

# Joint Venture

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*This is the sequel to my story **Words of Betrayal** and a crossover with the TV series **The Professionals**.*

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## Prologue - 23rd December

Ray Doyle stood by the drinks table wondering whether to get smashed, start a punch-up or find a new girlfriend. There were plenty of pretty girls around but, right at this moment, he had had his fill of actresses.

Zuleika was an actress. She had invited him to the Christmas party at Harlington-Straker Studios, where she was currently filming. Why she had bothered he had no idea. As soon as they had arrived she had made a beeline for one of the producers and left him there, fed up and feeling stupid.

He watched the two of them across the hangar like sound stage that had been rigged out as the venue. The producer was a big bloke, an older man with an expensive suit and a lecherous grin. Zuleika was turning a well practised adoring gaze on him. Doyle wanted to punch him. And as for her...

"You don't look very happy."

He jumped. There was a woman beside him, small and plain and around forty but wearing a beautiful burgundy silk dress. She was looking up at him, half smiling, half frowning.

"Sorry." he said, not sure why he was apologising.

"That, of course, is your business but it also means I've failed in my job. What's your job, by the way? You don't work here."

"I'm a civil servant." he said absently. "I came here with my girlfriend -"

"Ah." She looked in Zuleika's direction. "Is that her?"

He nodded gloomily. "Soon as she arrived she threw herself at that bloke. I gather he's something high up."

"Yes, he is. Excuse me a moment."

He watched her as she wove her way determinedly through the crowd. He kicked himself mentally, realising too late that she must be the man's colleague.

As she emerged by the couple she wore a dangerously sweet smile. She said something. The man frowned. Zuleika pouted and spoke. The man said something to her. Zuleika protested, waving her hands. The woman replied. Zuleika made to slap her. The man grabbed her hand. This was getting interesting.

There were a few more angry exchanges, then two security guards came over and escorted Zuleika away. Doyle grinned. He should not be enjoying this but he was, mightily.

The man and woman were making their way back towards him. Now what?

The big man walked up to Doyle. "I'm sorry about this, mate. Kate explained what happened. There's nothing flattering about someone finding your job attractive, believe me. I'm Alec Freeman, by the way."

He stuck out his hand and Doyle took it. "Ray Doyle. No hard feelings, I should never have trusted her." He turned to the woman. "Thanks."

She shrugged. "I don't like people taking advantage of Alec. I'm Kate Straker."

Doyle blinked. "As in..."

"As in I married the business."

He took a drink. He did not quite know how to take that one. He was not used to dealing with people this important in a social setting, only a professional one.

Freeman also got himself a fresh drink. "Anything for you, Kate?"

"Ginger ale, please."

They got chatting after that and Doyle felt surprisingly comfortable. These were pleasant

people with no airs. He suspected they were good employers. Maybe if Cowley chucked him out... But what could a film studio possibly need an ex policeman for, except maybe to guard the gates?

A few minutes later they fixed him up with a pretty black girl who was passing. Her name was Nina and she seemed to be an old friend of both of them, so he was determined to be on his best behaviour. He was just about to ask her to dance - it was a good band, Kate said they were doing the soundtrack for an upcoming film - when the atmosphere in the room shifted.

He looked over to the door. A man had walked in - a tall, slim man with blond hair and a designer suit. The crowds parted before him, many people turning to greet him. He acknowledged them and moved on, heading in their direction. Doyle watched him, watched the people move around him. This man had power, the kind of natural authority that Cowley had. Did you really need that to run a film studio? But his career was his choice. This was Ed Straker, he recognised him from the newspapers.

Soon he was standing among them.

"You made it, then?" his wife asked, smiling.

He chuckled. "I said I would. Don't you believe me?" The accent was American.

"Rarely."

He laughed and put his arm around her, greeting Alec and Nina. He turned to Doyle and Kate introduced him. Straker frowned as she explained what had happened.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Doyle shrugged. "I'll be more careful next time. It's a good party."

"That's down to Kate. And Alec handles the drinks."

Everyone laughed. It was obviously a standing joke.

The Strakers drifted away to dance. Alec found another girl and Doyle was happy to be left with Nina. They danced, they kissed, they did not get any further. She knew what she wanted.

"Not on a first date. I don't know you and I'm on location after Christmas."

He did not push it.

The Strakers were still dancing in the early hours, outlasting many younger couples.

Nina sighed as she watched them. "It's good to see them happy."

He had to agree. It was good to see people so much in love.

## **Some months later.**

### **Day one**

Straker did not resist as he was bundled down steps and along a corridor. He was propelled through a door and the bag over his head was ripped away. At least that made it easier to breathe.

He was in a fair sized, windowless cellar room. There were wooden chairs in two corners and a kitchen table in the centre. There were three men besides himself: the two gorillas who were holding him and a medium build man in a smart business suit. That was the one in charge.

He looked Straker up and down. "Strip him."

Straker was stripped. He already knew the two men were strong and well trained. He let them get on with it, neither co-operating nor resisting. There was no point in getting hurt for the sake of it.

When he was naked, they stepped away from him. He stood still, knowing they were expecting him to cover up in embarrassment and refusing to oblige. It was cold in here, though. It had been unseasonably cold for a month or more.

The man still surveyed him dispassionately. After a moment he added: "Take the hair."

Straker was wrestled face down onto the table, his arms twisted to hold him still. Someone produced clippers and swiftly, savagely took his hair off, grazing his scalp in several places, deeply in one.

Straker knew it was meant to take away his identity, like being stripped. It was a standard technique and in his case, his hair was his most identifiable feature. It was just routine. Yet he was surprised how deeply he felt it, as if losing his hair did take part of his identity. Nevertheless, he locked that away as something to be dealt with later if at all. For now he needed to find out about them.

He was forced upright again and made to stand in front of one of the chairs. The man in the suit sat down. He had cold eyes, as grey as his suit. He was now holding a whip lightly in his two hands: a heavy, short of thing made of leather and with a tiny knot at its tip. It would hurt, Straker knew that.

The man paused for effect, then began speaking. "My name is Manley but if you address me you will call me sir. You will speak only when spoken to but if spoken to you will reply immediately and directly. Also respectfully. Likewise you will answer all questions put to you. If you are given an order you will obey it. You will not do anything you are not told to do. Understood?"

Straker raised an eyebrow but did not reply.

The whip snaked out, cutting him across the leg. He gasped.

"Understood?"

"Understood."

Again the whip came down.

Straker bit back a yelp, hesitated a moment then said: "Understood, sir."

Manley smiled coldly. "That's better. If you behave yourself you will be rewarded with food, blankets, perhaps even clothes. If you misbehave, privileges will be withdrawn. Understood?"

"Understood, sir."

The man nodded. "Better. For that I'll allow you to sit-down."

Straker lowered himself slowly to the ground. He was going to have to think this through

carefully. There was a fine line between getting hurt for the sake of it and the slippery slope that would lead to him talking. A very fine line indeed.

### Day three

George Cowley sat looking at the folder in front of him, knowing both that the information was true and that it did not add up. Why would anyone higher the likes of Peter Manley to interrogate the head of a film studio? And, indeed, who had hired him? He checked through the pages again but there was no clue as to that.

He had been chasing Manley for months. Now his sources told him Manley had another victim and such an unlikely one. Why? There had to be more to it.

There was a perfunctory knock at the door and Bodie and Doyle barrelled in.

"You wanted to see us, sir?"

He scowled witheringly at them but it had no effect. He had not intended it to. He would never admit it but he enjoyed having their youth and exuberance around him.

He slipped the folder across to them. "Manley. It looks like he's found someone else."

Doyle picked up one of the photographs, frowning. "I know this bloke. What would a worm like Manley have to do with him?"

It was a photograph of Straker, a publicity still from the studio.

"And what would you have to do with the rich and famous?" Bodie enquired.

Doyle shrugged and flopped down into a chair. "Okay, *know* is putting it a bit strong. I met him, once, last Christmas. He was alright and he's got a nice wife. They didn't have to take notice of the likes of me."

"Nice wife?" Bodie leered. "I bet -"

"Not like that." Doyle snapped.

Cowley banged on the desk to bring them to order. Then he turned to Doyle. "Do you have any idea why Manley would be sent after Straker?"

The young man paused thoughtfully, running a hand through his curly hair. "I'm not sure - but there was something about him. The way people moved around him. He was the Alpha male, no doubt about that. He could be involved in something but I've no idea what."

"Didn't he used to be an astronaut?" Bodie chipped in.

Cowley nodded. "He was USAF as well. I'm trying to get -"

The phone rang. Cowley answered it gruffly.

He recognised the voice at once. The Home Secretary. His boss. "George, I need you here at once. And bring everything you have on a..." It sounded like he was speaking to someone else in the room or perhaps on another line. "A Peter Manley. At once, George."

He rang off.

Cowley was not at all pleased to receive such a perfunctory summons, even from a government minister. He was, however, somewhat intrigued.

Arriving at the Home Office, he was shown straight up. The Home Secretary had a worried expression.

"Ah, George. Sorry to be so... What can you tell me about Manley?"

He passed Cowley a whisky as he summarised what he knew. "He's a torturer for hire, a very successful one. So far as we know, he's never yet failed to extract the information required. He's wanted by us, MI5 and 6, the FBI, the CIA and half the police and intelligence services in the Western world. Possibly the Eastern world as well but they won't say."

"And what can you tell me about Ed Straker?"

Cowley nodded. That was the question he had been expecting. "Not as much as you can tell me, I suspect."

The minister sighed heavily and took a swig of his own drink. "I don't know much,

George, and what I do know I can't tell you. It's simply too far above your security clearance."

Cowley nearly choked on his drink. He had one of the high security clearances in the country. "What on earth does he do?"

"I'm breaking all the rules by telling you this but he runs an organisation so secret that there are probably only a dozen people in this country not directly connected to it that know the organisation exists, perhaps two hundred around the world. And no, I can't tell you what it does but they want to speak to you. There's a car waiting downstairs. You're to do what they say, George. We need Straker back, alive and in one piece. If it's not too late."

And that was that. Annoyed but slightly more enlightened, Cowley was shown downstairs to a waiting limousine. The driver was polite but uncommunicative so he availed himself of the well-stocked mini bar and sat back to see where they were going.

He was driven a few miles into the countryside, surprised to find himself at the gates of Harlington-Straker studios. Then again, where else would they take him? He knew of Straker's connection to the studio and there was nothing to say that this was their real base.

After a brief stop at the gate, he was driven up to an office building then ushered into a medium-sized conference room. It was deserted as he entered but a moment later a young, confident looking man in an expensive but loud purple suit followed him in.

"Mr Cowley? My name is Paul Foster. The others will be here in a moment."

They were. The next to arrive was an attractive blonde with a businesslike manner. Behind her came two people. The first was a short, plain woman whom he identified as Straker's wife. Not a trophy wife, though they had been married less than two years. That meant she either had intelligence or money. By the way she appraised him and from what he had read in Straker's file, his guess was the former.

What the file had not told him was that she was several months pregnant.

Behind her came a large man on crutches, his left leg plastered to the hip. He was the one who spoke.

"Mr Cowley? I'm Alec Freeman. Would you like a drink?"

Cowley smiled. That was a reasonable way to start a meeting. Foster did the honours and then they settled around the table. He noticed Mrs Straker did not drink. Sensible in her condition.

He was content to let Freeman do the talking.

"I don't know what you've been told and I hope it wasn't anything to get your back up. We don't want to cause you trouble in any way. All we do want is Ed Straker back in one piece as quickly as possible and maybe a word with this Manley to see what he knows about his clients. We're prepared to bend security to get that but, as you can imagine, we'd rather not bend it too far."

Cowley nodded. It seemed reasonable but he would reserve judgment. "What can you tell me?"

Freeman made an expansive gesture. "What do you need to know? Within reason."

"Do I get to know your names?"

Freeman chuckled and introduced them. Cowley noted there was no concession to Mrs Straker being there, she was mentioned in the same tone as the others. That suggested she was someone senior in her own right.

"And you can't tell me about your work?"

"No, sorry." Freeman shook his head. "That's totally off limits. Besides, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Cowley raised an eyebrow but carried on: "Then tell me about the man."

A look passed around the table.

Freeman shrugged. "Again, what you want to know?"

Cowley took a deep breath. "How will Manley break him?"

He had intended to provoke a reaction and he got it. Foster was on his feet, protesting. Lake, the blonde woman, was speaking. Freeman and Mrs Straker were looking at each other.

Freeman banged his fist on the table and the others shut up.

It was Mrs Straker who spoke. "Could you tell us more about Manley? He falls rather outside our purview. Then, perhaps, we can be more specific."

She was very calm but Cowley reminded himself that she was pregnant. He wondered how frank to be. "Manley extracts information to order - be it military, industrial, scientific or whatever is required. He has no politics or allegiances we know of and he has a one hundred per cent success record. He has never failed to break his victim within five days and when I say break..."

She nodded. So did Freeman but Lake looked unhappy and Foster was muttering under his breath.

"Now," Cowley asked, "weaknesses?"

Freeman gave a wry smile. "Kate's not going out without a bodyguard."

"And nor are you." she shot back. "At least I can run - just."

He grinned but ignored her and Cowley wondered how much of this was a performance put on for his benefit.

Freeman continued speaking. "Besides that he's claustrophobic, though he's not keen on admitting it. There's not much else. Obviously he doesn't like to get hurt and he has bad memories they can mess around with if their information's good enough. I don't think there's any reason for you to know the specifics. They won't break him easily."

"They won't break him at all." Foster said, his tone disgusted.

Mrs Straker ignored him. "Ed gives himself three to six days, depending on the techniques used. I'd give him longer -"

"You talk about that?" Foster again, incredulous.

She shrugged. "Who else is he going to talk to?"

Cowley was beginning to see why Straker had married her.

She turned to him. "Mr Cowley, I'm sure you'll understand when I tell you that this is a small organisation, under-funded and unrecognised. We get no credit for what we do. We don't get particularly well paid. We run on loyalty and morale and my husband is centre of both. People round here think he walks on water. Now the opposition have him and I'm not even sure that they want information. If they can break him, really break him, they break all of us."

Freeman was nodding slowly.

Cowley also nodded. "I'll do my best."

There were still details to settle. His presence at the studio, it seemed, had been explained.

"You're here because we're lobbying for official approval for a CI5 TV series." Mrs Straker, it seemed, was in charge of the studio's cover. "The Home Secretary is in favour - good publicity. You aren't. That would also explain one of our people doing a ride along with your people and, if necessary, one of your people stationed at the studio." She smiled. "I used to be in PR so I'm rather good at lying."

Foster was appointed to return to CI5 with him and arrangements for communications



were set-up. He left a copy of his file with them but did not get theirs in return. They were very polite, friendly even but he was left in no doubt as to who was in charge and it rankled.

Mrs Straker walked him to the car while Foster got his things. "Mr Cowley, I can appreciate that this isn't easy for you. It isn't easy for us, either. We aren't used to working with other agencies and in the last six months - well, it's been a bit of a disaster. Ed's been in hospital once, Alec twice, I've got pregnant -"

Cowley cleared his throat. "Wouldn't you be better at home?"

"Alone and bored? I'm safer here as well as more use."

Over her shoulder he could see Foster coming out of the offices accompanied by Freeman - who, when he finally arrived, apologised for his slowness.

"Stupid thing means I'm stuck here all the time. I ought to be out there... Never mind."

"Professional injury?" Cowley inquired politely.

The big man shook his head and scowled. "Drunken driver as I was coming out of a restaurant. Didn't even get the number. Good job my date was a nurse... Look, Kate's probably already said this but we appreciate your co-operation and we'll try not to get in your way. Paul can make himself useful at your end and if there's anything he can't do, just ask. All we want is that you do what you're good at and find Ed."

Cowley nodded. He was not sure if he trusted these people but he liked them. He shook hands and got into the car, wondering who - if anyone - would be bothered if he disappeared.

\* \* \*

The two colonels watched the car depart, then walked slowly back towards SHADO's underground base, their pace dictated by Freeman's injury.

"What do you reckon?" he asked.

She paused. "He's got a good reputation and personally, I like him. He could have been a lot more touchy over our muscling in."

Freeman shrugged, as far as he could on the crutches. "We were straight with him."

"He doesn't know that. And I noticed you let me do most of the talking. I'm... non-threatening, aren't I?"

He smiled, a slightly sad smile. "I'm not so sure about that."

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Cowley decided not to pump the young man, Foster, for information until there was something he really needed to know. It would be interesting to see what he could get out of him but he also had no desire to antagonise them - and the Home Secretary - unless absolutely necessary. Getting rid of Manley was the important thing...

He remembered Straker's pregnant wife. Finding Straker, *that* was the important thing.

Foster followed him up to his office, where he called for Bodie and Doyle to join them. They were surprised to see a stranger there.

"Did I see you at the Christmas party?" Doyle asked.

Foster hesitated. "Were you with Nina?"

"Later on, yeah. Nice girl. Couldn't get in touch with her after."

Foster shrugged and smiled slightly. "I'm not surprised. She's one of our best location scouts. I can give her a message but -" He grinned. "- I'm not sure I want the competition."

Doyle smiled back.

Cowley gave his people a brief outline of what was really going on. "And that doesn't go outside this office. You have anything, you do not mention it to anyone except myself or Foster."

He could see Bodie and the man in the purple suit subconsciously squaring up to each other.

"Does that mean we take orders from him?" Bodie asked.

"No."

Foster looked at him, then shrugged. "My orders are to help, not to get in your way."

"We do have something." Doyle said, trying to get them back to business. "We don't know anything about Manley's client -" he shot a look at Foster, "- but we might have a lead on the middleman, Dawson."

That was a start. Manley had used Dawson before, a buffer between himself and the clients not to mention between himself and the authorities. The man was an ex solicitor and Doyle's police sources suggested that he was still in contact with one of his former colleagues.

"We were just going over there when you got back."

"Get moving, then." Cowley growled. "Foster?"

The man nodded and followed them out.

Cowley sat down to think things over.

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"You ever done this before?" Bodie asked casually.

"Yes, I have." Foster replied coolly.

"Only with you being a *film producer*..." He made it sound like some kind of pervert.

Doyle sighed. He wasn't exactly in favour of the quiet life but he did not want a war breaking out in the car. Nor did he want to be trying to keep the peace all the time when there was work to do.

He made an effort. "He's OK, your boss. I met him at the party. Struck me people respect him."

That got Foster's enthusiasm. "They do. He's saved my life more than once, times when other people might have wanted me dead. He's like that."

"Go on," Doyle said, "what do you really do?"

"I can't tell you that."

The conversation turned to Straker, Straker's wife, Cowley and others. It broke the ice, as Doyle had intended. He wanted to get on with these people. He shrugged mentally. Maybe he just liked to getting on with people full stop.

Except the villains, of course.

They were outside the offices of Barton and Caulfield, suburban solicitors. It was the end of the afternoon by now. The sun was setting and the staff were making their way out.

"That's him." Doyle said. "Dawson's friend."

"The one with the stupid tie?" Bodie replied.

"You can talk." Foster said.

Bodie laughed, a laugh that might have been ever so slightly menacing.

All three exited the car. Quickly and quietly they surrounded the man, isolating him from his fellows before they noticed that anything was happening.

"What going on?" the man asked, looking around as they shoved him into the car but not calling out for help.

Bodie smiled wolfishly. "I think you're being kidnapped."

"Me? Don't be stupid." At least he was taking it well. "Is this some kind of joke?"

They were driving away now.

Doyle pulled out his ID. "This is no joke. There's also no reason why you should be in

trouble if you don't want to be."

The man looked surprised but not especially troubled. "What could I possibly have that CI5 want?"

"You used to work with a man named Dawson. He dropped out of sight a few years ago but we hear you're still in touch. We'd like to know how."

There was no answer for a long moment and Doyle wondered if he would have to get heavy. Bodie was itching for it, he could see.

But in the end the man replied: "Why? What's he done?"

How much to tell him? "There's a real kidnap going on. We think he might have a lead on it."

Foster leaned towards him. "There's a woman who six months pregnant wondering if her child's going to have a father."

The man shook his head and Doyle thought -

"Reg Dawson has always been one for a fast buck. I never liked that about him, though he's good fun otherwise. I don't have an address except a *poste restant*. Sometimes he phones me."

He got out a pad and pen and wrote down have the address of the tobacconist. "What else do you want?"

"Do you have anything else?"

"Not really. Last thing I got from him was a birthday card and that didn't have a letter in it. Haven't seen him in two years."

They dropped him off at his flat. He agreed to let them bug his phone.

"What about other calls?"

Bodie grinned. "Got any talkative girlfriends?"

"I'll warn them to be careful."

"No." said Doyle. "You don't warn anyone."

He nodded.

They left him to it.

Foster turned back on the doorstep. "Thanks." he said. "We appreciate it."

\* \* \*

Straker knelt on the cellar floor as Manley walked silently round and round him, his suit brushing against Straker's skin. It was oddly threatening, an invasion of personal space.

Finally, another question. "What is Alec Freeman's date of birth?"

Straker said nothing, remained still.

The whip came down across his shoulder, another welt amongst the many. He barely reacted.

Manley began walking again.

Straker had decided on his strategy early on. What Manley told him to do, he did: stand, sit, kneel, do press-ups. None of that mattered. He simply did not answer questions, no matter how innocuous. Nothing.

"What are the specifications of your computer system?"

Another blow.

He shuddered. The policy had won him short rests and allowed him to keep the blanket. He needed that, it was cold in here. He was yet to win any food, though Manley allowed him just enough water to keep him going. He needed the food, needed it desperately, but he would have to give up too much to get it.

"Who is Colonel Lake currently seeing?"  
The beating went slowly on.

## Day four

Lunchtime in a semi-squalid, suburban shopping street.

Doyle had got the cushy job, ensconced in the cafe across the road for the tobacconists. It was not the Ritz but his mixed grill was well cooked and the waitress was friendly enough, if not exactly giving him a come-on. She must have worked out that something was going on, he had been there since they opened, but she did not appear to mind.

Foster was sat in the car. Bodie had drawn the short straw and was left to hang about, trying to look inconspicuous. Not an easy thing for Bodie. He breezed in a few moments later, ignoring his partner and walking up to the counter.

"You do takeaways, love?"

"Certainly. You can take it as far away as you like."

"That's not very friendly."

"Depends where you want to take it."

"Your place?"

"What's your order?"

Bodie chuckled throatily. "I'd like a -"

Doyle had got distracted but as he glanced out of the window he was on his feet. Dawson. They had got lucky, it might have taken weeks not hours. Now they just had to make sure they seized the luck.

Foster had the car running. Doyle was not sure if Dawson had a vehicle or had arrived on foot. He drank the last of his coffee and walked slowly out, trying to time it so that he hit the pavement the same time that the target did on the other side of the road. He judged it about right. He could feel Bodie behind him.

Dawson walked back the way he had come and got into a green Vauxhall. The two CI5 men hurried for their Capri.

"It's not much of the car, is it?" Foster complained. "Still, I suppose it's inconspicuous."

"What do you drive?" Bodie was miffed.

"Just follow the car," Doyle said. "You do this in your job?"

"Normally in a plane."

That caused a slight pang of jealousy. If it was true.

It was, as they had suspected, a long drive and for the first ten minutes or so Dawson took precautions. Foster did a competent job of keeping out of sight without losing the car. After that, Dawson took off. They were out into the country, the traffic thinning - which was both a help and a hindrance.

It took them about an hour to reach the house, a small Thirties semi on the edge of a village. Dawson parked on the drive and went in.

"You think he's alone?" Doyle asked.

Bodie shrugged. "Let's find out."

Foster nodded. He parked around the corner. "I'll take the front door, I look presentable."

"Presentable?" Bodie protested. "Besides, he might know who you are."

Foster grunted with frustration, then agreed. "Give me five minutes to get into the garden."

They did, then the two of them stood on Dawson's doorstep and rang the bell.

"Think we look like Jehovah's Witnesses?" Bodie asked.

"You could pass for a nun."

Bodie gave him a look but there was no time to reply. The door opened, chain on.

Up close, Dawson was a weedy little man in his late Thirties, prematurely middle-aged. His voice was thin and reedy.

"Yes?"

Bodie spoke, full of himself as usual. "Good afternoon. We're from the local library service, checking up on unreturned books. I believe you have some that have been due back for, ooow, three months?"

Dawson glared at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Bodie shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry you're taking that attitude. We have an amnesty on at the moment. No fines. So if you could just let us in to look for..." He turned to Doyle. "What were the titles again?"

Doyle scowled at him, thinking that if that was his line they should have dug out a clipboard and glasses - not to mention an elderly spinster with a bun. "*Quantum Mechanics Made Easy, Lady Chatterley's Lover and International Terrorism - How To Get Involved.*"

Dawson looked from him to Bodie and back, then slammed the door shut. Too late. Bodie was in the middle of shoulder-charging it. The wood around the chain splintered but held.

Dawson ran for the back of the house while the two of them attempted to kick the door in. It took several seconds.

"Hope Foster knows what he's doing." Bodie commented, puffing with effort.

"He's got the incentive. What would you do with if it was Cowley?"

But there was no time for a reply. The door was open and they split up to search the place. Dawson might not have gone for the backdoor and might not be alone in the house. Doyle grinned. Manley. Or better yet, Straker himself. Sometimes you got lucky.

He went up the stairs three at a time, swinging his gun around to cover the landing. Four doors, two open. The nearest was closed. He seized the handle and flung it wide. Bathroom, empty.

The next three went open, closed, open. Do them in order? That risked someone sneaking out of the closed one.

There were sounds of a scuffle downstairs and he really wanted to be there.

He took the next door. Office. Might be some useful papers but no people. Then two bedrooms. Clear.

He hurried downstairs. Dawson lay motionless at Foster's feet.

Doyle feared the worst. "You didn't -"

"Of course not." Foster snapped. "We need him alive. At the moment."

Doyle was not too sure about the way he said that. Still, in his shoes...

Bodie emerged from the kitchen. "There's a cellar. Want to take a look?"

That sounded promising. They handcuffed Dawson to the crossbar of a table and went on. Bodie open the door slowly, quietly. There was no sound from below, no light. Cold air lay heavy.

Quietly they moved down the stairs. Doyle could just about make out a door at the bottom.. Good place to keep prisoners.

Bodie kicked the door open.

The room was full of junk, not people. No Manley, no Straker.

Doyle sighed. They had Dawson and there might be something in the office.

He sighed again. "Let's get back to HQ."

\* \* \*

Things were not going well at the bleak building that was CI5 HQ. A team had done a

preliminary search of Dawson's office and found nothing, nothing at all of any use. Of course these people were careful. They had been in operation long enough.

Dawson had come round but he was not co-operating. He had said nothing. Doyle had no idea if he had faith that Manley would rescue him or was simply terrified of him. As it was, he was sitting stubbornly silent.

Foster had gone off to make a call to his people. He had muttered something about effective methods. Somehow that gave Doyle the cold shivers. CI5 had a reputation - partly deserved - but no one even knew these people existed. What could they get up to?

He was surprised when it was nice Mrs Straker who came. He went down to meet her. She was just entering, followed by a very burly chauffeur.

He jogged down the last few steps. "Mrs Straker? I don't suppose -"

She looked up at him. "Ray, isn't it? You were at the Christmas party."

He felt surprisingly pleased that she remembered him. "That's right. I wanted to say... I wanted to say how sorry I am about your husband. We will find him."

She smiled. "I'm sure you will."

He gave her his arm to lead her upstairs. Foster had said she was pregnant but he had not realised quite how round she would be. He was not used to being with pregnant women. How delicate was she? If he was one of her people, he would be scared in case she lost the baby. She was not exactly petite but there was something fragile about her.

She leaned on his arm as they went upstairs to the cells.

Cowley was waiting outside Dawson's cell. "Mrs Straker, are you sure you want to see him?"

"Yes."

He paused a moment, sizing her up. Then he opened the door.

Dawson was sat on the far side of a plain wooden table. He was tense but did not have that look about him that said he was going to break. Foster was standing in the corner, arms folded, looking at him. Bodie was perched on the edge of the table, invading Dawson's personal space. They all looked round when the door opened.

Foster stepped forward. "Kate, you shouldn't be here."

"Where else should I be?" she asked. "I understand he's being difficult. Alec's in two minds about the... technological approach." She smiled apologetically at Cowley. "Pushing security a little."

Cowley nodded. "It's your decision but -"

She held up her hand and he stopped, waiting.

She turned to Foster. "Are you armed, Paul?"

"Of course."

"Give it to me, please."

He hesitated. "You don't outrank me."

She was quite calm. "It's not an order, it's a request."

Doyle could see him trying not to pull a face. He handed her the gun, though.

"Thank you."

She took the pistol, checking the clip smoothly and calmly removing its safety catch. Then she turned to Dawson.

"Do you know who I am?"

He shook his head, his eyes fixed on her. She seemed to be the still centre of the room, even though she was moving more than anyone else.

She carried on. "My name is Straker, Kate Straker, and your associate Mr Manley is currently torturing my husband. Can you think of any good reason why I shouldn't kill you?"

There was no anger in her voice, no passion at all. She was like ice.

Dawson was staring at her, mouth half open.

She raised the gun. "Can you, Mr Dawson?"

"You can't." he babbled. "You can't."

"Who's going to stop me?"

Doyle almost spoke then - he did not want her to kill in cold blood - but something about her manner stopped him. He looked around the room. Bodie was wearing a slight, feral smile. He was enjoying this. Foster looked vaguely angry, half ready to step forward - whether to stop her or help her was not clear. Cowley was frowning slightly but his body language was relaxed.

Still Dawson stared at her. "You can't do this."

The gun was level with his forehead. Her finger slowly pulled the trigger back.

"Hertfordshire, he's in Hertfordshire."

Her finger stopped but did not relax. "Go on."

"That's all I know. Manley never tells me where he is - it's a security precaution - and he won't contact me until he's finished. And I don't know where you can find the client, either. He came to me. He said he'd come back next week."

"You must have more than that."

"No locations, honest, just odds and ends."

She nodded and lowered the gun. "Give it up or I'll be back."

She returned the gun to Foster and walked out of the room. Cowley followed her. Doyle stayed behind to see what else they could get.

\* \* \*

Cowley followed Mrs Straker out. She was leaning with her back against the wall, breathing hard. For the first time he noticed how pale she looked.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She nodded. "Just a little tired." Then she grinned. "Don't ever get pregnant, Mr Cowley, it throws your whole system out."

He smiled at the joke. "In my case, I think it would."

She looked at him. "You're not married, are you?"

He shook his head and then felt an unaccountable twinge of loneliness. "Perhaps you'd better come to my office for a drink before you go back." He paused. "You are going back?"

"I'd like to stay until they're finished, if you don't mind. I don't think they'll be very long."

He took her to his office and settled her in an armchair. He was about to offer her a whisky when he remembered that she had not drunk when they had met before. "Do I take it you're off alcohol while you're expecting?"

"Actually I'm teetotal, the same as my husband."

He was not sure if that meant she did not drink because of her husband or simply that she held the same views. "Tea, then?"

She smiled. "I could murder a coffee, though I'm supposed to lay off caffeine in my condition. We're all addicted to it at work, I'm afraid." Then her face turned wistful. "I promised I'd do all the right things if Ed would lay off reading every book he could find on complications. He always worries about me."

Cowley thumbed the intercom and ordered the coffee. If she had been simply the wife of



a kidnap victim or simply a fellow security operative he would have known how to deal with her but the fact that she was both - at least he thought she was - threw him. She was calm and professional but she has obviously suffering.

He had to ask. "Would you have killed him?"

She looked away. He was not sure if that was a yes or no but he suspected it was the former. Nor was he sure whether he would have stopped her.

The coffee arrived and, oddly, talk turned to the CI5 TV series she was using for cover. She had a plan thought-out in such detail that he wondered out loud if that was all it was.

"I have to keep my brain occupied. Would you give us the go-ahead?"

He thought about it. It would be an odd situation to be in. "How realistic would you make it?"

"No long, boring stake-outs. And not much in the way of paperwork, though I gather you aren't big on that anyway. We'd have to tone down some things and jazz up others but pretty realistic, I think. Ray and his friend would make good models for the leads. But don't you have any highly placed women?"

She carried on, making a very persuasive case. He would have to turn her down of course - unless the Home Secretary really did decide to back the idea - but for the moment he let her run on. As she said, it was keeping her mind off other things.

There was a knock at the door and Foster walked in. "We think we've got everything. Bodie and Doyle are putting him away. I'm afraid he can't narrow the location down closer than Hertfordshire."

"Could be worse," Kate sighed, "could be Yorkshire."

Foster shot her a look. "Seems he's almost on the studio's doorstep."

That made a kind of sense. Why take someone to the ends of the earth when you can lose them effectively in their own back yard? And from their own point of view it would be easier to throw resources into a close, reasonably small county. The fact that it was in the densely populated South East might work for or against them. Cowley sent out a call for any unusual incidents reported in the area. Then he looked at the two people in front of him. He still did not even know the name of the organisation they worked for.

"You'll excuse me if I'm blunt but Mr Straker has been gone for nearly four days. How do you think he's holding up?"

"He'll be fine." Foster said tightly. "We just have to find him."

Cowley was not sure whether he totally believed that or whether it was simply loyalty.

Mrs Straker took her time. "From reading the file I understand that if Manley had broken him -"

"How can you say that?" Foster was furious.

She was quiet, very quiet. "Let me finish, Paul."

"How can you betray him -"

"He's human." she snapped back. "He's a man. He suffers. Oh boy does he suffer. And no, I don't think he's broken yet. I'm not sure Manley can break him but have you read the file? Have you read what he's done? There's only three possible outcomes, Paul. We find him, he breaks or he dies. If we're not realistic, it's not going to be the first one."

She stared him down.

He turned away. "Maybe. But I bet he's got them outsmarted."

"I hope so."

Cowley found that he hoped so too.

\* \* \*

Ed Straker sat huddled in the corner of the cellar, knees up to his chest and arms over his eyes so that he could not see the walls closing in.

He knew Bates, one of the guards, was watching him from the far corner. Manley and Parker, the other one, had gone away. For good, he forlornly hoped.

He shivered and was vaguely surprised he still could. He had lost the blanket. He had failed to complete the fifty press-ups Manley had set for him and then had not taken his beating like a good boy but had vainly tried to argue. So Manley had taken the blanket. At least the cold numbed the pain, if not the hunger.

He resettled himself, curling up on the floor, and tried to sleep. If he slept, he might dream of something good. Of Kate.

## Day five

"You are nothing."

Manley's voice was calm as he brought the whip down across his prisoner's shoulders.

*Kate*, Straker thought.

"You are no one"

The blow landed across his chest.

*Kate*.

"You have no validity."

Across his legs.

*Kate*.

"There is no reason for your existence."

Groin.

*Kate*.

\* \* \*

Everything was ticking over with its normal efficiency in the SHADO HQ control room, despite the air of quiet anxiety. No one was going to let the Commander or Colonel Freeman down now.

Freeman himself was prowling around, as far as anyone could prowl in a plaster cast. He had hardly been above ground in days, hardly slept, and it was getting to him.

Keith Ford was receiving one of the regular check-in calls from Moonbase. Freeman wandered over to speak to Gay Ellis. As he did so the screen fizzed, spluttered and went black as Ford punched buttons in an attempt to stabilise the transmission.

Freeman exploded. "Ford, you moron, how the hell do you manage to lose a routine call?"

Ford looked up, shocked.

The whole room went silent.

Behind him, Freeman heard a quiet, warning voice. "Alec."

It was Kate.

He looked from her sad face to Ford's.

He took a deep breath. "Sorry, Keith. My fault."

Ford managed an understanding smile. "That's all right, sir. We're all feeling a bit below par."

The two colonels made their way into the commander's office.

Freeman threw himself down in the chair, then winced. "I guess Ford bashing goes with the job."

Kate smiled tightly. "I think he's used to it. We're all tense. Did Paul tell you we had a stand-up row in front of Cowley yesterday?"

Freeman took a deep breath. "No but he told me you threatened to shoot a suspect in cold blood."

She scowled. "Honestly, he's behaving like the classroom sneak. What did I ever do to annoy him?"

"Stole his thunder. He thought he was guaranteed as number three here until you came along."

The scowled deepened. "I do the studio, I'm no threat to him."

Freeman shrugged. "I didn't think he'd take it like this but if he's not careful, he'll turn into a proper little Henderson."

He turned away a moment, wondering whether this was the right time to broach a subject

he had been thinking about. "Kate, if the worst does happen - and I don't believe it will -"

"But it might one day. Go on."

"If it did and if I got the top job - Lord knows I don't want it -"

"More to the point, Ed knows."

"If it happened, would you consider becoming my second in command?"

She stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"Perfectly. Though I know this isn't exactly the best time."

She looked away, then back. "Have you discussed this with Ed?"

"Sort of. He knows you can do the job but it would look wrong for his wife to be his second in command. Me, I'd need you."

He almost hoped she would give him an outright no. The other reason Ed would never do it was because he loved her and could not bear to put her in danger. It was bad enough with her running the studio. That reason Ed and Alec shared but Freeman knew that he would need her should that evil day ever come.

Eventually she answered. "I'll tell you when the time comes. Things may be different then." She turned to go, then paused. "Alec, could you do me a favour? I'd rather Ed didn't know what happened between me and Dawson. It might upset him."

"You want me to lean on Paul?"

"Please."

\* \* \*

Ray Doyle was bored, more bored than he had been yesterday. No one seemed to know anything. They had checked every source, snitch and informant they had - not just about Manley but now also about things going on in Hertfordshire - and had drawn a total blank. They had pumped Dawson dry of info. Now all he kept talking about was Mrs Straker. Something about her had scared the life out of him.

Doyle shrugged mentally. At least it had made him co-operative.

Now they were reduced to cruising around the semi-rural delights of the Home Counties.

Doyle was surprised. Some parts, like Hitchin, were built up but here - only a few miles off the end of the Tube route - they were in farmland. At times there were no buildings in sight down the winding lanes, only high hedges, trees and crops. It was all very relaxing - if they had not been looking for a man being tortured.

They called in at the police station in Berkhamsted. The sergeant they spoke to was mightily impressed with their credentials, even more so when he found out that Foster was in the movies.

"I've done the studio tour. Went with our local Round Table. We saw... What did we see? We saw *Night of the Cobra* being made. It was funny to see it at the pictures after."

They were getting nowhere.

\* \* \*

Cowley paid a courtesy call to the studio.

"We're not getting anywhere, are we?" Freeman asked.

The CI5 man could understand his frustration. "We're closer to Manley than we've ever been."

"We're no closer to Ed!" The big man took a deep breath. "Sorry. I'm snapping at everyone today."

"I don't blame you. Tell me, what is your actual rank?"

Freeman gave him a sharp look. "Why are you trying to distract me?"

Cowley chuckled. "Among other things, I'm curious. Do you outrank me?"

Freeman was obviously choosing his words carefully. "Depends how you look at it. You have your own organisation, I'm a second in command."

"But?"

"But your military intelligence rank was major and I'm a colonel. So are Paul, Kate and Ginny Lake."

"So you could order me around." It was not exactly a question.

"I could do that because of our mandate but where would it get me? I've no interest in making enemies."

Cowley shook his head. "I'm sorry I couldn't be more use."

Freeman shrugged. "You've done your best. You've found more than we have. And we still have a little time."

\* \* \*

Straker had retreated back to his corner, trying to think about the good things: Kate, the baby, Alec. He would be going home soon, he told himself.

Manley walked in. Parker stood up briskly. Straker pushed himself wearily to his feet, leaning against the wall.

Manley looked at him coldly. "I've been listening to the radio. Your wife's dead. Lost the baby too, I think, but it didn't give much detail. Complications to the pregnancy. After all, she wasn't very famous. Now, shall we get on?"

The world froze.

Manley kept on speaking but Straker was not aware of him, of anyone.

Kate. Dead.

Was it possible?

Was it shock, the stress of his being kidnapped? She was - had been - pregnant.

She had made him give up his medical textbooks: "You are a hypochondriac by proxy and I will not have you plaguing me for nine months."

Kate. Dead.

He could not go on without her.

Was it true? Could she have been ill before and not told him? Could he have been too busy to notice?

Kate. Dead.

Maybe.

He had to know.

The blows fell again and again on his weakened body but he hardly felt them. The pain was inside.

## Day six

Straker came back to consciousness slowly and reluctantly, though at first he could not remember why. Then it struck him.

Cold.

Hunger.

Pain.

*Kate.*

Was she dead? Was she?

His empty stomach clenched. There was no way to find out.

A peculiar sound interrupted his thoughts. It was coming from the far side of the room.

Snoring. Bates was snoring, slumped in his chair.

Straker pulled himself awkwardly to his feet. In all the time he had been here - and he had very little idea how long that was - he had never been left alone. This was as close as he had got.

He walked shakily over to the sleeping guard. He smiled as he stood over him. It was a stupid idea. He was too weak and confused... Yet the fact he could register that he was confused reassured him.

This was the only chance he was going to get. He had to take it.

He raised his hand and struck Bates across the back of the neck. The man fell forwards to the floor, his head dropping at an unlikely angle.

Straker blinked. He had not intended to kill him.

It was not a problem. Even if Manley came looking for revenge, what else could he do?

He needed clothes. He manhandled the jumper from Bates' corpse. The man was big and he was weak, it took a long time. He could not stop to get the trousers. He slipped the jumper over his head. The wool was rough against his broken skin but it hung down to the middle of his thighs and he felt warmer already.

The shoes would have been useful but they were several sizes too big. He shook his head. They would only get in the way.

He went through the man's pockets. No gun. He had not expected one. No wallet. Must have left it in a safe place. There was only one useful item: his keys, so Straker took those.

He moved to the door and unlocked it. Walking was a problem. Anything was a problem. He was running on desperation alone. How far would that get him?

The door led out onto a short corridor with another door opposite and a flight of steps at the end. He did not bother checking the other room but hurried upwards towards the next locked door. This, he knew, led to the outside. He had followed the route in his head as he was brought down here.

It was good to breathe fresh air again and it was slightly warmer here than in the cellar. He pressed himself up against the wall as he looked around. He was at the back of the house, gazing across an overgrown lawn towards a solid hedge with woods beyond.

Perhaps it would be best to work his way around the side of the house if he could avoid the windows. There was more likely to be a main road at the front. Even as he thought that, a harsh barking started up. Dogs, three or four by the sound of it.

There was no time to lose. He thought the dogs must be tied up or they would be on him by now but even so, if there was anyone in the house they must soon come to check on them.

There was a small gap in the hedge. That was the way. He stumbled across the lawn and pushed himself through the tall growth. The twigs caught at him, scratching him and

threatening to imprison him. He lent all his meagre strength to the task, sobbing in despair as it seemed he was trapped once again.

In a moment he was through and running in the woods. The debris on the ground cut at his feet and he needed to catch at the trees and bushes in order to stay upright. He flung the keys away. If he was recaptured, there was no way he would be able to hide them.

He felt stronger now he could taste freedom but he knew he could not keep going for long. Still he kept on, running and stumbling. He could hear the dogs behind him in the distance but they were fading.

He tripped, his foot catching on a fallen branch. He landed hard, crying out in shock.

He scrambled to rise but it was no use. He did not have enough strength left, so he crawled on his hands and knees. Anything to keep going.

His consciousness was wavering when he heard the sound of an engine up ahead. A road. Maybe he could flag down a car or find a house or... Or something.

He pulled himself back to his feet, clinging on to a low branch, and stumbled on.

A few moments later the woodland cleared and he found himself on the grass verge of the road. He could hear a car. He looked round. There, coming towards him.

He pulled himself up, stepped onto the tarmac and waved his arms. He could see the woman driver, see her shock. She would have to stamp on the brake.

She stamped on the accelerator, steering straight at him.

He threw himself aside.

The car drove on.

He lay on the grass, sobbing with pain and despair. There was no hope now, nothing left.

But he had to go on, even if it meant crawling along on his belly. He had to keep moving.

He raised his head and looked around. There was woodland on both sides of the road, which curved around the base of a hill on the far side. That meant he could not see far in either direction. There was no more traffic and no indication of buildings. To his right, however, at the edge of his vision was a splash of red. A phone box. Hope.

He crawled and stumbled, crawled and stumbled the hundred yards or so towards it. Finally he was pulling the door open.

Then it struck him. No cash. He had no money on him.

Think. *Think*. But that was almost impossible, the state he was in.

He could dial 999.

Or...

He dialled the operator then, clutching the receiver, sank to the dirty floor, his back propped up against the glass.

It was hard to speak and he found he had to be very deliberate about it. "I want to make a reverse charges phone call."

"Certainly sir. What number are you calling from?"

He groaned as he pushed himself to his feet again in order to read the number off the dial. Then he gave her the number of his own office. A moment later he could hear her speaking to a familiar voice, asking if she would take the call.

"Miss Ealand, it's me." he shouted.

He could hear her gasp of shock but she recovered quickly. "Sir? Is that you? Yes, thank you, I'll take the call. Goodbye. Sir, I'm putting you through to Mr Freeman."

Then he could hear her speaking indistinctly on the other line and a moment later he was through to Alec.

\* \* \*

Miss Ealand was on the intercom, more excited than Alec Freeman had ever heard her. "Sir, he's on the line."

"Who is?"

"Mr Straker, sir. Reverse charges call from a phone box. I'm putting him through."

Freeman swallowed hard, feeling as if he was about to have a heart attack. *Why am I surprised? This is Ed.*

"Get it traced. Call Cowley. Call Kate. Put me through."

"Yes sir."

He heard the click as she switched him over. He had to clear his throat before he was able to speak. "Ed? Is that you? Where are you?"

The reply was weak and hoarse, the voice of the man pushed beyond endurance. "Don't know. Don't know where I am."

Freeman tried to keep his voice calm. "Doesn't matter. We're having the call traced and we've got the general area. Just keep talking."

"Don't know how long I can. They must know I'm gone. I killed one of them."

"Good for you. Look, if you can't tell me the name of the place, what does it look like?"

"Alec."

The voice stopped him, commanding even in its weakness. Ed wanted something.

"What is it?"

Now there was hesitation and he was sure it was not simply the product of weakness. "He... He told me..."

"Manley said something?"

"You wouldn't lie to me would you, Alec?"

Straker's desperation was heartbreaking. He tried to reassure him. "Of course not."

"Not even this?"

"You haven't told me what it is yet."

"He said... He said she died. She lost the baby and she died."

Freeman swore. The evil, cold-blooded, sadistic bastard. "It's not true, Ed, it's not true. She's fine. Worried about you of course but she's fine. She'll be here in a moment."

"You wouldn't lie to me? Promise?"

"Honest, Ed. How can I convince you? If you just hang on she'll be here."

Ed did not reply and Alec wondered if he had passed out. "Can you hear me? Tell me what the place looks like."

There was a gasp at the other end of the line. "Dogs. Dogs. They found me. Mustn't know I was here."

"Ed!"

But he had hung up.

Kate was banging on the door. "Is it true?"

"He's hung up. But it was him." He fell like hugging her but he could never allow himself that luxury.

She gave a great sigh of relief. "Was he alright? No, stupid question. Where is he?"

He turned to the intercom to ask Miss Ealand that question. He longed to be there, to find Ed but his leg made him a liability. It ought to be the same for Kate in her condition but Ed needed to see her. He told her, briefly, what Manley had said.

A dark anger came over her face. "Good psychologist, that one. Seems to have backfired,



though."

Miss Ealand was reading out the location and telling him that Cowley was on the line. He took the call.

\* \* \*

Straker hung up the phone. He had a vain hope that they would not see where he had been but already he could hear the barking of the dogs. Not pets, these were hunters and he was the quarry.

He ran, crossing the road and plunging into the woods beyond. That was uphill, harder. He could barely breathe.

He tripped again, falling headlong. He cried out, somewhere between a gasp and a sob.

His leg had twisted. It was back to hands and knees. Even that... He dragged himself slowly on.

The dogs were getting closer, much closer. He kept moving but he knew the game was up. They had him.

The barking changed to a growl. He heard the gallop of padded feet directly behind him. His leg was seized between jagged teeth. Someone was shouting.

Straker blacked out.

\* \* \*

"Alpha One to 3.7. and 4.5.. We have a location. Straker's made a call from a phone box -"

Doyle snatched up the handset of the car radio. "He's done what?"

"You heard. A phone box just south of a village called Potten End." Cowley gave him a map reference. "However, he may have been recaptured."

Bodie had already swung the car around in a sharp turn and was roaring off down the road. "Nobody escapes from Manley."

"Ed does," Foster told them.

Doyle shrugged. "Ed does."

\* \* \*

Straker faded in and out of consciousness, not wanting to come round. He was being dragged across the road, through the woods. He was on the drive of the house. Parker was chaining up the dogs.

He passed out again.

\* \* \*

Kate Straker was flexing and unflexing her hand on the handle of the car door. She was being driven the few miles to the phone box at a speed that was barely within the law.

Soon. She would see him soon.

Her other hand rested over their unborn child.

\* \* \*

Cowley was on his way from central London. He wanted to be there. He wanted to catch Manley red handed.

He wanted to see Straker.

\* \* \*

Cold water in his face. His head slapped backwards and forwards.

"Wake up! Wake up!"

He had to obey. He opened his eyes slowly. Straker was kneeling on the cellar floor, held up by Parker. They had removed the jumper he was wearing and he was cold.

He groaned.

Manley threw more water in his face. "You're with us? Welcome back."

He gestured to Parker, who thrust their prisoner towards Bates' corpse.

"It seems -" Manley said - "that I've been too lenient with you."

Parker dragged Straker up - one hand on his neck, the other around his wrists - and threw him across the table, winding him once more. He started to slip towards the floor but Parker caught and held him.

Manley held the whip once more. He did not bother to speak, he simply brought it down again and again and again.

Straker lay there, knowing all he could do was endure. He had used up the last of his strength.

The pain would put him out soon or he would die.

Again and again.

But it had been worth it. He had nearly made it. And he knew now. He believed Alec. Kate was alive.

\* \* \*

The Capri squealed to a stop by the phone box. There was, as they expected, no sign of anyone.

Doyle and Foster went to the phone box. There was dirt and what might have been blood but nothing to indicate the direction.

Bodie was casting about on the edge of the woods. He bent to look at a bush, then turned to call the others.

"Does he know what he's doing?" Foster asked.

Doyle grinned. "Him? He grew up in the jungle. He'd give Tarzan a run for his money."

"I'll take your word for it."

They jogged along the road.

"This way." Bodie told them.

Doyle ran back to the car for the most detailed map. "There's a farmhouse."

"Come on then." Foster pushed past, gun in hand.

Bodie in turn pushed past him. "My job. You can go in first when we get there."

Doyle was still at the car, radioing Cowley. Then he joined them and they entered the woods.

They moved swiftly. Within a few minutes Doyle could see the outline of the house through the trees. A big, old, red-brick place. Maybe a hundred or a hundred and fifty years old. Moments later they were standing by a tall hedge which was broken through in one place. There were a couple of strands of wool hanging from twigs. Someone had come this way.

In the distance Doyle could hear a car pull up. Pushing through the hedge, he ran towards the front of the house. He stuck close to the bushes. There were four Alsatian chained up at the side of the house. They were no direct threat if he kept away from them but they were barking fit to burst. They had to give the game away.

He did not recognise the car that had pulled up at the far end of the long drive but he knew the driver, Mrs Straker's burly bodyguard. He thought he could see her in the back.

A moment later, Cowley's familiar Rover came to an unusually sedate halt from the opposite direction, driven by the ever competent Betty.

Doyle and his companions met up with the others in the shelter of a massive, battered clump of pampas grass.

"Can't be certain -" Bodie said - "but there's a door at the back that looks like it goes down to a cellar. I reckon that's our best bet."

Cowley nodded. With Mrs Straker's permission he dispatched the two drivers to cover the front and rear of the house. Then he turned to the woman.

"I don't suppose I can stop you going in?"

"No but I'll keep to the back." She pulled a gun from her pocket. "Are we ready, gentlemen?"

Doyle smiled at her as they made their way back to the cellar door. Foster tried the handle. It was not locked, something Doyle was faintly surprised at. He wondered if they had got the right place. The door opened onto steps and a bare corridor with two more doors, one on either side.

Guns raised, the five of them hurried downstairs.

One door was ajar. Through it they could hear muffled sounds, sounds like those of a beating though there were no cries of pain. All Doyle could hear in that line were perhaps the quietest of moans.

They were ready to go in.

Foster kicked the door opened. "Drop that. Step back. Hands up."

Doyle and Bodie were through the door. A big thug was holding the limp form of a naked man across the table. Manley was on the other side, whip raised. He dropped it, attempting to go for a gun.

Foster was on him, slamming him up against the far wall.

The thug raised his hands, letting his prisoner slide to the floor. Bodie was covering him.

In the corner lay what appeared to be the dead body of another thug.

Cowley and Mrs Straker were in now. She gave a little cry and rushed to her husband, sliding to the floor to cradle him in her arms.

He was a mess. He was painfully thin, dirty and the whole of his body was criss-crossed by welts. His back was particularly badly cut up. His head had been roughly shaved, leaving two or three tufts of hair that were stiff with sweat. That also revealed what looked like an old scar that completely encircled his brow. He lay now in his wife's arms, his eyes half open and his lips moving.

She was whispering in his ear. Then she took hold of his hand and rested it on her distended stomach.

Cowley was slipping off his overcoat and for the first time Doyle noticed how cold it was. Cowley handed the coat to Mrs Straker and she wrapped it around her husband.

The situation was contained, except - except for the look on Foster's face. The look as he twisted Manley's arm up behind his back. The look that said he was likely to kill him.

Doyle moved towards him. "I'll see to him. You look after your boss."

Foster looked at him, then back to Manley. Then he smiled gratefully and moved away.

Soon the ambulance was there, the van to take the prisoners and the hearse. Straker *had* killed one of them.

"Good for him." said Bodie.

Doyle nodded. "I'm impressed."

There was another siren in the distance, coming towards them.

"You think that's anything to do with us?" Doyle asked his partner.

Bodie shrugged. But it was something to do with them. A moment later a police car pulled up and two rather confused looking uniformed officers got out. The two CI5 men went to meet

them.

Doyle pulled out his ID. He rather objected to letting Bodie handle any police matters. "Can I help you, fellas?"

The policeman looked at each other, that look they always seemed to get when CI5 were involved.

One of them spoke. "We had a report from a lady motorist. She said some bloke tried to get her to stop her car. Mad looking, only wearing a jumper and had his head shaved. She said she drove straight at him. Seeing as this is the only house in the immediate vicinity..."

Doyle sighed. "We're clearing up after a kidnapping - it sounds like she nearly mowed down the victim. Give me a minute and I'll tell you all about it."

## Day seven

Cowley was not exactly sure why he went to the Mayland Hospital the next day. Some kind of *memento mori*, perhaps. Remember, you too can be broken. Because there could be no real doubt, the condition he was in, that Straker had been broken. And yet...

And yet there had been the phone call and the dead body in the cellar. Perhaps, Cowley told himself, he wanted to believe that the man had come through that unbroken.

Straker was in a pleasant, private room that was filled with flowers. He lay still and pale on the bed, hooked up to drips and monitors. His wife was by his side, gently stroking his cheek.

She pulled her hand away as Cowley entered. "Mr Cowley, how nice to see you. I've just been telling Ed how much help you've been."

Cowley cleared his throat, suddenly embarrassed. "That's my job."

She smiled at him, then at her husband. "I expect you have things to discuss and I'm due at an antenatal clinic. Have to get things back to normal."

She breezed past Cowley. "I expect I'll see you later. Don't tire him out."

There was an awkward silence after she had gone, then for the first time the two men's eyes met. Straker's eyes were ice blue, clouded by pain and medication but intelligent and alive and Cowley knew, knew for a certainty, that he had not broken. It might be a long, hard road back but Straker would make it. But that was what Cowley had hoped to find and had not dared admit to himself. Then again, he did have Mrs Straker to lean on.

Straker raised a hand and weakly gestured him to a chair. "I gather I should thank you."

Cowley shrugged. "Just doing my job."

"That was your coat? I don't remember much."

Cowley nodded.

"That's more than the job." Straker lapsed into silence, apparently exhausted.

Cowley did not like to bother him further but: "Mr Straker, I should like some answers."

Straker managed a slight smile. "You shouldn't have the ones you've got. We'll consider those a professional courtesy."

"You make it sound like you could take them away."

Straker just looked at him.

There was nothing further to say. Cowley left him to sleep.

Outside in the corridor he met Alec Freeman.

"Mr Cowley, nice of you to come."

He smiled. "Professional courtesy. How long do you think you'll be with Manley?"

"We're nearly finished."

Cowley raised an eyebrow. "Already?"

Freeman smiled, a smile his prisoner might not appreciate. "We're good at getting answers. If you've got a list of questions..."

He let it hang, left Cowley remembering Kate Straker with a gun. If CI5 could go further than most, how far could these secret people go?

He nodded. "I'll send it to you."

There was nothing else.

Freeman put his hand on the door knob.

"I think he's sleeping." Cowley said.

The big man smiled gently. "I won't disturb him."

He went inside and Cowley walked away, thinking that he would never know the name of

the group these people worked for. Part of him was insatiably curious but part wanted to leave them far behind him.