

The Carlson Imperative
Book 1: Svetlana Curuvija
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Chapter 1: Frightened Waif

“Leave her alone.”

He stopped his leering at the girl and looked at me.

He snarled “And what if I don’t?”

“Carry on,” I paused, looking straight through him, “and you will find out.”

He made to move forward towards me, but his friend grabbed his arm. “Leave it Rodge.” then turning to me he said “We don’t want any trouble.”

I nodded, but watched them both carefully.

The troublemaker scowled, and shrugged off his friend’s restraining hand, but turned away from me and the girl.

She had borne his loud-mouthed profanities and uninvited comments regarding her appearance with stoic patience, and had kept her gaze on the floor of the carriage, despite his baiting her. I had remained quiet, just watching, until I had seen his hand go slyly to her backside and touch her intimately. Even to this she had not reacted, but was visibly shaking and close to tears, and I had seen enough of his cruel bullying.

The train rattled and squealed it’s way into Baker Street station, and the bully and his friend left the crowded carriage. The train moved off and I remained standing, despite there now being a seat empty near me. I said quietly to her. “Would you like to sit? I’m getting off at the next stop.”

She looked up at me, and there were tears in her eyes. Despite the dirt on her face and short curly blonde hair, she was

stunningly pretty, with high Slavic cheekbones, blue-green eyes and a wide sensual mouth.

Since she made no move toward the seat, I stood to one side and gestured with my hand. She nodded slightly and then sat, trying to wipe away her tears with the back of her hand. I held out a couple of clean paper tissues, and she took them, gently pressing the back of my hand as she did. She wiped her face, and then looked up defiantly around the carriage, causing those that stared at her to look away, then she looked up at me again and said "Thank you." Her accent was thick and mid-European. I smiled back and said "You are welcome."

The train lurched it's way across the points and into Edgware station, and I nodded at her and said 'Bye', then followed the Friday five-o'clock crowd along the platform and out onto Chapel Street.

London was still like a frying pan, oppressively hot and very sticky, so I walked slowly down towards Edgware Road, letting most of the other commuters overtake me. As I waited at the crossing, I was aware of the girl just behind me and to my left. I crossed the road and made my way slowly down Praed Street, and as I turned left into Junction Place, I could see she was still behind me, following at a short distance. Just before I turned into the 'Three Keys' pub I stopped and turned around. She too stopped, about twenty-feet away. I smiled at her and walked slowly back towards her.

She waited as I approached. Her expression and demeanour was an inexplicable mixture of supplication and defiance, and she spoke, a tremor in her voice. "Will you slip with me plis? I need money."

Good manners had stopped me from observing her closely in the train, but she was now standing full in front of me, and she looked desperate. She wore a skimpy, filthy dress, with a dirty silk scarf around her neck, and the straps of a small haversack were over her shoulders. Her long legs were streaked with dirt and on her feet were a beat-up pair of dirty plimsolls. She was a little too thin for her height and was visibly shaking despite

the heat.

“Are you hungry?” I said, and not waiting for a reply I pointed at the ‘Three Keys’ and added:

“That pub do lovely sandwiches. Come with me and we will eat.”

I held out my hand.

I’m not sure she understood fully, but she bravely took my hand and we walked the few steps back to the pub.

I opened the door and led her to the counter. The barman nodded at me. “Hi Joe, what will it be?”

“Hi Alfie. Double rounds each of beef, ham, and cheese sandwiches please, with two big side-salads, a jug of water and two large orange juices.”

As I spoke I could see the girl’s eyes taking in the huge display cabinet stuffed with large pieces of cooked meat, cheeses and bread.

Alfie smiled at me, and quipped “And for the lady?”

I laughed, and led her to a quiet side table.

Despite the hour, it was still quiet, with only a few punters. A barmaid set the drinks in front of us, and I said to the girl “Have a drink, there are some sandwiches coming.”

She lifted the juice glass to her mouth and drank heavily, finishing off the half-pint in one go. I smiled and sipped my own, then put down my glass.

“Како се зовеш?” I said quietly.

I saw her jump, and knew I had guessed correctly.

Unfortunately I had also frightened her. Before waiting for her to tell me her name I reassured her, telling her not to be afraid “It’s OK. Не бојте се.”

She clasped her hands together, and her lips trembled with emotion, but she managed to speak.

“Моје име је Светлана.”

I reached out my hand across the table “ Hi Svetlana, it’s lovely to meet you. My name is Joe.” I repeated in Serbian “ Моје име је Јо.”

She grabbed my hand and clenched it fiercely in her own. She started to speak, but far too fast for my grasp of her language

and dialect. I held up my other hand and said gently. “Пребрзо. He разумем.”

She stopped, but held onto my hand and looked at me pleadingly.

I saw Alfie and the barmaid coming across with our food and told her that I'd help her, but first we should eat. “Svetlana, Ja ћу вам помоћи, али прво нека нас поједу.”

Her eyes lit up as the food was laid in front of us. I ordered more juice, and we started on the sandwiches. She was ravenous. The delicious beef, ham and cheese rolls were demolished in rapid succession, together with the salad. I ordered strawberries, bananas and cream, and these followed the sandwiches, this time a little more slowly. Finally she put down her spoon and reached out her hand again. “Thank you. I enjoy very much.”

I smiled and nodded “Good, I can see you feel a little better.”

Despite the warmth, she still had the scarf around her neck, but during the meal I had noticed signs of dark bruising as she moved. On her upper arms too, as her sleeves moved, I could see ominous dark brown and blue patches.

The pub was filling up, and there were one or two glances in our direction due to her appearance, so I settled the bill and we left.

Outside, she grew apprehensive again, and held on fiercely to my hand. “I slip with you now Joe?”

I struggled to explain to her, in a mixture of English and Serbian that I would help her, and she didn't need to sleep with me. I explained I lived nearby and she was welcome to stay for a while.

“Светлана, ви сте лепу девојку, али очигледно невољи. Ja сам у близини куће, где можете остати за неко време.”

At this she smiled, but seemed still uncertain and a little afraid, and I guessed my mangled Serbian wasn't cutting it.

We walked down towards the bottom of Sussex Gardens, and down the steps to the basement door of my house. I let us in. It was blissfully cool compared to the hot pavements outside. I opened the lounge windows, put on the coffee pot, and grabbed a pile of fluffy towels from the airing cupboard. She had stood in the middle of the spacious lounge, looking around, her mouth a little open in surprise at the room's size, but said nothing and taking my offered hand followed me into the guest bedroom.

I threw back the bed cover on one of the two single beds, then showed her the carefully chosen contents of the drawers, and cupboards. I showed her into the bathroom, demonstrated how the mixer tap on the bath worked, and then tried to explain to her slowly and carefully in Serbian. "This is all for you. I will find you a change of clothes."

Then I added what I hoped was re-assurance.

"You are free to stay here as long as you need, and no-one will hurt you, nor make you do anything you do not want to do. You can leave whenever you wish."

I paused then added "Do you need a Doctor?"

When I finished my halting speech, she took hold of both of my hands in hers and looking up at me with tears in her eyes she said

softly: "Хвала ти Џо. Ви сте веома љубазни и посебан човек. Не треба ми доктор.", then in halting English "Thank you Joe. You are very kind man. No Doctor."

She moved forward and brushed her lips gently on my cheek, then stood back again to look at me.

I thanked her, and left her to bathe. I poured a large coffee then picked up the 'phone and called Zee.

It was answered almost immediately. "Hi, Joe."

"Hello Zee, Are you very busy?"

Her laughter tinkled down the line. "Not especially, can I help?"

"I've brought a young woman home, and she badly needs a change of clothes. She's a little taller than you, but a mite skinny."

"Ah, OK. I'll sort out and bring down a few things - twenty

minutes OK?"

I laughed and thanked her. "Thanks Zee, that's fine. It'll give me a chance to talk to you while she's in the bath."

"OK then, Bye." She hung up.

I sat and sipped the coffee and thought long and hard. Then dialled '9' for an outside line and rang Katya Salinsky's number. I heard her quiet "Katya. Who's calling please?" and greeted her in her own tongue.

"Хелло Каћа. То је леп да се поново чују твој глас!"

She laughed and replied. "Hi Joe, your Serbian is as bad as the last time I heard it!"

I laughed, and she continued. "It's lovely to hear from you, what can I do for you?"

I explained about Svetlana, and that I was worried that she might need medical attention, but may not talk to an English doctor.

"Are you available tomorrow afternoon, around tea-time?"

"Of course, and it will be a pleasure to help."

"OK Katya, and thanks. Perhaps you will have some tea with us?"

"I'd love to, see you then."

We said our goodbyes, and shortly after, I heard a discreet knock on the internal door leading from lift to the house upstairs.

"Come in Zee."

She smiled at me as she entered, and placed a pile of clothes neatly on the sofa, then sat down beside them. I poured her a coffee and related the past hour and a half to her.

"How old is she?"

I shook my head "It's hard to tell, but my estimate is in her middle twenties."

"Oh" she said, "not a kid anyway."

"No. She's Serbian and I suspect she may be illegal. As well as showing signs that she has been brutally beaten, she looks, and acts half-starved and she badly needs help."

She smiled at me. "Well, that's what we do."

"Any sign of drugs?" she continued.

I shook my head. "She looks clean. But.." I shrugged my shoulders.

Zee nodded. "Doctor tomorrow?"

I nodded. "I've arranged for Katya to call around 4.00pm to interpret, can you arrange for Millicent Courtney to call about 5.00pm?"

"Consider it done."

We both looked up as we heard the door from her bedroom open, and seconds later she stood in the room.

It was all I could do to stop my mouth from falling open. I had seen she was very pretty, but now, with the filth removed from her face and hair, she was staggeringly beautiful.

"Wow!" I heard Zee mutter under her breath, as we both rose.

She stood still, wrapped in the fleece bathrobe and watched us approach. I gestured to Zee and spoke, first in Serbian followed by English.

"Hi Svetlana. This is Zee - she works with me here at our Refuge. She is my best friend and she is here to help you."

Zee moved forward and kissed Svetlana on the cheek. The girl's arms closed around her and held Zee tight. Zee's arms went around her and they hugged each other. Svetlana was facing me and I watched as floods of tears sprang into her eyes and she wept uncontrollably.

I turned away, tears beginning in my own eyes, and poured another coffee. Zee held her, stroking her head and murmuring low assurances as she would have to a distressed baby.

Eventually the tears and sobs subsided and they sat together on the sofa, Zee with her arm around Svetlana's shoulders, Svetlana grasping Zee's other hand in a tight grip. I poured us all a coffee, and explained my intentions for tomorrow, as carefully and slowly as necessary, in both English and Serbian, until I was convinced that Svetlana understood.

Tomorrow, Zee would take Svetlana shopping for clothes of her own, and any other necessary personal items she needed. We would all have lunch upstairs and Svetlana could meet the other Refuge staff and some of the girls. Then at tea-time Katya would arrive and talk to Svetlana in her own language. If she

wished, she could then see a lady doctor, with Katya acting as interpreter.

I stressed again that no one was held here against their will, and that she was free to leave whenever she wanted, but I hoped she would stay and let us help her. I told her that she would be kept safe from harm, and that no-one would inform the Police.

In the course of my long and sometimes laboured speech, Svetlana relaxed visibly and when I finally sat back in my chair, she got up, crossed over towards me and planted a big kiss on my cheek.

She whispered “Thank you Joe.” then sat back down beside Zee and kissed her too. Zee gestured to the clothes, and they both picked up a bundle and left for Svetlana’s bedroom.

I felt emotionally and mentally exhausted. Translating on-the-fly, and being all-too-aware of the effects of making a bad mistake would have on her, had left me completely drained. I was also aware of the beginnings of conflicting personal emotions regarding her, and that worried me. I crossed to the ‘fridge and grabbed a bottle of German lager, sat down with it and switched on the TV.

I kept my eyes on the box but heard only the chatter of the girls, and I smiled wryly, knowing that despite the cacophony of Zeena’s occasional Portuguese, mixed with her perfect English, and Svetlana’s Slavic overtones, they both understood each other perfectly, and it gladdened my heart.

It was my turn to say “Wow!”

She stood just inside the lounge, Zee by her side, and gave a twirl, a delighted grin on her lovely face.

I recognised the dress immediately, it was three-quarter length and of powder-blue chiffon, and fitted her slim body perfectly. She wore no Bra and only a thin slip under the dress and her nipples stood proudly against the material. On her feet were a matching pair of kitten-heel slippers, again in powder-blue.

I stood up and walked over smiling, telling her in Serbian “You look beautiful Svetlana.”

She blushed. I looked at Zee. “A lovely choice Zee, truly delightful.”

She looked steadily at me. “You don’t mind?”

I leant forward and kissed her cheek. “No, it’s as if it was made for her.”

She gave me a quizzical look, but I just smiled. I noticed that Zee had very successfully hidden most of the bruises on Svetlana’s neck with make-up foundation, and on a sudden wild impulse, I moved over to my wall safe, and removed the small velvet box I kept there. I took out the gold chain and pendant, and walked back to the girls. I went behind Svetlana and fastened the chain around her lovely long neck, then walked her over to the full-length mirror. She gasped, and her hand reached up and held the exquisite opal-decorated Lalique pendant up to the mirror for a closer look.

I stood and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Zee touched my arm and said quietly. “Are you sure you want her to wear that?”

I turned my head and replied evenly “As sure as you are that she should wear the dress.”

She answered, a tremor in her voice. “I’m so sorry Joe, I hoped that you would be pleased to see that beautiful dress again.”

I turned fully towards her “My sweet, sweet Zee. I am pleased, no-one is more deserving nor fitted than Svetlana to wear it, or the pendant.”

I took her in my arms and hugged her.

We both turned around, but Svetlana was oblivious to our exchange, admiring herself in the glass in every possible pose. “She’s beautiful.” Zee said wistfully. I squeezed her hand and said quietly but with some force “And so are you.”

She looked up at me, a little unconvinced. “I have to go, Tomas is waiting for me. Be careful.”

“I will.” I murmured and we kissed each other lightly on the lips. “Nine tomorrow morning?” she said. I nodded and she let

herself out quietly.

Svetlana heard the door close and looked around. "Zee?"
"She lives upstairs with her husband." I repeated it in Serbian
and she smiled. "Just me and just you."

I grinned "Yes."

"Unhook plis." she turned and offered her back to me, and I
unhooked the pendant. I gave it to her, and she left the room.
I had just finished washing up the coffee cups, when she came
back dressed in a long warm nightie, with the bathrobe over
her shoulders.

She caught my mood. "You are sad Joe?"

"No, Svetlana, I am glad – Драго ми је."

We sat down in front of the TV and she nestled her head
against my shoulder, ignoring the TV, having eyes only for the
pendant.

She rolled it carefully between her fingers, the light bouncing
off the beautifully cut stones.

"It is most beautiful thing I see ever." she paused then added
more slowly, "It is special to you?"

Now that she felt calm and safe, her English, though still
halting, was at least as good as my bad Serbian.

She held the pendant in front of me.

I turned and faced her, looking straight into her beautiful eyes.

"Please," I paused "I want you to have it now."

"You are too kind man – I cannot accept. If say I borrow while I
stay OK?"

I nodded and smiled "Yes, OK then."

She seemed satisfied, and again curled up beside me, but I
could feel that there was something more. As if reading my
mind, she took a photograph from her bathrobe pocket and
handed it to me.

I looked at the two girls together – they looked like twins –
beautiful twins, except one twin was inexplicably larger than
the other, but I knew. The smaller girl was Svetlana's sister. She
had been watching my face, and knew I understood. She took
my left hand and said quietly.

"Katrina. Is 13. I follow to England."

I nodded in encouragement, but her emotions threatened to overwhelm her again.

“Many bad men..”

She stopped and shivered and I squeezed her hand gently, and she told me briefly, but haltingly, of how she had left her teaching job in Titov Vrbas, where they had both lived, and began her long journey to find her missing sister. How she had ended up in London, with very little money, but at last finding her sister, only to be made prisoner with her. She became more agitated and upset as she continued, especially as I could not understand some of what she said.

Finally, I hushed her, saying the words in English, then in Serbian. “We will find her, together, and very soon. But tonight you must rest. Ми ћемо јој наћи заједно. Али, вечерас морате одмора.”

She nodded and smiled, and I handed back the photograph.

We sat quietly together watching the TV. She had chosen a delicate scent that was most hypnotic in its effect and I found the warmth and touch of her body so close to me both pleasing, and not a little disturbing.

In a while I felt her breathing deepen, and my own head was feeling very heavy. I carefully lifted her into my arms and carried her into her bedroom, placing her gently on the sheet, and carefully removing the bathrobe. The Lalique on its chain was still curled around her fingers. I gently extricated it and placed it on the bedside table, together with the photo from her pocket. I filled a water jug and placed this and a glass on the table, and then I stood looking down at her beautiful head on the pillow, and a great sense of that which I had lost came over me. I turned down the light and left the room, leaving the door partly open.

I brushed my teeth and fell into my own bed, my mind churning. Not the useful, planning, insightful thoughts that usually accompanied my pre-sleep doze, but the events of the evening, and that of other evenings long ago, mixed and meshed, until they formed a surreal other-world, in which I blundered about blindly.

I did sleep eventually, but it seemed that the tormented brain-twisting of the evening gave way almost immediately to the bright sunlight filtering in from my French windows, and high on to the bedroom wall.

Chapter 2: Metamorphosis

I was aware of her straight away. She was lying in front of me, inside the sheets, her back and rump fitted into the curve of my body. Her head lay over my right arm and she had wrapped my left arm over her. I was aware of the loose grip of her left hand on mine.

I felt the slow pattern of her breathing against my chest, and realised she was still asleep. She was also naked. As naked as I was.

Experience prompted me to get up immediately, but I couldn't. My face was close to the nape of her lovely neck and I instinctively kissed it. She didn't move, but I was moved enough to realise that I should get out of the bed now, or it would be too late. She had my heart.

I carefully extricated both arms and got up. I was about to recover her exposed back with the sheet but paused, and stared in horror at the massive bruises stretching up from her lower back to below her shoulder blades. I covered her and shivered involuntarily.

I bathed and shaved as quietly as possible, and dressing quickly headed for the lounge-diner. I started the coffee pot, and a frying pan with bacon and mushrooms, loaded the table with Muesli, fruit and spreads, and fired up the big toaster.

I ate breakfast in silence and was munching through my last slice of toast, when two arms were put around my neck as she stood behind me and kissed my head. She greeted me.
“Добро јутро леп човек”

She walked around the table to sit facing me, a beaming smile

on her face. She had wrapped herself in the fleecy bathroom robe, but still looked ravishing, her short blonde curls falling over a slightly freckled brow to meet the heavenly blue eyes.

I smiled at her. "Thank you. Good Morning Svetlana. How do you feel today?"

She cocked her head on one side and looked at me quizzically as she worked at my words. I repeated the greeting in Serbian. "Добро јутро Светлана. Како се оцећате данас?"

She laughed. "I am fine. You help and make feel good."

I poured her coffee and juice, and asked what she would like to eat first. She devoured bacon, mushrooms and toast, followed by the muesli and fruit, with the relish and ravenous hunger she'd demonstrated yesterday in the pub.

I smiled and she laughed, pointing with her spoon. "Good! Is all good!"

The contrast this morning with the shivering beaten wreck I had met yesterday was startling, and I silently applauded her bravery and spirit. But there was still the matter of her physical health, which worried me intensely. I resisted the urge to question her further about her sister, Katya was far better equipped to talk to Svetlana about that than I was.

We both finished on coffee, and she went off to wash and dress. I washed up the breakfast mess, then rang Zee.

"Hi Joe, is everything OK?" She sounded concerned.

"Yes Zee, just I've been thinking about your outing this morning."

"Oh? What's the problem?"

"I think I should get Thak to shadow you both."

She was silent.

"Sorry Zee, I didn't want to frighten you, but I believe it's best for your safety and hers."

"Is there something you know?"

"Just that Svetlana came to England on a mission to rescue her younger sister, and has brushed with 'bad men' as she calls them."

I forestalled her next question. "Look, it's just a precaution in

case she's spotted. I know we weren't followed yesterday, so there's no reason to suspect they know where she is."

She said quietly "Then I think you are right. Will you speak to Thak?"

"Can you ask him to come down with you? I want to explain to Svetlana who he is, in case she spots him following you around and panics. I'll talk with him then."

"OK Joe." She sounded relieved. "How is she this morning?"

"An indomitable spirit" I laughed.

"Good!" she laughed, "see you in half an hour." and she hung up.

I took a small leather shoulder bag out of my closet drawer, matched it with a tiny purse, in which I put £50.00 in ten-pound notes, some pound coins, a £10.00 phone card and a card detailing our address and telephone numbers. After adding a small white cotton handkerchief, the little bag was very nearly full.

Svetlana entered the room, and once more my heart skipped a beat at her beauty. This time she was wearing a beautiful embroidered white blouse, and a full flowing white skirt. The green embroidery was complemented by a green silk-covered belt and matching shoes. I recognised the clothes as Zeena's own this time, but Svetlana once again made them look as if they had been made for her. I noticed she had the gold chain around her neck, but had wisely decided that the pendant should stay here while they shopped.

She stood smiling, watching my eyes looking at her in admiration.

"You like?"

"Да. Ви изгледа очарувајќе!"

She crossed the room to me, stopped and twirled. The full skirt ballooned revealing her lovely thighs above her knees.

I laughed and shook my head in admiration. She stopped. Standing facing me she reached out with both hands either side of my face and kissed me gently but firmly on the lips. I felt her sweet tongue run lightly under my top lip. She

withdrew her mouth a little – as if gauging my reaction, and I couldn't help myself. I kissed her, my arms moving around her and pulling her close. We stood there lost in each other, until the clock on the wall caught my eye. I broke away, but she held on, her face close, her eyes intent on mine.

"You help so much. Plis, I help you forget pain."

I swallowed. Was it so obvious? I was helpless to protest, nor did I want to insult her by doing so.

I said quietly in Serbian. "You are helping me by just being here."

There was a tap on the door, and she backed away smiling. "Come in." I said, and Zee entered followed by Thak.

I introduced Thak and Svetlana. I could see Svetlana was intrigued by this economy-sized brown-skinned man with his perfect manners and easy smile.

"Let's all sit." I said, and then to Svetlana in Serbian and English "I will explain what Thak does."

I explained that Thak made sure that no harm came to anyone of our guests upstairs, and that because I was concerned Svetlana may be spotted by the 'bad men' she had mentioned, I had asked him to watch over both her and Zee on their shopping trip. I stressed that he would stay 'in the background', and that she may not even see him, but that he would be there in case of trouble. She nodded and smiled at Thak, delighting him with her "Thank you Thak".

I got up and passed the small shoulder bag to Svetlana. "For you." She grinned and took the bag. While she opened it to look, I turned to Zee. "I'm dropping you off in Oxford Street. When we stop, you and Svetlana leave the car, and Thak will follow a few seconds later."

She nodded, and I continued. "Use the Trust's card, and get Svetlana a full week's change of clothing, shoes etc., and anything else she may need. Ring me with your location when you're done and I'll send Tomas to pick you up. What you can't or don't want to carry, have the stores deliver it – and Zee?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for this, and for the loan of your lovely clothes. Please be careful."

She smiled generously at me. “We will.”

“OK, let’s go.”

We left the basement by the door and passage that led directly to our Mews garage, and I pointed to our venerable M3. We all piled in. I operated the garage door release, and turned the car into Radnor Mews, then out onto the main road.

I dropped the girls outside Marks & Spencers, and Thak waited until they had entered before he followed. I returned home, grabbed a coffee, then walked upstairs.

On the ground floor I knocked on Zee and Tomas’s apartment door. Tomas let me in, his customary good-natured smile on his face.

“Hi Joe. Checking up on us?” he laughed.

“That’s right” I smiled. “Any problems?”

Tomas looked after our vehicles. We discussed replacing our aged Espace and I agreed he seek a suitable replacement.

“Anything else?”

“Well..”

I laughed “Spit it out!”

He shook his head “She should talk to you herself.”

“Zee?”

“She’s fretting that we are turning girls away, whilst that room lies idle.”

“You’re right, she should tell me instead of nagging you.”

“I’m sorry, I know it’s not my place..”

I touched his arm. “Look, there’s nothing to be sorry about. It’s my bloody fault for dragging my feet. I’ll talk to Zee.”

“Thanks Joe, I know it’s bugging her, but she doesn’t want to hurt your feelings.”

“Consider it sorted.”

He looked relieved. As I made my way to the 2nd floor I reflected on how my personal grief had impacted on the team, and I cursed myself.

I stopped outside the locked door, got out the key, felt the surge of pain inside me, and pocketed the key again, walking down the short hall to the Matron’s den. The door was ajar and I tapped and walked in.

“Hi Margery. How’s things?”

“Hello Joe. “She got up from her chair and kissed me on the cheek.

“Tea?”

I nodded. She poured me a cup, passed it over and watched me as I sipped it.

“How is Svetlana this morning?”

I smiled. “A quantum leap better than when I found her yesterday.”

She nodded “Good, good. I look forward to meeting her.” she paused watching my face “I gather she is quite stunning?”

“Very beautiful, but suffering from some seriously nasty bruising.”

She shook her head and swore “Bastards!”

I nodded, but laughed lightly at her oath. She grinned wryly, then reached out her hand and touched mine, saying quietly. “We can clear it out for you, if you want.”

Momentarily I was caught off balance. She nodded with her head in the direction of the locked room.

“Ah. How the Hell..?”

She grinned “I saw you just now.” she pointed at the CCTV monitor on the corner of her desk.

“Oh. Of course.”

“You provided them!”

I laughed out loud, and then more quietly I told her I was going to talk to Zee about the room.

“Let me know if I can help” she said simply.

I nodded. “Any problems outstanding?”

“Well, you already will know we are full, and I could use a part-time nurse. Can we afford one?”

I nodded. The story of the refuge was one of continual pressure on growth, made worse as the trafficking in humans now paid criminals better than that in drugs.

“Go ahead Margery, we have sufficient funds, so get the best you can.”

She nodded. “Thanks, that’s a relief.”

“How is Anna doing? Are you still happy with her?”

She nodded “I’m delighted, she’s everything we could wish for

and the girls love her.”

“Shall we invite her onto permanent staff?”

“Absolutely”

“OK, I’ll attend to it.”

She smiled. “Good, that’s it I think. Thank you Joe.”

I stood up. “See you after lunch, when I’m showing Svetlana around.”

“OK. Bye”

I went up to the third floor and entered the day room. I had re-engineered this room of the large corner house out of two smaller ones, and the sunlight flooded in through the large open French windows, which led to a paved high-level patio open to the azure-blue London sky.

There was a quiet, calm buzz of conversation in several different languages. Most of the girls were in their low teens, most still looked too slim, and most of them I had already met. Several girls looked up and smiled. Some of those I hadn’t seen before looked at me a little warily, and I didn’t approach them. Jane, the senior nurse was sat plaiting a small girl’s hair and nodded to me smiling. It was the same on the patio, scattered chairs and tables with books, MP3 players and drawing materials, and yet more girls. I nodded to Anna, the youngest of our nurses and she came over and greeted me.

“Hello Mr. Carlson. How are you?”

I smiled “I’m fine Anna, and please call me Joe.”

She blushed. I added “How is it going for you?”

She recovered quickly and smiled “It’s fine – I really enjoy looking after the girls.”

“Margery not to bossy for you?” I watched her slight discomfort at the leading question, then I relented, laughing “You don’t have to answer that, I was just teasing you.”

She looked relieved.

“Seriously. Is there anything you aren’t happy about? That’s why I’m here – to take on the problems that you can’t solve alone.”

She said simply and quietly “I love working here.”

I smiled “Good. Anna, we love working with you.” I paused. “By the way, Margery is taking on a new nurse part-time. If you

wish, We'd like to make your contract into a permanent one?" She beamed "Yes Please Mr.." she hesitated "Joe" I laughed "OK, then, and there will be a small wage rise." She thanked me, and turned her attention to one of the newcomers who was hovering beside us.

I sat down in a vacant armchair, and Baldwin, our most amiable neutered tabby, meandered over to me and jumped onto my lap. He did his dance then settled down, purring loudly as I stroked and tickled his neck. We kept two cats, both friendly and forgiving, and also a little spaniel whom the girls all called Sniff - not very original, but most befitting her.

I had closed my eyes and relaxed, then sensing someone in front of me, opened them to see the smallest of the newcomers standing silently in front of me looking at the cat. Close up, I could see she was very young - barely 12 I guessed.

I smiled at her, and spoke quietly. "Have you met Baldwin? He is very lazy, and lies in the sun all day."

She nodded, and reached out her hand, stroking his head.

After a while she looked up at me and said "Who are you? Where is Thak?"

There was a slight lilt in her voice. I guessed Wales.

I smiled "I'm Joe. Thak is busy this morning, but he will be back for lunch."

She looked at me and then nodded slowly.

"I like Thak."

I nodded. "Yes, I do to. He is a very nice man."

She relented. "My name is Lizzie."

"Well it's lovely to meet you Lizzie. I work downstairs, so we haven't had the chance to meet until now."

"Downstairs with Zee?"

"Yes, close to Zee."

"I like Zee, she is very kind."

I saw Jane walking towards me. She slowed, and mouthed an "Are you OK?" I nodded. She smiled, but sat close by just in case.

"I'm glad that you like her. I like her too."

"Are you staying all morning?"

"No, I can't, but I would like to come back up for lunch, with

Zee and Thak and you.”

She paused from stroking the cat and looked up at me, her big sad brown eyes solemnly assessing me.

“Yes. That would be OK.”

I breathed out slowly. Jane was smiling and shaking her head. She got up and joined us.

“Would you like to cuddle Baldwin Lizzie? Joe has to go now.”

Lizzie sat down in the chair next to me and I lifted the sleepy cat onto her lap.

I nodded at her and said “Bye Lizzie. See you later.”

There was no reply, so I nodded to Jane, and turned to go.

“Bye Joe.” came over my shoulder, and I turned and smiled at her and a grinning Jane, before leaving and making my way back into the day room and crossed to the kitchen/diner.

Connie, our cook was busy preparing for lunch.

“Hi Connie.”

“Hi Joe – tell me what you think.” She passed a small dish.

“They look like chunky deep-fried corn-flakes!”

“Taste – then tell me.” she fired back.

I bit into the warm morsel. It was crunchy on the outside, succulent inside – very spicy, very delicious.

“Mmm. Very good. What is it?”

“Tripe.”

I shook my head. “Connie you never fail to amaze me. I remember being disgusted at the piece my old man once gave me when I was a kid. He used to eat it cold, in a large lump, covered in salt and vinegar.”

She laughed. “It’s Portuguese – from Porto – their version of a tapas dish.”

I helped myself to another piece. “It’s lovely – and the girls will love it too – as long as you don’t tell them what it is.”

She grinned. “Maybe after – maybe not.”

“Any problems?” I asked.

“Can’t think of any.”

I smiled “Good. Let me know if there are any.”

“I will.” She smiled and turned back to the stove. I had been ‘dismissed’.

I left and headed back downstairs, spending some time on my

PC updating Anna's status. I tidied around the lounge, picking up the empty velvet-covered box and took it into Svetlana's room. I put the Lalique in the box and left this on her bedside table. I looked around. The room was immaculate, everything carefully tidied away. The one thing left behind was the delicate scent of her body - a mixture of the gentle perfume she had used, together with the sweet essence that was only her. I stood for a moment in the centre of the room, just breathing her in, and a million questions rang around inside my head.

It was 12:20 when Zee rang.

"Hi Zee - everything OK?"

"She laughed. Yes, we've had a lovely morning, and no bad men in sight."

She told me her location, and after hanging up, I called Tomas to take the car and pick them up.

I was relieved, but there was something else - I wanted Svetlana beside me. To distract myself, I switched on my old valve amplifier, and put a Beach Boys LP on my turntable. The bitter-sweet Brian Wilson masterpieces rang through my lounge and I felt a little better. I was tidying up my kitchen area to 'Do You Wanna Dance', when two arms were wrapped around me from behind and her voice was in my ear. "Yes plis I do."

I turned around, and she kissed me full on the lips, before stepping back slightly, and moving rhythmically in front of me, her arms moving up around my neck. We danced until the track faded, and then I broke away and greeted Zee and Thak who were standing in the middle of the lounge surrounded by parcels, looking quizzically at us both.

I thanked Thak, and said we would be up for lunch shortly. He left after smiling politely, nodding and clicking his heels together - something he did, thankfully, only for me.

Between the girls and myself, we carried the parcels and bags into Svetlana's room. She immediately started to unwrap everything, so I led Zee back out into the lounge. She was quiet, and I wasn't surprised. We looked at each other, but she

spoke first.

“She adores you.”

I gulped, but bit the bullet.

“It’s mutual Zee. I’m mad I know..”

She smiled. “Maybe, but maybe..” she paused, and I waited.

“Maybe it’s just.. well, right. Right for her and for you.”

“I’ve known her less than 24 hours. I feel guilty that she is vulnerable.”

She shook her head laughing lightly.

“I don’t believe it’s her that’s the most vulnerable.”

“What?” I was staggered.

“She has spent most of the morning talking about you, and asking endless questions. She knows what she wants.” she paused “Do you?”

I didn’t answer and she reached up and touched my face.

“You need your life back Joe. Let her in - I promise you will never regret it.”

She saw the tears well in my eyes, and moving closer, hugged me gently.

I slowly recovered some composure “I’m sorry Zee, for blubbing like a baby. What would have become of me without you?”

She looked up and kissed me, then touched me gently on the mouth with her finger “And what would have become of me, if a certain big, strong, handsome man hadn’t crashed into the hell-on-earth where I was imprisoned and physically carried me away in his arms to his own home, to safety and to unconditional love?”

For a brief moment we clung to each other, then separated. No further words were needed.

“Lunch?” I said smiling.

“Absolutely” she replied.

I walked back to Svetlana’s room and tapped on the partially open door.

“Plis to come.”

Hers was the happy face of a much-loved child at Christmas. She turned around picking up various garments saying “Look, look” only to put them down and repeat the display with

another. I laughed encouragingly. “They are lovely, and so are you. Would you like some lunch?”

She nodded vigorously “Plis. I’m hungry.”

“Good” I said. She took my hand and we re-entered the lounge. I grabbed 2 bottles of chilled Chardonnay from my ‘fridge, and we all piled into the lift.

Lunch had just started. The massive oak dining table groaned with a buffet that looked absolutely delicious. Some girls were sat at the table with Margery, Anna and Thak, some preferring to sit with a friend at one of the smaller tables, and Jane sat with Lizzie at a table to the side of the room. Connie wafted across the room with plates and dishes. I handed her the wine and we all three sat down together at the main table. I introduced Svetlana to all the girls at the table, Anna helping me when I stumbled with some of their names.

Connie’s Tripe was a big hit, the dishes emptying rapidly, and when I caught her eye she winked, shook her head sideways in a ‘No’ and laughed.

It was one of the most pleasant and enjoyable meals I’d eaten in 3 years.

We’d finished, and I took Svetlana on a tour of the house. I explained the use of the heavy doors, with their combination locks, both on rooms and each end of corridors, and that how I’d re-engineered the whole house so as to be as safe as possible for our guests, without transgressing on their freedom to come and go as they pleased. I took a circuitous route over from the 1st floor of the main house, to the small mews flat over our garages where Thak lived, and introduced Svetlana to Thak’s diminutive wife Pash. I explained that Pash took care of the main administration of the Refuge’s business and financing, and that her and I jointly worked on fund-raising and publicity.

We then left via the stairs down to the garage, and back to my basement down another set of stairs and secure corridor.

“Coffee?” I said and she nodded her head.

She put her head to one side. “Can go upstairs when I like?” While the coffee percolated, I retrieved a small lady’s watch

from the wall-safe and gave it to her.

“Of course. If you wear this, you will find that you can simply push the doors open, rather than typing in the combinations.” I held out my own watch, saying I had the same device fitted to it.

I repeated it in mangled Serbian, but she understood.

“Also, if you get lost, or lose the watch, just press the red button next to the nearest door, and someone will answer, and come and get you if necessary.”

Again I repeated slowly in Serbian, and she nodded her head and smiled sweetly.

I walked over to the wall cabinet and retrieved my spare Nokia, handing it to her.

“This has all of our telephone numbers in the contact list.”

I paused and she nodded. “Again, if you are out and need help, telephone, and someone will come to you.”

I repeated this in Serbian and then added apologetically

“There are only two things I ask Svetlana.”

“Yes?”

“Please do not tell anyone outside of this building where you are staying. They may not be the friend you think they are, and may hurt you or the other girls.”

She had caught my apologetic tone, and put a finger up to my lips. “I understand. I tell no-one. And other?”

“Until we have your sister Katrina safely by your side, I feel you are in danger.”

She nodded.

“I would like you to feel free to go out and about. In fact it is good that you should. So I would ask you, if you do wish to go out on your own, that you don’t go out without either Thak or Tomas following you. Is that OK?”

She nodded and smiled “Yes, is fine. Will you go out with me?”

I laughed “Of course.”

We sat down and sipped the coffee.

“Thak is small man for bodyguard?” she said thoughtfully.

I nodded, and answered her in Serbian.

“Don’t let Thak’s size fool you. I have seen him take down bigger men than me.”

Her eyes widened in surprise.

I continued. "I trust him with your life. He would kill anyone who tried to hurt you, or any of the other girls, if he had to. That goes for Tomas also."

She nodded and looked at me, then said evenly. "I see your eyes in train. You would kill?"

She missed nothing. I would have to be completely honest. "I think you know that to keep you and the others I love from harm, I would do anything, including kill."

She was silent.

I asked her in Serbian. "Have I shocked you?"

She smiled "No not shocked. You fight for your loved ones – that is what any good man should do."

She paused. "Will we find my sister?"

"If she is in London, I will find her. But we need to know everything about what has happened to her and to you, and that is why your talk to Katya this afternoon is so important. Are you still OK to talk to her?"

She nodded. "Will you be with me?"

"She's coming here, and I will stay if that is what you want. If you don't wish me to be there, that is fine also."

"Plis, I want you with me."

"Good, then I shall be."

I added "Will you see the lady doctor after?"

She shrugged her shoulders. She found this difficult and replied in Serbian. "I am fine, I don't need a Doctor."

I took her hand, and said slowly in Serbian "I saw the terrible bruising on your back this morning. I am worried you may have kidney damage."

She looked at my serious face and smiled at me "Then I see her for you not worry lovely man" and she leaned forward and kissed me. Her hands reached up and held my head, as her tongue flicked sensuously around my lips, and I put my arms around her.

It would have been so easy to just let go. She was ready, but I felt another pang of guilt, and although I responded warmly to her kisses, felt I had to say something.

I pulled back, and reaching up, stroked her right cheek and temple gently. She moaned softly and smiled encouragement at me. I was about to speak, but she saw my difficulty and did

it for me.

In her native Serbian she said quietly and slowly

“I am falling in love with you Joe. I am sure that you are falling in love with me, but something holds you back. I know that you are a kind and gentle man, who doesn’t want to take any advantage from my predicament and I respect what you feel. Then there is Christine. I know you have lost her forever, but you still grieve, and that too I respect”

She paused then went on “If either or both of these things are stopping you from making love with me, I want you to know I will wait – wait until you are ready, because I’ve never met anyone in my life before that I was so sure about as you, and I believe we were made for each other and belong together for ever.”

She stopped talking then added in English “You understand me?”

Her insight and beautifully-expressed words in her classic ancient tongue brought tears to my eyes, and I nodded.

She removed the small cotton hanky I’d given her, from her pocket and dabbed my cheeks gently.

I looked at her quizzically “How do you know about Christine? Did Zee tell you?”

She shook her head. “She is surprised like you when I mention her name in shop. But she not talk.”

“Then..”

She took my hand and gave a little laugh. “Easy, no secret. You tell me yourself.”

Now I was genuinely puzzled.

“What?”

She stopped teasing and continued more seriously.

“You cry her name during the night. Over and over. I come through to you and stroke head, say your name and you are calm. I go back my room. Second time same, but I want you much, so I stay cuddle with you.”

I was mortified. I began my apology in English, then remembering, I slowed down and repeated it in Serbian.

“Svetlana, I’m so sorry. After all you have been through. It is me that should be helping you.”

She smiled sweetly “No mind. Last night I love cuddle you. Help

me too."

She reached forward and kissed me again.

She had been patient so I answered her.

I took both her hands in mine, and in her own language I told her.

"I think I fell in love with you when we first met on the train. I wanted you this morning when I woke and found you beside me. You are right, I have felt that it would be wrong of me to take advantage of you."

I paused, but she waited patiently, knowing there was more.

"Up until yesterday, I couldn't believe that there would ever be anyone else for me but Christine. Since you walked into my life I now know that there can be, and that I want that person to be you."

I kissed her gently, and she said slowly "My heart is glad you love me. You need time? I give. I love you."

We kissed again. This time a gentle kiss, a kiss of trust, but an implicit promise and understanding that there would be more, much, much more.

I looked at my watch. "It's 3:00. Do you want to freshen up before Katya comes?"

"Plis, and try lovely clothes."

I laughed "OK, I need to change also."

She went into her bedroom, and after a short while I heard her start to sing. I couldn't understand the broad strange dialect, but the song was of passion and love, of that I was no doubt, and her voice was strong and passionate to match.

I went into my room, and catching my eye immediately was a small posy of miniature red roses in a small vase on my bedside table. A neat tag was tied with a small ribbon around the vase with a simple but so expressive "X" followed by "S". I ran a bath, undressed and slid fully into it and lay there soaking blissfully, listening to the rich Slavic tones in her voice.

The water was tepid when I got out, dried and shaved. Svetlana was singing still. This time a more delicate, tinkling song, and her voice had changed too, with a pure, sweet gentle tone that would have sent a baby to sleep, and which caressed me too.

I set out the dining table with my best china, a couple of notebooks and a portable recorder. I cut a few rounds of sandwiches, stacked up a bowl with Scottish Shortbread, and had just filled the kettle when the doorbell rang.

Chapter 3: Interview

I opened the door. She smiled warmly at me and threw her arms around my neck.

“Hi Joe. It’s lovely to see you, and in such beautiful company too.”

She released me and I turned, realising that Svetlana had entered the lounge.

She wore an embroidered blue top and matching flared skirt, with the powder-blue slippers on her feet. She beamed at both of us. I had heard Katya’s sharp intake of breath, a reaction that was now becoming common to anyone seeing Svetlana’s great beauty for the first time.

“Svetlana, this is Katya, a lovely lady from Smederevo, who will help me understand your account of your missing sister and your search for her.”

I expected a little excitement, but was totally unprepared. Svetlana rushed across the room and engulfed Katya in a shower of kisses, followed by a big hug, tears and finally telling Katya how she had been looking forward to meeting.

From now on it was pedal-on-the-gas idiomatic Serbian, and very little made any sense to me. Eventually Svetlana slowed down, and we moved across to sit at the table.

I held up the recorder for Svetlana to see and spoke slowly in my own halting version of their lovely tongue. “Svetlana, this is a tape recorder. It will help Katya draft an English version of your conversation with her, so that I can understand. Are you happy that I switch it on?”

“Yes plis do Joe.”

I switched on the recorder, and while they chatted, finished laying the table. The conversation carried on through tea, and as I cleared away when we had finished. Katya was a trained interviewer, had special experience with trafficking victims and needed no prompting from me as to the information we needed. Although she took copious notes, these were in her own special shorthand, and were made without her taking her eyes off Svetlana.

As both girls talked, I could feel the rapport grow between them, and Svetlana began to show more emotion in her replies. I prepared several different fruit juices and placed these on the table, and both pounced on them to ease the dryness caused by the constant talking.

Being an observer wasn't a role I usually filled, but although I could contribute almost nothing, I was fascinated, both with the fluidity and rhythm of the conversation between them and of the almost constant eye contact they achieved. I had expected that Svetlana would show signs of distress, but although she spoke at times through small tears, her self-control was remarkable. Katya's left hand had met Svetlana's across the table, and in the latter part of the session, they held hands constantly.

I excused myself and went to my room, and looked at my watch - nearly 5:00pm. I rang Zee.

"Hi Joe. Millicent Courtney has just rung, she's a little late but on her way. Everything OK?"

"So far. Would you like to bring Millicent down when she arrives, and tell her not to apologise as we are over-running also?"

Zee laughed. "Will do - see you in 10 minutes."

I went back into the lounge and discovered that Katya and Svetlana had gone to her bedroom. I assumed Katya had suggested Svetlana freshen up for the doctor.

I made myself a coffee, and greeted Zee and Millicent Courtney as they stepped out of the lift.

"Mr Carlson - so nice to see you again."

“Miss Courtney, the pleasure is all mine.”

She smiled at me. “Flatterer. Some things never change.”

“And when they are as fair as thou, what mere mortal would dare to?” I quipped.

She laughed out loud, dropped her bag and we pecked each other on the cheek.

Zee stood grinning and shaking her head at our banter. I was glad about Millicent, as some lady doctors, especially the very good ones, could be unbelievably stuffy or arrogant.

I turned as Svetlana and Katya re-entered the lounge. I nodded at Svetlana and made the introductions. Svetlana was a little shy, but Millicent’s easy manner soon put her at ease.

“Should I stay Joe?” Zee asked.

I asked Svetlana “Would you like Zee here with you as well as Katya?”

Svetlana smiled “Hi Zee. No thank you. Katya help me. Take Joe for drink.”

We all laughed, then Zee and I went upstairs.

I went with her into her kitchen and we sat with Tomas at the table.

Zee looked at me. “Are you OK?”

I smiled. “Zee, I’ve never felt better in a long, long time.”

She looked significantly at Tomas, but I said it first.

“I promise I will start clearing the room out tomorrow.”

Tomas burst out laughing and Zee asked “Have I missed something here?”

“No Zee, you haven’t.” I paused then added more seriously

“You miss nothing, and that’s why you are so good at what you do.”

They both waited.

“I need my life back, as you said. To do that I need to face what’s left in that room, and we need the space. It’s a no-brainer.”

She looked hopefully at me “Svetlana?”

“I can’t deny what I feel – I feel wonderful.”

She leant over and kissed me on the forehead.

Tomas grinned, and got out a bottle of Blandys and a small Bolo de Mel. “You will have a piece?”

I laughed “Try to stop me.”

There was silence as we all savoured the beautiful cake and washed it down with the lovely fortified wine.

As I smacked my lips, and Tomas offered another glass of Madeira, I said “I’ve been thinking about space – or our lack of it.”

They both turned to me.

“I don’t want to move.” I added.

Tomas spoke “Neither do Zee and I. We knew this was coming, we’ve talked about it and we both love this house.”

Zee added quietly “Pash and Thak feel the same.”

I laughed. “OK. We won’t move. That means an annexe.”

“But how?” Zee asked. “Nothing for sale is remotely close to us, and could we afford it if there were?”

“Let me worry about the money. What about next door?”

Tomas grunted. “The guest house?”

“The very same.” I replied.

“They aren’t selling.”

I laughed. “They will if I offer them enough. I met old Soames in the Mews last week and he was moaning that he was getting too old, that the stairs hurt his knees, and the guests were all bloody dirty foreigners!”

They had caught my enthusiasm. Zee said “It would be ideal, we could simply knock a few holes through the wall.”

We all laughed. I said “Seriously, if everyone is ready to take up the challenge, putting up with the short-term chaos and the long-term added-responsibility, I would like to make it happen.”

“You’re serious aren’t you?” Zee said.

I nodded. “Couldn’t be more.”

“I’m excited.” she said, grinning widely.

My phone rang. It was Katya. Millicent Courtney had just left. I headed back downstairs. Svetlana and Katya were sipping orange juice and laughing together at the table where I joined them.

“Well? How did the doctor’s visit go?”

Katya spoke “Doctor Courtney was appalled at the bruises on Svetlana’s back, and she wrote a prescription. She’s taken urine and blood samples and will have the urine specifically

checked for blood protein. She said that apart from the obvious bruising and under-nourishment, Svetlana was in remarkable 'rude' good health, as she put it, with no signs of drug or alcohol abuse. Also, there is no evidence of rape. Physically she's fine Joe – stop worrying."

I thanked her.

She took a deep breath.

"Her story was very harrowing, but her recollections are remarkable. Sometimes psychological trauma tends to blot out detail, but she still remembers everything in extremely sharp focus."

"She is highly intelligent, tracking down the route her sister was taken on, but foolishly tried to tackle the criminals here in London that have her sister prisoner. They imprisoned her and beat her, but eventually she managed to escape. Unfortunately they stole her passport and what little money she had, so for a couple of days she has been wandering around homeless, 'til she met you."

"I will translate our conversation and email the transcriptions to you tomorrow as soon as possible. I will include my annotations at various points in the transcriptions, from the shorthand notes I made.

There is one more thing. Take a look at these drawings she had in her knapsack."

She handed me a small notebook. As well as a lot of Cyrillic script, the pages had five drawings of mens faces. The drawings had been done in pencil and were outstandingly lifelike.

Katya was watching me. "She has an Art degree, and specialises in life drawing."

She paused "These men, she assures me, are the 5 criminals responsible for her imprisonment, and who, she believes, also hold her sister." She paused again.

"Taking the remarkable clarity of her account, alongside these drawings she made after she escaped, leads me to believe she

has a pronounced Eidetic Memory ability. You would need to confirm this, but I'm almost certain I'm right. If so, she could probably draw for you almost everything she's seen and been through, in the most intimate and painful detail, which would make any investigation by you a walk in the park. However..."

At this point she paused and smiled reassuringly at Svetlana who was sat watching us. "I urge extreme caution Joe. Talking in the way that she has about her experience is one thing, but asking her to call up actual visual images is something else entirely. I urge that you seek a doctor's advice before putting her through what could be a very traumatic and dangerous experience."

I shook my head. "Katya, you have done me proud. How can I thank you? Your help is invaluable, and I shall be forever in your debt."

She blushed and then smiled at me. "It is I who will forever be in yours Joe. It is always a pleasure to help you."

"How are you getting home?"

She hesitated. "The Tube."

"I can have you driven, if you like."

She thanked me but declined. She kissed then embraced Svetlana, and we all walked to the door.

She smiled at Svetlana and said Goodbye, then added in Serbian "Call me any time you wish. It's been lovely to meet you, and don't worry, Joe will find your sister for you."

With that she turned and left.

Chapter 4: The Memory Girl

I closed the door and Svetlana and I looked at each other. Then we embraced. She held me very tight. She was trembling, and it didn't surprise me, after what she had just recalled. I felt that she needed diversion, so I murmured in her ear. "Every Saturday evening, we have a little party upstairs. The girls dress in their best and we have games, listen to music and dance. Would you like to go up tonight?"

She released me, but kept her arms around my neck. "Plis, that would be lovely. Can I change?"

"Of course, there's no hurry, take your time."

While she washed, I picked up her notebook, and sat down at my desk. I scanned in the images of the five men she had drawn, at 600 dpi resolution and composed two emails.

"Mr Linton,

I have a young lady artist looking for placement, please see attached samples of work. Probably equally as good with landscapes. Quick answer required if possible, meet your place or mine.

Rgds J."

I attached the scanned pictures and sent it, and began the next.

"Hi Derek,

A few of the guys and I were considering a spot of off-roading in the middle of the week. If you fancy making the numbers up

to four that would be great. Contact me on Monday at noon for meet details if you are interested.

Respect, J.”

I pressed the send button and sat back in the chair. Maybe I was being a little hasty, but a strong sense of urgency had gripped me.

I washed and changed clothes. The humidity levels were still high, and I was thirsty. I fished a cool lager from the fridge, and sat down on the sofa.

She was so quiet. As before she appeared in front of me, having made no sound entering. She wore the blue dress, matching blue slippers, and the Opal Lalique hung on its chain around her neck.

She clasped her hands in front of her. From the short curls of blonde hair, to her neat ankles, every inch of her was beautiful. She smiled. “You don’t mind I wear her dress?”

I stood up and took her hands.” She would have wanted you to have it – so it is now your dress.” I paused, still mesmerised.

“You are so beautiful, it takes my breath away.”

She moved forward and kissed me, her arms wrapping around my neck.

Her kiss set my lips on fire and I held her sweet face between my hands.

We separated, and holding her hand, we went upstairs.

It was still early, but several of the girls were already dancing to the music from a CD player. We grabbed a few sandwiches and sat down together on a sofa, and Svetlana looked around, then said quietly “You rescue all?”

I smiled. “We take in any girl that needs help, if we have room for her.”

“What becomes?”

I paused, then replied slowly in Serbian “Various things happen. Those that have had their passports stolen, we help repatriate when they are ready, if that’s the right thing to do. Some girls

just leave when they are ready to, and some others are adopted, or fostered. We try to keep in touch with those girls that want us to. Some of the girls get a job in London, some help us with other girls."

"Like Katya?"

I nodded. "Like Katya."

"She is special to you - like Zee."

It wasn't a question, but I felt she needed an explanation.

"Some of our girls have been in really bad situations. Some in which I had to take action personally - those girls are really special to me."

She nodded and smiled, her calm blue eyes assessing me "I understand why they love you so much."

Her praise was said matter-of-factly, but nearly had me blushing, and her perception meant that I couldn't take risks with hiding from her actions I needed to take, so I took the opportunity. I said in halting Serbian. "I've taken the liberty of sending copies of your drawings to a friend, who may be able to identify them. I hope you don't mind?"

She took my hand, shaking her head. "Anything that will help you find my sister, I will do - just ask."

I got up and walked to the bookcase, pulling out one of my favourites - photographs of rural English towns. I leafed through it and found a particularly busy picture, and passed it to her, looking at my watch as I did.

"Please try this for me. I want you to look at that picture for 30 seconds. When the time is up I will ask for the book back, and I want you to describe as best you can, what you remember about the picture."

She laughed and looked down at the photograph. I kept one eye on my watch, the other on her face. It was strangely animated, her eyes dancing over the picture, while fleeting expressions floated like ghosts.

"OK Svetlana. Time's up."

She passed me the book and I took a pencil from the table and moved across to another chair to face her.

"OK" I said, "In your own time, and words, what do you

remember?"

As she talked, I numbered each item she mentioned in sequence with the pencil. An awe crept over me, as she didn't simply describe who, or what was there, but gave a flawless and lengthy description of the appearance and actions if any. This coupled with the sheer number of people and things she had noticed, astounded me. I was aware the room had gone quiet, although Svetlana rattled on, so I held up my hand for her to stop.

She smiled "I do OK?"

I laughed. "That was brilliant"

Although Svetlana had been describing the photograph in her own tongue, Jane and several of the girls could see I was marking the photo as she spoke. Jane came over. "That is one of the most remarkable feats of memory I have ever seen." she said quietly.

I smiled up at her "For me too, Absolutely incredible."

One the girls came forward. "Can we try?" I handed Jane the book, and they went off to test themselves. I turned to Svetlana.

"That is a remarkable gift."

She looked quizzically at me, and I repeated it in Serbian.

She smiled "You are sweet man. My trick pleases you?"

"It does - very much."

I walked over to our sideboard, and took out an A4 drawing pad. I passed this and the pencil. "Can you draw what you have seen in the photograph?"

"Sure." she smiled easily and set to work. I noticed that the items she drew first were in the same order as those she had named. After 5 minutes I asked her to stop. It was incredible. Her detailed sketch was almost identical to the photo itself.

I leaned forward and kissed her. "You are one very clever girl!" I went to get her another juice, and passed the pad to Jane, murmuring "You enjoyed the first demonstration of her memory, how's that for a second?"

She took the pad from me and glanced at it, drawing her breath in quickly as she did. "Good God!"

“Exactly” I said quietly, and returned to Svetlana.

I sat down beside her and took her hand, she cushioned her head on my shoulder and I began quietly in Serbian.

“Katya told me that your memory is very good, if not outstanding, and suggested that you could maybe help by drawing places you have been and seen in London. But she also warned that recalling these images might hurt you dreadfully, and that we need some professional advice if we are to ask this of you.”

She had sat up “But this I can do Joe!”

“Shall I arrange for a doctor to talk to us as soon as possible?”

“We no need doctor – I help.”

She was very keen, and I didn’t want to argue. I made a mental note to talk to Millicent and let the subject drop.

I kissed her.

We sat and relaxed, watching the girls dance. Her sweet smell washed over me, and the soft tinkle of her laugh as she watched the girls was like heavenly music. I must have closed my eyes when a soft lilting voice asked “Is she your girlfriend?” It was Lizzie.

“She is. Her name is Svetlana.”

I turned to Svetlana “Svetlana, this is Lizzie. She hasn’t been with us very long.”

Svetlana beamed at the child. “Hello, Lizzie. And lovely brown eyes you have.”

Lizzie wasn’t phased. “You are very pretty.”

Svetlana laughed lightly “Thank you, and so are you.”

“Can I do your hair?”

For the first time I noticed the hairbrush in Lizzie’s hand.

Svetlana looked at the brush and understood. She nodded “Yes, plis.” and turned sideways on the sofa, smiling at me as she did.

Lizzie gently ran the brush through Svetlana curls, and she started to sing quietly. I couldn’t understand the words, although they were vaguely familiar. Nor did they sound Welsh, but I was no expert. She sang beautifully, and I closed my eyes

and just listened.

When Svetlana felt Lizzie tiring, she asked gently. "Thank you. I brush your hair now Lizzie?"

Lizzie handed her the brush and sat down on the sofa. This time it was Svetlana who started singing - the same lullaby I'd heard earlier today.

Unaccountably, tears began in my eyes, and not wishing to upset either of them, I got up quietly and went into the kitchen.

I fixed myself another juice and re-entered the day room, sitting down with Jane. She nodded at Svetlana. "Can we help her?"

I nodded. "She probably has every detail of her captors, and the places they haunt, ready to recall from that amazing memory. But, Katya is concerned that the act of recalling everything could be very dangerous."

Jane nodded. "It's one of the things that was discussed at college. A visiting professor of psychology was giving a lecture on the rehabilitation of patients suffering from severe PTSD. He was researching mechanisms that can turn off the involuntary recall of such violent and disturbing images, so as to help the patients."

We sat and chatted while we watched the activity around us. I looked across the room. "Look" I said. Lizzie was curled up in Svetlana's arms, both had their eyes closed and both, apparently were asleep.

Jane grinned. "They look lovely together."

I nodded. "They do."

I walked across the room. They were indeed both asleep. Both breathing deep and evenly. I fetched a rug and covered them, and then sat down opposite them. They did look lovely. The smaller girl's dark hair fell over Svetlana's honey-coloured neck, Svetlana's cheek tenderly lay against Lizzie's head.

I sat letting the sounds of the room wash over me, and watching the sleeping, embracing girls in front of me, and must have dozed off.

A quiet "Joe" in my ear brought me back instantly. Jane was sat

beside me. I looked around. Apart from us and the sleeping girls, the room was deserted.

“Oh, sorry Jane, I must have dozed.”

She laughed quietly. “I wouldn’t have woken you, but..” she nodded at Svetlana and Lizzie.

I nodded. “OK, I’ll carry Lizzie, if you get the doors.”

I stood up and gently moved the rug to one side, then lifted the sleeping child into my arms. Jane re-covered Svetlana with the rug and then led the way across the room. In Lizzie’s room, she peeled back the sheets and I laid the girl down. Jane removed her shoes, covered her over, and we returned to the day room.

“Will you waken her?” Jane whispered.

“No, but can you get the doors again for me?”

I removed the rug and lifted Svetlana into my arms. She murmured “Mmm”, her eyes fluttering briefly, and her left arm went around my neck. Jane grinned at me, then headed once again to the door. She led the way after we left the lift in my basement, and turned back Svetlana’s sheets, then whispered “Good night Joe.”

I nodded “Thanks Jane.” and she left.

I sat Svetlana on the bed, and unclasped the Lalique and laid it on the bedside table. I unzipped the dress, and slid it forward, off her arms, then laid her gently down. After lifting her legs onto the bed, I lifted her thighs gently and removed the dress. For a brief moment I looked at her lying, calm, peaceful and so beautiful in a sheer silky slip Zee and her had bought that morning. I lifted the sheets to cover her, but she reached out and took my hand. Her eyes were open. “Will you cuddle me tonight Joe plis?”

I knew. I knew all was not well, and that the events of the day had taken their toll. “Of course sweet Svetlana. Of course I will.”

She smiled, her lovely blue eyes thanking me.

I peeled off my clothes and lay beside her, covering us both with the sheets. I slid my right arm underneath her neck, and she needed no more encouragement. She snuggled in, her head on my chest and her right leg straddled my body. I

wrapped my left arm around her and I felt her breathing started to deepen almost immediately. For a long while I just lay there. It felt so strange, so beautiful, and so right.

I woke up only once during the night. I was thirsty and my mouth tasted foul. I extricated myself gently, and went into my own room, cleaning my teeth and drinking a glass of water. With another in my hand, I returned to Svetlana. She was still asleep, but readily resumed cuddling me as I lay back down beside her.

Chapter 5: Lovers

I was wakened by a fluttering on my lips. I opened my eyes. The sun streamed in the window, and her face was over me, her lips gently brushing mine. The blonde curls fell forward over my face, and I opened my mouth and kissed her. She gave a little laugh.

“I wake you?”

“You know you did.” I laughed

She kissed me again. “I love you.”

Her right hand caressed my ear and neck.

“And I love you.”

We kissed again, our lips hard together. Her tongue danced along the inside of my lips. She moved over to lie on top of me, then sitting up, removed her slip. She had already removed her panties because I could feel her silky intimacy as she sat on me.

She leaned forward and took my head in both hands. Her face close and beautiful before mine. She whispered in her native tongue.

“I feel you. I feel you want me. No more waiting?”

I answered. “I want you Svetlana. I love you.”

She reached down with her hand and eased me inside her. I gasped. It was all I could do to stop myself from coming immediately. She sat up and started moving slowly and rhythmically up and down me. As she moved, she watched me intensely, and as if reading my every feeling, brought me close, so close, as she controlled the contractions in her vagina, only to keep me waiting just that little way away. I ran my hands up the sides of her body and over her beautiful breasts, taking the nipples between my finger and thumbs and kneading them gently. She squirmed a little, and her head went back.

We moved together now, my arms in a frenzy of caresses over her back and sides, and there began a low rattle in her throat that turned first of all into a growl, then moaning and finally short screams, before subsiding back into a growl. Over and over, as her body shook with each contraction, she screamed. Finally, her moans were interposed with shouted words of love for me, as she looked down at me through her curls with eyes glazed with emotion. The last waves of her orgasm racked her body and she arched back and shook uncontrollably. I let myself go, sitting up and burying my face between her breasts as I screamed.

We sat, locked in each other and rocked slightly, then she kissed me gently and we lay by each other's side.

I knew I would never be the same again. As if reading my mind she said quietly in Serbian "No man has ever made me feel that way."

I answered "And no woman, me."

"Now you believe that I said we made for each other?"

I nodded "I do."

We cuddled and kissed tenderly. Eventually, remembering we had another busy day ahead, I asked "Breakfast?"

"Yes plis, I'm hungry."

I grinned at her. "Good, lets get up then, and eat straight away. You can bathe after breakfast."

I left her and went to my room for my bathrobe. She was filling the kettle in the dining area, where I joined her, and together we prepared breakfast. I cooked us bacon, mushrooms, tomatoes and toast as she set the table with the crockery and juices.

As we sat opposite each other eating, there was a wonderful feeling of calm and togetherness between us. She rarely took her eyes off me, and it seemed, neither mine from her. Despite knowing what we still had to go through, I'd never felt as happy in 3 years.

While she bathed, I cleared away the breakfast mess, and was about to load the dishwasher when the 'phone rang.

"Good morning Joe. I hope I didn't wake you?"

I laughed. "Good morning Katya - even if you had, your beautiful voice would be as a soft caress to my ears." She laughed loudly at my banter, then continued a little more soberly.

"I've completed my transcription of yesterday's conversations. I know that urgency was required so I've emailed everything to you, including an MP3 file of the recording."

"Katya! You must have been up half the night. I'm so grateful."

"Just find the little girl Joe - that will be thanks enough."

I told her of my experiment with the photograph the evening before, which confirmed her beliefs regarding Svetlana's memory.

"I thought as much." Katya said "Her application of her gift, together with her artistic talent, borders on that of the savant." I agreed with her. "Yes, I thought that too. But I will be contacting Millicent this morning and asking her advice, as you suggested."

"Good. Her well-being is paramount."

We said our goodbyes, and I resisted the temptation to open her email and delve into her transcription, and continued the washing-up.

The 'phone ran again. The message was terse and to the point.

"Linton here. Essential that we talk. Your place at one?"

I answered "That will be fine."

I heard him hang up. Good, a result I thought, and although he had said very little, the words, as always were carefully chosen. This together with the early meeting, meant he took the matter very seriously, and wanted involvement.

I didn't put the 'phone down. I cleared the line and rang Millicent Courtney's number.

"Mr. Carlson? Is this my early morning call?"

I laughed "Yes, Miss Courtney, and I can only apologise for not being there in person."

She giggled. "Probably just as well that you aren't."

Despite knowing her for a long while, I was mildly shocked, but I laughed. "'Tis my eternal loss. But I still beg favour from you."

"Ask away Mr. Carlson."

I explained Katya's findings regarding Svetlana's memory, and

described my test of her memory to Millicent.

“We are concerned that any forensic probing, especially that of asking her to physically identify locations, may trigger serious stress.”

“You are right to be careful Joe, it will be important that she remains totally in control of where you’re asking her to re-visit. However my impression of her is that although these images will present themselves to her as a very strong stimulus, it would be easy for us to over-react, and be over-protective. After all, you need the images to have a reaction for your investigation. I believe that you and your staff will be able to cope adequately with the inevitable short explosion when it happens.”

She had used my first name. I was flattered. I thanked her and agreed. “Yes, OK – and do you mind if I call you Millicent?”

She laughed gently. “Please do, as long as you continue with ‘Miss Courtney’ when you’re teasing me.”

“Why Miss Courtney, tease you? My protests of love are straight from my heart, trusty and true.”

Again her laughter tinkled down the ‘phone.

“Thanks for making a dull world that little bit lighter Joe. I’ll call with the test results sometime tomorrow. Anything else?”

“Just to thank you for not just being a truly excellent Doctor, Millicent, but also a damn good friend.”

“You” she said quietly, then paused before continuing “will always have my friendship.”

She said “Bye.” quietly and hung up.

“Wow” I thought as I replaced the receiver. “Still waters do run deep.”

I made another pot of coffee, and listened to Svetlana’s singing, while I downed a cup. Resisting again the strong temptation to read Katya’s words, I went to Svetlana’s room and knocked.

“Plis to come.”

She stood with nothing on but a slip, and in front of her spread out on the bed, were the dresses and skirts bought yesterday.

She beamed at me. “They all lovely. You choose for me?”

I laughed and kissed her, then looking down at the clothes I

said "Whatever you choose, you will be ravishing"
She cocked her head sideways and smiled quizzically
"ravishing?"

I repeated my sentence in her own tongue, and she grinned and kissed me again.

"I'm going out to the hotel next door, to send someone for your prescription. I won't be long. Will you be OK?"

"I am fine, not worry, but choose dress."

I left her, and picking up the prescription wandered next door and found Soames behind his reception desk.

"Hi Alec. I've a favour to ask. Could your boy get a prescription for one of the girls filled for me?"

"Morning Joe. No problem" He picked up his telephone, and a few seconds later his 'boy' appeared. I gave him the script and some money. The boy left and I turned to Soames.

"How's business?"

He shook his head.

"As good as that?" I said lifting my eyebrows. In spite of his obvious unhappiness he grinned ruefully.

"If I could get out now, and just keep the mews flat, I would." he said flatly. "But with things as they are?" He shook his head.

"You may think this impertinent of me," I began, "but what if I said go and get 3 estimates of the hotel's value, and I'll buy it from you at the greater of either the average valuation or what you owe, plus sufficient for you to own the mews flat outright, together with a little unofficial spending money?"

He was stunned, so I continued. "That way, Stella and yourself can go on living here in the part of London you both love, in your own flat, without any of the hassle you have currently, and with enough to retire gracefully on."

I waited. He looked at me. "You mean this don't you Joe?"

"I do Alec. But my motives aren't all altruistic. We're full to bursting, and none of us want to move. Making your hotel an annexe to the Refuge would be an ideal solution for us. Maybe it would for you to. Will you think about it?"

He smiled and nodded. "I will. I've been scratching my head for months."

"Discuss it with Stella. Take your time. If you want to go ahead,

come around and see me.”

I offered my hand. He took it in a vice-like grip I wouldn’t have credited him with, and shook mine vigorously.

“I’ll do that Joe.”

We nodded and I left. I knew he would send the boy around with the medicine as soon as he got back.

I re-entered my basement. Svetlana stood holding a large glass of juice, but put it down and gave a little swirl.

“Do you like what we choose?”

She stood in another full, bouncy skirt, lightly embroidered in blue, and a matching silk blouse. Tied around her waist was a blue belt, and the powder-blue shoes graced her feet.

I walked over to her and held both her hands. “You are so beautiful, it would not matter what you wore. But, these clothes are lovely, almost as lovely as you.”

I knew she didn’t get most of my English, so I repeated it in Serbian, and she beamed at me.

“Zee shows me clothes I never thought I would like, but they are so beautiful.”

Suddenly I felt we had to get away. She deserved to walk in the light in the lovely clothes, and the thoughts of my intended reading of her account oppressed me, as although Katya had hinted as much, I was afraid of just how dark and horrid Svetlana’s life had been during the last few months.

“Would you like to walk in the park?”

Her face lit up. “Yes plis. It is close?”

“Very” I said, “only 5 minutes walk”.

We left, and walked down to Lancaster Gate and into the park. Svetlana had never been in Hyde Park before, so we had a slow parade around. She held my hand the whole way, but the occasional strangers over-enthusiastic stares clearly affected her and she gripped my hand harder.

At one point I said quietly in Serbian “These young men will not hurt you, but simply cannot stop themselves from admiring your beauty. Don’t be afraid. If there is any danger, I will see it and you will come to no harm.”

After that she relaxed slightly. She drew the admiring looks of

young women also, and was happy to return their smiles.

We followed the path around The Serpentine, and stopped to watch the children feeding the birds. Svetlana's eyes were everywhere, and I paused to wonder at how different the world must look to her, as there was no doubt she saw far more of it than I did, or anyone else had that I'd ever met.

I looked at my watch. "We need to get back Svetlana. I have some reading to do and an important meeting at one o'clock." She smiled and nodded, but I could see her disappointment. She would have walked around the park all morning.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but it has to be done. Perhaps you'd like to go up to the day room and talk to the girls, and I'll join you for lunch at about 1:15pm?"

She squeezed my hand. "You not be sorry, I am sorry for miserable face, when I know what things you do are to help Katrina."

I gave a little laugh, and we cuddled and kissed.

We walked back to the house, and she gave a little wave to me as my lift door closed, and I prayed that she wouldn't get lost. Then I turned with heavy heart to the PC and printed out Katya's transcription.

Several times I had to stop reading, but I fortified myself with strong coffee and continued. When I'd finished reading I listened to the MP3 of the original recording, and referred to Katya's notes. Finally I sat back in my chair and relaxed. It was horrendous, but it was done. Often I'd had to read similar very-disturbing material, but in this case the tortured girl was my lover, and I waited for the anger, anguish and all of the other emotions to wash over and out of me before finally printing off three more copies of the transcription.

Chapter 6: Revelations

I gathered up the print-outs, and copies of Svetlana's 'Bad men' and headed to the garage. I unlocked and opened the main garage doors. It was 5 minutes to one. I entered the small 'waiting' room to the left-hand side of the garage, got out two crystal glasses and a bottle of Gordon's from the small cupboard, and was cutting up a lemon when I heard the door close behind him.

I turned around and stretched out my hand.

"Good Afternoon Sir."

He smiled briefly. "I've told you - it's George, not Sir."

George Dearby was approaching sixty, but no-one would have said so. He was still lean and well-proportioned, with none of the spine-bending that affects most men approaching sixty. But he looked tired.

I poured ice and a slice of lemon into the glasses, then a healthy measure of gin, snapped open two fresh bottles of tonic from the fridge, and put his drink down on the table. He sat and pulled open an A4 folder, spreading the contents in front of me - a précis of each of 3 of the 5 'suspects' records. Their faces glared at me from the pages.

"The other two sketches you sent, we can't identify, but that doesn't mean much. The quality of your witness's drawings is outstanding, and the other three were immediately identified." He paused "These two," he prodded with his finger "are small-time Russian Mafia. Nasty, vicious thugs, but so far we've found nothing we could finger them with. However.."

he paused again "This one - Piotr Vasilov"

This time his finger came down forcibly on the picture of the man's face. "is FSB. We know he moonlights selling drugs, running rackets and prostitution, and we have suspected him of human trafficking for some time. He is a slimy, vicious, truly

evil little man, who has tortured, maimed and murdered his way across Europe.”

He was becoming agitated. I tried not to show my surprise. He continued “He has murdered British agents, and I have corroborated evidence that he is the execrable ball of slime who murdered my daughter.”

He picked up his glass, tossed it back in one, and slammed the glass on the table.

I was stunned, and to give myself time to think, I poured him another. He picked that up to, but sipped on it, looking at me thoughtfully over the rim.

I looked at him “Finally..”

“Yes” he said defiantly keeping back his tears. “Finally, and thanks to your informant, we might just get a chance to nail him for good.”

“Let me bring you up-to-date.”

I related the events of the last two days in full, describing my test of Svetlana’s memory, and his eyes gleamed. He agreed caution with respect to further questioning of her, but finally he simply asked.

“When?”

“I was thinking we could prepare to go early Wednesday morning.”

“You think she can give you his location?”

I nodded “We’ll be careful, and she’s very spirited. I think we can do it.”

I paused then asked him. “Same MO?”

He nodded slowly, but then shook his head “I don’t want the Russians spiriting away this bastard using any immunity tricks.”

“No.” I said, waiting.

“And I don’t want any witnesses testifying he’s been snatched.”

“No.”

He looked straight at me. “Joe. I’m going to ask a big favour from you.”

I nodded “Go ahead.”

“I want this bastard delivered to me personally, not to SOPS.”

“SOPS aren’t to know about him?”

“That’s right.”

“And his cronies can ask questions, so we..”

“Eliminate them.”

I nodded.

“Other than that, conduct the Op as you see fit. I’ll put all normal support in place, including armoury, transport, clean-up and welfare for any girls who want it. As usual any assets you find are yours to dispose of to cover your expenses and support your Refuge. How many?”

“I think myself and four should do it.” I said. He nodded briefly.

“Another?” I said lifting the bottle.

“Shouldn’t, but I need it. Cynthia keeps whinging about my clockwork.”

I topped up the glasses and we lifted them together and saluted, then drained them empty.

I handed him the transcription of Svetlana’s account. “For your records.” I said “It’s grim.”

He shook his head. “One more thing.”

“Yes?” I said

“If we nail this bastard, I’m retiring.” he paused then added

“I’m sorry Joe.”

I nodded “No apologies needed. God knows you’ve done enough. I don’t blame you in the least.”

The old twinkle came back into his eye. “But I’m training my replacement, and I’m sure he can be persuaded to come to a similar sort of arrangement as we’ve had.”

I smiled “Let’s get this over first.”

He held out his hand, which I shook, then for the first time ever, he hugged me and said quietly. “Bring him to me Joe – but keep yourself safe. I’d still rather lose him than you.”

“Thanks George.” I said.

Finally he said. “A courier will drop off SOP ID’s and contact details tomorrow. Ask your acting Quartermaster to contact the SOPS armourer with requirements, and I’ll deliver in person.”

I waited in the small room, but heard him making his call. Thirty seconds later I heard his ‘taxi’ whisking him away. I looked at my watch. It was 1:15pm. I locked up the garage, then clutching the transcription copies and criminal records George had brought, I went upstairs.

In the day room, there were a large group of girls around Svetlana. As I walked towards them I heard her say to Patricia standing in front of her. "Who would you like to be?" Patricia smiled shyly "A model, please."

Svetlana's pencil moved over the A4 pad with great speed, accompanied by Oohs and Aahs from the girls who were watching her draw. She gave comments in broken-English, as she drew. I watched in fascination as Patricia's pretty face and slim body appeared rapidly on the paper, her body then covered in a lovely sheer dress, together with wide-brimmed 30's style hat, all completed finally, set in a sashay down a catwalk.

As I watched the girls applauding, and Patricia's delighted smile when Svetlana handed her the drawing, another picture pinned up on the wall to my right caught my eye. I walked across.

I stood in front of it, and I felt my jaw slacken as I stared at the terrible creature she had drawn. A Viking warrior held a broadsword by both hands with the blade pointing vertically downward. On his head, a helmet with bull-horns projecting menacingly forward. Behind him, filling the rest of the scene were two incongruously beautiful large wings. His face looked down at his invisible victim and was a truly frightening vision that was an admixture of cold fury, grim determination, and the total conviction of his murderous intentions. His face was very familiar. His face was mine the night after Christine was murdered, when I had looked into the mirror as I washed away my tears.

Behind me I vaguely heard Connie call everyone to lunch, but I could not move. Then I felt a warm hand take mine.

"Girls pinned up my drawing though I did not want. I see I hurt you. Plis forgive me."

Her voice was shaky, and when I turned to look at her, there were tears in her eyes.

"Hush" I said and took her in my arms. She gave a little sob and wrapped her arms around me holding me very tight. I whispered softly in Serbian "There is nothing to forgive, for you have only drawn what you see." I paused. "I thought I kept my

hatred hidden, but you have shown me that I delude only myself."

She seemed to be calmed with my words, and turning round she pointed at the drawing. "I see this man in your eyes on train."

I nodded. "And you are right, for he was there."

"In Serbia we call person avenge.." she halted and resumed in her own tongue "...avenging Angel, and he strikes terror in the hearts of those who would hurt his loved ones."

"And the wings?" I asked gently. She continued. "Despite his deadly mission, he is still an Angel, and his heart brims over with love for those he holds dear. You understand?"

I nodded. "I do"

I made to move into the kitchen, but she took my hand and walked me to where she had been sitting. Picking up the sketch-pad she opened it up at the first page and passed the pad to me.

"This is man I saw in your eyes this morning, with his chosen one."

I gasped. It was the most exquisitely-drawn sketch of two lovers I had ever seen.

I stood naked, my arms loosely held out around her shoulders and side. Her left leg was lifted from the ground and crooked a little around my right. Both bodies were perfectly drawn, with an accuracy of detail that had my heart racing. Her simple, slim, naked beauty; my powerful, all-protecting build. On our faces as we looked into each other's eyes was a look of serene and tender love.

Tears welled in my eyes, as I turned to her. "This is simply the most beautiful drawing I've ever seen, and it gladdens my heart."

"We keep?" she smiled.

"We certainly do."

"I tear other down and to pieces." she said matter-of-factly, moving toward the Angel drawing.

"No Svetlana."

She turned "No? But it hurt you."

I walked to her. "It is both terrible and beautiful" I paused as she looked at me quizzically. I repeated my sentence in Serbian and added "It is a terribly powerful observation, but it serves to remind me of who I can be, and it is beautiful because of that." She nodded, "I understand. We keep then."

This time I nodded and smiled, and hand-in hand we joined everyone else in the kitchen.

After everyone had eaten, Svetlana was dragged off by the girls to do more drawings. I passed a copy of the transcription to Zee. "It's bad Zee. You don't have to read it if you prefer not to."

She touched the back of my hand and smiled. "We need to know the devil that haunts her."

I grinned ruefully at her close quote from "Crazy Man Michael" I began "The room.."

"Shall I do it for you this afternoon?"

"Can you?" I said "Do you mind?"

She kissed me on the cheek "Of course not. I'll come for you when I'm ready."

I looked at her, a little alarmed and puzzled. "I can't.."

"Not to clear it darling Joe. But you must pick and keep one thing only."

"I must?"

She nodded. "If you don't, you will regret it, trust me."

"I do." I laughed nervously and she grinned "No you don't, you great fibber!"

This time I laughed, then handed her an envelope with the criminal records in it. "Please give these to Tomas, and ask him to show them to Thak too. I now have information that Svetlana's captors are known murderers, and everyone should be on their guard."

She nodded "I will."

I crossed the room to where Jane sat, watching the impromptu art class with some amusement.

"She is very, very clever." Jane said shaking her head in wonderment.

I laughed "You've noticed?"

“Joe, she is a real Godsend. I’ve never seen the girls so animated.”

I nodded. “You’re right. Let’s see what happens.”

She looked quizzically at me. “It’s none of my business, I know..”

I stopped her. “Of course it is Jane. I realise that what I do affects others.” I paused “I have to confess that I am completely smitten by her.”

She laughed “And her with you!”

“I believe so.” I grinned.

I passed her the remaining transcription. “I have a great big favour to ask you. If you have any doubts at all, please refuse. I will not be offended.”

She smiled “Joe, just ask.”

“That is the transcription of Katya’s interview with Svetlana. It is terribly grim reading. But if I’m to attempt to persuade Svetlana to make a series of drawings to help identify the location that she was taken to, I will need help, and anyone helping me needs as much information about what has taken place, as is possible. As our only other fully-qualified psychiatric nurse, your helping Zee and myself with this would be invaluable.”

I paused, but she didn’t hesitate. “I will give you all the help you need. I will read her account, and maybe weep a little, but if I can help, it will be worth it.”

“Thanks Jane. I shan’t forget this.”

She smiled broadly, clearly pleased with my thanks.

I got up and brought back two glasses of Connie’s lemonade, and we sipped in silence as we watched the girls.

“Have you noticed Lizzie?”

Jane nodded. Lizzie was the only girl in the crowd who wasn’t behind Svetlana as she drew. Instead she sat closely to her, but in front of her, in rapt attention.

I smiled. “Yet another conquest?”

Jane laughed. “It would appear so. Although you didn’t do so bad yourself yesterday.”

I raised my eyebrows. “But I didn’t..”

You are the first male Lizzie has approached since she arrived.”

“But I thought Thak..”

“She likes him, but has not approached him yet.”

“Oh.” was all I could say.

“You have the great gift of inspiring trust Joe – perhaps instinctively she knows you will never harm her, or let her down?”

She quietly looked at me, her calm blue eyes inviting an answer.

“I hope that I never, ever, let a single one of you down.” I said slowly.

She relented. “You know what I mean. It’s important for Lizzie and girls like her, to know that all men aren’t complete bastards.”

I felt relief and laughed. “Aren’t we?”

She didn’t answer my half-joking reply directly. “Sometimes” she said quietly, gesturing to the Angel drawing, “it takes someone like that over there to put really bad things right.” I looked across at the drawing and nodded.

“What was the girls reaction to it?”

She laughed gently. “Not negatively, as you might have thought. They all recognised you. Anna stood in front of it and said ‘Wow!’ Some remarked that you were ‘having a bad day’, others that you looked ‘well dangerous’ and a few, I suspect, actually found the drawing a turn-on, so said nothing.”

“Good God! A turn-on?”

She smiled, but said soberly “You are a fiercely attractive man. Add to that a cachet of danger, and some women cannot resist.”

I was silent. She had stopped me dead, and she knew it. She said gently “I apologise for my candour – I meant no disrespect.”

I said slowly “There is nothing to apologize for, and I respect your speaking your mind.”

“I want only to help you. Working here is a great privilege.”

I nodded. “It is our privilege to have you with us.”

We both sat sipping our drinks for a while.

Jane said quietly “Well, I’ve lazed at Svetlana’s expense long enough. I’m going to check she isn’t tired.”

She got up and walked over to the group. I saw Svetlana shaking her head and smiling, and Jane simply sat down. Shortly after that, the girls pulled her up for to pose. It was 'her' turn.

I closed my eyes and drifted, thinking that so many events couldn't happen in such a short time. I must have dozed off, and was woken by a light hand on my arm, and Zee's soft breath in my ear.

"It's time. Are you ready?"

I opened my eyes. She looked down at me, her dark hair falling around her face, and her soft warm loving eyes smiling at me.

"I will probably never be ready Zee, but let's do it."

As we walked down the one flight of stairs she asked "Have you thought about what to choose?"

"I haven't a clue. Please forgive me if I turn and run."

She must have heard the tremor in my voice, and she took my hand and squeezed it. "You won't. I am with you."

She opened the door and led me in, closing the door behind us, then walking me to the centre of the room.

I looked around. Everything was clean and neat. The room had obviously been cleaned and dusted regularly. Christine looked out at me from a half-dozen different photographs. Her personal possessions everywhere. It was more than I could bear, and a great sob erupted in my chest.

Zee turned and threw her arms around me, holding me tight and whispering in my ear. "She would not have wanted you to suffer so Joe. Let her go, and embrace the beautiful woman who has just walked into your life, and who so-obviously adores and wants you."

She held me until I was ready, then slowly released me. She reached into her sleeve and wiped my face with her hankie. I looked around. Moving over to Christine's dressing-table I picked up her hairbrush. I turned around and looked at Zee.

"Good choice. Is there anything else?"

I shook my head. "Show her clothes to the girls and give them to anyone who wants them."

"Don't you mind seeing her clothes on another girl?"

"No. I don't. And she has some beautiful clothes that should be

worn."

She nodded, and opening the door, ushered me out.

"Go downstairs Joe, and spend some time on your own. You need it."

She kissed me. I nodded and made my way to the basement, the lovely Lalique hairbrush in my hand.

I placed the hairbrush on Svetlana's dressing table, and made my way into my bedroom. I stripped and showered, then lay down on the bed, covering myself with a single sheet. I felt exhausted, and fell asleep instantly.

Chapter 7: Recoup & Recover

When I woke, the shadows were starting to lengthen and the sunshine threatened to leave the room altogether. I was cocooned from behind in the warmth of her body, a lovely slim arm wrapped around me and her hand caressed my chest. I felt soft kisses on my neck, interposed with her gentle voice singing her Slavic lullaby in almost a whisper. I lay there without moving, glorying in her close presence, but she must have sensed I had woken. Her head moved up and she nibbled my ear.

“You enjoy Serbian baby song?”

“I did.” I said turning over carefully to face her.

Her lovely short curls fell partly over her face. Her blue-green eyes danced with life, and she grinned, revealing her neat white teeth.

“I notice you gone. Zee says you are resting, so I wait. Then I come downstairs and freshen in room, and find beautiful brush. This I use and brush my hair. I tip on toes to you, and cuddle. Not mind?”

I laughed “Of course not. I feel rested, and I enjoyed your song and cuddle.”

She smiled “I am pleased you happy, for I love you.”

She kissed me gently.

“And I love you Svetlana.”

“We have a busy day, no?”

I sighed. “Yes, very. You need a break, after all your hard work upstairs with the girls.”

“Plis?” she said

I repeated my words in Serbian.

“Oh!” she laughed “No work – only fun. Everyone happy.”

She paused “But Joe?”

“Yes?” I nodded.

“I’m sorry. No paper left. We use all.”

I laughed out loud and kissed her on the nose.

I said in her own tongue “Never apologise for having fun. We will get more paper tomorrow. Yes?”

“Yes plis.” she grinned.

We lay quietly in each other’s arms, then I remembered her prescription.

“Wait there.”

I got up and retrieved the large tube of cream, and asked her to lie on her tummy and gently massaged the cream into her bruised back. She moaned softly with pleasure at my touch and her body quivered under my hands. I screwed the top back on the cream tube and asked “Are you hungry?”

She turned over and looked at me smiling. “Yes plis, but something special for me first?”

I smiled “Yes my love?”

She sat up and kissed me, then taking my head in her hands, held me to her left breast.

“Kiss me Joe.”

I took her nipple and some of her lovely breast into my mouth, sucking hard and running my tongue over and around the encaptured nipple. She gasped, then moaned. I continued, whilst I caressed the other breast in my hand. Her hands ran feverishly through my hair, holding, pulling my head hard against her as she orgasmed, over and over, shouting my name loudly between screams.

She lay down and pulled me close to her, breathing heavily.

Eventually she spoke.

“I make sure it is real and not dream. You mind?”

I smiled gently at her “Of course not, that was lovely.”

We lay in each other’s arms for a while, but her recent starvation got the better of us. She laughed as her stomach rumbled, and she sat up and put my hand on her flat stomach.

“Empty!” she said.

I got up. “C’mom, slip on a bathrobe and I’ll make us an omelette”

I beat four eggs, chopped up tomatoes and chives and made us a Spanish omelette, while she set the table.

I went to my small cellar cupboard and brought back a bottle of Rioja, and we ate in easy silence, Svetlana once again obviously very hungry.

When we finished, we left the table uncleared, I got out an LP of Bix Beiderbeck and loaded it onto the turntable, and we cuddled up on the sofa with our glasses.

“Are you OK to talk a little about your captivity?” I asked gently
She turned to me and kissed my nose. “Of course.”

I got up and went to my PC desk, returning with a notepad, and copies of the men she had drawn.

“Can you name the girls who were kept prisoner with you?”
I watched her face work as she recalled each name in turn. It struck me that a mental picture of each girl in turn was brought into her consciousness, and the name retrieved. Most girls she had both Christian name and surname for, a handful she knew only by their 1st names. I wrote as she spoke, then handed the list to her, and she corrected some of my spellings, then smiled and handed the list back. There were 13 names. Adding Katrina, 14 girls condemned to a living hell.

“Good. Thank you. Now a little more?”

She nodded smiling. I handed her the pictures of the two men that Dearby had been unable to identify. “Do you know their names?”

She took the pencil I offered and wrote a Christian name under each picture. “Sorry Joe. Only 1st names ever spoken.”

“Svetlana, that’s good enough.”

I paused. She said gently “Anything more?”

“Yes” I said. “You have been very patient with all of us, whilst I know you feel desperately afraid for your sister. Tomorrow afternoon, I would like to sit down with you, Jane and Zee and try to establish the address where you met this man.” I held up the picture of Piotr Vasilov.

She nodded gravely. “I am ready Joe.”

“Good.” I said “I am confident that you will be able to show us enough for to find where he lives, and I intend to rescue Katrina near the middle of the week, and bring her back safe to you.”

A tear ran down her cheek, and she gripped my hand tightly.
“Pray God that she is safe.”
“She will be.” I said quietly.

She curled up beside me, and as darkness fell, her deep, even breathing told me she slept.

I carried her into my room, removed the bathrobe and laid her between the sheets. After a shower and cleaning my teeth, I joined her, cuddling her back and wrapping my arms around her.

Monday morning saw us walking hand-in-hand, meandering up to Edgware Road, then taking the quiet route to Baker Street, past ‘The Windsor Castle’ and along Crawford Street. She had got up before I woke, made my breakfast for me, and had been very loving, but unusually quiet, and I had hoped the walk in the warm morning sunshine would raise her spirits, so I was a little heartened that as we turned the corner into Baker Street, she spoke.

“You love London Joe?”

I nodded. “I love this part of London, and where we live. Some parts I don’t like, so I don’t go to them.”

She squeezed my hand. “I love your beautiful house, and these streets, but most, I love you. Will you ask me to stay beside you always, whatever happens?”

I stopped and looked at her. I had assumed that this afternoon’s planned investigation had been preying on her mind, and that was the reason for her unusually low spirits. Maybe I was wrong.

I held her lovely face in my hands and said quietly in Serbian. “Will you stay with me Svetlana? Will you stay and be my life and love? Will you be my wife?”

Her arms went around me and she buried her face in my neck.

“I will! I will! I love you so much, I am afraid.”

“Afraid?” I asked.

“Afraid I lose you.”

“Never.” I kissed her. She still had her arms wrapped around me but she smiled, and the happiness was back in her eyes.

“Let’s get those Art supplies.” I said.
She nodded, and we crossed the road.

As we approached Roberta Connaught’s Art Shop, Svetlana stopped and stared in the large window. “We go in here?” “We do.” I replied and pushed the door, holding it open for her to enter. Svetlana let go of my hand, and moved from display to display, picking up items and cooing to herself in Serbian.

I spoke to the young gent behind the counter.

“Hi, my name’s Joe Carlson. I work in the girl’s refuge down in Sussex Gardens. Miss Curuvija will be teaching life drawing and other skills to some of the girls, and we need some supplies and equipment. I will be paying by VISA. Will that be OK?” I handed him my business card.

He smiled. “Sure, Mr. Carlson. Will I walk the young lady round?”

“How’s your Serbo-Croat?” I asked smiling.

He grinned. “Sorry. That’s one I haven’t learned yet.”

“No matter” I laughed, “I’ll walk round with you.”

He nodded, and we crossed the showroom to Svetlana.

I introduced them and she gave him a dazzling smile. He blushed heavily.

We walked around the room. I invited Svetlana to get whatever she wanted, and suggested she also get items for the girls to use. The young man maintained a shuttle-service between us and the counter, carrying her purchases. Finally, when she announced that she had everything, I pointed to some easels. “What about some of those?”

Her face lit up “Not worry cost much?”

I shook my head, and we took three of the ones she chose.

Heading back to the huge pile of purchases on the counter, Svetlana’s hand went to her face. “Joe. I get too much?” “No.” I said firmly and smiled at her, and continued in Serbian “You have inspired the girls. I am so pleased. The money is of little consequence.” She nodded happily.

As we settled up, I rang Tomas and asked him to bring the Espace.

Ten minutes later saw us packing the people-carrier with supplies and equipment, and we headed back to Sussex Gardens.

I left Svetlana, Anna and a handful of the girls, organising space to store the art materials, but just before I left the day room I noticed that one wall had been stripped of the several nondescript prints we had, and now was proudly bearing a collection of Svetlana's drawings of the girls. I walked over to look.

Jane joined me. "They had started writing comments on the wall, so Anna pinned up those sheets underneath each drawing."

I stood and admired the vivid sketches, how she had made life jump out of the paper with so few, but beautifully drawn lines. I read some of the comments and smiled. Some were funny, some genuinely complementary, all were generous.

Pride of place had been given to a sketch of Lizzie, who had asked to be a 'princess', and my eyes kept being drawn back to it. Svetlana had drawn her beautifully dressed in a mediaeval Celtic gown, sitting imperiously, but strangely vulnerable, on a throne. Lizzie's beauty shone from the picture and I felt the tears on my cheeks, as I looked into the dark soulful eyes, with their terrible secrets, looking back into mine from the picture. "Christ!" I said wiping my eyes with my hand. "I'm sorry Jane." She touched my arm. "Don't be - I cried too.." she paused "Go on." I said gently.

She continued "It's as if Svetlana's sketch is speaking to us, though Lizzie herself cannot."

I nodded, but said nothing. I squeezed her hand and left.

I had just sat down with a cup of coffee when the front doorbell rang. A tall, impeccably-leathered motor-cyclist raised his visor when I opened the door.

"Special delivery person-to-person for Mr. Carlson. ID is required sir."

I nodded. "Please come in."

He followed me inside and I retrieved my driver's license and passed it to him. He compared the details with the receipt he carried, and passed the license back. Only then did he remove a stout jiffy-bag from his shoulder pouch. I signed the receipt and he took one step back and saluted. "Thank you sir." he said and left, shutting the door behind him.

I opened the package. Dearby had supplied five SOPS ID cards ready to have the photographs laminated into them. There were also contact numbers for the armourer and other details, including the addresses of two safe-houses, one of which I was to deliver Vasilov to, the other for my own use. There were also the keys to three vehicles. Nothing was missing. The 'phone rang.

"Hi, Derek here. Got details of our 'meet' yet?"

"Hi" I said. "Sure. We all get together for the drive Wednesday at one. I'm emailing you the rallying point. I've also got a source for the equipment we need, and I'll put his contact details in the email. Looking forward to it?"

"Absolutely." he replied, "I've emailed you the names of the three other guys who are coming along."

"Thanks. I'll see you there then." I said.

"Absolutely." he replied, and hung up.

I replaced the receiver and drafted him an email and encrypted it before sending, then read his email, and spent the last hour before lunch, laminating copies of five photographs, including my own, onto the ID cards.

It was nearly 12:00 noon, and I wandered upstairs for some lunch.

While being occupied with the girls, Svetlana was animated and apparently at ease. However during lunch, though attentive and smiling, she seemed troubled and subdued. I looked at the faces of Zee and Jane, and saw the same troubled anxiety. All of us then, regarded the looming early afternoon investigation with some trepidation.

I had moved the dining table close to the PC desk. Zee sat in front of my PC, whilst I sat at the table, my laptop in front of me with Svetlana on my left, between Jane and myself. I had placed an A4 pad and pencils in front of Svetlana, and both Zee and I had copies of her conversation with Katya close by. Pictures of Svetlana's tormentors were in front and to one side of the laptop, and there was juice and glasses in front of us.

I touched Svetlana's hand. "Are you ready?"

She squeezed my hand "Yes plis."

"OK if I record this?" I held up the recorder.

"Is OK." she said quietly.

I talked to her in her native tongue, being as careful as possible.

"OK. You've arrived at this man's house." I pointed to Piotr Vasilov. Can you draw the street in front of the van?" Just a sketch will do."

"I do." she said and commenced drawing. I quietly translated what I'd asked her to draw, to Jane and Zee.

A pretty scene quickly emerged on the paper. The street was narrow, but had several small trees in the centre of the roadway. On either side were 3-story London town houses of late Georgian aspect. Our view was short, and the end of the street terminated in a small graveyard on the left, a much narrower lane, then what looked like a larger graveyard on the right.

Behind the trees in the left-side graveyard, I could just make out a large building, which looked more like a hall than a church. Svetlana pencilled in a few parked cars, but other than that the street was totally unremarkable.

She paused, and I asked "Was it a sunny afternoon?"

"Yes." She said. "Sun in front, over trees." She pointed on the drawing. I scribbled a 'W' and arrow on the drawing.

She looked around hopefully at me.

"OK. Now you are looking at the house you are about to enter. Can you sketch that?"

“Yes.” Her voice was very quiet, but I could see a strong twitch on her temple. Jane quietly took the pulse on her left hand. Svetlana had been pre-warned about this and said nothing. A neat, but nondescript dwelling appeared on the paper, much like every other house-front she had already sketched. The number to the side of the door was 16a.

I waited for her to finish and said to Zee and Jane “Anything ring a bell?”

Both shook their heads.

I turned to Svetlana. “Did you get a chance to look to your left, before the man shoved you through the door?

She nodded “Street same as this.” She pointed to the 1st sketch. “But up at top I see small shops on main road.”

“Good.” I said smiling encouragement. “A shortish quiet side road, running East-West, with London Town Houses, and a couple of graveyards, with possibly – probably, a church. The street leads off a reasonably busy main street.”

I took a drink of my juice, and picking up the transcription, quoted directly from the Serbian.

“Now you were in the back of this dirty, smoky van with no windows, and you asked them to stop because you felt sick.” She nodded. “Wouldn’t stop, but I retch and he curse me then ask driver to stop.”

“Good” I nodded. “They stopped and you got out.”

“I retch badly.”

“Can you remember where the sun was?”

She nodded. “Over big house with pretty roof.”

“On your side of the road?”

Again she nodded.

“What was so pretty about the house roof?”

“I show.” She said and quickly sketched the skeleton of a large house with a pronounced large zig-zag pattern on the roof.

“Before you got back in the van, what else did you notice about the road?”

“Very pretty road, narrow, with many trees and bus – number 46, Lancaster Gate.”

“Coming down the road on the other side?”

“Yes.”

Zee was rattling the keys on the PC. I asked Svetlana. "How much longer after you got back into the van before you arrived in the street?"

She shrugged "A few minutes only."

"Do you remember the van taking any sharp bends?"

"Only one, then we stop."

Zee spoke. "No. 46 - Lancaster Gate to Stonecutter's Lane."

She enlarged the bus route-map on the screen.

"So." I said she's travelling roughly north, on a narrow, tree-lined road." I paused.

"Let's look at the 1st section of College Crescent just after the bus leaves the A46."

I opened Google maps on my laptop and fed in the road name.

"Svetlana. If there's anything you recognise, stop me."

She nodded. I double-clicked until the 1st Google photo of the road was shown. Svetlana leaned forward eagerly.

As we moved up and into Fitzjohn's Avenue, she murmured.

"Yes?" I said stopping.

"Road looks same. Pretty, with many trees."

I smiled. "We'll get there."

I moved slowly up the road until she let out a yell. "On left - big house with pretty roof!"

I moved the viewpoint to the opposite side of the road and panned around.

"There." she shouted "I retch there!"

I nodded smiling. "Devonshire House Preparatory School." I said aloud.

Zee was typing again. "There's a couple of churches close by. The nearest one is left off Heath Street, it's called Spinner's Lane, just into Hampstead."

I panned around and moved us slowly, but steadily north. The trees gave way and a small parade of shops appeared on the right.

There were several small streets leading off. When I saw Spinner's Lane flagged, I turned left into it. Svetlana had gone completely still, I moved the viewpoint slowly forward.

Suddenly she jumped up, her chair flying back behind her.

“Stop! Stop! This is street. Look! Graves!”

And so there were. I looked at Jane. She persuaded Svetlana to sit, and quietly took her pulse again. Svetlana grabbed my arm. “Show me Joe. Show me houses on left!”

I moved across the street and panned around. There in front of us was 16a.

I expected a reaction. It was inevitable. She screamed in Serbian “That’s the evil bastard’s house. The slimy, miserable loathsome creature that he is. I will kill him, kill him!”

She beat the table in front of her with her fists, then picked up the picture of Piotr Vasilov and spat on it, before tearing it to shreds. Then she stood up and screamed at the laptop screen. “You make me suck your slimy little dick will you? Yes, then I will! Only to bite it off and spit the pieces in your loathsome face!”

I had stood up and tried to comfort her. She turned on me and beat my chest, screaming non-stop abuse I could only half-understand. Jane and Zee made to restrain her, but I held up my hand, and we let Svetlana’s anger run it’s course.

Eventually, her screaming turned to sobs, and she buried her head in my chest and gripped me in an embrace that close took my breath away. I mouthed “tea” to Zee. She nodded, and I walked Svetlana to the sofa, took her in my arms and cuddled her.

Slowly, she recovered her composure. Zee handed her a mug of sweet tea and a shortbread biscuit, and Svetlana dunked the biscuit before hungrily devouring it. Zee passed the dish, and Svetlana took another. We waited while she ate. Jane quietly asked Svetlana for her wrist and again took her pulse. I waited and Jane looked up and nodded. She was OK – so far.

The biscuit dish was nearly empty. She appeared much more calm and smiled weakly back at Zee, thanking her for the tea.

“I draw inside for you now. Yes?”

Jane was shaking her head at me. I knew I had enough. I answered. “Svetlana, you have done enough. The rest is up to

me."

She was adamant, but I resisted. Finally she said
"OK then. I stop on stairs. Point to rooms, not go in?"

Jane was still doubtful, but Svetlana was determined. She got up and brought back the pad and pencil. After doing a blazingly fast sketch, she spoke, and delivered her commentary in a convicted and confident way, that was not unlike the rat-a-tat-tat of an automatic machine pistol.

"Inside front door. See video-camera on wall? 1st door - sitting room, next door dining and kitchen." She drew an arrow pointing to behind the stairs. "Stairs to cellar."

She flipped the page and drew a view half-way up the stairs.

"See video looking at us?" She drew it on the wall above a door at the top of the stairs. She pointed to the door. "Loo."

Again she flipped the pad and we watched the 1st-floor landing appear rapidly. "Next to Loo is bathroom. Then bedrooms one, two." She pointed onto the wall above the window which would look out onto the street. "More video". The next page another view up the next flight of stairs. She pointed again. "Video."

There was no door this time, and on the next page she drew just two doors. "1st door - his room and en-suite loo and bath.

2nd room - his office. There is connect door to bedroom from office also." There was a note of disgust and contempt in her voice as she spoke the last few words, and she threw the pencil and pad onto the coffee table.

I took her hand and she turned to me and smiled sadly. "I do not know what outside building looks like where girls are. I'm sorry Joe."

I kissed her. "We will find them. I will ask Mr. Vasilov nicely, and he will tell me."

She looked at me quizzically. I repeated my words in Serbian and she laughed quietly. "You get help from Avenging Angel?"

"I will." I smiled, and we kissed again.

She had spoken the last words in English, and both Zee and Jane looked at each other and smiled.

I felt a terrible weight lifted from my chest, and breathed deeply and freely. Her bravery and sheer determination had seen her through a difficult and dangerous early-afternoon.

Svetlana spoke. "Can we go walk in park?" she said, looking at me.

I looked at Jane. She nodded.

"Do you mind Jane and Thak going with you?"

"You not come?"

I kissed her. "I need to sort out some details, I'm sorry."

"Ssh!" she said, putting her finger gently to my lips "I am sorry. You need use things we talk about. I understand."

I called Thak, and all three set off for the park.

I poured another coffee. Zee was quiet.

"What do you think?" I said.

"That," she paused "was a roller-coaster ride I wouldn't like to take too often."

I laughed gently "But will she be OK?"

She smiled "Joe, she's a fighter. Yes, I think she'll be OK."

"Thank God for that." I sighed.

"What did she scream at your laptop?"

I smiled sadly. "Are you sure you want to know Zee?"

She paused then nodded. "It was about a key event, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "Svetlana refuses to give Vasilov oral sex, and he beats her."

"But she still refuses - and he could have forced her, but didn't. How can that be?"

I looked steadily into Zee's eyes. "The detail is missing in Katya's account - I believe Svetlana never mentioned it deliberately."

Zee nodded "Go on Joe."

"She frightens him."

"Christ! How does she do that?"

I repeated an English translation of Svetlana's threat.

She gasped "You believe she actually said that to him?"

I nodded "I do - and he knew she meant every word."

She continued "So he then beats her again, this time to cover up his own cowardice and shame, rather than to coerce her."

I nodded again.

Zee shook her head slowly. "I believe you are right. She stood up against this bullying, perverted thug and won!"

"She is a very, very brave young woman." I said quietly.

"And you are right to love her." Zee said. She got up and kissed me gently on the cheek. "I'll leave you to it. See you later." I squeezed her hand and she went upstairs.

I showered the effects of my anxiety off me, and was towelling myself when the doorbell rang. I grabbed my bathrobe and headed for the door. It was Alec.

"Oh" he said, seeing the bathrobe, "I'll come back.."

I laughed "Come in Alec, it's not what it seems."

"A juice?" I asked, pouring myself one. He nodded. I brought it over to the sofa and we both sat down.

"I'll come straight to the point" he said "Stella and I would like to take you up on your generous proposal."

I leaned forward and extended my hand. "That's great Alec. I'll set the wheels in motion."

He shook my hand. "I've already asked for 3 valuations, and I'll bring them round to you when they arrive."

I said, a little tongue-in-cheek "Stella and you are sure about this, aren't you?"

He laughed. "More sure of anything I've ever done before."

He finished the juice in one swallow and stood up. "Look Joe, I'll be happy to show you, or any of the other Refuge staff around, should you wish to start making plans. I will also drop off the architects drawings I had done a few years ago." He paused "I can see you're busy, so I'll now see myself out."

We shook hands, and he left. I returned to my toiletries in the bathroom.

I stood back and looked in the mirror. Had I over-cooked it? I smiled at the image. The 'transformation' was almost complete. From the light-blue cravat around my neck, the shocking-pink shirt and the blue veleted-cord jacket and fine-weave herringbone trousers, to the light-blue socks and red suede shoes on my feet.

I reached into the wardrobe and took a matching corduroy cap, jamming it on my head and re-inspected myself in the mirror again. This time I laughed. I looked so camp, everyone would have to believe that I was indeed so.

I headed upstairs and entered the day room. There were several titters from the girls, but I just grinned happily at them. Sniff was lying in her basket, but as I bent down in front of her she got up and her tiny tail wagged furiously. I picked her up and tucked her rump under my right arm, supporting her little body with my forearm and hand. I turned around. The whole room were my audience. Anna grinned from ear-to-ear, and several of the girls whistled.

“Whaddya Fink?” I lisped.

The room erupted with shrieks of laughter. Zee came out of the kitchen and looked at me, shaking her head. “Oh My God! You’re not going out like that are you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” I minced “What’s wrong?”

She collapsed into laughter, and I strutted over to her.

Lisping heavily I said “A man has the right to take his dog for a walk, without all of this homophobic abuse. I shall talk to you later.”

I winked broadly, retrieved the dog’s lead from the kitchen and headed for the garage.

I got into the M3 and parked Sniff on the passenger seat, and opening the garage doors with my remote, I headed out into the afternoon sunshine.

After the short drive to Hampstead, I parked two blocks before Spinner’s Lane.

“Now then Sniff – it’s walkies.”

She barked and wagged her tail, and I slipped the lead on her and we left the car, and headed up to the lane next to the back of Vasilov’s house.

I walked slowly, letting the dog’s tiny legs set the pace, and pouted at one or two of the locals who stared at me. I took a good look at the rear of the building, and meandered on, going around the corner and into Spinner’s Lane.

I crossed the road and took in the layout of the street. Despite Google’s excellent photography, I needed to reassure myself of

the street's exact geography. I left Spinner's Lane, and returned to my car walking back down Heath Street.

I was back in Sussex Gardens in less than twenty-minutes, and the whole exercise had taken about an hour. I took Sniff back upstairs, emptied her dish and gave her some fresh water, grabbed a glass of Connie's lemonade for myself, then sat down on one of the sofas after removing the hat, jacket and cravat.

Patricia walked over to me and smiled. "Do you always dress like that to take Sniff out Joe?"

I laughed. "Thankfully no, Patricia. But it did give you a laugh, didn't it?"

She nodded smiling. Still looking at me carefully, she said steadily "But that isn't the only reason is it?"

I nodded "You are quite correct. I wanted to check somewhere out, and needed to look as non-threatening as possible."

"You are very good." she said "If I didn't know you, I'd have been convinced you were well gay."

I laughed "Thanks Patricia. I'll take that as a compliment, and I'm glad it gave everyone a laugh."

"Well." she said, "not just that, but something for Svetlana to draw later" She held up her mobile, showing the photo. There I was, Sniff under arm, proud and as gay as could be.

I burst out laughing. "Oh Dear! Looks like you've really got me!"

She laughed and left to join the other grinning girls.

I sat for a while watching the activity in the room. The three easels were all in use, with a further two girls acting as models. From what I could see, the standard of drawing, unskilled as it was, seemed very good. Already, it seemed, the very few hours the girls had been instructed by Svetlana were paying off.

Lizzie walked up to me. "Hello Joe. What pretty clothes you are wearing."

She said it matter-of-factly, with no hint of irony or sarcasm.

I nodded. "They are very pretty - I'm glad you like them."

She reached out and touched the velveted-cord jacket on the

sofa beside me. "This feels nice too." She rubbed the cloth gently with her fingers, then lifted the cravat and placed it around her neck.

"Do you like blue?" I said.

She nodded, and added vaguely "Like the sky."

"It is," I said "very much like the sky."

She sat down on the sofa beside me. I saw Zee sit down facing us a few yards away. She nodded at me.

"Where is Svetlana?" said Lizzie.

"Svetlana is walking in the park with Jane and Thak. They'll be back shortly."

"Do you like my picture she drew?" She beckoned to the wall.

I smiled. "I did, very much. You make a beautiful princess."

She looked up into my eyes. "But I'm not really, am I?"

"You can be whoever you want to be. Don't listen to anyone who tells you differently."

She nodded slowly. "My real Dad said I was his princess."

I nodded. "Then that is what you are."

"He went away." she said simply.

"But you are still his princess, even though he isn't with you."

She nodded. "He died."

"I'm sorry." I said quietly.

"My Ma got me a new Dad, but he was horrible to me."

I looked across at Zee, who was watching and listening, and didn't appear too concerned, so I relied on my instincts. "Oh! That must have been awful for you."

She nodded and looked steadily at me. "He used to creep into my bed and touch me, then he started hurting me."

"That was very wrong of him. Is that why you left home?"

Again she nodded. "I told my Ma, but she didn't believe me, and thumped me, so I left."

"And now you are here with us, how do you feel?"

She smiled "It is lovely. Everyone is so kind to me."

"Good. I'm glad you are happy here Lizzie, because we love having you with us."

I thought that our conversation was drawing to a close, and she would drift off to the other girls again, but it wasn't to be.

"Do you hurt Svetlana when you fuck her?" she was looking

straight at me.

“No, I don’t” I said evenly. “I would never hurt her.”

She shook her head “But it hurt when he fucked me.”

“You are still very young, and your body is not fully grown. It will not hurt when you are older.”

She was quiet, so I added “This man did a terrible thing to you Lizzie, hurting you in this way.”

I looked at her. Tears had started rolling down her cheeks. I offered my upturned right hand and she took it.

With tears in my own eyes I said “I’m so sorry you have been hurt. Can I do anything to help?”

“Will you be my new Dad?” she said looking at me.

“Of course, if that is what you want.”

She lifted my right arm and slid underneath it, putting her head against my chest with her right arm wrapped over me tightly. I held my right arm around her. I didn’t know what to say, so said nothing.

She started to sing, the same melancholy song in the same strange tongue she had sung whilst brushing Svetlana’s hair. I closed my eyes, but still felt the tears running down my cheeks. She played with the buttons on my shirt as she sang. Part of me was very, very angry, part of me very glad. Mostly I felt that my emotions had been fed through a wringer.

I felt a warm hand touch me gently on the back of my neck. I opened my eyes. Zee was behind the sofa. She kissed the top of my head before walking back into the kitchen. I closed my eyes again and let Lizzie’s plaintive song soothe me. All at once I felt at peace, and the anger had disappeared.

Lizzie finished the song and we just sat cuddling. I said softly.

“Where did you learn that song Lizzie?”

“My Dad taught me it. It was his favourite.”

“You sing it so beautifully.”

She tightened her arm around me. I closed my eyes again.

Jane’s gentle voice broke my reverie. “Joe”

I opened my eyes. Jane and Svetlana stood in front of me, both grinning.

I gave them both a lop-sided smile. Lizzie greeted them both, but without moving from my arms. "Hello Jane. Hello Svetlana." Jane smiled at Lizzie. "Are you enjoying a cuddle with Joe, Lizzie?"

I felt the child's head nod.

Svetlana sat down beside me and whispered in my ear. "She is very precious girl. Good she loves you."

She kissed me on the neck.

Jane said gently "Shall we get some tea Lizzie?"

Lizzie peeled herself off me, then turned and asked me "Are you having tea Joe?"

I looked at Svetlana. She nodded, smiling. I turned back to Lizzie. "Right, let's all have some tea."

We headed into the kitchen.

Chapter 8: Preparations

It had been a long warm night. We had made long and passionate love on going to bed, and afterwards had fallen asleep in each others arms, only for us both to awaken hot and thirsty. I brought us cool drinks and we lay and cuddled. She had talked about Vasilov, and about what he had done, in more detail than she had told Katya. As she spoke, sometimes in English, other times in Serbian, I realised that her anger had gone, replaced only with contempt, and the all-too-present concern for her sister.

She told me of the inside of the house where she had been kept with the other girls, of the squalor and discomfort, and of the constant to and fro of the girls as they were taken away and returned. She had been kept in a separate room from her sister, so had been spared watching her departure and return, though she was aware that this had happened.

As she talked of her sister she snuggled in to me and held me tightly, as if afraid I would go. Later, her upset had turned to passion and we had made love again, then to fall into sleep.

I woke to find her head on my chest, her leg straddling my stomach, and for a few minutes I lightly caressed the side of her face, her neck and shoulder. Slowly she stirred and gave a gentle moan of pleasure, then moving her head looked up at me smiling. “Don’t stop. It is lovely.”

She snuggled in and I continued to caress her gently, the touch of her velvet skin under my hand sending little shivers through me. Finally, I reached out to the side table and picked up her prescription cream. She needed no prompting but lay on her tummy beside me. I began with the bruised area just below her

shoulders and worked my way slowly down her back. She moaned softly with pleasure as I worked the cream into her skin. When I put the top back on the tube, I sensed her regret that I had finished, so I continued to caress her, first her lower back, buttocks, then the inside of her thighs.

Tremors ran up and down her body as I touched her and finally she murmured softly "Joe, plis?"

I placed myself above her and as I entered her silky vagina, she raised herself to meet me with a gasp. As I moved inside her I continued to caress the whole of her back and sides. Her moans grew louder and she shivered uncontrollably from head to foot. I thrust harder and deeper inside her and she gasped and sobbed in pleasure as she orgasmed over and over again. I waited until she was almost delirious with pleasure before I let myself come, and exploded with a force that surprised me, as I buried my face in the pillow beside her to mask my screams.

I lay above her, gently covering, but not letting my weight squash her, and kissed her neck and shoulders. Finally, I lay beside her and wrapped her in my arms.

She looked into my eyes "Oooh! That was so lovely." she said "Thank you."

I smiled. "And thank you. You are truly gorgeous."

"What we do today?"

I brushed the curls away from her face. "This morning, we relax. Then I would like to have a walk with you, if you like, as well as have lunch. Later this afternoon unfortunately, I have business to discuss with the others. That business is about what is to happen early tomorrow morning, amongst other things, and we should talk about that now, if that's OK?"

She sat up excitedly. "You fetch Katrina to me?"

I laughed "That is my intention. Unfortunately, it means that you will need to be awake from very early tomorrow morning, so I suggest that you have an early night and Zee will wake you at 2:30am tomorrow morning. Zee, Tomas and Jane will keep you company down here in the basement until I come back. I may need you to talk to Katrina on the telephone, to reassure her, so try not to get too excited."

She held my head in her hands and kissed me deeply and

sensuously, then she spoke "I love you. You are beautiful, kind man."

After we breakfasted she went upstairs, and just before 10:00am I went into the garage and opened the doors. On time, as always, his 'taxi' pulled up outside the door. He stepped out with a large heavy holdall, put it down in front of me, and shook my hand.

"Good luck and God speed Joe."

"Thanks George" I replied, and he was gone.

I closed the garage doors and took the bag into the waiting room. I inspected each of the weapons in turn and checked the ammunition, before placing everything in the small safe. I checked that everything was cleared away and made my way back to the basement, where I grabbed a lightweight blue jacket, my wallet and a small digital camera, then headed upstairs.

In the day room, an art class was in full swing. All three easels were in use, and some of the girls had sketch pads on their knees. The subject was Anna, and she was perched, half-sitting, half-lying on one of the tables, as Svetlana walked around, talking animatedly to each of the girls, and demonstrating on her own sketchpad the points she was making. I was happy to notice that Lizzie had a sketchpad and was joining in. Up until now, she had been a bit of a loner. Some of the girls that weren't drawing, were watching and listening, hanging on Svetlana's every word.

She saw me, and she grinned and waved a kiss to me, and I sat down and watched her. Like most very good teachers, she both loved and knew her subject intimately, and I was surprised at the quality and expression she managed in her English, stumbling only rarely, and eliciting good-natured help from the girls when she got the words wrong.

I looked around the room. The collection of sketches had grown, with those by several of the girls also, and what they lacked in skill was made up in enthusiasm.

“Добро јутро, Џо.”

I turned around in surprise. Jane was standing smiling at me, a small tattered Serbo-Croat phrasebook in her hand.

“Добро јутро Џејн, и како си?” I answered smiling.

She laughed. “Sorry. I’ve not got far with this.”

I smiled broadly at her and she sat down.

“Are you going to learn Serbian?”

She nodded. “I’d like to, and with more and more girls coming from eastern Europe, I think it would help.”

“I think it’s a great idea. And you have a native speaker to help you if you need it.” I gestured to Svetlana.

I pointed to the phrasebook. “Is that all you have?”

“Yes, up till now.”

“I’ll get you some better resources, including a couple of CD’s to listen to.”

She smiled. “Thanks, that would be great.”

I sensed she wanted to ask me a question, but was a little reticent.

“Ask away.” I said “The worst that will happen is I’ll say no.”

She grinned “From what you say, Svetlana will be staying with us permanently?”

I smiled. “Yes, she wants to, and I want her to, but quite apart from my love for her, she will be a tremendous asset to the Refuge.” I waved my hand at the engaged art class.

“I agree” Jane said. “And I’m very happy for you Joe.”

“Thank you Jane. I appreciate that.” I replied.

She got up and joined the girls.

I watched the activity for about an hour and a half, and eventually Svetlana had sat down, sketchpad in hand, with Lizzie sat next to her. I walked around looking at the girls handiwork and making what I hoped were complimentary noises. Later, I walked over to Svetlana. She beamed up at me.

“Hi Joe. You take me out to walk?”

I nodded. “A visit to a bookshop, some lunch, then a walk in the park?”

She folded the pad closed, got up and kissed me. “It is good. I will enjoy.”

I noticed Lizzie’s disappointment. “What about Lizzie Svetlana, would she like to come?”

Svetlana flashed a big smile at me and turned to Lizzie. "You come for lunch with Joe and I, and walk in park?"

Lizzie's face lit up. "Yes please."

As we left the day room, I told Jane we were taking Lizzie out and she smiled. "Good. I'm glad she feels safe enough with both of you to go out. Enjoy your lunch."

The late morning heat hit us as soon as we left the house, and we headed up Sussex Gardens and on to Praed Street. Lizzie was between us, holding both our hands, and was enjoying the walk. It crossed my mind that she hadn't been out at all since arriving at the Refuge.

I turned into W H Smith's and headed for the Foreign Language section. I said to Svetlana. "Take a look around. If there's anything you would like, I'll treat you." I looked down at Lizzie. "Would you like to walk around with Svetlana? If there's a book you would like, I'll get it for you."

She smiled and nodded and they walked off slowly, looking at the shelves of books.

Whilst keeping one eye on both of them, I picked up a good Serbian Foundation course which included grammar, phrase book and 2 CD's, and then stood for a moment looking at the two girls.

Lizzie was stood in the Literature section and Svetlana was pouring over large Art books. I made my way over to Lizzie. She had her back to me, a book open in her hands, and as I drew closer I heard her reading aloud from the book. It was Welsh. I stood behind her and listened to her read the poem, her pure, lilting voice matching the ancient tongue beautifully. I noticed too, that there were several other people standing by listening attentively also.

Lizzie had herself an audience.

She finished the poem, and became aware of the silence in the shop, then looked around a little puzzled as some of her audience gently applauded.

I spoke. "That was lovely Lizzie. You have a lovely voice."

She turned and grinned shyly at me.

“Do you prefer Welsh to English?”

She nodded. “I like the sound of it better.”

“Would you like that book?”

Her face lit up. “Yes please, Joe.”

“Come on then, let’s find Svetlana.”

She took my hand and we walked across the store. Svetlana watched us as we approached. “You find lovely book Lizzie? I hear you read very good!”

Lizzie laughed “Have you got a book?”

Svetlana nodded and held up a small book on life drawings.

“OK?” I said, “Let’s pay, then get some lunch.”

I had intended crossing Edgware Road and going to a small Spanish restaurant I knew, but as we were passing Junction Place, Svetlana suddenly stopped. For a moment I was worried that I had inadvertently dragged her back into bad memories, but she smiled at me and said. “Can we go to lovely pub where we first talk?”

I laughed. “Of course.” So we turned into Junction Place and walked down to ‘The Three Keys’.

It was still early, so there were plenty of empty seats. Svetlana took Lizzie over to a window seat and I turned to the bar.

Alfie’s gaze was firmly fixed on Svetlana, but he turned slowly to me. “Sorry Joe. But is that.”

“Yes.” I laughed.

“God, she’s stunning! What a transformation!”

I laughed again. “I’ll pass on your compliments Alfie. Now can I order some lunch?”

“Oh! Sorry.” he said “But you understand?”

“If by that you mean do I know that every man who sees her falls instantly in love with her, then yes, I do.”

He shook his head. “What would you like?”

“A round each please of beef, pork, ham, chicken and cheese sandwiches, three side-salads and a couple of packets of crisps. To drink, can we have three large freshly-squeezed orange juices and a jug of water and glasses please?”

“My pleasure Joe. Sit down and we’ll get them to you as soon as.”

I joined the girls at the table. They were sat next to each other. Svetlana was telling Lizzie how we had met, and that she had come in here to eat with me.

Lizzie looked at me. "Were you going to thump that man who touched Svetlana's bum on the train Joe?"

I laughed. "Yes, if he hadn't stopped, I would have thumped him."

"I need someone to thump my new Dad for touching me." she said.

I looked at her. "Do you miss your Mum, Lizzie?"

She lifted Svetlana's arm and cuddled in. "Yes. But I won't go back if he is there."

I nodded. "Quite right, but what if your Mum was finished with him and he had to go away?"

"I would like to see her first to find out."

The drinks arrived, and we were all thirsty, Svetlana draining her glass almost in one gulp. I poured half of mine into her glass and she thanked me.

I turned back to Lizzie. "Would you like your Mum to come up to London to visit you Lizzie?"

"Will he come?"

I shook my head. "Definitely not - just your Mum, and only if you want her to."

"Then I would like to see her."

I thought quickly. It might seem like haste, but maybe she would change her mind and I wanted to let her mother know she was at least alive and well. I pulled out my notebook and a pen and asked her for her Mum's name and address. She told me. I wrote the name, Catherine Davies, but the address I couldn't fathom, and Lizzie laughed as I messed it up, then she took the notebook and wrote out the address in neat script, together with a telephone number.

The food arrived, as if on cue, and we all dived in to the beautiful sandwiches and salad, and I ordered more juice.

They looked lovely together, and I couldn't afford to miss the opportunity. I took out my camera. "Do you mind if I take a photo of you both Lizzie?"

She grinned. “Course not.”

They cuddled up and I took a couple of shots, before putting the camera back in my pocket.

I looked around. The pub was filling up with the one o'clock lunch-time crowd, and several men stared openly at Svetlana. She was either oblivious to them, or had decided to ignore their rudeness. We ordered some strawberries and cream, which disappeared in a matter of a few minutes, and I got up to settle the bill. Just after Alfie had given me my change, there was a loud shout behind me. “Watch your mouth kid!”

I made my way back to the table. Lizzie was close to tears and Svetlana nodded to one of the men on the next table. “Him.” was all she said.

I turned to him. “Are you tired of life?” I said quietly. He froze, looked up at my face, then said sheepishly “She spoke out of turn.” he gestured to Lizzie.

“And what did she say that hurt you so deeply?” I asked.

He didn’t want to answer my leading question. I raised my eyebrows. “Well?”

“She said ‘Don’t you know it is rude to stare?’”

“And don’t you?” I said quietly. His friends were shaking their heads, it looked like he was out on a limb.

“I’m sorry.” he said, “It’s that your girl-friend is so pretty.”

“That’s right.” I said, “I agree with you, she is, and I can understand your staring, but your response to Lizzie’s justified comment is entirely and totally out-of-order, and you should apologise to her.”

He looked relieved and nodding, turned to Lizzie. “I’m really sorry I’ve upset you. Can you forgive me please?”

She looked at him, tears still on her cheeks, then nodded with a quiet “Yes, OK.”

“Thank you.” he said, and turning to me, “I apologise to you and your girl-friend too, for any upset I’ve caused.”

I nodded. “OK, then. Apology accepted.”

The pub was in silence, and the young man had gone a deep shade of red. I looked at the girls. “Are we finished?”

They both nodded, so we made our way to the door. Alfie said as we passed “I’m sorry Joe, I’ll have a word with him.”

“Thanks Alfie” I said, and we left.

We walked in silence down Sussex Gardens, and I was concerned that Lizzie had been frightened back into the limbo she had been in for weeks, but by the time we reached the park, she was chatting amiably to Svetlana. All was apparently well.

We spent an entirely enjoyable two hours in the park. I took more photographs of them both, and then Lizzie, then Svetlana took photographs of me and Lizzie. Finally, we were sat on a bench with an ice-cream each and I glanced at my watch. Svetlana said "We have to go now Joe?"

I nodded. "I'm afraid so." I turned to Lizzie. "How do you feel about what happened earlier in the pub, Lizzie?"

She smiled. "It's OK Joe. He was just a silly man."

I laughed. "Yes, that describes him exactly. Shall we make our way back home?"

She nodded "Yes, OK, and thank you for taking me out, it's been lovely."

I smiled. "Lizzie, it was our pleasure."

I went upstairs with them, but let them continue to the day room alone, and I knocked on Margery's door.

"Come in Joe."

I went in and sat down.

"Tea?"

"Yes please."

She busied herself with the kettle. I got out my notebook and when she sat down I handed it to her. "That's Lizzie's Mum's name, address and telephone number."

She beamed at me. "Well done!"

"Can you check the police missing person notifications for that area and surname Margery?"

"Yes, I will. But we have already, for all of Wales, over the last few weeks ever since she arrived, and no-one answering her description or name has been posted as missing."

She turned to the computer, and I got up and made us a pot of tea.

"There's nothing Joe."

"What the Hell is going on?" I said. "You don't think her mother

hasn't reported her missing do you?"

She shrugged. "What else is there to think? Is her mother OK?"

We looked at each other. Margery poured two cups of tea.

"To Hell!" I said "I'm going to ring her and find out."

I picked up the telephone and rang the number Lizzie had given.

After two rings the 'phone was answered. It was uncanny. She sounded exactly like Lizzie, with a beautiful musically-modulated voice. "Hello, Catherine Davies here. Who's calling?"

I gestured to Margery to pick up the other receiver. "Hello. My name is Joe Carlson, and I'm the manager of a girls Refuge in London. Have you got a daughter missing?"

There was silence. Then I heard her whimper. "Brangwen, you have found Brangwen. Is she alright?"

"Mrs. Davies," I said "the girl that gave me your address is fine and healthy, but her name isn't Brangwen. Does she use another name?"

"She calls herself Lizzie. I try to stop her, but she insists.."

I cut in "That's her Mrs. Davies. It's Lizzie."

Then the tears and sobs came and I just sat and listened until she had calmed down.

"Can you answer a couple of questions for me Mrs. Davies?"

"Yes, OK. Go ahead."

"First. Why haven't you reported your daughter missing?"

There was silence then a mumbled reply.

"Can you speak up please Mrs. Davies, I didn't hear what you said."

"I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid that they would take her from me and I'd never see her again."

I was nearly speechless. "Who are 'they' you speak of?"

"The social."

"Why would they take your daughter from you?"

Again she mumbled, and again I asked her to speak up.

“He told me. He told me what he’d done.”

“Mrs. Davies. Just tell me exactly what he said to you.”

“I can’t, they were awful words.”

“Try.” I said “It’s important, and I won’t be shocked.”

“I had told him to leave and he said ‘fine’ and ‘that was OK’ by him, and my daughter ‘was a better fuck’ than me anyway.”

She started crying again. I swore silently and waited until she had calmed down. I knew it was a waste of time but had to ask.

“Have you reported him to the police?”

“No.” she said almost whispering. I looked across at Margery and raised my eyes to the ceiling.

“Can I see her?” she said.

“Yes, of course, but I’m afraid there are a couple of things that you need to do first.”

“Yes?” she said.

“You need to report your boyfriend to the Police for the rape of your child. They will be curious to know why you have waited so long and also not reported her as missing. My advice, Mrs. Davies, is that you talk to your family solicitor or the citizen’s advice bureaux, before you go to the police, so that they can advise you of your rights and responsibilities as a parent.”

“Oh Christ! What have I done? Does she hate me?”

“No, she doesn’t hate you.” I said more gently. “In fact she misses you. Now I want you to act immediately to do the things I have said, and tell the local police of my ‘phone call to you. When I hear from them that you have been interviewed, I will contact you with a view to your coming to London to see her.”

“I have no money.” she said.

“I’ll arrange rail travel and accommodation for you, free of charge Mrs. Davies. Now I want you to take a note of my name, telephone number, and the address of the Refuge, so get a pen and paper.”

I waited then told her my contact details, and made her repeat everything.

She thanked me.

“There’s just a couple more questions Mrs. Davies.”

“Yes.”

“What is your daughter’s date of birth?”

“It’s in three days time, she will be 12.”

Margery wrote it down on her pad.

“You know that Lizzie loved her Dad very much don’t you?”

“Yes. She did, and so did I.”

I asked quickly before the tears started again. “Was he Welsh Mrs. Davies?”

She sounded puzzled when she answered “No. He was Irish.”

“Just one more question. What were his favourite band?”

Now she was genuinely puzzled. I didn’t give an explanation but simply waited.

“The Chieftains.” she said softly.

It all clicked into place in my head, and I thanked her and hung up.

I sat back in the chair and shook my head vigorously. Margery replaced her receiver and laughed. “Don’t let them get to you Joe.”

“Why Oh Why Margery? She is like a child herself, hopeless and lost! No wonder tragedies like Lizzie happen.”

“What was all that about her Dad’s favourite band Joe?”

“Is your Dad still alive Margery?”

She smiled. “Just – the old fool is still clinging on.”

“Lizzie has lost hers. I’m going to try to give her a little bit of him back.”

She looked at me and shook her head laughing. “You are a strange man Joe Carlson, but loveable with it. Now get out!”

“**H**i Everyone, and thanks for joining me a such short notice.”

I looked around the table. Thak and Pash on one side, Zee and Tomas on the other.

“I’ve called this impromptu meeting of the trustees, because of recent and currently unfolding events, and I wanted everyone to be here because there are certain things I have to propose that need early consideration by all of you.”

I paused. They all nodded and smiled, so I continued.

“My first proposal may or may not come as a shock. I propose that we invite Jane on to the board of trustees.”

They looked across at each other and then back to me.

“Let me explain. Previous to Jane joining us, just over two years ago, Zee had the full weight of psychiatric assessment for all girls on her shoulders alone. That was unfair on Zee, and we had to do something about it. Since then, almost every aspect of what we do here has improved, and due to the combined efforts of both Zee and Jane, our success rate, if I can call it that, with the girls has nearly trebled. Margery has statistics available for you, should you wish to verify this.

Jane has assumed a supporting role to Zee in the training of new staff, as well as her other duties. These things, not to mention that all of the girls love and respect her, have made her a valuable, some would say essential, member of our team.”

I paused for any comments, but they knew there was more, so I continued.

“I believe Jane has a lot more to offer than that she currently brings to our Refuge, and I believe it is right she should have a suitable forum for her thoughts. That forum is this Board.

Further, we have talked informally of increasing the effective size of the Refuge, and that means either adding yet more responsibility to existing senior staff’s remit, or divesting some of it to worthy members of staff.”

Again I paused, but this time mostly for breath.

“I believe the clue to a large part of the success of our small Refuge is just that – it is small. The girls know all of the staff, and can have a one-to-one relationship with us when they wish it. I want to take that model on into our expansion, to create, if you like, another ‘family’, separate, but together with us, and I believe that the understanding and expertise Jane can bring, will help us to achieve this.”

I paused then added “I could go on, but that is my 1st proposal. Can I have a seconder?”

There was no hesitation, all four held up their hands.

I looked across at Pash. “Pash, it looks like we don’t even need a separate vote.”

Pash smiled back and added notes to the minutes in front of her.

They knew I had more, so all looked at me expectantly.

“Because of the nature of what we do, and the hard work that lies ahead, I propose that Jane be asked to join us for the remainder of this meeting, so that she can make an informed choice about whether she should accept our invitation.”

They all nodded. I picked up the ‘phone and spoke to Margery. “Can you ask Jane to join us in the basement please Margery?” She was expecting my call “Will do Joe.” she said and hung up

I got up and walked around with the coffee pot. Zee opened the door when Jane knocked, and we sat down.

“Hi Jane, thanks for joining us. I’m sorry to spring this on you so suddenly. The Board of Trustees would like to extend an invitation to you to join us, as a full and equal permanent member.”

She looked at me and smiled nervously.

“Oh!” she paused “you have taken me by surprise. I don’t know what to say. I’m honoured of course..”

I smiled at her. “At this point you don’t need to say anything. This is an invitation, not a request or command. I’d like to explain a few things to you, and we would like you to sit with us for the rest of this meeting, and then, in your own time, you can make your mind up. Whatever you finally decide, we will accept your decision, and your non-acceptance will not in any way change your status as a trusted and valued member of the staff.”

She looked around at us and smiled shyly. “Thank you.”

I looked around at everyone.

“OK Jane. First of all, you retain your status as staff. However, as a board member, and because of the extra responsibility, your salary would be increased substantially. In addition, instead of the single-room accommodation you have currently, a fully-autonomous 2-bedroom flat will be put at your disposal. I’ll explain how I propose to do that at a later date.”

She was listening intently, so I continued.

“Rather than go over any new responsibilities with you, I propose to carry on with the rest of this meeting, as I hope that as a result, all will become clear to you, including the hard work we have ahead of us. Please feel free to comment on anything we discuss. Is that OK?”

She nodded. "Yes Joe."

"Very well. That leads me to my second proposal then."

I looked around the table. "I have made an informal offer to Alec Soames for the purchase of the guest house next door, in its entirety, with the exception of his mews flat. I am pleased to say that yesterday, after fully discussing the matter with his wife Stella, he has agreed to go ahead. I will be putting the details before all of you shortly. For now, let me say that this is a unique opportunity for us to increase our capacity by more than 100%, without moving from this house, within which we have all been very happy. Alec has invited us all, either separately or together, to a tour of the hotel at a time to suit any of us. I suggest a 'phone call first though, in case he's busy. I estimate the cost to the Trust to be within the region of seven million pounds, and Pash will confirm that we can more than meet this from current funds. I need your formal agreement before we can go ahead. Can I have a seconder please? "

Again four hands went up. I laughed "One more vote like that and it will be a first for us."

Everyone laughed.

"Just one more thing from me please, and then I'll throw the meeting open."

I had their attention again.

"Everyone on the Board is aware that on occasions I take a personal role in the organisation of the extraction of female victims from criminal traffickers."

The room was very quiet. I looked at Jane.

"Jane, I suspect, has become aware through her own observations and talks with some of the girls."

She nodded.

"It is absolutely essential to the well-being of the girls, and to the continued existence of this Refuge, that no-one employed by the Refuge should be linked in any way with activities that could be regarded as questionable, however well-intentioned. That is why I will allow no-one, other than myself, a non-employee, such involvement, despite an evident willingness to help from others."

I looked at Tomas and Thak, and they both nodded.

“Moreover, I cannot share either the detail or outline of anything that I may be involved in, with any of you, without putting you at risk of charges of complicity or even worse, risk to your lives.”

“Early tomorrow morning an operation to extract Svetlana’s sister Katrina from the group of criminals holding her is to be carried out.”

They all waited.

“I cannot carry out this operation without giving you one truth about it however. The same vicious thug that holds Katrina prisoner, is the torturer and murderer of my wife, Christine.”

There was complete dumbfounded silence. Then Zee exploded.

“Christ!” she said. “How long have you known this?”

“Not long enough.” I replied evenly.

There was silence. Then Thak spoke.

“You tell us this because you feel guilt regarding your intentions Joe. I say that you should feel no guilt. This man deserves everything that happens to him.”

Everyone around the table nodded, including a stunned Jane.

“Thank you Thak.” I said, “What I’m trying to say is that all of you may see news items shortly, and wonder who it is, that you have called your friend these many years.”

I looked around the table. “My intention is to go ahead and attempt a rescue of Katrina. After that, I will put my future with this Refuge to a vote by this Board, by all of you, whom I love and trust.”

There was immediate protest, but I held up my hand.

“Please. You will have time enough to dwell on this. Can I now throw this meeting open?”

I got up, and walked around with the coffee pot again. There were some private conversations, but quiet when I sat down again.

Zee looked at me, she looked hurt, but said quietly “I understand now why you wish to strengthen this Board.”

“You do? Good.”

She smiled sadly at me and shook her head.

“I thought I’d explained.” I said gently.

I should have known better. Zee could read me like a book.

She turned to the others. "Since Joe will not tell you what is in his mind, I think I should."

I sat back in my chair. It was useless to protest, for to do so would be to insult her.

"Joe has invited Jane to join this board, and for all of the reasons he has given, he is correct, it is a right and proper proposal. However, the most important reason is, that he wants there to be a strong Board of five persons already in place, in case of his untimely death during this raid early tomorrow morning."

There was complete silence.

There were tears in her eyes as she finished, and she looked at me as if I'd betrayed her. "Deny it." she added.

I felt two-foot tall. "I'm sorry Zee. Of course I don't deny it. You are quite right."

She got up and left the table, clearly upset. Tomas followed her. I looked at Thak and Pash. Thak knew, so did Pash, and they both understood.

Jane sat looking slightly bewildered. I touched her arm. "Are you OK?"

She looked at me. "How can you be so cool, accepting that you may die within a few hours?"

I smiled. "I'll answer your question, if you will answer one for me first."

She nodded and I continued "As a trustee, will you be able to accept that I do what I have to, and live with the fact that I may go out one night and not come back?"

She looked straight into my eyes. "I don't want you to die, but yes I accept if it must be, then it must be."

"That is, above all, why I want you on this Board." I said "And to answer your question - I'm a soldier."

"And the people who help you?"

I nodded "Soldiers also. I cannot tell you more, I'm sorry."

She took my hand. "I will not wait to make my decision. My mind is made up. I want to help as much as I can. I accept your invitation to join the board."

"Good. And thank you."

I looked around. Tomas and Zee appeared to be having an

angry and animated discussion. Pash and Thak sat quietly. I cleared my throat. “Well, if there is no further business, I’d like to bring this meeting to a close. I’ll talk to those of you concerned with the proposed reception of Katrina later.”

I nodded to Pash and Thak, then turned to Jane.

“Sorry this has been a bit of a scary fairground ride for you – 1st time as well.”

She smiled. “I have found it both exciting and informative. I look forward to the next.” She got up and left, followed by Pash and Thak. Tomas and Zee were still talking as they got into the lift.

I sighed. I felt punch-drunk. I poured myself some juice from the ‘fridge and sat down on the sofa, trying to clear my head. I dozed for about ten minutes, and there was a knock on the internal door.

“Come in.” I said.

Chapter 9: Zee, a minha amiga

Zee opened the door and walked in, turning the key in the lock after she closed it. She walked purposefully across the room and sat down in the chair opposite.

“I’m sorry Joe.”

“What for?”

“For being silly.”

“But you weren’t silly Zee.”

She paused before replying.

“Tomas thinks I’ve been silly, and wants me to apologise to you.”

“Is that why you are here? Because Tomas sent you?”

She shook her head and levelled her gaze straight at me.

“No, rather I used his insistence as an excuse to come here and see you.”

“Ah.” was all I said.

“I cannot bear the thought of losing you.” she said simply. I leaned forward and took her hand. “What would you have me do? Leave Katrina, and those like her to suffer as Svetlana did?”

“No, but.. I love you.” she said.

“I know.” I said gently. “I love you.”

She gripped my hand hard “No you don’t know Joe, I’m in love with you.”

“Yes.” I said “I know that too. Trouble is, showing your feelings as you did this afternoon, there is a danger that Tomas will soon know too, and where will your marriage be then?”

She didn’t answer.

“I’ve been on several of these ventures before, and you have always taken them in your stride Zee.” I said.

“I feel differently now.”

“I can see that. What do you want to do?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Would you like a break? Perhaps back in Madeira, seeing your old friends?”

“No, definitely not that.”

I sat quietly holding her hand. We both knew the answer had to come from her.

She withdrew her hand. “Pick me up please.”

I was completely taken aback, and looked at her in surprise.

“Please, Joe.” she implored.

I looked into her dark, beautiful eyes and could not refuse. I stood up and bending over her, slid my right arm under her thighs, my left arm around her back, and lifted her like a baby from the chair.

As I stood upright, she gasped.

“Oh!”

A shudder of pleasure shook her whole body. Her eyes closed then opened and looked up at me pleading. I remembered.

“Hold on to me little one.” I said in Portuguese, and smiled at her.

She put her arms around my neck and hugged me ferociously, then relaxing her grip she moaned again. I walked slowly around the room with her in my arms, her hands caressing my neck and face, touching my chest and arms, as her body undulated in my arms and her contractions grew fiercer.

Suddenly her head snapped back and she gasped, then throwing her arms around my neck again, she buried her face in my chest and screamed as she shuddered in ecstasy.

Slowly she recovered, and still with her arms around my neck, looked up into my eyes. She looked exactly as I remembered.

“Oh Joe,” she said “what have I made you do? Please forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive. You feel what you feel.”

She made no attempt to get down, so I stood holding her.

“This is beautiful.” she said softly, “I dream of being in your

arms again, almost constantly.”

“Does Tomas never lift you in his arms?”

“No.” she said quietly.

“Have you asked him to?” I said gently.

“No. I’m afraid of how I might react.”

“Like now, you mean?”

She nodded. “Yes like now. How could I explain? Or even worse, I might feel nothing at all.”

I pondered. “The event we shared has had a powerful and lasting influence on both of us, and that is perfectly understandable. But as a nurse, you probably know the phrase ‘physician heal thyself’?”

She smiled sadly at me. “I thought I could cope with how I feel about you. I find that I have been fooling myself.”

She tightened her arms and moved her face close to mine. I knew what she intended, and though she waited for me to, I could not stop her. She kissed me. A long, generous, sensual kiss that left my lips on fire. I responded gently and lovingly. I had no choice. We became one, lost in each other for a while before she pulled away.

“You can put me down now.” she whispered softly.

I set her gently down on the chair and sat opposite her.

She looked across at me. She seemed more at ease and content.

“Thank you for loving me so much Joe.”

I smiled. “No thanks are needed. I will always love you. How do you feel?”

She gave a little laugh. “Guilty as Hell, but much better. That was truly lovely.”

“Don’t feel guilty, there is no need.”

“And if I ask you to pick me up again?”

“Then I will, but Zee?”

She nodded.

“Try and work things out with Tomas. He loves you, and would want to make you happy, however odd he thought your request was, or indeed your response.”

“If he found out why I felt that way, he would be profoundly jealous of you.”

I nodded and smiled. "And if he found out what has just happened, how would he feel?"

She nodded. "I will try."

We both stood up and embraced, and she went back upstairs.

I knocked on Tomas & Zee's door. Tomas showed me in.

"Zee's upstairs." he said.

"I know. I just need a few words with you about tomorrow morning."

He looked worried. "Joe?"

"Yes?" I looked at him, waiting, knowing his concern.

"Are you and her OK?"

I touched his arm. "Of course Tomas. Zee and I are fine."

He didn't seem convinced. "She was out of order."

I motioned to the chairs "Can we sit down?"

He nodded, and we sat.

"As you know, Zee and several other girls were rescued by my team from one the most appalling places I have ever seen."

He nodded.

"Zee was injured, and could not walk, so I carried her from that terrible place to my car, and from there into this house."

He waited.

"Zee has never forgotten that incident, either the part I played in it, the physical act of carrying her, nor how she felt about it at the time. She probably never will forget. Are you OK with that?"

He nodded "Of course."

"She still relates to the intense relief and happiness she felt on that night, even though she is now a mature adult, and there is a bond she feels with me that, despite her best efforts, she cannot break, nor bear to think will be broken, as we saw this afternoon."

He hung his head, he already knew. His awareness could make my task easier, if I was careful.

"She loves you Tomas, and she needs you. The trouble is, that Zee spends so much of her time here trying to repair the damaged individuals we care for, she has had little time to come to terms with, and set in its rightful place, what she

experienced that night. You understand what I'm saying?"

He looked up. "Yes, but what can I do?"

"At times, especially stressful times, she may want to re-visit how she felt all those years ago. She cannot ask you herself, because she would feel guilty."

He pondered and I waited patiently.

"I think I understand. I will try."

"Good." I said "In time, and with your love and understanding, she will be able to re-focus her perceptions of the incident.

Don't give up on her Tomas, I know she loves you."

He nodded "I won't."

I waited in case he wanted to say more, but he seemed relieved.

"Now what about tomorrow?" he asked.

"OK" I said, "I expect the operation to begin at 2:00am, and be over by 4:30am. I would like you to be on standby from 2:30am, ready to drive if I call you, but otherwise keep Zee, Jane, and Svetlana company in my flat. Thak will be on duty in the house as normal, but of course, call on him if you need help."

"OK. That's seems fine. Anything else?"

"No, that's it, and thanks Tomas."

He smiled at me. "It's my pleasure, Joe."

I left, and headed to Thak's flat, telling him the arrangements, then headed upstairs to the day room.

Svetlana stood in front of an easel on which she had placed a medium-sized canvas. Four girls sat and watched as she deftly applied pastels from a pallete on to what was already an uncannily lifelike and beautiful portrait of Lizzie.

Lizzie herself, sat alone, in front of the group, Baldwin on her lap. She stroked the cat almost absent-mindedly, her eyes only on Svetlana.

Svetlana looked towards me as I entered the room, and flashed her dazzling smile, blowing a kiss to me. She had paint on her face, but I didn't care, she looked wonderful. I waved back and made my way over to Zee, who was sat watching from the corner of the room.

“Hi” she said, a little shyly.

“Hi Zee.”

I told her of the arrangements for tomorrow morning and she nodded carefully. I continued.

“Svetlana will be excited, of course, and we must manage her expectations. Depending on what I find, it may be necessary for Svetlana to convince her sister to come with me, as she will probably be terrified. I will call you if so, but could you warn her beforehand to try and simply reassure Katrina as to who I am, and not to become too emotional, as timing will be crucial?”

She smiled. “That’s a tall order!”

I laughed “I know, I’m probably being silly, but you know what I mean.”

“Will you bring back anyone else?”

“It depends on what I find. I have pre-arranged welfare organised for the other girls we find, but if there are girls who need immediate attention, I shall bring them back with me.”

She nodded. “We only have one room Joe, remember?”

I smiled “Yes, I know. I’ll sleep on the floor if I have to.”

She shook her head and reached out, taking my hand.

“Ever selfless, ever giving. Do you blame me for loving you?”

I replied gently “And you. Despite your feelings about me, or indeed because of them, your joy at my love for Svetlana, is that not selfless and ever giving? Can you blame me, then, for loving you?”

She shook her head slowly.

“Sometimes Joe..” she paused.

“Yes?” I said quietly

“Sometimes I feel as though we were two parts of the same person, torn apart, but forever trying to re-unite. Does that make sense?”

“I don’t know Zee. For a long time now, I have simply accepted what I feel about you, as multi-faceted and contradictory as it seems to me at times.”

She looked at me, her gaze very steady.

“You are the most non-judgemental person I have ever known. At times, your cool and calm acceptance of the emotional needs of others is almost as glorious as it is at times

frightening."

I tried to evade her praise. "Tell my enemies I am non-judgemental."

She shook her head. "They deserve your wrath. I talk of me. I talk of your friends. I talk of little Lizzie, of Svetlana a few short days ago."

I was quiet, she had more to say.

"I quickly grew to be jealous of your love for Christine, but over time I began to understand that you have so much within you, that there is enough for everyone. Only your sexual fidelity for your chosen one stops those who would have your heart from breaking it."

She paused.

"I took you to a place this afternoon, a place I'd created because of my selfish love for you, a place I had no right to force you to go. I am truly sorry."

Tears poured down her cheeks.

"Zee. You needed to be there. Do you not understand how glad and happy you made me feel, that my simple act of holding you, gave you so much pleasure?"

She looked at me recovering slightly, but still doubtful. "It was selfish, just plain selfish."

I shook my head. "It was both innocent and adorable. Please don't think otherwise."

She wiped her eyes with her hankie, and managed a nervous smile. "You really think that?"

"Yes," I nodded "I do. Your conflation of my act of rescue with that of a beautiful orgasm, is not only innocent and understandable, but a tremendous compliment to me."

She gave me her most gorgeous smile. "You have turned my selfish act into a compliment to you! How do you do it?"

I laughed "Sorry!"

"Fibber! No you aren't."

I got up and kissed her cheek. "I need a word with Jane."

"Of course." she smiled and squeezed my hand.

Jane was part of Svetlana's audience, but I caught her eye and beckoned her to two seats at the side of the room.

“Hi Jane. Everything OK?”

She smiled “Fine. Did you notice the picture?”

I nodded. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s absolutely remarkable..” she paused.

“and talking of remarkable, I heard about your conversation with Lizzie yesterday, and her giving you an address today.”

I felt myself blush. She noticed and smiled.

“I’m sure she was ready to talk anyway.”

“Now that’s just bullshit Joe. Throw away the modesty. You are as pleased as everyone else is with your breakthrough.”

Her candour surprised me, but her insight was undeniable.

I smiled and nodded “OK Jane, it was quite difficult, especially her earthy language and the very direct question about myself and Svetlana.”

She nodded. “You did well, many would have bottled at her personal remarks. That’s why you must accept your success gracefully. If it was easy, anybody could do it.”

“You,” I paused “are too kind.”

“I,” she mimicked my pause “simply tell you the truth.”

We both laughed.

“About tomorrow.” I said.

“Of course, go ahead.”

“I want you to keep Zee and Svetlana company, from about 2:30am. I need you to keep an especial watch on Svetlana when Katrina arrives, as I suspect that after the initial excitement of their re-union, all of the pent-up anger and guilt she feels at herself about leaving her sister may surface. Zee will help with Katrina.”

I paused.

“And?”

“There is always the chance I may bring back one or more other girls Jane. Are you ready for that?”

She nodded. “We’ll manage.”

“Shall I ask Anna to help?”

She shook her head emphatically. “No Joe, she’s not ready for this just yet. Don’t worry, we’ll cope.”

I smiled. “Good. I like your confidence.”

I looked across at Lizzie, still sitting with Baldwin, apparently

totally content as long as she was with Svetlana.

Jane caught my thoughts. "They are close, so very close."

I related the events of our threesome earlier in the day.

Jane nodded. "They have both benefited enormously from each other's company, there is real love between them.." she paused

" and you."

"Lizzie is adorable." I said, "It would be hard not to love her."

I added "I was going to tell her I've spoken to her Mum, but I'm not going to interrupt them now. Can you tell Lizzie later, that her Mum now knows that she is safe, that she loves Lizzie, and that the boyfriend is gone. Also tell her that I expect we can organise a visit for her Mum here, in a couple of days or so."

Jane smiled "Of course Joe. Are you off somewhere now?"

I grinned. "Just bed. I probably won't sleep, but I'll be up all night so any small rest will probably help."

She touched my arm. "Come back to us please. We would all miss you dreadfully."

I looked into her now serious face. "I have every intention of returning. Don't worry."

She smiled, a little sadly.

"I'll see you early tomorrow morning." I said, and quietly left the day room.

The drive to Waltham Abbey took me only 30 minutes or so.

I parked the M3 in between a few other cars, two blocks away from Jasmine Drive. I got out and looped the heavy holdall's straps over my right shoulder, locked the car and started to walk. There was no one around. It was a quiet neighbourhood and although only just a little after midnight, most houses were now in darkness.

It took me 3 minutes to walk to 'Grace and Pride', which was about half-way up Jasmine Drive. The front garden and house were screened from the road by a dense hedge, and the drive looped around from the right to the left - perfect cover. I walked up the gravel drive and slowly the front of the house

was revealed to me. It was a large Mock-Tudor double-fronted detached dwelling built around the early thirties, with big Bay windows and a substantial entrance porch and front door. To the left was a large three-door garage block, and it was to that I headed first.

I opened the side door into the garage and clicked on the light, putting the holdall down just inside the door. Immediately in front of me was a large Transit with the insignia of BT on the side. I walked around and opened the back doors. At first sight it looked stuffed full of cable, tools and all the other paraphernalia required for modern telecom installations these days, but closer inspection revealed that one of the panels slid sideways to reveal a small enclosed seating area sufficient to hide at least 4 people. Two baggy boiler suits hung amongst the clutter fastened to the side panels. The van looked familiar, and I suspect we had used it before. I got out and checked the roof. It had a substantial rack on which there were a selection of extending ladders, along with several aluminium poles.

The next vehicle was a venerable, but sleek 4-door Sierra Sapphire Cosworth. I smiled with quiet anticipation. I knew this car also, and it rode like a dream.

The other car was a 5 year-old BMW M5, with a nice big boot. I started each vehicle in turn, checking that all lights etc., worked correctly and that all 3 tanks were full. I was well-satisfied, George had done us proud.

Returning to the door, I opened the holdall and removed two plastic bags, walked back to the Cosworth and put them in the boot. I then picked up the holdall, switched off the light and locked the door, then walked to the front door of the house. I let myself in, and made my way to the kitchen before switching on a light. The house was naked and bare, as I expected, and I suspected Dearby's department had simply 'borrowed' it on a short let from a friendly estate agent for a few days. However there was a table and 5 chairs in the kitchen, together with a kettle, cups, and the makings for both tea and coffee. I closed the kitchen window blinds and unpacked my briefing materials from the holdall, arranging a small set of papers in each of 4

places. I also laid out a large-scale map detailing Spinner's Lane and the area immediately around it, which I had already annotated, and put the SOPS ID's in a neat pile in the centre of the table.

I filled the kettle and whilst it heated up, opened the holdall and removed a heavy Glock, together with a screw-on silencer, ammunition and holster, and one of the Kevlar vests. I dismantled and checked the weapon. It had been thoroughly cleaned and was in perfect condition. After re-assembly, I fed rounds into the 4 clips supplied and fitted one clip into the pistol, then snapped the holster onto my belt, putting the remaining clips into the large right-hand vest pocket. I left the remaining weapons alone. Each man preferred to check his own.

I made myself a coffee and relaxed. I didn't have long to wait. Two short rings on the doorbell announced the arrival of the rest of the team. I opened the door and gestured them in and towards the lighted kitchen.

We all knew each other, having worked together before, but as was usual I had left Mac, aka 'Derek', to choose the team from who was available. We all shook hands and I poured another 4 cups of coffee and we sat down.

I sat back and said nothing as they went through the material in front of them. Only when everyone looked up did I speak. "It's good to see you once again Gentlemen. I want to thank you for volunteering for this mission. All of you have been with me before, so I'll try to be brief." I picked up the photo of Piotr Vasilov. "This man is FSB, but also moonlights in almost every illegal, nasty racket he can get into. There is evidence that he has tortured and killed British intelligence officers, and currently he is holding about a dozen under-age girls captive and selling time with them to every nasty little pederast who is interested. Our primary mission is to rescue these girls."

I paused, but there were no questions so I continued. "The other four men form the rest of his team. We believe that

these two" I lifted up their photographs, "keep him company at his house in Hampstead. The other two are guarding the girls at an unknown location. The address of this location will have to be obtained from Vasilov or his two immediate henchmen. Any questions so far?"

They all shook their heads.

"OK. We will form two teams. Carl and John, I want you to take the BT Transit. Mac and Peter the BMW, and I will take the Cosworth. Shortly after 2:00am we will effect an entry from the rear of the house, but only Mac, Peter & myself will actually enter, Carl and John acting as backup. When the second address is known, Carl and John will leave in the Transit to observe and await my arrival. Mac and Peter, when I finish talking to Vasilov, I want you to deliver him to this address." I handed them a piece of paper.

When you get there, simply ring the doorbell and when challenged just say 'package for Mr. Linton.'"

"When I arrive at the second address, two of us will enter, the other staying outside as backup. When the hostiles have been neutralized, I need to extract this girl in particular, before we make the call to the services." I held up a photo of Katrina.

"All of these men can be regarded as armed and dangerous. Don't hesitate to shoot if threatened. Also be aware that there may be more hostiles than we have discussed here - if in any doubt act first."

I looked around for comments. They were waiting until I finished.

"Normally, we leave any hostiles trussed up waiting for the police when they arrive. This time is different. Apart from Vasilov, the hostiles are to be eliminated. I am taking that responsibility myself. I will try to do this out of sight of yourselves. Any questions?"

"No? OK. Last but not least, your normal fee will be paid, whether this mission is deemed a success or not. As is usual, any disposable assets will be retained by us, and after

expenses, 90% of the remainder will be given anonymously to charitable Refuges for young women. The other 10% will be divided equally as a bonus between the four of you. Everyone happy with that?"

They all nodded, so we moved on to discuss the entry operation at Spinner's Lane.

At one o'clock all weapons were checked and loaded and we vested up and headed for the garage. We left for Spinner's Lane at two minute intervals starting at 1:15am.

I walked over to the two glowing monitors at the small CCTV station in the corner of the room. Five pictures looked out at me, and I realised that some of the cameras were already switched to infra-red.

I could see an empty downstairs inside the front door, with a partially-dismantled burglar alarm system. Peter stood in the 2nd bedroom on the floor below with the two nylon-manacled prisoners. One of the monitors showed an empty downstairs living room, and the next showed the figures of Mac and myself looking at the CCTV desk. The final infra-red picture was of the bedroom next door. The shape of a medium-built body lay still on the bed, and that of a much smaller body lay as far as possible away from the larger, almost at the very edge of the bed.

I holstered my weapon. Pointing at the largest figure, I gestured to myself, then to Mac and his weapon. He nodded and we moved toward the connecting door.

The door opened without a sound and we split, I took the left-hand side of the bed. The room was only partially-lit from a weak moon and the street lights, and I made my way towards the head of the bed. I saw his right arm moving up in a fast arc from its position down by the side of the bed and stepped quickly to the right. There was a muzzle flash and a dull thud, and my left shoulder turned as if kicked by a horse.

I stepped inside his arm, grabbing it with my right, and with my left hand pushed his gun-hand back. There was another thud, but this time the bullet only found the ceiling. He grunted in

pain and the gun fell to the floor. The girl started screaming. I jammed my boot into his armpit then pulled his arm around and down, giving it a sharp yank. He yelled in pain. I let go of his arm and it fell down beside the bed like a piece of dead wood, his shoulder dislocated. I kicked his weapon across to the side of the room. "Lights." I said.

He lay there blinking at me and grimacing in pain. I looked at the child. She was sat upright, completely naked, her eyes full of terror. She had screamed only once but now sat sobbing, with her hands to her face, her small body rocking to and fro. I ripped the silk sheet off Vasilov and put it in front her. She looked at me, but could only see the cruelly-cut ski mask balaclava I wore, and looked away in terror, but she picked up one corner of the sheet and draped it around her shoulders.

I turned to Vasilov "Get up." I said quietly.

He pretended not to understand, and mumbled "Sorry." in Russian.

"Get up," I repeated again, just as quietly, then added "or otherwise I'll help you get up by taking your arm."

He inched himself gingerly off the bed, supporting his dead right arm in his left.

I stood to one side to let him pass and gestured to Mac. "Take him in there and sit him down. If he twitches, put a slug in each knee."

Mac nodded, I tossed over Vasilov's dressing gown and they both left the room, Mac closing the door behind him.

I turned again to the child. She couldn't stop shaking. Worse still, she wouldn't look at me.

She was about 11 years old. I didn't hesitate, but tore off the balaclava, and put it down on the bed, sitting down on it myself but giving her as much space as possible. I saw her eyes move to the balaclava, then to my face. I smiled, and this time she didn't look away. I noticed she was sweating. I got up and poured a glass of water from the decanter on the bedside table and offered it to her. She reached out for the glass and sipped, her eyes still on me.

"What is your name little one?" I asked gently.

She mumbled, the glass and hand still in front of her face. I waited until she had finished drinking, and held out my hand. She passed me the empty glass. She still shook, but much less so, and although the odd involuntary sob broke from her, I was much relieved.

I took a small bar of chocolate from the tin in my breast pocket and tore off one end of the wrapper. I broke off a square and placed it in my mouth, then offered her the remainder of the bar. She reached out and took it. I waited as she munched through the first part of the bar then repeated my question. "What is your name little one?"

This time it was quiet, but plainly audible.

"Chamo-me Constanza"

I reached into my pocket and retrieved the plastic card I'd made of the girls names Svetlana had supplied.

"Constanza De Sousa?"

"Sim!" she said loudly, probably in surprise at hearing her surname.

"Chamo-me Joe" I said, and she nodded.

Next I brought out a copy of the photograph of Svetlana and Katrina, and showed it to her. Her face lit up and she pointed a chocolaty finger. "Svetlana, a minha amiga!"

I pointed to Katrina. "Katrina!" she said emphatically.

My Portuguese had never been good, so I retrieved my crib list of carefully-worded questions I had prepared years ago. I turned to the section Zee had written in Portuguese, and pointed to the question. "Do you know the address of the house where you were kept?", then pointed to Katrina.

She answered me in sign language. She shook her head, gestured to the other room, and put her hands in front of her eyes. I understood. It didn't matter, the vicious little bastard next door knew the address, all I had to do was ask him.

I smiled at her. I gestured to myself, then to her, then to the picture of Svetlana, and spoke the words, hoping she would understand. "I would like to take you to see your friend Svetlana Will that be OK?"

She responded, probably to my tone of voice, with a sad smile

and she nodded her head.

I stood up and picked up her shabby clothes from a chair, placing them in front of her. I pointed to her and then to the clothes. “Can you get dressed for me now? Até breve.” She understood and nodded. I walked over and picked up Vasilov’s weapon, put it in my side pocket, and left the room, closing the door quietly.

“Watch her on the screen please.” I said, and Mac walked over to the CCTV desk and sat down, his gun still pointing at Vasilov.

Chapter 10: Precious Inventory

I took out two nylon ties and strapped Vasilov's wrists to the wide oak arms of his Carver chair, ignoring his squeals of pain when I moved his right arm. Turning to his desk, I pulled out each drawer, and emptied the contents on the desk top, then bending down, emptied each of the small cupboards, until I found what I was looking for.

I placed the heavy-duty stapling gun, and a 1000-piece refill box on the desk in front of him. Very briefly, almost imperceptibly, a look of guilt mixed with curiosity flashed in his eyes, then it was gone and he eyed me warily, but said nothing.

Taking a small voice-recorder from my pocket, I switched it on, holding it close to his face.

Svetlana's strident threat shouted at him from the recorder, and although again it was brief, I caught both recognition and fear in his eyes.

“Vot does this mean?”

“Well, I will tell you Piotr. It's first of all about you not asking stupid questions, to which you already know the answer.”

I picked up the staple-gun, jammed his left hand hard down on the chair arm, and fired a staple through his middle fingernail and into the oak arm of the chair.

He gasped in pain. I waited.

“I will kill you for this.” he said venomously.

Again I held down his hand, this time putting the staple through his thumbnail.

A rattle of agony escaped from his throat, and he broke into a sweat. I looked at him. “It's also about you not making threats you will never be able to carry out.”

I waited and he croaked. "What do you want?"

"That's better. I want the girls."

"The girls?"

Another staple, this time in his pinky nail. He screamed. "Stop! Please stop!"

I shook my head. "Piotr, you are a disappointment. Just as I thought you were catching on, you let me down."

"I will tell you."

I picked up his notepad and a pencil, and waited.

"21, Eastbrooke Terrace, Hackney, E9." He said the words slowly, in between gasps of pain.

I wrote. "Telephone?"

He slowly spoke the number, then I made him repeat the number, this time backwards, then repeat the address.

I tore off the address from the pad, and walked over to Mac. "Ask them to move close, but observe only."

He nodded, and busied himself on his radio. I walked back to Vasilov.

"Passports."

"What?"

I held down his hand for what I hoped was the last time, and despite his cries for mercy, fired a staple through his ring fingernail, then one through his index finger.

He screamed loudly, then started yelling. "I'm sorry, sorry! I'll tell you everything."

I ignored him. "I've been told Piotr, that torturers are born out of necessity, but are quickly converted to sadists, relishing the pain and misery they inflict on their victims."

I paused. He was now shaking from head to foot, his eyes staring with horror at the heavy staple gun in my hand.

"For me," I said, "this has been simply a matter of training you into giving me the responses I desire - think Pavlov's dog."

Sadly, I think I still need more practice, and we still have your untouched right hand. As an expert torturer yourself, what do you think?"

I stepped back, and he spoke shakily. "Under your feet, remove the carpet and pull the handle."

I put the machine down on his desk, pulled back the carpet and lifted a section of the floor by a small handle. A large floor safe revealed itself.

“Numbers.” I said.

He said them slowly, stumbling, but correcting himself. I entered the sequence carefully and was rewarded with a click as the door opened slightly.

I lifted out the contents item by item. First out were two big bags of wraps, ready for distribution. I flung them at him. “You piece of shit!” I said. Next, a large bag of meth-amphetamines. I stood up and breaking the seal, showered them over him in a fountain.

A rubber band held a bunch of passports. I stood again, and carefully compared the passport names with Svetlana’s list. Some passports matched, some did not, but I was satisfied, Svetlana and Katrina’s passports were there.

I put the passports in my side pocket, and opened my shoulder bag, then removed the remainder of the safe contents, looking only briefly at what each item was before transferring it to my bag. I put the deeds to the Spinner’s Lane house and the property in Eastbrooke Terrace together with a small black book, on the desk and closing my bag I stood up.

“Laptop.”

He didn’t hesitate, but gestured to a small cupboard behind him. I opened the door and removed the laptop, placing it in the shoulder bag lying beside it, and then added the black book and deeds from the desk, before zipping the bag.

“Keys.”

He gestured to the bunch lying in the mess on the desk and I held them in front of him. “Which ones?”

He told me, and I picked up a paper clip and twisted it through the two keys he’d indicated, then put the bunch in my pocket. “How is she doing?” I said.

“She’s fine.” Mac replied. She’s sat brushing her hair.”

I smiled. “Good.”

I turned to Vasilov, and reaching to my right shoulder pocket, removed a small syringe, and a vial.

His eyes opened in terror. "No, please don't kill me. I'll do anything. Just tell me."

"Piotr," I said quietly, "I'm not going to kill you, but I have to move you, and before I can do that, I want to put your shoulder back and free your hand from the armchair. I don't want to hurt you any more, as I have what I want. This is just a relaxant so you won't feel any more pain for a while."

Whether it was my tone-of-voice, or what I had said, I don't know, but his breakdown was complete, and wallowing in self-pity, he cried shamelessly. I prepared, then stuck the needle in his upper-arm and waited. His head fell slowly to one side. I took his pulse, then removed the nylon ties, and as carefully as I could, and with the help of a small steel ruler from his desk, I prised his damaged fingers from the armchair. I wrapped his hand in a field-dressing, then taped a plastic bag around it.

"Mac, help me put his shoulder back."

Mac held the sleeping Vasilov as I rotated and clicked the shoulder back into position.

"OK?"

Mac tried Vasilov's arm. He nodded "OK"

"Then get Peter up here, and deliver Vasilov and that."

I pointed to the laptop bag.

"Then you are finished. Good work, as always."

He nodded and we shook hands briefly.

I waited until they left the house with Vasilov, took a look at Constanza on the CCTV monitor, removed the two DVD disks from the dual CCTV recorders, putting them in my pocket, and went quickly down to the bedroom on the 1st floor. I switched on the light, and the two bruisers squinted at me over their gags. I positioned the silencer on my Glock close to each forehead in turn, and let off two rounds. I took the pulses of both men, then closing the door I went back upstairs and into the bedroom.

Constanza was sat waiting patiently. She had scrubbed all traces of tears from her face, and although her clothes were shabby and dirty, she was very pretty.

I sat down on the bed and asked her how she felt. "Como tu estás se sentindo a minha menina?"

She smiled sadly at me, but did not reply, simply shaking her head.

"Vamos?" I said, standing up and holding out my hand. She stood up and immediately sat down again, her face contorted with pain. She reached down and rubbed her ankle. I kneeled on the floor and looked at her. "Posso?" I said, pointing to her foot.

"Sim." She straightened her leg, and I felt the ankle gently, it was almost twice as big as it should have been.

I stood up and said. "I will have to carry you."

She bit her lip. She didn't understand my bad Portuguese.

Rather than simply lifting her up, I tried to warn her of my intentions. I pointed to myself, then held my arms out as if cradling a baby, then pointed at her.

She nodded. "Sim. Esta bem."

I gently put my left arm around her back, and slid my right under her legs and hoisting her into my arms, I stood up. She was still a little afraid. I smiled at her and asked her to hang on to me. "Segure-se em mim, minha menina linda."

She put both her arms tightly around my neck, and I carried her downstairs.

I walked around the block to where I'd parked the Cosworth, and sat her gently in the passenger seat, fastening the belt. Getting in myself, I typed the Eastbrooke Terrace post-code into the sat-nav, then clicked my radio twice and spoke. "ETA twenty-four minutes."

There were two clicks in reply, and I started the engine.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw her looking at me, then around, out of the car windows, taking in the early-morning London streets, then to the dash when the sat-nav spoke, then looking up at me again as I drove, not to fast to raise attention,

to our destination.

The feeling of Déjà Vu was very strong, and the powerful, all-consuming desire to protect her, was again back with me. Vasilov didn't matter any more. All that mattered was that I try and put right some of his terrible wrongs.

I pulled up slowly behind the BT van. I looked down at her beside me and smiled. "Espere por mim?" I said and she nodded. I got out of the car.

The back door of the van opened quietly and I entered. I handed over the keys, indicating the two I'd clipped together. "Are you happy to go in first?" They both nodded. "OK." I said. "Click me when the hostiles are neutralized."

I walked back to the Cosworth and sat down again beside the little girl. All of the earlier signs of fear had gone, and in their place I could see she was very weary. I took one of the large woollen rugs from the back seat and wrapped it securely around her. She smiled her thanks, and snuggling down in the seat, closed her eyes. The next time I looked she was asleep, her breathing deep but even.

A few minutes later the radio clicked. I spoke. "Good work. I want one of you out here to watch the girl, then I'm coming in." I looked at my watch, took out my cellphone and dialled.

"Linton here."

"Ah Mr. Linton, an update for you. Your special delivery package is on its way, ETA 10 minutes. Unfortunately, two other packages were damaged in transit, so we've left them at the pick-up point, 16a, Spinners Lane, Hampstead. Can you advise on them?"

He repeated the address "That's 16a Spinner's Lane, Hampstead. Good, I'll do that. Anything else?"

"Yes, unfortunately there's also a couple of broken items at 26, Eastbrooke Terrace, Hackney, E9, plus a dozen or so items that are very fragile, and need immediate attention. Can you deal?"

He repeated the address, then there was a pause as he checked.

“Will twenty minutes be enough?”

“That would be very good. We thank you for your help.”

“And you, yours.” he said and hung up.

I left the car quietly, retrieved the two plastic bags from the car boot, and put my balaclava back on my head, as Carl walked towards me.

“Watch her, but don’t approach. The mask will freak her, and God knows she’s been through enough already.”

He nodded and moved into the bush at the side of the path.

I made my way into the house. All was quiet. John stood just inside the front door, weapon still in his hand. He passed me a large day diary and a laptop, which I placed in my shoulder bag.

“How many?” I said.

“Two.” he answered, gesturing to the closed front-parlour door
“As per your pictures – good likenesses by the way.”

I laughed quietly at his wry humour, and we made our way upstairs. There were two locked doors, both with keys in the locks. “One at a time?” he said.

I nodded and turned the first door’s key. I entered the room quietly, but not quietly enough. A tremulous voice spoke, I switched on the light and a girl screamed as she saw my mask. I closed the door behind me and held out my hands.

“Ssh! please be quiet. I am here to help you.”

I spoke the words again in Spanish, Serbian and French. Slowly the noise died down. I scanned the faces in the room, as I counted, there were seven girls, but no Katrina.

I took out the photograph of Svetlana and Katrina and passed it to one of the older girls. She shouted in guttural English

“Svetlana, it’s Svetlana.”

She turned to me, handing the photo back. “You know Svetlana?”

I nodded. “It is she who has sent me to you. Those men out there cannot hurt you any more.”

She pointed to my mask. “You frighten us with that.”

I nodded. "I know. I'm sorry, but it's best I don't take it off." I added "Is Katrina next door?" She nodded.

They had all mostly calmed down, and I took out the bunch of passports from my pocket. There were murmurs and exclamations.

One by one as I read out the names from each passport, three girls walked forward in turn and I handed them their passport. Each nodded their thanks.

When that was done I said quietly. "The criminals who kept you prisoner are now my prisoners. Shortly, there will be help from the social services arriving, and they will take all of you to safety. Meanwhile, can you sit quietly while I talk to the girls next door?"

There was a pause as some translated my request to the others, but they all sat down, talking animatedly amongst themselves and I asked the older girl to come with me next door.

Outside the door I stopped, picked up one of the plastic bags and re-entering the room I opened it. I removed two small shoulder bags and passed them to the nearest girls to me. "For you all." I said and gestured to the open bag. I left them helping themselves to the small bags Zee had carefully packed, and returned to the upstairs hall.

I gave the photo of Svetlana to the girl.

"Can you go in, and show the girls that photo, and tell them what is happening. Also warn them I am wearing a mask, but that they shouldn't be frightened."

"Sure. I do that. You good man, but bad dress sense."

She smiled at me. I was stunned, stunned and speechless.

She turned the key and entered the room, closing the door behind her. John and I stood listening to the voices, hushed at first, then more excited.

She opened the door. "Come in." she said and I entered a room, almost exactly the same size as the other. I counted six girls, and one of them was Katrina.

In the photograph she was the very pretty smaller twin of Svetlana. Close up and in the flesh she was every bit an equal in her great beauty to her sister. Together, they would be awesome.

She looked at me, terrified of the mask.

I reached into my pocket for my cellphone, and rang Zee. She must have had the phone under her hand, as it was answered immediately.

“Hi Joe.”

“Hi.” I’ve got Katrina with me, but I’m masked, and she’s terrified.”

“OK. I’ll pass you over.”

“Joe! Joe! She’s there? You have her? Is she..”

I cut in, and spoke slowly in Serbian “Svetlana. Katrina is fine and healthy and standing in front of me. I want you to speak to her as calmly as you can, and tell her that you sent me to fetch her, and for her not to be afraid of my mask. Can you do that?”

“Yes plis.”

I held out the phone to Katrina. I said. “Светлана би желео да разговара са вама.”

Her face had begun to light up as she had listened to me, and she shouted, “Svetlana!” and snatched the phone from my hand.

There followed an excited conversation, very little of which I understood, so I busied myself handing out passports and telling the other girls about the help that would be coming.

The older girl was looking at me quizzically. She spoke in Serbian “You speak Serbian well. Do you know my country?”

I nodded. “I spent two years in Bosnia.” I paused then added. “Terrible times.”

It was her turn to nod. “I believe so. I was too young. Now you help us again. You are kind man.”

Finally there was a tug on my tunic, and Katrina handed me back the phone “Svetlana talk to you plis?”

“Hi.” I said.

“You lovely, lovely gorgeous man. I love you so much. Thank you, Thank you.”

I laughed. "You are welcome, and I love you. We will be back in about thirty minutes. Tell Zee to put the coffee pot on, and Svetlana?"

"Yes?"

"Tell Zee I'm also bringing a little Portuguese girl home."

"Oh! Good! I tell her."

"Bye." I said and closed the call.

Katrina stood in front of me. "You take me Svetlana now?"

I nodded "Right now." We went back into the upstairs hall, and I picked up the other plastic bag and gave it to the girls, showing them the contents.

"Those are for all of you. Just things you may have missed."

I turned to the older girl. "Are all the girls here?"

She shook her head. "No. Constanza is still away."

I nodded. "We have already rescued her, she is safe and well."

She smiled with relief. "Thank you for what you have done."

"And thank you." I said "You are a very brave girl. What is your name?"

"Libena." she smiled shyly.

I held out my hand. "A lovely name - it means 'love'?"

She took my hand and nodded. "Yes. I just wish I could see the face of the brave man who has freed us."

I nodded. "I'm sorry it has to be this way Libena. Good luck with everything."

With that, I walked downstairs holding Katrina's hand, with John behind me.

We left the house, but leaving the door open, John got into the BT van, and I walked Katrina to the car. She gave a little cry of joy when she recognized the sleeping Constanza, and I sat her in the back seat and belted her in, wrapping a rug around her. I closed the door, put my shoulder bag in the car boot, and gestured to Carl with one finger on my watch. He waited and I went back into the house, entered the parlour, and used four more bullets on the trussed-up thugs. I locked the parlour door before I left, and threw the key into the long grass in the overgrown garden.

I walked back to the car, gave a thumbs-up to Carl, and clicked

twice on my radio, then spoke. “Go. I’ll wait till the services appear. Good job both of you, thanks again.”
There was no reply except two clicks.

I watched the Transit pull away. A few minutes later I saw several lights coming up the road behind me, and starting the Cosworth’s engine, I eased away from the kerb, and headed for home.

As we moved steadily up the quiet street, I tore off the mask, and unbelted the Kevlar vest. My shoulder hurt like Hell. I saw Katrina’s face in the mirror staring at me. I held my hand up, pointing to my face.

“Better without mask?” I asked. She nodded vigorously and smiled shyly at me.

My throat felt dry. I reached down into the central console and fished out a can of Coke.

I looked in the mirror. “Coke?” I said and she nodded, her slim hand reaching between the seats, I handed her the can and retrieved another, splitting it open. The delicious cool drink revived me instantly. I looked down at the still, sleeping child beside me, and suddenly I felt very, very happy. We had a quiet and uneventful journey across London.

I waited as the doors rolled up and turned the Cosworth into the garage. They had wanted to wait there but I wouldn’t hear of it. As the doors closed I spoke to Katrina.

“Ми смо овде.” I got out and opened her door.

She stepped out and looked around.

I opened the front passenger door and lifted the child out carefully.

“Следите ме” I said to Katrina, and led her down the passage and to the basement door. I held my watch up to the door and it swung open. I walked in, Constanza in my arms and Katrina by my side, and smiled at our welcoming party.

There was an explosion of sound as Svetlana and Katrina ran to each other and embraced, shouting each other’s names loudly.

Constanza stirred, and looked up at me. I smiled at her and said softly in Portuguese. "Hello little one, you are safe now."

I saw the tears fall from Zee's eyes as she heard my words, and she rushed forward and embraced both me, and the child in my arms.

Chapter 11: Refuge

Zee released us both and held out her arms.

“Can I take her?”

“Careful Zee, I think her ankle is broken. Sit down, and I’ll give her to you.”

Zee sat down on the sofa, and I placed the still-sleepy Constanza beside her. Zee talked to her softly in Portuguese, and the girl’s face lit up with joy.

I turned to where Svetlana and Katrina were dancing round each other, both hands holding, tears streaming down both their cheeks.

Jane moved over to me. “No problems there then?”

“Not yet anyway.” I smiled. “But I still want you to watch them both. Zee will have her hands full. Can you manage?”

“I will.” she nodded.

I moved over to the dining area, and Tomas followed me.

He eyed me shrewdly. “You’re beat.”

“Yes.”

“Coffee?”

“Please.” I said, and sat down heavily at the table and looked at my watch, it was 4:35am.

He poured me a coffee and sat down opposite.

“You know you’ve been hit?” he said quietly.

“Yeah, Thank God for the vest.” Then I looked quickly down at my left shoulder.

“Yes.” he said, “The vest didn’t stop it.”

“Have they seen it?” I said urgently.

“I don’t think so, but when the excitement dies down, they will.”

“Christ, Tomas. They mustn’t see.”

"I'll make an excuse and we'll go upstairs and take a look at it."
"OK." I said, and drained my coffee.

Tomas walked over to the girls, and said we needed to discuss things, and were going upstairs.

I heard Svetlana saying she wished to thank me first, and then she was in front of me.

Kisses showered around my neck and face and she almost smothered me with her loving embrace. Suddenly she stopped.

"But what is this?" She stared in horror at the blood on her hands.

"Svetlana!" I said sharply. She froze, and I beckoned her close to me.

"Sweet lover. Don't let the girls know. It will only upset them, and I'm fine. It is only a flesh wound in my shoulder - look!" I pointed to the small patch of blood on my Tee shirt.

She took my head in both hands. "You not lie to me?"

"No, never."

"What we do now then?"

"Please. Stay with Katrina. She needs you. Tomas and I will go upstairs and see what needs to be done. Don't worry."

She seemed doubtful, but accepted what I said.

"OK lovely Joe. Go and look. But in one hour I find you, plis?"

I smiled "Yes, OK."

She went to the sink and washed her hands, flashed a smile at me and re-joined the other girls.

We headed upstairs to Tomas and Zee's apartment, and Tomas found Thak.

They laid me on the kitchen table and stripped my shirt off. Thak left and retrieved his instruments, and after sterilising them and the wound, he had a gentle poke around.

"I can feel it, and it's not too deep. Also, there're no local large vessels. Shall I pull it Joe?"

"Yeah." I said. "Go for it."

He picked up a pair of long-nosed forceps and nodded to Tomas, who held both my shoulders on the table.

Thak dug in, and it hurt like Hell.

"Whoa!" I said "Stop!"

I turned to Tomas. "Where's that Madeira?"

He grinned, and passed me the half-empty bottle of his favourite Blandy's. I took out the cork and took a long swig, then lay down again.

"OK."

It still hurt like Hell, but when the red mist cleared from my eyes, I saw Thak holding the forceps and staring intently at the projectile he had retrieved.

I said. "Let me see."

Thak placed the bullet in my hand. It was three times heavier than I expected and tapered to a very sharp point. "Good God!" I said. "No wonder the vest didn't stop it."

Thak shook his head. "The vest, and probably your bag's leather strap, saved your shoulder. If I'm not mistaken, that bullet is made of beryllium-copper with a depleted uranium core."

"Christ! He was using armour-piercing rounds?"

"It looks like it. Lie still," he said, "while I practise my cross-stitch."

I laughed, then winced as he cleaned, then closed, the small wound and placed a plaster over it. Tomas washed me down, and brought me one of his shirts, and we wandered back down to the basement.

Svetlana ran across the room. "You are OK?"

I smiled. "Yes, just a very small hole."

"Can I see?"

I laughed. "Later. Please don't mention this to the girls."

She placed her finger on her own lips. "I promise."

Then she wrapped her arms around me and whispered wonderful things in my ear, occasionally taking a little nibble of me.

Then she broke away. "Come. Katrina has not good chance talk to you."

She led me to where all the girls sat.

I sat down next to Constanza and Zee. A cold compress had been wrapped around her ankle, but she smiled at me shyly. "Ola Joe."

"Ola. Como estás a minha menina?" I asked her smiling. She giggled softly at my accent but replied. "Estou bem, Obrigada."

I looked at Zee. She beamed at me.

"What a lovely little girl you have brought back to me. How strange is fate that you walk through that door for the second time, saying those words again, in the same language."

I smiled sadly. "Yes. The night has been heavily punctuated with Déjà vu for me."

Her smile faded. "Should I know now?"

I nodded. "There is just a little."

She wrapped her arms around the willing child, who cuddled in to her.

I spoke very quietly. "I took her from Vasilov's bed. The man was a monster. God knows what she's been through."

I saw her shudder.

"Are you going to be OK Zee? Shall I call in extra help?"

She shook her head. "I will look after her. But forgive me if I spend too much time with her."

I laughed softly. "Nothing to forgive, we'll play it by ear."

"Joe?" Her soft voice was close to my ear, and I felt her breath on my neck, and smelt her perfume. I turned.

She stood with Katrina, hand-in-hand.

Laughing, she said. "Katrina says that when she first saw you, you look like monster-man. She wants to say proper hello."

They really were very, very beautiful together.

I looked into Katrina's bluest of blue eyes, and held out my hand.

"Хелло Катрина. Моје име је Џо."

She ignored my hand, and leaning forward placed her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek, then greeted me.

“Здраво Јо. То је дивно бити овде. Ти си леп човек.”

I thanked her for her greeting and compliment. “Ви сте

превише љубазни. И то је дивно да си овде.”

She looked up at Svetlana and smiled, then they both giggled.

I turned to Zee smiling. She said “What’s so funny?”

“My accent probably – or worse.”

Svetlana kissed my cheek, and said Jane and her were going to help Katrina freshen up and put on some clean clothes, and all three went into Svetlana’s room.

Tomas had been sitting separately, just watching. I got up and beckoned him over. “Sit with Zee and Constanza please Tomas.”

He looked at me quizzically, but did as I asked.

I looked at all three of them sat on the sofa. Zee, the little girl who could easily be mistaken for Zee’s daughter, and Tomas, a potential worthy father.

“I won’t spoil the moment by taking a picture,” I said, “but you really all look very good together.”

Zee and Tomas grinned. Constanza didn’t understand, but smiled at me.

Then came the screams.

I held up my hand as Zee started forward.

“Stay, she needs you.”

Constanza’s eyes had already widened, and she shouted.

“Svetlana?”

I made my way swiftly into the bedroom.

Katrina stood in the middle of the room, naked apart from her panties, and with her back to me. Multiple, dreadful bruising, a carbon copy of Svetlana’s, decorated her back. At the far side of the room Jane was attempting to stop a screaming Svetlana from smashing her own head against the wall.

I ran over and put my arms down and around Svetlana’s, pinioning them to her sides, and turned her away from the wall.

I caught Jane's eye and said "Katrina." quietly but firmly, and she turned and left me holding a struggling, screaming Svetlana.

I managed to turn Svetlana so that she was facing me and tried to make out what she was screaming. Her anger and accent made it difficult, but Katrina's name, 'left' and 'fault' figured, so I followed the instinct that had already warned me that this would happen.

Quietly, my mouth close to her ear, I asked her the questions in Serbian, pausing slightly between each one.

"Had you not left her, would you not now both be prisoners still?"

"Had you not left, would you be together now, free and able to talk and dance together?"

"Had you not left, would little Constanza be with us now, or still in the bed of the evil bastard who beat you? It is his fault, not yours, that all of this happened."

"Or the twelve other girls, who are now free. Would they be free had you not left?"

"Your brave act of escaping means that you and your beloved sister are together again, Constanza is free from that wicked, wicked man, and the other girls are now safe, in other Refuges around London."

After the second question, her screams had turned to sobs, and I relaxed my grip, turning it into an embrace.

I felt her nodding after the third, and after my last statement, she tightened her arms around me and kissed my neck.

"Hold me Joe. Please hold me."

I held her. We stood in each others arms until she finally stopped sobbing. She broke away a little from me and looked at me, her beautiful face flushed red with tears.

"Him?" she said.

"He is dead." I said softly. "All five are dead. They will never be able to hurt you, Katrina, Constanza, nor anyone, ever again." Her eyes flickered to and fro across my face. "The Avenging Angel - he helps you?"

I nodded. "He did, and his heart is full of love for you."

"Oh Joe!" she said, and kissed me gently on the lips.

I whispered. "Katrina needs you Svetlana. Will you go to her?"

She smiled. "Yes plis."

She walked to the bed where Jane sat with Katrina, covered now in a bathrobe, and they wrapped each other in their arms. Jane looked at me and made to get up, but I held my hand up and smiled, mouthing "Wait", then left the bedroom.

Constanza looked up at me as I re-entered the lounge.

"Svetlana?"

"Ela está bem." I said.

She held out her arms.

"Posso vê-la?"

I lifted her, and she hung her arms around my neck. Zee smiled the gorgeous smile I loved, then turned to a smiling Tomas.

He looked from her, to the little girl, to me, then back to Zee, and reaching up held Zee's face in both hands and kissed her.

I left them, and walked back into the bedroom.

In Serbian I said "Your little friend was worried about you, can she sit with you for a while?"

Space was made between Svetlana and Katrina, and I gently lowered Constanza onto the bed.

I looked at Jane. "Are you OK for a few minutes Jane?"

She smiled and nodded, and I made my way out to the lounge.

I stopped at the bedroom door. Tomas and Zee were in a loving embrace on the sofa.

I smiled, and turned back into the bedroom, closing the door behind me. I went to the dressing table and picked up the Lalique hairbrush.

Svetlana was sat at the foot of the bed. I walked over and stood behind her, then started gently brushing her hair.

“Ooh!” she exclaimed, and Katrina and Constanza giggled.

“Is that nice?” I said.

“Yes plis lovely man.”

I stood and brushed slowly and gently, as they talked together. After several minutes, Svetlana turned and flashed her dazzling smile at me, taking the brush.

“I am gooey now. So is Constanza’s turn.”

She turned and started brushing the young one’s hair.

I looked at Jane and we both laughed.

I sat down on the dressing table chair and let the chatter of their voices drift over me for ten minutes or so. All was now calm, so I suggested that Svetlana help Katrina bathe, and Jane and I take Constanza into my bathroom, so that she could bathe there.

They all nodded, and I picked Constanza up and carried her through into my room, Jane behind me.

I noticed that Tomas & Zee sat hand in hand talking quietly, as we walked through.

I sat Constanza on the bathroom chair, and started running the bath. Jane helped Constanza take off her clothes while I found fresh towels.

I tested the water temperature and turned off the taps, and was ready to leave the room, but Constanza held both arms out to me.

“Joe! Faz favor!”

I smiled, and lifted her carefully up, and lowering one of my knees to the floor, set her gently down into the bath.

She pointed to the hand shower head, and I picked it up, then turned on the taps, and held it out to her, but she smiled, pushed her hair back, and pulled my hand so that the water ran down her hair.

I carefully rinsed her hair, holding the back of her head, as she lay back to avoid the water in her face.

I turned off the taps and taking a face cloth, dried her face. While I had washed her hair, I had been conscious of her eyes upon me, unblinking throughout. She took hold of my hand and said my name.

“Joe?”

“Sim?” I said

“Aquele homem, aquele homem horrível?”

I paused, and looked down at her brave sweet face.

“Ele está desaparecido. Ele nunca vai te machucar novamente.”

She nodded. “E os outros?”

“Eles se foram também.”

“Posso ficar com você agora?”

“Sim, a minha menina. Claro.”

“Muito obrigada, você é um homem muito gentil, Joe.”

“É o meu prazer. Até breve”

I got up and turned to leave.

Jane sat on the bathroom chair looking dumbstruck. Zee was stood in the doorway, a big grin on her face.

I smiled at Zee. “Would you like to take over now?”

She kissed me gently on the cheek. “Yes please, although you seemed to be managing very well!”

I smiled and turned to Jane, who was still watching Constanza.

“Jane?”

She didn’t hear me. I touched her on the shoulder.

“Oh! Sorry Joe.”

“Shall we start breakfast?” I asked.

“Good idea.” She said, getting up and following me out of the room.

Tomas set out the places, while Jane and I prepared to cook. She was very quiet.

“Are you OK Jane?” I said. “I know you must be tired. Do you want a break?”

She smiled. “Neither of those things. I’m just stunned.”

I laughed. “Stunned? At what?”

“You.” she said, stopping what she was doing.
I poured three cups of coffee, passed one to Tomas, and held out a cup to her. We all sat at the table as the bacon fried.

She looked levelly at me. “I’ve seen the way that Lizzie seems to trust you implicitly, and that is one thing. But that little girl, who clearly has been very badly abused, and up until a few hours ago had never seen you before, she let, no, she invited you to bathe her.”

She paused.

“How did you gain her trust so quickly? That’s why I’m stunned.”

“Well,” I said tentatively “I suppose that I tried to show her from the very start that above all else, I respect her.”

“At all stages I informed her of my intentions, especially when I realised she was injured, and intended picking her up and carrying her.”

“I tried to be gentle and kind, despite our not understanding each other well, and my touch, my carrying her, she probably already associates with her happiness at being free.”

I paused. “Now my theory, though academics will probably shake their heads at me, is that in extremis, when we feel our very life is at risk, and someone comes along and saves us, we are permanently altered by that single event.”

“There is a part of us that associates our continued existence inextricably with our saviour’s, the logic being, because if that was not so, we would not now exist. In fact, both ourselves and our saviour are changed by the experience. By what degree of course, is quite variable.”

I could see by her face, that Jane was still struggling.

“Do you think that is too simplistic and sterile?” I said, smiling.

“Yes, I do. I’m sorry..” she paused.

“It’s the girl. I’m still having problems with her complete and utter trust, and apparent devotion, even love, for you.”

Tomas looked at me, smiling, and raising his eyebrows slightly.

“Well.” I said, “I’m not so sure of love – more an acceptance that our fates are shared, our lives are linked, and that she’s intensely glad that it is so, because through me, she is free from the Hell she was in.”

“I think I prefer the word ‘love’.” Jane said smiling.

I looked at her and grinned. “What woman wouldn’t?”

I got up and removed the cooked bacon onto a drainer, then fed some toast into the large machine, and started the mushrooms and tomatoes frying.

“How do you feel?” she asked quietly.

“In the car, on the way here, looking down at her peacefully asleep and safe beside me, I felt ecstatically happy.”

“And just before, when she insisted you help her wash?”

“Momentarily surprised, but I shouldn’t have been. Then very happy to wash her.”

“Didn’t you feel embarrassed?”

I looked at her. “Why would I feel that? She is a little girl I’ve just rescued from the bed of a serial torturer, child rapist and murderer. I have no reason to feel embarrassed, just thankful at her total acceptance of my innocent intentions, that she knows I am here to help her, and for no other reason.”

I smiled at her in encouragement, seeing she had yet another question.

“And the conversation you had with her after washing her

hair?"

I laughed. "Funny, but already my poor Portuguese is coming back to me.

She asked. 'That man, That horrible man?' and I replied 'He is gone. He cannot hurt you ever again'.

Then she asked 'And the others?' and I said 'They are gone also.'

She then said 'Can I stay with you now?' and I said 'Yes, little one. Of course.'

Finally she thanked me."

Jane drew in her breath.

"You say he is 'gone' Joe," she said quietly, "and I heard you tell Svetlana he was dead. Did you kill him? The murderer of your wife?"

I shook my head. "No Jane, much as I would have wanted to, I didn't. I'm afraid that privilege went to someone else."

She nodded, and thanked me, knowing I would not say any more in explanation.

I heard Zee shout my name, and went into my bedroom, coming back with Zee, and carrying a giggling Constanza. Svetlana and Katrina joined us, and we all sat down together and ate.

As I looked around the table at Tomas and the five happy girls talking and laughing, a deep feeling of satisfaction came over me, a conviction that the events of the night were justified, and very right.

I sat thumbing through 'Homes and Gardens', and sipping yet another coffee. It was around 10am, and I felt wrecked. Millicent had insisted on examining both girls herself, and had just despatched Constanza and Zee to the X-ray room. She was now with Katrina and Svetlana.

Twice I had been called in to help translate, but Svetlana had managed to help Katrina answer almost all of Millicent's

questions.

A hand gripped my shoulder and I flinched. She walked around in front of me. "Are you OK Joe?"

"Just a little tired." I smiled at her.

"You jumped."

"I was surprised. You float without sound, as if on Angel's wings, Miss Courtney."

She laughed, and shook her head. "Let's go over there." She pointed to an empty consulting room.

She followed me in and closed the door.

"How is.." I started to ask about Katrina.

"Be quiet, and take your shirt off."

"What?"

"Just do it."

I shook my head and removed my shirt.

"Aha! I thought so." She gently removed the plaster and scrutinized Thak's handiwork.

She looked at me. "Nice sutures. Do I know the doctor?"

"Thak."

"Your beautifully-mannered Gurkha bodyguard?"

"The same - he's a trained field paramedic."

"I won't ask how you got it." She smiled ruefully at me.

"No, please don't."

She applied a new plaster, then prodded, poked and manipulated my shoulder, but despite showing it being tender, exposed no real problems.

"You'll live." she said. "Extend my compliments to him."

"I will."

She shook her head "You should have told me about this Joe."

"But you've seen for yourself, it's nothing."

She stood back and looked me up and down. "Anywhere else?"

I shook my head.

"Sure?"

I laughed. "Yes Millicent, I'm sure." I added. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't want to compromise you in any way.."

She cut me short. "You are kind Joe. But next time give me the

opportunity of helping you as your friend, as well as your doctor. You are not a fool, you know how I feel."

She looked steadily at me, and I nodded slowly. I moved forward and kissed her gently on the cheek. Her hand reached up and touched my face gently and briefly, her hazel eyes meeting mine. Then it was over. I stepped back, and she flashed a brilliant smile at me.

"Well, as I was saying, Katrina seems fine. I've done the usual tests, and I'll have the results tomorrow. She has been very roughly used, hence the severe bruising, but she is strong and there is no lasting damage I can see."

I grinned at her. She smiled and continued.

"Constanza has, I suspect, a small fracture of her ankle, which the radiologist will shortly confirm or not. She is underweight, but shows no signs of heavy or frequent penetration. There is, as you've no doubt seen, quite severe bruising."

She paused. "Do you know her abuser and his predilections?" I nodded. "I believe he was impotent and insisted on oral sex."

Millicent nodded gravely. "I've checked her mouth, and she seems OK, but the test results will show any problems."

She shook her head. "She's still a child. What's wrong with these people Joe?"

"They are past redemption Millicent." I said simply. She looked sharply at me, then nodded slowly.

I smiled. "I want to say thank you once again, for all your help." She nodded. "You are always welcome."

I pulled my shirt back on, and we left the consulting room joining Svetlana and Katrina in the waiting room. Zee joined us pushing Constanza in a lightweight wheelchair, and Millicent headed off to get the X-ray results.

Everyone looked a little tired. I took out my mobile and called Thak.

“Can you bring the Espace round to Millicent Courtney’s Clinic in Harley Street Thak. Svetlana and Katrina are ready now, Zee and Constanza maybe, maybe not.”

“Will do.” He said and hung up.

I got up and stood in front of the girls. “When you get back, I want everyone to rest – for at least a couple of hours anyway. No exceptions. OK?”

Svetlana did a mock salute. “Yes sir!”

Katrina and Constanza giggled. Zee laughed and shook her head. Perhaps I was mistaken. Maybe it was just me that felt completely washed out.

Chapter 12: Payback

It was nearly lunch time. I left Svetlana and Katrina sipping coffee and headed for the garage. I picked up my vest and bag from the Cosworth, and entered the 'waiting' room. I looked at my watch, then unloaded ice and lemon from the 'fridge into a glass, cracked a fresh bottle of tonic open and sloshed in the Gin.

I took a large gulp, put down the glass and picked up the bag. The neat hole through the tough leather shoulder strap reminded me of how close Vasilov had come to making Zee's worse fears become reality. I poured the contents of my bag onto the table, then sat back and looked at the haul, sipping the G & T.

There were bundles of high denomination Pounds, Euros and Dollars. There was a thick wad of very high denomination Euro bearer bonds and finally a small chamois leather pouch. I undid the lacing, and tipped the contents carefully onto the table.

Twenty or so beautifully cut large diamonds winked up at me. I let out a whistle. Then got to work.

15 minutes later I had some totals. There was just over two-hundred thousand pounds in the currencies, nearly two and a half million Dollars in the bearer bonds, and I estimated the large diamonds would fetch around forty-thousand pounds.

I finished off my G & T, got out a Torx driver from the toolbox and headed out into the garage. The house heating and air-conditioning control unit was a 19-inch rack cabinet, comprising two 6U units. I turned off the power, and releasing the bottom unit pulled it forward. I removed the top panel and exposed the empty rear of the fully functional unit. I returned

to the waiting room, gathered up the booty, and carefully fitted it into the rack unit, then replacing the panel, returned the unit back into the cabinet and re-secured the screws. Finally I switched the unit back on.

I went back to the waiting room and removed the two DVDs from my tunic pocket and smashed them to smithereens with a small hammer, dumping the plastic shards in the bin. I took out Vasilov's pistol and my own, and placed them in the small wall-safe.

I heard her come in behind me, and smelt her soft but very distinct perfume. I turned. "Hi Zee."

Her eyes were bright and she smiled. "Tidying up?"

"Just about done." I smiled at her.

"Let me see." she said, her face more solemn.

"What?"

"What? - your damned shoulder, that's what!"

She shouted the last words at me. I said nothing, but unbuttoned my shirt and slid it over my left shoulder. "There's nothing to see Zee, I'm fine."

She stared at the small elastoplast on my shoulder, then looked into my eyes. "Another six inches to the left and you wouldn't be here." There were tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Hey." I said, and cuddled her. "Everything's fine. I will always come back to you, please believe me."

She stepped back a little. "I try to, but sometimes it's very hard."

She picked up my shoulder bag from the table and fingered the hole in the strap, then looked up at me. I nodded. "That, and the vest, stopped the bullet from doing any real damage."

She brushed the remaining tears from her eyes. "You're forgiven - this time."

I laughed. "Thank you. Did you come down here just to check me out?"

She nodded smiling. "Mostly, but I wanted to thank you for talking to Tomas."

"About what?"

"You know what. About my feelings for you."

“Did Tomas tell you that?”

She shook her head. “No, but I detect your sure, but gentle touch, in the change in his attitude.”

“Is everything OK?”

She smiled happily at me. “Everything is better than it’s been in a long while.”

I picked up the laptop and diary and took her hand. “I’m glad Zee, so glad you are both happy. Shall we check on the Terrible Two from Titov Vrbas?”

She laughed, and we headed back to the basement.

I opened the door for Zee to the sound of loud music, and we stood in awe, watching as the two beautiful sisters danced around the room with each other, both yelling ‘I Like It’ at the top of their voices. Constanza was sat, her plastered foot up on the sofa, watching them both, clapping her hands and laughing. The amplifier was cranked up almost full, and there was evidence on the table, apart from the Gerry Marsden LP that was already playing, that they had begun a systematic trawl through my old vinyl collection.

Zee turned to me laughing. “So much for ‘taking it easy’ Joe.” I shook my head, smiling at her. “What do I know?”

We turned and watched the girls, and when the track finished I said. “Anyone for lunch?”

The girls were drifting into the kitchen as we arrived in the day room. Zee pushed Constanza’s wheel chair to the table and Patricia removed a seat to make room for it. Lizzie was sat at the table beside Anna, and smiled sweetly at me as we all sat down.

There was curiosity of course, as always when there were new arrivals, and after the main course, Zee stood up and introduced Katrina and Constanza to the rest of the girls. There were enthusiastic smiles and nods from the current residents, and a more muted and shy response from the two newcomers.

After lunch I sat down on one of the sofas and watched a process of which I never tired. All of our girls had been hurt, in one way or another, and all of them recognised that. Generally

there was total empathy, mixed with a natural curiosity. Sometimes there was angst as new friendships were formed, and current ones diluted. Rarely though, did we have any real problems with jealousy, but the staff on these occasions were still particularly wary.

I loved her even more as I saw the skilful and considerate way Svetlana immediately invited Lizzie to sit with her and Katrina, and it became obvious that Katrina was as struck with Lizzie's brooding beauty, as Lizzie was with Katrina's uncanny resemblance to her beautiful sister.

Constanza too, drew attention, her very real frailty bringing out the strong mothering instincts in some of the older girls. One of the Spanish girls who had been practising learning Portuguese with Zee, had taken charge, and I was glad, because as I watched her, I could see Zee looked very tired.

I walked over to her. "What are your sleeping arrangements going to be?"

She looked up as I sat down opposite.

"We've put two single beds in.."

I laughed "It's OK. Until you think of another name let's call it Constanza's room."

She smiled with relief. "Well, I know she can't be on her own at the moment."

I nodded. "Yes, I agree. How does Tomas feel?"

She smiled. "He's happy. He knows it's short-term."

"What does he think of her?"

She looked at me curiously. "You don't miss much do you?"

I laughed, then added more seriously. "Zee. Be careful. Until we know her circumstances, there can be no plans regarding her future."

"I know. I've told him that. It's just.."

"Yes. It's just that she is the daughter that you have both always wanted. I understand. We'll make it a priority to find out as much as we can about her as quickly as possible."

I wandered into the kitchen, and re-filled my glass with Connie's lemonade, then headed back to my seat. I sipped the

drink, and shortly Patricia sat down beside me.

“Did you know I’m leaving tomorrow Joe?”

I nodded. “How do you feel about that?”

She shook her head. “At first I was so glad. The foster parents are lovely, but I’m going to miss everyone here terribly.”

“Have you changed your mind?” I said gently. “You are allowed to, you know.”

“No..” she paused. “No, I know I can’t stay here forever, much as I would want to.”

“How far away do they live?”

“Brentwood.”

“That’s not far.” I said “You can easily come and see us whenever you want.”

She looked at me hopefully. “Whenever I want?”

I nodded. “Yes, whenever. We will always be glad to see you.”

“They have enrolled me in a local school,” she said “but I would like to visit at the weekends.”

“What are your plans long term? Have you thought about what you would like to do work-wise?”

She looked across at Jane. “I would like to do what Jane does.”

I smiled. “That’s excellent. Because already, you have been doing just that in the last few weeks, and we are very happy with the help you have given with some of the other girls.”

She blushed slightly. I continued. “If you like, we will log your visits as work experience, and I’ll arrange that your travel costs are refunded, plus £5.00 an hour for the time you are here.”

She began to protest “I don’t want any money..”

I laughed. “If you want to go to college later on, any extra you can save now will be really useful, so please consider it.”

She smiled. “Thanks. Thanks very much.”

I looked at her and remembered her appearance and demeanour when she had first been brought to us by one of the other Refugees, who at the time had no space.

“When are they coming for you?”

“Around six tomorrow evening.” she said. “Will you be here?”

I smiled “Yes. It would be nice to see them.”

“To check them out?” she laughed.

"Well, that's been done already. No, mostly just to see you will be OK."

She nodded.

I said quietly. "I'm going to ask you a couple of questions. If you don't want to answer, that's fine. OK?"

She nodded. "Yes, go ahead."

"How do you feel about what happened to you?"

She smiled sadly. "At the time I blamed myself. Now I realise that none of it was my fault, and that he was just a very sick person."

I nodded "Good. And how do you feel about men generally?"

She paused before answering. "A little wary."

Again I nodded. "That's not a bad way to feel. You will be OK."

She looked straight into my eyes. "If they were all like you Joe, I would have no problems at all."

It was my turn to blush, and I smiled at her. "You flatterer! But thanks for the compliment."

"I mean it." she said quietly, "You are a lovely man. All of the girls are a little bit in love with you."

"Thank you." I said.

"The reason I asked how you felt was that sometimes a really bad experience can eat away at your insides like acid. You have used the understanding and insight your terrible experience has given you, to help others. That makes you very special. If in the future, you would like to work here full-time, we'd be very glad to have you."

She took me by surprise. She leaned forward, put her hand to my cheek, and kissed me briefly, but fully, on the lips, then she gave me a lovely smile. "Thank you. Thank you for everything."

I grinned "You are very welcome."

She got up and went into the kitchen. There were a group of girls standing close to the kitchen door who were looking at me and giggling amongst themselves, and I realised that Patricia had set me up with the kiss, probably for a dare. I shook my head and smiled as they looked at me, and several burst into laughter.

I got up and made my way to where Svetlana was sat. I bent down and kissed her, causing giggles amongst some of the girls around us.

“I have to go out.” I said. “But I’ll be back around five-thirty. Is everything alright?”

“Lovely man.” she said. “Everything fine. We are all very happy.” then a look of concern crossed her face. “You not going into danger?”

I shook my head and grinned “Nothing like that. Just returning a car I borrowed.”

She visibly relaxed. “OK Good. We see you for tea then.”

I crossed the room and told Zee what I was doing, then headed back downstairs.

I walked up Praed street to W.H Smiths and poured over the large CD collection until I found what I wanted, then chose a pretty Birthday card with no greeting, and headed back to my basement. I made a couple of calls, one to a caterer, the other to the local Italian Restaurant, then set off in the Cosworth.

The journey to and from Waltham Abbey was uneventful, and I had felt a pang of regret that I had to return the Cosworth. I made sure that everything in ‘Grace and Pride’ was in order and left the vehicle keys on the table, before walking briskly to the M3 with the heavy holdall.

Back home in the garage, I added my weapon and Vasilov’s to the holdall and locked them in the safe, then made my way back to the basement. I sat down at the desk, pulled on a pair of latex gloves and opened up the diary. It was mostly written in Cyrillic text, but since the content was largely names, addresses, dates and times, I had no problem reading any of it. Anger welled in me as I saw Katrina’s name, that of Constanza and also Libena, together with several of those on the list of girls names Svetlana had given me.

My anger this time wasn’t directed at Vasilov, but at the long list of pederasts documented in the diary.

I got up and made myself a coffee, then sat back in my chair and pondered. The diary was undoubtedly dynamite. There were several prominent names and addresses. Trouble is, I realised that if I handed it over to the police, a long lengthy investigation would ensue, dragging in the girls to corroborate evidence, with no guarantee of a suitable outcome. I wanted more.

I opened the laptop and switched it on. There was no password protection, and I browsed freely amongst the various spreadsheets and letters I found. It became apparent that the girls were being traded using a bogus Escort Agency as a front. If the diary was dynamite, the laptop with its detailed payments and credit-card numbers was weapon-grade plutonium. All I needed was a delivery system, and every nasty little pervert named would be finished – for good.

First things first. I scanned every used page of the diary onto my PC, and printed out a copy to ensure that every page was readable. Next I re-partitioned the spare hard-drive in my PC and connecting a transfer cable, made an exact copy of the laptop's hard-disk contents, checking everything was copied successfully.

I poured over the diary copy and made copious notes on it. One girl's name stood out as a possible candidate – Libena. She had apparently been much in demand, but even better, several of her 'clients' were well-known members of the London socialite clique.

Again I sat back in my chair and pondered. I would have to find her again – quick, before any trail grew cold.

I looked at my watch, then made some 'phone calls. I was becoming despondent as each Refuge manager in turn had greeted me, confirming they had taken in some of the girls but no-one called Libena. Then the last on my list turned up trumps.

Charlotte Craven had greeted me warmly. "Joe. Lovely to hear

from you. How are things - you are busy?"

I laughed. "Yeah fairly, we took in a couple of girls this morning. How about you?"

"Us too." she said. "I managed to take in four, but we had to squeeze them two to a room. Do you know anything about what the Hell went on during the night?"

I dodged the question. "I expect we'll hear the 'official' version on the six-o'clock news."

"Yes, I suppose so, but I'm intensely curious." She paused.

"Anyway, what can I do for you?"

"Well, Charlotte it's about the girls you took in actually. I'm trying to trace the whereabouts of a girl called Libena Krotovski."

She laughed. "That's easy. She's here with us."

I breathed out slowly. "Ah. Good. Is it possible to speak to her? One of her friends is staying with us, and wants to contact her." "Don't see why not Joe. To be honest, despite what she's been through, she seems remarkably resilient. Hang on, I'll get her for you."

I realised the risk I was taking, but the stakes were too high to ignore. A few minutes went by.

"Hello. Mr. Carlson?"

"Hi Libena. Is there anyone in the room with you?"

There was a pause. "No, Miss Craven has just left closing door. Do I know you?"

"Can I ask you a couple of questions first, then we can talk freely?" I said.

"OK." she sounded puzzled.

I continued in Serbian "Would you like to put an end to what has happened to you, by helping me to bring the men who abused you to justice?"

There was no hesitation, she almost spat the reply. "Those bastards? Yes."

"I can promise you won't be identified, but I would like you to talk to a reporter."

There was another pause, then she said softly. "You are him, aren't you?"

I knew what she meant. "Yes." I said quietly. "Can I trust you to keep my secret?"

"For you I will do this." she said "And tell no-one who you are."
"Good, Libena. You are a brave girl. How do you feel?"

"Much, much better, thanks to you. When do you want me to talk?"

"First of all, I'd like to go through the diary I have with you. Would you be OK to do that?"

"Yes." she said emphatically. "Just say when."

"Could we meet tomorrow? Perhaps for lunch, then we could take a walk in the park and talk?"

"Yes. That is good."

"OK Libena. I'll come for you tomorrow. Leave the refuge at 12 o'clock, and I'll make myself known to you just outside. If you are in any doubt, ask me a question about Wednesday morning when I greet you. OK?"

She said quietly "Good. I will do that."

"And thanks very much for helping me." I said.

She laughed. "No Mr. Carlson. I thank you."

We said our goodbyes and I hung up.

I took another look at my watch, then got out one of the spare pre-paid mobiles, slipped on the muffler device I'd bought, and dialled the Guardian sub-editor's number.

His P.A. answered. "Andrew Donaldson's office. Who's calling please?"

"He will know me as Daniel." I said. I'm a C.I. Please get him for me, I have information related to the police raids last night."

"One moment sir." she said. There was a click and a brief pause, then his broad Lanarkshire accent boomed down the 'phone.

"Daniel! Nice to hear from you. I gather you have something for me, but before that, thanks very, very much for your last contribution. As you no doubt already know, we used the information wisely."

He paused, and I answered “You are welcome. I’ll come straight to the point. If I put a laptop and diary in your hands documenting the sale of under-age girls sexual services to several prominent men in London, what would you do?” He answered immediately. “Well, there’s the question of provenance.”

“OK” I said, “I thought you would say that. What if I add in a full and detailed interview by one of your staff, with one of the girls named in the diary, and who was rescued last night?”

“We’d publish.” he said without hesitation. “Conditions?”

“The identity of the girl is strictly protected and for corroboration purposes only. You must make no attempt to locate her whereabouts.” I said.

“No problem. I can guarantee that. Why haven’t you placed this material in the hands of the police?”

I laughed quietly. “You know why. It will take them weeks, and involve exposing all of the girls to endless questions.”

“Have I exclusive?” he said.

“Of course. I will give you the original laptop and diary. When you have copied the contents, at some point you can pass it on to the police.”

“Yeah. They will probably demand it anyway.”

“That’s OK” I said. “They can’t drag their feet then.”

“What’s in this for you?” he asked.

“You should know better.” I said. “I want nothing other than you publish as quickly as possible, and the girl is not named – to anyone.”

“Sorry.” he said “I should have known by now. I didn’t mean to give offence.”

“None taken.” I said. “Can you provide a female reporter for around 3 pm tomorrow?”

“Our features editor is a smart young woman. I don’t want to trust this to just anyone.” he replied. “Her name is Sam Johnson.” he read out a mobile number. “Call her yourself to arrange where you want to meet. I’ll talk to her myself now, as soon as we are done.”

I laughed "Not far to go. The girl will be escorted by another young woman, who you must promise not to try and identify. The girl in question is Serbian, and although her English is excellent, I'm arranging an interpreter for you who I can trust." "You have my word Daniel." he said.

I believed him. So far he had been completely trustworthy, plus open and honest with me in the past.

"You will have the laptop and diary by courier at your reception desk within two hours. This will give you a chance to work on them before the interview tomorrow."

"Excellent!" he exclaimed.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow afternoon, after you have had a chance to discuss matters with Ms. Johnson, in case you need anything clarifying."

"Good. And thanks again Daniel. No chance of any background on what happened during the night?"

I laughed. "You don't miss a chance do you?"

He laughed "You can't blame me for asking."

"Andrew. What I'm sending you will blow last night's incidents onto the back page or beyond. There are dates, times, names, addresses, telephone numbers, VISA card numbers - all of over two hundred men. Have you heard enough?"

"Christ!" he said. "I can't wait. Thanks."

"You are welcome. Bye for now." I said and hung up.

I 'phoned Katya. She did not hesitate to agree when I told her of my intentions, and I told her I'd ring early tomorrow with a location to meet.

I called Tomas, asked him to get himself ready for a bike ride, and that I would be riding pillion, then cleaned both the laptop and diary with an alcohol wipe, put them into a large Jiffy bag, and addressed it. I took the SIM card out of the mobile, picked up the Jiffy bag and went through to the garage, where I wrapped a piece of paper around the SIM and smashed it to smithereens with a hammer, sprinkling the pieces into the dustbin, as Tomas came in from upstairs.

"We are going to the Guardian Editorial Offices." I said.

He nodded. "OK."

"When we get there I want you to stop a hundred yards or so away from the main door and prying eyes. Then sit with the engine running, I'll be straight in and out with the parcel."

He smiled through the visor. "Will do."

I put the Jiffy bag into my shoulder pouch and donned my leather jacket, a pair of heavy sun-shades and the helmet, then opened the garage doors as Tomas started the bike. I pulled myself up behind him. He gunned the engine, and we turned into the mews.

Svetlana saw me enter the day room. She got up and walked across to meet me, putting her arms around my neck and gently kissing me. "I worry."

"Why?" I whispered softly. "I would not lie to you. I have not been in danger."

She held on to me but moved her head back, and her lovely blue-green eyes focused on mine. "I know when you do things." she said simply.

I smiled at her. "Yes. I know you do, because you are a very perceptive young lady. I will tell you, but later. And you must tell no-one else."

She smiled "I promise." She kissed me again. "We have tea now?"

I nodded. "Then would you like to walk? Just you and I?"

"Yes plis. Very much. I miss you with all activity."

"And me you. Let's have some tea."

We joined the other girls in the kitchen and sat down. There was still a buzz of excitement amongst the girls regarding Katrina and Constanza, and as I looked around the room I was happy to see the newcomers had been made so welcome.

Just before six, I took my cup of tea and sat down in the day room in front of our small TV. It was the third item on the news.

"Acting on information received, Police entered a house in Hampstead in the early hours of this morning to discover the bodies of several men. A large quantity of drugs were also found on the premises. Police would neither confirm nor deny the rumour that the house belonged to a member of the Russian Mafia, but have said that they believe the deaths are the work of a rival drugs gang.

In a separate incident Police were called to an address in Hackney where they found 12 young girls, who had apparently been kept prisoner for some time. The girls, all under-age, have been found temporary homes by social services. The bodies of two men were also discovered at the scene. Police will not confirm that the incidents are linked, and said that 'inquiries are on-going'."

Two hands gently touched my cheeks from behind the sofa, and she kissed my head before walking around and sitting beside me.

"You heard?" I said, turning the TV off.
She smiled. "Mostly. You are drugs gang?"
I turned quickly to look at her, but she was laughing.
I grinned. "Apparently so."
She leant over and kissed me. "Good Police don't know Avenging Angel."
"It is." I nodded. "Walk?"
"Yes plis."

Katrina looked up and smiled at us both as we approached the group of girls around her. Svetlana told her we were going for a walk. She got up and put her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek and said slowly in Serbian "Thank you again, Joe. I am so very, very happy."

I grinned at her. "It is my pleasure. We won't be long."

We stepped outside into the early evening sunshine. It was still warm, but a light breeze was blowing, just enough to keep the temperature pleasant.

“The park?” she asked.

“Yes, if you want.”

“I do.” she said, and took my hand.

We had walked slowly around the park as I told her about the diary and laptop and what I’d found in them. She had simply nodded when I told her that I had found and contacted Libena, and arranged an interview with the newspaper, and that I had made copies of both the diary and the laptop hard disk and sent these to the editor. I had bought two ice creams and we were sat on a bench watching the children before she spoke.

“She is good girl. Very strong, and will not betray you. This man at paper – you have given him other stories?”

“Several.”

“But he doesn’t know who you are?”

I laughed. “No, and I hope he never finds out.”

She squeezed my hand and said quietly in Serbian “You tell me that you have not put yourself in danger, but I saw your face after lunch and knew you were contemplating risk. These people at the newspaper. Can you trust them?”

I nodded. “Yes. He’s a journalist. He won’t kill the goose that lays the golden egg.”

She laughed. My Serbian version of the old saying had translated badly, but she understood.

She said quietly. “You are going to bring Libena to stay with us, aren’t you?”

I nodded, still a little surprised at how easily she knew what was in my mind. “Yes. It is the only way to protect her. Do you mind?”

She grinned. “No! I like her very much. And Katrina – they are close.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

She squeezed my hand again. “Take me back and we make love now plis.” she said quietly.

“Yes.” I said. “I will.”

I had guessed that she wasn't ready for a fuss. So I'd had Anna creep into her room early and place the card and CD at the foot of her bed, so she would see them as soon as she woke. I'd located the words on the Web for her special song, and printed them on the inside of the Birthday Card, and had most of the staff sign the card before sealing the envelope.

It was just before ten when I'd gone up to the day room with Svetlana and Katrina, and as we entered, I heard Lizzie's lovely voice singing her song, along with The Rankin Sisters. Although all of the girls were there, no-one spoke, just listening to the beautiful song, and the haunting accompaniment by The Chieftains.

*Raghadsa chun coille agus caithfead an chuid eile
San áit ná beidh éinne, ag éisteacht le ceol na n-éan
Ag bun an chrainn chaorthainn mar a bhfásann ann féar go leor
Ag tabhairt taitnimh don duine úd, sé Jimmy mó mhíle stór*

He's the fondest of lovers, sweet Jimmy mó mhíle stór

Svetlana stood beside me captivated. "That song - she sings most times, it is so lovely!"
She gripped my hand as she shivered with emotion.

Lizzie came over to us when the song finished, holding the card in her hand. She stood in front of me and held out her arms. I bent down and kissed her cheek, then whispered "Happy Birthday Lizzie. Did you like your present?"

She folded her arms around my neck and kissed my ear. "It is lovely. Anna told me. How did you know?"

She let me go and I stood up straight. "Your Ma told me that your Dad was Irish, and his favourite band were the Chieftains. I thought you would enjoy listening to it again."

She flashed her small white teeth in a lovely smile. "I do. Thank you."

Svetlana and Katrina each gave her a cuddle, and we found a seat together. The rest of the CD played on, the Chieftains lovely music filled the room, and Lizzie's face was a picture of

delight.

We sat and chatted, then I excused myself just before 10:30 am and made my way back downstairs.

He sat down as I poured Gin over the ice and lemon into the two tumblers, and sloshed in the tonic. I pushed a glass towards him and sat down opposite. We raised the glasses, clinked, and drank.

“A nice, neat job Joe. Thanks.”

I smiled. “You’re more than welcome.”

“How is the girl?”

“Surprisingly good. Still excited at seeing her big sister again. No doubt more tears will come later.”

He nodded and sipped the G & T.

“I extracted an 11 year-old Portuguese girl from Vasilov’s bed George.” I said mildly.

“Jesus Christ!” he exclaimed, shaking his head. He reached for the bottle, and topped up our glasses.

“Tell me he is gone.” I said.

“Minced, and feeding the fish off Southend.”

I nodded. “Good.”

He took a sip of his drink and asked quietly. “How did you know about the stapler?”

“I went to see her.”

“I tried to protect you..” he began, but I interrupted.

“I know, and I thank you. I just wanted to see her again.”

“Jesus Joe. Why haven’t you said anything?”

“You had your own grief to deal with.”

He nodded. There was a pause as we both drank slowly.

“Was that his own..”

“Staple gun? Yes.”

He nodded his head. “A fitting refinement.”

“I thought so too.” I replied.

He looked at me. “What if you hadn’t found it?”

I looked into his steady grey eyes. “I took one with me.”

He nodded slowly and changed the subject. "Thanks for the bonus of the laptop and notebook."

"Useful?" I asked.

"The notebook has been translated by our team and the transcription given to the Drug Squad. They are arresting his contacts as we speak."

He paused. "The laptop was encrypted but we have already broken some of the codes. It details several well-placed FSB operatives, as well as a mine of other information. The Russians are going to be very upset. If for nothing else, your raid would have been worthwhile for that alone."

I nodded. "Good. And talking about the FSB, have you seen these before?"

I took the small polythene bag from my pocket and emptied the remaining rounds from Vasilov's gun onto the table.

Dearby picked one up, turning it between his fingers.

"Unfortunately," he said "We are seeing more and more of these. The Russians are equipping their army with them, and now their agents. Next, they'll be selling them on the street."

I took out the spent round and held it up.

"You took one?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

I nodded. "Thak dug it out of my shoulder. It went straight through the vest like a hot knife through butter."

He nodded. "Nasty." He waved the live round slightly as he spoke. "With sufficient velocity, the payload will cut through concrete, heavy steel, you name it."

I topped up our glasses, this time with tonic and only a little more Gin.

"I've put Vasilov's MP-443 in with the other ordnance. The only weapon we discharged is 8 rounds short and I've tagged it."

"Good." he said "I'll have it destroyed."

He took another sip of his drink. "Did you find enough loose change to cover your expenses?"

I nodded. "A bonus for the guys, and sufficient for substantial donations to two other charities, as well as our Refuge."

"Good. I'm glad the op paid for itself."

He sat back.

"There's just one more thing I think you should know." I said. He smiled. "I thought there might be. But do I really have to know?"

I laughed. "OK. I'll spare you the details. I recovered all of the records regarding the girls from the house in Hackney. All the clients names, addresses, credit card numbers, the whole works."

"Jesus! Anyone prominent?"

"Several. There are over two hundred men named."

He looked steadily at me. "Don't waste time with the police. Do what you did a few months ago, and sink every last perverted bastard, by giving the stuff to the Press."

I nodded, and he laughed again. "You already have? Good for you."

There was a pause.

"Do you want a look around?" I asked, "It's been over three years."

He smiled. "Thanks, but not today. I know Cynthia would like to see you, so maybe I could give you a call?"

"Of course." I nodded. "I'd be delighted."

We both stood and shook hands. He made a call on his mobile, and I picked up the heavy holdall I had beside me, and walked him to the garage doors. I pressed the button and the doors rolled up slowly.

His 'taxi' appeared and he picked up the holdall, turned and winked at me, then got in. The taxi pulled away, and I closed the garage doors and headed back to my basement.

I had just finished making a pot of coffee when the 'phone rang.

I picked it up. "Good Morning. Joe Carlson."

"Ah, Mr. Carlson. Good Morning." The voice was slow and deliberate, and very Welsh.

"I'm Sergeant Nevett of the Bala Police."

"Good Morning Sergeant. I've been expecting a call."

"Yes." he said, "I expect you have. We interviewed a Mrs. Davies early this morning regarding her missing daughter Brangwen. Can you talk?"

"Yes, of course."

"I've made some inquiries about your Refuge, and it's very highly thought of, so I don't doubt your credentials. Can you briefly describe how Brangwen came to be staying at the Refuge?"

I told him. I also told him we knew her as Lizzie, not Brangwen. He listened without interrupting as I explained that it was only in the last three days that she had been able to tell us what had happened, and had given us her Mother's name and address.

"I gather that it was you who advised Mrs. Davies to contact us, Mr. Carlson. Did you manage to get any information from her?"

I sighed. "Only that she finally realised that her daughter had told her the truth, that her boyfriend was sexually abusing her daughter, but that she hadn't reported him, nor notified you of her being missing."

"Yes. That ties in with what she has said to us Mr. Carlson. How is the girl?"

"Physically she is fine. We had a doctor check her shortly after arrival, and she found minor tearing and abrasions, but nothing that won't heal. Mentally is another story. As you can imagine her confidence, especially with men, has been shattered, but I'm glad to say she's improving day by day."

"Would you say she is fit enough to rejoin her mother?"

I paused."It's my opinion that her confidence in her mother has been damaged as well. The girl herself would like to talk to her

mother here in London, before she makes any decision."

"That doesn't surprise me. Are you happy to continue looking after her until such time as she may be ready to return?"

"We are. I have also offered Mrs. Davies her fare to and from London, and free accommodation so that they can meet. The only condition I imposed, was that she report matters to you first."

"It's a dreadful business, and thank you for your insistence that she talk to us. I have men out looking for the nasty little shit as we speak."

"Will Mrs. Davies face charges?"

"Well, of course we could charge her, but as you may have already gathered Mr. Carlson, she isn't very bright, and we tend to try not to punish people for their lack of mental acuity."

"I'm glad. The poor woman has probably suffered enough."

"Yes." he said. "Mind you, the Social Services take a dim view of what they see as criminal negligence. So that is all still up in the air."

"If the girl can't go back to her mother, then we are happy to take care of her."

"I've informed the local Social Services Mr. Carlson. They may want to talk to you, or possibly come and see you."

I had the impression that he'd said all that he was going to.
"OK Sergeant Nevett. Thanks for your help and understanding. I hope you catch the child rapist as soon as possible."

"Thank you Mr. Carlson. Good Day sir." he hung up.

I was a few minutes early. Police take a dim view of men

hanging around women's refuges, so I took a walk down Handley Road, returning via Southborough Road, just in time to see her leaving Charlotte Craven's 3-story house. She wore a crumpled skimpy dress, and had cheap trainers on her feet. One of Zee's little bags hung over her shoulder.

She looked around. Across the street from her was a young man in a striped tee-shirt, and a little behind him a women pushing a baby-carriage. She turned and saw me walking towards her and came to meet me. As I approached I greeted her in Serbian.

"Good Afternoon Libena."

She looked at me a little curiously. "Good Afternoon. Tell me what is in my bag, please."

I smiled. "Five ten-pound notes, ten one-pound coins, a phone-card, a handkerchief.."

"Stop!" she said, "You are wrong!" She looked at my surprised face, then burst out laughing.

"Only four ten-pound notes. I bought nice perfume this morning!"

She moved forward, stretched up and kissed my cheek, before standing back and looking at me.

"You are handsome man. Much better than last night!"

I shook my head and smiled. "Thank you. Shall we eat?"

"Yes." she said. "I am hungry."

We headed down the road and into "The Broken Chain."

At the bar she looked at the menu and asked for lemonade and a ham salad. I nodded to the young barman. "I'll have the same please." I paid, waited for the drinks, and we sat down.

She was very easy to be with, bright and cheerful, and remained so as she recounted how she had ended up a prisoner.

I had stopped her at one point and asked her how she remained so cheerful, despite what had happened.

She pointed with both hands to her body. "They make prisoner and use this" she said, then pointing to her head with her right hand "But cannot use this, and that is where I really am."

I looked into her brave and pretty face, with not a trace of self-

pity in it, and I felt greatly humbled.

The salads came, and I was reminded of Svetlana, as I watched her attack the meal with evident relish. We finished with some fruit and cream, then two coffees.

She went to the Loo, and when she returned I said. "A walk in the park suit you?"

She nodded, and we left and walked down onto Gore Road, and into the park.

We found an unoccupied bench in the bright sunshine and sat down. I tapped the A4 folder I carried. "Are you ready for this?" "Sure." she said easily, so I took out the copy of the diary.

She hadn't seen it before. I said "Are you sure?"

She said nothing but took the stapled pages. I'd marked in highlighter the entries with her name, and I sat quietly as she thumbed through the diary. For the first time since I'd seen her, I saw tears in her eyes. I suddenly felt heartless and cruel.

She finally rested the diary on her knees. I reached across and closed it. "I am so sorry." I said. "I have asked too much of you."

She looked up at me, unashamed of her tears, but her eyes pleaded. I put the diary down beside me and wrapped her in my arms. She put her arms around my neck and wept uncontrollably.

Her sobs drew attention from strangers passing, but my warning looks moved them on quickly. Eventually she had calmed, but still clung to me. Then she spoke in my ear. "You are first man I want to hold me. For you and other girls I will do what you ask. We will destroy these perverts?"

I nodded. She released me and I took out a clean tissue and gently wiped her face.

"Are you sure?" I said.

"Yes. Very. Tell me what to do."

"OK." I said. "Shortly, we will be meeting a young lady called Katya. She is Serbian, from Smederevo, and she is a good friend of mine. She is there to help and support you when you

meet the journalist.”

“You will not be there?”

I smiled. “It is very important that this journalist does not find out my name, nor even know of my existence.”

She nodded. “Of course. I am silly.”

I shook my head. “No, you are not. You are very brave.”

She smiled at me, and I continued.

“The journalist is a lady called Samantha Johnson, and she is the features editor of The Guardian newspaper. She already has a copy of this diary, but she doesn’t yet know who you are. When you meet, simply tell her your name, and she will want to ask you to confirm some of the times and dates where you are mentioned in this diary. If, and only if you want to, you can tell her anything else you consider relevant about any of the men that you have met. She will not pressure you in any way.”

I paused, waiting for her to absorb the implications of what I was asking.

She nodded. “I understand. I can do this.”

I continued. “Your name, and the names of the other girls will not be published, only a code letter for each girl’s name will be used by the reporter. Also, I’ve been assured that no attempt will be made to question you further in the future, unless you wish it so.”

Again I paused. She smiled at me, the tears all gone.

“I am ready.”

I said “Wait. I have just one more thing to say before we meet this reporter. There is always a risk that someone will find out who you are and where you are staying. People are very good at putting two and two together and making five.”

She laughed at my dry joke, then added seriously. “They may pester me?”

I nodded "It is a possibility. You can still say no. I will understand."

She looked at me thoughtfully. "You know where Svetlana, Katrina and Constanza are?"

I nodded "Yes. They are safe at my Young Women's Refuge."

"Can I be with them? Will I be safe then? Is that possible?"

I smiled. "If that is what you want, of course you can join them."

She nodded vigorously "Yes. I do. That is what I want."

I looked at my watch. "OK. A short walk from here is a small hotel. I've booked a room and the journalist is waiting there. Katya will be waiting in the lobby for my 'phone call. I'll phone her now, and she'll meet us on the way, and walk you back to the hotel to meet the journalist. When the interview is over, I'll see you both back at that pub we were in earlier. How does that sound?"

She smiled. "It sounds good. And then will you take me to Svetlana?"

I nodded. "Yes. I will talk to Miss Craven before we meet in the pub. You and I will return to her Refuge and get your things. She will be more than happy for you to join your friends - she has no more room, and will probably be glad of the help."

I got out my mobile and called Katya. She greeted me and we arranged she would walk down Gore Road to meet us.

I put the mobile back in my pocket and we both got up and started walking. She took my hand and squeezed it, not letting go until she put her arms around Katya and kissed her.

I stood by smiling at them as they fired questions at each other in rapid colloquial Serbian I couldn't fathom, then we walked slowly up Gore Road toward the hotel. A few hundred yards from the entrance I stopped and spoke.

"Be careful, both of you. Don't tell her anything you don't want her to know. She will be fair, but very clever, so bear that in mind."

I turned to Libena. "You can still say no. Are you OK to go ahead?"

She nodded and smiled "Yes Joe."

"Good." I said "I'll see you both in 'The Broken Chain' when you're finished."

I kissed them both, then re-traced my steps down Gore Road and into the park. I got out the mobile and 'phoned Charlotte Craven.

"Hi Joe. Second time in one week! What will people think?" she laughed.

"It's about Libena. She has asked if she can join her friend at my Refuge. How do you feel about that?"

"Have you any space? I thought you were full?"

"A girl is leaving today. We have one room."

"Well Joe. To be honest, I'd think it a favour. I'm chancing my arm with the law about overcrowding. If she's happy, then so am I."

"Thanks Charlotte. I'll bring her back round to pick up her things a little later, if that's OK."

"Great. Will you have a cup of tea with me?"

I laughed "Yeah. Of course."

"See you then Joe. Bye for now" she said and hung up.

I switched off the M3's engine, and turned to Libena.

"We're here."

She grinned and we both got out of the car.

Katya wasn't long following us, and after she parked the little Micra, I closed the garage doors and we headed for the basement.

"Would you like to freshen up before you meet the girls Libena?"

She was standing just inside the door, looking around.

She smiled. "Yes please, Joe."

I grabbed fresh towels from the airer, and lead her into my bedroom, showing her where everything was.

She carried everything she owned in a small carrier bag, and

although her dress was clean, it was shabby.

“Later we’ll find you a change of clothes. Use anything you need, Katya and I will be waiting in the lounge.”

She stretched up and kissed me on the cheek.

“Thank you.”

“Libena, it’s my pleasure. I hope you will be happy with us.”

I left her to bathe and closing my bedroom door, headed back to the lounge.

Katya had made us some coffee and had taken out her notes and small recorder. I poured us both coffee and sat down.

“Ready?” she said.

I nodded and she switched on the recorder. At various points she stopped and spoke, sometimes winding on the recorder when I waved my hand.

After half an hour or so, we were finished.

She switched off the recorder and sat back in her chair looking a little anxiously at me. I grinned at her. “Perfect!”

I got up and leant across to kiss her cheek.

She laughed nervously “Thank God for that! I wasn’t sure if we’d said too much.”

“It was just right. Not too little, not too much. Did she look pleased?”

Katya nodded. “Ecstatic. Only minutes into the interview when she realised which of the girls Libena was, she could barely contain her excitement.”

“And Libena?”

“Well, as you heard, she was quiet, but confident throughout, and answered every question without hesitation. There were no tears. I rather got the impression Sam Johnson liked her a lot, and Libena sensed that, which probably made a difference.”

“And last, but not least, you?”

She laughed. “I’m fine Joe. Libena is lovely, a real pleasure to be with..”

She paused.

“Yes?” I said.

“There is something about her – a steel – no, I’m putting this badly.”

I nodded. “I know what you mean. An inner strength, an

indomitable determination?"

She nodded. "Yes. There's that, but.."

I waited.

"She is like you."

I couldn't help myself. "What?"

Finally she found the words. "She's a warrior."

I was dumbstruck. Katya had put her finger right on what I had been trying to define ever since I'd met Libena early Wednesday morning.

I nodded slowly. "You are right. That is it. She is."

She picked up her cup and drank the remainder of her coffee.

"I must be off."

I walked her to the garage, and opened the doors, waving to her as she pulled into the Mews in the little Micra she seemed to adore.

I got out the spare mobile and fed it a topped-up SIM card, attached the muffler device, and rang Andrew Donaldson's office.

His polite secretary put me straight through when I identified myself. His voice boomed down the phone.

"Hi Daniel. Fantastic!"

"You sound happy." I said softly.

"Absolutely. Seventy kinds of shit will hit the fan tomorrow morning. Make sure you get a copy of the 1st edition."

"I will." I said. "How are you running it?"

"As you asked." he said "WMD stuff. Front page with headline and prominent names, and a little note from yours truly.

Second page the girl's interview, third page..."

"Whoa!" I laughed. "Leave some for me to be surprised at."

"There's enough for three days, plus all of the stuff I've got a team working on now, can unearth about the men involved. Is that what you wanted?"

"Exactly Andrew. And thanks."

"Christ!" he exclaimed "It's you we should thank. Sam will probably pull a prize for the interview."

I laughed. "Yeah. She is good. I listened."

He laughed. "Your interpreter recorded it?"

"Just checking on you Andrew. Seriously though, thank Sam for her considerate and kind treatment of the girl."

He laughed again. "Who shall I say wants to thank her?"

"Well it's still Daniel, unfortunately."

"Damn! I thought I might catch you out." he quipped.

"We can help each other better the way things are Andrew." I said softly.

"Yes. I know. Still, I would like to shake your hand at some point." he said.

"I look forward to that," I answered "but not just yet."

"One question?" he said.

"Yes?"

"Why do you think they kept such detailed records?"

I paused. "Well, it's a guess, but the evil bastard who ran that operation, probably had his eye on blackmailing the clients at a later date."

"You know who it was?"

"Yes, but I can't say, at least not yet."

"Russian Mafia?"

I laughed "I thought you said 'One question' Andrew."

He laughed. "I'm a journalist."

"Yes. He was Russian Mafia."

"Was he one of the ones found at the scene?"

"No. He was executed elsewhere."

"Can I print this?"

"Yes."

"Good man."

"You're welcome. Can I go now?"

He laughed. "Of course. Don't forget - 1st edition."

"I won't" I said and hung up.

I cleared away the coffee cups as Libena entered the lounge. She smiled a little nervously at me.

"How do you feel?" I said softly.

"Strange. Many things happen in short time."

I smiled "I know. But once you've met your friends again and the other girls you can relax. You've been very brave and I want to thank you again."

She smiled at me, and I took her upstairs.

Svetlana was in the day room, the inevitable sketchpad in her hand, but when she saw us she came straight over and greeted Libena with big hugs and kisses. They chattered rapidly in Serbian, and I left them together and walked over to Zee.

She looked quizzically at me. "You've been busy I see." I grinned. "Sorry to spring things on you Zee, but I brought her for her own protection."

She raised her eyebrows. I sat down and quietly told her what I'd done. When I finished she nodded and smiled.

"Tomas and I wondered about the parcel to the Guardian. I should have guessed. Any more surprises?"

I laughed. "Only one, and I'm about to announce it now, but need to say a few words to both the staff and girls about what they may see and hear tomorrow."

"I'll round everyone up" she said, getting up.

"Thanks Zee. After I've spoken, can you find Libena something nice to wear?"

She laughed. "Of course. Leave it to me."

I went into the kitchen and poured myself some of Connie's lemonade. She was just finishing off making sandwiches. I smiled. "I'm making the announcement now Connie. Would you come into the day room."

She nodded. "Just finishing off Joe."

Girls were still finding their seats when I re-entered the day room. I waited a minute or so to make certain everyone was there, then went and stood in front of the wall with all Svetlana's sketches on. She caught my eye and smiled a little nervously. In fact looking around, everyone looked a little apprehensive.

"Hi Everyone. First of all, there is no need for glum faces. This is not going to be bad news." I paused as they visibly relaxed. "I have two things I wish to say. The first is by way of preparing all of you for what you may see or hear both in newspapers and on the TV tomorrow. I am going to speak plainly and not use any fancy words so that everyone will understand exactly what

I am saying”

“As you know, London has it’s fair share of unpleasant men, by far the most unpleasant in my opinion being those, who for whatever the reason, prefer to have sex with children. Some of you here this evening have suffered as a result of these men, and I am pleased to tell you that tomorrow, and over the next few days, there will be widespread arrests by the police, of a large number of them.”

“As a result of the news coverage, the names and possibly photos of these men, will be displayed in the newspapers and on the TV. I tell you this because you may see someone who has hurt you in the past, and find seeing them again upsetting. If so, I want you to tell a member of staff, so that they can re-assure and comfort you.”

“Although you might find this news unsettling, I hope all of you will understand that this is a good thing that it is happening, that so many of these perverts are going to end up in jail, where they can’t hurt any more children.”

“If anyone is not sure about what I have said, and would like further explanation or assurance, please come and talk to me or another member of staff.”

I waited. Because there were several girls whose first language wasn’t English, they relied on other girls to help them. There was a hubbub of conversation, but eventually they quietened and looked expectantly at me.

“Now. This next announcement hopefully is a little more pleasant. Some of you will have noticed that Connie is sat amongst you, rather than cooking your tea. That is because I have arranged for all of us to have a meal in a local Italian Restaurant, to celebrate Lizzie’s Birthday.”

I paused, waiting for the cheers to die down. A big smile was on Lizzie’s face.

“You will be able to have anything you like to eat, and there will

be a cake, live music and a Karaoke.”
I paused again.

“Thak and Pash have agreed to stay behind and look after any girls who don’t want to go out, and Connie has prepared sandwiches in the cooler. I know you will want to take the opportunity to freshen up, so let’s all meet again here just before seven. The restaurant is only 3 minutes walk away.”

The roomful of excited girls began to clear. I walked over to a hesitant Patricia. “Your foster parents have been informed, and are welcome to join us when they arrive.” I said.
She smiled “Thank you Joe.”

Svetlana walked over, put her arms around my neck and kissed me.

I said softly “Aren’t you going to get ready?”
“We wait for you.”

I laughed. “Until Patricia leaves later this evening, Libena has nowhere to wash or change, so I suggest she uses my room. Zee is finding her a nice dress and will bring it down.”

She stood back and beamed at me. “You are lovely man!”

I turned to Libena “Is that OK Libena?”

She grinned “Yes. It is good.”

“OK. I said “Off we go. Lizzie and I’ll take Constanza to her room to get her ready, then I’ll see everyone back up here later.”

We walked out of the day room, and they disappeared into the lift as I waited with Constanza in her wheelchair for its return. Lizzie had taken my hand, and she chatted excitedly until the lift returned.

I took a deep breath and walked through the door pushing Constanza. I needn’t have worried. The room had been repainted and the furniture changed around, and there were now two single beds, so that Zee could stay with Constanza at night. It looked completely different.

Lizzie was quite happy to help Constanza in the bathroom, and

I sat on one of the beds, listening to their happy chatter and laughter until they were ready.

I looked around at the happy, animated faces of the girls, and picked up my glass of Rioja and took a large swig. The meal was now mostly cleared away and the small combo that had played for us as we ate were having a break, and a laugh, watching the antics of the girls with the Karaoke machine.

Almost inevitably, it seemed, the 'Terrible Two' had been first up to sing, and the singing of the two beautiful sisters together, had brought the activities of the restaurant almost to a halt, and prompted encores from several customers.

The remains of the Birthday cake I had ordered for Lizzie was on the table in front of me, but Lizzie herself was now standing with Svetlana by her side, singing her special song. There was complete silence in the room apart from her singing and the Chieftains music, and as she finished the song, the whole room burst into thunderous applause.

"What a truly lovely voice she has."

I looked across at Jim Watson.

Jim and his wife had joined us, with Patricia, at my insistence, when they arrived shortly before we left the Refuge.

I nodded and said softly. "Yes. It is quite beautiful."

He looked shrewdly at me. "This work must bring you great pain, as well as joy, Joe."

I smiled. "Sorry. Sometimes my mask slips off."

"Don't apologize." he said "It must take enormous courage. I certainly couldn't do what you do."

"You do your share Jim, fostering as you do."

He looked across the room to where Patricia and two other girls were sitting.

"Yes. But you've already done the really hard part."

I shook my head. "They need us both." I paused, then added.

"Take care of her please Jim, she's a lovely girl."

"We will. I promise." he said quietly, and smiled at his wife who nodded at me.

The combo once more took their places and struck up with a slow tango. Svetlana stood next to me and took my hand. "Do You Wanna Dance?" she quipped.

I looked up into her lovely eyes and laughed. "I'd love to."

We walked out together to the small dance area in front of the stage and bowed to each other then danced, much to the delight and whistles of some of the girls.

The number came to an end, and Svetlana turned to the piano player. "Another plis?"

He laughed, and they began again. Another tango, but this time more dramatic, and much more demanding. There were whoops from the girls as we whirled around the small dance area, and when we were finished, gentle applause from the customers.

The night was warm, and I lay with only one sheet covering me, going over the events of the last 48 hours. A nagging doubt that I'd missed something had crept into my mind earlier in the evening, but I'd dismissed it so as not to cloud Lizzie's birthday celebration.

I'd had such feelings before, and sometimes, most times, they proved to be groundless – perhaps just my unconscious mind working it's way through a checklist. This time also, I recognised that trying to ferret out the reason for my discomfiture was a complete waste of time – it would come to me eventually, as if out of the blue, and hopefully not too late to act upon it.

I heard her enter the room, and then her lips were on mine, her hands holding my head. Her tongue swept across the inside of my lips and immediately I felt the stirring in my groin.

She moved the sheet, and gently sat astride me, again kissing

me. I ran my hands along her silky thighs, under the thin nightie and caressed her lovely buttocks. She moaned, and moving her head down, she took my left nipple between her teeth and nipped it gently, before spreading her mouth and kissing my breast in a powerful, passionate movement, her head rotating, moving up and down, and it was my turn to moan.

She lifted herself slightly, and I moved, then entered her. I felt her grip me as I moved deep inside her. A shudder ran through her body and she lifted her head and gasped.

“I love you.”

I kissed her. “I love you, beautiful lady.”

She grasped the shoulders of her nightie, and pulled it off over her head, and I eased myself up and took her right breast in my mouth. We rocked together as the spasms within us grew stronger, and she began shuddering with each stroke of me inside her, her head falling back, then moving forward, over and over.

I kissed her throat and neck, and the first of her screams was deafening. I felt her groin pressing into me with all the strength she could muster, and I could feel her fingernails biting into my back as she clung onto me, as if for her life.

There was a pause, a brief few seconds when she was perfectly still, then her grip on me became relentless, and she yelled my name and shook her head from side to side, in the final contractions of her orgasm.

I waited until she was nearly done, then simply let go of all of the pent-up passion I felt for her. I thrust into her powerfully and hard and I heard her breathe the words softly and intently into my ear.

“Ooh! Yes plis. Go, my lovely Joe.”

Her encouragement unlocked even more passion within me, and she moved skilfully and beautifully in time with me, cooing her appreciation in my ear, as I gasped my way to fulfilment.

I buried my face in her breasts and screamed, while she clasped my head with both hands, and kissed my head. We said nothing, locked together, before she carefully climbed off me, and lay at my side.

My breathing slowly returned to normal, as we lay, looking into each other's eyes.

“I am so happy.” she said simply
I smiled at her. “So am I. I can’t believe how very happy you have made me. I love you.”
She kissed the tip of my nose.
“I love you, My Angel.”

Alphabetical Index

16a, Spinners Lane, Hampstead.....	112
26, Eastbrooke Terrace, Hackney, E9.....	112
Alec.....	44p., 69, 88
Alec Soames.....	88
Alfie.....	3, 80pp.
Andrew.....	141p., 157p.
Andrew Donaldson.....	141, 157
Angel.....	51p., 54, 68, 123, 129, 144, 164
Anna.....	17p., 20, 22, 54, 61, 70, 77, 99, 134, 145p.
Avenging Angel.....	68, 123, 144
Baker Street.....	1, 60
Baldwin.....	18p., 96, 99
Beach Boys.....	20
Birthday.....	138, 146, 160, 162
Board.....	86pp.
bodyguard.....	24, 129
Bolo de Mel.....	30
Brangwen.....	83, 149
Brian Wilson.....	20
BT van.....	111, 116
C.I.....	141
Carl.....	102, 112, 116

Carlson.....	1, 18, 29, 43, 61p., 83, 85, 139p., 149pp.
Catherine Davies.....	81, 83
CCTV.....	17, 103, 106, 110
Chapel Street.....	2
Charlotte.....	139, 151, 155
Chieftains.....	85, 146, 162
Christine.....	25p., 51, 55p., 89, 97
Coke.....	116
Connie.....	19, 22, 51, 54, 71, 135, 159p.
Constanza.....	105, 110, 115pp., 120, 122pp., 128pp., 134p., 138, 143, 154, 161
Constanza De Sousa.....	105
Cosworth.....	100pp., 111p., 116, 132, 138
Craven.....	139p., 151, 154p.
Crawford Street.....	60
Cynthia.....	50, 149
Cyrillic.....	32, 138
Daniel.....	141p., 157p.
Dearby.....	48, 59, 62, 101, 148
Derek.....	34, 62, 101
Devonshire House Preparatory School.....	66
diamonds.....	132
diary.....	113, 134, 138pp., 145, 152p.
Doctor Courtney.....	31
Dollars.....	132
Drug Squad.....	147
Eastbrooke Terrace.....	108p., 111p.
Edgware Road.....	2, 60, 80
Eidetic Memory ability.....	32
English.....	4pp., 9p., 15, 25, 28, 36, 46, 51, 68, 75, 77, 79, 113, 142, 160
Euro bearer bonds.....	132
Euros.....	132
Fitzjohn's Avenue.....	65
foster parents.....	135, 161
FSB.....	48, 101, 148
George.....	48, 50, 77, 100, 147
Gin.....	132, 146, 148
Glock.....	101, 110
Gore Road.....	152, 154p.
Grace and Pride.....	100, 138
Guardian.....	141, 143, 153, 159
Guardian Editorial Offices.....	143
Gurkha.....	129
Hackney.....	108, 112, 144, 148
Hampstead.....	66, 70, 102, 112, 144
I Like It.....	134
Irish.....	85, 146
Jane.....	17, 19, 22, 37pp., 53pp., 59, 61pp., 66pp., 72pp., 76pp., 86pp., 96, 98p., 118, 121pp., 136
Jasmine Drive.....	100
Jim Watson.....	162
Jimmy mó mhíle stór.....	146

Joe3pp., 7pp., 13, 15pp., 21, 25, 28pp., 37, 39p., 42pp., 49p., 53pp., 66pp., 71, 73p., 76pp., 82p., 85, 87pp., 92pp., 96pp., 105, 114, 119pp., 123, 125p., 128pp., 134p., 137, 139, 144, 147, 149, 155p., 159, 161p., 164	
John.....	102, 113p., 116
journalist.....	145, 153p., 158
Junction Place.....	2, 80
Katrina...10, 23, 47, 59, 76, 89p., 92, 96, 99, 102, 105, 109, 113pp., 128pp., 134p., 138, 143pp., 154	
Katya.....	5pp., 13, 24, 26, 28pp., 35, 37p., 42pp., 46p., 53, 63, 68, 75, 142, 153pp.
Lalique.....	8, 10, 20, 35, 40, 56, 124
Lanarkshire.....	141
Lancaster Gate.....	46, 65
Lancaster Gate to Stonecutter's Lane.....	65
laptop.....	63, 65p., 68, 109p., 113, 134, 138p., 141pp., 145, 147p.
Libena.....	115, 138pp., 145, 151, 155pp., 161
Libena Krotovski.....	139
Lizzie.....	19, 22, 38p., 54, 62, 71pp., 77pp., 85, 96pp., 126, 134p., 146, 149, 160pp.
London.....	2, 10, 17, 24, 32, 35, 37, 45, 60, 64, 81, 83, 85, 111, 116, 123, 139, 141, 150, 159
M3.....	15, 70, 100, 138, 155
M5.....	100
Mac.....	101pp., 108pp.
Madeira.....	30, 93, 120
Margery.....	16pp., 22, 83pp.
meth-amphetamines.....	109
Mews.....	15, 31, 157
Micra.....	155, 157
Millicent.....	6, 29pp., 38, 43p., 129pp.
Millicent Courtney.....	6, 29, 31, 43, 131
Miss Courtney.....	29, 43p., 129
Mr. Linton.....	102, 112
Mrs. Davies.....	83pp., 149p.
Ms. Johnson.....	142
murderer.....	89, 128
paramedic.....	129
Pash.....	22, 31, 86pp., 90p., 160
Passports.....	108
Patricia.....	50p., 71, 134p., 137, 161p.
Peter.....	102p., 110
Piotr.....	48, 59, 63, 66, 101, 107p., 110
Porto.....	20
Portuguese.....	7, 20, 93, 105, 111, 115, 117p., 128, 135, 147
Pounds.....	132
Praed street.....	138
Praed Street.....	2, 78
psychiatric nurse.....	53
PTSD.....	39
Refuge.....	6p., 22, 45, 49, 69, 78p., 83, 85p., 88p., 118, 139, 148p., 154p., 162
Roberta Connaught.....	60
Rodge.....	1
Russian.....	48, 104, 144, 158
Russian Mafia.....	48, 144, 158

Russians.....	49, 148
Sam.....	142, 156p.
Sam Johnson.....	142, 156
Serbian....3pp., 13pp., 23pp., 28, 33, 35pp., 42, 46, 51p., 57, 60p., 64, 66p., 75, 77, 79, 113pp., 122, 124, 140, 142, 144p., 151, 153, 155, 159	
Serbo-Croat.....	61, 77
Sergeant Nevett.....	149, 151
Sierra Sapphire Cosworth.....	100
SIM.....	143, 157
Slavic.....	2, 7, 26, 57
Smederevo.....	28, 153
Sniff.....	18, 70p.
Soames.....	31, 44, 88
Social Services.....	151
SOPs.....	49p., 62, 101
Southborough Road.....	151
Spanish.....	58, 80, 113, 135
Spinner's Lane.....	66, 70p., 101, 103, 109, 112
staple.....	107p.
Staple gun.....	147
Stella.....	45, 69, 88
Sussex Gardens.....	4, 61, 71, 78, 82
Svetlana....1, 3, 5pp., 13pp., 20pp., 25p., 28pp., 43pp., 48pp., 71pp., 77pp., 89, 92, 96pp., 105, 107, 109, 113pp., 117pp., 128p., 131p., 134, 137p., 143p., 146, 152, 154, 158p., 161p.	
Terrible Two.....	134, 161
Thak.....13pp., 18p., 21pp., 31, 53p., 68, 72, 86, 89pp., 96, 119p., 129, 131, 148, 160	
The Broken Chain.....	152, 155
The Rankin Sisters.....	146
The Serpentine.....	46
The Windsor Castle.....	60
Three Keys.....	2, 80
Tomas.....9, 15, 20, 23p., 30p., 53, 61, 76, 86, 89pp., 118pp., 122, 124pp., 133, 135, 142p., 159	
torturer.....	89, 108, 128
trustee.....	90
Vasilov.....48, 59, 62p., 66pp., 70, 75, 101p., 104pp., 121, 132p., 138, 147p.	
vinyl collection.....	134
W.H Smiths.....	138
Waltham Abbey.....	100, 138
Welsh.....	38, 79, 85, 149
X-ray.....	129, 131
Young Women's Refuge.....	154
Zee 5pp., 13pp., 19pp., 25, 29pp., 36, 40, 46, 52p., 55pp., 59, 63pp., 72p., 76, 86p., 89pp., 94pp., 99, 105, 114p., 117pp., 124p., 128p., 131pp., 137, 151, 159, 161	