on many small yachts tied up in the various basins spread along the river. A raucous party was in full swing on a nearby houseboat moored not one hundred metres from where he clung for his life. He could feel himself shivering and felt the feeling going from his legs and fingers and knew that very quickly; somehow he had to get dry and warm. The bullet must have gone right through him because although there was a lot of blood, nothing appeared to have been seriously damaged as the bullet had penetrated his chest. Whether or not the gunman had been one of the two in the car, he couldn't be sure, but he sincerely hoped that he would meet him

again one day. The same guy didn't usually catch Rick twice. In fact it was unusual for Rick to get hit at all. In the long time that he had been involved in this sort of work, he had never taken a bullet or actually fired a gun.

Suddenly, somewhere from out of the misty gloom a car rounded the end of a nearby warehouse, and drove onto the quay. The car's headlights casting beams of bright white light that bored through the mist and out into the river beyond. It came to a halt at the top of the steel steps. A door opened and a hand reached down to Rick.

"Come on you old fool, you weren't suppose to get involved, I heard what had happened from a mate at the Yard".

Rick couldn't believe his ears. Here was

the guy that with his own eyes he had seen blown sky high just a few sodden hours ago.

“Adam, you bastard, how on earth did you get here, and what the hell is going on?”

It was no mean effort to get Rick up and out of the river with the chest injury and his soaked clothing adding to his weight, but very carefully easing Rick up the rungs of the ladder, he helped him gently into the back of his car, Adam began to explain what had gone on.

It had been a set-up. A member of the same gang that had kidnapped the girl had placed the ransom money. He had been discovered earlier in the day and had said during questioning that something was going to happen during the hand over. Nobody could discover what it might be, so the powers to be had

decided that the money would be placed by this guy, and Adam would be very close by to watch the drop. Rick had been told to watch from the roof in case something had gone wrong. Somehow he must have been spotted and followed to the bar.

“Okay, but how did you know I was here” enquired Rick.

“We received a tip off from a woman about a couple of hours ago. The information was vague, so I have been searching the quay areas since. I’m glad that I found you”,

“Not as much as me” chipped in Rick as he slowly sank into the warm comfort of the car’s rear seat and closed his eyes.

Not unlike a lot of other folk who made their living working in London, Rick lived in a quiet town, Worthing, situated on the South

coast betwixt Brighton and Littlehampton. Worthing many years ago in Victorian times was a very well frequented sea side resort. Many holidaymakers would make their way by whatever transport was available to the south coast for sun, sand, and sea. Worthing was and still is recognised as a gentle resort catering for the mainly over forties. The town is presently rapidly expanding with many new housing developments springing up around the town centre. The new developments are designed not only for the young families moving into this area from the 'darker' northern counties but also as a means to providing affordable

housing for the first time buyer and young couple starting off on their married life together. The increase in population has also resulted in an influx of commercial and industrial developments and is the base for a few multi-national companies and industries.

Rick rented a small privately owned detached bungalow situated in one of the older and quieter areas of Worthing providing everything that he needed as a single guy. Unfortunately Rick was not a gardener, although he loved to sit amongst the greenery of a well-kept garden, wineglass in hand, to contemplate life and all that it kept throwing at him.

Fortunately he had found a local gardener who kept the lawn and flowerbeds neat and tidy. There was certainly enough garden to separate him from the road and neighbours, and to have

the occasional Bar-B-Que for himself and every

now and again his adult sons. As it was somewhere miles away from the aggravation of work and the constant hassle that his job entailed, Rick felt that the bungalow offered him sufficient solace to keep him sane (well at least to a tolerable level) and gave him some very valuable space.

Slowly opening his eyes, (dreading to find that all was not well), Rick discovered that he was, in fact, back home and lying in his own bed. His gun shot wounds had been treated and bandaged and except for the pain in his chest he actually felt a damn sight better.

His tired and bloodshot eyes slowly focused on the shape of Adam sitting on the edge of his bed and he wondered what this was all about.

"You've had a very lucky escape Rick, Your
Debits

doctor has just been and has said that you must spend a few more days in bed to get your strength back”, Adam whispered gently as he bent to puff out Rick’s pillow and straighten his covers. “Would you like something to drink, nothing alcoholic though?”

Rick stretched and painfully raised himself up on to the pillows. “What-ever, the principal thing on my mind at the moment is to sort this whole bloody episode out”.

“Well I’m afraid that’s totally out of the question old mate” replied Adam as he left to fetch the drink.

“We’ve both been taken off this case and I have instructions to warn you, that if you are seen involving yourself in this matter, your head will be for the chop. And that was from high!”

Rick was astounded. How could they just remove him from the case? He has just been shot at for God's sake. He had to do something, if only to find the gunman who had tried to send him to his maker. He wasn't going until he was good and ready. And it wasn't now. He wasn't use to be used as a human target for some nutter with a gun. He wasn't in too good a condition to argue with Adam at the moment, but that would soon change. All he needed was a couple of day's rest at home.

After checking that Rick was comfortable, Adam soon left, and Rick was alone to think. He still couldn't believe that whoever was involved, they wouldn't have destroyed five hundred thousand pounds without a very sound reason. Once he had solved this, Rick felt

that he would be well on the way to finding the gunman who tried to shut him up once and for all.

Rick was never the sort of guy to just lay back and think of England. He needed to occupy his mind whilst recovering and enjoyed trying to outsmart some of the newspaper crosswords. He was pretty good at the standard word puzzles, but the cryptic clues often drove him to despair. It needed a warped mind to solve them, he thought.

Thankfully, within a couple of days, Rick was up and about and ready to get back to work. He had been told by his colleague, Adam, that he must keep well out of sight, so decided that whatever he did, it would, initially at least, have to be done at night.

That coming evening there was a harvest moon,

and fairly clear. There was a nip in the air, but after being indoors for the past few days, Rick felt glad to feel the fresh air. His first port of call was to the square where the explosion had occurred, so made the two-hour drive to the Docklands Area where he arrived undetected. He left his old but reliable Primera in a small back street close to the square and then made the rest of the way slowly on foot.

Rick had always treated the many cars that he had owned or borrowed as purely a means of getting from A to B as quickly and as comfortably as possible. They were a tool to be used in the execution of his work, and as long as they started first time and ran reliably without too many problems they were fine. For a while a couple of years ago, Rick

had worked on the renovation of an old MG Midget. The car was purchased in running condition but gradually required more and more work to be done to keep the vehicle on the road, most of this work being body work related and corrosion prevention. As he only ever owned one car at a time, any work done on the car had to be completed over a weekend so that it was mobile again the following Monday. Eventually this became impossible so a second car, the Primera, was purchased and the MG stored in the garage.

Any one who has ever worked on classic cars will tell you that storing a car in a lock up garage is doomed to failure as the car will eventually corrode away leaving a pile of expensive dust. Rick therefore, somewhat regretfully, decided that it made far more

sense to sell the car on to someone who had the ability and time to restore it correctly, which left him with the Primera. A little like himself. Old but reliable with very few vices.

As Rick explored the precinct he was able to confirm that the buildings in this area were mainly used as offices. The vast majority had been respectfully converted and refurbished from the original Regency styled buildings that were once expensive dwellings for the wealthier population. The streets for the most part had been cobbled and turned into pedestrian precincts. Every now and again Rick would find a range of bench seating, small tables bolted to the ground, and attractive Regency styled street furniture.

As Rick approached the square itself, he

noticed that the 'Police Keep Clear' ribbons had been removed and replaced by a series of steel mesh security fencing around the damaged area. Much of the repairs for damage caused to adjoining buildings was well underway and there was an obvious indication of the local residents and shopkeepers wanting to get back to normal.

There was not much to see in or around the hole caused by the explosive device, except several damaged cables, a temporarily repaired water pipe, and a series of optical cables probably servicing the computers and IT for the offices fronting the square. Some of the nearest buildings showed signs of blast damage with fire staining on the woodwork around openings and the occasional patch of masonry. The passageway along which Rick had seen the

man run just after the explosion was to the Northeast of the square and he reckoned a look in this area might just reveal something useful and may previously have been overlooked by the 'scenes of crime' team.

Making his way slowly around the edge of the square, Rick could hear himself breathing and the gentle slap of his footsteps on the cobbles. Occasionally he had the disquieting notion that he was being watched from somewhere within the square. One of the corners of the paved area seemed to lead to a feeder road, which in turn would probably feed back into the main road at the beginning of the precinct. The area was considerably darker here as the lights on the square didn't quite reach this far, and Rick felt a slight shiver as the hairs on the back of his neck

began to rise.

An indistinct sound just behind him made Rick turn and in the corner of his eye he noticed the end of a shadow disappear into the darkness. His pulse began to race and he could feel his head begin to spin. Perhaps it was too soon after the shooting for him to be doing this, but he was here now and had to find out what was going on. An old wooden door tucked into the side of a building just to the front and right of him, creaked, and closed to. One of the lights in the square behind him flickered and went out, and he was for a short while plunged into complete darkness. A sound like that of rushing air

made him turn in fear and as the clenched fist caught the side of his jaw, his world began to spin. Rick grasped at a nearby street sign for support, and as the words 'Kindly place your rubbish here' came into focus; he hit the damp cobbled street with a soft thud.

His swollen eyes were finding it extremely difficult to focus on anything. Rick's entire world was spinning like a demented top and it made him feel sick. The pain from the side of his face completely obliterated the pain from his chest wound and he felt as though he had just gone ten rounds with a bulldozer. He was still attached to the sign with his right fist clenched around the steel pole and he was on his back staring up between two deserted office blocks. Reminiscent of the days as a young beat copper on the regular Friday night

binge, usually just following an Indian takeaway with several mates.

“These cobbles were just not designed to be slept on” he muttered to himself, desperately trying to convince his legs that they should get themselves vertical. They would have to do it on their own though. He was in no condition to assist. For some reason his fist wouldn't leave hold of the pole. It was still dark but he could just make out that the sun was reflecting on rising yet again, and he had absolutely no idea as to how long he had been lying there. His back told him that it had been for too long and was not particularly forgiving.

Eventually back on his feet, Rick made himself gingerly back to the car. Once in the driving seat he started the engine and lay

there waiting for the warm air to bring him round. Although to be honest he didn't really care. A knock on the driver's window made him sit up with a start, and turning to the window he could see the concerned face of his mate, Adam.

"What the hell are you doing here, Rick?" he asked attempting to open the locked door.

"I just wanted a second look at the explosion site. I needed to try and get my mind clear on what may have happened", replied Rick as he scrambled to open the door and almost fell back out of the car.

Adam had taken a step back and had his hand on the roof of the car. "Rick, I explained what would happen if you were seen around here. Bugger off and keep your head down, otherwise I won't be able to prevent something

happening to you". Saying this he put his hand on Rick's shoulder and disappeared around the corner of the building.

Rick lowered himself back into the car and drove off in the direction of his office.

Many of Rick's colleagues as private detectives were these days employed by large agencies dealing with every aspect of private investigation and were based in large purpose designed and built office blocks in the city centre. They were often retained by the larger establishments to monitor employer loyalty, confidentiality issues, and the occasional case of industrial espionage. Rick would always try to refuse any assignment that would involve personal relationships and concentrated on specific inquiries usually linked to police action of some sort or

another. It was generally safer that way.

Rick had established himself in a small first floor lock-up just off the main High Street. Not particularly plush, but smart enough to impress the normal punter, and guarded by his long time receptionist, Cathy. Cathy had been with Rick for a long time and was always extremely loyal. She had joined the business over five years ago when Rick had decided to go it alone as it were. Cathy had been made a widow during a police raid that had gone seriously wrong leaving her husband, a police detective, fatally wounded. At the time Rick was on hand to ease her through the bad times and they came through the whole affair as good friends. Nothing more, but she would never forget what Rick had done for her and was, therefore, only too pleased to work

with him when he retired from the force shortly afterwards.

Parking in his allocated parking bay, Rick locked his car and climbed the old timber stairs leading to the hallway feeding the many offices on the first floor. The block had been recently built, but was sparsely decorated with magnolia painted plastered walls and ceiling, and a cheap industrial standard carpet covering the concrete floor. Many of the offices had impressive entrance ways with names engraved in gold on hardwood plaques, but Rick's office had the standard glass entrance door with 'Rick Shore - Private Investigator' in black script lettering on the upper glass panel.

Cathy was collecting the morning post from the ground floor post room as he entered the

office, and Rick didn't notice the man waiting in his private office, until he entered the room throwing his dirt stained coat onto a nearby chair.

"So, Rick Shore, I presume," said the stranger as Rick came into view.

Startled, Rick spun round to see a tall, distinguished looking man rise from his seat.

"You have me at a disadvantage", managed Rick as he gained ground once more.

"Yes, sorry if I made you jump, Let me introduce myself" and raising his hand for a shake, "I'm Jon Blake. I'm with the Fraud Squad" Rick shook his hand and returned to his desk and favourite chair. He felt more comfortable in familiar surroundings.

"So Jon, to what do I owe this pleasure?" Jon strolled casually over to Rick's desk,

pulled out the chair from under the desk and planted himself gently down.

“Please sit down, Mr Shore,” he said, pointing to Rick’s chair. Rick obligingly sat down, resting his elbows on the top of the desk.

Pulling a file from inside his coat, his visitor placed several typewritten sheets face up in front of Rick. Without moving his arms, Rick glanced down and scanned the data on display, to be honest, not making an awful lot of sense out of what he was seeing.

“Okay” said Rick, “What is this all suppose to mean, and more importantly, what has it to do with me?”

Raising his glaze towards Rick, Jon explained that the documents in front of them were lists of a sample of credit card

transactions that had been intersected by someone, transferring the funds to an untraceable European bank account.

“I want to employ you to trace some of these transactions and discover if there is anything that tie these all together”.

Easing himself from his chair, Rick explained that he had very little knowledge of credit card fraud, and asked why he had been selected.

“I am beginning to think that this operation is being co-ordinated by someone or some people in reasonably high positions so to avoid unnecessary gossip or scandal I need someone who is no longer associated with the Force and, to be frank, not a threat to anyone”

Rick was not sure if this was a compliment

or not, but, hey he needed the work, and it would take his mind of the reason events.

“Okay Jon, I accept, but I must have complete autonomy over the way I run this case, and all expenses paid”.

“No problem”, confirmed Jon as he rose from his chair and made for the door.

“Have a look at what I have given you, and keep me up to date with any progress. If anything goes wrong though, we have never met and you're on your own”. With that, he left the office and made his way back into the open corridor.

Spreading the papers over his desk, Rick could see a series of columns taken from a spreadsheet of some sort. The columns were headed 'Card Issuer', 'Amount', 'Date Authorised', 'Date Transferred from Payee',

and finally 'Date Credited to Merchant'. Rick was by no means an expert in financial matters (completing his own tax returns was a challenge in itself), so he decided to pay a visit to an old contact of his.

During his long career within the police force Rick had made many contacts. His fair dealing attitude and sense of what was right led many of these contacts to keep in touch well after his retirement and were generally fairly happy to help out now and again.

One of these faithful contacts was a guy called Sam. Rick never actually knew his full name, or even if Sam was actually his first name, but he could always be relied upon to help if he could. Sam was an accountant.

Was, as in the past. He had been removed from the list of Chartered and Certified

Accountants for a slight indiscretion a few years ago and was currently employed by a firm of Bookmakers, on an unofficial basis, to advise on their bookkeeping arrangements.

He had a large house though, on the outskirts of London, and Rick never quite understood how he ever managed to buy it, let alone maintain it. However he was a good friend from way back and Rick was sure that Sam could explain what all the figures meant. And, importantly, keep his mouth shut.

As Rick pulled into Sam's long sweeping drive leading up to an impressive front door, he was still puzzling over the fact that the Fraud Squad had approached him at all. This was still going over in his mind when the front door opened and his friend, Sam, welcomed him in.

“Long time no see Rick”, Sam said as he ushered Rick into the lounge.

A magnificent room with wide glazed sliding doors opening onto a panorama straight from a holiday guide. Wide, beautifully tended lawns, neat flowerbeds, and a series of water features spread around the lawn and patio areas. The furniture was sparse but extremely comfortable and complimented the décor, which breathed relaxation and peace.

“Thanks for agreeing to see me Sam, “said Rick as he lowered himself into one of the very inviting armchairs.

“You’re very welcome, Rick” replied Sam, “It’s great to see you again after all this time. What do you drink?”

Rick was still suffering from his chest wound and was unsure about taking alcohol, but what the hell,

“A double scotch, please Sam, no ice” Sam disappeared into a small bar area and returned shortly with a drink for himself and Rick.

“Now then, Rick, how can I help you?”

Rick took out the various papers and spread them on to a glass coffee table in front of him.

“I can understand the various columns, and see what is happening, but could you explain the implications of all this?”

Sam took the first sheet of data and leaning back in his chair studiously looked through the contents.

Placing the document back on the table, and taking a small sip from his glass, (it looked

like Sam was also partial to a tot of single malt), he commented

“Okay Rick, this is what appears to be happening, although to be honest, I can’t understand how. You could be looking at the greatest scam ever”

Sam picked up his glass from the table and sat back down in his chair

“Rick, if you purchase an item on the internet and pay for it with your debit or credit card, this amount is debited to your account immediately the transaction is completed. At the end of the month, or when you decide to transfer funds from your personal account to your credit card account to cover the latest month’s expenditure, the amount is debited against your personal account immediately, but is not credited

against your credit card account for several days. This can be up to five working days after you make the transfer.

Somehow, someone is intercepting the transfers to the credit card account and relaying them to an unlisted high interest account somewhere within the EU, where it remains for five days. After this time the funds are forwarded on to your credit card account. Nobody realises that the scam has occurred and everyone is happy. It is a very clever trick and I am surprised that nobody has done it before, but there you are”.

“But surely”, cut in Rick, not totally appreciating what he had heard,” Five days interest would not amount to much. It’s hardly worth the effort”.

“Hold on”, explained Sam, placing his glass

back down on the table and lifting his calculator, “In any twenty four hour period it is estimated that one hundred and fifty million dollars is spent on the internet. The majority of this is cleared by credit or debit card. Assuming that the scam is able to generate four- percent interest on the funds this would produce an income of almost seventeen thousand dollars a day, for doing absolutely nothing. This amounts to almost six million dollars a year. And this assumes an interest rate of only four- percent. Some merchant bankers are paying considerably more”.

“That’s incredible”, concluded Rick, “I see what you mean. Thanks for the explanation. Goodness knows where I go from here though. In fact I am not sure why they have selected

me to sort it out. Surely it is for a specialist group. I'm not in any way financially knowledgeable. Mind you, theoretically I guess nobody is actually losing money”.

“No, not quite Rick. The card issuers are the losers because they would normally have access to these funds for the three to five day period between the client transferring the funds, and the credit appearing on his card account”.

Rick gathered up the paperwork and headed towards the door. “Thanks again Sam, I shall probably be in touch again soon”

“Not so long this time, Rick. It's been good to see you. Take care”.

Rick returned to his car and drove slowly back on to the main road. His head was

spinning with all sorts of ideas and he desperately needed a meal.

Chapter 2

Rick had had a mind-blowing day and was in no mood to prepare a meal, so against his better judgement (the diet would have to wait), he pulled up alongside his local fish and chip restaurant, locked his car doors and made his way towards the shop. Rick hadn't noticed, but some one hundred metres back a maroon estate car had pulled into the side of the road and tucked itself neatly behind a parked van.

A local Chinese family who had moved into the area a few years ago ran this particular fish and chip shop. They very quickly established a reputation for well prepared food and the prices were reasonable. Rick had

been amazed when, over a beer with a close friend a few weeks ago, discussing the local economy, just how many of the local fish and chip restaurants were now being operated by Chinese proprietors. In many respects it was a great shame, but surely a sign of the times.

Rick's favourite fish meal was Haddock and Chips, so having placed an order, he took a seat backing on to the road and waited patiently for his meal to be prepared. There were not many customers this evening and he really couldn't understand how this business ever made any money. However, with a smart new silver grey BMW parked outside, somebody obviously was. It always smelt good inside the shop and somewhat comforting, so it was of no surprise that he had to be shaken awake by the restaurant owner who exclaimed that his

meal was ready. Wrapped in the latest newspaper, the meal smelt very appetising and felt comfortably warm as he strolled back to the car.

As he headed off for the short drive home, Rick was still trying to come to terms with what he had learnt today. He was so pre-occupied that he didn't notice the estate car pull out behind him. The lights from his car lit up the road ahead showing that it had rained fairly recently, but had now stopped.

A young couple was walking their dog, a white Spaniel, on the pavement, and a middle-aged woman was delivering the local free newspaper, with the use of a pushchair as a temporary trolley. Life here seemed very normal, and it was difficult to believe that so much had happened over the past few days. Rick's

bungalow came into view, and at first slowly driving past, he reversed into his driveway and parked just in front of his garage doors.

The meal was delicious, helped down with a glass or two of 'CECCHI, Sangiovese Di Toscani' red wine, one of his favourites. 2001 had been a very good year. Feeling warm and very comfortable, Rick decided that enough was enough. There was nothing that he could do tonight, there was very little on the television, so an early night was decided upon and he retired to bed.

The driver of the car parked a few yards back from Rick's house and waited until the lights in the bungalow were extinguished. He then made a quick call on his mobile and drove off. He would be back early in the morning to resume the watch and, if necessary, deal with

any difficulties.

Rick always had difficulty sleeping. The initial few hours were fine. In fact he usually fell fast asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. However, inevitably, a few hours later he was wide-awake. From then on the best he could do was to 'cat nap' until dawn. The snatching of short periods of sleep would cause Rick to experience many short, but vivid dreams. Many of these were a conglomeration of his past, but now and again some would appear to be almost premonitions of times to come. One day he would pay a visit to a local psychologist who would perhaps help him to settle his mind somewhat.

The shrill ring of Rick's patent white telephone shattered the quiet peace of the new dawn. Struggling to regain consciousness Rick

reached out to the telephone, only to succeed in pushing a small delicate vase of roses onto the bedroom carpet. Cursing under his breath, Rick grabbed the handset and with very little grace enquired as to whom was there at this unholy hour.

“Rick, you old sod. What have you been up to?”

Rick immediately recognised the voice as belonging to Adam.

“Bloody hell, Adam, why ring me at this hour with such a stupid question. You some sort of moron?”

“Hold on, I heard a rumour that you were looking into a credit card fraud, and just wanted to check that you were okay”.

“My God, word travels fast” replied Rick, not altogether clear as how Adam had found

out, “but Yes, I’m fine. But why the hell ring me at this time? Couldn’t it have waited ‘till later?”

Rick could hear that Adam was in an office somewhere. There were several people talking in the background and he could make out telephones, and a computer keyboard being used.

“I’m being temporarily transferred to a new office some miles away, and have to move this morning so called whilst I was at the office. Sorry if I woke you. I will call you again sometime later. Cheers

“The telephone went silent and he was gone.

That same night, it was almost two-thirty in the morning when a small grey BMW pulled up outside the large, rather impressive detached house on the outskirts of London. The

prestigious detached property, probably built in the late eighteenth century, was surrounded on all sides by a high flint faced wall capped with a continuous run of broken glass. The only entrance being a pair of formidable looking cast iron gates locked and bolted from inside. There were specialist CCTV cameras distributed throughout the grounds keeping a careful watch on anyone entering or leaving the premises, and high tech. trip alarms spread randomly around the site.

The air was deathly still, with only a very slight breeze moving the nearby trees gently to and fro. The dark night sky was filled with millions of brightly shining galaxies each adding weight to the argument that we are not alone.

As the car pulled quietly up to the kerb,

the engine was stopped and the passenger quietly got out and made his way to the front gate. Removing a small steel box from his inside coat pocket, he flicked a switch and a short brass pin extended from the box to a length of about fifty millimetres. A bright red light also began to glow on the side of the box. He directed the brass pin at the main lock and it sprung silently free. Repeating the operation on the side bolts rendered the gate open.

He replaced the box as he squeezed through the partly opened gates and stood looking for signs of alarms or guards.

From the other inside pocket, he removed a Siemens palm top computer and touching the screen with his finger brought up the menu. Selecting a combination of codes, the screen

was soon displaying the site layout of the building in front of him, together with the location of alarms and sentry positions.

Walking slowly and very carefully towards the house, he could make out a light at a first floor window just in front of him and glancing at his computer, noted that it was the master bedroom. Good, his target was reading himself for bed. This should make it easier. The original front door was a solid oak panelled door with a series of high security bolts and seemed impossible to open without disturbing the resident, so he began an inspection of the ground floor windows and remaining doors. Working his way methodically around the house he came across a small larder window that didn't appear to have been locked correctly and was slightly ajar. He passed a

short steel bar against the stay and the window sprung open. Inside was complete darkness and the only thing that he could hear was the sound of a grandfather clock coming from somewhere deep inside the house.

In fact he hardly heard the sound behind him until it was too late, and a swift and heavy blow to the back of his neck sent him reeling backwards onto the flower beds below the window. He thought that he could make out a figure climbing in through the now open window, but that was all and very soon darkness and pain took over and he was out.

He must have been out cold for only a short while, and wasn't sure if it was his colleague who had woken him, the piercing sound of the alarms, or the smell of burning. But whatever it was, he knew that he had to get away from

here as fast as he could.

The house was totally ablaze. Ugly, thick dense black smoke was billowing from almost every opening and crevice, with vivid orange flame forcing itself through the smoke and escaping into the outside air. The tortured night sky was filled with falling debris that seemed to explode on impact with what remained of the house. The entire roof seemed to have been lifted from its supports exposing burning rafters, joists and a collection of twisted steel fittings. Not a single window was left intact and as he struggled back to the safety of his car, he heard, and occasionally felt, shards of broken glass singing through the cold night air.

This had to be a massive bomb. This was not a normal blast. Whoever and whatever had

caused this atrocity to happen didn't intend much of the house and occupants to survive. This had been set by someone with no respect for life or the environment and was the work of a dangerous man.

As he reached the car, and his colleague started the engine, he looked back to see what still remained of the house collapse into a hell hole of fire, and the surrounding night sky glowed a frightening shade of orange.

"Let's go, and quick" he screamed, slamming the car door shut and sinking into the warm security of his seat.

The car disappeared off into the night.

Seven-thirty and Rick's alarm clock radio announced that it was time to rise. Making a

sudden move at this time of the morning was not advisable, so Rick slowly rubbed the sleep from his eyes and pumping up his pillows rose slowly to a sitting position. Terry Wogan was welcoming the new morning with his usual Irish charm and banter and all seemed well with the world. At least for this short moment.

Minutes later and Rick had showered and was preparing his usual breakfast of a boiled egg and pitta bread. A good start to any day.

The weather had brightened up considerably, and if you were very fortunate you could spot the sun desperately trying to break through the clouds which were lingering high above.

Maybe it will succeed later, Rick thought.

It was while Rick was counting the three minutes for his egg, that he heard the news announcement on the radio.

“There has been a massive explosion at a property in the London area and Police searching the remains have discovered the body of the owner, a Mr. Samuel Hodgkins, a retired accountant. Foul play was suspected, and a man had been seen running from the building shortly before the blast occurred”.

Four minutes - five minutes - abruptly Rick came back to the present and realised that his egg had been well and truly boiled. But Sam, he had only just recently been talking to him. They had discussed the debit fraud; nothing seemed out of the ordinary. What could Sam have done that had provoked such an attack? What a world we live in - this is complete madness. Fraud, okay, but murder, now that is something quite different. A ring on his doorbell shattered Rick's thoughts, and giving

up with the egg once and for all, he made his way down the hallway.

“Mr Rick Shore” asked the taller of the two men standing in front of him,

“Who want’s to know?” replied Rick with that sense of something bad building up inside him.

“I’m DCI Scott” showing Rick his warrant card, “and this is my colleague, DI Thompson” indicating his partner, who too showed Rick his card.

“Okay, so I’m Rick Shore. What can I do for you guys?”

“I have to ask you to come back to the station with us. We need to ask you a few questions” answered the DCI.

“Questions, about what?” Rick was beginning to feel this particular sense developing badly, and the thought of accompanying these

two was worrying him considerably.

“I’m afraid that I can’t say at this stage, sir, but I am certain that it will only be for a short while. We have to clear up one or two issues that have recently come to light” “If you prefer it sir, we can obtain a warrant for your arrest, but none of us want this, do we sir?”

This time it was the other guy, DI something or other and judging by the look that he got from his boss, had not been the right thing to say. This was a lot more serious than Rick had thought.

“Okay” followed Rick, “I’ll get my coat and be with you”

Sitting in the back of a car with these two morons had not been part of Rick’s plans for the day and he still felt that something was

not right here. The ID cards looked real enough, and the photographs matched each guy, but that feeling would still not go away.

“What station are we going to?” enquired Rick of the DCI sitting next to him

“Just a local nick where we can have a private chat. That okay?” replied the DCI.

No this was definitely not okay. It was about time that Rick left this party of three, and quick.

Rick had noticed that the driver had locked all of the doors before starting off, so it would be impossible to escape from the car using the door.

“DI Thompson, may I open my window, please. I need some air?”

The DI shrugged “If you must”

To get through the now open window seemed an

impossible task, but this was probably the only means of escape and when desperate, anything is worth a try. About a hundred yards ahead the traffic was beginning to slow as it approached a series of road works. Never before was he so happy to see the traffic come to a halt through road works. Rick felt that this was the opportunity that he had been looking for. The car in front had slowed to a halt to allow three workmen to pass across the stream of traffic towing lines of Optical cable probably for a new telephone network. Rick's car also came to a halt, and realising the opportunity that may now present itself to Rick, the DCI raised the open window.

"Damn and blast" thought Rick, but noticed the roof light was partly held open only by a

small plastic clip.

Rick was never an agile man. He preferred the diplomatic approach to any confrontation rather than to physical effort, especially where some athletic ability was required. To even conceive diving through an open roof light seemed ludicrous, but a partly closed one. A miracle was needed.

It had to be now, so throwing himself upward through the roof vent, the window smashed open and bouncing off the car, Rick landed face down onto a pile of builder's sand some two metres from the car.

Stunned, the DCI was struggling to get the door open. "For Christ's sake, open the bloody doors. I can't get out"

Picking himself up, Rick could see that his hosts were also leaving the car (albeit using

the more traditional method) and would soon be on him.

He sprang to his feet (his agility even surprising himself) and headed for an open trench that ran parallel with the road and about two metres deep. Glancing behind, Rick saw that the two guys had somehow mastered the sand, and were entering the trench not far behind him. About thirty metres ahead the trench entered a steeply climbing concrete culvert that carried the cables under the road, and as the culvert was unfinished, approximately twenty metres ahead stood a cable drum on a wheeled platform ready to be moved forward as the culvert work continued. Rick reached the drum just as his captors entered the culvert and from behind, using every ounce of remaining strength; Rick

released the drum break, and pushed the drum back down towards the two men.

Neither of the two men had a chance of escaping from the culvert in time and were both caught by the steel cable drum as it gathered speed. Forcing themselves against the side of the culvert they could do nothing but watch as Rick made his escape through an open escape hatch. In the midst of all of the confusion, the irate drivers caught up in this event and the many rubber neckers passing by, Rick was able to merge into the crowd and disappear.

Once Rick had made his escape from the now totally congested main road, he found himself in a narrow back street seemingly going nowhere. Hiding himself behind a large blue plastic waste bin, he decided that a plan of

action was required, otherwise he would be undoubtedly caught again, and sooner rather than later.

First of all, who had arranged for him to be picked up? It wasn't the normal plod, and in any event what had they expected to find out from him. As far as Rick knew he had not done anything that would have sparked such a response, unless it was all connected with the hostage situation and his being shot at in the bar.

It was still reasonably early in the morning, so there was still only a few people about and would be easily spotted if he tried to get back home now. Who did he know in this area who would put him up for a few hours until the dust had settled. A few years ago whilst on a vaguely similar fraud case, he had

met up with a young woman whom he remembered did have an apartment quite near here. Maybe she would remember him. Even after all these years he hadn't changed much, except for the loss of hair, and the concerned 'lived in' look on his face.

Nicole was her name, and quite a stunner, or so Rick remembered. It would be good to see her again. Brushing his clothes down to remove traces of sand from the building site, and dust from the tidy-bin, Rick made his way to the apartment block, and approached the entrance door. Each apartment was protected by an intruder alarm and a call button was

available for each occupier. Scanning the list of names, Rick recognised Nicole's and pressed the button.

"Hello" came the voice through the speaker.

"Can I help you?"

"I sincerely hope so. Is that Nicole?"

enquired Rick

"It might be. Who's asking?" Why are people so afraid these days? It's not natural.

"Nicole, It's me, Rick Shore. We met a few years ago. I could really do with some help about now. May I come in?"

"Rick. Is that the copper, Rick?"

"Yes, that's right - may I come in?"

The door buzzer sounded and Rick could hear the lock release. Opening the door he walked into the foyer and searched for the lift.

Nicole lived on the sixth floor and Rick had

no intention of using the stairs. The lift doors were concealed behind a small coloured glass screen that was reflecting rays of coloured light on to the white painted ceiling and walls producing a sort of kaleidoscopic effect. As he approached the lift the doors slid open and a well-dressed couple entered the foyer. They were both in their early fifties and seemed anxious not to be seen as they slipped quietly into the street. Rick entered the lift, selected the sixth floor, and wondered what would happen next.

As the doors slid open, Rick could make out a smart blue carpeted area with matching wall and ceiling decorations, and an assortment of pictures and ornaments dressing a pair of ornamental side tables. There were four doors opening on to the landing and Nicole's was

immediately to his left. As he approached the door, a very attractive young woman opened it, probably in her late thirties, immaculately dressed in a light blue blouse open at the neck and a pair of slim-fit jeans. She was bare foot and her long brown hair hung way past her shoulders. If this was Nicole then, God, I must look old, thought Rick. This woman was delicious, a sight for sore eyes, everything a man could ever want, and here was Rick, hoping that she would help him out of a difficult and dangerous situation.

Nicole spoke first

“Rick, goodness you have changed since we last met. What on earth have you been doing to yourself?”

“I don’t believe it. Are you really that young boyish woman that helped us with a case

so many years ago? You look wonderful,” exclaimed Rick, moving towards the door.

“Always the charmer. Come on in. Tell me how I can help. You look as though you could do with a drink” and she gestured for Rick to enter her apartment.

The apartments were not large, but had all of the normal facilities and were very well designed to make use of all of the available space. Nicole obviously had a feel for design as the rooms were carefully decorated and furnished to produce a feeling of calmness and quiet, and yet alive and vibrant. A new CD system was playing a series of 'Nice and Easy' tunes and it was very difficult to remember that they were so close to the main road.

“Sit down Rick” suggested Nicole pointing to

an easy chair close to the window.

“Thanks, Nicole. I must explain. If any of it makes you feel uncomfortable, let me know and I will go. Please, sit down”

“Firstly Rick” replied Nicole as she made for the chair “Would you like a drink?”

“Maybe later, but I must ask for your help”

Rick took a deep breath and began to explain what had happened over the past few days.

Starting with the hostage assignment, to being shot in the bar, dumped in the river, picked up by the police, and the final escape to her apartment. Rick even described his meeting with Sam and the subsequent explosion.

Throughout the describing of the recent events Nicole had kept a serious but concerned look on her face, but this changed with the announcement of the explosion, and death of

Sam Hodgkins.

Suddenly Nicole's tone changed and she became very agitated. "Are you sure that Sam is dead?" she asked. "Has his body been found. Could it not be someone else?"

Rick rose to his feet and slowly walked over to her, placing his hand on her shoulder which had started to shake with emotion.

"No, I'm sorry Nicole, but the body has been identified by the police as that of Sam. I am sure there is no doubt. I'm very sorry. Did you know him?"

"Sam was my father. We hadn't really got on since my mother left us for some gigolo lover, but he was always there when I needed him. We had just begun to get to know each other again. I really thought that we were making progress. Why did it happen Rick, Do you have

any ideas?" Nicole was now trying to pull herself together again but could not hide the tears that were running down her beautiful cheeks.

"In all this time, I never knew that he was your father. I am really sorry. If there is anything that I can do" comforted Rick and held her even closer.

"Do you think his death had anything to do with your visit?" asked Nicole wiping the tears with a tissue gained from her jean pocket. "Maybe it was more serious than you thought"

"I just don't know" said Rick as he moved to sit down beside her "The more that I see and hear makes me wonder if the entire past few days are not connected in some way, but what, and where do I start?"

“For the time being I need somewhere safe to stay...”

“Of course you can stay here” interrupted Nicole “For as long as you like. You were good to me those many years ago, and I would love to be able to repay the favour. Maybe I can help in other ways as well”

“How do you mean” cut in Rick, somewhat relieved that at least he had somewhere safe to stay whilst he tried to make some sense of all of this.

“Let me show you something” replied Nicole, pointing Rick in the direction of a room at the end of the hallway.

Opening the door Rick was amazed to see a suite of six top of the range computers and a series of junction boxes, printers and switched hubs. There was also several filing

cabinets, each carefully labelled a couple of easy chairs, and a small desk.

“This is where I work” indicated Nicole, introducing Rick to the various sets of equipment “and it may just help answer some of your questions”

“What is it that do you. I would never have guessed that you would be so technically minded?” queried Rick, somewhat impressed with the sight he saw.

“I am paid, quite handsomely I must admit, to uncover information on people or companies, in fact anything at all. You would be surprised at what people will pay to discover secrets that were previously hidden away.”

Nicole’s eyes were beginning to recover their twinkle once more, and she continued “I have independent one megabyte broadband Internet

connections to each of these six computers and have written a software application that zips any up or download package into six separate items. Each item is handled by each of the computers that unscramble the package on arrival. As each broadband connection is made in series I have the use of effectively a seven hundred and twenty-megabyte connection.

Impressive huh!"

"Verg" chipped in Rick "But how does this help me?"

"Given time I will write a spyder application that will continually troll the internet for any credit or debit transfer at any moment in time, and will then analyse the time lapse between the debit and credit transfer. If there is any discrepancy in these times, my spyder will trace the account

to which the funds are being temporarily credited against and we should have your man”

“How long will this all take? Not that I’m rushing you, but if all this is connected I want to get my hands on the guy who shot me”

“Tell you what,” said Nicole “Give me twenty four hours and we can give it a crack”

This was very good news and at last it seemed that he was getting somewhere. Rick felt exhausted and asked if it would be possible for him to take a shower and perhaps a short nap.

“Of course Rick. Get yourself into the shower and I will bring you a towel and clean clothes. You’re about the same size as my old dad. You can have some of his clothes. He won’t be needing them any more”

Rick was guided to the bathroom and very

soon was luxuriating in a warm soapy shower. All of his worries were being washed away and for that short moment in time he felt happy and content. Rick heard the bathroom door open and through the steamed up shower cubicle saw Nicole place some clothes and a towel on the side table. If only he was twenty or so years younger. If only...

Chapter 3

It felt fantastic standing in the shower, the hot perfumed jet seemed to wash away all fears and concerns and left Rick feeling refreshed and invigorated. It was as if standing in the womb. Innocence and freshness. Safe in the care of your mother. As Rick became engulfed in a mist of sweet smelling steam, he felt that at last a turning point had been reached and from here on in

things would improve. Reaching through the screen for his towel it felt soft and comforting and as he began drying himself he realised the great loss of not having a loved partner with whom he could share his life and experiences, both good and bad.

“Hey Rick, would you like some breakfast. I’ve already got the coffee on, but how about some bacon and eggs. How do you feel”

“Oh yes please, I had forgotten how hungry I was. That would be great, thanks” replied Rick, pulling on the borrowed clothes that did, surprisingly, fit him quite well.

“Well, when you’re ready come into the dining room and help yourself to the coffee. The food won’t take long”

The dining room was attractively designed with a antique oak dining room table and six

bow rounded chairs all hand carved in a sort of mock Regency style. The floor was covered with a thick pile dark blue carpet and there were heavy velvet curtains to match.

Decorating the walls were several individually lit designer framed watercolours depicting scenes of the ocean, on a light blue flocked wallpaper.

On the elegant oak side table stood a coffee jug and several gold rimmed glass coffee mugs, similar styled milk and sugar bowls, and a selection of wrapped chocolate biscuits.

Rick carefully helped himself to a coffee, added a drop of milk and a single spoonful of sugar. Declining Rick's offer of a coffee, Nicole entered the room carrying a plate of bacon, eggs and fried bread and placed them on the table in front of Rick. She returned to

the kitchen and re-
appeared with some cutlery

and her own coffee that she had taken earlier.

Rick needed no second reminders and eagerly tucked into the breakfast.

Whilst eating, Rick was listening to Nicole as she explained how she would begin working on the computer program straight away, and should have it ready for testing later that evening. In the meantime it would be a good idea if Rick would take some time to recover himself and perhaps summarise what had happened to date. Possibly some of the pieces may start to fit together.

Six floors down, in the street below, Rick's two captors were still desperately trying to locate their quarry with very little success.

Having scoured the entire area surrounding the point where Rick had left the car, they very

soon came to the conclusion that somehow Rick had gone to ground. It was now sometime since he had made his escape so it was very unlikely that he would be found now, at least with only the two of them looking.

The only thing left to do was to return to base and take whatever consequences were forthcoming.

As the day went on, the weather appeared to brighten, and shafts of bright sunlight began cutting through the large glazed screens of the apartment like lasers. Looking up from his bed, Rick could see clouds of light dust rising from the floor caught in the beams of light. It was very difficult to imagine the horror of the past few days and he hoped that it had all been a very bad dream.

The sun began to fall below the horizon of

office blocks and apartments and the room fell dark. Shadows began to form in the corners and between the items of furniture and reality began to return. It was almost nine o'clock in the evening when Nicole announced that she had completed the program and they were ready for a test run. Would Rick like to come and watch?

He pulled himself from the comfort of the bed and headed back into Nicole's office.

Nicole had switched on the six computers and they were humming impatiently, waiting for the next command. Each screen had a bright blue background and in the top left hand corner, the cursor was flashing expectantly.

Rick took a seat alongside Nicole at one of the computers and once again realised that she was no ordinary young woman. Here was a very

attractive woman, a body that any warm-blooded man would die for, and eyes that seemed to melt in your gaze and yet were strong and determined. A woman who knew what she wanted and would do anything to get it.

She inserted a CD into the drive and waited as the computer began to take instructions. The screen was soon filled with thousands of symbols of all shape and form forming an endless scroll. Nicole explained that her program would search the Internet for any debit transfers and then check to see which of these did not immediately arrive at the creditors account. These would be the ones

that had been temporarily diverted. Given enough information it would then be possible for her program to trace the actual account that these funds were diverted to. Nicole reckoned that the process would take about two hours but after that the results should start coming in.

It had been some time since either of them had had a meal so agreeing to leave the systems running they made their way to an excellent and intimate French restaurant close to her apartment block.

The restaurant was situated in a small back street just off the main road and within about one hundred yards from the entrance to her block so was reached fairly quickly without any problem. There didn't appear to be anyone watching the area and the restaurant was empty

as they entered the dimly lit building. Rick moved to a small table facing the window and helped Nicole to her seat.

There were four main courses available and using Rick's schoolboy French they managed to interpret them as being a choice between Chicken, Pork, Rabbit, or Beef Steak all served with a selection of vegetables and appropriate sauces. Between them they decided to order the Staves of Rabbit in a Field of Turnip and Carrot, with Cabbage Potato and a rich Cranberry Sauce. Sounded delicious and washed down with a bottle of 'Pinot Noir' would certainly fit the bill.

As the waitress left to pass on their menu choice, Rick gently took Nicole's hand and gazed into her eyes. Expressing any sort of emotion following the news of her father's

death seemed impossible and probably not appropriate anyway. All that Rick could do was to assure Nicole that he was around if she ever needed someone to talk to or confide in. Nicole appeared to understand and sat silently deep in thought. Save for the sound of distant traffic and some gentle bustling in the kitchen, the two sat in peaceful silence. The wine arrived uncorked and as the waitress, a small, attractive young French girl with close cropped brown hair and bright green eyes, poured a small taster of wine for Rick, Nicole released her hand and sat back in her seat. The wine was as good as had been anticipated and both glasses were filled. "Here's to you. Your beauty, intelligence, and gentle spirit. May it last for ever" toasted Rick bringing his glass up to hers.

“And may you find peace and good luck in all that you do” replied Nicole. “You’re a good friend and may it long continue”

The meal was delicious, and as they finished the rest of the wine both Rick and Nicole felt a warm glow spread through every pore.

The walk back to the apartment went uneventfully and as they entered the block, two men had just entered the street and were standing against a nearby telephone box.

Through the wine and good food, Rick could feel that sense begin to rise again and grasping Nicole’s arm he ushered her quickly into the foyer. He knew that something was wrong but could not put his finger on it. It was probably safer to use the stairs so they made their way quietly up to the sixth floor. Rick had never been a fitness fanatic. In

fact, running for a bus was over exercise, and years of good wine and food had slowed him down. On the straight he was as fast as most, but give him a set of stairs to climb and he needed time.

Nicole arrived at her front door first and was about to insert her key when Rick shouted for her to stop. Arriving a few seconds later, winded and considerably out of breath, he ordered Nicole away from the door and on to the floor. He collected the key from Nicole and very slowly entered it into the lock and began to turn the handle.

The blast threw Rick, still attached to the door, against the wall on the other side of the foyer. It was followed by a cloud of dense white acrid smoke, which rapidly filled the landing and made breathing almost

impossible. Nicole had fallen to the floor and was gasping for breath whilst screaming with terror. Then silence and all that could be heard was the shouting from other residents shaken by the blast, several of whom were beginning to climb the stairs.

Gradually the smoke began to clear and Rick could see into the flat. The bomb had been placed in the computer room and had been detonated by the lock on the front door. All of the computers had been destroyed and the room was littered with smashed and broken electrical parts, monitors and broken glass. It would seem that the bomb had not been set to intentionally injure either Rick or Nicole, but solely to destroy her computers, and in this it had been very successful.

Nicole had pulled herself to her feet and

was checking that Rick was okay. Grabbing his arm, she made her way towards the other end of the landing and using a key on a chain around her neck, opened a small steel door of what looked like a wall safe.

Inside was a further computer screen displaying a series of account numbers and a scrolling message informing the user that the data had been lost except for the last five seconds of transmission. This had been automatically saved when the main computers had gone down.

Rick watched Nicole as she grabbed a note pad and pencil from a shelf above the computer and wrote down the series of numbers as they appeared on the screen. He could see that with the exception of one or two, the account numbers were the same, and as Nicole

explained, would seem to be the account that they had been searching for. All they had to do now was to trace the account to the originating bank.

There was little point in hanging around here as all of Nicole's computers, with the exception of this back up machine, had been destroyed and in any event Rick had obviously been traced. It wouldn't be long before his captors returned and he wouldn't be so lucky the next time.

What was for certain was that the computer fraud was very important to someone, and they were doing everything that they could to make sure that Rick's investigation failed to reach any conclusions.

Nicole took Rick's hand and together they made for the lift. The blast had convince her

that Rick was on to something important and leaving aside the damage to her apartment she was determined that answers would be found. Upon reaching the ground floor the lift doors opened and they walked steadily towards the rear of the entrance lobby and passed through the fire exit door leading onto the rear parking area.

Her car, a Goodwood Green MG sports convertible was parked at the far end of the compound and they approached it with a great deal of caution. Nothing appeared to have been interfered with so using her key fob Nicole unlocked the doors. There was a flash of her indicators and a gentle clunk as the locks were released. But nothing more. So far, so good. Gingerly both Rick and Nicole lowered themselves into their seats and Nicole

inserted the ignition key. The car started with a muffled roar and as they pulled out of the parking compound they both visibly gave a sigh of relief.

Nicole drove the car well, making good advantage of the road handling characteristics of the MG and they were soon out on to the open road. Passing along tree lined country lanes the headlights picked out several rabbits whose eyes were lit by the beams of light. Shadows grew and shrank as they sped along, with glimpses of the moon as they passed under overhanging branches. It was a good feeling away from the bustle of the city and it was here where one could get the correct perspective on what was really important. Why continue with this search at all. It was obviously dangerous and they had

both already been under attack. Nicole had lost all of her computers. It would be difficult to explain this to her insurers.

Nicole seemed very quiet and Rick was unsure of how he could help. She seemed determined to continue with the investigation but he knew that he was responsible for the blast and didn't want to put her through any more.

Nicole seemed to sense what Rick was thinking and placed her hand on his. It was enough to know that they were both in this together and she was determined that the solution would be found.

They were soon approaching a small village and as they passed the local Inn, the MG slowed and turned into a narrow lane winding its way behind the row of quaint village cottages. One of the cottages, neat and with

a decoratively thatched roof stood back from the lane and it was here that Nicole turned the car into a short shingled drive and rolled to a halt. Switching off the lights and engine, they both sat in complete darkness save for a dim shaft of light from a window of the adjacent cottage a few yards away.

Rick followed Nicole to the front door as she inserted a key and entered a prettily decorated hallway. Closing the door quietly behind him, Rick switched on the hall light and a warm orange glow flooded the area.

“What a lovely cottage” remarked Rick as he took in the cottage style furnishings and well designed wall and floor coverings.

“It’s, it was, my fathers. Nobody knew about this place. It was his escape when life got difficult. I use to visit very

occasionally so he gave me a key.” Nicole was heading for the study. “Rick, make us both a coffee, and I’ll see if I can boot up his computers. We’re not beaten yet”

Moving towards the kitchen Rick could see how a place like this would be an ideal retreat from the pressures of life. The kitchen was modestly presented with all of the normal appliances and spotlessly clean. Everything had a place of its own with shelves for spices, baking tools, etc. located throughout the room. The coffee pot was on one of the worktops and alongside were pots for coffee, sugar, and cream. Whilst the coffee was brewing, distributing a wonderful aroma of

fresh coffee throughout the cottage, Rick searched for mugs and cutlery.

A shout from Nicole led Rick into the study where he found her seated at one of the computers, a look of quiet satisfaction spreading across her delightful face.

“We’ve cracked it. We’ve found the link” she exclaimed, and pointed to details of an account currently displayed on the screen.

Rick noted down the account details and without thinking, kissed Nicole on the cheek. Nicole’s face turned a pale pink and as she turned to Rick, he felt that at that moment he could have melted in her eyes. He had never felt that way about anyone before, and longed that it would continue forever. Nicole had risen to her feet and as she gently cupped his face in her hands her lips touched his. The

traumas of the previous hours dissolved into a mist of tenderness and love as they held each other in a passionate kiss.

Her body felt warm and inviting as he held her close. He could feel her heart beating in time with his own and as he began to explore her he felt her offer herself totally to him.

He tenderly removed her light blouse and released the catch on her jeans allowing them to fall to the ground. He felt her soft gentle hands explore his own body and as they kissed, his whole being surged with passion and love. Naked they lay on her wide-open bed

and he fondly cradled and kissed her firm round breasts. His mouth found areas of pleasure along her firm abdomen and hips and together they discovered each other in a passion of love and tenderness until they both

fell fast asleep captured in each other loves embrace.

Chapter 4

Adelboden is a small mountainside village in the Berner Oberland district of Switzerland.

A beautiful and scenic area of this country surrounded by magnificent snow capped mountains and fast flowing rivers that begin as glaciers high above the freeze line, currently at four thousand metres above sea level. The spoken language in this particular region is predominantly German, with small sections of French, English and a spattering of Italian.

Disastrously the very warm summers that Switzerland has experienced over the last few years have had a serious detrimental effect on the many glaciers, with quite a few thawing

rapidly. Recently large sections of glacier have been seen slipping down from the mountaintops into the flowing rivers and many of these same rivers had turned a dirty shade of grey and were bitterly cold. It is very sad to note that although the glaciers have been continually formed over a period of thousands of years, they can be destroyed so quickly, never to be reformed. Part of man's destruction of his gift of nature.

The Swiss are a very environmentally conscious nation and take great pride in the presentation of their country.

There are many new lodges being erected on the sloping green land and one such was registered to a German businessman, Hans Hafenburg. Hans, a banker working in the SDW Bank based in Bern, had paid for the lodge to

be built almost two years ago and frequented it as much as he could. His neighbours knew him as a quiet, kind gentleman who kept himself to himself and rarely had visitors, although this had recently changed. Several small parties of mainly English gentlemen had been seen staying at the lodge over the occasional weekend, and rarely was Hans alone. To his close neighbours, Hans had now become rather agitated, anxious and seemed constantly on edge about something, although he would never discuss any problems with other German speaking Swiss in the village.

Yesterday had been a particular upsetting day for Hans as he had been called to the lodge from his work place in Bern and been instructed to accommodate some English visitors who would be arriving later that day.

Shortly after he had arrived Hans had noticed that two men unknown to him, were working at a computer terminal in his lodge when, apparently, a computer hacker had triggered an intruder alarm, whilst penetrating some hidden files.

All hell had been let loose, and instructions had been passed to an English colleague to silence the hacker for good. Shortly after that episode had passed, Hans had been locked out of the computer room and ordered to prepare a meal for his guests.

Back in the UK, Rick had just completed a refreshing shower, and Nicole was preparing coffee as the telephone rang. Nicole lifted the receiver and listened in silence, save for the occasional grunt, ending the call with a “thanks”.

“We have traced the account to a bank in Switzerland, the SDW Bank, which has its headquarters in Bern” called Nicole, as Rick entered the room.

“Fantastic, we seem to be going places at last” Rick retorted “So what’s next?”

“Rick, I am afraid that I have gone as far as I can. To be able to identify the owner of the account you will need to go to the bank where the account was set up and have a friendly chat with the people in charge. If you mention a fraud or something, you may get a decent response. The Swiss banks are trying to rid their reputation of secret accounts, money laundering, etc., so are keen to help if they suspect someone is using their account for illegal transactions”

Nicole seemed to know quite a bit about bank

trading, probably from her father, but in any event now was not the time to enquire further. She had already helped a great deal and it was time he did something for himself.

A trip to Bern in Switzerland was the next item on the agenda, but first he felt that he needed to speak with his friend, Adam, so waiting for a moment when Nicole had left the cottage for a few shopping items, he called his old office. Adam, apparently, was on leave, they were not sure where, but it was for at least a couple of weeks. An important family issue had arisen and he had been called urgently away. When enquiring about progress on the hostage case, he was given the brush off, but did manage to discover that Adam was back on the case, and a conclusion was expected soon. They would say that, wouldn't

they, mused Rick.

Travelling any great distance was not Rick's forte, and air travel was a definite 'no go' after a disastrous experience a few years ago, so by road it had to be. The thought of driving over six hundred miles in his old, but reliable Nissan, didn't particularly inspire him and with the need for some rest and relaxation, he decided on a short coach holiday to Switzerland to include a visit to Bern. This way he could enjoy a well-earned break and work on the case at the same time.

Rick succeeded in finding an available place on a coach tour to Switzerland, and at nine o'clock the following morning found himself waiting with a large crowd of excited holidaymakers in a service station just off the M20. Lined up before them, like runners

preparing for the off, were coaches about to head off to a wide range of destinations.

From Lake Garda in Italy, the Austrian Tyrol, Alsace in France, Switzerland, and local areas such as Devon, Wales and Scotland.

Nine thirty came, and the coaches began leaving the pick-up point, fanning out to their planned destinations. Rick's group headed for the Dover / Calais ferry crossing before moving on into France and Belgium.

There was a mixed crowd of guests on board the coach. The party seemed to be made up, for the most part, of middle aged to elderly couples. Most of who were probably experiencing a coach tour for the nth time. A young quiet couple who looked as though they were on their honeymoon, and three other single passengers, a middle aged gentleman who

kept himself to himself, and two women in their late forties, eager to chat, and obviously determined to enjoy the trip.

Seated behind Mike (Rick managed to catch the name on his luggage label whilst boarding the coach), Rick noticed that he was keeping a record of the places that they passed through, and wondered if, in fact, he was writing a book of some sort.

The ferry port was reached without incident and following the usual passport and immigration checks, the coach drove on to the loading bay of the Pride of Canterbury, one of the fleets latest vessels. Some of the guests had already introduced themselves to each other and as they all disembarked from the coach in search of 'duty free's' and a good seat next to a window, Rick began to take in

the holiday spirit. He soon realised that this was something he should have done many years ago.

When his wife left to search for greener pastures, over twenty years ago, his life changed dramatically and the role as an instant single parent father took over his business and personal world completely. His sons gradually leaving the nest left him with mixed emotions. The sense of relief at the rediscovered independence was mixed with the feeling that he was no longer required to father the three growing lads. They were now old enough to manage their own affairs and no longer required the parental advice. Obviously there was the occasional request for a cash top-up, a good solid meal, or the use of the washing machine, not to mention the

shower, which would bring the lads back into the fold, even if only for a short while.

Independence? Well, sort off! Once a parent, always a parent!

It is not a simple task to take a holiday alone. After arranging holidays for oneself and three sons for many years, the thought of being along away from the security of home is not an easy one. Your whole existence for many years has been in the pursuit of pleasure and an expansion of understanding for your three sons. You are suddenly free and this sudden freedom is not easy to adjust to.

Breaking away from his thoughts, Rick noticed that he was the last to leave the

coach and made his way up the stairway to Deck Eight.

The ferry was bustling with excited holidaymakers. Young children were running in all directions. Given their unexpected release from the restraints of the car or coach. Queues were forming for the wide range of meals available on the crossing, and many of the passengers were making their way to the open decks to watch as the ferry left the white cliffs of Dover way behind.

Rick fancied a light meal, so joined the queue for snacks. Eventually, after an extensive wait, when at times he felt that he could well be eating the meal on the beaches of Calais, he managed to purchase a bowl of 'Spaghetti Napoli'. This tasty dish comprised of Spaghetti pasta and a rich tomato sauce,

and was amiably washed down with a half bottle of the ship's quite acceptable red wine of the day. A pleasant wine, not unlike that experienced at the French restaurant a few nights ago. God, that seemed like months away.

“This is all part of a dreadful nightmare and in a minute I'll wake up”, thought Rick, and pinched himself to make sure. No, that hurt, it had to be real.

The meal tasted good and feeling dreamily content he gazed out of the expansive panoramic windows. Rick lingered over the views as he watched the well known and recorded white cliffs slowly disappear into the warm summer mist. There were many boats scattered about the Channel, some untidy, well worn craft, fishing for their livelihood, and

the occasional pleasure boat ferrying holiday makers, much like Rick's group, from France and back. Seagulls could be seen swooping noisily down on to the wake of the boats carrying fish home to port, no doubt picking up the scraps left by the men on board preparing the catch for trade.

The tranquil seascape had a calming influence on those that gazed upon it, yet the gentle swell reminded all of the power that the sea could muster if roused by storm.

In less than two hours the call to board the vehicles was transmitted in several languages over the public address system, and Rick made his way, with hundreds of other anxious travellers, to their respective vehicles.

Heaving and shuffling his way along the corridor and down the narrow staircase, Rick

contemplated what it would be like if this was an emergency drill and they had been asked to make for the lifeboats. Head back to the bar and order a double scotch, was the sensible thing to do in that event, thought Rick, and wait to be rescued.

Speeding through France, Rick noted that all of the guests were now talking to each other, even Mike had opened up and explained his reasons for being on the trip. Only one of the quieter couples at the rear of the bus seemed reluctant to join in, and continued to keep themselves to themselves. Mike seemed a normal sort of guy. His marriage had ended in divorce just a few years ago, but since his children were already off his hands, he had taken many of these tours before. He enjoyed seeing different parts of the world in

comfortable surroundings accompanied by new friends, and spoke very highly about this particular tour operator, with whom he had travelled many times before. Rick had to agree that this was certainly an ideal way to travel and leaned back in his seat to enjoy the scenery that stretched out before them.

The en-route overnight stop was to be made at a hotel managed by the Novotel group and was situated in Luxembourg. The City of Luxembourg is undergoing massive re-development with all of the representative countries of the European Union establishing a presence within the city by building individually designed headquarters. It is remarkable that of all of the major cities of each member country within the European Union, Britain seems to have gained the least. Every

member Country is benefiting from massive investment through the development of modern new office and accommodation buildings for each other Member State except Britain. Maybe he was being cynical, maybe not.

The late booking made by Rick had yet to cross the Channel, so a room had not been reserved for him, but after several telephone calls and various mumblings in a mixture of French and English, a fine room was found on the first floor. It was hardly worth unpacking just for one night, so removing a bottle of Single Malt Irish whiskey from his overnight bag, he decided to toast his safe journey with a couple of sizeable shots and retire to bed. "Why is it", he remarked to himself, "that with all of the English speaking guests that must frequent this hotel

they do not provide an English speaking channel on the hotel television system. After all, most of the programmes on view are either English or American made anyway, and are being shown with French or German dubbing!”

Before settling in, Rick had perchanced to see that Mike had a room not two doors away from his own, but this was probably due to the fact that they were both occupying single rooms and had no sinister meaning. He was getting paranoid again and this would not do.

During the night, a torrential rainstorm that appeared to pound its way into the enclosed courtyard below awakened Rick. Sheets of water passed his window for over an hour, until gradually the storm eased and a pleasant washed and refreshed smell drifted around the buildings. The rain had been long

overdue. Much of the surrounding parkland had begun to turn a sandy shade of brown, with well walked areas actually bald of grass completely. Still grass is extremely robust and the autumn rains will soon bring life back into the parks and gardens.

Morning arrived on time with a rose coloured glow and Rick awoke feeling fresh and of good spirits. The next journey would take them to their main holiday hotel where they would be staying for four nights before making the return journey home. In that time Rick was determined that this case would be solved and he could return to his normal style of work.

Breakfast was the traditional Continental meal with a fine selection of hams and cheeses. A wonderful display of warm fresh bread, fruit juices, cereal, and that special

French coffee. The rest of the coach party expressed their good wishes to all, including Rick. Mike also seemed particularly talkative and together they shared a table of eight with other guests from the coach. For the couple sitting opposite Rick, this was also their first coach tour, and so far were very pleased with their selection of destination. They came from the Lincoln area where he was an Electrical Engineer, whilst his wife was relishing in the freedom caused by their last child leaving home. They were a kind friendly couple and Rick felt sure that he would enjoy their company for the rest of the trip. The second couple were totally different. They had holidayed this way many times before and were always travelling with this particular company. They hadn't had any children, but

felt that their careers within education had made up for that, with each child passing through their hands treated as their own. The remaining two were an elderly pair who had most certainly been married for a considerable time. Paul, her husband had learnt a long time ago that it was pointless to argue and left his wife to make all of the important decisions. After all, she was always right anyway. Sheila, his wife, in spite of being a hospital matron for many years, had, or so it would seem, single handily brought up four children on her own. What Paul had been doing whilst this was going on, Rick felt afraid to ask, and decided that it was best left to history.

Back on the coach the group settled down for the long drive to Switzerland. Mike had

brought with him an expensive pair of binoculars and used every opportunity to view the magnificent scenery as they sped towards the resort hotel. The coach made several 'comfort' stops on the way and they eventually arrived at the hotel just before six in the evening.

The village was spectacular with an awe inspiring backdrop of snow capped mountains, glacier fed mountain falls and torrential rivers, mountain lodges scattered like dolls houses over the emerald green slopes, and the ever traditional sound of small herds of cows each carrying their own bell. It was a

complete picture and for a long minute Rick felt completely lost in the tranquil beauty that lay before him. Here were natural monuments to the wonders of the world. Centuries upon centuries these mountains had grown and stood totally undeterred towering above the almost insignificant smallness that is man. And yet it is us who, in almost every part of the world, are caught in war, famine, deprivation and fear, and even now through the pollution caused by our misuse of the elements, are eroding the very glaciers that took so many years to form.

The cases had been offloaded from the coach and each guest given their hotel room key. A welcome drink was planned for seven o'clock and in the meantime, a refreshing shower, a tot of whiskey and a change of clothes was the

order of the day.

Rick's hotel room looked over the range of mountains that enclosed the small Swiss village perched high on the slopes, and as he opened the window he felt the clear mountain evening air enter his lungs and fill his very soul with renewed life.

The following day the programme would include a visit to Bern and here he was to try and discover the owner of the bank account so efficiently uncovered by Nicole only a couple of days ago. He wondered how she was. Had she returned to her apartment, or had she decided to stay at the cottage for a few more days. Perhaps a call to Jon explaining progress so far was in order, but maybe it would be more productive after the Bern visit. After all he might have the solution following

this visit. Who knows?

He pulled back the hotel's clean, white, sweet smelling bed covers, left open the small wooden sash windows, and with the curtains slightly drawn retired to bed. Lying on the soft white bed sheets, Rick could see out on to the Swiss night sky. High up on a mountain pass a single light was shining. Was this a refuge for hikers lost in the magnificence of the mountains that have lost track of the very time, or a waypoint for travellers passing through the area? It shone through the dark night sky like a beacon of hope, backed by a range of snow capped mountains that have stood there for a thousand years. Stars twinkled in the satin blue sky establishing their place in the universe around him, and he promptly felt proud and honoured to be a part of this great

patchwork of life.

He gradually closed his eyes, and the world of evil and destruction, of which he was an uninvited guest, left him in peace and tranquillity and he slept soundly.

The morning arrived with a brand new day; the alpine sun streaming through the hotel windows and brightening all that it fell upon. The mountaintops were glinting in the bright sunlight and Rick could feel the warmth easing its way through his clothing. The sky was a vivid blue with small tufts of white cloud dancing about on a light south-westerly wind. In the distance he could make out the many brightly coloured cable cars and chair lifts winding their way through the large expanses of pine forests lining the slopes as they made their way to the summit of each mountain. In

the winter these same slopes would be filled with hundreds of skiers, snow-boarders and sledges racing each other in the fine crisp and deep snow that this region was so famous for.

A delicious traditional breakfast was taken in the panoramic dining room. Arrangements for the day's programme were discussed, and plans made for the evening meal. Rick gathered up his hand luggage and following the other guests through the main entrance foyer boarded the waiting coach.

They travelled along narrow mountain roads that seemed to cling to the side of the mountains. They passed through beautiful untouched villages and along the banks of deep still lakes reflecting the mountains as a mirrored picture postcard. It was to be a

couple of hours later when the coach pulled into Bern, the capital of Switzerland, and dropped the passengers by the Tourist Information Office. They had two hours to explore the city and would be collected from this same point.

With its time-honoured sandstone buildings, historic towers and unique fountains Bern, the seat of the Swiss government, is one of the finest examples of mediaeval civic architecture in Europe. The city's appearance has remained virtually unchanged for centuries, earning Bern a place on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. Thanks to this honour the city with its popular Bear Pits (the bear is Bern's heraldic symbol) is on a par with Rome, the Egyptian pyramids and the Taj Mahal.

Most of his fellow travellers left the coach and headed for the city centre, crossing the River Aare where rows of shops hidden under stone promenades tempt visitors to purchase expensive souvenirs.

Rick, however, headed for the headquarters of the SDW Bank where he hoped some of his questions would be answered. Whilst leaving the coach he hadn't noticed where Mike had gone, but assumed that he was sightseeing with the others.

The SDW Bank headquarters were, according to a local tourist map, situated at the top of the main street leading from the 'Bear Pit', a walk of about three hundred metres. Making his way up through the myriad of narrow promenades lining both sides of this busy street, Rick was trying to conceive a plan

that would produce the answers that he was looking for. The manager is not going to be any sort of a fool, so the best approach would be straight and up front.

The building announcing itself as the SDW Bank headquarters was a distinguished looking building made from traditional stone with many ornate carvings decorating the exterior.

There had been an attempt to bring the façade up to date without destroying the character of the original design and this had been tastefully and reverently completed. Pushing open the wide glazed doors Rick was greeted by a vast entrance foyer hung with crystal chandeliers and beautifully maintained stained glass mirrors, many inscribed with a bear, the symbol of Bern.

The bank itself was relatively quiet with

only a few businessmen and woman at the various stations and the heavy mahogany door leading to the Manager's office lay to his left.

As Rick approached the door he was confronted by a uniformed security guard who, in broad German, enquired as to his business in the bank. Rick explained that he was English, and in the short time that he was in Bern, he would like to have a word with the Manager. The guard politely led Rick to a small waiting area and knocked on the Manager's door. The door opened and the guard disappeared for a few moments, returning to beckon Rick forward.

The Manager was a pleasant, very well dressed young man with short cropped blond hair, an expensively tailored blue suit and

highly polished shoes, and coming out in front of his desk, motioned Rick to take a seat.

“Good morning, sir” the Manager spoke perfect English “and how can I help you?”

At least we are speaking the same language, thought Rick whilst passing the account details to his host. “I am a private detective from England, following up a case of Internet credit fraud.” He passed the Manager his card “In the course of my enquiries the following account details surfaced” Going well so far, tempted Rick “I am hoping that you are able to put a name to the account, and possibly an address”

“Ah, well. The account number would most certainly appear to be from this bank, but as I am sure you are aware I am unable to release any details of the account” And the sheet of

paper was passed back.

“Yes, I understand that” added Rick, “but this account is being used for the transfer of fraudulently obtained funds from across the world and no action by yourself may be construed as condolence.”

The Manager moved to the back of his desk and reached for the telephone “Mr Shore” glancing at Rick’s business card, “How can I be certain that this account is indeed being used for the purpose you suggest?”

This was a very good question and Rick felt the opportunity to close this case was beginning to fade

“At this precise moment, Sir, I can't. I can assure you however; that whatever I discover will be passed to you personally before I make any other move. I am not interested in the amount in the account, only in whose name it is registered.”

“Okag Mr Shore” As he pressed one of the telephone keys “I shall instruct my assistant to provide the information that you have asked for. But you must understand that as soon as you have any news you will report back to me immediately” He replaced the telephone “And you will only be given the name of the holder of the account. I cannot possibly release any other information. At least at this stage.”

The door was knocked and a short, bald headed gentleman entered the room.

“Ah, Hans, would you please fetch this

gentleman the name of the holder of this account” signalling to Hans, “Mr Shore would you pass the details over”

“If Mr Shore would care to wait outside, Hans will bring you the details forthwith” and indicated that the meeting was at an end.

Both men left the room and Rick took a seat once more as Hans headed for his office and computer.

A rather annoyed and middle-aged businessman

dressed in a formal tweed suit was shouting at one of the young cashiers, causing her to burst into tears and head for the rest room.

Rick noticed that a more senior member of staff, who was trying unsuccessfully to placate the customer, immediately filled her place. Eventually even she felt defeated and called for the Assistant Manager. A colleague

informed her that he was currently busy in his office sorting out a query with another client and would be a few minutes. The customer, by this time, had obviously had enough, and picking up his papers, he stormed out of the bank leaving the glass doors swinging on their hinges. This was not a good day, mused Rick.

It was almost ten minutes later when several members of staff announced that Hans had not re-appeared from his office and it had been locked from the inside. Whatever they tried they could not get him to answer. Even the telephone remained unanswered although they could hear it ringing through the door. The Manager was reluctantly called and a small rescue party headed towards his office.

The door had most certainly been locked from the inside and it was impossible to either

unlock it, or look through the keyhole, as the key remained in it. The only way forward was to break open the door and gently pushing his colleagues to one side, the Manager placed his shoulder against the lock and pushed with all of his strength.

At first the door refused to budge, but with a sudden jolt it sprung open. Hans could be clearly seen lying across his desk with a stream of warm scarlet blood oozing from an open wound in the back of his neck finding its way across the polished mahogany desk and down on to the carpet beneath his feet. He was certainly dead, and from the smashed window behind him, he had been shot at fairly close range from the street outside. Death was probably instant. Papers and files that he had been working on were exactly as he had

left them.

Rick, realising something was wrong, headed for the same office, and finding an hysterical crowd gathered around the open door, gently brushed them aside and entered the room to find the Manager hovering over the lifeless body of his assistant.

Taking immediate charge “Don’t touch anything” screamed Rick “and has anyone called the police?” Several onlookers moved back towards the cashier stations as Rick approached the desk. He spotted his note containing the account number still in the dead-man’s hand and opened on the desk was a printout of the same account.

Both Rick, and the Manager, grasped what had happened at the same time as the name of the account holder was Hans Hafenburg, the very

same person that had died so brutally a few moments ago.

Rick turned and left the bank with the printout still in his hand. He headed back to the coach as the police began to arrive. The sirens wailing as four police cars skidded to a halt outside the bank and a squad of armed officers entered the foyer.

The tour party was already beginning to gather around the coach doors as Rick arrived at the 'Bear Pit'. Many of the couples had bought a range of souvenirs. Mike, and the youngest of the single women, were deep in conversation about the state of the bears in the pit and complaining that they didn't appear to be very well treated. Although to Rick the bears seemed perfectly happy strolling around the sizeable compound

accepting food titbits from the crowd above.

Boarding the coach and making his way to his seat behind Mike, Rick opened up the report he had taken from the bank. This was indeed the account being used by the fraudsters as could be seen from the number and value of the transactions over any twenty four-hour period.

The address of the account holder was clearly printed on the top of the report and this was to be Rick's next port of call.

Lunch was to be in a small castle town some fifty kilometres west so with the last person on board, the coach headed off once more. The journey was uneventful except that one of the elderly ladies had difficulty in unlocking the on-board toilet door, which did cause some light amusement amongst the other passengers.

With the hot sun beating its way through the

wide windows, the temperature inside the coach began to rise and was soon doing battle with the air-conditioning system. Fortunately the latter won and the temperature was controlled at a reasonable twenty-one degrees.

The castle town of Gruyeres was soon reached and the passengers disembarked and headed for the nearest restaurant. Gruyeres is located approximately sixty four kilometres to the south west of Bern, and this small town, once belonging to the counts of Grugères, is known for its castle and its cheese. It's a highlight for anyone taking the "cheese route" through Switzerland. It's also a good base for exploring the district of Grugère (the region is spelled without an "s"). In the canton of Fribourg, the little town of Grugères seems to slumber somewhere back in

the Middle Ages. Enclosed by 12th-century ramparts, it's dominated by a castle, where the counts lived from the 12th to the 16th century. Their crest, which bears a crane, is still used in Grugères.

Cars are forbidden to enter between Easter and the first of November (and on Sunday all year round). Therefore you must park your car outside the gates and walk into town.

Everything within the town can easily be explored on foot.

Rick made his way up the steep incline on the search for a public telephone box from where he would make contact with Jon, his employer back in the UK, and request further instructions. Rounding a sharp corner almost opposite the town church, he almost walked into Mike who appeared to be on a similar

search. Apologising, Mike continued his search in the direction from whence Rick had come, leaving Rick to climb further up the hill towards the castle.

The view whilst climbing the steep lane that led up to the castle and town square was magnificent. It looked out over miles of neatly laid out fields, generally of maize, criss-crossed with narrow fast flowing streams leading from the grand mountain ranges to the many small lakes that form the pattern in this area of Switzerland.

Just ahead and to the right Rick noticed a small sign indicating the location of a call box and he made his way towards it. The box was standing in the shade made by the end of a row of neat cottages, no doubt used by the servants of the castle's household many years

ago. They were each adorned by well kept flower boxes, and neatly tied back net curtains fluttered gently in the light summer breeze that was making its way around the buildings. The smell of freshly made bread hung in the air and Rick could make out rows of bottles of recently made jams setting on the windowsills.

The call box reached, Rick reached for the telephone handset whilst hunting through his pocket for some loose Swiss currency, when he felt the barrel of the pistol in the crook of his back. Swinging round, he found himself staring into the barrel of the loaded pistol held in Mike's right hand.

"What the devil!" screamed Rick, easing his way out of the call box.

"Now, now, Rick. Keep cool. We don't want

anyone else to get hurt do we” and beckoned Rick to walk slowly up the path that turned away from the cottages. “You’re certainly persistent, I can give you that. Pity it will be the death of you, and in such a beautiful setting too”

The two men had by now reached the top of the path and had begun to turn to the right and down towards the river that had once, no doubt fed the now defunct moat. Coming towards them, deep in conversation, was one of the couples from the coach struggling to make the steep slope towards the castle. Mike had get to see them and was continuing forward when Rick raised his arm and began waving to the surprised couple. Caught completely of guard, Mike was unable to stop Rick, and instead began prodding Rick even harder with

the gun. This was an opportunity not to be missed and spinning round with his arm still outstretched he caught Mike a hefty blow around the side of his neck. Mike gasped for air, dropped the pistol and slumped lifeless to the ground, rolling out of site of the couple into a mass of shrubs and undergrowth assisted by a hefty kick.

Rick quickly threw the pistol after him and walked casually on to greet the puffed couple who were trying to decide if the effort to reach the castle was worth it or not.

“Hi there” greeted Rick as they came into range. “I’m not sure if it is worth the effort”

“Well we’ve made it so far, we had better continue. Wasn’t that Mike we saw you talking to?”

“Yes, that’s right. He went off for a roll. Presumably he was feeling hungry. See you later, back at the coach” and Rick left them standing on the edge of the path.

As soon as the pair had passed out of sight, Rick made his way back towards the telephone box and was about to lift the receiver when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Spinning round with the thought of a repeat episode rushing through his brain, he found himself face to face with Jon, the guy who had introduced him to the case in what seemed a lifetime ago.

The look upon Rick’s face must have been self-explanatory as Jon gently took hold of his arm.

“We’ve been keeping track of you since we discovered Mike was involved in some way” Jon began to explain. “He use to be one of Adam’s old partners way back and we had our suspicions that it was he who planted the bomb at your contact’s house a few days ago”.

“So who were the two guys who tried to bring me in?” Rick queried, beginning to understand how it may all fit together.

“Actually, that’s a bit embarrassing” smiled Jon “but those two are currently directing traffic. Need I say more?”

The two men began walking slowly back down the main street where hundreds of tourists and locals were oblivious to what had been going on. Rick began to explain about the encounter he had had with Mike, but was quickly reassured that it was all in hand. The coach

operator had been informed, as apparently Mike had to return home due to a family crisis.

“I understand that you have the address of the unfortunate Hans?” questioned Jon as they began to merge with the crowd. “How about a coffee and we can discuss the next move”

The old castle keep that had since become the main thoroughfare was lined on both sides with an abundance of small attractively decorated shops and cafes. One of these had a table free and making their way through the maze of brightly decorated tables and neat wicker chairs, the two men established themselves in the bright sunlight facing the cobbled street. They ordered white coffees and for a short while just sat and contemplated the busy scene before them. It was Rick who spoke first, and passing the

computer report over to Jon he asked if there had been any developments on the hostage enquiry.

Apparently, according to Jon, there were several rumours circulating within the Force that implicated a few high ranking officers and the enquiry was now to be handled by his own department. There had been no further ransom demands, in fact no contact with the hostage takers at all. All of the leads had so far drawn a blank.

“Okay, if you’re ready, we’ve got work to do” and placing a Ten Swiss Franc note against the bill laid on the table made moves to rise from his chair.

“Just one thing” asked Rick “Are we in this together?”

Jon didn’t reply, but a broad grin had

stretched across his sun-tanned face, and Rick took it to mean yes.

Chapter 5

The evening sky was a rich shade of blue decorated with millions of bright stars and they could feel a slight chill in the air as the two men drove towards Meiringen.

Meiringen is the chief town in the Hasli Valley above Lake Brienz. Reichenbachfalle is just outside of town and has a funicular to the top. This is the falls from which it is thought the fictional character, Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty fell to their death. There is a museum containing memorabilia belonging to Holmes and Doctor Watson. Conan Doyle resuscitated his character a few years after the fall from Reichenbachfalle. In fact on a statue of Holmes in the centre of the

town, it is reported that there are clues to over sixty of his adventures for the enthusiastic visitor to try and solve. Rick considered this place as a very apt meeting point for their current task.

The address they had obtained had been passed to members of Jon's elite team of officers and instructions issued to join a meeting point some five kilometres from the lodge. Their time of arrival had been planned for twenty-one hundred hours and Rick felt that they were well on time.

Scattered around the magnificent countryside usually close to many of the towns were many traditional Swiss lodges. Many of which had been long abandoned or were only used during the winter season as ski lodges for the hardy skier caught in a snowstorm. In one such

derelict Swiss barn probably used by a family for the storage of Maize during the harvesting period, several portable tables and benches had been set out in a horseshoe shape, all turned towards a large white screen. Temporary lighting was festooned around the barn and a generator could be heard providing power for a range of networked computers.

After a quick but satisfying snack in one of the town's many restaurants and leaving the security of Meiringen, Rick and Jon drove up into the mountains and were soon entering the small stone flagged courtyard, where they parked the car and approached the barn on foot. All of his team were now present and awaiting further instructions. The computers were humming with life, and on one screen a GPS monitor was displaying the location of a

moving vehicle heading for their target lodge.

“Okay guys” Jon had approached the screen and began to address the group before him “You can see our target car is approaching the lodge. We have positive information that following the untimely death of Hans Hafenburg, the team have decided that it is not safe to remain here and are about to move base.”

“Sir”. A tall well-spoken man had risen to his feet. He was dressed completely in black and appeared to be carrying a shoulder weapon of some sort. “How many targets are we expecting to have to confront?”

Turning his gaze towards the questioner, “We understand from our intelligence, that there are six men and one woman involved and that they have all been called to this lodge

tonight.” Turning back to the group. “As soon as we understand that they are all present and correct we move in. This is not to be a heavy-handed blast and kill operation. Ideally I would like all of the prisoners taken alive and well”

Another member of the group rose to his feet

“Sir, what happens if we come under fire?”

“You fire back. But do not, I repeat, do not, shoot to kill. Do I have all of your understanding on this?”

A rumble of agreement went around the gathered group.

Night fell fast as the fading sun sank behind the mountain range behind them and a chilled mist began rising from the various streams that networked their way across the fields spread out before them. Rick had been

introduced to the team and it was apparent that they were all ready and waiting to go.

The lodge had been built on a small plateau cut into the mountain slope and was accessible only by using a narrow gritted lane that led up from the village. As the four vehicles slowly left the courtyard, Rick could feel the adrenaline surging through his veins and gripped tight on to the pistol he had received from Jon. Four hundred metres from the lodge, the lead car indicated them all to stop and pull over, and the team gathered behind a natural break in the slope.

It was agreed that it was no longer safe to use the vehicles and the remainder of the climb would have to be on foot.

Keeping to the grass banks running parallel to the track they made their way cautiously

towards the lodge. As they got closer they could see that one or two lights were on within the first floor whilst the ground floor remained in darkness. There were three cars parked to the side of the building each displaying GB plates.

The cut of the plateau into the natural slope of the land meant that Jon's team could get to the first floor level of the house by using the bank. This side of the building was in complete darkness and would, therefore, be an ideal point of access. Rick had begun to wonder why there was so little security to the building, when he heard a brushing noise in the still darkness some thirty metres ahead and slightly to his right.

Pulling up sharply, Rick held his breath and tried to determine what it was that he had

heard. He hadn't remembered any of Jon's men moving in that direction and in any event he was convinced that they were too experienced and well trained to make that sort of mistake. Again he heard the same sound and the hairs on the back of his neck began to rise. It had come from an area of low bushes only twenty or so metres directly in front of him. One of Jon's men had also heard the sound this time and had begun to circle back to seek out the cause of the noise from behind. Signalling to Rick to stay perfectly still, he was less than five metres away when a large hairy Marmot strolled nonchalantly across the gap between them, blissfully unaware of the stress that he had just caused. Rick smiled gratefully, waved, and both men moved closer to the lodge. The remainder of the team had, by this time,

gathered on the top of the plateau cutting and could see clearly into the first floor windows. One room was obviously being used as a computer room with monitors lining the walls. There appeared to be two men and a woman in this room sitting watching the screens. The woman seemed familiar to Rick and it was with a painful recollection that he put her in the bar just before he was shot. The memory made him put his hand to his chest and hoped that soon he would have the chance to have a chat. The next room was in darkness save for a low wattage bulb emitting some light from behind a large lampshade that had been untidily placed on one of the desks. Rick thought that he could make out the shape of a body lying on a divan bed placed up against the wall. But he couldn't be sure.

The remaining room was the lounge area, and here three men were sitting, reading some newspapers that were scattered on a low table in the centre of the room. One of these men was definitely the man from the bar. The other men he didn't recognise.

A shout from one of the guys in the computer room sent the occupants of the lodge into a sudden frenzy. One of the monitors had reflected a glint of light from Jon's team and they had been spotted. A shot rang out from the lodge narrowly missing Jon, who had by now organised his team into action. One of his men returned the fire and as a gush of blood splattered across one of the monitors, gang member slumped to the floor, blood oozing from a gun wound to his face.

It was no longer necessary to remain silent

so the team scrambled down the steep slope to the base of the plateau and under fire from the lodge made their way to the front door. Unprotected, the door was rapidly removed and they entered the hallway. There was absolute silence. The lodge had been plunged into complete darkness save for the flickering glare from the monitors easing its way under the door and down the stairs.

Jon signalled for two of his men to start climbing the stairs, when a shot rang out from the landing and a bullet penetrated a book standing on a small shelf, smashing a glass vase as it did so. Glass splinters flew everywhere and the team instinctively covered their eyes.

There was a second shot, which this time found its way into the left thigh of one of

the team causing him to drop to the floor clutching his leg. Blood began seeping through his trousers and he winced with pain. A returned shot buried itself in the wall on the upper landing sending small clouds of plaster exploding into the air.

Retreating back into the lower dining room, Jon needed to think out a plan. Whilst they were holed up in the rooms upstairs, the gang were virtually untouchable. Certainly without more of his team coming under fire. The only possible solution was to get the gang to come out of the lodge where they could then be picked off. The Swiss lodges are primarily built from timber extracted from fallen trees and were, therefore, constantly under threat from fire. Moving his team back into the open and into positions around the lodge, Jon set a

small explosive in the hallway to detonate in three minutes and he and Rick made their way back to join his men and waited.

Although anticipated, the explosion came as a shock to Rick and he was amazed at how quickly the fire took hold. Dense black smoke began emanating from the hallway and was seen to be spreading across the ground floor areas. Cursing and screaming three men appeared at the doorway with their arms outstretched above them and were quickly and unceremoniously whisked away by four of the team.

One more man followed them, and the woman who seemed only too pleased to be escorted away.

The gunman was the last to show and staring coldly at Rick he was handcuffed and stood alongside two of the team. They were watching the fire that had begun working its way through the ceiling and was making fast and steady progress into the first floor rooms, when Rick heard a scream coming from one of the rear bedrooms.

Indicating his intention to Jon, he made his way to the rear of the lodge where the fire was less intense, and smashing his way in, he clambered through one of the ground floor windows. The smoke here was beginning to fill the rooms and he could already feel the heat of the flames across the side of the hallway. Somehow he had to reach the stairs. Stripping the curtain from the side window, Rick wrapped it around his face and began making his way

towards the foot of the stairs. They were already well alight but with the screaming continuing he knew that he had to at least try. Rick cautiously climbed each step until in what seemed like a lifetime he had reached the landing. The screaming had now changed to a sob and was coming from one of the closed doors. Forcing his way in, Rick spotted the dishevelled body of a young woman lying trussed up on the bed. She was sobbing with fear and was almost certainly in a poor condition. Untying the ropes, with the smoke now penetrating well into the room, he scooped up the now almost lifeless body and ran to the open window.

“Jon” he screamed “catch her. Quick. I haven’t got long”

Without questioning Jon ran to a point

directly below the open window and held out his arms catching the young woman's body as Rick dropped her. Climbing out on to the window ledge, Rick took a flying leap from the room and landed in a sprawl on the courtyard below.

"My God" gasped Jon; "It's the Home Secretary's daughter".

Turning to Adam who was now standing alongside "Get hold of Peter Thompson and let him know that we have recovered his daughter, Susannah"

Gently carrying her to the grass bank, he laid her down and covered her with a blanket taken from one of the men's survival kit.

Susannah had, by this time, began to come around and sensing that she was out of the building began opening her eyes. She was in a

really bad state. Her normally bright sexy face was pale and drawn and there were tearstains down both cheeks. She had obviously not been well looked after and was in desperate need of a warm bath and some hot food as quickly as possible. Rick lifted her up and carried her to the car where she was laid out on the rear seat and covered to protect her from the cold night air.

Jon arranged for Adam and two of his team to remain at the lodge until the fire had been extinguished so that they could search through what remained of the building for any evidence that would help to convict the men. Although Jon felt that they had already collected enough and had six live witnesses, he was determined that this prosecution would not fail when it went to court.

The rest of the team left the burning lodge and headed back down the lane and towards the town of Meiringen. It was early morning and although the sun had started to rise from behind the mountains, the town was still wrapped in a dark cold blanket that gave no indication of a fine day to follow. The town's primary hotel, The St. Michaels Hotel, had a twenty four-hour reception and it was to here that they took Susannah. Eight twin rooms were booked, all adjoining one another, and the team began to settle themselves in for what would be a relatively short stay.

A Doctor was called to look at Susannah and she was to be confined to bed for a further forty-eight hours before being allowed to travel home. Fortunately there was nothing seriously wrong and the rest and some good

food would soon have her back to her normal self.

The morning arrived in full glory with a warm benevolent sun beaming down from above the snow-capped mountains. Life returned to the busy narrow streets as the town's people went about their normal business. The smell of freshly cooked croissants and hot Swiss coffee began penetrating the many corridors of the hotel and as with the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the many hotel guests were soon heading for the Dining Room where breakfast was being served.

Jon had ordered a light breakfast and coffee to be taken to Susannah's room from where the message came back that she had slept well and was feeling much improved.

It was about eleven-thirty when Adam and the

rest of the team arrived back at the hotel. They had thoroughly searched through the lodge, had collected some small pieces of evidence that may help their case, and were extremely tired and hungry. The fire had burnt itself out in the early hours of the morning and had been made safe. Enquiries were made as to Susannah's condition and they were re-assured to find that all was well.

Jon suggested that they rested for a few hours before holding a conference in the hotel lounge just before Dinner at seven o'clock.

Rick had a double room to himself and returning after a very full breakfast, (Not his usual boiled egg and toast), he decided that before taking a well earned nap he would first call in on Susannah to check once again that all was well. Her room was three doors

down from his own and had one of Jon's men on sentry position outside.

"I'm sorry Sir", he said as Rick approached him, "but I have orders not to let anyone enter the room without the express position of Jon Blake. I'm sure you'll understand, Sir"

Rick did, and making his apologies returned to his own room where he decided that he would first have a couple of hours sleep and then Jon and he would look in on the girl together. No point in disturbing her now anyway.

The sleep was deep without any dreams at all and Rick awoke feeling refreshed. The bright sun was beaming through his window illuminating the many small prints that adorned his hotel room. It was peaceful here, the air was fresh and invigorating high in the mountains, and he declared that someday soon

he would return to enjoy a longer stay. He should do this more often he felt. It was about time that he began enjoying himself now that his sons had left the roost. It takes a place like this to get your life into the correct perspective and reorder your priorities.

There was a gentle knock on his door and opening it he was greeted by Susannah. She was dressed in a hotel dressing gown, had washed and brushed her hair and smelt of roses and petunias. Asking her in, Rick offered her a drink, which she readily accepted, and pouring two glasses of red wine taken from the hotel mini bar they sat on a low bench facing the window.

She wanted to thank him for rescuing her from the lodge and bringing her down the track

to this hotel. She explained that she had been very frightened throughout the dreadful ordeal and was very much looking forward to returning home to see her father. Her father and his advisors had often warned her of the possibility of a kidnapping but she had never really taken the threat seriously. She certainly would though from now on.

Rick felt very uncomfortable alone with this attractive young teenager and suggested that they could perhaps go down to the lounge area where they could take in the magnificent views of the mountain range.

Leaving their glasses on the coffee table, they left the room and entered the hallway together. The telephone in Rick's room began to ring and asking her to wait by the door, Rick returned to the room and lifted the

receiver. The receiver was dead, obviously a wrong number and as he replaced the handset it suddenly dawned on him that when they had just entered the hallway, there had not been a guard on her door.

His heart missed a beat and his pulse began to run. He felt the blood begin to beat through his body and he rushed to the hallway. Nothing, the hallway was completely empty.

Susannah had gone. Pounding on Susannah's door, he was quickly joined by Jon and Adam, who without a second thought forced open the door. The room was empty. Everything was in its place and it looked as though she had recently had a shower.

“My God, Jon” shrieked Rick “I was with her only seconds ago. Where the hell has she gone? And why should she go? We were on our way to the lounge”

“Adam, you organise a search party” ordered Jon “I will notify the hotel management. Perhaps someone saw her. Come on Rick, there is no point hanging around here”

That smell, Roses and Petunias. Rick caught a whiff of it brushing past Adam as he re-entered the hallway.

“Adam, have you spoken to her since she showered?” Rick questioned. That feeling rising through his system once again.

“No, of course not. I was asleep until, like Jon here, I heard you pounding on the door”

“Yes of course,” Rick replied as he finally

left the room "I apologise. It's just that I'm getting paranoid. Just ignore me"

Adam left behind Rick and Jon, and went to seek out the rest of the team. Jon headed for the hotel reception on the ground floor, leaving Rick alone in the hallway.

Adam's room was next to his and when trying the door Rick, as he had expected, discovered it was locked. Knocking violently, he thought that he heard a sound coming from inside. The door gave on the second heave with his shoulder, and Rick fell into the room to see Susannah, with her dressing gown torn open and a wide staring expression on her face lying sprawled across the bed. She had been gagged with tape and handcuffed to one of the bedposts. Rick also thought that he could smell chloroform. Rushing towards her he

reached to release the gag as Adam entered the room, pushing the door to behind him.

In his hand Adam was holding a thirty-eight pistol. There was no doubt as to where it was aimed.

“You stupid interfering bastard” coughed Adam “I have tried to keep you alive since you blundered into this affair, even though my colleagues tried to kill you on more than one occasion. But you just wouldn’t give it up” and he beckoned for Rick to sit on the edge of the bed.

“But why all this” asked Rick indicating Susannah “For goodness sake Adam, why take a hostage?”

“It was our guarantee. If we had been caught she was to be our bargaining power” commented Adam “Hans used to look after her.

He wasn't much good for anything else, the pathetic weak willed moron. If it hadn't been for me, him stealing funds from his own bank would have been discovered weeks ago. How do you think he was able to afford to have that lodge built? It certainly wasn't from his piddling salary”

“So now what. You can't just shoot us both and expect to get away with it” struggled Rick, trying to find a way out of this.

As Adam moved towards Rick, the bullet screamed through his chest, blasting pieces of blood soaked clothing in all directions and spattering blood and tissue on the wall behind him. A second bullet caught Adam in his shoulder as he slumped to the floor, his head catching the end of the bed as he fell, spinning him round and on to his back. His

eyes stared up at the ceiling and life's light went out. Jon had silently entered the room.

Jon smiled at Rick and recovered the fallen weapon. Rick on the other hand had begun to untie Susannah and release the gag. She was still groggy from the chloroform but gathering her dressing gown around her she clung to him. She was quietly sobbing and Rick could feel the warm tears falling on to his arm. She had been through hell but was now free and he held her close as she began to recover herself.

Jon gently guided them both from the room and into Susannah's where Rick laid her down on the cool crisp sheets where she lay still and safe. Quietly pulling to the blue cotton curtains that hung at her window, Rick took her hand, gave it a gentle fatherly squeeze, and slowly left the room, closing the door

securely behind him.

The tour hotel was in virtual darkness when Jon dropped Rick off in the entrance foyer, and he quietly made his way to his room.

Somehow Jon had contacted the hotel and arranged for a cold meal and wine to be served in Rick's room ready for his return. There was also a note from Nicole wishing him a happy holiday and expressing her desire to see him when he returned to the UK. That was nice. He would certainly do that.

The bright new morning heralded the start of a free day for the holiday crowd and following a light breakfast Rick made his way to the local cable car that carried tourists to the top of a nearby mountain.

The air was crisp and clear. The sun had already begun warming the world around him,

and as he entered the pod, and it moved slowly skywards, his gaze took him once again to the distant snow capped mountains. Upon reaching the final stage he left the pod and with long thoughtful steps, climbed the final few metres to the small café built on the highest ledge of the mountain.

He ordered a cappuccino and taking it on to the small timber balcony that extended from the building he sat down under a brightly coloured sun shade. From this vantage point he could see not only across to the vast mountains that still towered above him, with their snow covered tops sparkling like diamonds in the sunlight, but also down in to the many valleys below. Ditches fed the streams and these in turn fed mighty rivers. The hundreds of beautifully designed and

decorated lodges scattered about the bright green hillside. The signs of village life with small herds of cattle munching their way through the lush green pastures. Their bells a sign of ownership.

Rick was reminded for not the last time of the insignificance of man and the stupidity of many, and he sighed contentedly as the spectacular scenery and purified air invaded his senses.

About the Author

Peter Thwaites is a Polio Survivor from the early 1950's and has reluctantly taken early retirement due to the steady degeneration of his physical abilities.

Peter is a qualified Building Surveyor and has a Masters Degree in Land Information Management and Mapping. He has been published in several professional magazines on subjects as Geographical Information Systems and Facilities management.

Just recently Peter published his autobiography, 'Come Smile With Me' which gave a personal and sometimes very amusing insight into the trials and tribulations of a person determined to overcome personal difficulties.