

## **To Return A King (working title)**

### **Prologue**

Under an old apple tree and shaded by a spreading Ceanothus he stands looking into the excavation he's just dug. About a metre down and a metre square he can see steps descending towards a doorway. To his left a flat concrete roof shows a ragged hole and a brick wall supports what's visible of the doorway. Due to the high water table in this part of London thick black water is already rising up the wall as slowly as oil spreads across a table. It will be more than half an hour before the water will mostly fill the trench. He scrapes the shovel over earth on the roof to uncover more of the concrete. The hole in the roof is bigger than he realised. Scraping again he tries to uncover more and is soon digging again. Straightening his back he now leans on the shovel and looks at what he has cleared. The whole roof is cast concrete and about a metre and a half wide by two and half long. The roof is split by a gash along the length of the roof and at its widest is about 40cm. What looks like soot colours the edges and he uses the shovel to splash water onto the roof to wash away some of the earth but it just adds to the black and it is hard to see where dirt ends and soot begins. The water has slowed rising now leaving a good sized gap below the doorway so he climbs into the trench and with feet in the water, several steps down he crouches to look into the shelter. At first all he can see is more water reflected light falling through the torn roof and dappling patterns confuse his eyes. What appears to be part of the frame of a bunk bed becomes visible above the surface, a lighter black than the watery darkness. As he looks he can hear a faint scraping noise like mice nibbling skirting board. Puzzled he strains his hearing trying to locate the source of the noise but the more he listens the less defined the sound becomes. He decides to come back with a torch and as he turns and rises to leave the trench a ripple starts in

the water at the centre of the shelter as if something suspended under the water has started to surface.

*“We have to be sure” said the man with the light behind him “we can’t afford to take any chances, we must know”. The watcher grunted but said nothing.*

*“You have to stay out of sight and watch for our man’s return” added the silhouette. “He is a threat to us”. The watcher grunted again then interjected “you don’t know where he is or even if he got off the Island. In short you know nothing! Nothing! Am I supposed to set up a 24 hour watch on a house when every night there are bombing raids and those bloody rockets without knowing whether our man is coming or not?”*

*“We told our friends where he was but they failed to catch him, so yes” said the man behind the light “that’s exactly what you do”.*

## **Prologue 2**

They were lying entwined on Ben’s bed covered by a thin duvet. Both were awake but had their eyes closed and both had that heavy satisfied air and inner glow that only comes from good love making. Aless sighs and moves closer to Ben giving him a small kiss on his shoulder. Ben tightens his arm round her shoulder in a loving hug.

“Mmmm darling” said Ben “I’m going to have to move, my arm’s gone to sleep. Aless growls deep in her throat “don’t you dare”. Ben smiles and slightly shifts his arm to ease the pins and needles. They lay there dozing for a while.

Outside the afternoon wore on and the sun began to touch the roofs of the houses, sending golden beams dancing through the curtains and across the ceiling above Aless and Ben.

She turns to Ben and said “I have to go now”.

“Another five minutes” asked Ben “Ok” said Aless as she laid herself down again nestling up to his broad chest.

“But no naughty business” she smiles.

Ben smiled in response “I promise a hands free zone”.

“Are you going back to the office today?” Aless asks.

“After you go” replies Ben. “I need to check on a sale from earlier, but as everything goes through the internet I’ll only be about an hour. Fancy meeting up later”?

“No” said Aless “I have to go home and clear up my place. I’m on deadline for an article tomorrow and I need to have a clear workspace”.

Ben turned on his side and looked at her. The mood in the bedroom was turning to another parting. Their time was always limited to an afternoon here and there or sometimes a weekend day and as evening was approaching it was time to be on his own again. Aless stood up to get dressed and the late sun through the curtains highlighted her slender figure. The sight always made Ben catch his breath at her beauty yet, like many women, she didn’t see herself as her lover saw her and so she couldn’t understand why he found her so attractive. Ben reached for her but she side stepped laughing

“Hey” she cried “hands free”!! Ben laughed too. They started to dress side by side with an easy quiet between them.

“Ben, can you get me a glass of water please” Aless asked as she pulled on her dress.

“Sure” he replied. Ben left the room and walked down to the kitchen. He poured bottled water into a tall glass and took it back to his bedroom. Aless was standing by the mirror fixing her face, as she put it.

“Thanks” she said taking the glass and drinking half of it. She returned the glass to Ben and he stood slightly behind her as she applied lipstick to her mouth. He watched her take a tissue from her bag and compress her lips onto it to remove the excess make up. She turned her cheek to him for a kiss and smiled up at him.

“Are you house hunting later” she asked.

“I might look around a few streets in Streatham to see if there is anything for sale round there” he replied. “It’s a bit better value there with some nice older properties that are bigger than you get around here”.

“Try to find something that has a nice garden too” she said “you remember those barbeques we used to have at your old house”. He smiled as he cast his mind back to the long summer evenings when he had put thirty or so tea lights throughout the garden so as dusk fell the whole place looked like a fairyland with twinkling lights in trees, bushes and in the undergrowth. A very happy memory, yes he thought I’ll definitely get a place with a garden.

## **Chapter one**

A is for Avarice, one of our vices,

We corner the goods and put up the prices.

Ben walks to his work on Tooting High Street and enters his office about 4pm. Mrs Broughton, his office manager, is at her usual desk in front of her PC.

“Hello Mr Wilson” she says “How are you today? How was your afternoon”?  
Ben looked at her before replying, he wondered if she was referring to his time with Aless.

“Quiet as usual, how about things here? How did the article sale with that American magazine go?” he asked.

“Oh they loved the site and they think they’ll use quite a few of our articles over the next year. They’ll be a lucrative client” she said. “In fact, Mr Wilson, they’ve already paid the first invoice”.

“Wow” said Ben “that’s fast. It was a good idea to go for online credit payments. It really does cut out a lot of paperwork and time”.

“Yes, soon we won’t be needed here at all” she smiled.

Ben laughed “I suppose we can just drop in now & then to pick up our cheques”. Mrs Broughton smiled back and turned back to her screen. Ben felt a bit of criticism from her but it was true. The business virtually ran itself and though someone was needed in the office to answer the phone, mostly business was done over the net and could as easily be done remotely. Running a website, [www.wordsonline.co.uk](http://www.wordsonline.co.uk) that writers submitted articles to and he sold on to magazines and newspapers was hardly time consuming. What was good was the time it gave him to spend with Aless and time now to house hunt for a new place. Ben had been searching for a property for quite some time and had really quite enough of estate agents. It was possible he’d been unlucky, but they did seem to have a lot of problems with lost papers, missed appointments and details forgotten. Then even if they did manage to meet at a property then if the key wasn’t lost, the key they had wouldn’t open the door. So now Ben had decided he would find a property privately and had been walking the streets of Streatham in an attempt to find decent properties

that were empty and that would accept a private sale. Ben switches on his PC, waited for his internet service and then connected to Google. He types “properties Streatham” into the search engine and hits enter. The screen rolled up web address after address, some looking interesting, other’s way off. An address for an estate agent’s called Taylor & Walker caught his eye so he clicked the link. A website appeared on the screen offering properties across South West London with locations to click. Ben searched for then clicked Streatham and another page opened showing photos of houses. Ben wanted a Victorian or Edwardian property and despite the fact that Streatham lost 60% of it’s houses in the World War two bombing and rocket attacks there were still quite a few left on nice wide avenues and side streets.

However all those on the screen were way above his budget! Though his business was profitable it still didn’t pay a fortune and Ben had never bothered pushing it to make more money instead preferring to earn less and have more free time with Aless. Ben decided he would take another drive up some of those streets so tantalisingly laid out on the monitor and look for “for sale” boards. Ben looked across the office at Mrs Broughton, who was steadily typing looking at her screen. She was a tall woman in her early fifties, slightly overweight and rounded but still obviously proud of her figure. Given her full figure she was surprisingly narrow faced and sharp featured, with a hard, sharp look framed by short brown hair. Ben had found her through an agency when he first opened the office. When he started the business he had worked from home but the workload became too great and it became obvious he needed the help. She had arrived for her interview in a formal skirt suit with an impressive CV from various firms in the City. Ben had asked her why she wanted to come to a much smaller and very much quieter office, she had replied that she had had enough of the commute to the City and as she lived locally it suited her to the ground. Her main

fault to Bens mind was her excessive formality; she always used second names with clients and had a phone manner that reminded Ben of an old fashioned school teacher. On more than one occasion Ben tried to find out her first name and had been completely blanked each time. Even Aless for all her playfulness and ability to win others over could only ever reduce her to Mrs B. However her competence was beyond question and the office paperwork was handled with a scary efficiency that had never happened before. Ben compared her to Aless in his mind. He pictured Aless as he had last seen her that afternoon, bare arms and a bare leg slipping out from under the quilt, golden in the late sunlight and so slim. An expression popped into his mind, "as slim as a promise". But the promise with Aless was in her dark eyes and the swing of her long dark hair as well as the look of love on her face. Ben felt a surge of warmth for Aless and he made a silent vow to find a place she'd really love so much she might decide to move in with him after all. But then again Aless has made it clear more than once that though she loves him she values her independence as highly as she does him and is not going to surrender it lightly! And Ben has to admit the arrangement suits him perfectly too, freedom whenever and wherever he wants it. Ben turned his mind back to looking for a new house. It's true he was in this position of having to rent a small place whilst looking for a new place mostly through his own fault. Previously he'd been living in his marital home which he'd bought with his first wife. When she moved to Devon with her new partner, after her and Ben's divorce, she had agreed that he should pay her rent and carry on living in the old house. The moving out was forced on him after he and his ex fell out again and after another major row she decided to sell the house to fund her buying property in the village she had moved to. So he had had to find a new place. The new flat was nice; but too small really and Ben needed space. A new house with five

or six rooms was the answer. Tooting was too pricey and houses mostly small in the cheaper parts. Balham was impossibly expensive so Streatham was an ideal alternative with big old houses, not quite so sought after as Tooting or Balham and still close to Ales.

Ben stood up “I’m off out again Mrs Broughton. If you need me ring my mobile”.

Still looking at her screen she nodded. “Bye then” she said.

“Bye” said Ben as he opened the door. A short walk back to his flat, where he unlocked his car, an older Land Rover Discovery, and starting the motor drove out onto Mitcham Lane. He turned right, then left onto Rectory Lane and drove up to Tooting Bec Common where he again turned right. Now driving along the common he takes the turning for the Streatham High Road. Ben had a picture in his mind of the kind of property he wanted and felt he might know where to find it. Almost by instinct Ben follows his nose and heads toward Streatham Common. Now he turns left at the memorial to the Royal Fusiliers who died in World War One then onto Streatham Common Road then left again to a street named Hopton Road. And at the end of Hopton Road he finds the house his heart had told him would be there, a run down Edwardian property that was obviously the roads surviving building after a bombing raid in the Second World War. All the other properties were 50’s and 60’s blocks of council buildings that would have been put up after the war had finished and as the older house seemed ok the local council had decided not to knock it down. Ben parked the car outside the house and studied it intensely. It was built of red brick and single fronted with bay windows, three floors and a beautiful ornate arched porch. The roof sloped towards Ben except for a triangular eave that provided the third floor jutting out on the right hand side. The blank left side wall had visible supports taking

the place of the terraced house that would have been next to it and traces of stairs and fireplaces could still be seen in faint marks on the brickwork. Looking at the front of the house Ben could see the house was intended to end on the corner as Hopton Road turned left on a right angled corner and other similar houses continued after the bend, but before the corner the building was hanging as it's neighbours had long gone in that cataclysmic evening in 1944 and a badly mowed grass patch ran for about two hundred yards before a newer council block of flats. Finally a sole relative of the house stood at the corner of Polsworth Road and Hopton Road before too continuing round another corner. All the houses in between must have gone at the same time though there were still three original buildings on the opposite side of the road before becoming the utilitarian council blocks. Despite his finding the place by gut feeling the only detail Ben couldn't see was a "for sale" sign. Undeterred Ben decided to knock so getting out of the car he locked it he then walked across the grass verge onto the front garden path. A small wall ran round the garden on the right, closing it off except for the gate. On the gate a faded much corroded plaque that was once brass could just about be read, Ben puzzled out the letters and made out the words "La Rocquaise". On the left a newer slightly higher wall closed that side. Inside the front garden was an overgrown lawn giving every indication of neglect. Ben opens the gate and slowly walks up the garden path. As he steps up to the porch a surprisingly strong gust of wind buffets him, almost forcing him off the path. The breath was pulled sharply from his lungs and made worse by his jacket lifting up and wrapping around his face before the gust passed, ruffling foliage in the garden and then raising the vortexes of dust devils in the road outside. Ben gasped for air and feeling an irrational fear struggled to free the folds of cloth from its entanglement round his face. Still breathing hard he struggles to regain his self possession and to smother his rising

feeling of panic. Turning to the door he noticed this was an imposing, glossy black wooden door with a large iron knocker in the shape of a ring. There was no bell other than old fittings for where the houses original bell pull must have been. Ben felt himself calmer and then knocks, but much louder than he had intended and the sharp noise raised echoes through the house before him. He'd have to say sorry to whoever comes to answer the door Ben thought. Ben waited for a minute or two but there was no sound or sign of life from within the building. Ben knocks again more quietly but it was obvious the property was empty. He walks back to the car and got in, as he did so his mobile rang.

It was Aless. "Slacking off again are we" she teased "honestly you take more time off than any three people I know. No wonder you're not a millionaire yet".

"Two words for you and neither are polite" Ben replied "You rang?"

"Yes, I'm free for an hour. Want to meet up?"

"Absolutely! Your place?"

"Yeah, come round for a coffee"

"On my way" said Ben and hangs up. Pleased she's phoned, Ben thinks of his find and how to tell her. Of course not knowing whether it is for sale or not is a disappointment but Ben is certain things will work out right. After all, the house was right where he knew it would be, almost as if he'd conjured it into existence. It only took 15 minutes to reach Aless's place on the other side of Tooting Bec Common. Aless owned a terraced house just off the common on a fairly busy road so parking the car was difficult and Ben had a short walk to her door.

Aless greeted him with a big smile and when she had closed the front door gave him an enormous hug. "I'm glad you're here" she told him.

“I’m happy to be here, you know anytime spent with you is a bonus” Ben smiled.

“Coffee?” Aless asked

“please”

“Tell me what you’ve been looking at then” Aless insisted. So Ben related his find and how wonderful the house was, how it needed a bit of fixing and so should be in his budget.

Aless looked doubtful “Come on Ben, this is a bit fanciful even by your standards, you don’t even know if it’s for sale. You really should look at others. There must be more and you only looked at the one road, there are hundreds like that in Streatham so there are going to be a lot more empty places”.

Ben reflected for a moment “you’re right my love” he said. “It was just so quick to find I felt it had to be just for me”

“I think it was just coincidence” Aless replied “and besides isn’t Hopton Road a bit rough?”

“It used to be but everywhere round there is getting smarter”

“True, when Dave and I first moved here people used to talk about constant burglaries and drug dealers trading house to house! Now we have a doctor next door and a barrister the other side of the street. I certainly couldn’t afford to buy here now”.

Ben thinks for a second about Dave, Aless’s dead husband. Would Aless be with him if Dave hadn’t died? It is not a thought Ben is comfortable with so he drops it from his mind. Ben knows that Dave’s death left Aless comfortable but not wealthy, not that it matters to Ben. It certainly isn’t money he finds attractive in Aless.

Aless continues “besides everyone now is ‘fixing up’ rather than buying a new place because it’s cheaper than moving”

“True, true”

“And anyway why not wait for a while, you might get more money together”

Ben knew that waiting wasn’t something he was good at so he decided to change the subject.

“You know” he said “I’ve always wanted to ask you about your name. Why do you call yourself Aless rather than Alice? Were you born Aless”?

Aless laughed. “You never thought to ask me before? You know I loved the way you just accepted me for what I am and didn’t comment on me or the things I do. As a child I hated being called Alice and I thought it was associated with rabbits, mind expanding drugs and dirty old men. I used to get so many smart remarks on the lines of been down any holes lately that I changed the spelling. It didn’t stop the jokes though. And it started again when The Matrix was released at cinemas, all that taking tablets and talk about getting Alice into wonderland that Laurence Fishburn’s Morpheus character did”.

“Did you want the smart remarks to stop?”

Aless paused for thought and lines of concentration appeared on her forehead. “I suppose not, because if I did I’d have called myself something entirely different. I liked the attention anyway but I suppose I wanted something more exotic and I thought Aless sounded more...well, chic and European!”

Ben was surprised “You want to be European?”

Aless laughed again “Well French and Italian women are always seen as so chic & sexy I thought I couldn’t be hurt by that association”

“You know you’re really sexy, you’re very sophisticated and chic...don’t think you’re not, you’re a complete...gorgeous and beautiful woman!”

She looked up at him from under her eyelashes and gave him a shy smile “you think so?”

Ben felt a surge of love burn through him so stood closer to her and held her shoulders

“you’re stunning” he told her, his voice deep with passion for her “you have no idea what you do to me”. They stood for a while in each others arms feeling the warmth of their breath on each others cheek, and then they reluctantly parted. Ben instantly felt an absence, an almost palpable sense of loss from where his arms had held her.

“I ought to go” Ben said “I need to do some work before tomorrow and then I want to research more properties”. They smiled at each other, kissed briefly then parted.

The next day was a Saturday so Mrs Broughton wouldn’t be in the office and Ben would be free of the vague guilt feelings she inspired in him. Ben decided he would spend the morning carrying out some updates on his website and as he worked he thought about how he had first met Aless. He recalled their first meeting nearly ten years ago and again felt astonished about how long their relationship had lasted. He pondered over would it have lasted so long if they had a more normal relationship? This was another uncomfortable thought and he pushed it to one side. They had met when he was first starting the business and was desperate to get writers to contribute to what was a relatively new idea, selling articles over the internet. He’d been given Aless’s name by another writer and as she was fairly close to where he was living he rang her to arrange a meeting. He’d wanted to see her work and if it

was any good he would try to persuade her to join up. Some five years before his meeting Aless he and Amy, his first wife, had separated and Ben had gone a little bit mad with women. He was over six foot tall with a well built athletic figure and an easy going but attentive manner that many women found very attractive. But Ben found he was picking women up simply because he could and had no intention of forming long relationships, though the women he was meeting all wanted as long term partner. So he was perpetuating a series of disastrous encounters with women who were looking for commitment and each ending more dramatically than before. Then a girlfriend, who had two children and had told her children that Ben was going to propose to her on Albert Bridge in order to pressurise him into to marrying her and had made Ben realise that he and the kind of girls he was meeting were really not compatible so he had decided not to bother anymore, that he was better off single and despite being asked out more than once, he was still alone after six months and had no intentions of altering. But when he rang Aless's front door and she appeared, very slim and wearing a figure hugging long dress, Ben had the feeling he'd been hit by a train. Aless looked every inch the professional model she was before making her living as a freelance journalist. Ben struggled to keep his mind focused and when Aless invited him to her study to read examples of her writing all he could think about was how wonderful it would be to kiss her, just kiss her lips or maybe even just hold her hand. As Aless explained her work and her previous experience Ben's mind wandered around how beautiful she was and how lovely her voice sounded until with horror he realised his left hand, under its own volition, had arrived on the back of Aless's chair and was approaching her shoulder. He quietly brought it back under his control and now kept a stern eye on it, then realised he'd missed completely what

Aless had been saying. She was looking directly at him as if waiting for an answer and Ben knew he didn't know what it was she'd said.

"I'm sorry" Ben stammered "I missed what you said then".

Aless looked hurt but replied simply "I asked you if you'd like to meet for a drink or lunch, but if you're not interested then that's ok"

"Good God...of course, I'd be delighted to have dinner with you" Ben struggled to keep a huge, stupid smile on his face. He was so delighted that almost couldn't talk through grinning. Their first lunch together was at a local fish restaurant; they both had smoked salmon and as they ate they swapped stories about their pasts. Both realised this was something different and that this was a relationship different enough to be worth taking time over. She had joined his agency and her work sold regularly so they had an excuse for regular contact. Ben and Aless did take it very slow, just dating to start, going to restaurants, theatre or the occasional cinema before even kissing. Ben can still remember their first deep kiss, it happened in her hall just before Ben was going to leave, they were standing close together and as Ben went to squeeze past her she'd put her arms around him, pulled him closer and turned her face to his, their lips met in a gentle kiss which became deeper and stronger as it went on. Finally after several minutes they reluctantly pulled apart.

"Why now, why this moment" asked Ben?

"Because it was right" replied Aless.

More than six months passed before they first went to bed to make love and now, despite the length of passed time, they are still deeply passionate for each other. Ben's friends first wrote this relationship off as another one of his mad women but became more accepting as time proved they were together. Now they met as often as they could but Aless's desire for independence always made her return home and

rarely did they spend a whole night together. Ben often wondered if her husband's early death had affected her ability to see anything as permanent. Aless, when asked, would say that what they had was so good why risk changing? But Ben realised that Aless associated love with loss and so felt protected by keeping a private place of her own. Ben, smiling at the memory of their first meeting, allowed his thoughts to wander along the flow of their time together. Hardly ever an argument, rarely cross words, nothing but really nice good times only flawed by frequent partings and separations. Perhaps they lived on a permanent high together because they knew time was always to short for them? Knowing this to be another unanswered question Ben turned back to his PC screen, connected to the internet, opened Google and started to think about the house on Hopton Road. What did happen to that road? Ben thought about how to find out and then typed "hopton road Streatham bomb" into the search box. The usual long list of entries appeared and about half way down the page he saw a line that quoted a local newspaper dated July 1944. He shivered as he clicked through to the article and his mind flashed up a picture of the house that night of the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 1944, at 8.28pm when a V2 rocket destroyed six of No 12's neighbours and severely damaged another thirty. "Many dead" claimed the piece and his minds eye pictured the flames and ruin around the house he had visited but that which had already called to him. He recalled the road as he'd seen it only a short while ago with the council flats replacing some of the older Edwardian houses and an empty space now grassed over which hides the wreckage from sixty years ago. An icy chill filled him as he imagined the noise of the fires and the falling debris. He shuddered and closed Google, sitting back from the screen as he did. His chest felt tight and he relived the blast of air that had met him when he had first knocked at the door there.

Ben wondered if he had somehow felt a trace of what had happened that awful night so many years ago.

The next morning Ben got his day organised at his office, decided to be positive and find out more about No 12 Hopton Road. He drove his old Land Rover Discovery to Streatham High Street, parked at a meter and walked to the office of Taylor & Walker. Inside a male assistant sat at a desk, another talked to a woman looking to rent a flat.

“Can I help you sir” asked the suited young man.

“Certainly hope so” Ben replied “I’m trying to find who owns an empty property on Hopton Road, if I can trace the owner I’d be interested in seeing if he’ll consider selling”.

The agent thought for a minute “I suppose I could do a search on the Land Registry website, we have an account with them”. He tapped at a keyboard for a minute or two, logged in and entered passwords.

“The address please” he finally asked Ben.

“Number 12 Hopton Road, London, SW16 9PE...I think that’s the right postcode” Ben offered.

The agent tapped more keys. “There’s a three pound fee for this” Ben passed him the coins “Mmmm” he mused “It’s registered as to belonging to a Mr Edward Arundel-Paige but the address is given as a solicitor’s office in Hampstead. Jenson, Hyde & Wilmott, 16 Heath Street, Hampstead, NW3..there’s a number, Hampstead 5645 though I don’t know how old that listing is! They stopped using that style of phone number in the sixties”. Ben wrote all the info on the agent’s card and thanked him for his time but the agent didn’t respond as he was already looking for the next customer. Ben continued up the High Street and walked up to the Streatham library.

He knew the reference section had a complete set of London phone books where he might trace the firm. Picking a copy of yellow pages for North West London from the directories shelf Ben turned the pages to the entry for Solicitors, his finger traced the names down the J's and drew a blank. No Jenson! Suddenly inspired he flicked to the "H" page and quickly came to Hyde & Wilmott, Solicitors with a Hampstead address. The number listed was, not surprisingly, different to that on the estate agents card but he jotted it down anyway and turned back to the phone book. He checked through the rest of the listing but nothing else looked close so he replaced the book on its shelf. On a whim he entered the local history department of the library and walked to the enquiry desk.

An attractive young girl with spiky red dyed hair and face jewellery smiled at him "can I help you"?

"Yes I hope so" Ben answered "Do you have any maps showing bomb falls in World War Two".

"No, not just bombs, we have a map of all the bombs and rockets that fell then, is that ok?" she pointed to a rack of files to Ben's right "take a look through the shelf's labelled Streatham WW2". He walked to the shelf and rustled through the papers. An article caught his eye and he found the original cutting of the article he'd seen on Google. There was a photo he hadn't seen before. It was taken the day after the explosion and showed skeletons of buildings that emitted plumes of smoke with No 12 clearly visible through the devastation. He took the article to the copier and inserted his ten pence to get a photocopy. Folding the paper and putting it in his wallet he left the library and walked back to his car. This part of Streatham was on the top of a hill and the road he was on is a main road to the south coast, the A23. The two lane road ran roughly south west before turning sharply south down the hill

and if Ben could have somehow looked over the buildings he would have been able to see Hopton Road in the dip before Streatham Common. Ben considers whether he has time to walk to the house, maybe talk to the neighbours, but he looks at his watch and decides to go to work where he can look up the firm of Hyde & Willmot and see if a journey across London would be needed. Ben got back to the office just before five and found Mrs Broughton finishing up paperwork and getting ready to go home for the evening.

“Oh hello Mr Wilson” she smiled, a trifle sardonically for Ben’s comfort. “I didn’t expect to see you until...well tomorrow” she said brightly, clearly implying she didn’t expect to see him then either!

Ben grimaced then managed a weak smile “OK Mrs B, point taken. Did I miss anything important”?

“Course not” she replied “I’ve dealt with it all”

Ben knew better than to question what she had dealt with and decided to offer a diplomatic solution to the issue so he wished a good evening and held the door for her as she crossed the office like a ship under full sail.

“Night” said Ben. Checking his A-Z Ben found the road that the solicitor’s office was quite close to Hampstead tube so he’d go into the office first thing, do a serious mornings work then take the northern line up to North London in the afternoon. That way he might avoid at least some smart remarks from the redoubtable Mrs B.

The next day dawned and with it a cold miserable spring day with weather that depressed, grey and with a thick overcast that darkened the skies with threats of drizzle or worse. A cold wind prickled the skin and any thoughts of an early start were quickly driven from Ben’s mind as he looked out the window of his small flat.

Maybe I'll turn my day around, he thought, I'll go to Hampstead about ten then do a long afternoon. The gloomy light did little or nothing to increase his enthusiasm. Having made and eaten his breakfast Ben sat hunched over his coffee cup and thought about his visit to the firm in Hampstead. What if they were shut down? How would he find this Arundel-Paige person? Would he sell to Ben anyway? Ben got up, put on a coat and left the flat walking the few minutes to the tube station. Getting on a train was simple but uncomfortable as usual, the Northern line not being known as the "Misery Line" for nothing. The journey took about 40 minutes and as the train clattered noisily through the stations on route Ben ran his mind through all the possible outcomes of this trip. It was a straight through train so Ben didn't have to change at Kennington. Ben started to come out of his commuter trance around Chalk Farm and got out of his seat as the train left Belsize Park. At Hampstead Ben got off and walked up the escalators rather than ride. Slightly out of breath Ben turned left and walked down the High Street looking for the Heath Street turn off. Five minutes later Ben saw the small side street and turned into it. Number 16 was halfway down and was neighboured by a bakery one side and a newsagent the other. The office looked a bit shabby but the worn doormat gave every indication of regular, if not busy use. He rang the bell on seeing a notice reading "ring & wait". After a minute or so an undersized middle aged clerk opened the door

"Do you have an appointment Sir?" He asked.

"No" Ben replied "I'm here on spec".

"In connection with what Sir?" the man queried.

"With a property at number 12 Hopton Road Streatham".

"I'm not aware of anything about that Sir; I'll get one of the solicitors to see you. Please take a seat". The clerk left the reception and disappeared into a back

room. Ben heard a telephone receiver lifted and a murmured conversation. The phone was put down with a click and the clerk returned.

“Mr Francis will see you in five minutes Sir” having said that the clerk disappeared again into the back room and the reception filled with silence. Ben sat still deep in his thoughts and waited. He did have a gift of being able to make time pass without getting bored if necessary though once his patience went he became edgy and frustrated. He was approaching that now after being made to wait fifteen minutes. Ben was hesitating whether to knock and get the clerk again when another door opened and a young looking man in a slightly too big suit entered the reception.

“Mr Winstone?” he murmured

“Wilson!” stated Ben.

“Oh sorry, sorry” flustered the young man “Please come this way”. He turned and went back up a narrow corridor which led to an equally narrow and steep flight of stairs.

“Sorry about the passage Mr Wilson” he said “the building is 16<sup>th</sup> century mainly but this bit may be 15<sup>th</sup> and it’s certainly the least convenient”. Ben realised the most junior member of the firm with the least convenient office had been sent to deal with him and his sense of irritation grew. The stairs led to a small dark room overlooking an equally gloomy looking garden below. Birds chirped in the few bushes that were there and the pastoral sounds relaxed Ben a little as he took a look at the man in front of him. He saw a man in his middle twenties wearing an ill fitting suit. The man seemed nervous of Ben and Ben guessed this junior hadn’t completed his training as a solicitor yet.

“May I have your name?” Ben asked.

“Oh sorry I’m Ian Francis” he replied. Ben noted he hadn’t titled himself mister so maybe he wasn’t so pompous after all.

“Well Mr Wilson” asked Ian “How can our firm help you?”

Ben considered honesty the best response without giving the appearance of anything odd. “I’ve been looking for empty houses in Streatham and I came across a delightful house at No 12 Hopton Road” Ben continued his explanation about the empty property, the land registry search and his desire to buy it. Ian listened and obviously relaxed as he realised he wasn’t about to be tested with anything difficult or outside his competence.

“Let me look up our files” he said standing and opened an antique looking cupboard then to Ben’s surprise slid out a modern PC on rollers which looked hugely out of place in the antique office. As the machine rolled out Ben noticed the usual wires and a phone junction box the PC was plugged into, a small white box at the back of the cupboard. Obviously some work had been done to make this office connect to a network somewhere. Ian wiggled the mouse to reactivate the screen which came to life lighting the room with the usual bluish glow. Ian clicked a few tabs on screen then logged into a database and typed the address Ben had given him.

“It belonged to a Mr Edward Arundel-Paige” stated Ian.

“Ah good” said Ben “would he consider selling, it looks as if it’s been empty for years”. His obvious keenness made Ian look up at him sideways.

“I don’t know” Ian said “You see it says here that he died about ten years ago”. Though half expecting this Ben spirits still sank, in his heart he’d thought it would be simple, find the man make him an offer, complete the legal details and move in. Yet here was a major obstacle, the owner was dead.

Ian fiddled with the mouse and keyboard “I’m trying to see if he has any relatives listed here that the estate passed to...if it’s still empty now that might be unlikely” he mouthed a couple of swear words and looked at Ben again. “That’s unusual...there’s a locked file that’s asking for a password”...he started to talk to himself “lets try this”. A few minutes passed in which Ian attempted various combinations of words and numbers. “Ah, I’m in” he triumphed. “The property was handled by a Mr Alan Jenson” mused Ian “but I’ve never heard of him”.

“The firm was named Jenson, Hyde & Wilmott a while ago” offered Ben.

Surprised Ian looked at Ben. “Was it?” he questioned “how long ago?”

“Must be about 1950 or earlier” Ben surmised, though he wasn’t sure. “I’m guessing it was post war really” he continued.

“You know more about my firm’s history than I do” Ian sounded a bit amused.

“No” laughed Ben “it’s just that the ownership check came up with your firms name, I checked Yellow Pages and the only match was here”.

Ian looked back at the screen “Well all I can do is enquire about relatives and get back to you”.

Disappointed Ben asked “can’t you give me a name I can follow up?” There must be somebody on the file who got the estate”.

Ian was frowning at the screen again. “Well that’s just it, the file is...” he paused. “It’s unusual; I’ve not seen this layout before and its just text. Not an Access database like we use normally”. Ben looked over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of columns of figures, words and lists that were meaningless. Unaware Ben was looking Ian continued to scroll down the columns. He paused the screen and Ben caught site of a phone number. Ben made a mental note of it, Westminster 3887, caught by it having the same format as the first number he was given for the solicitors

he was now at. Ian now noticing Ben's attention moved to impede his view then turned off the screen. Ian faced Ben again "I'll have to look into the relatives and may I take a number or details of how we can get hold of you if they are willing to sell".

"Sure" said Ben. He gave him his card "Call me on the office number daytimes" Ben stated and added in an attempt to impress this young man "If I'm not there my office manager will take a message".

"Thanks, I'll call you as soon as we have something"

They shook hands and Ian stood signifying the meeting was over. Ben stood too by reflex then cursed himself for reacting automatically. He tried to think of anyway to get more information but without reading the file he was stuck.

Ian motioned to the door "Mr Wilson" he murmured, back in professional mode now the interview was over. Ben left. Ian remained standing for a second then pushed the cupboard door and shutting it as the PC slid back on its rollers. Ian left the office, made his way down the narrow stairs and knocked at a door along the corridor.

"Come in Francis" demanded a firm voice. Ian entered the office and faced the much older man

"Uuuh Sir, we've had an enquiry about a property and the file mentioned I had to inform a senior partner" stated the younger man.

"Get on with it please" interrupted the older.

"Sir" apologised Ian then explained Bens visit and his enquiry.

"You didn't give him any information did you?"

"No sir, there wasn't anything to give him"

"Are you sure he couldn't see anything that he could use"

"No sir I was blocking the screen the whole time".

“Hmmm...” the older man thought for a few seconds “All right Francis give me all the details and I’ll deal with this matter”

“Thank you Mr Wilmott, thank you very much” Ian gushed, happy to be relieved of what could only be boring old history.

*On a large desk a phone came to life. Rather than the usual ring it beeped twice then a light flashed impatiently. A hand lifted the receiver and a voice said “Yes?” Through the crackle and static of filters another voice replied “There’s been an enquiry about file CR14”. “Hold please” said the first voice. A whisper of voices came down to the line to the caller but no words could be heard. A series of clicks came down the line then another voice said bluntly “Who?” The caller gave an address and a name. The voice came on again “put him off without raising questions”. The caller querulously raised more questions but the voice cut across what he was saying and uttered “do it” then hung up!*

Ben returned to his office to face out the disapproving Mrs Broughton and decided to ring Aless. He listened to the ring tone for a few seconds then felt his spirits lift as her clear and delightful tones came through the telephone.

“Hello lover” she whispered “I knew it was you”.

Ben felt a love struck smile spread across his whole face and then blushed as he caught Mrs Broughton raising her eyes to the ceiling. “Can’t talk at present darling, can we meet for tea this afternoon?”

There was a pause as Aless considered then she said brightly “I’d love to! My place?”

“OK” replied Ben I’ll be there at 5pm. As it was now about 2 Ben continued to work on his PC and talked with Mrs Broughton about the day and generally catching up on his business. As it was still pretty much running itself he felt no

pressure to do more than was needed and took it easy until a quarter to five when he packed up and left the office for Aless's place. Leaving Mrs Broughton to lock up Ben walks to his car and drives the short distance to where Aless lives. At his ring she opened her front door and flung herself into his arms. They hugged closely and Ben turned his head to kiss her under her ear. She sighed and turned her face up for him to kiss then shyly broke away.

“What will the neighbours think” she smiled at Ben who then turned around and waved to a couple looking at them from their first floor window. “Stop it Ben, you’ll embarrass them”

But Ben waved again and shouted “Its OK...I LOVE HER!”

“Oh good grief” flustered Aless, dragging Ben inside as the couple rapidly moved away from the window. Aless glared daggers at Ben but he smiled at her and grabbed her again for another hug. She resisted for a second, just so he wouldn't have it all his own way then melted into his embrace. Later they talked and Aless frowned as Ben related his visit to Wilmott & Hyde but listened intently to how Ian Francis had left part of his PC screen so Ben could read the info.

“I couldn't make it out” said Ben “it was a lot of seemingly random words but with this phone number in the middle”.

“How did you know it was a phone number” asked Aless.

“I remembered the format that the estate agents gave me for the solicitor's office. Hampstead 5645, this was Westminster 3887”.

“Maybe I'm being slow but are you sure that's a phone number”?

“Absolutely! Apparently up to the 1960's numbers were like that. They went through a local exchange so to call you then I'd have to dial Balham 5043 or call the

operator and ask for your number at the Balham exchange, they were all changed to a seven figure number during the mid 60's".

"I remember" considered Aless "then the London numbers got changed to 01".

"No" corrected Ben "they always were 01 but were changed to 081 and 071 in the 1990's, then again to 0208 and 0207 which we still use".

Aless glared at him under her eye lashes with a look which clearly said you're boring me!

"Oops..sorry I didn't mean to lecture you" Ben said.

"Better not" muttered Aless.

Ben grinned and then yelped as Aless slapped his shoulder.

He jumped up and made a pretend monster face with his arms outstretched and staggered towards her doing a ridiculous zombie impersonation. Aless gave a mock shriek and said "come any nearer I'll scream for real". He was close enough to put his arms round her and Aless screamed but so quietly only Ben could hear her.

"Get off me" she murmured as she kissed him "get off me or I'll have to drag you upstairs" kissing him again.

Ben looked at her and smiled "make me let you go then".

Aless grinned back then murmured "right! You asked for this. You sure you're up to some serious abuse". Grabbing a smiling Ben's arm she pulled him towards the stairs and led him to her bedroom. After several hours of hugely satisfying love making Ben and Aless were again lying completely entangled with Aless pressing her face deep into the space between Ben's shoulder and neck. Ben was mostly awake but Aless was deeply asleep with Ben's arm wrapping her tightly to his chest and her legs entwining his. They often joked about how impossible it was to move wrapped like this and that their bodies had to be made for each other because

they were such a perfect fit. Even after 10 years Ben still found her breathtakingly desirable and had been completely faithful to her in that time. As Ben was the first to admit, the idea of monogamy was a new concept to him when he had two-timed, three timed or just merely overlapped most previous girlfriends but every day with Aless was a thrill and Ben couldn't bear the thought of hurting her; it would reinforce her idea of a love/hurt/loss cycle. And these moments of time after their love making was always a defining moment in their relationship for Ben. The way she could so trustingly sleep so deeply in his arms made him go soft in the head with love for her and he felt another rush of affection for this slim, warm and so beautiful woman lying in his arms. But again it was almost time for him to go, they never spent longer than a few hours in bed together. After such intense love it seemed there always had to be a parting. Maybe that's what made their love so firm; it was always renewed with the pain of small separations, made poignant with many special memories and never allowed to go stale with domestic routine.

## **Chapter Two**

**N are the Nasties, incredible devils,**

**But were they such poops as our Ramsays and Nevilles?**

How do I tell this tale? Where do I start? There are so many roots here and each one could bloom to a full grown story in its own right. Do I relate my youth

when I was a foolish 18 year old and so full of what was right and what was wrong. Do I tell of that same foolishness driving me to Spain in 1936 and then to enlist in the International Brigade even though that tale was more nearly a short story than a novel. No, it should start where the main events began and so early on a bright mid May morning in 1940, I Matt Rathbone, walked to the barracks office where I'd been summoned to see my commanding officer. I'm considered a tall man with an athletic body I like to keep in trim and I wore the uniform and twin stripes of a corporal in the newly formed 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Parachute Regiment but adorned with a beret badged with my previous regiment, the Royal Fusiliers. As the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne hadn't changed to its distinctive red beret yet the current convention was for the airborne troopers to wear their old regiment berets to show where they had come from. I'd undergone the rigorous jump training devised by Major John Rock at Ringway in Manchester and my background is academic rather than military as I used to lecture as a professor of chemistry at London's University College. When war was declared in 1939 after the German invasion of Poland I immediately enlisted as an infantryman in the Royal Fusiliers London Regiment but later transferred when I had heard about the new elite airborne regiment being formed and was one of the first accepted into it. My enlisting had really surprised my colleagues, family and friends but had been an obvious decision for me. I was ashamed about the appeasement of Nazi Germany by Chamberlain's vacillating and weak government. Also I was unusual in that though only mildly political my outrage at the actions of the fascist forces had driven me to Spain, like many other Englishmen at the time, and joined the International Brigade in the civil war and there I saw the methods of the German Army Condor Legion and Mussolini's Italian division, the armies that had provided victory for Franco's Nationalists. Their troops added a new dimension to brutality in warfare and this was

also the testing ground for Hitler's blitzkrieg methods. Luckily I'd been posted to and fought with Tom Wintringham's brigade. Tom, commander of the British battalion XV Brigade was an officer that didn't believe in political correctness, as did the communist's, which often led to them shooting their own men to make the others fight harder, he just let his troops see what happened to prisoners captured by the Nationalists. Wintringham had taken a liking to me and trusted me with special assignments like reconnaissance tasks behind Nationalist lines. This was how the war in Spain ended for me on one of these tasks, in the battle for the San Martín - Morata Road during the February 1937 Jarama Offensive. The intense fighting had cost the British brigade over 50% casualties and a British machine gun company fighting to take "Suicide Hill" was cut off then overrun by Franco's regular troops.

Wintringham, whilst fighting a desperate rearguard action, still found time to send me back to round up any survivors. What I did find was the bodies of the entire company, a 100 or so men lined up and executed by being shot in the head despite having surrendered. As I made my way back to the Brigade lines with this news I was ambushed by a Nationalist patrol and in an exchange of fire was shot through the shoulder. Whilst lying in agony from the wound a *Regulares* officer approached me and raising his pistol fired at my head. I had no time to react or even to move but luckily for me the gun had misfired and the bullet went slightly askew, grazing my skull and causing enough blood and unconsciousness to convince the officer he'd done his duty in leaving another republican to the scavenging kites. Later another shift in the battle saw the International Brigade go forward again in another, but this time successful, bid to re-take Suicide Hill and advancing International Brigade troops found me, realised I was still alive and had me taken by ambulance to a field hospital in Pinto where my wounds were assessed and bandaged. I was then sent on to another

hospital in Toledo where I was treated but deemed unfit to carry on fighting. Making my own way back to England I vowed that if the fascists threatened England then I would fight them again. Now completely recovered and fit again in May 1940 I'd completed basic training in the Royal Fusiliers before volunteering to join the embryonic 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne and had already earned my jump wings. I had heard that Major John Rock had been replaced by a new officer, an actual Lieutenant-Colonel about whom I knew little but whom rumour said was going to bring the new regiment to life and action! This new officer had already issued an order for me to report to the CO's office. I had felt an adrenalin rush on hearing the order and was keen to find out what was expected of me. The Company Sergeant-Major at the office door announced my arrival and I was ushered into the office with a surprising lack of army rudeness and shouting.

A tall, elegant man in an extremely well tailored uniform rose to greet me "At ease Corporal" he said. I stood at ease, relaxed and listened whilst Lieutenant-Colonel "Boy" Browning explained why he'd been sent for me. "Well Rathbone" stated Browning "it seems a higher authority than I has taken an interest in your pre war exploits. You seem to have been more of a warrior than you told us corporal". He continued "in fact if we'd have known these exploits ourselves you certainly wouldn't be just a Corporal now, oh....and you have permission to speak" noticing the look that had crossed my face.

My heart dropped and a wave of disappointment washed over me. My first thought was I was to be posted because I hadn't mentioned serving in Spain.

"I didn't want my war experience known sir" I replied "it would have caused a lot of resentment among some of the instructors had I mentioned it earlier".

“Rubbish man, you should have told us. The Parachute Brigade could have put you to really good use. You’re just the sort of chap we need! Most of our boys have never had to deal with anything more dangerous than their Mothers and you actually took part in some of the bloodiest fighting in that Spanish business. Of course we would have liked to know”.

I was staggered again at the word Browning used earlier here

“Could? You mean I’m to leave the Brigade sir”?

“Well it’s your choice actually old man. As I said a higher authority has requested you join their party”. “In any case” Browning continued “now we know about your past a change in your career is inevitable”.

“I’m not sure I want a change sir” I stated.

“Let’s put it this way, in either case knowing what you are capable of will mean a change of job though we would prefer you to stay here as a trainer, a veteran and an inspiration to our new troops, with a rank of course. But you haven’t heard what is also on offer”.

“So what is this other job and what do I have to do Sir” I asked.

“A certain organisation that is so secret that not even I know what they do or even who they are? Even with my connections I haven’t been able to find out anything”. Browning did look distinctly peeved and had obviously prided himself on how good his connections were.

“Well they want you to join them to do certain discreet tasks that my good friend Tom Wintringham had told me you performed so well at in Spain. It will mean foreign travel, a commission naturally, better pay too but also an element of risk”.

We both knew that, given the times, foreign travel meant working behind enemy

lines. I had been staggered once more at the mention of my old commander's name. This interview was having far too many revelations coming into the open

“Do you know Tom Wintringham Sir?”

“Of course” Browning replied “he and I go way back and the last time I saw him he was reminiscing about that Spanish affair and how he often wished he had a certain trooper still doing odd jobs for him. When I mentioned you were in my new regiment he was quite beside himself with jealousy. So much so in fact I actually teased him a bit and I think this is where I made my error. He told me you were wasted in the infantry and he'd give notice of your talents to ..ah...certain people he knew. As it seems he has so done”.

“I'm not sure I'm interested in either Sir!”

“Nonsense man” murmured Browning “your only choice now is forward. Your days of just being in the PBI (poor bloody infantry) were over as soon as I heard about you from old Wintringham. Why don't you meet these..ah...people and listen to what they have to say, then turn them down and come back to us”?

“Is that an order Sir?” For the first time in this interview I felt a smile cross my face

“Good Lord I wish it was” sighed Browning “I wish it was!”

I made my way back to my barracks and found the orders already on my bunk to proceed to Kings Cross, London. A rail warrant was provided and an address of a hotel with a voucher for two night's accommodation. I briefly wondered why an interview would take two days. I was already deeply regretting the uncovering of my past activity in Spain and was getting concerned about what was coming. All I wanted was to get into the fight against the Nazi's. Conflicting thoughts began to confuse me but one thing began to come clear, I don't want this job and I don't want

to be an officer in the para's...so what do I do. Well the first thing is to find what this job is, then decide on facts rather than thoughts. The address for the hotel was close to where the interview was to be held and surprisingly close to the university where I used to teach. It would take about five hours to get from Ringway to London. That would leave me a couple of hours to pack a bag and get to the station then the hotel for the night and the interview tomorrow morning at 10am sharp, so late in the day I thought. Used to army routine I'm usually awakened by reveille at 5am then lights out at 10pm often with a bruising, exhausting fifteen hours of training in between. I packed and grimly considered what the morning might bring.

Having made the journey the night before and booked into the hotel on Judd Street I got up early as usual, took a leisurely breakfast and walked up to the end of Judd Street where the interview was to take place. Having deliberately arrived half an hour early I wanted time to look the place over and see, if possible, the sort of people going in or out. In this though, I was disappointed, the office's door was a nondescript wooden portal that opened into a corridor and the only person I saw going in looked suspiciously like a cleaning lady. As 10am got closer I gave up and thought so much for reconnaissance then walked in. In the dingy corridor a sign on the wall pointed the way to the reception which turned out to be a door at the end of the passage. Another sign read "please knock and wait" which I duly did. After a short silence, footsteps could be heard approaching the door which then opened to reveal an elderly man dressed as a commissionaire.

"Good morning" he said "Corporal Rathbone I presume"?

"Correct" I replied.

"Come this way sir".

He led the way to another door, knocked and on an answer from inside motioned me to proceed into the new office. On entering and looking around there was another older man, maybe in his sixties, sitting at a wide desk covered in folders. Desk lights were at intervals across the desk and a low wattage bulb glowed in a ceiling fitting making the room darken in each corner. The light reflected off the glossy varnish of the desk reflected up onto the man's face giving him a tanned look. I also noticed he wore a suit rather than uniform with a more rumpled than tidy look. Dark rings were under his eyes and he appeared to have been up rather longer than he should at his age. He was looking directly at me making immediate eye contact. I held his stare and after a few seconds the man spoke.

“Good morning Corporal Rathbone, please take a seat”. He motioned to a chair more in shadow but close by a lamp. I sat down, momentarily dazzled by the change of lighting.

“It's necessary to give you classified information before we can go on so I want you to sign a document committing yourself to silence about this interview for at least the duration of the war and more probably the rest of your life”.

“And If I refuse” I said?

“Then this interview terminates now and you return to Ringway and you take part in Browning's plans to make the Paratroop regiment one of the most experienced and elite regiments in the British army” the man continued “though we think our offer to you will be far more..shall we say ..of interest to you given your past”. “I should introduce myself, my name is Jenson, Alan, and by profession I am a solicitor”.

I was puzzled “I thought this was a military organisation” I asked.

“Well to know more you just have to sign these forms”. Jenson pushed papers and a pen across to me so I picked up the documents and started to read. I soon

realised I would be under a mass of restrictions that would prevent me from ever discussing this forthcoming interview even with Browning at Ringwood let alone anyone else. Now really intrigued I read through the rest of the papers and eventually signed my name at the end of the form.

“You realise your obligations completely Corporal Rathbone” asked Jenson?

“Completely sir” I replied.

“Ah good so now we can proceed, please follow me” and rising Jenson left the office, proceeded out into the corridor again to another room. On Jenson’s knock the door was again opened by the elderly commissionaire who on seeing me smiled as if to welcome me into a new club. I smiled back and followed Jenson to another door into another office. Again Jenson motioned to me to take a seat, however in this new office there was no desk, only a low table, more even lighting and several comfortable chairs. I took a club chair by the small table and Jenson sat down opposite him, shifted his position a few times to increase his comfort then offered me coffee. Accepting, we both sat in silence as the commissionaire left the room and quickly returned with a coffee service for two. Obviously it had been prepared in anticipation of the request.

Jenson poured the cups then enquired “milk”? I nodded yes and sipped the surprisingly good coffee.

“My superiors will be pleased you have agreed to listen to our proposal and only hope you see fit to accept. Are you aware of the situation in Europe” Jenson paused before continuing without waiting for my response. “As we speak our army and that of France is facing up to the Nazi’s across the Belgium frontier after the German Army Group B has smashed into Holland and our little ally Belgium”. I listened in silence as Jenson continued “And as that force is the backbone of our

army, trained experienced men, the British Expeditionary Force, it is vital they survive. Oh we'll give them a good fight but the odds aren't good.

“Where do I come into this” I interrupted?

“Well you don't...yet. Our need is for experienced men that are..unconventional. We need men who can act independently and for a cause. You see we feel that France will fall and her defeat will bring problems far beyond that relating to the military or Government. I sat back in shock, it's true I knew it wasn't going well in Europe but it was understood that the British and French armies were the best in the world. Certainly at that time France had the largest and best equipped army in the world and everyone assumed the Germans would break their army on the indestructible Maginot line before fleeing back to Germany. I now began to understand why I'd been signed to so much secrecy. It would cause low morale and despondency to the public if this was generally known. Obviously I'd heard there were British men and women sympathetic to the Nazi's cause and openly stating we shouldn't be fighting them. Then as if reading my thoughts Jenson started speaking again.

“You see there are many in high places who feel when France surrenders that is when we should make a separate peace with the Germans. People like Oswald Moseley are openly imitating the Nazi's though he and his more rabid followers are now mostly under lock and key there are still others less...overt, who would welcome Nazi rule here. Even a few Government ministers oppose Churchill whom as of today is our new leader, though we are interested he has included Lord Halifax in his cabinet”. At this point I paid more attention, I personally thought that Churchill would be a good leader in a crisis and this was a crisis. But in my mind I suddenly recalled an Englishman I'd found dying of wounds in a battle during Franco's early

attempts to capture Madrid. The man was in the uniform of the Condor Legion, German soldiers, who were fighting for Franco in order to help crush the communist element among the Republicans and who were known to be particularly brutal in a conflict where brutal was the norm. I had assumed he'd been a prisoner and the dying man had assumed I was a Condor Legionnaire like himself. When I'd had told him I was in the British battalion of the XV International Brigade the man had immediately tried to draw his gun in order to shoot me. Horrified and to save my own life I pulled out my automatic and fired into his chest then watched his life fade away as he still muttered threats at me.

I returned to the present to see Jenson waiting for me to make a response. "Sorry" I said "I was recalling an Englishman fighting for the Germans in Spain".

"Ah..I see" responded Jenson "so you have already met some of our more committed collaborationists then". More than one I thought to myself. Jenson picked up where he had left

"So my superior was approached by a Government minister and tasked with setting up a group that is sort of aligned to our secret service and that would work undercover in occupied Europe and possibly here to monitor the activities of the Nazi's in how they control their subject populations. So in the event of an invasion of Great Britain measures would be devised and in place to help our population based on actual facts. We know from reports obtained from contacts in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Norway and Denmark that after the surrender a large police force is moved into the occupied country who then arrest potential opposition and contact sympathisers, often offering positions of power to those that would work with them. So working in such countries our operatives could not only be at risk from the Germans but also from their collaborators. It would need someone who is brave but

not reckless, able to fight but know when not to and certainly be discrete at all times. What do you think? Would you like to join our group? There would be benefits”!

I considered what I'd been told, it certainly had been a bombshell dropped into my lap but the idea of operating by myself had appealed to me far more than I had thought it would. I'd been used to being part of a squad then in charge of a platoon but I also thought about how much I'd enjoyed the tasks I'd performed for Wintringham. However caution prevailed and I said simply “I'd like to know more”.

“Ah good” Jenson actually beamed “well then, on to phase two!”

The commissionaire knocked quietly at the door and entered at Jenson affirmative. “Can I serve lunch sir” he asked? Jenson nodded approval and I looked at my watch, surprised to see it was gone two and my neglected stomach reacted to the suggestion of food. Lunch being served and accompanied by small talk the afternoon continued with a briefing on the political situation in France, which was unstable to say the least. After this briefing a medical officer was ushered in and I had to suffer a very thorough medical examination which I apparently passed effortlessly. Stripped and facing a stern Scottish Doctor I was poked, prodded, tested, grabbed by the testicles and made to cough then as a final indignity asked to bend at the waist so my anus and genitals could be inspected. At this point my patience started to crack and I asked the laconic Doctor if he had found anything interesting.

“Not from this side” laughed the Doctor. A lecture then followed on the structure of the Nazi party and what their known policies were. Jenson was careful to emphasise, we think, on some points rather than we know and another bombshell was dropped on me when Jenson told him the idea that the Nazi's were setting up large tracts of land and building camps to imprison “undesirables” in their subject countries.

I interrupted “how do we know? How can they plan something like that knowing the war will have to end at some point”. Jenson pointed out items in Hitler’s speeches as early as 1935 where he was calling for a Thousand Year Reich, obviously this also called for a world totally dominated by the Nazi’s for ever.

I was horrified afresh by this idea and asked “who are these undesirables..I mean apart from communists, I know in Spain the Condor Legion and Franco’s men almost always executed anyone they caught sooner or later but a communist was doomed on the spot”.

Jenson replied “Communists certainly, but also Gypsies, Jews, Trade Unionists, Freemasons, Homosexuals of both sexes and Church men, also the mentally ill and the disabled”. I sat back again, more than surprised into silence pondering this “but we don’t know this for sure, do we”?

Jenson had noted that Matt was already referring to this discussion as “we” and that meant he was already on board, at least in his mind. “We don’t for sure but we do have information from the Ukraine that special “Kommando’s” went in after the front line troops and emptied lunatic asylums, Hospice’s and some hospitals. We have listened to their speeches, we have the books they’ve written including Mein Kampf, penned by Hitler himself and God awful rubbish full of hatred it is too. Also we have these reports particularly from Poland concerning deportations and executions of intellectuals and army officers though still vague admittedly”. More discussion followed, then a lecture about the Nazi’s police methods. This time from a man claiming to be a policeman who had visited Germany in 1934 and had spoken to officials who had openly discussed the formation of the Geheime Staatspolizei or Gestapo, said to be similar in structure, but obviously not in operation, to the American FBI and who were to be in charge of investigating “all tendencies

dangerous to the state” across all the German nation and occupied territories, relying on informers and collaborators to gather evidence about suspects. Another departure for a supposed elected Government was the increasing reliance on torture of suspects to gain information.

I suddenly realised I was going along with this project and I wanted it, wanted to be part of something that gave me a chance to carry his fight on my own terms. A new excitement began to build in me and turning to Jenson I said “Alright, I’m in, what next?”

Jenson shook my hand and said “well its gone 7pm now so I suggest you get some rest at your hotel, return tomorrow again at 10am and we’ll outline your training, arrange to transfer you from your unit to our little band and also we’ll draw up false papers for you as well. Whatever else, you can say goodbye to being a Corporal very soon”. Reaching to shake my hand again Jenson beamed broadly and congratulated me on his choice before showing me the way out. Back on the street and in the fading light of a May evening I considered the things I’d been told, particularly the plight of the British Expeditionary Force now the fight for its life against an enemy that was more dangerous than I could have possibly believed. I remembered again the fighting in Spain and pictured the Nazi tanks and planes closing on a retreating British army, maybe men I knew who had fought beside me in Spain, maybe men who had watched my back as I watched theirs. In any case they were fellow soldiers, men who had enlisted the same way I had done and wanted what I wanted, to fight fascism and to make a difference.

*“Well what do you make of our new recruit?”*

*“He’s good, very motivated and his experience in Spain confirmed for him what we told him of our enemy today. I think he’ll make a good operative for us”.*

*“What about his background, is he one of us?”*

*“That I don’t know, I ran checks on what is known about him and though he has a good education record his degree was redbrick rather than Oxbridge. University College said he’s a bloody good lecturer and much admired by his students. Of course the frisson of glamour that his Spanish service gives him will add to that”.*

*“I’m not bothered by his education I’m more concerned about his fighting for the wrong side in Spain, any politics, any left wing meetings, membership of any proscribed groups or lefty friends?”*

*“I’ll make more checks”.*

*“Do so”.*

Next day I woke up again at 5am and took the luxury of a lie-in whilst I recapped the previous day’s events. I’d worried that I’d prematurely accepted without knowing more of the conditions I was to operate under but a sense of excitement had built up in me and I knew I wanted this. I wanted to be alone in the field, to have the responsibility for my fate that so often had been in the hands of others in Spain. So often I’d barely escaped from dangerous situations caused by another’s failing to grasp that day’s realities. After a second breakfast free from army harassment and regulation I knew he was excited by the forthcoming day’s events. At ten sharp I was again being admitted to the first office to see a beaming Alan Jensen sitting in the same place. The same suit with the same rumpled look and again the same tired looking eyes made me wonder what was taking so much of this man’s time.

“Good morning good morning” Jensen seemed in particularly good spirits today. “Well Matt..may I call you Matt?” Jensen flowed on “Yes?..good good..well today my superiors have conditionally accepted your...ahh...application subject to you passing certain tests”. I raised a quizzical eyebrow at this and Jensen continued

“Ah no, not academic Matt. We have to send you to a rather special school where we can add to your already impressive physical skills. The Doctor yesterday told us that there is nothing at all wrong with you apart from some interesting scars and a possible problem regarding impatience for authority. Generally he described you as a very fit young man and well able to perform the duties we will require from you”.

“And when can I commence those duties Mr Jenson” I asked.

Jenson looked up and smiled at me “Oh soon we hope...very soon”. The day passed with endless form filling with requests for transfers, will signing, letters to friends that explained he would be out of touch for a while because of training, more forms, even more forms and finally an application for an officer cadet course at Sandhurst.

I looked up puzzled “surely I’m too old for officer school”?

“Don’t worry, it’s going to be backdated” Jenson continued “oh and by the way we thought that being a Major might eventually be useful to you, though it will be a paper record only. Your actual working rank is going to be Captain and will be through your training”.

I laughed “bloody Boy Browning only offered me a Lieutenancy”.

Jenson smiled too “That’s the cheapskate paratroopers for you, see? Stay with us and we’ll make you a General...paper only of course”.

After a last night at the Judd Street hotel I took a train from Kings Cross to Fort William in Scotland, where I was ordered to join the Archnacarry Commando Training School by the deep waters of Loch Linnhe and I had to wait patiently for the interminable train journey to end. During my journey German troops crossed the River Meuse at Sedan, again following the 1914 Schlieffen plan through the Ardennes and by-passing the Maginot line without it’s firing a shot. The date was Monday 13<sup>th</sup>

May 1940. The British Expeditionary Force were currently heavily engaged in the fighting around the Belgium town of Gembloux and remained unaware of their peril from this encirclement.

A moody and silent Navy petty officer collected me from Fort William station that evening and drove me out along the Loch to the special camp. This suited me as I was tired from my tedious journey, the last thing I wanted was conversation. I watched the scenery pass by and get wilder, more forested and remote with each mile. This countryside pleased me after grimy blacked out London and the frenetic activity at Ringway and I looked forward to a bit of a rest. Another CPO (Chief Petty Officer) saluted me and I had to resist the impulse to turn around and salute this officer who must be walking behind me before he realised they were saluting me because I was the officer. Christ on a bike I thought, how do real officers put up with this? My Captain's uniform with badges of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Durham Light Infantry and the name Thompson stitched across my shoulder had been especially chosen because this unit was waiting for the Germans in a previously prepared defensive position called the Dyle Line in Belgium and it was thought it extremely unlikely that I would meet any other Durham's officers here in Scotland before back dated papers could be slipped into Army records at the Ministry of Defence.

My self delusion about a bit of rest came to an abrupt end at 3am when the door to my quarters flew open with a crash and a brawny sergeant in a green beret bawled "Begging sirs pardon but training starts punctually four hundred hours ack emm SIR!" and emphasized the final sir with a reverberating thud with his heel before smartly left turning and marching out the room each foot fall seeming to land on my head. Groggily I sat up in the complete darkness before finding my lamp and matches. A lit match filled the room with dim light and I quickly located and lit my

bedside lantern. Apparently even officer's quarters didn't merit electricity here. Laid out on my locker by the foot of my bed was a blue boiler suit and ammunition boots, I dressed quickly as the move 400 miles north had made the morning air very much cooler than I was used to. Leaving my quarters I turned into the camp buildings, my eyes quickly becoming adjusting to the not quite dark that was typical of Scotland before sunrise in May. Other figures passed in the gloom but now none saluted. I stopped one such figure and asked where the officer's mess was, the man now saluted and pointed out a building whose windows glowed with faint lamplight. Moving rapidly now to escape the chill I took the steps into the mess two at a time and on opening the mess door a smell of bacon and tomatoes assaulted my nose. My stomach growled and realizing how hungry I was I looked for a queue to join before again realising my mistake. Other men were seated and being served by stewards. I have to remember I'm an officer now, even though only a pretend one! A bit abashed I took a table and was approached by a cheery Scottish lad who surely must have lied about his age to enlist.

“Morning Sir, can I get you a cup of tea before your breakfast?”

“Yes..thank you. And what's for breakfast today?”

The lad laughed “same as yesterday, the day before and the day before that sir, bacon, tomatoes and toast. Except Sunday's when it's porridge”.

I grimaced but welcomed the tea which arrived hot and so sweet it made me pull a face.

“Oh you'll be needing the sugar sir” interjected the young steward “it'll help you through the day”. Sipping my tea I waited for my breakfast to arrive and wondered about what was coming for me at this new place. Breakfast was duly served and I tucked in with an appetite. As I finished eating another sergeant banged

the door open and yelled “Captain’s Thompson, Brown, Wallace and Pierce parade ground NOW..please”. I sat for a while as three other men stood up and made their way to the door. Other men looked around puzzled on only seeing three then I abruptly realized I was Thompson now. I ran to the door to catch up with the others and the sergeant holding the door muttered “a bit slow this morning sir”? I grunted an embarrassed apology as I passed him and followed the other men onto the dimly lit square. Several sergeant instructors were already lined up waiting.

One stood a step forward and barked “Officers line up!...please” We all made a few adjusting steps and formed a straight line facing the sergeants. Their spokesman carried on “Gentlemen! You are here in order to learn skills not taught in the regular army. In barracks and on the parade ground your ranks will be respected at all times”. He continued in a louder voice “however out there in the woods you are to do everything I say....any questions?”

A Captain Pierce, a tallish but gangly figure drawled “Well sergeant, just how much respect for our rank will we get in the woods then?”

The instructor took two quick steps to Pierce and though not as tall suddenly looked a lot bigger and far more threatening. Pierce involuntarily stepped backwards as the sergeant barked into his face “just as much as you earn..sir!” The sergeant stepped away from Pierce, turned to the line and yelled “right! Follow me for your first training run”. He turned and started off at a fairly easy pace heading for a path visible through the trees. I found myself running easily behind Wallace after the sergeant. The pre dawn light had brightened the sky as the sun readied itself to rise. I had made sure I’d kept my fitness up at Ringway and I was considered one of the best runners in the paras but Wallace seemed to find it a piece of cake as he paced effortlessly behind the instructor. The other two seemed a bit surprised at this turn of

events and already were a few yards behind. Another sergeant instructor brought up the rear. The path twisted through the pines and the smell of heather, grass and resin from the trees registered on my thoughts. I began to relax into the pace and had started to enjoy myself. My breathing was steady and my legs felt good but Pierce and Brown were now a good five yards behind and Brown was looking already red in the face. I could also hear his breathing from where I was. I moved up the pace and ran alongside Wallace

“Got wind to talk?” I asked. Wallace looked round and smiled at me

“of course! You?” The sergeant looked around in suspicion at the two of us but maintained the same easy stride.

“When did you arrive?” I asked.

“About 1600 hrs yesterday, you?” Wallace replied.

“Must have been about 21.00”

“Where from?”

“London”

“No I meant where are you from?”

“The same, I was born in South London and my family are still around there”

At this point the sergeant glanced around again then abruptly turned off the track and followed a faint path running through a glade between pines towards a slope that gently climbed away from them.

I asked Wallace “You?, where’s your home?”

“Devon, Exeter in fact, my parents own a farm, Whitestone Cross, just outside the city”.

We continued to talk and swap family stories as the slope started to get a bit steeper.

Breathing harder now, even we found it harder to get words out between breaths.

Glancing back the sergeant smiled in satisfaction, Pierce and Brown were now easily a hundred or more yards behind and obviously struggling. Continuing uphill at the same pace Wallace and I found even we had to fight to continue the pace set by the sergeant.

After I had estimated they had to have run for an hour the sergeant put his hand up and called a halt.

“Right gentleman, 15 minutes” he shouted. I stood up straight and breathed in deeply, held it a second, exhaled, then he repeated this until my breathing had returned to normal. I realised that Wallace, who had his hands on his knees, was watching me with interest then asked “that’s an unusual technique, why do you do that?”

I smiled “it uses all the air in your lungs and increases your stamina”.

“Where did you learn that?” I stopped and thought, being undercover was harder than I realised. I didn’t yet have a cover story about my past and had already realised that being friendly was potentially going to cause security problems so I thought a bit of fact would be ok but without the whereabouts it should be safe.

“A friend was in Spain during the civil war and there was a Morrocan in his platoon who had deserted from the Nationalists, this Morrocan used to live in the mountains and trained his breathing this way, my mate taught me when I told him I liked running, it’s very good for getting your breath back and increases the capacity of your lungs”.

Wallace nodded “Interesting” he said “I’ll try it, seems it could be useful”.

A second sergeant instructor materialised out of the trees and barked

“gentlemen, line up please”. The officers duly stood to attention.

“Right” the sergeant continued “today will be given to studying techniques for living off the land and concealment”. And so I passed the day digging foxholes and camouflaging them, learned how to set traps for rabbits, dry bivouacs and generally enjoying myself. Peirce and Brown were struggling though, Brown was still very red in the face from the earlier run and was wiping sweat from his face at the smallest exertion. Wallace was totally cool, never out of breath or even raising perspiration at all. I hoped I looked the same. At sunset, around 7pm the sergeants jogged us back to the barracks where we went straight to the mess for supper. Food was the usual army diet of beef stew washed down with tea. Pierce pulled a face and commented that he was used to much better than this at his regiment. Wallace sized him up and remarked that as they were all there for special training perhaps that included being less fussy about food. Pierce glared but said nothing. During the next week the days rolled into each other through an increasing fog of exhaustion. Every morning, rain or sun, we were awoken at dawn and given a two hour run and then training until sunset before returning to the barracks for supper then bed. After a particularly tough day of unarmed combat in which I had taken a malicious pleasure in throwing Pierce all over the forest glade we were training in, we returned to the barracks to find a gloomy air of depression amongst the staff. I asked a steward what has happened. The steward replied that the Nazis had split the British and French armies and broken through to the north French coast at Abbeville. The BEF (British Expeditionary Force) were trapped in northern France. Rather than the usual early bed to recover from the exertions of the day the entire occupants of the camp were gathered round the only radio, especially installed in the mess for the occasion, to hear the BBC’s 9 O Clock News about the situation. What we heard was disquieting to say the least and we all well understood the real meaning of terms like “regrouping” and “fighting

withdrawal". Then the voice of the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill came on air. He began his "By Ye Men Of Valour" speech

*"After this battle in France abates its force, there will come the battle for our island - for all that Britain is, and all that Britain means - that will be the struggle. In that supreme emergency we shall not hesitate to take every step, even the most drastic, to call forth from our people, the last ounce and the last inch of effort they are capable. The interests of property, the hours of labour, are nothing compared with the struggle for life and honour, for right and freedom, to which we have vowed ourselves".*

Not a sound was heard during the speech and we were all moved by the power of his words. Phrases like *"if we fight to the end, it can only be glorious"* particularly stirred my blood. My earlier thoughts about the Nazi's returned but now I began to think it wasn't just my fight, here was our national leader saying what I'd been thinking since my time in Spain. It was my countries fight! My tiredness seemed to lift and I went to bed feeling inspired and that this was all worth it after all. The date was Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May 1941. Training continued as normal and now I had become an effective unarmed combat fighter and something of a woodsman. I could go to earth in a matter of seconds and be very difficult to find and as fit as I had ever been in my life. I felt great!

Next morning after the run, instead of the usual sergeants there was a lorry and we were driven to a range where a different group of instructor's were waiting for us. We were back on the side of the loch with a clear area of about 400 metres long and 200 or so wide. A series of ruined concrete shelters lined one side of the area and man sized targets took up another side. The lorry pulled up by a khaki tent and tables.

The usual shout to line up came from one of the sergeants and we dutifully dropped of the tailgate and formed up.

“Today you will learn to fire all manner of weapons including German, French and Italian as well our British standard arms” shouted one of the instructors. I smiled to myself thinking well this will be old hat as most of my battalion in Spain had been armed with all sorts of stuff. My grin attracted the sergeant’s attention.

“You” he snapped, pointing at me, “front and present”. I doubled up to him and the sergeant thrust a German MP40 (Schmeisser) into my hands.

“Move double time, strip and oil that weapon”. I doubled off to one of the nearest tables and without thinking about my cover story had stripped, cleaned & oiled the gun in a couple of minutes. I looked up to see the group including the instructors staring in astonishment at me.

“What?” I asked in surprise.

“Well sir I’m a bit surprised you knew how to do that” said the instructor. I thought rapidly, again caught out by what I wasn’t supposed to know.

“We did this at Ringway” I lied “to familiarize ourselves with captured German weapons in case we had to use them”.

“Very good sir” returned the sergeant “let’s see how familiar with it you are then”. He turned and shouted an order and an unseen hand pulled a string raising five targets painted as German soldiers at about 50 metres away. I swore to myself as I re-assembled the gun, I had caught myself out again as I was supposed to be in the Durham’s and anyone checking would quickly find Ringway was the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne. Clicking the safety on I pulled out the full magazine and removed two cartridges. Sliding the safety on I turned to the targets, put the weapon to my shoulder and looking down the sights fired two shots into each figures head, then holding the gun at

waist level but bracing it against its sling I fired a full burst at the nearest target and blew it apart. The other officers clapped and cheered, even Pierce was waving his hands above his head and shouting. I slid the safety on even though the magazine was empty and did a bow to my audience whilst placing the weapon back onto the table. The sergeant instructor approached me.

“Why did you take out those cartridges” he asked.

“Because it’s a design fault, the magazine takes 32 bullets but if you try to fire it with 32, it occasionally jams, if you take two bullets out it never jams at all”.

“I never knew that! Well done sir, that was really good shooting, my names Baines sir”. I looked at the sergeant and realized I’d earned their respect at last. The rest of the day was spent firing the MP40 at targets between 10 and 50 metres away because Baines explained they were unlikely to be in a long range fire fight and the MP40 only had an effective range of 100 metres. I knew this too but wisely stayed silent because of my earlier slip. Now our routine changed to include time at this range where we simulated close quarter fighting and shooting at pop up targets in the concrete bunkers done out to look like houses. Lee Enfield and American Springfield rifles with sniper scopes were used at long range for practice at assassinations as Baines cheerfully pointed out and our targets were Swedes, head sized vegetables. Beretta’s, Lugers, Smith & Wessons and Colt pistols were all used at two or three feet, in case of emergencies suggested Baines again. But what I enjoyed the most was the grenade throwing, though the initial start was humiliating to say the least. In Spain I had thrown grenades of all sorts, including sticks of dynamite but with no great accuracy and usually in a confused fight close to the enemy.

Baines held a canvas bag and handed out a potato to each officer. “I’m sure you gentleman know what these are” asked Baines.

Pierce replied “A potato??”

“Wrong sir” smiled Baines “it’s a safety grenade”. The group laughed, all becoming much closer as the training was progressing.

Baines continued “with one of these there is no danger from you lot cocking it up and blowing someone’s leg off”. He set them tasks throwing potato’s as far as possible, then at barrels so they dropped into the top. Moving back to the bunkers they practiced throwing the potato’s through windows and doorways at different distances. It seemed to me my skill was improving and this feeling was borne out when the real grenades arrived. The honour was given to me that I would be the first of the officers to throw a “live” one. I picked one up from the box and hefted it in my hand. It was a new design to me and unfamiliar, a number 69 grenade Baines had said. It was smaller than the earlier Mills bomb and Baines had told me they had only been introduced this year because it was less destructive than the Mills so the thrower could remain safe even if there was little cover. The Mills bomb once thrown meant that the thrower had to get into cover quickly so as not to be injured by his own grenade. Baines had got the weight of the potato safeties about right I thought. The bomb weighed about 12 ounces and was still fairly heavy. I pulled the pin, counted to three and aimed for a window in a bunker. The grenade flew smoothly but caught the lower window frame, hung for a moment then overbalanced into the bunker. A second later a satisfying explosion blew fragments of stone over their heads.

“Well done Thompson” yelled Baines.

As the group moved away Pierce walked up to me “I thought Ringway was airborne territory old boy”.

Ready for this I had already worked out a response “Yes I was seconded there for a while” I replied “it was great fun...old boy”.

More work, more training but every night now all the camps personnel gathered around the radio to listen in ever increasing gloom as the news reader talked of strategic withdrawals to the coast and rearguard action. My adopted regiment the Durham's were in the thick of it and their name was often mentioned as being involved in a particular action and I had the ironic thought that my cover might be perfect after all, particularly if the whole regiment were lost or captured in France. Training now involved language classes and as I had learned Spanish and French whilst serving in Spain I was promoted to temporary instructor as the other three, though all French speakers, were a little rusty. We were aided in this work by another instructor, a dark haired Parisian from the French embassy in London who had volunteered for war service and for her pains had been shipped out from the delights of London city life to this remote camp in Scotland where she was the only female. As a very urbane and refined city woman, to say it was not what she had expected was an understatement and her lessons included quite a lot of curses and insults, particularly aimed at the camp, its environs, occupants and staff, and slang at which she was surprisingly fluent with a wide vocabulary. Her name was Yvette Colmer and her classes were a source of great pleasure to me as I could chat with her in her language. My only problem was that I did lack the current idiom and the French language changed rapidly in its usage of slang and idiom. I soon caught up though. Yvette sat next to me during the nightly news broadcasts and her olive complexion darkened as she heard of the latest defeats and setbacks. British troops were trapped at Calais and Bolougne; the French 1<sup>st</sup> army were surrounded at Lille, but both armies were fighting back with a fierceness that caused the mighty German armoured army to halt for the first time to bring up fresh supplies and reinforcements. In the fighting at Calais alone, three British and one French regiment, some four thousand men, held

off the Germans for four days and in order to defeat these gallant soldiers the Germans had to divert two armoured divisions to the battle there. This went a long way to keeping the flank near Dunkirk open. After those four days only 30 unwounded survivors made it back to Britain. Then on the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> May came the shock announcement from King Leopold that Belgium was about to surrender. This was a disaster beyond belief and the occupants of the mess were aghast at this betrayal of trust. The British and French armies were only in Belgium because of the request for immediate assistance in early May by King Leopold and this assistance had come with a heavy price with the Allies having to extend their supply lines and the Germans overrunning large parts of the Belgium army before slicing through the allies to Abbeville, France. Now the whole 30 mile southern flank of the BEF was open and a defence had to be hurriedly established but this meant losing contact with the French army and increasingly heavy German attacks increased this confusion. It seemed the end of the British army in Europe but unknown to the mess's audience the British Government had long planned an evacuation and on the 26<sup>th</sup> May, the day after the Belgium surrender the British launched "Operation Dynamo". In an astonishing exercise of cooperation between civilians and the navy, small house boats, fishing craft, ferries and even dinghies from as far up the Thames and inland such as Hampton and Teddington in Surrey were assembled and towed across the channel, many of these volunteers never came back having died alongside the men they were trying to save. For nine nights soldiers were collected off the beaches and the harbour mole at Dunkirk by fishermen, pleasure boat owners and ferrymen as well as the navy's destroyers. The Government had expected to save a maximum of 45,000 troops but when the operation was finally shut down on the night of June 4<sup>th</sup> over 340,000 soldiers including 120,000 French troops had been carried to

Britain. These experienced fighting men enabled the British to reform their armies and the French to form the Free French army under General De Gaulle. However many other soldiers, British and French side by side, gave their lives fighting at the perimeter to save their comrades at Dunkirk in keeping the German tanks and troops from breaking through the cordon, getting to the beaches and preventing the occupation,

Again the mess radio had the entire camp personal around it as Churchill's latest speech echoed around the camp. Obviously Dunkirk was a defeat, but Churchill's oratory and the idea of the Nation unifying round a cause in getting the small boats across the channel made it seem more like a victory. Churchill's determination to continue to fight was made clear in the final paragraph of his speech

—

*“The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”*

As these words resounded through the tightly packed room Yvette took my hands in hers and as I looked into her face I saw tears rolling down her cheeks. In seeing her

distress my tears flowed too, but not just from sadness, more from a reaction to the feeling of togetherness and spirit the whole room was experiencing. The will to fight and to win had been given to the whole country. The date was June 5<sup>th</sup> 1940.

### **Chapter 3**

**M are the Markets, wherein you may spy**

**The price-lists of things, you're unable to buy.**

Ben was once more sitting at his work station in front of a computer screen but his mind was running through the events that occurred at the solicitors. How would he trace an old number, how would that help him find any relatives of this Edward Arundel-Paige? He thought for moment then on impulse entered the name into the search engine and saw there were 35,000 entries but all were a separate listing of one of more of the names he entered. Typing the name again, this time he included it in quote marks, hit enter and got eight results. The first listed an Edward Arundel-Paige as a writer of mystery novels, there were a couple more for a bar owner in Tennessee whose theme seemed to be Englishness but the last simply mentioned a foundation for medieval geneology and a link to the name Arundel at Aynho in Northamptonshire. Clicking the link, the page became a form for joining the foundation and Ben tutted in frustration. Hitting the back button he scanned the page for another reference point. The word Aynho must be a name but on a mental prompting from a half memory he got up and searched for his road atlas of Great Britain. In the index he found the village of Aynho in Northamptonshire nestling on the borders of Oxfordshire and

Buckinghamshire, so it must be at the very southernmost point of what most people thought of as the Midlands. It would be very rural around there Ben thought and he turned the pages in the atlas to the references given for the place. A tourist attraction caught his eye and he looked it up in the legend. It seemed there was an historic building listed there. Is it going to be this easy Ben wondered and at that instant the phone rang startling Ben out of his musing.

“Hello” said Ben into the receiver and a crackling came through the earpiece then a voice.

“May I speak to Mr Ben Wilson please”.

“Speaking” Ben replied.

“Oh hello Mr Wilson, It’s Ian Francis from Wilmott & Hyde”.

“Hello Ian”

“it’s about your enquiry for the Hopton Street property, I’m afraid there are no living relatives of Edward Arundel-Paige and the property is owned by a corporation based in Switzerland. Apparently they are keeping it as an investment given the London property prices”.

“I thought you’d said it was owned by this Arundel-Paige guy”? Ben asked in surprise.

“I never said that”!

“Oh” replied Ben “then maybe they would consider selling it?”

“I don’t think so Mr Wilson, I know they are thinking long term in this”.

“Maybe you could give me their contact details”

“Again I don’t think so, sorry Mr Wilson, they made their wishes completely clear to us. No contact, no sale, no interest in selling, sorry”.

They made their goodbyes and Ben replaced the phone returning to his computer. He worked through the list of updates and changes he was making to his Writers online website and was looking forward to meeting with Aless. They had arranged to meet at a local pub that had a garden facing west, it was unusual for them to meet at a place as normally Ben would collect Aless but she had called that morning and suggested they had a sunset drink together. The weather was good and not too hot for late summer. The actual sunset would be around 7.30pm but they would have maybe two drinks and a lot of talk and go to their separate homes about nine. Ben was very keen to see her, though always in touch by phone or text, he hadn't actually seen her for two days and was looking to recapturing her face, figure and the way she moved. He loved to walk behind her when he got the chance so he could watch her swing her hips in that graceful, sensuous way she did so unconsciously. If she caught him she always told him off and called him a dirty old man but Ben thought he'd be quite OK with being rebuked just to see her move like that again. He knew Aless liked to be punctual so he tried to arrive about five to six to get there before her but because of traffic he arrived at the same time as she did; both finding parking places in the pub car park. Arm in arm they walked into the garden and Ben offered her a drink. Aless wanted a chilled Rosé and Ben thought he would have the same. After a short wait at the bar he was served by a pretty Polish girl who was all smiles. Returning to Aless she immediately remarked on how she'd seen him shamelessly flirting with the barmaid and, knowing this was an ongoing joke they shared, he protested that as Aless was the only good looking woman in the pub, if not the whole of Europe, and therefore why would he flirt with second best? Harmony restored and points made about her beauty they chatted about their respective day. Aless was struggling with a paragraph she was doing for a local magazine. Would Ben help her? Of course!

They sat over the printout Aless had brought with her and as Ben suggested corrections she made notes in the papers margin with a small fountain pen. Occasionally debating a word or phrase they finished the piece between them as the garden began to fill with customers stopping for a drink on their way home from their work. A party of noisy office workers grabbed the table next to them and began to debate the latest England football debacle in loud voices and Aless suggested they move to the more secluded area under a marquee near the pub back door. Here they could still sit in the sun and talk in quieter surroundings and so settled again Ben told her about the call from Wilmott & Hyde.

“So that’s it for the house” Aless said.

“I’m not so sure” replied Ben “remember the agent in Streatham who gave me the owners details. It definitely wasn’t a Swiss company name he gave me”.

“Perhaps you should go back and ask him to check when the sale was made”.

“Good idea, I’ll call on him tomorrow and see what he can find out”.

“Also” said Aless “I wanted to ask you something”.

“Anything” replied Ben

“I know we don’t spend much time together in the evening but that’s mainly because I don’t feel right about not being home. And having you stay at my house makes me feel like I’m being unfaithful to Dave though I know it’s been years since he died”.

Ben took her hand as he knew Aless found it hard to talk about anything deep and emotional relating to her own life. She had had a tough childhood from a “tough love” Mother and often associated love with being hurt. The other later relationships after Dave she’d had also tended to reinforce this association so she wanted to always

have private space to retreat to and Ben respected that. He too needed his space occasionally and this way they both had what they wanted.

Aless continued “well despite all of that I do want to spend time with you and I thought we might go away together for a few days”.

Ben was delighted “I’d love to!” he exclaimed “do you have any idea of where you want to go?”

“Well I thought I’d like to see the Channel Islands, maybe we could go to stay on Jersey or Guernsey. We can fly from either Gatwick or Southampton or Brighton”.

Ben laughed “so you haven’t thought about it much then”.

Aless lowered her head and smiled at him from under her fringe and it went right through his heart. He squeezed her hands in his and said “of course my darling, anywhere you want”. She pulled herself onto his lap and turning around leant her back against his chest, laid her long legs along the bench seat and folded Ben’s arms around her. The sun shining on her face gave her skin a golden colour and Ben thought he’d never seen her look so lovely. He hugged her with his arms and she squeezed them in return then they both chatted about where they could go. Later the same Polish barmaid came round the tables collecting glasses and the sight of the two of them brought a wistful smile to her face as she went about her job. Soon the sun had gone under the horizon and Aless began to shiver, knowing how she always felt the cold Ben kept a jacket in his car which he offered her. Aless refused, saying she wanted to get back home and have an early night. They made their way to their cars kissed and hugged each other then Ben waited to wave Aless off before making his way home to bed and then one of the worst nightmares he had ever had in his life. Ben desperately struggled awake and gasping for breath, his hands searching

frantically for the light switch. Finding it he clicked it on and sat with his heart pounding in his chest so loudly he could feel his pulse in his ears. The sudden bright light burned across his vision and he had to close his eyes, then open them again several times whilst looking away from any bright area that threatened to dazzle him again. Gradually his breathing came under control and his heartbeat started to slow but he was covered in a cold sweat and was still shaking. He began to recall the dream that had scared him so. He had been walking past the house but as he walked towards it he began to see smoky vague figures moving in the windows, but only from the corner of his eye. If he looked directly at the house the shapes dissolved and faded only to reappear if he looked ahead again. The movement kept attracting his attention and as he passed the house the figures began to appear more frantic. In his dream he began to feel a bit panicked as if somehow he was influencing their movements. As he approached the corner where Hopton Road turned to the left a gust of wind sprang up and with increasing force drove him back towards the house. Using his whole strength to resist and with fear raging through his body, Ben tried to scream for help was unable to make a sound and now he was forced onto the path with the front door appearing huge, threatening and now he could see the vague ghostly shapes dancing in the windows, as if in glee at his imminent arrival. He was pushed up against the front door, it began to swing open and it was then he awoke! Ben considered his dream, he knew he was a bit obsessed with the place but now it was affecting his sleep. He remembered the wind that had caught him the first day he saw the place and began to work out the dream in his head to reduce its power to frighten him. He turned off the light and pulled the quilt up to his chin and tried to relax back into sleep but as soon as his eyes were closed the ghostly shapes were dancing in the windows again. Cursing Ben sat up and put the light back on. This is

ridiculous he said to himself but sleep would not come. Ben decided to go to the kitchen and get a tea light. Aless had given him some lavender scented ones which were supposed to relax and bring a trouble less sleep. With the tea light lit and its comforting swaying flame casting warm flickers across Ben's closed eyelids he finally began to drift off. Waking with a start Ben sat and felt heavy lidded with lack of sleep. He looked at the clock and swore! Never normally one to oversleep he'd managed to go an hour over his usual getting up time. Then he realised it was a Saturday and he wasn't needed at the office anyway. As he made his morning coffee Ben pondered the dream he'd had and decided to allay that demon by walking up to house to show himself that there was nothing to worry about and set his mind at rest. The walk to Hopton Road took him across Tooting Bec Common and, as usual, the bridle path that ran around the edge of the common was busy with joggers. Ben smiled to himself at the obviously unfit ones and took sly second looks at the more attractive girls in their lycra but immediately recalled Aless's face and felt slightly guilty. He crossed the end of the common and made his way to St Leonards Church before descending the hill towards Streatham Common and turning into Hopton Road. It was a bright sunny morning and busy with people starting their weekend. Families were getting into cars for trips and young couples set off for DIY shops. Ben made his way to No 12 and as he approached the house a young woman turned the corner and walked towards him clutching the hand of a little girl. As they came close the girl stopped in Ben's way and looked up at him. She was about six with curly blond hair and clear blue eyes. Ben thought she was charmingly pretty but then she said to him "You're Ben, the man that the Captain said was coming to help him and his friends go home". Ben was mystified and was about to ask her what she meant when the

mother, also a pretty blonde, exclaimed aghast "Holly! I thought we wouldn't mention that when we were out" and was obviously about to push her past Ben.

"Hang on a minute please" Ben asked "what's this about?"

Little Holly answered straight away "My friend the Captain told me you were coming to help him" she pointed to the house "you know" she insisted. Ben felt a finger of ice slide down his spine. Holly's mother with her eyes down muttered "I'm really sorry" and made to move on again. Again Ben stopped her, he looked at the mother and asked did she know he was trying to trace the owner of the house in order to buy it. The woman was shocked in her turn "no of course not, we've never seen you before". She looked as if she was going to scold the child but Ben knelt before the little girl and asked "who is the Captain?" Holly looked at her mother who stood for a short time before nodding it was OK to talk. Holly looked back up at Ben. "Mummy says he's not real but he comes to my room at night when I'm scared of the dark and tells me there's nothing to be scared of. That he's there to look after me and if he can't come he'll send a friend to look after me". All this came out in a rush and it was obvious the girl had been told not to tell any one outside the family so it was quite a relief to get it all out. Ben was feeling decidedly that the earth was moving under his feet and so stood to talk with Holly's mother.

"What do you make of this" Ben asked. "Oh by the way I'm Ben Wilson".

"Lucinda Palmer" and having shaken hands and introduced each other they felt a little less awkward. Ben then smiled

"well Lucinda, now we've been introduced maybe we can chat a bit".

Lucinda gave an embarrassed smile and answered

"perhaps we can sit on the bench over there". Ben turned to see an area of grass and small hawthorns under which a graffiti covered bench huddled. They

crossed the road with a very happy Holly in tow and sat at opposite ends. Ben looked at Lucinda and thought about this development.

“We thought Holly made this up because we insisted on her staying in her room at night even if she said she was frightened”

“Can I ask Holly some more questions?”

“Not if you going to say something that will scare her”

“Of course not... and no I won't ask her anything that would disturb her”

He turned to Holly.

“How long have you known the Captain?”

“Oh ages” she replied in a high voice. “Ever since I was small”

“When did he first mention me”

She considered for a few seconds “I don't remember”

“Did he tell you my name”

“Ben” she answered

Ben began to feel quite strange and he turned back to Lucinda.

“What's the background behind this?”

Lucinda's face had a definite uncomfortable look and she hesitated before answering.

“Perhaps I should talk to my husband before I say anything”

“I understand, but please ask him to meet or ring me if you're worried about talking family stuff to a stranger”. Ben gave her his business card and put his hand out to shake hers. However Lucinda pulled back, again looking uncomfortable.

“Don't worry” Ben said. He searched around for Holly but didn't make a move towards her.

“Bye Holly” he called.

Holly waved absently, having lost interest in grown up talk was playing with the hawthorn berries quite unconcerned about the bombshell she'd dropped into her Mum's and Ben's lap.

Ben walked back towards Tooting up the Streatham Road. He tried to gather his thoughts which were racing around his mind like rabbits on speed. He'd have to talk to Aless but didn't want to put her off the house still further. How was he going to put this latest twist? Ben carried on walking home but was no clearer in his mind when he got back to his flat. Going upstairs he went into his kitchen and switched the kettle on for a cup of tea. Sipping the hot liquid he went over the last 24 hours happenings. Item, he has a nightmare. Item, he finds a child with an imaginary friend that claims to know him. Item, it wasn't possible for Holly to know him or his intentions about the house so how could she know. If she did know about his house hunting who was Captain Jack and how did he know? His head began to ache with the complications of this thinking. It simply wasn't possible for Holly to know his name let alone his wanting to buy number 12. As he was making a second cup of tea the land line rang. Ben picked it up with his customary curt hello?

“Mr Wilson?” said a male voice with a French accent.

“Yes” replied Ben thinking another junk call wasting my time when the caller identified himself.

“Hello Mr Wilson? This is Holly's Father, Anthony. I think we should talk”.

“Yes of course, I didn't expect to hear from you so quickly”

“Well Lucinda was really upset and called me to come home after meeting you and told me what happened. Well I googled your name and found you were a local businessman so unlikely to be trying a scam on us but I'm more concerned about Holly. We thought it was just all imaginary”

“I understand” said Ben, not really understanding at all.

As if reading Ben’s mind Anthony replied

“No you don’t understand, how did Holly know your name, we’d never heard of you up until then. Yet we know now that Holly has known your name for at least six months. We moved to our present house about a year ago and Holly had her first bedroom. She didn’t like to go to bed but we made her, sometimes we would hear crying in the night and after we checked she’d say she’d been told a sad story but she wasn’t scared anymore as she had made a friend to look after her.

“How did you know when she knew my name?”

“Because Lucinda looked at a drawing that Holly did when she first started nursery six months and she had put your name on a drawing she’d done of her friend the Captain”

Ben sat down hard.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes...yes..only I’m a bit shocked”

“Only a bit?” Anthony responded sarcastically “How English you are. How do you think we feel? I tell you we’d go to the police and accuse you of stalking Holly if we thought for a second.....”

“Just a second” snapped Ben “I’ve never seen you guys either. I don’t even know where you live and I certainly have no idea about where the local nurseries and schools are, not having any kids myself”

“If we thought for a second you were some scumbag paedophile you’d be talking to a police officer now and not me. That’s why I’m talking to you. We love Holly and don’t want anything bad to happen to her”

“Ok ok” said Ben “why don’t we meet and if you want to meet me with Lucinda I’ll talk to Aless, my girlfriend and we’ll maybe have dinner or a drink or something”.

“Good” stated Anthony “I’ll talk to Lucinda and we’ll get back to you”

After the weekend Ben made his way back to the Streatham High Road and the offices of Taylor & Walker, the estate agents. The office was as before but Ben didn’t see the original person who had given him the name of Hopton Roads owner. An older agent approached him with the usual can I help you sir?

“Yes” Ben answered “there was another guy here about a month ago, young guy, spiky hair and a dark suit”. The man pondered for a while looking upward.

Another estate agent said loudly across the room

“he means Geoff”.

The older man shrugged a bit and said

“oh yes, young Geoff, he...err left and I replaced him” adding a bit quieter “and the others here haven’t forgiven me yet”.

“Why did he leave” Ben asked

“Well he was dismissed I think”

“What on earth for”?

“Do you know I’ve no idea, but it seems he was popular and apparently good at his job”.

“Well perhaps you can help me, Geoff looked up an owner of a local property on the land registry database for me and I’ve lost the details”.

“Yes I can do that, may I have the address please and I’m Peter by the way”

“I’m Ben” and they shook hands. Peter found a free consol and typed in a password, clicked a website then entered his details into the land registry database. Ben gave him the property details and Peter entered them into the search box. A few seconds passed and Peter read the entry. “It’s a company called Siig Investments with an address in Basel, Switzerland”.

“Is there a contact address?”

“Only a Swiss PO Box”.

“No other details?”

“No sorry. Just the company and the box address”.

“How quickly does the land registry get updated because this must have only just gone through since I was last here”.

Peter gave him a quizzical look

“It says here the transfer was a decade ago, in fact look”. Peter turned the monitor to Ben. Ben looked at the date shown and was shocked to see it was dated more than ten years ago.

“That’s impossible, I was here less than a month ago and the owner was down as an Edward Arundel-Paige”

Peter looked at the monitor again and pointed

“look there, that was the previous owner, that’s him isn’t it”.

Ben looked and saw it was the right name. Peter continued

“The property was transferred on the death of the original owner, this Arundel-Paige guy”.

Ben’s brain had staggered to a halt and he couldn’t process the information.

“But surely” his voice raising “it must be a mistake because last time Geoff definitely told me the owner was Arundel-Paige”.

Peter looked at Ben and then back at the screen

“He may have made a mistake and read you the details of the last owner. Maybe Geoff wasn’t as good as he was made out”. At this Peter’s manner brightened at the thought of moving out of his predecessors shadow a bit. Ben was still unable to think, maybe Geoff had made a mistake or maybe he’d missed something Geoff had said. In any case it didn’t make any sense. He thanked Peter and slowly walked back to his car with his mind racing. This needed thinking about, he was sure he wasn’t imagining Geoff’s information. What about Ian Francis? He had taken Arundel-Paige’s name as the owner. Or had he? What was it he’d actually said? Ben thought hard, he thought that though Ian Francis had confirmed Arundel-Paige as an owner he’d never said current and certainly hadn’t mentioned a Swiss company as an owner, again if the company was his firm’s client then he would have to have been discrete about their involvement. But again isn’t there something odd about a solicitors handling the same property for two different clients. Wasn’t that a conflict of interest? Arriving at his car he saw that matters were now made worse because of a parking ticket attached to his windscreen and a smiling warden taking a picture of it. Damn and blast thought Ben. He thanked the warden ironically and threw the ticket onto his passenger seat. He picked up his mobile to ring Aless but it went straight to ansaphone so he couldn’t even get this off his chest. Pulling away sharply Ben returned to his office for another afternoon of updating in the company of Mrs Broughton. Arriving at the office he thumped his mobile grumpily onto his desk and muttered a terse response to Mrs B’s usual greeting. Surprised she looked at him across the top of her monitor.

“Everything alright Ben” She asked?

Surprised in his turn at her conciliatory tone and her use of his first name he looked back at her.

“Well I suppose so but I had a ticket parking and got confused by some information earlier”.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

Ben realised he'd never confided what he'd been up to in her and had just relied on her to run the office. On top of his earlier frustration a new sense of guilt troubled him

“I'm sorry Mrs Broughton, I should have been a bit more open in my conversations with you”.

“Well without being funny Ben I don't really recall having many with you, if ever”. Another guilt chasm loomed before Ben.

“I'm really sorry now, but I know I've been occupied with stuff and lost track of what's important”.

“Do you want to tell me anything, oh I know about you and Aless, it's not really a secret is it, about your relationship”.

“I know it's no secret about Aless but I'm not given to talking about her much. This is more to do with looking for a house that I've got preoccupied with”.

“So it's not just a complicated sale then”.

Ben related how he'd found the house and the feelings he still had about it, how it seemed meant for him yet the obstacles that faced him seemed impossible to get round. He was staggered to find he'd talked to her for over an hour. She sat silent for a while then suggested why doesn't he squat? Ben sat stunned again! The redoubtable honest Mrs B suggesting something as illegal as squatting. She went on

“If it is a Swiss company that owns it, it will be ages before they find out you’re in there and isn’t there some law that if you offer and have the means to pay a fair rent regularly you get an automatic tenancy right. Why don’t you talk to a solicitor about it”?

Ben considered what she’d said. The idea had merits though it was a bit off the wall for him. Maybe it could be a last resort if he couldn’t obtain the house legally.

Anyway Ben still wasn’t convinced he’d been wrong about the ownership of the house. The memory of the village in Northamptonshire returned and with it, it’s association with the name Arundel-Paige. Maybe I can work this from the bottom up, find out how Arundel-Paige came to own the house and who he was. Maybe the sale of the house wasn’t legal and this Swiss company is a front mused Ben in his mind.

Whatever! Research was needed and he had a lead, no two leads because of the Whitehall phone number he’d seen in the office of Wilmott & Hyde. Turning on his computer Ben waited for it to complete its boot cycle, connected to the internet and typed “Northamptonshire stately homes” into the search engine. Over 900,000 entries were listed and Ben clicked through a few but found nothing linking Aynho to a historic building. Ben tried typing “aynho stately homes” and quickly found Google had Aynho listed as Oxfordshire. The third link showed an Aynho Park House listed near Banbury, typing Aynho House revealed a link to the photographer Francis Frith’s website. Frith was a well known photographer who worked about the turn of the last century and specialised in photographing historic old buildings. The website existed to sell the work of the artist who was long dead and the photograph showed a building with an impressive frontage that was built before 1615. It had an amazing history with associations with the Stuart Royal family, the English civil war and apparently King Charles the First stayed there after the battle of Edgehill and remained under the

control of the royalists until the end of the war when the house was demolished by Parliamentary troops. Rebuilt in 1680 with compensation money paid by King Charles the second, the house was owned by the Arundel family and is apparently considered one of the finest stately homes in Britain. How cool was this, Ben thought, here was another connection to follow up. But where does the Paige connection come in I wonder mused Ben. Then his thinking was interrupted by Mrs Broughton asking him a question.

“Sorry” Ben said “I missed what you said”

“I asked what are you looking at. You seem awfully intent on whatever it is” A sudden alarming thought hit Ben, what has changed with Mrs Broughton? He’d never known her so chatty nor asking so many questions, yet he’d just admitted he might consider breaking the law to her. Maybe it would be an idea to be less forthcoming until he found out what caused this apparent change in her nature.

“Aless and I were thinking about taking a short break together and I’ve been looking up stately homes for a possible tour”

“Nice! Any particular choices yet?”

“Yes some nice ones around Wiltshire and Dorset, it’s also a short trip to the coast from there to”

Mrs Broughton agreed it was a lovely area to visit and she and Ben continued to swap places to visit until it was Mrs Broughton’s time to go home. On the way out she again surprised Ben by saying she’d really enjoyed their chat and she hoped now they would be much better friends. Ben replied in kind and with that she left the office. Ben immediately tried Aless’s number again. There was a lot of interference on the line but the ring tone started and after a few seconds her soft accented voice came down the receiver.

“Hello darling” she breathed setting Ben’s heart beat soaring “I knew it was you”.

Ben had to clear his throat to reply

“Hello lover” he answered. The crackling nearly drowned her voice and he asked her to say it again.

“What an awful line” she said “I’ll try calling you back”. She hung up and Ben replaced his receiver. After a few seconds the phone rang and Ben quickly picked it up.

“Hello again darling” Aless said.

The crackling was still evident but not as bad as before and Ben related all the day’s events about the strange behaviour of Mrs B, the parking ticket, the sacked agent and the mystery of the changed ownership.

Aless listened sympathetically and made interjections when needed but then said “Maybe you did hear it wrong initially?” Ben began to wonder about the crackling phone line, didn’t phone lines crackle because of interference? Surely Aless’s line wasn’t being tapped? Incipient paranoia began to flood Bens brain and a crafty thought came into his head.

“I’m not sure now” Ben said “It has really confused me and I really think it might be really good idea to give this whole Hopton Road idea up”. There was a moments silence from Aless.

“That’s the best idea you’ve had today my love! You coming round later?”

“On my way” said Ben.

Aless had cooked supper for them both and they caught up with each others news and small daily details as they ate. Though Aless used simple ingredients she was a superb cook and had done sirloin steaks with home made oven baked chips and had

sliced goat's cheese to grill over a salad. As they ate they sipped chilled Rosé wine and chatted. When they were finished Ben helped Aless clear the dishes and wash up, finally putting away the pans and plates before pouring another glass of wine each and moving into the lounge with its comfy sofa. They sat together and Aless immediately ducked under Ben's arm then swung her long legs over his.

“OK so what didn't you tell me about today” she asked?

Ben laughed and smiled down at her pixie face, how well she knew him.

“I'm going paranoid I think. I was stunned when the agents showed me the ownership details so much so I was thinking I was going mad. Then getting the ticket, then having Mrs B talking to me like a mate”

“That IS strange” agreed Aless “are you sure she hasn't decided you're partner material after all?”

“Good God” spluttered Ben “what an awful thought. You know you can be really evil when you want to be”.

“Did I introduce you to my evil twin” Aless asked sweetly?

Ben laughed then turned serious again.

“Really I'm beginning to think I'm intruding into something odd here, you remember all those missed appointments and cock ups with the first lots of estate agents”.

“Of course but if you think there's some CIA or fundamentalist plot to prevent you from buying a house, then friend, it's the funny farm for you”.

“I'm not going barmy but it does feel like something is going to happen”.

Aless looked at Ben

“What is going to happen” she asked “you're going to buy a house or not. What else is there”?

“There is something else”

“What”?

“After I saw you last at the pub I got home and went to bed, then I had one of the worst nightmares I have ever had; it was a really bad one you know and really screwed my mind up so Sunday I felt I had to check Hopton Road just to put my mind at rest”.

“Tell me” said Aless. Ben related the dream and how he had desperately struggled awake and gasping for breath, his hands searched frantically for the light switch.

Aless sat white faced and asked “Why didn’t you tell me this before? You could have phoned me and told me this”.

“Darling if I’d told you over the phone you WOULD think I was going mad. This is the first chance I’ve had to mention this. You’ve been busy with your deadlines and besides I’m wasn’t sure how you would take this”

“I’m alarmed of course...and very worried now. You have a dream which you then go to check and then meet a small child that knows you? Are you sure you didn’t bump into them at a school fete or something”?

“Darling I don’t go to school fetes and you know I don’t know any couples with kids”.

“Well I certainly want to meet this couple so we can see if their little brat is making all this up”.

“Maybe later because I was going to suggest we go away for the weekend”

“This weekend? I suppose I could as I’ve finished my articles, where were you thinking” Ben told her about his looking up Arundel-Paige and tracing the name to an old Manor House in Oxfordshire, he went on to suggest they used a trip to see

several homes as a cover, in case one was needed, and that their first visit was to a place called Aynho. He saw then that Aless had a disappointed look and realised too late he'd promised to take her to the Channel Islands.

"I'm sorry my darling, Jersey slipped my mind. Don't worry we'll do the country houses later, after all we can do that as day trips". Her face lifted like the sun bursting through clouds and she brought her hands together in a silent clap that revealed how pleased she was. Ben felt for the first time in a long while that he'd done the right thing.

"I think I'd much rather go to the Channel Islands" Aless said "it's really been on my mind to go there for a long time now. We can always go to Aynho and the others as a day trip as you said. That will give us a nice little program of days out".

Ben smiled at her pretty little face

"That's a much better idea" he said "I'll check out the flights and we'll go to Jersey. Aynho can come later". The next day Ben had booked flights to Jersey from Gatwick and made sure the flight gave them a whole three day's on the island by booking an early flight on Friday and a late return Sunday evening. He rang Aless to tell her the times and she was ecstatic with enthusiasm and excitement down the telephone.

"Oh I'm so happy to be going" she enthused "I haven't been away with you for ages and it's been getting a bit of a rut lately". Ben felt a little bit of guilt again, he should have been spending his time making her life special instead he'd put all his spare time into the house on Hopton Road.

At 6am Friday Ben picked Aless up from her house in Balham and they drove to Gatwick. Aless was sleepy and quiet but she frequently glanced at Ben and gave

him a happy smile. Ben's heart leapt at each and they both were happy to be going on a trip together, something that was a rare treat for them. After the interminable airport security they boarded their flight and landed at Jersey airport just before 9.30am. They made their way to the hire car desk after clearing customs and arranged their little car for the weekend, then hand in hand they crossed the airport car park to collect it. Ben had used the internet to find and book a little hotel on Jersey's north coast but had promised to take Aless shopping in St Helier, Jersey's major town, first. Then they were going to do a sight seeing drive along the coast of the island, taking in Corbiere and St Ouen's as they made their way to their hotel for the evening. Ben had also booked a special restaurant that friends who knew Jersey had recommended in St Aubyn's, a small town on the south coast of the island. But shopping was the main pleasure at the moment for Aless and now more so as Ben had assured her that Jersey was an independent state and had no VAT, so everything was a lot cheaper than on mainland UK. As they drove off on the start of their weekend they were both blissfully unaware of the storm that was about to break around them.