

Matthew Hisbent
70 Deas Wharf
Kirkcaldy
KY11JJ
07734247886
@mattie2twi
<https://scribbleandgo.com>

6500 words

The Eyes Have it

In the year 2525, if Man is still alive, so the old song went.

Well, it's 2085 now and this man is still alive.

Am I surprised? Sure. I've done a lot of looking over my shoulder.

It's an odd thing about a pandemic. I mean the second pandemic of 2035. When the weaponisers saw the havoc a pandemic could wreak, it was just a matter of time before someone unleashed a virus deliberately. Massive fortunes were made; millionaires became billionaires, bodies piled up in hospitals or make-shift cemeteries and government media machines worked overtime to shift the blame to everyone but themselves. Down in the gutter, at my level, minor gangsters carved out little empires resting on the corpses of their victims. I managed to stay under (or above) their radar for the most part, working my own little plot of Hell.

Until, one day, a clock, a dead tiger and a headless corpse drew me into a different world.

Want to know how? Buy me another drink and I'll tell you.

* * * *

Blood on my shoes.

Not my blood.

Suede shoes, second hand.

Red and green should never be seen except upon an Irish Queen.

No idea what that means, but for green suede shoes and thick, congealing blood, it's true.

Nothing I wear is new, but in 2035, after the nosedive of retail, charity shops are thriving, coughing up decent rags, even occasionally bespoke suits, one careful owner. A bit worn, saggy at the elbows and knees, but stitching and labels intact. At least I look semi-pro like a private enquirer should.

I'm on a job.

Supposedly empty house, easy entry.

Inside, I was lazily careless.

Big puddle of blood. Shining in the laser penlight. Even if decapitation tends to be messy a puddle that big is avoidable. I was too engrossed staring at a DeLander Longcase clock, circa 1720. Wow. German lacquer, possibly Schnell. Everything about the design, inside and out, shouted art, genius and money. Sixty grand to a rich collector under the hammer of a top auctioneer. Double that on the antiques black market. That's one of the things a pandemic could

not eradicate. Money, greed, avarice and conspicuous consumption. Four things. More importantly, the same clock as the one in the photo in my jacket pocket.

Worth a grand to me (plus expenses) for finding it. Expenses would be low. It had taken me less than 72 hours. A grand I was sure I wouldn't collect because of the decapitated corpse.

Blood all over my shoes in a country house that wasn't mine.

The client waiting outside in my Scrapyard Reco van idling at the side of the house.

Another mistake.

Never do favours for friends who are fellow members of a secret society, as ridiculous and totally lacking in influence as any secret society like ours might be. There are secret societies for just about anything now. Black market Scotch drinkers. Sex for vax deniers and refuseniks. Gambling dens where people gamble with their body parts for transplant to the rich. DIY vaccine peddlers. It's not relevant to this story which one Mikey and I belonged to. Sufficient to say, don't do favours outside of the society. Not even for Mikey Lobes.

Especially not for Mikey.

Headcase.

The Siberian tiger was a concern. It posed no threat to me, dead and lifeless in the middle of the room. Origin unknown. As many zoos ceased to function, other zoos, public and private had traded in the animals, looking to make a kill rather than kill the beasts. It was lucrative as black markets go. Equally unknown, cause of death, though asphyxiation was a possibility. Not easy for any tiger to breathe, with a whole human head jammed between its fangs.

Did I say, occupation, private enquirer, at the snooping, cheating spouse end of the scale?

Banned from using the word detective. That is strictly an official government appellation now,

punishable by sterilisation. Half-deaf with a faltering Hearing Aid I can't afford to replace and perpetually down on my luck except for Rosie, love of my miserable, often penniless life. She was working as a waitress in an Art Deco café above a recycled-shoe shop in the city centre when we met over pseudo Earl Grey and pitifully small French Fancies. I was detecting, contracted to unmask a tea poisoner whose antics were causing clients to vomit and not return. She clocked me as a gumshoe immediately. She pinched my last fancy; I took hers and as a reward she suggested an i.d for a poisoner with no killing intent. Her i.d. had been spot on. Who could imagine there were rivals for a Rennie Mackintosh café franchise in the same city? Soon after we went on a date, then another and another.

Happy together. Three weeks now.

Clocks.

I am horologist enough to recognise Aladdin's Clock Cave from the inside. Besides the DeLander there was a fine Regency mahogany eight day striking longcase. John Moore and Son out of Clerkenwell, London, circa 1810. An equally fine Japanese style Queen Anne longcase and the most gorgeous Grandmother clock in a tapered case with Chinoiserie decoration on a red ground. Painted dial with raised Arabic numerals. Eight-day Westminster quarter chiming movement. Circa 1925. As Art Deco as Rosie's Café. How good would it look there? I considered stealing it. A dozen fine mantelpiece clocks.

All of them hotter than a chicken wing on a summer barbecue.

Someone had been a naughty boy, but in his defence, he had great taste in timepieces, even if he didn't have a head. Genuine Harris Tweed sports jacket, corduroy trousers and tan leather Chelsea boots. Size 9 still visible on the sole. Interesting. I took photos of all the clocks,

carefully avoiding the corpses and returned via the window to the van at the side of the house and my client.

Smoking.

Inside.

Bastard.

“Found my clock?” I was terse; he was downright curt.

“Yep. Got my grand? Cash.”

I was banking on his reluctance to provoke me. If I was Hulk Hogan he was Minnie Caldwell. Look it up, under History (Soap Operas).

“Clock first.” Petulant.

“Nope. Money. You asked me to find it, not fetch it.”

He grudgingly handed me a grubby bundle. Dodgy payments were so rife no-one bothered with envelopes anymore. I checked every note. Small denomination, all present and correct, and genuine. Best to check with Mikey. Another secret society – counterfeiters.

“Follow me.”

He did. Confused.

“Is that blood? Is that a head? Jesus H Christ, is that a tiger? Not a rug?”

Nodded my head to all, smiling at his discomfort and the blood in which he stood.

“The corpse has no shoes,” he observed.

“No head either. Which was the cause of death do you reckon?”

He didn’t laugh. When he wasn’t paying attention I took his photo, on my phone.

“Can we take my clock?”

Shook my head.

“Not without dismantling its guts. Ruin it forever, and I won’t let you do that. It’s a beauty. How come you own a DeLander?”

“I don’t. I was on a finder’s fee to locate it.”

I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shook him like the rat he was.

“How much?”

“Five grand. A grand up front, non-refundable. You’ve now got that. I can’t collect without the Militia Police getting involved. Wait. The house is empty. You dismantle the innards and wait here while I fetch some packing and a van.”

I laughed, shaking my head.

“We need to go. Bodies, remember?”

I dragged him outside, no wiping for prints. I was wearing gloves, he wasn’t.

We drove about a mile down the road when he told me to stop off-road in the tree line. Called someone on his mobile and gave instructions to bring the tall van. No surprise as to the address.

“I gave you a grand. Tell me how to dismantle the innards.”

I did, but warned him against destroying the clock, or we would settle up.

He got out, I drove off, the tan boots on my feet, suede shoes in my holdall. Waste not, want not.

A grand in my pocket.

Cider, and dinner, with Rosie tonight.

Life wasn’t all bad. I did wonder, who’s the lady whose head is in the tiger’s mouth?

And where is the other head?

Dinner was great, Rosie was great. I was adequate but she was generous and forgiving.

I had a new pair of shoes which didn't go with the suit but life's not perfect. Especially not mine. If there were birds singing when I awoke, I didn't hear them. Some of the cash had to go on a new Hearing Aid. Else this one would soon be as dead as....

..a tiger. That woke me properly. Cat got your tongue, so the saying goes. Not sure that covers the cat having the whole head in its mouth. I shaved to keep up appearances and showered so I didn't repel myself with yesterday's stench. The suede shoes were still wet from the scrubbing I gave them. The new boots were a good fit, supple too. Not a speck of blood anywhere. Waiting naked to air dry in the draught through the apartment window I checked my phone. One cheeky text from Rosie (nice) and one sarcastic rant from Mikey who wanted my help to put the clock back together. £100 I replied. He would have stiffed me on the finder's fee; no surprise he balked at paying for professional help. Without me that clock was useless – he might even have killed it with his inept dismantling and transporting in his scabby old van. I wasn't concerned about the owner and the five grand – I did care about the clock, and all the other clocks in that room. Even with my short scan in the penlight I would reckon on minimum 250 grand's worth of timepieces in there. Maybe not all stolen, but the few I recognised were worth enough to wonder about.

I had bigger questions to find answers for.

Had the weasel who had given me the tip-off about the clock known or expected a body to be there?

If the tiger had removed a lady's head, where was the body, and where was the man's missing head?

In stories, right at this moment, the hero says, *'the answer was right on the tip of my tongue but lurking unseen and would not surface.'* Lucky them. If I had any answer it was buried in a coal mine that had been filled in with concrete.

The phone blipped. Mikey. Okay. £100. He gave me the map reference for the location of the clock. His warehouse in the Railway Arches. He really watched too much old vid television. Imbecile. The fridge wouldn't cough up breakfast, not even milk for tea, so I left. Easier to find a backstreet caff for a bacon sandwich and a big mug of strong tea. Too early for Rosie's dainty cakes and China cups.

I was a reasonably familiar face in a little café in China Street (a long way from Chinatown) where a customer's order never changes. My bacon buttie and strong tea was on the table before I sat down. The phone vibrated in my pocket and was ignored. Never answer it while food is in my mouth. It vibrated there more times before I consented to answer.

Mikey texting.

<where are you>

No punctuation. Doubt he even knew what that was.

<30 minutes>

<don't mess with me>

<You took the words right out of my mouth. 29 minutes.>

I may be stubborn, but I am no liar. 28 minutes later I was parked thirty metres from Mikey's unit in The Arches. He had some new neighbours. Barber to the left, sculptor to the right. Three units empty, displaying TO LET signs. No stability now. Businesses started up, made a bit of money, closed down before the next rent was due. I walked over cobbles to Mikey's place. From three feet away I saw the door was open a crack. No trouble, I was

expected. What was unexpected was the darkness inside as I pushed the door open to a wider crack. I pulled on my sheer nylon gloves, never off my person. Even Mikey knows what a light switch is for. The silence prickled on the back of my neck. Unnatural silence. Mikey was a runt, but he was a clumsy, noisy runt. One step in, I waited, allowing my eyes to adjust to the darkness when I pushed the door back to a sliver. I wanted to use the penlight. Last time I didn't, I ruined a pair of shoes.

Eyes adjusting, grey shapes began to form in the blackness. Half an old car Mikey had promised to customise for me. Never happened. Just a pile of discombobulated parts. A few towers of packing cases and a tool bench cluttered with old rusting tools.

A body hanging by its jacket collar from a butcher's meat hook mounted into the far wall. A length of gold-plated chain used to hang there. Now Mikey hung there, or so I surmised from the jacket. A formal identification would have to come from DNA if it was on file or from one of the river boys Mikey used to sleep with. They might recognise bits of Mikey I had never seen.

His head and hands were absent. AWOL. Missing in action. Whatever.

This time I managed to avoid the puddle of blood beneath the corpse. I stared at it, nonetheless, getting angrier by the second. Scattered within the pool of gore were the shattered remains of a DeLander timepiece, smashed into a thousand pieces. Heart-breaking.

The place was empty, else I would have heard or seen something by now. I was a sitting duck for a sneak attack even with my hearing aid turned up to full volume. I took out the penlight for a better look around. It didn't take long to establish that nothing was out of place compared to my previous visit when Mikey was possessed of his faculties and his head. Nothing added either, apart from the DeLander. In his little office I found a metal box which once had contained Corgi toy cars. I looked inside. Just a guess but ballpark, ten grand. No believer in banks was Mikey.

Easy to assume he wasn't killed by a robber. I transferred the money into a plastic bag left lying on the desk and stuffed it out of sight under my jacket.

I don't believe in coincidence.

Sometimes I don't even believe in good luck.

Not when someone knocks on Mikey's door, and I am standing there beside his headless corpse.

"Cooooee. Are you in?" Female voice.

Time to go. Cheers Mikey for your paranoia. I moved quietly to the rear of the unit where an old, lacquered screen stood against the wall. I pulled one side out to reveal his back door. No-one would know it was his because few knew that he owned the unit on the other side and had joined them together, back-to-back. A short tunnel connected his emergency exit and the door to the outside world. I pulled the bolts back and stepped outside into the light. Closing the door, I backed away. Mikey's little joke. The name above the door was UNIVERSAL EXPORTS. Oh Mikey, James Bond you never were. The new Bond movie would be streaming in three weeks. I'd lost count and interest.

Viaduct Street took me north where I turned right at the corner, emerging next to my car, just in time to hear a woman scream. I reversed into the driveway of an empty building and unhurriedly drove away.

I didn't need to see the lady who found Mikey.

I knew that voice as well as my own. Screaming during sex.

So, how did lovely Rosie, teas maid, know Mikey?

* * * *

First of all, I needed to reassure myself that madness wasn't creeping over me like poison ivy. I parked up in a side street near the shops, free for 20 minutes, and walked to the tea shop. No, Rosie isn't on duty the new receptionist informed me. She phoned in sick.

No message to leave, so I left.

I returned to the car and drove off, heading for fresh air and trees. I didn't get as far as I intended thanks to the Militia Police who had taped off the lane leading past the entrance of the country house and were guarding the valuable tape with guns. So, the bodies had been discovered and a crime scene established. I pulled the car over and approached the uniform in charge of yellow tapes. I must have made his day. Someone to point his gun at. I hoped the safety was on. I tried to convince him that I needed to get down the lane to the next village to visit my ailing mother, but he was having none of it. I could do the loop, east or west, he clearly didn't care, and come into the village from the other side. The tapes extended only five hundred yards past the entrance, as far as the next crossroads. I thanked him, no need to be churlish and chose to take the western loop as the hill would afford me some views. I reckoned without the malice of trees in leaf. I could barely see the house from the road far less tell what the law was up to there. I drove on to the crossroads, farther than I expected, and turned right. Well, well, that was unexpected. I should get out in the country more. I thought the metropolis was where all the action took place. SAFARI PARK, CLOSED. I guess that losing tigers wasn't good for health and safety. The armed guards on duty behind the big gates didn't look in the mood to answer questions when I slowed for a better look, so I kept going. Private Militia are even more trigger happy than the ones we swear in. Four miles on, next crossroads, turn right, city bound. I drove

through the village without stopping as far as the small crossroads where I encountered police tape again. I gave up and headed back into the city. Too many pieces. Too many gaps.

* * * *

I bought the early edition at a newsagent in the suburbs and there it was. Safari Park owner found dead in his country house. I recognised his name, but it was news to me that he had opened up a safari park. The bulletin mentioned a dead animal but no details on species. Might have been the elephant in the room, or even a rhino. I pulled into a roadside inn with parking out back and strolled in just like any late lunch customer. I ordered a sandwich and a small beer, American style, since I was driving, and re-read the paper. Even post-pandemic, traffic laws were enforced more rigorously than murder. Above the bar the lunchtime news was silently playing but apart from the ludicrous typos the sub-titles were enough. I was more interested in the pictures. It was definitely the house and from the aerial shots it was connected through a gated fence into the safari park. That was interesting. The last I had seen Rod Smalling's name next to a house it was a penthouse development in the city. Our paths had never crossed professionally until he gained a clock and lost his head so the fact that he had set up a safari park wasn't so surprising. He was 100% the entrepreneur with fingers in many pies. One thing was for certain. It wasn't his money behind the venture. It never was. The sandwich came and went but I sipped the beer and waited. The news bulletin came and almost went before the briefest of brief items mentioned the death of an antique dealer in a unit beneath the viaduct. Mikey – an antiques dealer? He was thought of better in death than he ever was as a wee tealeaf in real life. Tail end item, that was it.

Nearly.

In the background, beyond the reporter standing outside Mikey's place, was a face I knew very well (along with other parts of the lady.)

Lovely Rosie.

This was getting very interesting.

* * * *

I finished the beer and scanned my notebook jottings, blank pages, good for mind maps. I had arrows all over the place, not really linking things, just squiggles looking for targets.

Rod Smalling. Decapitated. Dead. His own house. Head missing.

Tiger. Dead. Unknown lady's head in its mouth. Whereabouts of body unknown.

Tiger - safari park?

Stolen clocks. A lot of them.

Mikey pays me to find a DeLander.

Located with Rod Smalling.

Mikey steals clock. Found dead in his own place. Expecting me, a planned meet.

Someone else had called and punched Mikey's clock. For the last time. Destroyed the clock.

Another expected guest? Unexpected?

Lovely Rosie. Visiting Mikey. I didn't know they were acquainted. Did she phone the police? Hangs around long enough for Press to turn up and hovers, listening. Didn't know Mikey was dead.

None of this I had mentioned to Rosie. I keep my business and pleasure completely separate. So, whatever her agenda was, she was an independent. Maybe even a loose cannon. I rubbed my aching forehead. I could be looking at the end of Rosie and me if she was mixed up in this. I could be looking at the end of me if the police could tie me in to the house and bodies in any way.

Rosie. Oh Rosie.

* * * *

Needing time to think I headed for an I.T. café, now a bit quaint since smartphones packed more power than a NASA computer. Interesting side thought. Fourth space station now in orbit housing fewer people than a small village. Virus variants killing at will. Did they really believe space would be our home? Not in my lifetime.

Back in reality, I wanted a screen to read, not a postcard. I paid for an hour not imagining I would need all that time. I wanted to know more about Rod Smalling and his recent dealings. He was a known face; someone must have done a feature article or two on him. He wasn't hard to find online, not being the shyest man in town. One article followed another, lauding his efforts as an entrepreneur and an employer. Sponsoring a local football team, a stand named after him, buying a Lamborghini, presenting prizes to the local rugby team. Pillar of society. He got

around. It was the next to last photo which stopped me dead in my tracks. Charity Fete. Rod Smalling and his brother.

A brother named Michael.

Mikey.

* * * *

I continued to read getting full value for my hire. There were no further pictures of the brothers together and nothing to indicate who the woman might be. I was fairly sure from memory that Rod Smalling had been married but I could uncover no pictures of his wife. If my brain ached before then it throbbed like hell now. I wasn't even sure why I was chasing these phantoms. Mikey had paid me my finder's fee and there was no one to pay me for establishing how and why Rod Smalling had died. I was sad, a little, that Mikey was dead, but if I was a target something would have happened by now. Let the police identify the head in the tiger's mouth and as for the tiger I couldn't care less.

I could just walk away.

Except for Rosie.

We hadn't been together long, but I liked her. She liked me, I thought. Even if her part in this was peripheral, I had to know.

I wasn't much of diplomat and on the drive to Rosie's place I thought through a lot of ways I might tackle her. I came up empty every time. I didn't want to alarm her or upset her. Softly softly catchee monkey. My reason for calling would be that I visited the tea rooms and heard she was sick. Logical of me, the boyfriend, to call by, even without calling ahead. I

stopped at a Metro garage and bought some flowers that had been picked in a cemetery. But they were flowers, ok?

* * * *

When she opened the door, she didn't look peaky to me. Mad as hell, yes, but not ill. She gazed at the flowers with a less than effusive gaze of thanks. They were shit flowers but still. For a couple of minutes, we just looked at each other like strangers. After three weeks I suppose we were. To break the obvious ice as gently as I could I said,

“Rosie, why did you visit Mikey this morning?”

She slammed the door. I stood still. I wasn't going anywhere. Okay, not the most diplomatic entrée but my last gambit had been ‘to hell with it, just ask’. I waited. She had another exit route, but I didn't imagine she would use it. Not her style. She was feisty and had been challenged.

The door slowly opened.

“Did you kill Mikey?” she asked.

“Nope. Did you?” She hesitated and for a moment my heart stopped.

“No. Even if I wanted to, it would not have been that way. Are they for me?”

“Yep.”

“First flowers you ever brought me, and they are shit flowers.”

“Are you really sick?”

“Physically, no. I needed time. How did you know?”

“Saw you on tv. That’s a killer by the way if you are throwing a sickie. Hope you’ve still got a job.”

“I’m not going back. You better come in. And bring the flowers. This will be the first and the last.”

That didn’t sound good. Not good at all.

* * * *

“Who starts?”

I had a scotch, no ice, and we were sitting in the kitchen, not her lounge. It felt like an appointment, not our usual kind of date.

“You knew Michael?” she asked.

That was telling and we had barely started.

“Nope. I knew Mikey. Don’t know a Michael. I suspect we are talking about two different people in the same body. Mikey was a fly boy. Dealt in anything to turn a profit, some of it illegal, most of it just dodgy. Occasionally he would pay me to locate an object he wanted. If I found it, he paid me. If I didn’t, he cursed me.”

“This time?”

“He paid me. He took the goods. The day you visited I was due to see him, to help rebuild the goods.”

“A De Lander clock by any chance?”

“One question. Do we know each other because of Mikey? I thought we bonded over tea and cake. I am beginning to wonder.”

“Don’t. That was pure chance. I didn’t know you had any association with Michael. Did you know Rod Smalling?”

“Never met the living breathing gentleman. I know a fair bit about him. I am the curious type.”

“Such as?”

“He was Mikey’s brother. I just found that out by the way. Wonderful Internet.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, we are shadow boxing. I know the DeLander was stolen to order by Rod Smalling, not for the first time, and my brother paid you to locate it.”

“Well, it was first time he asked me to find a clock. I didn’t know Mikey knew I knew about clocks.”

“I told him. I watched you watching a tv programme on antique clocks one night in your place. First time I saw you so interested in anything, including me.”

“Aha. Perceptive of you. Yes, I located the DeLander. Mikey paid. He arranged for collection himself. My part was done.”

“You didn’t see him again?”

I shook my head. Tired of negatives.

“Your surname isn’t Lobes.”

She smiled and I melted into my stolen boots.

“Neither was Michael’s. It was an insult. His ears.”

“Never knew that. Wow. So, we spoke on the phone. Negotiated a new fee to re-assemble the clock. When I got there, I saw what you saw. Got out the back way when you called out.”

“You knew it was me?”

I nodded.

“I was confused. Still am Rita.”

“Mikey was retrieving the clock for me. We had a buyer on the black market. I intended to sell it and then I was getting out. Sorry.”

“Would you have told me? About getting out?”

She shrugged, putting me firmly in my place.

“Okay, you didn’t kill him. I didn’t kill him. Any ideas?”

“I know who killed him.”

That floored me.

* * * *

Walking in the park isn’t my thing, any more than driving around the countryside is. As the house closed in around us Rosie suggested we get the hell out and walk and talk, and boy, could she ever talk. Perceptive too. She would have made a wonderful business partner, in my line of business. We walked around the swan pond, twice, round the rose garden, once and found ourselves on the fringe of a children’s play park, full of the sound of joy. Shame we were in no mood to share it.

Now I knew who had killed Mikey I wasn’t any happier.

A gangster is still a gangster, even if everyone thinks Taylor is a minor gangster. I don’t know what the borderline between major and minor is. Probably academic. Since the first pandemic he had grown richer and bolder but hadn’t climbed out of his swamp. The swamp had

just got bigger, the stench more putrid. If he had decapitated Mikey, he was major enough for me. Until now Rosie and I had been holding things back, that much was obvious, and I was torn between telling her all and telling her nothing and just letting her walk out of my life. So torn in two I had to ask.

“Is there something I can help you with Rosie, or is running your answer? May be a good one. I don’t know.”

“Can you kill him for me?” Flat, emotionless. A business deal, wiping someone’s clock.

I shook my head. Not my line of work.

“Then you cannot help me.”

“I can level with you. If you agree to tell me what you are holding back.”

She nodded, a walking dead woman in her own head. So, I told her all about the bodies in the clock library, about the tiger, about the woman’s head, about Mikey and about a DeLander. She wasn’t surprised by any of it.

“Two down, one to go. Me.”

“For a clock?”

“No, it’s personal. Better clean up the story first. The tiger was Rod’s pet, raised it from a cub on the farm. It was tame, often in the house. Not for feeding. The head was fake. His little game with Rufus. The tiger. He had heads made of meat and dressed like heads, male and female. It was his way of playing with Rufus’ food. It must have been killed outside. Rod’s head was removed so I would know who did this. A signature on a masterpiece. Taylor knew that Rod was collecting stolen clocks. That wasn’t what ex-husband wanted.”

“You were married to that gangster?”

“Two years. After six months he put me on the street. Expensive clients, but it is still the street. Rod paid me to stay away from his hotels or restaurants while I was entertaining clients, for a while, then like a good brother he tried to extract me from Taylor’s grasp. That was Rod’s mistake. Taylor does not give up his possessions.”

“Rod was Mikey’s brother; Mikey is your brother...”

“I am their sister, yes.”

Peak detective work that.

“The clock was destroyed.”

“By his thugs, I guess. Probably just a clock to them. Rod first; Michael second.”

“He knows where you are?”

“Always. He is in no rush. Part of the fun is playing with me.”

“Does he know about me?”

“Probably. He won’t see you as a threat.”

“Great. I am irrelevant.”

“Be thankful.”

“Not while you are in danger.”

“Unless you have 300 Spartans at your beck and call there is nothing you can do. I am leaving tonight. I can’t tell you too where. Delete my number from your phone. Be safe.”

* * * *

That was twelve days ago. She would not allow me to give her a lift, to anywhere, not even the railway station. I have not spoken to Rosie since, but I have been busy. Probably the most dangerous job I ever took on, following Rosie's ex. I could not figure a way to implicate him in the deaths of Rod and Mikey and if the Militia Police suspected his involvement, they were doing nothing. He may well have paid them off. It wasn't hard to buy people these days.

It gives a strange feeling in the backbone to know that a person you are following would happily kill you, but it squeezed ten years of experience into two weeks. I knew of his routine, and his haunts, his street girls, his clubs, his pubs and his days at the races. I also knew he went nowhere without at least three guards who looked as if they could rip my head off. No need for a machete. There was no slack, no margin for error.

On the thirteenth day, Fate intervened. I had followed his black Range Rover to our version of Chinatown and was now on foot. We were emerging from the south entrance when I saw Rosie. The surprise stopped me dead. Then I saw him, emerging from an alley to block her path. This was the very first time I had seen him without his bodyguards. Neither was surprised to see the other.

A meet. He slapped her. I guess that's his way of saying hello, like 'hi there' in Klingon. She took it, never flinched. They went inside a bar I knew had no CCTV and I followed. My pretence would be spotting Rosie, apologising for the intrusion and skedaddling. Might work, might not, but I was hooked now. All in for a big deal. Over a Scotch I watched them argue in a booth. He was like a tiger, playing with a bloody head. For half an hour and through a second Scotch and a bowl of sour crackers this went on. All I could see were frantic gestures. Hers reeked of despair; his carried the stench of mockery. I had no plan, just the flimsiest kind of

thought process that only an idiot would call a plan. He reached a hand over the table and clasped hers. Too tightly. Hurting her. She nodded through the pain. I could guess what she was agreeing to. A life of hell. Then he got up, gestured to his groin and made some kind of remark that only he laughed at. He disappeared into a corridor of toilets, and I followed. He let the outer door close on me, oblivious, but as I followed on, he headed for a stall. As he opened the door, I removed the only weapon I had with lethal power and pointed it at the back of his head. He sensed me and turned. I put the crossbow bolt through his left eye, pushed him onto the toilet and closed the door. I left smoothly but quickly, jerking a thumb to Rita on the way. She barely recognised me under the disguise, but I guess the eyes have it. She followed me, good girl, not questioning. I led her to my new second-hand car, almost shoved her in, and jumped in behind the wheel.

I drove, explaining as I went.

That I had killed him didn't appal her. It didn't seem to please her either.

I didn't stop driving for fifty miles, re-fuelled, and drove another fifty. We stopped overnight at a motel hidden behind a service station in the back of beyond. When she didn't ask me to take her back, I drove another hundred and fifty miles. We stopped just north of the Solway Firth, and rested at a cottage which she didn't know I owned. Family legacy I used twice a year. I told her I had fortuitously rented it for three months, for a break. If she believed or dis-believed she gave no sign. Just accepted it.

I wasn't even sure she wanted to be with me. It was not something we had ever discussed. It had been my impulse alone to free her, and there were moments by the sea when I thought she would take my car and go back. Whatever else he might have given her that was bad, she would have been materially comfortable, not living hand to mouth off the money I had taken

from her brother's place. She might go back one morning and say she was kidnapped by a rival gangster out of revenge. I would not stop her.

I could never go back. I would not last five minutes. I might assume that the vacuum as head of the business had been filled. That didn't mean they would ever forget or forgive if I was identified.

I was just happy to have this time with Rosie.

A working hearing aid was a nice bonus.

I could listen to birdsong, and Rosie's gentle breathing in my bed.

For however long I could.

* * * *

That's the story. Worth the drink? Good.

The stray dog looked at me as if I was mad, drinking from a bottle hidden in a paper bag. North of the new Border we are in Prohibition land, the territory of the new Ecosse Europe Convention. Hadrian's Wall has been replaced by barbed wire and gun towers and only a permit or hard cash bought a way into the Northern Land. The cottage made me a resident without citizenship. That would come. Smuggling booze for personal use was a small price to pay for a new life. I bum around, doing anything that comes and pays for food and a drink. I am adaptable.

Rita stayed with me for one day short of three glorious months as the days grew shorter and my beard grew longer. Then one morning she was gone. So was my car. Farther north or

back down south I have no idea. I destroyed my phone in case it could be tracked. The dog has been with me for a week and looks like it wants to hang tough with an old man.

My disguise is now age, a beard and a shuffling gait that is wholly natural.

Perhaps if I ever met Rosie again, she would recognise me.

After all, the eyes have it.

As long as you can keep your head while all around you are losing theirs.

That always made me chuckle.