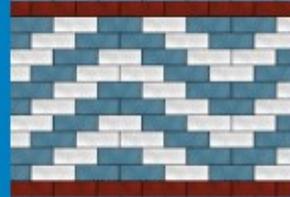


HOLBORN

Security Novels Series - Episode II



John M Upton

The Episodes of the Security Novels Series:

| | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Episode I - Hainault | Episode XI – Liverpool Street |
| Episode II - Holborn | Episode XII – Marylebone |
| Episode III – Waterloo | Episode XIII – Haychester |
| Episode IV - Moor Park | Episode XIV – Bank |
| Episode V – Westminster | Episode XV – Leytonstone |
| Episode VI – Victoria | Episode XVI – London Bridge |
| Episode VII – Embankment | Episode XVII – Cannon Street |
| Episode VIII – Earl’s Court | Episode XVIII – Bethnal Green |
| Episode IX – Lewisham | Episode XIX – Turnpike Lane |
| Episode X - Epping | |

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Episode XX – Star Lane
Episode XXI – St. James’s Park
Episode XXII - Aldwych

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Holborn

It was just like any other ordinary lorry, a blue Ford Cargo, the tatty remains of old sign writing on its slightly faded sides. Had there been anyone around, it is doubtful that they would have afforded it the slightest glance as it made its way discreetly through the quiet dark streets of the city of Haychester.

The clock of the magnificent city cathedral chimed in the twenty-third hour of the day as the lorry slowed outside the County Headquarters of the Department of National Security and Civil Defence, the United Nations inspired National Police Service that had been at the forefront of crime fighting in the United Kingdom for the last fifteen years.

As they slowly passed the entrance of the 1960's style concrete main building, the passenger, a man in his late fifties, greying hair matching an untrimmed moustache, leaned forward from his seat and looked out of the side window.

"Seems quiet enough, I think we can proceed," he muttered to the driver in a gravelly voice, having surveyed the fairly quiet scene in the distance. It appeared that some form of official function was coming to a close, but few people were now around.

"Let's go," said the passenger, tapping the driver on the shoulder. The lorry pulled away, making its way down the dual carriageway, across a deserted roundabout and around to the back entrance of the large site occupied by the Haychester Technology College.

The passenger got out of the lorry and walked over to the wooden gate that blocked their path. Looking around, he could see no one nearby so preceded to unlatch and pull open the gate. Once open, he gestured to the driver of the lorry who accelerated through, the passenger grabbing the open passenger door and climbing back in as it passed.

Although the site did have bulkhead style security lights, those that did have working bulbs were old and ineffective, effectively leaving it to the dipped headlights to pierce the darkness of the night, picking out the weaving narrow driveway that led to the rear entrance of the College's main technology block.

As they pulled up outside the entrance, the driver extinguished the truck's lights. "We have four minutes once we are through that door" the grey haired passenger informed both the driver and those waiting in the back of the lorry.

The passenger looked at his watch, straining to reflect any light off it in the darkness. "Let's go" he told the driver, who proceeded to move forward, turn then reverse the vehicle up against the doorway.

The passenger got out and walked briskly to the rear of the lorry. "Come on, out" he called to the occupants, raising the shutter type door with a characteristic loud clatter.

In moments ten people, all dressed in identical plain blue overalls and balaclavas joined him from the back of the lorry.

Two of the men carried between them a large case that was put on the ground adjacent to the main doorway. Opening the case revealed a complicated set of equipment, the key components of which appeared to be two thick black electrical cables on internally mounted reels, these having large electrical crocodile clips at their ends.

The second man who had carried the case from the lorry quickly identified a cable attached to the top of the doorframe. Using wire strippers produced from his pocket, he exposed two of the wires that ran through the cable before attaching one of each of the leads from the case to each of the exposed wires by means of the crocodile clips.

Jumping down he indicated to the man kneeling by the case that they were ready and then joined the others stood a little distance away. Using the controls within the case, the man kneeling set a voltage through turning a dial, then after releasing a red safety switch, pressed a large black button, unleashing first a magnetic burst down the cable followed within seconds by an electrical surge supplied by the large batteries built into the device.

The sparks emitted from where the crocodile clips made the connection soon died down and with that, the leader gave the signal to proceed.

Another member of the gang stepped forward and produced a lock picking kit before proceeded to work on the door, the expertise of this individual showed as despite the complexity of the lock, in just a few moments it was open and the group were making their way through the entrance hall to the elevator.

The light from the elevator shone out into the dark corridor as the doors opened on the second floor of the building. The grey haired man, the leader of the group, identified the group's target, a secure laboratory in the northwest corner of the building. At his signal, the group moved forward and into the laboratory. Shining torches through the wire glass window set into the door, they could see around the dark interior of the room, their light being concentrated on a stack of rigid equipment cases over by the windows.

"There should be eighteen cases, three manuals and a control unit," the leader instructed, consulting a list he had taken from his breast pocket as the door was opened. The others quickly set about lifting the heavy black cases, the corners capped with silver metal protective pieces.

Within a few minutes, the cases were being loaded into the lorry using its hydraulic tail lift. Whilst loading continued, two of the men watched the dark night surrounding the building, guns pointed outward in case of any unwanted interruption.

The driver watched in his rear view mirror as the last of the cases was loaded aboard and the men returned to the inside of the truck. The leader called in the two lookouts before hopping up on to the open tailgate of the lorry. He took one last look around, seeing that all was clear, he banged twice on the side of the lorry and at this signal, the vehicle departed again into the night.

Thursday 23rd December - Three Months Later

As Deputy Commanding Officer of the Department of National Security & Civil Defence's County Criminal Investigation Division of South Central Wessex, Commander Tracy Caverner was enjoying herself this week.

Her commanding officer, the legendary Commander and her closest friend and confidant, was off duty for the first time in what must have been years, attending the Security Department's annual conference in nearby Brighton. For the time being, the City of Haychester and surrounding district, its people, their security and safety, was all her responsibility.

With Christmas now only a few days away, the streets of the City were filled with the usual last minute shoppers even at this early hour, all seemingly oblivious to Tracy's presence as she pulled up outside the Cathedral Newsagent.

The bright red livery of Tracy's Security Department official motorcycle complemented the council's bright Christmas street decorations that were suspended over the main shopping streets, as well as the highly decorated window displays that dominated the shops in the area.

Tracy always loved this time of year, the Commander on the other hand hated Christmas, he usually wound up volunteering to cover all the duty shifts on Christmas day, this year however she was determined that this would change.

"Morning love" called the assistant as Tracy entered the newsagents. A copy of the local paper, the 'Haychester Gazette' was passed across the counter.

"You and your Guvnor have made the paper again" she announced cheerfully.

Tracy looked at the front page with slight hesitation. "Security Services Achieve Lowest Crime Figures in County" announced the headline.

"Ah!" Tracy mumbled.

"What's up?"

"Usually when they print a good announcement like that, all hell breaks loose within a day!"

Tracy handed her money across and took the paper before saying goodbye and leaving the shop.

As if to add weight to her prediction, the sound of sirens could be heard in the distance and getting closer as Tracy stood in the street. She reached over to the radio on her Harley Davidson and called in.

"Caverner - What's all the excitement?"

The control room back in the main headquarters building a little over half a mile away responded quickly despite that morning's sudden rush of activity.

"City museum has been turned over, Lieutenant Commander Longton is on his way".

"Right, Thanks" she responded as all thoughts of that quiet morning were consigned to oblivion.

The City's museum was housed in a small building in the most ancient central part; its ancient structure dating back to medieval times was almost a museum piece in itself.

Access to the building was a little restricted however as some unattended road workings were immediately adjacent to it forcing Tracy to swerve round them.

As she approached, even the usually dominant sound of her motorbike was drowned out by the incessant ringing of the burglar alarm.

"Can someone shut this alarm off?" she called. "Switch is stuck" came the reply from the Museum's Curator stood in the doorway covering her ears in protection against the deafening din.

"Right" Tracy had inherited some of the Commander's no nonsense approaches to such things and so was quick to deal with the problem. She drew her gun from its holster, pointed at the alarm box and fired twice. The alarm fell silent, only the echo of the last gunshot now rumbling around the closely confined streets of the area.

"I do wish you wouldn't do that Maam".

Tracy turned to see Lieutenant Commander 'Al' Longton, the Department's number 3 and essentially her own deputy. He envisaged paperwork landing in the Department over 'Damage to Public Property' and even now could feel the phone call from the Council's Chief Engineer winging its way to their office.

"What's been nicked?" Tracy asked. The Museum Curator, an elderly lady in her late fifties showed Tracy and Longton inside.

"It's downstairs in the basement gallery". She led the two officers into the building and down a flight of narrow wooden stairs, which creaked under the weight of the three people.

The Curator showed the obvious problem with a depressed sigh. "There it is, or rather was. The Haychester Romano Collection, gone".

Tracy and Longton looked at the empty display cases. Only the red felt lining was remaining, even the labels had been stolen.

"Worth much?" Longton asked as he gave the cabinet a closer inspection.

"A lot to the right person, a collector or such like, here is a copy of the guide, it has all the details of the artefacts here".

Tracy looked through the small glossy colour brochure handed to her by the Curator. Throughout were diagrams and photographs of some of the most beautiful Roman artefacts ever found in the area along with some maps and a whole host of technical information. It was clear that their loss was a major blow.

“There’s one other thing” the Curator continued, “When we arrived this morning, this room was locked”.

Tracy looked round, she could feel a crunch or a ‘but...’ coming here.

“It was totally locked from the inside”.

Longton rolled his eyes and looked up, “Aye, aye, looks like we got a weird one!” he announced philosophically.

“All right, all right Commander, here is my offer”.

The Commander looked up from the bowl of chips which the conference centre restaurant had to cook especially for his breakfast, waiting with baited breath for the now exasperated Chief Superintendent Travers. He was desperate for the right person for the job he had and the Commander was top of his list, a list of just one.

“Right to recap, with effect of the 1st of January, The Department of National Security & Civil Defence will assume responsibility for the areas of operation in the Capital formerly covered by the British Transport Police”.

The slowness of the consumption of chips meant that Chief Superintendent Travers had the Commanders full attention. “This I know, it’s the last bit of the ‘old’ Police service to come under our jurisdiction” another chip was swallowed thoughtfully, “although how it has taken fourteen years is anyone’s guess”.

“Yes well anyway I want you to be the Commander in Chief of the Capital Transport Security section”,

Another thoughtful pause, another chip.

“Go on”.

“You get semi autonomous command of all security matters relating to trains, tubes, buses, taxis, roads and airports except Customs & Excise in the Greater London Area”.

The Chief Superintendent looked across at the thinking Commander to see the reaction. He knew if he were to get his number one and indeed only choice, he would have to meet any and all of the Commander’s conditions, and he was about to find out what they were.

“I would want a hand picked team, Commander Caverner as my Deputy, no strings held from above, full co-operation from all agencies and sections of the Security Department and all staff to have full trackside safety training before commencement”.

The Commander could have asked for a cavalcade of pink elephants to sail down the Thames and the Chief Superintendent would have granted it. He was trying to recruit the Security Department’s most legendary Commanding Officer and his Deputy and he was prepared to sacrifice everything to do it.

“Done”

“...and an all zones Travelcard, mobile operations unit - preferably not an old Routemaster as spare parts are a nightmare, and offices situated centrally adjacent to or over a main Underground station”.

“...right”

“...but not Goodge Street”

“Why not?”

“It’s in Tottenham Court Road”

“Enough said”

The Commander smiled, he was enjoying this, it was the first and only bit of fun he had had at this National conference since it started two days ago. After this was settled, he decided he was going to fake an excuse to get out of there as soon as possible.

“Well?” the Chief Superintendent asked nervously.

For the Commander this was the new challenge he had been waiting for, after eight years at Haychester he felt it was time to move on to a new challenge and his current office would be fine in the capable hands of the team he had developed there over the years.

“Where do I sign?”

“Mr Robbins sir, your 9 o’clock appointment is here”. Arnold Robbins looked up from his newspaper at the butler as he delivered the message.

“Good, good, send him in” he replied. He groaned a little as he struggled to lift his ageing body from the easy chair. As he steadied himself with a walking stick, the study door opened once again and the grey moustached man entered, the neat suit a contrast from his appearance when he led the burglary on Haychester’s College a few months earlier.

“Good morning Sir”. He placed the briefcase he was carrying on the table and opened it. The distinctive clunks of the catches opening brought Robbins over to examine the contents.

“Ahhh...you got them”. Robbins rubbed his hands with glee as he looked over the Roman coins in the case; “these will go a long way towards the final payment”.

Bryan Collins, the moustached man, looked up, “What’s the next job?” he asked, eager to get on with his primary business - theft.

“A little fund raising” Robbins replied, “know any finances you can tap into tonight?”

Collins brushed a finger through his moustache in thought; there were a number of quick cash opportunities that he could ‘utilize’ but one in particular came to mind, he looked across at Robbins and nodded.

“Good, we need a little cash flow for the next main job but it means working Christmas Day I’m afraid”.

“As long as I get paid,” Collins replied sternly. He was a man who loved his job, even if it was illegal. The possibility of arrest and imprisonment was to him merely an occupational hazard, although as yet he had never been caught.

Robbins passed some cash into Collins front pocket, “Get yourself and the boys a Christmas drink on me, and then call me when you have improved our collective project cash flow”.

Collins smiled and looked at the cash, “Yes sir and Merry Christmas”.

Tracy entered the office she shared with the Commander and threw her motorcycle jacket on the back of the chair. In the Commander’s absence she had attempted to tidy the place up a bit but with little success.

As she looked at the mass of paper, old memos, half empty coffee cups and biscuit packets that littered The Commander’s side of the office she sighed. He was as untidy and disorganised as ever but she still loved him.

There was a polite and slightly timid knock at the door. Tracy turned round to see a young officer; she had never seen her before. “Who be you?” Tracy asked the decidedly nervous looking officer.

“Officer Louise Barrett Maam, it’s my first day here, Mr Longton sent me to remind you its time for the morning briefing”.

Tracy tried to look at the clock on The Commander’s desk but it was buried under a pile of junk. Instead she twisted her head to look at Barrett’s watch and saw that it was now just past 8.30 and she was indeed late.

As Tracy left the office she could see the empty corridor, its two-tone blue paintwork slightly fading through years of general neglect. Everyone was in the briefing room two doors down and it was to here that Tracy made her way.

The usual atmosphere of mummings fell as she entered the room. The Department's administrator, Janice handed her a clipboard and briefing notes and having scanned briefly down the list, Tracy began.

"Right then, for those who haven't heard, the City Museum was broken into last night and the Haychester Roman Coin Collection was stolen". This generated mumblings amongst those present, the collection was one of the City's finest treasures and the potential pressures from local interests meant this case was going to be receiving high priority.

"It looks at this time as though this will become this division's primary case so if you are doing anything that can wait, put it off".

"Second" Tracy continued "On the orders of the management above, we are winding up the College burglary investigation, it's been three months and we have had no developments".

"We are receiving complaints from people in the City centre of lots of vehicle movement at night, particularly in the shopping area's, if anyone comes across any information pass it to Longton who is collating odd incidents"

She looked around to see if everyone was paying attention, they were but not as much she felt as if the Commander was doing this briefing.

Tracy decided to wind this up as quickly as possible. The museum theft was the most exciting crime the City had had in weeks, and the boredom, what with Christmas approaching and all, was starting to tell.

Haychester was a city that suffered from a distinct lack of serious crime, much of it thanks to the Commander's direct approach to tackling it, added to which was the weirdness of the City's inhabitants who were usually too busy complaining about something or other completely trivial and wasting the Department's time.

Looking down at her briefing notes, her point was about to be proved. "In the last twenty four hours, we seemed to have logged an unusually high number of garden ornament thefts, namely gnomes, also someone has stolen all the drain covers in East Street again" she announced.

"So if we are approached by a suspicious gnome offering to sell us some second hand drain covers, we should report it?" asked Longton with a wry smile.

"Exactly" Tracy responded with a flourish. "The Commander's conference ends in two days so I expect he will find an excuse and be back by the end of this morning" she added.

In the corner of the room a phone rang and Barrett reached across to answer it. The

office fell silent with unbearable tension as she took the call. Everyone was clearly hoping it would be something interesting.

“Well?” Tracy asked expectantly as Barrett put the phone down. Barrett suddenly realised that the entire room was watching her waiting with baited breath.

“Eh? Oh, a body has been found in Shepham Harbour car park”.

Tracy organised the troops, “Longton, you are on the museum, I want forensics, fingerprints, the lot”. Longton nodded, grabbed his jacket and left. “Barrett!” Tracy called loudly over the din of everyone leaving “you are with me”.

“Oh no...” Robbins cursed to himself as he realised he had connected with an answering machine. He quickly composed his message in his mind as he waited for the bleep.

As ever with these infernal contraptions, the moment the bleep went, he completely forgot what it was he was going to say. “Err, this is Mr Robbins, erm the next instalment for your collection has been acquired, Mr Collins and his team are acquiring a little cash flow for the next stage, if you could supply the details ASAP. Err Merry Christmas”.

He put the phone down and fell back into the easy chair. He had a feeling that the next job was going to be huge. He did not know what it was, only that it had to be undertaken on Christmas day for some reason.

Still there was nothing he could do now except wait. Collins had never let him down in the past and once the final job was out of the way, the deal could be made.

As they drove through the City of Haychester, Officer Barrett became a little more relaxed. It was her first day as a Security Officer since leaving the Training Academy just two weeks earlier. She had connections with Haychester, her father served here first with the Police then with the Security Department when it took over, until he retired some five years previously.

She was disappointed at not having met the Commander, she had heard much about him but their first meeting would have to wait until his return.

Barrett was driving the Commander’s official marked Security Department Ford Mondeo patrol car with Tracy giving her directions. They soon found themselves pulling into a gravel-surfaced car park near Haychester’s natural harbour area, the wheels making a distinctive crunching noise as they slowed to a stop.

Just a few parked cars, an ice cream van and a JCB digger were present. The main focus of attention was however three council engineers, their grubby overalls and Day-Glo yellow jackets clearly marking them out from the gathered crowd, over by a

large pile of what appeared to be builders rubble in the corner of the site.

On seeing the Security Department car arrive, one of the council engineers walked over. "It's over here luv!" he called in typical engineer's fashion.

Tracy was a little concerned about the effect on Barrett of seeing a dead body for the first time. "Stay here" she called back as she followed the engineer to the site of the day's gruesome find.

The other two engineers moved aside as Tracy approached, giving a clear view of the rubble pile. Amongst the debris were clearly visible bones, a few fingers, skull, all definitely human.

"I think we can safely pronounce life extinct" Tracy responded as she knelt down to take a closer look at the remains.

"We reckoned there wouldn't be much point calling for an ambulance" one of the engineers replied sarcastically. "We were called about eight this morning by a resident, someone had fly tipped this lot ere overnight".

He kicked a loose brick back towards the pile of debris as he continued his story; "We just started shifting some of it when Eric here suddenly pulls out a leg bone".

Tracy looked back across to Barrett. "Call the forensics section will you, and get a lorry sorted out for this lot while you are at it".

Her words were almost drowned out by the arrival of the local service bus from Haychester. As the large double decker bus pulled up, Tracy spotted a familiar face alighting.

"Did somebody say something about a body?" the Commander called.

Tracy smiled; she was delighted to see the Commander back. He had been away for three days now, the longest time the two had been apart since they met just over three months earlier. In that time their relationship, both professional and personal had developed into something very special and she had missed him tremendously.

"Just bones I'm afraid Sir" Barrett replied as the Commander walked over to inspect the scene.

"Ah Barrett, glad to have you aboard". A warm handshake was exchanged as they met. "How's your father?"

Barrett smiled. "He's fine, he still speaks highly of you. I was so excited to find I had been posted to your section Sir". Her excitement was obvious, when she was a youngster, the Commander had been her father's deputy in the Security Department, he had even saved her father's life in the line of duty on one occasion so to be allocated to his section was to her beyond a dream come true.

The Commander moved over to Tracy, he too had missed her company immensely

over the last three days. “Barrett...” he called “look over there will you”.

Barrett, a little confused looked away in the direction of the harbour as the Commander stole a quick kiss from Tracy. “What...” Barrett looked back confused, it appeared as though nothing had happened.

“Oh yes, he or she is most definitely dead” the Commander commented kneeling down and looking over the remains before looking over a piece of wood that he casually picked up from the pile, however this offered no clues as to the origin of the mess.

He stood back up and brushed the dust from his trousers “Little we can do here, best get back and see what you have done to my office” he called back.

“By the way” Tracy added, “the City Museum was burgled last night”.

“I don’t know, I leave the place for three days and it goes all to pot” he responded wryly as he and Tracy walked back to the car leaving Barrett to guard the scene until the forensic section arrived.

Longton looked into the bottom of the now empty polystyrene cup. No matter how much coffee he drunk that lunchtime, nothing was going to make up for having to stand around in the cold wintry air outside the City Museum all lunchtime whilst waiting for the forensic section turned up.

“More coffee officer?” the Museum curator asked holding up a steamy pot in temptation. Longton shrugged his shoulders as he walked round the abandoned road works to the front entrance.

“Milk and four sugars” the Commander called as he walked passed the pair. Longton looked up in surprise.

“Commander, welcome back sir.”

“Well I was getting bored”

“Commander Caverner did a very good job in your presence”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less. So where were these coins then” he asked as he walked into the museum.

Longton followed stepping carefully so as not to spill hot coffee over himself.

“They were downstairs in the basement display room”. He showed the Commander to the wooden staircase that led to the basement area of the museum.

“This room was locked from the inside when the theft was discovered right?” the Commander asked as the two officers entered.

The Commander walked around the room, Longton looked on bemused as the Commander kicked the skirting boards and tapped the floor intermittently.

All of a sudden he stopped by the far wall. He looked up at Longton, “Listen carefully” he said.

He tapped his shoe on one part of the floor, “nice and solid right?” Longton nodded in agreement. The Commander moved a little further along the room closer to the end wall and tapped his foot again, the sound this time was different.

“That’s hollow!” Longton remarked.

“Give me a hand with this” the Commander called, Longton came over and together the two officers lifted the red woollen carpet away from the wall to reveal the polished floorboards below. Taking Longton’s cup of coffee, the Commander poured some over the floor and watched as it disappeared rapidly with a deep dripping noise indicating a significant cavity below.

“Stay here, I’ll be back in a minute” he announced as he got up off the floor and walked briskly out of the room.

A couple of minutes later Longton got the fright of his life as the floorboards suddenly flew up and amidst the cloud of dust the Commander appeared from below.

“That road works hole outside, leads right in here” he announced in between dust induced coughs, “They tunnelled in from outside”.

That was at least one mystery solved. Longton looked down at the Commander, his uniform was now covered in mud and dust from his hole clambering escapade.

“Crikey, you look a mess sir” the forensics officer dressed in white overalls remarked as she entered the room and saw the state of him.

“Well” he replied thoughtfully, “whilst I go back to the office and change, you dust this room and the road works equipment outside for prints, you won’t find any though”.

“Morning Sir” the overly cheerful receptionist called from behind her desk situated in the main foyer of the Haychester Security Department building as she saw the Commander arrive.

“Do you know you’re covered in mu...”

“I know!” He took off his mud stained uniform jacket and placed it on the desk, the metal epilate numerals clinking on its polished wood veneer surface.

“Janice, do me a favour and run this to the uniform office for cleaning, if I go in there

with another jacket in this sort of state I am liable to be shot”.

Janice the Receptionist nodded in reluctant agreement and smiled ruefully as she watched the Commander disappear from sight up the wooden panel lined corridor that linked the front building to the remainder of the vast complex.

He narrowly avoided being decapitated by the infamous automatic sliding door that guarded the entrance to ‘C’ block where his office was situated and made his way up the stairs to the second floor, though the fire doors and to his office, grateful no-one had seen the terrible state he was in.

He frequently told off his officers about any slip in standards or appearance and he was not willing to take any of his own medicine.

“What the hell is all this lot?” he asked himself as he picked up the huge pile of messages that were waiting for him on the desk.

“Hello love” Tracy called looking round the door, “you are a mess” she commented.

The Commander looked down at his uniform shirt and trousers and nodded in agreement. “You read this lot to me whilst I change” he asked passing the messages to Tracy.

“Right then...” she began as the Commander began to look through the mish-mash of uniform components in the cupboard at the back of the office.

“Chief Super wants a word as soon as you return about your Christmas holiday leave”

“I don’t have any”.

“That’s what you think. The Haychester Gazette want a quote”.

“To be or not to be, that is the question”

“Vehicle pool says that repairs to your car will cost at least a couple of grand and we don’t have it in the budget”.

“It wasn’t even my fault, anyway I’ll get on a bus...anything else?”

“Nope, that is pretty much all of relevance at the moment”.

“Right” the Commander announced as he stepped out from behind the cupboard “Full dress uniform is all I got left in one piece, so what do you think?”

Tracy looked over at him, “Its an improvement on your usual careworn look” she stepped closer and embraced him “but” she added pointing at the medal ribbons “unless you have just acquired the Hampshire Division Bravery medal in the last half hour, then you are wearing my jacket”.

The Commander looked down and shrugged “It’s the same size, no one will notice....

will they?”

Longton knocked rapidly on the door “Sir I think you better come downstairs quickly”.

“Well there it is, Haychester main Post Office, the largest postal and money office in the county” Collins announced.

The two men were sitting on one of the benches that lined the south side of Haychester’s West Street, towered over by the magnificent cathedral spire that dominated the centre of the city.

From the bench they had a clear view of the five storey Swiss style Post Office building on the opposite side of the road, the view being occasionally interrupted by the arrival and departure of local service buses from the adjacent stops.

“We can get in and out through the old cellar network, let Cecil do the alarms and get the whole job over and done with within one to two hours”.

“Easy money eh?”

“Aye”.

The front of the ‘C’ Block building was totally obscured in a veil of dust as the Commander and Tracy came out into the small car park area immediately in front of the main entrance.

“What the hell...” Tracy began.

Through the dust the Commander made out a large pile of rubble and rubbish lying in the Chief Superintendent’s parking space and Officer Barrett with a slightly bemused look on her face.

“All right lets hear it...” the Commander asked Barrett.

“Well sir” she replied coughing through the dust “I was just coming back when a Haychester District Council lorry pulls up and this bloke says ‘Where do you want this lot luv?’ the next thing I know he tips the lot right here and then legs it”.

Tracy looked through the mess and identified one of the bones and some of the rubbish from the car park earlier that morning. “Well you did say you wanted it all here as soon as possible”.

“All right we will have to do it here instead, Barrett get as many officers as you can find and go through this lot, there must be something in there we can use and get forensics to extract the bones, I want a date of death on the deceased”.

Tracy was already on her mobile phone to the Council “Hello, can I speak to your chief idiot please?” she demanded, “What do you mean which one?”

“COMMANDER!! I want you and Caverner up here now!” bellowed a familiar voice. Everyone looked up to see through the now rapidly dissipating dust the face of the Chief Superintendent leaning from his third floor office window.

“Are we in trouble?” Tracy asked.

“Probably” the Commander casually replied as they made their way back inside.

The Chief Superintendent sat back in his leather swing chair behind an impressive old oak desk and waited for the arrival of the Commander and Tracy. For years the Commander had run the investigation division and he was always happy to leave him to it and just wheel him upstairs for the odd chat now and then. However now a few key issues had arisen and a firm chat with the pair of them was now urgently called for.

The sight of his car parking space disappearing under a lorry load of rubble didn't exactly do anything to add to the mood either.

There was a knock at the door. The Chief Superintendent stroked his grey beard thoughtfully for a moment before calling the Commander and Tracy in.

He wasted no time and launched straight into the questions.

“When were you going to tell me about the Capital Transport Division?”

“How did you....” the Commander began.

“The Haychester Gazette just phoned to see if a rumour they heard on the Department grapevine in Brighton was true, we should employ them, they have better undercover intelligence gathering skills than internal investigations!”

“Rumbled.....” the Commander muttered.

“I called Chief Superintendent Travers and he confirmed it all, I'm losing both of you aren't I?” he asked still seated behind his desk.

“Not until New Year sir, although I am supposed to be going up to London tomorrow to meet some of the crew, and look at the new offices” the Commander replied as if in some sort of reassurance, “I could always turn it down”.

“You will do no such thing, this is the sort of job you have deserved for years, you two are going”.

Tracy smiled at this news, she already knew about the job with the Capital Transport

Division as she had been approached by Travers a week earlier to gauge the Commander's likely reaction.

"Second" the Chief Superintendent continued in a gruff voice "The Haychester Roman Collection, you do know who owns it don't you?"

"The Duke & Duchess of Haychester I'm afraid" the Commander replied looking up to the ceiling as if in search of some sort of divine intervention.

"Yes that's right, so I want you both over at Haychester House as soon as possible to show the colours and reassure them we are doing everything we can."

"Tracy, put your dress uniform on" the Commander whispered aside to her.

"You're wearing part of it" she whispered back.

"I though something wasn't right when you came in" the Chief Superintendent remarked, "anyway third item, your Christmas leave".

"I never have any, I always stay on duty throughout so everyone else has Christmas day off" the Commander responded now worried that he might actually have to find some alternative way of avoiding Christmas day other than working.

"See this..." a letter was passed over the desk to the Commander and Tracy "it's from Mrs Caverner".

"My mother?" Tracy asked incredulously.

"The same, it requests, no insists that I ensure you are both available for Christmas day lunch, that means you" he pointed at the Commander "are off duty and off to meet the future in-laws" the Chief Superintendent announced with a chuckle.

"In-laws?" the Commander asked.

"Oh come off it you two, you can't get any closer together other than becoming Mr & Mrs Commander!" he responded "and besides I have October in the office wedding sweepstake!"

"Tracy, remind me to speak to Longton about running books in the office will you!" the Commander remarked.

"Right you two, get some lunch then get over to Haychester House before I get any more earache from the aristocracy".

"Yes Sir!" both officers responded before turning to leave. As they went through the office door the Chief Superintendent called after them.

"And get that rubble off my parking space!"

For years the deserted factory had been host only to a few birds, rodents and a multiplicity of spiders. Now it had some new unofficial tenants.

The rusted ironwork, broken window panes and wind swept cobwebs looked down on four gentleman smartly dressed in blue boiler suits as they checked their equipment and loaded it into the back of a fairly anonymous blue Ford Transit van.

Collins looked on with a patient grin. With the loading completed, he beckoned his three accomplices over to an old tea chest and began to brief them on that evening's objective.

"Haychester Central Post Office" he begun as he passed a number of photographs of the building to those gathered.

"As you are aware, our employers are still requiring further finance to support the main operation which I can now tell you will take place on Christmas Day".

There were a few mutters and grumbles at this latter piece of news but all remained attentive to the briefing.

"If all goes well, this will be the last financing mission before then. Right then, we have as before plans of the subterranean area surrounding the target and our method of entry." He placed a blueprint plan on the top of the chest "We will be entering through this engineers tunnel under the main street".

"Is it wide enough?" one of the accomplices asked.

"The tunnel is wide enough providing we keep our equipment down, we should only need basic cutting gear and the disabler device".

"When do we go?" another asked obviously eager to get on with the job.

"We leave at 18:30, with snow forecast, there won't be many people about to disturb us which is a bonus". Collins looked at the attentive faces of his team "Are we all ready for this?"

They all nodded in agreement.

"Then gentlemen, lets make sure this job is a profitable one!"

The stone parapets of Haychester Manor echoed an ambition by its Edwardian architect for a pseudo castle or fortress like nature to its imposing frontage.

However time had mellowed the otherwise stark stone facia that now looked down on the Commanders borrowed Security Department Ford Mondeo patrol car as it crunched along the white pea gravel drive and pulled up outside the main front entrance.

Tracy pulled her dress uniform jacket tighter around her as the cold breezy air of the late afternoon whistled around.

“Definitely a dress uniform job” she remarked as the Commander locked the car and brushed dust of himself.

“Well” the Commander, now also dressed in his correct full dress uniform, complete with ceremonial sword replied “this is the aristocracy we are dealing with, and they do own a sizeable chunk of Haychester”.

Tracy looked across “How much?”

“Err pretty much all of it I think”.

The Commander put his peaked cap on, its gold trimming signifying his rank as a Section Commander. It occurred to Tracy as she too put her own identical cap on that this was the first time she had ever seen him wear it, and very uncomfortable he looked too with it on.

“Quick lets get inside” he motioned to Tracy “then I can get this ruddy hat off!”

“Two officers from the Department of Security to see you madam”.

Elizabeth, Duchess of Haychester, looked up at the butler from behind her newspaper, she had a look of what the Commander would have describes as a ‘Mother in Law from hell’, stony cold expressions and surrounded by a stuffy upper crust atmosphere befitting her station and her mature years.

“Ah about time!” she replied tersely, “I wish to see the senior officer alone”.

The Commander already was starting not to like her, he knew the Duke very well but this was the first time he had been up against the Duchess who he knew was a formidable ‘old cow’ from what the Duke had told him in the past. He foresaw trouble here as he turned to Tracy and shrugged his shoulders.

The butler closed the Study door behind the Commander and turned to Tracy. “Don’t mind the Duchess, she’s just set in her ways, come on, there should be a fresh brew in the kitchen”.

“Ah Commander I am glad it is you, perhaps you wouldn’t mind telling me what the hell has happened to my Husbands valuable collection?” The Duchess was direct in her line of questioning; there was no doubting that.

“We are doing everything...” The Commander began but he was cut off.

“Everything is simply not good enough. That blasted husband of mine should never have allowed them out of the vault, let alone allow them be displayed in that rat-hole

of a City you allegedly are supposed to secure”.

The butler took another mouthful of tea from his mug as he sat at the main table in the grand Victorian kitchen. Nearby, Tracy was looking out of the window at the snowflakes gently falling in ever increasing amounts.

“Bit of a clash of the Titans wouldn’t you say?” the Butler asked.

Tracy looked up as though she could see through the ceiling to the Study above, “My money is on the Commander.... but only just”.

“Where is the Duke by the way?” she added.

“Away on an archaeological junket to South America I believe. He’s due back in a day or two, certainly before Christmas Day anyway”.

The Commander was not happy with the situation as the Duchess continued her typical overreacted tirade of complaints; he decided to get out while he still could.

“Madam, when you’re Husband returns perhaps you would get him to contact me” he asked politely handing over a card with his detail and office phone number. Even such a small card was an affront to her upper class values.

“You may give that to the Butler” she sniffed.

“Fine!” The Commander retorted and turned to leave “Good day madam!” He closed the Study door behind and breathed a sigh of relief.

The Commander knew the house well enough to make his way down to the kitchen to find Tracy. A warm and welcoming atmosphere greeted him here, a stark contrast to the frosty reception he got upstairs and the icy snowy weather that was building outside.

Tracy was on the telephone when he entered the room, glancing up she mouthed to him that it was the office calling. The Commander gladly took a mug of tea from the Butler as he waited for Tracy to finish her call.

“Well?” the Commander asked expectantly when Tracy had hung up “What’s up?”.

“Mmm? Oh the Forensics Lab want to see us before they go home, about the skeleton and its accompanying rubble” she replied. “Also” she added with a more concerned tone “the snow is building up on the roads so we best get back quick while we still can”.

Already the gravel driveway was disappearing beneath a fine layer of pure white snow as the Commander and Tracy drove away from the house.

All round, the surrounding hills were hiding behind a veil of low cloud and swirls of

snowflakes.

“I don’t like the look of this” he commented as he tried to see through the dense snowfall that was now blocking his vision of the road ahead.

“I like snow” Tracy replied.

“Glad somebody does, mind you it does mean the crime rate drops though”.

As they approached the outer roads of the City of Haychester, the early evening gloom was starting to settle and many of the City’s workers were heading home early to avoid being trapped away from home.

Stuck in slow traffic by the Westgate roundabout, Tracy saw the familiar figure of Longton standing by the side of the road trying to redirect the traffic so as to minimise the chaos.

“Longton” she called “is it like this everywhere?”

He looked across and waved back. “There is an extreme weather warning of a blizzard coming in from the west in the next hour” he replied with a concerned tone that expressed the seriousness of the developing situation “and everyone is trying to get home as fast as possible, Hampshire is already jammed up and we are next”.

The Commander leaned across, “Get yourself home as soon as you can” he ordered.

“Yes Sir!” Longton replied as they pulled away leaving him with the remnants of the City’s traffic.

“Oi matey, shift that van” the driver of the service 700 double decker bus called, upon finding the blue Transit van parked blocking part of West Street’s westbound bus stops.

Dressed in all blue overalls, Collins tried to avoid showing his face to the driver, just raising his hand in acknowledgement and proceeding to move the van back until clear of the marked bus stop bay.

With the van repositioned where it should cause no further problems, Collins removed a large equipment case from the back, closed the door and walked over to the Cathedral green where up against the footpath’s retaining wall, two accomplices had set up a blue engineer’s tent over one of the services access covers.

Inside, they had already removed the large cast iron manhole cover and were ready to move inside.

Collins looked at both of them, “We all know what we are doing right?”

Both of his accomplices nodded in agreement. “Right then gentlemen, lets get on

with it, its warmer down there anyway!”

Security Department Forensic Pathologist Dr Stephen Sheridan was about to put his coat on when the Commander and Tracy walked into his laboratory.

“Nice of you to bother” the Doctor responded “I put out the message for you three hours ago”.

The Commander glared at the Doctor momentarily, he was still a bit put out by his earlier encounter with the Duchess. Tracy decided to leap in before he put his foot in it.

“Well what’s the result?” she asked cheerily.

Doctor Sheridan showed them to a nearby examination table, pulling back the green sheet to reveal the bones from the rubble, now arranged in more correct human form.

“Well we have about 80% of the bones, we are missing a few ribs, most of the lower left leg and one or two other minor bits”.

Tracy looked into the eyes of the skull as if trying to gauge something of the character of the deceased; the Commander just listened to the Doctor’s ongoing announcements.

“She was about twenty five to thirty years old, five foot three inches high and probably weighed about eight to nine stone”.

“When did she die?” The Commander asked.

“Sometime in the mid to late 17th century” Doctor Sheridan announced with delight “by sword, probably when Oliver Cromwell stormed and wrecked Haychester during the English Civil War I wouldn’t be surprised”.

“How can you be so accurate about the date?” Tracy asked.

Doctor Sheridan reached behind him and picked up a small plastic bag. Holding it up, Tracy could see it contained a small coin. “We found this jammed between two of the finger bones, its middle 17th century, well at least that’s what my assistant’s book of old coins says”.

“What about the rubble, anything interesting?” the Commander asked now realising that the chances of solving a juicy murder was out of the window.

“Various odd bits of uninteresting junk” Sheridan replied “I’ll get the list over to you as soon as my assistant is in tomorrow” he looked out of the window at the worsening snowfall “weather permitting” he added.

The Laboratory door opened and the Chief Superintendent appeared, fresh snow

resting on his lapels.

“I’ve put the emergency weather plan into action, skeleton crew of immediately local resident officers overnight,” he announced.

“Right” the Commander reluctantly responded.

“You two get home now otherwise you are going to be trapped here, you’ve probably got about an hour before the roads are completely blocked”.

“Home time dear” Tracy announced with a gleeful smile.

The Commander just looked grumpy, he was rather hoping to spend the evening working on the Museum theft but his plans had been scuppered.

“Come on” Tracy called taking the Commander by the arm, “I’ll make you a nice cup of cocoa,” she promised as they made their way back out to the car.

The quiet darkness of the snow covered and deserted West Street belied the activity that was occurring beneath it.

Within the long brick lined tunnel, no more than a metre across and maybe another metre high, the distinctive chipping sound of metal against masonry echoed along the musky old smugglers passage.

Collins, his face coated in red brick dust called up ahead to his associate who was doing the main excavation work.

“You should be close to it by now” he called, his voice echoed around them “what can you see?”

The accomplice, covered in cobwebs and other debris from his efforts swung the neon lantern back and forth in front of him, gauging the nature of the passageway ahead.

“There’s what looks like an old door of some kind up ahead” he called back “trouble is I will have to remove some of the side supporting brickwork to get our equipment through to it”.

Collins shone his torch on his watch, 12:30. Although they were on schedule at that time, there was little leeway for any delays before their activities would be discovered in the morning.

“All right lad, keep going” Collins encouraged “I’ll get some coffee down for you”.

“You never know when to stop working do you?” Tracy asked as she handed a mug of steaming hot chocolate to the Commander.

He was sitting on his old but much loved sofa pouring through manila coloured folders of personnel details. “Well I want to know who I am going to be working with in the Transport Security Division and judging by these files, it looks like personnel have picked some really good officers”.

Tracy sat down alongside him, being careful not to sit on the old tabby cat that ruled the Commander’s house with a rod of iron.

“Well what do you think?” she asked apprehensively.

The Commander put the last file on the pile alongside the coffee table and laid back. “From what I can tell, we should have a pretty good team. I’ll find out for real though when I meet them tomorrow”.

“Looks like I am holding the Haychester fort again tomorrow then, don’t forget to buy me a nice Christmas present when you are in London won’t you!” Tracy responded with a characteristic giggle.

“Oh!” he responded in surprised realisation.

“What?”

“Well it’s just that I hadn’t thought about it, I mean Christmas”.

“Come again?”

“It’s just that up until I met you I had virtually no close friends as such, and I certainly have no relatives worth mentioning.”

“What no relatives at all?” Tracy asked surprised. She came from a big family including an identical twin sister Jennifer, also a Security Officer assigned to the VIP Protection Division in London. The Commander’s background could not be any bigger in contrast.

“Well there are one or two odd relatives around but lets just say we cannot keep in touch, it’s all rather complicated”

“Never mind, this year you are going to be spending Christmas with the Caverner family, my mum is dying to meet you!”

“I don’t know.....” The Commander's reluctance was obvious.

“Turkey, stuffing, all the trimmings.....”

“Well....” He was beginning to waver.

“My mum said she would do some chips especially for you....”

“Sold! I’ll enjoy arresting your mum for attempting to bribe a Security Officer.” He

joked.

Tracy hit the Commander over the head with a cushion “Don’t forget my present!”

The Commander turned and kissed Tracy. “I won’t, I promise”.

“This is Holborn.... Change here for the Central Line.... The next station is Russell Square.... Please stand clear of the closing doors.”

The last words of the automated male announcer on the northbound Piccadilly Line platform of Holborn Underground Station were still echoing around the tile and black enamel panel lined tunnel as the doors of the 1973 series Tube Stock train closed with a characteristic series of clunks, the air brakes released and with an electrical grunting the train set off, plunging into the tunnel mouth, a vacuum of cold air being pulled along in its wake.

Those who had just alighted made their way serenely to the marked exit towards the north end of the platform. At the back of the crowd, the Commander who had alighted from the rear most carriage stood for a few moments to allow the crowds to die down a bit before he too proceeded to make his way along the white tube passageways to the three Piccadilly line escalators that led to the main bank of four escalators up to the stations booking hall.

Making his way past the top of the boarded off No.6 escalator which was out of use for refurbishment, he turned right to use the slightly less crowded High Holborn exit, pausing only briefly to put his ticket through automated ticket barrier No. 55 as he did so.

Outside the brown stone faced station building with its typical London Underground blue glass canopies and large Underground roundel logos situated on the south-east corner of High Holborn and Kingsway, were all the sights, sounds and smells of the City of London. The roar of traffic, the sound of busy footsteps on the pavements, distant emergency services sirens, Evening Standard newspaper sellers with their cry of “Standard! Standard!”, all echoing between the tall buildings that lined the busy thoroughfares.

The Commander, briefcase in hand and dressed in full best Security Department uniform looked up at the opposite south-west corner of the busy High Holborn crossroads. There stood a brand new office building, now in the final finishing stages of construction, its polished stone and glass facia curving around the corner and contrasting markedly with the older buildings to be found around it.

Up on the side of the eight-storey building, a builder’s sign proclaimed the name of this latest feature to join the capitals rich variety of architecture, “Aviation House”. Below the name, a second notice announced that the offices had been acquired for “The Department of National Security & Civil Defence - Capital Transport Division”.

Negotiating the constant mass of pedestrians, cars, taxis, buses and bikes that pass

through the High Holborn crossroad Traffic Light System seemingly in a non-stop stream, the Commander found himself looking for the entrance to this impressive building.

The ground floor was being fitted out for retail use by a Supermarket, the Security Department had the seven floors of office space above it, but the way into it was not at all obvious.

Finding only a locked fire exit set into one end of the front façade, the Commander decided to seek help.

“Excuse me” he called up to two construction workers drinking tea on a scaffolding platform a few metres above the pavement “How the hell do I get into this place?”

The elder of the two pushed his hard hat back a bit on his forehead in a thoughtful manner before replying. “The front door will be in Kingsway” he shouted down trying to make his voice heard over the roar of central London traffic “but for the time being you’ll have to use the back door in Newton Street mate!” indicating the side street he mentioned a short distance away.

“Thanks!” the Commander replied before setting off past a bank, jewellers and the High Holborn bus stop to a small turning off the main street.

About half way down the narrow road stood a newly constructed entrance, similar in style to the main High Holborn junction façade. Above the double sliding glass doors was displayed the legend ‘Department of National Security & Civil Defence’ complete with City of London crest with the addition of crossed swords, the symbol used by the capital’s security services.

The impressive status of the exterior of the offices however did not stretch to the interior. Piles of builders rubbish littered the hallway area, which led across the width of the building to the front entrance in Kingsway which was still undergoing the final stages of construction. The main reception desk was under at least an inch of concrete and plaster dust.

The shiny aluminium lift doors were adorned with a badly hand written ‘Out of Order’ sign which meant the Commander had to use the adjacent stairs, not that this bothered him in any way as he didn’t like lifts and always tended to avoid them whenever possible.

A plan pinned to the stairs fire doors on the first floor laid out which parts of the Department were allocated which space in the building. Command and Control were located on the top two floors with the remainder occupied by individual sections dedicated specifically to areas such as Underground, Main Line Railways, Buses and Road Transport, Traffic Management and Hackney Carriage Licensing.

The seventh floor was not as bad as the reception area but there were still uncompleted fittings, missing light diffusers and that distinctive scent of fresh paint and newly laid carpet, which betrayed the building’s youthfulness.

The Commander was the second person to arrive as it happened, stepping into the new control room he found Simon Fuller, the IT Network Engineer from the Haychester office kneeling under a desk and murmuring to himself in disapproval.

“Simon what are you doing?” the Commander asked.

A loud bang followed by more abrupt murmuring emanated from beneath the desk as Simon hit his head.

“Looking at the cable ducting Sir,” he explained as he extracted himself from his previous position. “I take it you sent the request for me to come up here?”

“Yeah” the Commander replied “As much as I don’t like computers myself, I want the best computer network set-up in here right from day one, you seem to be the best person to put it in and run it so I had you seconded”.

Simon stood up and brushed down his trousers. He was in his late twenties and a full Security Officer but as an IT Network Manager tended to be a more behind the scenes officer rather than front line.

“Why didn’t they put anything in when they built the place?” Simon asked.

“Because it was acquired in a hurry” the Commander explained “we were supposed to be in Euston, these offices were intended for some Government agency originally”.

“What do you want?” Simon asked, removing his screwdriver from his jacket pocket as if poised for action.

“Full computer network with terminals in all offices” the Commander replied reading from a bit of scruffy paper which he had produced from his jacket pocket “fully loaded Control Room with interlinks with all Security Services databases nationwide as well as the London Underground, Main Line Railway and Highways closed circuit cameras”.

“Right.... and when do you want this by?”

“Sorry about the short notice but I really need certainly the control room and the linked information system up by the 28th,”

“...of January?” Fuller asked knowing full well that was a little optimistic to expect such a long time”.

“December.”

“Ah!”

“...and you have an unlimited budget” the Commander added as if to soften the blow.

“If I install a clone of an existing system, then it might be possible, I got to make some phone calls if you will excuse me Sir”.

Fuller pulled a mobile phone out of the adjacent toolbox and dialled. “Geoff, are you sitting comfortably, I need a few things like yesterday....”

“Well there’s something you don’t see every day!” Barrett commented upon seeing the scene outside Haychester Post Office.

With just one day until Christmas, the streets were crowded, the snowfall of the previous night seemingly failing to deter many. However amongst the Council’s street Christmas decorations, the seasonal shop window displays and the Rotary Club choir singing beneath the City’s historic Market Cross, there was a new and somewhat unusual attraction that crisp morning.

From a distance everything looked normal, with a Mercedes minibus in white with three red chevron stripes, parked adjacent to the Bus Stop outside the Post Office. Closer inspection rather than a casual glance however revealed that most of the front end of the vehicle had fallen through the road into an old tunnel beneath the street, the roof of it collapsing under the weight of the vehicle.

“Excuse me dear, is this bus going to Tesco’s?” one of Haychester’s typically more elderly residents asked Barrett, seemingly oblivious to the precarious position of the vehicle and the fact that Barrett’s dark grey uniform was nothing like that of a Stagecoach Buses driver.

Longton intervened in a gentlemanly manner and accompanied the lady to the other side of the road where she could catch the right service.

“Don’t worry” Tracy assured Barrett “most of the old ducks in Haychester are a bit like that, it’s a characteristic of this weird City”.

Tracy turned to the bus driver nearby who was being assisted by staff from the adjacent department store with cups of coffee to overcome the shock of the incident.

“What occurred then?” she asked.

The driver took a gulp of coffee before gesturing in the direction of his stricken vehicle, “I was waiting time here before the next circular run when there was this sudden jolt from the front wheels”.

Tracy took notes as the driver continued to relate the story.

“Well I thought the handbrake had slipped off or something so I check it. Just as I am doing so, the whole front end of the bus falls forward with a huge bang and the rest, well you can see for yourself”.

“Right, thanks” Tracy turned to those assisting the driver “Get him inside and warm him up will you, thanks”.

“Ruddy Nora!” exclaimed the driver of the bus company’s recovery vehicle as it pulled up alongside their stricken vehicle, but before anyone could say anything else, an ear splitting siren suddenly pierced the air forcing everyone to move away from the source, the burglar alarm mounted on the front of the Post Office outside of which this little scene was developing.

Tracy was adept at silencing this sort of problem and with two rapid gunshots silenced the alarm to everyone’s relief. The silence meant that she could now hear her radio, which had been trying to get through since the alarm started.

“Go ahead”

“Can you get over to Haychester Post Office” the controller asked “there’s been a robbery overnight”.

Tracy looked up at the Post Office building, nothing seemed untoward, bar the alarm that had sounded though but she had not had any time to investigate that yet.

“All right” she responded “estimated time of arrival two seconds”.

Just as she was about to reach for the heavy front door of the Post Office it burst open and a short man who Tracy recognised as the Post Office senior Manager, appeared. He was startled to see that the Security Department had already arrived.

“Blimey that was quick”

“I was in the neighbourhood” Tracy responded indicting the problems in the street outside. She saw the Manager look up slightly stunned at the state of the burglar alarm now hanging limply from the front wall.

She attempted to divert his attention away from the alarm and guided him back inside. “What’s happened?” she asked.

“We had visitors overnight, we have lost a sizeable amount of cash, stamps and other valuable goods, mostly from the vault downstairs”. He pointed down a short flight of steps as they made their way past the service counters.

“Signs of a break in?” Tracy asked?

The Manager pointed to the floor. Visible was several loose and recently disturbed floor panels. “An old cellar” he explained “dates back to when this used to be a hotel, except it’s supposed to have been sealed”.

Tracy bent down to take a look but was not going in there if she could help it as confined dark spaces were not her favourite place.

“Commander?” called Longton from the top of the stairs.

“Down here.”

There was a loud clonking of feet on the wooden steps as Longton joined them in the basement vault.

“Go on” Tracy ordered as she lifted the largest loose floor panel “get down there.”

“Mmm” he responded, “entry through a basement, that rings a bell.” He climbed down and ducked his head inside. Tracy passed a torch down and listened as Longton shuffled off down into the depths.

A few minutes passed by without any sound. “Al, are you all right?” she asked. There was no response, it looked like she was going to have to face her fears and go down there after him.

“My wife will kill me when she sees the state of me” Longton responded as he walked down the steps into the basement.

Tracy who had been looking down into the hole banged her head, as she shot up, startled by Longton’s voice behind her.

“How the...” she pointed down.

“Let me take you on a little tour... by the way” he turned to the Manager “do you know you have the front of a bus in your basement?”

“Must be best part of a hundred grand” Robbins concluded as he looked over the pile of cash and documents that Collins had just placed on his desk.

“Will this cover our expenses?” Collins asked rather anxious to get on with the job in hand as he didn’t really like Robbins. He was a middleman and Collins was a crook who always preferred to deal direct with his clients.

“More than enough I’d say” a third gentleman said as he entered the room.

“And who are you, Santa Claus?” Collins enquired.

“I’m the man who is going to guarantee your freedom” the gentleman explained as he sat down on the couch that was on the opposite side of the office to the desk.

“Go on...”

“You see even a man of your considerable talents Mr Collin cannot just walk into an establishment such as the one we are asking you to enter without attracting the attention of the Security Services” the gentleman continued.

“So where do you come in?”

“Let’s just say I fix things not only on behalf of my client but also anyone who they employ such as your good self”.

“Sounds good enough to me, only you may be out of a job, I don’t get caught” Collins boasted.

“Foolish sentiment my friend especially for someone who is responsible for a serious crime in the Haychester District” Robbins cut in.

“Something I should know about?” Collins enquired as he lit a cigarette and took a deep inhale.

“Haychester may be a dull and quiet place but it does have one important element that you will not have come across” the gentleman continued as he passed over a copy of the Haychester Gazette.

“The Security Commander of the Haychester division and his esteemed Deputy are probably the best officers in the country, you won’t shake them off lightly you know”.

“London isn’t Haychester” Collins retorted.

“The Commander has a habit of blissfully ignoring judicial boundaries when it suits him so I wouldn’t bank on that” Robbins added.

“Everyone has a weakness” Collins replied “It’s just a matter of working out what”.

“Well just remember if you need my services, here is my card” the gentleman announced as he stood up and handed over a small piece of printer card to Collins. “Be seeing you” he added before leaving.

“The Commander? A weakness?” Robbins asked surprised once the office door was closed.

Collins took another thoughtful drag on the cigarette before casting his eyes over the article on the front page of the paper again.

“This Commander, tell me about him and his lovely Deputy”.

The Commander brushed down his slightly crumpled dress uniform as he stood in his new office. A modern room with a curved window situated at the front corner of the building with a view of the main intersection of High Holborn and Southampton Row below.

There was little in the room at the time, just a large desk, a chair still with its plastic wrapping on it and a large London Underground map on the wall which the Commander had just put up.

He turned from watching the traffic outside upon hearing a polite knock at the door whereupon in walked Chief Superintendent Travers.

“How do you like your new office?” he asked.

“It’ll do for now” the Commander replied thoughtfully.

“All ready to go?”

“Well computers are being sorted out as we speak”

“I saw the pile of boxes as I came in”

“Blimey that was quick, well anyway all the civilian staff, receptionists, clerical, etc. are being transferred from Euston. We should have all the vehicles ready to go by next week and then there are the Security Officers themselves”

“When are you meeting them?”

“Briefing is in about two minutes, you are welcome to come along if you want”.

“No thanks, I said this was strictly your operation, besides I have been sent with a list of Christmas shopping” Travers brandished a lengthy piece of paper in his hand.

“Ah!” Christmas never was the Commander's favourite time of year and Christmas Shopping in particular was a bit of a mystery to him.

“Good luck Commander!” Travers said as he shook the Commander’s hand before leaving.

Stepping out into the glass panel lined corridor, the Commander had to be careful not to trip over the various hazards, open cable ducting covers, boxes, odd bits of plasterboard, etc. that littered the place, a sign that the building was still very much in its infancy.

The briefing room was at the opposite end of the corridor from the Commander’s new office. Outside the double doors the Commander peered in through the small window to see about a hundred Security Officers from all walks of life it seemed, gathered inside.

He cleared his throat and entered. A hushed silence greeted his arrival.

Stepping up to the front of the room, the Commander quickly had everyone’s attention.

“Good morning”

There were murmured replies from those gathered.

“Right, if all goes according to plan, in six days time we will be the new Security Service for Transport in Greater London”.

It was only really now as he looked down at a map of Greater London on the desk in

front of him that the enormity of the task ahead and the responsibility attached thereto really hit him for the first time.

“Basically we will be responsible for all criminal investigations upon and protection of all railways, both underground and main line, buses, taxis, trams and roads within the Greater London area with the exception of the Metropolitan Line west of Moor Park”.

“The basic structure will be based on the London Underground network. The ground has been divided up into a number of key areas with a main Underground or Main Line station as the central point. At each of these locations a team headed up by one of you will be based and will be responsible for the area surrounding that location.” He could tell from the understanding silence that he had their complete and undivided attention, just how he liked it. Whether they were attentive through knowledgeable understanding, or they simply did not have a clue what he was going on about was anyone's guess.

“An example is the Victoria Station office which will be responsible for an area roughly encompassing the stations at St James Park, Westminster, Sloane Square and Green Park”.

“Most of the premises, officers and vehicles we are inheriting from the old Transport Police. Head office is here at Holborn which has everything to Bank, Russell Square, Leicester Square and Oxford Circus under it”.

The most important point was coming up and to emphasise it the Commander leaned forward and pointed.

“At the top of the tree is yours truly. Some of you will have heard of me and know I do not take fools gladly. Work well and I am a happy bunny" he explained before emphasising "BUT any funny business and your backside won't touch the ground between here and the Job Centre”.

There were looks of slight discomfort amongst those gathered at this statement.

“Hopefully it will not come to that, you all have been carefully selected for your skills and talents and should make a good team....I think”.

“Those who haven't already will be undertaking line side safety training at Acton next week and I would like to get at least one officer in each area familiar with how to drive a bus over the next few weeks in case you should ever need to move one in a hurry”

“My deputy will be Commander Tracy Caverner who you may also have heard of, she will be joining me here next week.”

There were a few murmurs amongst the audience as they discussed some of the points raised before the Commander held up his hand again and silence once again descended.

“Now then, you all should have a briefing pack that Superintendent Travers had made up” he looked down without success for his copy but had to continue without it, “Needless to say I have lost mine” he admitted “It should answer most of your queries but if you do have any questions I am down the hall in the third building site on the left”.

There were smiles and laughs from the audience.

“Don’t mind me” Fuller said as he passed by in front of the Commander unwinding a large reel of computer network cable.

“Oh that was Lieutenant Commander Simon Fuller by the way” the Commander announced pointing in the direction of the rapidly disappearing IT Network Manager “he is our head of IT here and is having a busy time sorting this place into an office of some sorts”.

Fuller waved momentarily at his introduction before disappearing through the opposite doorway.

“Right I think that’s all for now ladies and gentlemen. Could I see erm” he fumbled around for the right piece of crumpled paper in his pocket “Lieutenant Commander Cassini please before you go.” Everyone began to get up from his or her chairs when the Commander remembered something he had inevitably forgotten.

“Whoa, hang on, wait a minute, I’ve forgotten something!” he called waving his arms frantically, causing everyone to sit down again.

“You can pick up your new uniforms, id and warrant cards from the main office next door. The warrant cards entitle you to free transport on the Underground and Buses by the way!”

“Right..” called Longton pointing across the road from the Post Office “...the old cellar has a connecting passageway that runs under the pavement...” Tracy and the manager followed him as he continued “.....past our stricken bus here....” he patted the bonnet sides of the stricken vehicle before the party marched into the road “.....across the road and exits.....” they walked up onto the pavement the other side and looked down at the side embankment supporting the pavement where Longton was now pointing “...right here where the old coal supply access is”.

“And that’s how they got in?” the Manager asked.

“Yep, reckon so”.

“So how did the collapse happen then?” Tracy asked.

“I reckon that the culvert or passageway or whatever had been narrowed by strengthening work at some point and our uninvited guests removed some of the supports to gain access last night”.

The manager simply walked off slightly bemused. Tracy went back across the road to look down the hole from which the bus had just been pulled out.

“...and you can bet top dollar there won’t be any forensic evidence either” Longton added “these guys are too professional”.

Tracy looked around as if for inspiration. Amongst the hustle and bustle of the street one thing caught her eye in particular, a CCTV camera mounted nearby overlooking the main part of the street.

She pointed up to the camera, “Get me that tape,” she ordered.

The Commander just managed to escape the Briefing room before everyone else and so easily managed to reach his office without getting caught up in the crowd. Navigating inside his office was a little more difficult though as various things had been delivered since he left it.

Two large boxes containing a computer and monitor nearly caused him to fall over, meanwhile his new uniform had also been delivered. It lay on the desk still wrapped in its plastic protective bag.

The dark blue with silver trim was different from the dark grey of his current uniform but the style was similar, a common feature nationwide in the Service. Attached was a note from the Uniform Issuing Office in Camden Town;

‘Hope it fits, dress uniform to follow, having problems with your medal ribbons. Can you tell us Commander Caverner’s dress size?’

He should have known her well enough by now to know that but he didn’t. ‘Never mind’ he thought as he dumped his existing uniform jacket on the chair and proceeded to unwrap the new one, however he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Come in” he called. The face of a youngish black officer appeared around the door. “You wanted to see me sir?”

“Did I?” the Commander responded slightly confused as he pulled on his new uniform for the first time.

“Lieutenant Commander Cassini sir”.

“Oh yes of course” the Commander responded with sudden realisation “come in, take a seat”.

Visibly nervous Cassini came in and sat down in front of the Commander's desk.

“Does that epilate number look wonky to you?” the Commander asked showing him the gold ‘LT01’ letters.

Cassini leaned forward and twisted the 'L' of the right epilate slightly to correct the fault.

"Thanks" The Commander put the jacket back on and sat down.

"Right then" he opened a manila folder on his desk "Cassini, you were the deputy officer in charge of the old anti pick pocketing operation under the BTP".

"That's right sir".

"Now your old boss on that operation has retired so I would like you to take over the team on this one".

"Yes sir, thank you".

"and" the Commander added "I would like you to look at expanding the operation slightly to include specialist covert surveillance operations when the need requires" the Commander added "Are you up for it?"

"Certainly, only" a measure of doubt began to creep in to Cassini's voice.

"You seem surprised, go on, spit it out."

"My previous boss was not happy at my - how shall I put it - techniques and methods of operation apparently, so I just assumed I would be for the bullet".

"Ah yes..." the Commander leafed through to the reports section of Cassini's personnel file.

"Your previous boss described you as 'headstrong', 'independently minded with a will of his own' and 'prefers to ignore the chain of command when he feels it necessary to accomplish personal aims and objectives".

The Commander looked across at Cassini who was still feeling somewhat uncomfortable.

"Don't panic" the Commander assured him "that is what I call initiative and exactly why I insisted you be invited to this little party" he explained, "I need someone on this who can work independently and on their own initiative."

"Thank you sir" Cassini replied breathing a small sigh of relief.

"We'll talk again, it's been a pleasure to meet you" The Commander shook Cassini's hand and watched as he left the room.

"Right, there is the westbound bus stop outside the cathedral" Tracy commented as she watched the CCTV monitor in the Camera office back at the Haychester Security

Office.

“Can you fast forward it a little” she asked the technician controlling the playback of the previous evenings recording.

The image speeded up with vehicles and people passing through the picture at breakneck speed. “Whoa hang on” Tracy suddenly called out “back it up a little”.

Barrett came into the office and looked over Tracy’s shoulder at the image on the screen. “I figured a second pair of eyes may be of help Maam” she added.

“Hello who do we have here” Barrett commented as the video playback showed a dark transit van pull up in the bus stop.

“Mmm, could be something” Tracy commented as two men were shown leaving the van and walking around the back out of shot.

As the minutes ticked by it was obvious that these two men and their van were the most likely suspects for the Post Office burglary as they were often moving out of shot in the direction of the old access point from where the break in had originated.

Annoyingly the faces of both men were not visible, carefully hidden from view by peaked caps and the low light of the evening.

“Hello, this just got lively” Tracy responded at seeing what appeared to be a conversation of a not too pleasant nature between the van driver and the driver of the double decker bus that had just pulled up alongside, none too pleased at finding the bus stop blocked.

“If we can find the driver of that bus, we could get a description” Barrett suggested.

“Barrett go and get a timetable for the local bus routes” Tracy asked before turning to the technician “See if you can enhance this someone, I want the number of the van and an i.d. for the bus, also see if you can find this van or our two friends on tape from the night before last”.

Tracy made her way back to the office through the complex of corridors and rooms that made up the Haychester Security Department building.

She entered the office she shared with the Commander only to be quickly joined by Longton who placed a clear plastic bag of mud and pieces of rubble on the desk.

“Ohh a Christmas present for me?” she asked sarcastically “you shouldn’t have!”

“The rubble and stuff dumped in the car park with the old bones in it...” he explained, the soil is exactly the same type as found in the hole by the Museum.

“Wouldn’t that be the same across the city?” Tracy asked.

“Well normally yes” Longton added “but there is a very thin band of a unique clay

running through part of the city”.

“Right under the Museum?”

“Right under the Museum!” Longton confirmed.

“Right, here is what I want you to do” Tracy asked “trace all possible routes from the Museum to where the rubble was dumped.”

“Right.....”

“Then get some officers and start knocking on some doors along the most likely route, someone must have seen something!”

“I’ll get right on it!”

Tracy watched as Longton left the office closing the door behind him, however the peace was to be once again short lived as it was soon disturbed by the telephone ringing.

“Tracy? Its me” the Commander announced.

“Oh hello, where are you?”

“London Transport Museum, Covent Garden, giving some of my new officers a crash course in the basics of Underground Railways”.

Tracy smiled to herself; she knew that chances were the Commander was enjoying every minute of being there. He got to play with trains all day while she got to look down dark holes in Post Office cellars.

“Anything happening there?” the Commander asked out of professional curiosity

“The rubble and our skeleton came from the hole by the museum plus the Post Office was done over last night by almost the same method so I would say that our local friendly burglars are still around and still very well organised”.

“Did the alarms go off at the Post Office?”

“Now I come to think of it, only when the panic switch was hit when the Manager discovered it this morning”.

“Ah, and wasn’t there no alarm sounding when the Museum Director opened up yesterday morning?”

Tracy gently slapped her forehead in irritation “How did I miss that one?”

“Happens to the best of us love” the Commander assured her. “You remember the Haychester College burglary a few months back?”

Tracy leaned back in the chair whilst she recalled the incident “Yes they had that small robotics technology stuff stolen didn’t they?”

“Yep that’s the one” The Commander replied “their security system had been overridden by some sort of carefully controlled surge device attached to the system wiring, get forensics to check for any similar signs at the Museum and the Post Office”.

“You have a theory?” Tracy asked in anticipation.

“Nope, just a hunch”

“The last time you had a hunch you were nearly shot dead”

The Commander looked around the bustling Museum building as he had now lost sight of the party of officers he was supposed to be supervising. “I got to go, I’ll speak to you later”.

“Bye love. Oh and remember my present!”

As Officer Barrett rounded the Southgate Circulatory System in her small red patrol car the radio crackled into life.

“Barrett, its Longton are you receiving over?”

“Barrett here” she responded pulling up at the back of a queue of traffic typical of a mid afternoon in Haychester.

“Are you on your way to the Bus Station?” Longton asked from the Haychester control room.

“Yes” she looked at the stationary traffic ahead “that is assuming these ruddy railway crossing barriers ever go up again”.

“We have a registration number for the bus in the CCTV footage, its November three four seven November Papa November, registered keeper is our local lot down the Bus Station but we already knew that”.

“Right thanks” she responded as she pulled away again now that the railway crossing barriers had decided to open, something they don’t always do, even when they where supposed to.

She pulled right into the bus station forecourt and parked the car alongside a row of neatly parked double deck buses which dwarfed her tiny official Ford Fiesta patrol car by some considerable margin.

Barrett decided that the enquiries desk of the predominantly 1950s style brick built Haychester Bus Station would be the best place to start. Inside the man behind the

desk who seemed delighted to see someone different from the usual tide of little old ladies that he usually got as his clientele, especially at this time of year, greeted her with a warm smile.

“Morning Officer, what can I do for you?”

Barrett came up to the desk and removed her notebook from her pocket. “Can you tell me where I can find the driver of one of your vehicles at about 8.30 last night by the Cathedral?”

“Number?” the man behind the desk asked.

“N347 NPN”

“Well I meant route number but 347 is one we use on the 700 service so that narrows it down anyway” he responded reaching back to a large black plastic folder, the remains of years of sellotaped notes encrusting its outer cover.

“Right” he responded flicking through the pages within the folder “347 was used on the 700 all yesterday and driven by four drivers, the last one would be the one you are looking for, that’s Dave Partington”.

“Don’t suppose he is around by any chance?” Barrett asked out of hope knowing he could easily be anywhere on the route network from Hampshire through to East Sussex at that time.

The man behind the desk looked across at the drivers rota, “Good news, you’re in luck, he should be in to change shifts in a minute, Route 700, stand 10 in about one minute.”

Barrett contemplated the semi-melted slush that was still lying around as she waited for the bus to come in. She didn’t have to wait long though as the large predominantly white double decker swung into the bay and came to a standstill at the bus stand adjacent to her.

Before she could approach the vehicle however the seemingly still and quiet row of old ladies underneath the station canopy suddenly sprung into life and rushed forward like a tidal wave sending Barrett and anyone trying to get off the bus flying in all directions.

Once the mass scramble had died down, Barrett managed to intercept the driver as he alighted through the bedlam.

“You Dave Partington?” she asked.

“Yes, what’s up?”

“Did you see two men and a van outside the Cathedral late last night?”

“Yeah, they were stuck right in the bus stop, so I had a word....”

“We saw the CCTV footage, don’t suppose you can give me a description by any chance”.

“Only vaguely I’m afraid”.

Barrett’s heart began to sink; this was maybe the last chance for a decent description of the perpetrators.

“There is one witness you can ask though” he responded.

“A passenger?” she asked.

“Nope, the bus”.

“Mmm pretty good” Collins commented as the efforts of the previous nights work was inspected. The old pasting table was covered with postal orders, stamps and cash in a variety of dominations, a wide variety of easily bankable material that was not easy to trace.

“So what’s the big job then?” one of the men enquired.

“As you know gentlemen” Collins explained “our employer on this little enterprise has always been interested in antiquities, trinkets and the like” he walked around the table to the front of the room so he could address the men more directly.

“Regrettably the next job will need to be undertaken over Christmas day” Collins announced “as that is the only way we can easily access our target for the next job, but you will receive double the standard rate for the job”.

“And what is our target exactly?” one man enquired.

He threw a blueprint diagram onto the table “Gentlemen, this is our destination” he announced.

“Ruddy Nora!” Collins’s ‘deputy’, Richard Keynes, a young man in his early twenties exclaimed. Although he was a mere youngster compared with those others in the group, he was already a well seasoned and professional criminal, learning his trade from a master at the dark arts.

“Look..” Collins assured “if we follow the plan then it will work, and we will have pulled off one of the most daring burglaries in recent history, so let’s go to work”.

“Did you learn anything at the bus station?” Tracy enquired, looking up as Barrett entered the briefing room.

“Yes” Barrett responded somewhat out of breath, “Never get in the way of old ladies in Haychester!”

“Anything else?” Tracy asked chuckling at Barrett's misfortune which reflected a typical example of the City's more dafter characteristics.

“I might have something, I brought it with me”. Barrett replied however their conversation was suddenly and abruptly interrupted by the Chief Superintendent.

“Commander Caverner!” he called loudly from down the corridor in that booming voice that only meant one thing, trouble.

“Yes Sir?” Tracy asked mildly as she put her head around the corner of the doorway and observed the Chief Superintendent striding purposefully towards her.

“It took me most of yesterday to get a mountain of rubble out of my parking space, now there is a bus in it” he barked “I'm waiting for a really good plausible explanation.”

“Barrett!!” Tracy barked suspecting that she may very well be the source of the Chief Superintendent's irritation.

Barrett turned on her heel and swiftly returned to the briefing room to explain herself as requested.

“The bus has a CCTV camera positioned in the cab that looks out of the exit door at bus stops” Barrett explained “and last night it would have been pointing right at our two chaps with the Transit van.”

“Nice thinking” Tracy praised.

“Well what do you think of your new Department?” Superintendent Travers asked as he entered the Commander's new office.

The Commander looked up from behind the already cluttered desk with a thoughtful expression.

“Offices are fine and the staff appear to know their stuff”. He took a chip out of the carton on the desk and held it in front of him “the catering leaves a lot to be desired though, can't we get a decent chip fryer in the canteen?”

“I'll look into it” Travers responded, eager to address the Commander's every request. “When do you have to return to Haychester?”

The Commander looked at his watch, in sudden realisation of the time he grabbed his jacket, Tracy's new uniform and his briefcase off the desk and made a bolt for the door.

As he left he pointed upwards towards the wall clock, “The clocks don’t work around here either!”

“Hello, can I see your Guvnor?” The gruff voice of an elderly plain clothed security officer stirred the Haychester receptionist from her humdrum late afternoon routine.

There was a creak as the metal framed screen door opened and the Commander struggled in carrying various items that were sufficiently large as to hinder his progress.

“You may be in luck, here he is now” she replied pointing out the Commander as he approached. “Oh Commander?” the Receptionist called in that typically cheery voice that all receptionists seem to use even in the most adverse of circumstances..

He looked up at the calling of his name “Yes?”

“Gentleman to see you sir” she announced.

The gruff gentleman stepped forward and introduced himself. “Commander Richard Baron, National Robbery Squad”.

“Pleased to meet you” the Commander replied. Baron relieved the Commander of some of the burden that he was carrying, “What can I do for you?”

“About your two burglaries, I think your perpetrators may well be old acquaintances of ours”.

“You have my undivided attention. Step into my office....”

In the Briefing Room, Tracy was in the middle of briefing the Department’s officers as to the current situation when the Commander and Baron entered the room.

“Don’t mind me” the Commander told her, Tracy looked up, smiled at the sight of his return before continuing with the briefing.

“Right to recap, we have two distinctive burglaries, similar method of entry and in each case the security system was easily disabled by some form of power surge or similar”

“Is there a connection with that incident at the College a few months back?” one officer asked.

“Well the security system was disabled in a very similar manner so it’s not impossible to rule out yet” she responded.

“Subsequent enquiries and CCTV surveillance from various sources have shown little,

these guys are professional and very careful not to get noticed. We have no witnesses who can id or describe the gang leader and what we have of any accomplices are at best sketchy”.

“What about Barrett’s bus?” another Officer asked from the back of the room, a question than prompted a few suppressed chuckles around the room.

“Still waiting” Tracy replied “We can only hope our Mr Big slipped up and let his face show on the cab CCTV camera as it may be our only chance to id this guy”.

“Sorry to interrupt...” Baron asked “...but where their any vehicles involved?”

“Yes, a van and pick up in the Museum raid, a large box lorry in the College raid and the van again in the Post Office job” Tracy replied.

“They weren’t all blue by any chance?” Baron asked inquisitively.

“Now that you mention it...” Tracy began before she stopped and looked Baron directly in the eye. “I’m sorry, do you know something we don’t?”

Baron moved forward to the front of the room so he could explain his presence.

“Three months ago we had a spate of unusual burglaries in the Greater Manchester area, all used unusually well engineered methods of entry including using subsurface access tunnels, basements and the like”.

“What was taken?” the Commander enquired as he suddenly perked up.

“Antiquities mostly, some cash but particularly historic artefacts”.

“What makes you suspect that our burglars and yours are the same?” asked one of the junior officers.

“Whoever they are, they were thoroughly professional and at no time did any of the gang show their face on CCTV cameras or to witnesses, they always dress smartly in blue overalls and drive blue vehicles, usually stolen”.

Baron took a folder out of his briefcase, and removed a photograph from it. Showing it to the audience he continued.

“The leader is believed to be this man, Bryan Collins” Baron went on “The photo however is thirty years old so don’t rely on it. He was a civil engineer by trade before he turned into the break into buildings for money business, he works for whoever will hire him and tends to recruit from the local villains if he has any major jobs on”.

The Commander looked at the photograph, the face was new to him and it was clear that no one else in the room recognised him although the age of the photograph would have been of little assistance.

“Does chummy here have a fixation with the colour blue or something?” the

Commander asked.

“It appears so, he is believed to be superstitious about it, hence the vehicles and the outfits, lately he also seemed to have specialised in gold coins and Roman artefacts”.

“No artefacts in the Post Office” Tracy mentioned.

“If his methods appear in a job involving primarily a cash based theft, you can guarantee he is merely acquiring funds to finance a big job within a few days” Baron replied.

“Longton!” the Commander called out of the door down the corridor.

At the call of his name, Longton looked out of the control room in the Commander’s direction. “You yelled sir!” he replied.

“Likely major theft targets in the Haychester area, check them out and increase their security”.

“Aye sir!”

The Commander turned to Barrett and another junior officer seated nearby “You two get me a list of all museums, art galleries, anything that has a collection of Roman artefacts, especially coins”.

“If he is acquiring funds, then he already has a major target lined up, probably working on it right now” Baron added “All you have to do is work out where”.

A shrill whistle pierced the air as the large yellow battery electric locomotive started to pull its heavy engineers train out of the extensive Lille Bridge depot, the main infrastructure engineering depot for the London Underground system.

The Yard Foreman, clad in regulation orange day-glow overalls watched the train weave its way through the complex of sidings and onto the main line, the sound of clanking of wheels passing over worn track joints echoing through the air.

As the sound subsided with the train plunging into the nearby tunnel, the Foreman became aware of a blue van pulling into the yard through the west gate.

This seemed unusual to him, all of London Underground’s vans were white with blue relief so this vehicle stood out. Also he was not expecting any further deliveries or visitors that day especially as it was late afternoon on Christmas Eve.

Feeling that it was probably nothing he walked over to the now stationary van. There appeared to be just a single occupant, a youngish man in his late twenties behind the steering wheel, he was dressed in a smart clean set of blue overalls.

“Afternoon, what can I do for you squire?” the foreman asked in a typically relaxed

cockney London manner common around the City.

The driver wound down the window and pointed vaguely at a clipboard sitting on the dashboard of the van.

“I’m here on a collection” he vaguely explained.

“Collecting what?”

“A locomotive” came Collins voice from behind the foreman who fell to the ground with a thud, the blow across the back of the neck rendering him immediately unconscious.

“Don’t mind me,” the driver said as he got out of the van, stepping over the foreman as he did so.

The two men stood and looked around the yard through the gloom of early evening at the menagerie of heavy plant and equipment, pieces of rail, old sleepers and the Engineers Department locomotives, three of which were parked in a nearby siding.

“Which one boss?”

Collins looked across the yard at the small tube profile locomotives, “The blue one of course”.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you are looking at an historic moment” Baron announced as those gathered in the control room studied the newly developed still of Collins’s face taken from the bus CCTV footage.

“Seems ironic” the Commander mused “National Robbery Squad have been chasing him for twenty years with no success, he turns up on our patch and we have his latest mug shot in just three days”.

“He’s getting careless, must be old age” Tracy commented.

“Do we circulate the picture?” Longton asked.

The Commander pulled up a chair and sat down, resting his rapidly tiring limbs.
“Internal circulation only for the moment I think, lets keep him thinking we have no idea what he currently looks like for the moment, we can use that to our advantage”.

Longton walked into the room partially hidden behind a lengthy print off of paper. With a dull thud the paper landed on the desk alongside the Commander who looked at it with an awkward glance.

“What the heck is this lot?”

“List and details of all historic artefact collections in the UK. First list is just Roman

collections, second list is all artefact collections in the local area and the third list is all collections nationwide”.

The Commander picked up the first list and glanced at the first page of the poorly printed paper. “A little light Christmas reading....” he commented, “I don’t suppose there is a summary of this little lot is there?”

Longton passed another smaller piece of paper over which Tracy took and read out.

“In the local area we have 115 collections of ancient artefacts in 56 locations of which some 86 are all or part Roman, minus one collection from the City Museum”.

“and nationally?” the Commander asked.

Tracy looked further down the summary list with dismay “In two words.... A lot!”

“OK chances are that it has got to be within South East England so that should narrow it down a bit” the Commander concluded “what does that take us down to?”

“About 300 odd collections in approximately 200 locations, more if we include London in the equation” Longton replied.

“Forget London, that’s Metropolitan Division’s problem but notify them anyway” the Commander advised Longton.

“Now what do we do?” Barrett asked inquisitively.

“Wait for our friend Collins to strike again” The Commander replied.

“Last train!” echoed the Station Assistant’s cry down Holborn’s Eastbound Central Line platform. There was a rush of footsteps on the polished stone floor as the last passengers of the day boarded the final service.

“Hainault via Woodford, final call!” the Station Assistant announced again. The inevitable last straggler appeared from the platform entrance and leapt in the nearest open door of the waiting train.

The Station Assistant held aloft his hand to signal the right away. With the beeping alarm the doors closed and with the hiss of released air brakes and the whining of electric motors, the eight car train of 1992 Tube Stock pulled away and plunged into the tunnel.

Once the turbulent air from the train had settled down, all that remained was the deserted platform with the buzz of the fluorescent lighting humming in the background.

“Dave you done yet?” asked the Station Supervisor looking round the corner.

“Yep the last one just left” the Station Assistant replied as he bent down to pick up an old newspaper from a nearby bench.

“Come on, I got the kettle on upstairs” he called.

“Right I’m.....” his reply was interrupted by an unusual sound that seemed to be coming from the tunnel at the west end of the platform. “Can you hear something?” he asked as he turned to look at the arrival end dark tunnel mouth from where the sound appeared to be echoing.

The two men walked towards the end of the platform and peered round the corner of the portal into the darkness within. The distant sound of clanking metal and hiss of a train could just be heard in the distance.

“Sounds like an engineers train” the Assistant commented “there’s no engineering scheduled tonight is there?”

“On Christmas eve night you must be joking!” the Supervisor responded.

The sound then stopped as suddenly as it started. “Ah well, it must be the Museum Station ghost” the Supervisor joked.

"As long as it’s not those cannibals again".

The two men walked off the platform, as they left they were unaware of Collins appearing from the running tunnel and climbing onto the platform. He opened an access panel in the end platform wall and flipped the switch located behind it. The tunnel lights came on bathing the running rails in light. Collins looked around again before jumping off the platform and disappearing down the tunnel whence he had come.

“There you go, get that down ya!” the Supervisor instructed as he passed over the fresh mug of coffee before sitting down in front of the station CCTV screens.

“Well here’s to Christmas then!” the Assistant announced.

“I’ll drink to that!”

The Assistant glanced over at the bank of CCTV monitors; movement on one of them had attracted his attention.

“Looks like someone’s still working” he remarked.

On the screen, the two men witnessed a three car train of tube stock was moving slowly through the old Aldwych branch platform. The train was old and dusty, months of disuse parked in the disused running tunnel showing through the dull layer of murk and dust on the outside of its unpainted aluminium bodywork.

"Probably taking it for its annual check I suppose" the Supervisor remarked "odd of

the Line Controller not to mention it though".

"Okay gents, we have about two feet of bricked up old exit before we reach the old access level" Collins explained shining the torch upon the crumpled blueprint that was perched upon an upturned cable drum, "after that we will have to climb down this old access tunnel and then use the driller to punch through this secondary outer wall".

"With the drilling and masonry shifting, setting up our access and anti security equipment and acquiring the goods, with a following wind we should be out of here by the middle of tomorrow afternoon"

"Assuming these old blueprints are accurate enough" one of Collins' accomplices commented.

"Well they may be dated 1941 but the whole area down here has been disused since then so there is no reason to assume there are any major deviations"

Collins shown the torch into the gloom, the light illuminating the bricked off doorway that barred their path. "That's where we start gentlemen, lets get moving".

"You're not wearing that are you?" Tracy asked semi-incredulously seeing the Commander stroll into their front living room wearing his full Transport Division Security Department uniform.

"Err why not?" It was clear that this question had caught him off guard

"Because love, today is Christmas Day and we are supposed to be off duty and meeting my mother for Christmas dinner, that's why." Tracy retorted despite the fact she was not in the least bit surprised at the Commander's usual choice of attire.

"Well bar my pyjamas, my full dress uniform and a grotty pullover, this is it I'm afraid." he explained apologetically. As ever with the Commander, it was always a case of 'what you see is what you get'.

"Mmm, ah well, you'll will have to do I suppose" Tracy murmured with some resignation.

As they turned towards the hall, the Commander reached for the telephone in the hallway and picked up the receiver.

"What are you doing?" she asked incredulously, by now halfway out of the front door.

"I'm just giving the office a call to see everything is all right" he responded as he began to dial.

Tracy took the phone from the Commander and put it down, "Everything will be fine, you are off duty and you do not need to worry, now get to the car before I go mad!"

She had realised sometime ago that the Commander was going to require some getting used to. While she herself was a workaholic, the Commander surpassed that standard to the level of eccentric workaholic.

The Commander opened the driver's side door of the Security Department patrol car, pausing only to look at the divisional crest on the side.

Tracy looked at him across the roof of the car. "All right love, what's wrong now?" she asked seeing his expression of confusion that he always put on when he had noticed something not quite right with the world.

"Did you check the car when you booked it out from the workshop?" he asked.

"Yes, why?"

"What logo is on your side?"

She looked down at the passenger side door, "London Transport Security Division, why what have you got?"

"County of Norfolk" he replied, "methinks the motor pool have been nicking spare parts from other divisions again" he replied as he climbed into the drivers seat of the red Ford Mondeo, "which means I will probably get a complaint from my opposite number in Norwich first thing on Boxing Day morning".

"These things always happen, quit worrying will you" Tracy responded as she joined him alongside in the passenger seat .

The residual remains of the previous days snow was still to be seen on the surrounding hillsides as they drove along the main A3 road to London. Tracy attempted to cheer the Commander up as they travelled but to little avail so she decided to ask what was wrong instead.

"Are you all right love?" she asked, the concern in her voice obvious.

"Eh? Oh it's nothing" he replied never taking his eyes off the road ahead.

"Its just you've been out of sorts all morning, this just isn't like you" she continued with a clear determination to identify the problem.

"Nerves and meeting your parents I guess" he replied as casually as he could "besides I really do not like Christmas."

"Bah, Humbug!" Tracy joked aside.

"I haven't had a Christmas as such, you know a proper Christmas, family, dinner and all that palaver since I was 12 years old. I guess it's just the culture shock that's all".

Tracy was stunned slightly, this was the first time the Commander had ever really mentioned his past, certainly as far back as childhood anyway.

"So what happened to you then , if you don't mind me asking" she continued. If there was one thing that she was set upon, it was finding out everything about him if she was to commit to being with him for the rest of their lives.

The Commander paused for a few moments as he turned off the main road, waiting until he had finished his manoeuvre before continuing the story.

"I've never told this to anyone before, it's a bit sensitive from a security point of view so you have got to promise to keep to yourself, all right?"

"Of course." Tracy agreed.

"All right, here goes" He paused momentarily for a deep breath before continuing.

"When I was twelve my mother died in a road traffic accident, a few weeks into January. My father took it badly and went back to his old job to help support the family. Unfortunately his old job was armed robbery, he was a member of one of the old South London organised crime syndicates and he got a position as a getaway driver on a raid on the old diamond depository in Lewisham".

"The Lewisham Diamond Heist?" Tracy exclaimed. She was surprised to say the least, the Lewisham Diamond Heist of January 1970 was one of the most famous robberies of the day.

"Well I don't know if you recall but about two months later, everyone including my Father were arrested in a massive raid by Scotland Yard on the Lewisham Arms public house. It turns out they had been following the gang for weeks, the only problem was there was not quite enough evidence to secure a conviction"

Tracy recalled the stories in the newspapers and on the television at the time, a time when she was just a slip of a schoolgirl.

"They secured a conviction based upon a super grass didn't they?" she enquired delving into the depths of her memory.

"Yep, and you can guess who it was."

"Ah, I see, so what happened?"

"My father was supposed to be given a reduced sentence even though three security guards were killed in the robbery, he got a probable life reduced to twenty two years. The problem was there was a leak as to who the grass was, not that it would have taken much working out mind. In order to protect us, my brother, sister and I were adopted separately with new names and identities, whilst it was arranged for my father to 'disappear' into a secure location somewhere."

"I wound up being adopted by Chief Superintendent Bronwyn as he is now, hence how I wound up in this job"

"What happened to your brother and sister then?"

"None of us were allowed to know what happened to any of the others, although I did later find out that my sister Catherine became Michelle and is now in Australia, my brother Simon is now James and well, we'll say no more about him."

"Didn't get on with him?"

The Commander started to sound a little evasive "You could put it like that, anyway as for my father, he vanished from Strangeways Jail six months after the trial, reports at the time said he had died of a heart attack but I've never bought that story for a moment".

"Follow the signs for Wood Lane and Shepherds Bush" Tracy instructed as they neared a set of traffic lights.

"Why on earth did your parents move to West London?" the Commander asked as he negotiated the local traffic that despite it being Christmas Day morning, was still surprisingly busy.

"She wanted to be close to my twin sister I think, she is working on the theory that now I am settled with someone, its time she started work on the other of her beloved twins, it's the way she has always been."

"You make it sound like she's got the wedding sorted out already"

"Well now that you come to mention it...." Tracy remarked semi-sarcastically.

Collins shone the torch around the dark damp tunnels, fifty years of neglect having resulted in a layer of damp mould and stalactites mostly as a result of rain water seeping into the old tunnels from the street some 150 feet above.

"Spooky isn't it?" Collins' deputy, Richard Keynes remarked.

"Well no one has been in here since the early 1950's, it's all abandoned now". Collins cast his torch around towards the far end of the dark tile lined passageway.

Some of the gang began to set up industrial lighting equipment which soon bathed the chambers in light not seen in there for so many decades.

"Be careful of loose masonry, there's quite a bit about where the tiles have fallen off. We need to get into the tunnel located in the north west corner of the old lift shafts".

"Over here boss!" one of the men called. The distinctive vertical cylinder shape of an old shaft, the lifts long since removed and the base two feet deep in water, was clearly visible in the light from the lamps."

"Cutting gear!" Collins called. Within a few moments, a number of the men had

moved gas powered cutting gear into position, the aim being to cut through the welds that held shut the old passageway door in the opposite side of the lift shaft.

The smell of burning soon accompanied the bright arching light and smoke, filling the air as quick work was made of the fifty year old welds around the doorframe.

Everyone not directly involved with the cutting operation, shielded their eyes from the blinding light as the elderly metalwork, fatigued by years of water ingress and neglect, gave in to the dominance of the bright flame.

"We're through Guv" the welder operator announced. A few shoves of the elderly metal door soon saw it crash to the ground, raising a cloud of long undisturbed dust which momentarily clouded everyone's vision.

Collins shone his torch inside, being careful not to touch edges of the door which were still hot from the cutting flame.

"Well..." he announced "...providing none of you have a problem with spiders, the next bit should be a doddle"

"So glad you could make it my dears" greeted Mrs Caverner as Tracy and the Commander arrived at the front door of the home of her parents. The Christmas wreath on the door set off one of the Commander's allergies and he promptly announced his arrival to the gathered Caverner family with a huge sneeze that shook the Christmas decorations that lined the hallway.

"Bless you!" everyone called back simultaneously.

"Morning Sir!" called Jennifer Caverner, Tracy's twin sister who in many respects was identical with the odd exception of different coloured eyes, something the Commander could never quite fathom out.

"Right, quick intro's" Tracy announced as she began to point out everyone in the room, "Jennifer my twin sister you know, err Mum, Dad, brother James, Uncle Henry and the old boy at the back there is Grandpa. Everybody, you probably know....."

"Certainly do" Tracy's brother James said as he stepped forward to shake the Commander's hand, he picked up a newspaper from the nearby coffee table, "You and Tracy were on the front of last night's Evening Standard here".

'NEW SECURITY TEAM FOR LONDON'S TRANSPORT' read the slightly over enthusiastically sized headline which the Commander studied with slight scepticism.

"The picture is a bit over formal I think" the Commander commented. The photograph was of Tracy and himself in their full formal dress uniforms a couple of months previously.

"Nonsense my dear" Tracy's mother commented, "I think you two look lovely".

Tracy's sister Jennifer leaned over and whispered to the Commander "If she starts calling you 'my dear' that means she like's you and you're in! She probably already has most of the wedding planned"

"Mmm" the Commander mused more with embarrassment than surprise.

"Well if you would all like to come through, dinner is about to be served" Tracy's mother announced.

Everyone made their way through into the adjacent dining room, equally well decorated with the appropriate seasonal decorations. Dominating the centre of the room was a well polished and much loved family dining table of the sort where most important family gatherings are held.

Tracy's mother dominated proceedings despite being only just over five feet tall, only the Commander and her twin daughters came near to her height wise at around five foot six to seven. She soon had everyone moved around to where she wanted them sat.

"Father you are at the far end, Jennifer next then the Commander and Tracy". The Commander, Tracy and Jennifer squeezed themselves between the table and the wall which, because of its size, meant that room for manoeuvre was limited.

Once everyone was seated, plates of traditional Christmas dinner, roast turkey with all the trimmings was passed around. "I don't suppose I can interest you in vegetables can I my dear?" Tracy's mother asked the Commander who was already working his way through the turkey and stuffing on his plate.

"Err no thanks" he replied.

"Tracy my dear your gentleman needs a woman's touch" she instructed with a mock firmness.

"Believe me I've tried, waste of time trying anything on him that's healthy, do you know he has five sugars in his tea?" she replied.

"So when do you ask her then?" Tracy's mother asked the Commander pointedly.

"Ask her what?" the Commander replied clearly caught well off guard.

"The BIG question" Jennifer replied barely pausing her eating.

"Ahhh well erm....." the Commander began before turning to look at a smirking Tracy "...we haven't considered anything like that yet, really, well you know". It was clear he was well and truly off guard here and unprepared for this inquisition.

"Of course..." Tracy's mother continued "I would like to have heard the tiny patter of grand children but I know that's not possible"

"Why because of our work?" the Commander asked, his curiosity now raised.

Tracy leaned across and took the Commander's hand, "I can't have children" she explained "some genetic foul up resulting from being a twin".

"It's the same with me" Jennifer added "not that I can ever find Mr Right anyway".

"That reminds me, I nearly forgot you present" the Commander said as he began to fumble in his pocket, "now where did I put it". The entire table fell silent, eager with anticipation to find out what he had given Tracy as a present.

"Ah here it is!" he announced, "I better warn you that this is the first Christmas present I have bought someone for a very long time so I hope you are not too disappointed". He handed over the screwed up paper bag to Tracy, carefully placing it in her hand.

"Well thank you" she replied as she looked over its unconventional wrapping. "Love the wrapping".

"Sorry about that, all I had at the time"

Tracy opened the bag and pulled out a small hinged red box, tentatively she opened it to reveal a beautiful red and blue diamond ring, the light from the Christmas lights glimmering off it.

"Oh it's beautiful!" she responded almost breathless with surprise. She proceeded to slip it onto her finger, then after further admiration she showed it around the table to a fully attentive audience.

"I saw it in a jewellers in Holborn, the design is quite similar to the London Underground roundel design which seemed somewhat appropriate given where we are going next week".

Jennifer leaned over for a closer inspection "Looks like old Longton will have to pay out on the sweepstake a littler sooner than he anticipated" she mused.

"It's a tradition in this family Sir" Tracy's brother James told the Commander as they stood in the kitchen, "the men always do the washing up at Christmas".

The Commander wielded the tea towel with relish in an attack on the last dinner plate but then paused suddenly with a realisation.

"Hang on, you are calling me Sir, don't tell me you're with the Service as well?" he asked.

"Yes Sir, Lieutenant Commander with the Kent division, Ports and Airports section. This must be the only family at Christmas to have four people around the dining table all carrying loaded guns" he mused.

"Better not upset the chef then or there could be a shootout!" the Commander joked.

"Is it really serious with you and Tracy then?" James asked frankly.

"Well she has brought so much into my life, she is a part of me now"

"Now that is serious, but what would you do if you lost her, given your dangerous occupations, after all you've been shot what twice in your time"

"Three times actually, I still have two bullets rolling around inside me somewhere" the Commander mused as he looked down himself. "As for losing Tracy" he added with thought "Well I would probably tear the place apart until I found her I suppose".

The Commander looked out of the window at the Underground railway line that ran past the rear of the house, its rails slightly rusty and silent with lack of use on that day.

His train of thought was interrupted when Tracy came into the kitchen and hugged him from behind, "I love you, you know that" she said, her face beaming with that smile of hers that lights up even the darkest of rooms.

"Whoa..!" the Commander exclaimed as the dinner plate he was holding crashed to the floor, sending pieces of broken porcelain across the kitchen floor with an ear piercing crash.

"What are you two lovebirds up to in there?" Tracy's mother called from the front room.

"We are being summoned" Tracy announced.

"I am right behind you" the Commander replied "only don't mention the plate" he added pushing the broken pieces out of sight under the cupboard with his foot.

Arm in arm the happy couple went on into the front room where the rest of the family had gathered and where watching the couple's every move with fascination. The Commander normally found this kind of attention unnerving but in Tracy's company he was about as relaxed as he ever could manage.

"I did buy you a present love" Tracy announced "James, could you pass me the big flat package against the wall there".

"Blimey, this weighs a ton" James responded as he lifted the carefully wrapped present from its place leaning against the wall behind the Christmas tree.

The Commander looked over the long flat parcel, approximately five feet in length and eight inches wide with bemusement. "What on earth is this?"

"Something for our new office" Tracy announced "My dad found it in a junk shop a couple of days ago and thought it might be appropriate".

The Commander tore off the wrapping paper to reveal an elderly enamelled sign of classic London Underground Johnston typeface design. He looked at the white sign with its black 'HOLBORN' and light blue 'PICCADILLY LINE' roundel and blue edging and smiled. "I love it" he announced.

Tracy's father looked up "Glad you like it, it's one of the coving panel signs which were removed when the station was refurbished in the 1980's. There should be another twenty odd of those signs somewhere in the world".

"I'll hang it on the wall in the office" the Commander announced being careful to place the elderly sign down where its not inconsiderable weight would not cause anyone any harm.

The Commander moved across to Tracy's father, "So how come you have such a good knowledge of London Underground history then?" he asked out of curiosity.

"Well although the family firm was a locksmith, I also worked on the Tube for many years, first as a Station Assistant, then a driver on the Central Line, aye good times they were. You do know that the Central Line engineer's depot is just down the road from here?"

"I hadn't realised we were that close to centre of London, it still seems like outer suburbia with these houses".

"Yeah" Tracy's father added "Here there were a number of your Security Service chaps down there this morning, apparently something had happened"

"Really?" the Commander responded as he perked up. Maybe today he would be at work after all.

"Tracy" he called "I'm just popping out for a few minutes".

"Well I am coming with you, I am not going to let you out of my sight" she responded as they made for the door.

"We need to find some purple cabling" Collins told his men as he surveyed the wiring diagram in his hand.

They were now gathered around the portal at the end of the dusty passageway, the way ahead barred only by a partially rotten wooden door, years of moss and damp deposits covering the long decaying paintwork.

Collins pointed towards the far left hand corner of the cellar room inside the door, "It should be in a metal conduit over towards that corner".

Several of the crew began looking around using torches, soon the target was found. Quickly an electric screwdriver took care of the screws holding the cover of the conduit in place revealing a mass of electrical wires beneath.

Collins put on rubber gloves to protect him from any electrical current present before taking a set of wire strippers which he used to cut back the purple rubber insulation.

As he did this, one of the accomplices proceeded to do the same to a thicker green cable further along the conduit. He then fed two crocodile clips with wires attached into the exposed cable before connecting them to the equipment he had nearby.

By now Collins had connected a large black cable from a large heavy grey box they had brought along and was ready to proceed. "Ok everyone, cover your eyes and stand well back".

At the pull of a switch mounted on the side of the grey box, the room was filled with bright electrical arching light and the smell of smouldering insulation rubber. It was for only a couple of seconds and once the heat from the arching had cooled down, Collins checked the status of the cable with a meter,

"Ok, that's the alarms out of action" Collins turned to Keynes next to him, "What do we have on the CCTV?" he asked.

"The usual attractive views" Keynes replied as he flicked through the various CCTV camera views on the portable monitor "The ones that matter to us however are numbers 132, 136 and 137, give me two minutes and they will be seeing nowt but what we want them to see".

"Very well..." Collins responded "...two minutes".

"Where on earth are we going?" Tracy asked as she and the Commander made their way down the road from her parent's house.

"Oh just for a walk, the atmosphere back there was becoming a little too concentrated for my liking".

"Yes my mother does have that effect on people" Tracy replied with a knowing grin.

The couple held each others hands as they walked along the rough pavement, its surface riddled with badly bodged road and utility repairs.

"Our destination" the Commander announced. Tracy looked up at the rusty chain link gates, a barely readable faded sign alongside announcing this as the entrance to the London Underground Civil Engineers Depot.

"Hmm, charming" Tracy commented as she cast an eye over the miscellaneous engineers junk that littered the concrete covered yard in places to at least a couple of metres deep. In the centre of the yard, near the main yard office was parked one of the Security Service's Metropolitan Division's patrol cars, its distinctive red livery with blue flashing lights mounted on the roof not dissimilar to the livery to be found on similarly employed vehicles across the country.

The young officer saw the Commander's uniform as he approached and proceeded to greet him and Tracy as they drew near.

"Good afternoon Sir, madam".

"Afternoon" the Commander responded, I heard there was some excitement down here and seeing as this is about to become my jurisdiction, I thought I would pop down, seeing as I was in the neighbourhood".

"Ah yes sir, well the yard supervisor was found lying unconscious in the yard this morning".

"Badly hurt?" Tracy enquired.

"Pretty much so, he's only just regained consciousness in Willesden General Hospital, we've managed to get some details out of him but nothing much makes sense".

"Such as?" the Commander enquired.

"Well the assailant and his mate were average build, dressed in blue overalls and driving a blue transit van, the older guy had a moustache".

Tracy perked up at one key detail of the description of the assailants.

"That rings a bell...." she commented aside.

"Oh yes" the officer added "and apparently some engineer's department equipment has gone missing but you'll have to ask the assistant Yard Foreman".

A London Underground engineer peered out of the Yard Office window at the gathered officers, "You two are the new Transport Security chiefs aren't you?" he enquired.

"Yep!" the Commander confirmed.

"Then perhaps you two can tell me where my two trains have gone" the engineer demanded.

"You have two trains missing?" Tracy exclaimed.

The Commander thought back to the Haychester robberies and the colour usually chosen by the suspects for those crimes, "They weren't painted blue by any chance?" he jokingly asked.

"Yeah. Hang on, how did you know that?" came the slightly startled reply.

"Haychester Control Room" Longton responded, surprised by the ringing of the

telephone interrupting what was normally a fairly quiet day with little of note happening.

"Longton? I thought you were doing the morning shift" the Commander asked.

"I was but I swapped with Havers, that way I don't get to spend the afternoon with the in-laws!" he replied.

"Believe me I know how you feel" the Commander sympathised "Look, I am looking at an extreme long shot here but can you fax me the most likely robbery targets with Roman coin collections in Central London".

"Oh that's easy" came Longton's quick reply "Main one would be the British Museum, they are hosting a special exhibition of priceless Roman artefacts at the moment, mind you security is tight so I would be surprised if that is a target".

"Ah!" the Commander responded as his knowledge of London Underground system history and the present facts began to meet in the beginnings of a conclusion. "Right, thanks Al, I think I'll follow up a hunch, speak to you later".

Longton put the phone down and turned to one of the officers nearby, "Someone better press the big red button at Metropolitan Division, the Commander's got a 'hunch'!"

Back in the yard, the Commander walked out of the yard office and turned to the two engineers standing nearby, "Excuse me, could I borrow one of your trains?"

Only the light offered by a few display case lamps broke the gloom in the Exhibition Room of the British Museum. Nearby, two security cameras looked on pointlessly, their imaging systems having now been overridden with fake views.

The silence in the room was however gradually broken as a whirring noise approached the display cases that sat in the centre of the room. What approached was mechanical, a machine with tracked wheels about three feet in length and fitted with a small camera, remote control aerial and multi head manipulating arm that could extend and change its end at the wish of its controller.

Its controller was Collins, still located with the rest of the gang in the cellar room immediately below the Exhibition Room. Using the views from the robotic unit itself as well as the pictures from the Museum's own CCTV Security system which he viewed through the TV monitor in front of him, he manoeuvred the robot arm into position up and over the main case in the centre of the room.

With deft manoeuvring, one of the glass side panels was removed and placed carefully upon the ground so as to avoid making any unwanted noise. Despite their shutting down of the security system, there were still the ever eager ears of the Museum's security guards to be wary of.

On the screen Collins could now see his target, twenty five gold coins, the light from the display case shimmering off their golden brilliance. Using the machines grabbing tool, it was easy to gather up the four corners of the red velvet cloth upon which the coins were laid until all four corners were together in the centre of the case.

Collins then had some difficulty grabbing all four corners of the cloth together, his accomplices held their breath as several times one or more corners slipped from the grabbers grasp.

"Yes got ya!" he murmured with triumph as the monitor showed he had finally succeeded in picking up the cloth successfully, the coins snugly gathered together within.

With a few careful twists of the controls, the coins were manoeuvred over and into a tray mounted on the back of the robot, the silence of the room momentarily disturbed by the soft clink of metal as the coins rested into the tray.

Collins looked at his watch, "Pretty good, even time to have a go at some of the other exhibits" he announced.

"Well where are you going?" Tracy asked as the Commander climbed aboard yellow battery electric locomotive number L23.

"British Museum, coming along?"

"Err no thanks, not too keen on enclosed dark spaces, why *are* you taking the train anyway?"

"There is an old closed Underground Station right next to the Museum which by the way happens to be having a major exhibition of Roman artefacts on at the moment, the method of entry is right up Collins' street".

"Shouldn't we alert Metropolitan Division?"

"Would they believe us? Besides the old station is technically our jurisdiction so it looks like it's down to us"

"Want do you want me to do?" Tracy asked barely audible above the whine the locomotive's traction motors starting up.

"Your motorbike is at you parents house isn't it?"

"Yes I had it brought up to London yesterday seeing as I will need it up here from now on"

"Good, get over to the British Museum, park up in Russell Square and wait until I contact you, it's probably nothing but I want to check this out".

"Have a safe trip!" Tracy called as the yellow tube shaped locomotive began to move off down the slightly uneven siding tracks that led to the main Central Line.

Collins admired the haul as it glistened inside the steel briefcase before he firmly closed and locked it ready for their departure.

He bent down to pick up the empty gun lying alongside, inserted a fresh clip of ammunition and then placed it inside his belt. All of his accomplices bar Keynes lay still and lifeless on the ground where they had shot them using silencers just a few minutes previously.

By now Keynes had changed his clothing and was dressed in the blue uniform and peaked cap of a British Museum security guard and within a couple of minutes Collins became similarly attired. They both checked each other to make sure they looked the part before Collins picked up the briefcase and opened the hatchway through up into the main part of the Museum building.

The polished marble floors provided a distinctive tapping noise which echoed along the semi dark artefact lined corridors and rooms, famous antiquities such as the Elgin Marbles looked on in silence as the two men made their way through the darkened building purposefully but carefully should they run into one of the Museum's legitimate security patrols.

They needn't have worried as the two guards on duty that day had just finished their hourly rounds only a short time ago and were now safely relaxing in their office upstairs.

Two mice investigating a discarded sweet wrapper in the gloom of the darkened Central Line eastbound platform at Tottenham Court Road station suddenly ran off as the silence was broken unexpectedly by the sudden hum of the rails as a train approached.

As the yellow locomotive burst from the tunnel mouth at the west end of the platform, the accompanying wind forced down the running tunnel by the trains forward movement rustled the few pieces of uncollected litter that lay around and the automatically operated announcement system sparked into life.

"This is Tottenham Court Road..... Change here for the Northern Line..... The next station is Holborn..... Please stand clear of the closing doors".

By the time the last syllables of the announcement had echoed around the deserted platform, the locomotive had already gone, plunging into the east end tunnel portal like a startled rabbit into its burrow and the platform fell silent once again.

"Course the funny thing is" the engineer commented loudly so as to make himself heard over the rattle of the locomotive on the rails "Piccadilly Line depot said this

morning they can't find one of their trains either, mind you they gained some old stored passenger train that should have been in Aldwych, funny isn't it?"

The Commander looked across the dark slightly cramped cab at the engineer seated on the left hand side and watched him as he began to slow the locomotive to little more than walking pace. He pointed to the tunnel ahead and to a set of points, the offshoot of which passed off to the right into a second tunnel running parallel with the one they were travelling in.

"That's the reversing siding" the engineer pointed out "I'll stop here, you jump out and see if anything is down there" he told the Commander.

"Right" he replied as he put on a orange hi-visibility safety vest over his uniform. He opened the small inward opening cab door and using the steps, carefully climbed down to the track bed, being careful not to touch the greasy live rail with its 600 volts of direct current waiting to trap the unwary with a nasty shock.

The Commander pulled his gun from the side holster where it normally resided and moved forward cautiously, squinting slight with failing eyesight to make out the way ahead in the gloom. Only two red lights could be seen piercing the darkness ahead, barely illuminating the tube shaped cab end of the engineer's locomotive ahead.

Squeezing between the grimy tunnel wall and the slab like side of the loco, the Commander pushed open the partially ajar cab door fully and trained his gun inside carefully checking the cab for any sign of occupation.

Apart from a few pieces of paper beside the power and brake controllers, the cab was empty. There seemed little point in checking the rest of the train, there was clearly no signs of life here, instead the Commander switched on the interior cab light and looked over the papers that had been left behind.

Looking out of the window, he could see the engineer walking towards the locomotive, carrying a torch to make negotiating the hidden dark hazards of the tunnel safer.

"This you're locomotive by any chance?" the Commander asked.

"L43, yep this is her all right but what is she doing here?" the engineer replied puzzled as he climbed aboard.

"Here shine that torch on these will you" the Commander asked pointing to the papers. With the light upon them they became much clearer and it was the engineer who was first to comment.

"Interesting, old track plan, looking at it I would say its a copy of a Public Records Office diagram of the tunnels in the area, you see Holborn station, the siding where we are now, the old Museum station, its all here".

"This one is somewhat more recent" the Commander commented looking at the second smaller piece of paper from which he quoted the main headline "No lift

service at Russell Square Station until mid January, to which has been added the word 'avoid, use garden' by someone".

"Garden?" the engineer asked, "could be Covent Garden, that has lifts and they work, well most of the time anyway".

"Lets get to British Museum, I think we may find your train snatchers there". Together the two men made their way back down the siding tracks to the main eastbound running tunnel and climbed back aboard their locomotive.

"Go slowly as far as the old platform tunnel portal, quietly if you can, we don't want anybody running off on us and spoiling the party".

With headlights shining off the running rails ahead, the train made its way slowly forward the twenty yards until the opening of the wider platform tunnel could be seen just ahead.

A slight squeal from the brakes marked the trains stopping just short of the west platform portal as the Commander wanted.

"You stay here" he instructed.

"Ok but you better have the torch, and I suggest you take the hi-visibility coat off or they definitely will see you coming".

"Good thinking" the Commander responded as he folded the coat and also his uniform jacket over the back of the second man's seat. The tap of his shoes on the metal side steps echoed around the darkened tunnel as the Commander stepped down once more onto the trackside.

A few yards ahead and to the right of the running track the former eastbound platform area could be seen, the original platform tiling covered with sixty years of grime and dirt, in amongst which some passing engineer had drawn a London Underground roundel style 'British Museum' station sign.

The platform had been removed during the war when the closed station was used as air raid shelter accommodation, so now the floor was level with the running rails alongside. The Commander trod carefully through the layers of old ballast, dirt, discarded rails and other engineers pieces stored in the old platform area towards the far end where the old passenger exit was set into the far end platform wall.

All the time the Commander had his gun in his left hand trained ahead in case of unfriendly passers by, however it became quickly apparent that there was no-one here in the main old platform area.

It was clear even in the gloom of the long disused tunnel with its cobweb filled cross passageways to the nearby old westbound platform, that a number of people had been through there very recently, disturbed dust and rubble removed from the old exit way being the most obvious signs.

The Commander shone the torch up the steps that led away up from the old exit before carefully climbing up, avoiding the randomly abandoned pieces of rubble and other detritus that was strewn around.

The musty smell you would associate with a long sealed cellar mingled with more modern fresher smells which the Commander paused to attempt to identify.

"Yeeshh!" the Commander muttered to himself "it don't half reek in here". He shone the torch around the passageways as he made his way to the old lift area, the portals for two of the passenger lifts still visible cut into the side wall of the circular passageway.

It was here that the Commander identified one of the more modern smells that filled the passageway, that of electrical burning, a fact confirmed as his torch alighted upon a small diesel generator lying in front of one of the former lift portals.

The Commander reached down and felt that the unit was still very warm, whoever had been here could only have just recently departed. He continued through and into the old lift and ventilation shaft situated at the far end of the passage way, noting the fresh cuts on the metal door edges, the recently exposed metal still shiny, yet to dull from exposure to the atmosphere.

Shining the light inside the doorway, he found the second smell's source, the floor was littered with around half a dozen bodies, the light from the torch glistening off the fresh blood that was soaking through their blue boiler suits.

Looking at the faces of each one in turn, it was quickly shown that Collins was not amongst them to the Commander's slight disappointment, the banging of a nearby door however soon took his attention elsewhere.

British Museum Security Guard Smithers threw back the last gulp of rather cold and rancid coffee and casually slung the empty paper cup into the nearby waste paper basket, by now overflowing with identically discarded receptacles.

The swivel chair in front of the bank of CCTV monitors creaked with age as he swung it round and slumped into it, casting his eye for the umpteenth time over the screens whose images had not altered one bit in the three hours he had been on duty.

He was the only person in the building now, or so he thought, since the second guard on duty with him had gone home for an hour. His reaction of startled surprise was therefore to be expected when there was a sudden rap on the glass windowed door of the office.

"Afternoon" the Commander called "I hate to disturb your daydreaming but you've just been burgled!"

"What the hell is going on?" the guard called out not unsurprisingly bemused as to both what had happened and how the Commander had managed to climb all the way

to the second floor security office without once being picked up on his CCTV screens.

"Can't stop, just thought you had better know" the Commander added as he left almost as quickly as he had arrived "by the way your CCTV system has been overridden!"

The impressive regal stone steps that led down from the column dominated front entrance of the British Museum looked down on the Commander as he almost skipped down them. Looking around the deserted courtyard he noted nothing unusual except that the iron gates leading towards Russell Square were open.

Soon a familiar roaring of a Harley Davidson motor bike could be heard echoing around the walls as Tracy appeared around the corner on her Security Service marked bike.

"You look a mess" she commented seeing the dust and grime that covered the Commander's uniform, a fact accentuated even more by the fact that he was in his white shirtsleeves without his jacket thus further enhancing the generally grubby effect.

"Where's your jacket?" she asked concerned that he may catch a chill in the cold wind that was starting to whistle around the stone buildings.

"Erm on its way to Stratford?" the Commander replied whimsically as he realised where he had left it, "I don't suppose you saw anyone leave here did you?" he added.

"Blue transit van left about two minutes ago, two men dressed as Security Guards carrying steel briefcases got in, there were at least two more already inside the van who disappeared inside and brought out some large equipment cases."

"Right, we better get after them" the Commander announced as he ever so slightly reluctantly climbed on the back of the bike. As Tracy manoeuvred towards the gate that led to Russell Square, he pulled his radio off its belt clip and fiddled with the controls.

"Lima Tango Zero One to Metropolitan Division Control".

"You haven't got it switched on dear" Tracy replied with a rueful smile as the Commander demonstrated his usual lack of skill with anything remotely approaching technology.

"How about I do the honours?" she suggested.

He simply nodded as Tracy picked up the radio unit fitted to her Harley.

"Lima Tango Zero Two to Metropolitan Division Control".

The radio crackled into life. "Receiving over..."

"Any chance you can summon up a van load of bodies, preferably armed within the

next ten minutes?”

There was a pause before the slightly reluctant reply, “Err, well yeah I suppose so, where do you want them?”

“Good question” she turned to the Commander as he brushed dirt off his shoes, “Where do we want them?”

“Covent Garden, I should think, enclosed, building works in progress, station has working lifts unlike Russell Square over there, no one would notice a van load of blokes in boiler suits especially as its Christmas Day”. The Commanders deductions sort of made sense to Tracy, but not much.

“Covent Garden, possibly the Tube station” Tracy responded. Her request was acknowledged as she prepared to move off.

“Hold on tight” she called back as the Commander shut his eyes and hoped for the best.

There was a crack of wood as Keynes forced the lattice gating open. There was no one around to see the group break into the small red glaze tiled Covent Garden Underground Station, another reason why they had chosen Christmas day for the operation.

“Right, load the gear, lose the van” Collins called. Within moments the cases had been unloaded and stacked in the waiting lift and the van driven away by one of the gang.

Collins made sure that the lattice gates were closed before he joined the others in the lift. At the press of the button the stainless steel doors closed with a characteristic metallic creak accompanied by the door closing alarm.

Collins looked around a little nervously in case anyone had heard the alarm but all seemed clear as the doors met and the lift began its decent to the platform level below.

“Whoa!” Tracy called out as she swerved to avoid a blue Ford Transit van as it came haring out of the Covent Garden piazza area.

“He’s running empty, he must have unloaded around here somewhere” the Commander observed as he looked over his shoulder in the direction of the rapidly disappearing van.

“Wait, what’s that noise?”

Tracy stopped the bikes engine and looked around at the Commander. She listened but without the benefit of the Commanders unusually highly sensitive hearing, she couldn’t hear anything obvious.

“Err what noise?”

“Sounded like a lift alarm or something similar” the Commander responded thoughtfully. He alighted from the motorbike and walked across the cobbled surface of James Street to the nearby station building.

Tracy was still sceptical about the Commander’s theory “Are you sure about all this?” she asked.

The Commander looked around the front of the building before stepping forward and jolting open the lattice gating which was still unlocked. “I think this is it,” he announced.

“Cavalry’s late” Tracy remarked glancing at her watch “but then again it is Christmas”.

“Looks like it’s down to us....again”. The Commander looked around for a moment as if for inspiration.

“Tracy, get yourself and the cavalry if they can be bothered to Holborn”.

Tracy started the bike and looked up “What are you going to do?”

“I’m taking the train” the Commander responded as he disappeared into the station building. Climbing over the ticket barriers, his first thought as he heard Tracy’s bike roar away was to try the lift however Collins and Keynes had cut the power to both of them from the platform level.

Looking across the hall at the staircase, a descent of one hundred and ninety three steps awaited him according to the adjacent hand written sign. A combination of haste and gravity saw him reach the halfway point rather more rapidly than he could cope with.

He stumbled to a halt and bent down to remove his shoes, as he had by now realised that the sound of a rapidly descending Security Officer with his best shoes on in a tiled near deserted Underground Station may just alert the gang to his presence.

At the bottom, the Commander approached the platforms, an engineer’s train, two blue and yellow battery electric locomotives either end of a yellow works car and an accompanying wagon was standing at the far end of the yellow and orange tiled northbound platform.

Alongside the train, Collins stood confidently as he made one final check up and down the platform before boarding the leading locomotive, Keynes already in the driver’s seat waiting for the order to leave.

"Right let’s go" Collins ordered. As Keynes prepared to pull away the automatic platform announcer activated.

“This is Covent Garden..... The next station is Holborn..... Please

stand clear of the closing doors”.

This was the Commander’s cue, looking round from the corner where he was hiding to avoid being seen, he saw that the coast was clear. Stooping low he passed across the platform and grabbed the cab handrail of the rear locomotive and clambered aboard.

Within seconds the train moved off plunging into the tight dark tube tunnel. The speed was gradual to allow for the twists and turns in the 93 year old railway line but even still the Commander had to hold on tight to avoid being thrown off the platform on which he was perched in front of the small tube profile locomotive’s cab.

The Commander felt the train slow as it pulled into the northbound Piccadilly Line platform at Holborn. An ironic location under the circumstances as the black platform wall panelling was decorated with images of artefacts from the British Museum.

“Right, call Trevor and get the right away for the points” Collins called out, but what he said next was a mystery to the Commander though as the automatic platform announcer launched his friendly greeting.

“Please mind the gap.....This is Holborn.....Change here for the Central Line.....The next station is Russell Square.....Please stand clear of the closing doors”.

The Commander used this as an opportunity to make a dive for the cross passage in the platform wall nearby. Collins did look up as he thought he saw someone down the platform, but all he could see was a disinterested mouse near one of the chocolate machines.

The platform signal set into the end wall changed to green and Collins once again boarded the locomotive. As the train pulled slowly away, the Commander pulled his radio from his belt.

Only on Christmas day are the streets of central London this deserted and Tracy was able to blissfully ignore the myriad of one way lanes and traffic lights as she pulled across the road from Southampton Row to Kingsway and stop on the pavement outside the impressive stone faced Holborn station.

She removed her helmet and hung it on the adjacent pedestrian barrier before moving round the building, situated on the corner of Holborn’s Kingsway to see if you could see any sign of activity.

As she peered through the gates at the darkened station booking hall, the radio on her bike burst into life.

“Tracy, where are you?” the Commander called. Tracy went back to the bike and picked up the radio.

“Holborn station, nobody here and that includes our alleged backup”

“You need to get to Aldwych” the Commander told her. Tracy reached in her back pocket for the tube map he had given her earlier. After a few moments scanning it, she realised that she now had a potential problem.

“Did you say Aldgate as there is no Aldwych on this map”

“Its not on the map, it was closed in 1994”.

“Ah”.

“Head south down Kingsway, bear left, go round Bush House then turn right, it is then on your left, sort of small red tiled building with Strand Station written on the front of it”.

“Right” Tracy replied now thoroughly confused.

The squeal of wheels on rails on Holborn’s disused Aldwych branch platform meant that the Commander had to break off suddenly. This time he would have to board the back of the train while it was moving, not a prospect he relished but necessary if he was to avoid detection.

As the back of the train drew level with him, he stooped down and leapt across the platform and repeated his manoeuvre of earlier. However a sudden jolt nearly threw him onto the tracks. Just managing to grab the handrails, he hauled himself up onto the locomotive as it descended back into the dark of the tunnel.

It was only when she was halfway down Kingsway that Tracy realised she was travelling without her helmet, she had left it behind at Holborn. All of this was observed through the traffic camera by the local area Security Service Traffic Monitoring Centre.

The duty communications officer was just taking a call from the backup that Tracy had ordered earlier. She looked across at her colleague who was watching the traffic cameras. “They’re not at Covent Garden. Can you see either of them?”

“This Commander Caverner” the other officer replied thoughtfully, “she wouldn’t happen to be about 5’ 9’, brown hair, bit tasty and riding one of the company’s Harley Davidson’s would she?”

The Communications Officer looked across, “Sounds like the one”.

“Well she’s heading like a bat out of hell for Aldwych” he replied.

The stillness and silence of the long closed and dusty platform of Aldwych station was suddenly broken as the rails hummed with the approach of the gang’s commandeered train. With a roar of forced air, the train emerged from the tunnel mouth and drew to a halt.

The gang members were quick to disembark, one of the first off operating a wall

mounted switch box that activated the station's lights, illuminating the tired and only partially tiled platform with its original name 'Strand' still emblazoned in brown tiling on a cream background.

It was with a professional and swift approach that the gang's equipment was off loaded, Collins directing the operation with his usual military precision, still unaware that they had been followed all the way from the British Museum.

The Commander was still hidden against the cab of the rear locomotive unable to make a move until the gang had cleared the platform. After all they had more firepower than his comparatively meagre standard issue six shot revolver.

Outside, Tracy was alone, the normally packed Strand was deserted with no sign still of either the promised backup or indeed any of the gang or their accomplices. What neither she nor the Commander knew was that they had an extra trick up their sleeve.

The Commander was becoming more and more worried as he trained his gun round each corner of the dank and dark station interior, at every turn no sign of anyone and also no evidence they had ever been there either.

He made his way up the spiral staircase that wound its way around the long since disused wooden lifts, through the booking hall and across to the exit, there to find only Tracy looking as perplexed as he was.

"All right I give up, where did they go?" she asked.

"I have absolutely no idea, they were here then they vanished" the Commander replied. This was ridiculous, a gang of armed thieves and several hundred thousand pounds worth of ancient artefacts couldn't just disappear. Aldwych was the end of the line. It didn't go any further so it stood to reason that they had to be there somewhere.

"Hang on I'll join you" she called as she removed a pair of small screwdrivers from her jacket pocket. With ease she picked the lock on the lattice gate and opened it, joining the Commander in the dusty and deteriorating former booking hall.

Visions of paperwork and complaints from London Underground's properties division suddenly started to flash through the Commander's mind if they ever found out about Tracy's lock picking skills, a little party trick she inherited from her father.

She surveyed the scene; "Well they are definitely not up here so they must be downstairs somewhere". The Commander nodded as Tracy drew her gun from its holster and followed him back down the staircase.

The only noise audible down on the platform level were the two officers breathing and the humming of the motors of the engineers train echoing along the deserted tiled corridors. Gradually they worked their way to the platform, checking the cross passages as they went.

"Nope, no one here" Tracy announced as the Commander threw up his arms in disbelief.

As he looked up and down the platform, he began to wonder if there was something he had missed whilst Tracy squinted at the platforms south end, "What's that door?" she asked.

"What door?"

Tracy pointed to the platform wall right at the far end, badly obscured by the poor light, it was easy to miss especially with the Commander's failing eyesight.

"Old relay room I expect" the Commander commented as they walked over to it. As they approached however, he could see that this was not the case. Before them was a fairly ordinary looking wooden double door, a relay room door would have had grilles set into it but this one was plain wood panelling and of a design that said 'This door isn't really here so ignore it'.

"Hello what do we have here?" Tracy announced as she tried the handle and found it to open easily. The Commander shown a torch through the opening, another deserted corridor, only this one had a light in the distance. Unlike the rest of the station built in the early 1900's, this seemed newer but was not fitted out as a station building passageway as the cast iron tunnel lining rings were clearly visible and the floor was just rough concrete. There were also signs that the years of dust and debris on the floor had been disturbed very recently.

"Where the hell does this go?" he murmured as the two officers edged down the narrow passageway, guns trained ahead in case they ran into any nasty surprises.

After a short distance the passageway curved round to the left and opened out onto a much larger tunnel, this one well illuminated with industrial type bulkhead lights.

The Commander put the small torch back in his pocket and with Tracy looked around for some clue as to where they were. To the left the tunnel was blocked with what appeared to be the rusty remains of old boring machinery, to the right the tunnel curved away into the distance.

"This looks like a running tunnel" Tracy commented.

"Yeah..." the Commander replied. "But where's the track?"

Tracy looked down at the bare earth floor. She had thought that something was missing but it was so obvious she couldn't see it. She watched as the Commander walked over to the opposite side of the tunnel wall and looked closely at one of the cast iron segments that made up the tunnel wall.

"1977"

"What?" Tracy responded surprised.

"1977, the casting date on the tunnel rings and when they built the original part of the Jubilee line" the Commander explained, "This must be the running tunnel overrun

from Charing Cross”.

“Don’t tell me, go to Charing Cross” Tracy replied. The Commander looked round but she was already away making her way back through the station complex

“Well this is Aldwych and there is one of our Harley’s so she must be here somewhere” the Security Department van driver commented. Neither he nor his colleagues were at all happy about being called out on Christmas Day, they never had been before and were just about to tuck into their canteen’s attempt at Christmas lunch. However being spared that may just have been a blessing in disguise.

He was suddenly jolted from his thoughts of lunch by a tap at the window. “Get yourselves to Charing Cross” Tracy called as she mounted her bike and started the engine.

“Right. Won’t anyone make up their mind where they are going today” he muttered clearly annoyed at being dragged all across London, especially today of all days. He put the van into gear and followed the rapidly disappearing Harley Davidson down The Strand.

After walking about 500 metres along the curved tunnel, the Commander came across the buffer stops that marked the commencement of the running rails. A little further on stood a stabled train of 1996 tube stock; its front central emergency access ramp having been lowered to enable access to the train’s interior.

The extremely tight clearance between the tube tunnel and train sides meant there was no other option than continuing through the train. Although the Commander pointed his gun inside, there was no one there. The train’s lights had been switched on though and the communicating doors between the carriages had been left wedged open.

The windows in the end walls of the carriages meant the Commander could see all the way through the train. Detecting no obvious sign of anyone present, he made his way quickly through the six car train to the far driving cab which had also had its emergency access ramp lowered down to the track.

The same had additionally been done to the next train up beyond a set of crossover points from the opposite running tunnel. Unlike the previous one however, this train was adjacent to the disused eastbound Jubilee line platform of Charing Cross station, and also all the passenger side doors on the platform side were open.

As he clambered through the partition door that separated the cab section from the rest of the train, the Commander heard voices on the platform and bent down below window level to avoid detection.

Meanwhile up on the cobbled forecourt that fronted Charing Cross station, Tracy and the officers in the Department van had sighted a pair of blue Ford Transit vans,

apparently unattended parked near the south subway entrance to the Underground section of the station complex.

At her own direction Tracy and the other officers strode purposefully across, guns trained ahead towards the vans. The rear vehicle was empty, but the front one had a driver who had dozed off whilst listening to the radio.

“Its all right you can stand down for now, search the station area” Tracy called. She looked inside the van at the dozing man and tapped on the partially open window.

He woke with a start to find Tracy’s automatic pistol pointed against his head.

“Wakey, wakey!” she called “You’re nicked!”

The dusty atmosphere from the old stations and tunnels the Commander had just spent the last fifteen minutes walking through must have affected him adversely for he suddenly found himself unable to control a huge sneeze that echoed round the interior of the tube train carriage and also the station platform outside with the impact of a thunderclap.

Immediately Collins and his associates, gathered at the platform end furthest from the Commander, were alerted to his presence. Three shots echoed around the underground station complex as Collins fired down the platform, the bullets ricocheting off the sides of the carriage one up from where the Commander was.

The slight natural curve of the platform provided a little cover for the Commander as he rolled out of the passenger door of the train and over to the platform wall where he got up and backed up against the chocolate vending machine directly opposite.

“Richard, you stay here with me, the rest of you get the stuff together and then get to the vans, Go!” Collins whispered. The remainder of the gang quietly set about their task of gathering together their equipment and hauling it over to the nearby bank of three escalators in the passageway between the east and westbound Jubilee line platforms.

“Here I think I just heard gunshots somewhere” one of the Security Department officers commented as two others bundled the van driver unceremoniously into a waiting car.

Tracy had by this time got back on her bike and was slowly driving round the station area looking for any sign of the gang. The blue vans were stolen and the description of their usually preferred method of transport was right so it seemed logical that they had to be around here somewhere.

It was then she noticed that the gates to the tiled subway entrance of the Underground station were open. She manoeuvred her bike down the two short flight of steps and

through the rather dank corridor, its high walls lined with some very typically 1970's yellowy brown and white tiling.

Not only were the subway gates open but so was the front entrance to the Underground station booking hall area, another rather tasteless 1970's effort this time using yellow, green and blue plastics.

“Oi!” she called up the subway entrance to the officers above on ground level, “get down here quick”.

The chocolate machine behind which the Commander was taking cover was taking the brunt of Collins bullets. After a few moments the onslaught paused while Collins changed the magazine on his small automatic weapon. The Commander took the chance to fire a few shots and managed to wound Keynes who was also still on the platform.

Using the hit as a distraction, the Commander managed to move further on and reach the next vending machine down. The yellow and grey panelled décor took a few more hits before Collins realised the target of his efforts was right underneath the electronic next train indicator mounted above the platform, jutting out from the wall. With careful eye and hand movements he quietly informed Keynes as to his intention.

“Now” he called and they jumped forward from the platform wall, aimed at the point where the unit met the wall and fired repeatedly.

Under the hail of bullets, the Commander crouched down only to realise that it was not him directly they were aiming at. It was too late by the time he realised what was happening and amid a shower of sparks and ricocheting bullets, the black tubular information display came apart from its mounting and crashed down across the Commander immediately rendering him unconscious.

In one leap Tracy was over the aluminium ticket barriers in the booking hall, gun in hand and swiftly followed by everyone else.

Sixteen pairs of Security Department issue standard boots and one pair of ladies shoes made quite a hollow clanking noise on the stationary steel escalators as they made their way down into the bowels of the station.

At the bottom a blue tiled wall with two wooden doors stood straight ahead, to either side passageways running left to the Northern line platforms and right to the Bakerloo line platforms.

Quickly the officers divided into two teams, each taking one set of passageways and splitting up as necessary to search the myriad of cross passageways, platforms, nooks and crannies that comprised the subterranean part of the station complex.

It quickly became apparent to Tracy, still stood at the base of the escalators that they

were still missing something. It had not yet dawned on her that the Commander said that the empty running tunnel led to the Jubilee line at Charing Cross, yet there was no indication that the Jubilee line had ever been here as it had been closed when the new extension was opened avoiding the station altogether the previous year.

The answer lay behind that very new looking blue tiled wall, an answer that only came to her when she was suddenly aware of the sound of an escalator starting. None of the ones she had just come down where working, this noise was coming from behind that wall.

She beckoned some of the other officers over who had just returned from their fruitless search of the rest of the station, and pointed to one of the wooden double doors set in the blue tiled end wall.

“On three” she whispered. With no degree of subtlety whatsoever she kicked in the doors and trained her gun down the bank of three escalators that lay behind the wall.

At the bottom, the creaking noise of the escalator had blocked out the sound of the door at the top being breached. Collins, supporting his injured colleague on his shoulder, joined the other men.

With bags in hand they all stepped onto the escalators, brimming with confidence that they had got away with the crime. It was not until they reached the top of the escalators and were confronted with a row of heavily armed security officers that they realised that the game was up.

“Armed security officers” Tracy barked loudly. One of the officers reached across and used the Emergency Stop button to halt the escalators.

“Merry Christmas, you are all under arrest. Put your bags and weapons on the ground and your hands in the air”.

The gang had no choice but to obey, any self-respecting crook knew that you did not argue with several armed Security Department officers, especially ones who had been dragged away from their Christmas lunch.

As the other officers led the gang away in handcuffs, one of the three escalators restarted. Tracy looked down to see a dusty, bruised and slightly battered Commander, his uniform looking even more battered than normal, making his way up the escalator.

When he reached the top Tracy gave him a hug and a kiss to make him feel better, it worked as the Commander smiled. “What happened to you?” she asked seeing the state of him.

“I got my ticket punched!” he remarked with chuckle. He was feeling a little sore though as although the indicator unit was fairly light and the vending machine took the worst of the impact, it still hurt somewhat.

Outside on the station forecourt the gang were being led away. Collins was bundled

into the back of the car nearest the station entrance as the Commander and Tracy emerged into the daylight once more arm in arm.

“You got nothing on me, I have friends, you cannot charge me with nothing!” Collins called confidently from the back seat of the car. The Commander and Tracy looked at each other in search of a suitable response.

“Well” the Commander started “there’s breaking and entering for a starter”.

“Theft of British Museum property” Tracy added.

“Taking and driving away, namely London Transport Infrastructure Maintenance Department property”.

“Trespass on Railway property”.

“Misuse of emergency stop buttons on the escalators”,

“Possession of illegal firearms”,

“and a £10 penalty fare for failure to produce upon demand a valid ticket for your entire journey on London Underground!”

The Commander turned to the officer nearby, "I want him and his friends behind bars in Haychester by tomorrow morning, all right?" The officer nodded in response, "and nobody talks to him until I interview him!"

The patrol car containing Collins pulled away towards Trafalgar Square, its unwilling and handcuffed passenger snarling confidently in the back seat.

"You are watching BBC News 24, these are the main headlines at a quarter past five"

The jaw of Tracy's mother and twin sister dropped in amazement as the red and yellow graphics of the BBC's news service gave way to a picture of a somewhat battered Commander with Tracy by his side.

"Foiled - Robbery at the British Museum, the London Transport Security Service scores its first major arrest following a bizarre Christmas Day chase under the streets of the capital".

"I was wondering what those two were up to" Tracy's mother murmured.

"What's going on?" James enquired emerging from kitchen armed with a tea towel.

"On the news" Jennifer replied indicating the television set in the corner of the room "it would appear that two certain Security Officers of our mutual acquaintance have been busy"

"Sssshhh! I am trying to listen" Tracy's mother whispered loudly.

"It has been described as the most audacious robbery on a National museum in very many years. Earlier this afternoon five people were arrested at Charing Cross Underground Station following a bizarre chase across London through the subterranean rail network, for the latest we go over to our correspondent James Bevan who is at Charing Cross".

The view moved from the warm glow of the BBC News studio to the chilly semi-darkness of a Christmas Day evening, a few snowflakes fluttering around in the cold chilling gusts of wind.

"The deserted streets and Underground railways of Christmas Day London were today the scene of one of the most audacious robberies probably ever attempted in the history of the City. Here at the capital's Charing Cross Station, the complex escape plans of the perpetrators were brought to a halt by the Commanding and Deputy Commanding Officers of the Security Service's newly formed London Transport division".

Jennifer looked at the television screen as the camera view panned away from the reporter to scan the view of the front of the station lined with Security Service vehicles of a variety of different divisions and types.

The front door opened and in walked Tracy and the Commander, the effect of the cold weather that was starting to set in with the dark evening clearly taking its toll on the Commander who clearly looked frozen, the loss of his uniform jacket earlier in the afternoon had left him in his shirtsleeves. The layers of grunge and grime from the various underground passageways he had passed through also added to an overall effect of decrepitude.

"This is the second uniform I have managed to wreck in three days" he commented as Tracy closed the door behind him "I mean look at this!" he said holding up his left arm to show where the sleeve was badly ripped.

"Never mind" Tracy replied warmly kissing him, "I still love you".

"Ahhh..." Jennifer sighed as she watched the couple "Come on in you two, you're on the telly".

As they came in, the news report on the television continued.

"A Security Service spokesperson refused to say how they managed to detect the crime or confirm any possible connection to a series of similar crimes earlier in the week in Haychester, by coincidence the Security Office that was covered by the now new Commanding Officer of the London Transport division. Once the suspects had been taken to an unnamed Security Service office, the Deputy Commanding Officer of the Transport Security Division, Commander Tracy Caverner made this statement to the press"

"In order not to jeopardise a current ongoing investigation, you will appreciate that

some details cannot be released at this time. Approximately one hour ago, five members of a sophisticated, armed and well organised gang were arrested while attempting to leave Charing Cross Underground station. These arrests follow an armed raid upon the British Museum earlier today."

Questions from the watching reporters were suddenly thrust at Tracy, "Can you tell us what was stolen?"

"Artefacts from a special exhibition at the Museum" replied Tracy, this didn't tell the press much so they fired yet more questions at her.

"Is there any connection with the series of robberies in Haychester this week and earlier in the year in the north of the country?"

"That is a current line of enquiry we are looking at" she confirmed.

The Commander watched the television with a little pride in Tracy as she handled herself admirably with the press, taking questions and giving careful answers that satisfied their enquiries whilst at the same time keeping facts crucial to the investigation suitably covered up. Soon the news report had relocated back to the BBC studio.

"A little later, our reporter spoke to the Commanding Officer of the London Transport Division who chased the gang through the underground tunnels of central London". The image of the slightly dishevelled and also annoyed Commander appeared on screen, it was usually moments like this with the Commander let loose in front of the national press that had the Security Department's Press Office quaking nervously, for a diplomat he was not.

"Commander, what was going through your mind as you were chasing the gang?" the on site reporter asked.

"Nick the buggers" he replied as honest and to the point as ever. Tracy and a number of other officers could be seen in the background chuckling amongst them selves upon hearing the typical reply from the Commander.

The reporter was knocked a little off balance there with the slightly unexpected response and there was a short uncomfortable pause before the questioning resumed.

"Were there any firearms involved" she asked hoping for a slightly more insightful answer this time.

"Yes, all the members of the gang were armed with a variety of small semi-automatic arms which they proceeded to use at Charing Cross once they realised that they had been followed by me.

"Any casualties?"

"One of the gang was shot in the leg and I received minor injuries during the arrest of the suspects, plus I don't think what's left of my uniform will ever be the same again".

"Commander thanks for talking to us".

"Well that went well" Tracy remarked as BBC News 24 moved on to other stories "at least this time you didn't say anything rude about the Home Secretary or any other Government Minister for that matter".

"Drat! I knew I forgot something....." the Commander replied jokingly.

"Come on" Tracy said looking him up and down "lets get you cleaned up, you look a mess"

"Good morning Gents, I do hope we slept well" Longton announced as he rattled the iron bar door of Haychester's detainment cells. Inside the stark walls of the cells were Collins and three of his accomplices, the fourth was still in hospital recovering from being shot the previous day.

"On today's agenda" he continued "breakfast will be served shortly followed by a short stroll up to our luxurious interview area where our pleasant and friendly staff will take your details before deciding whether to throw the book at you. We hope you enjoy your stay with us today and we look forward to your custom again in the future".

Longton reached the last cell in the row, a defiant Collins stood right by the door staring intently through the bars, "and you matey are going first" Longton informed him.

"I want my brief, Mr Robert Hamilton-Smythe before I say anything, and I ain't saying nothing anyway so you might as well not waste you time" he responded in a deep menacing tone.

Longton had heard it all before and looked unmoved, the choice of solicitor did raise an eyebrow however. Longton departed in order to contact Collins solicitor. On his way there he ran into Tracy who seemed more cheerful than normal that morning.

"Morning Maam, Collins has asked for a solicitor, an old friend of ours, Mr Hamilton-Smythe" he informed her.

Tracy paused upon hearing the name "Hamilton-Smythe?" she asked "are you sure?"

"Yep, he has got to be the most expensive brief in south east England, the Commander has dealt with him before".

"Good or bad?" Tracy asked slightly worried.

"Hamilton-Smythe annoyed the Commander so much that he 'accidentally' put his car registration number on Traffic Division's computer as one that was wanted in an

enquiry, Hamilton-Smythe got pulled over by Traffic Division about twenty times in a week".

"This could get interesting" she commented, "I'm about to ring London, see if they have had any success finding the stolen goods yet, you had better inform the Commander about our solicitor friend, he's in his office".

"Righty-o", Longton replied, "Nice ring by the way" he added noticing the distinctive blue and red diamond ring on Tracy's left hand.

"You like it?" she asked, "it was a Christmas present from the Commander" she explained, holding up her hand so as to afford a closer inspection.

As he watched Tracy disappear down the corridor towards the custody block, Longton decided he had better shorten the odds in the office sweepstake.

An empty bed in the ward alerted the duty nurse to the fact that one of her charges had decided to slip away from his resting place for a moment. Suitably annoyed that her orders had been disobeyed, the large and formidable woman immediately went in search of the miscreant.

"They are down at Haychester" Keynes whispered into the public telephone in the front reception area of the Hospital entrance. He was dressed in a gown and had managed to give his Metropolitan Division guard the slip for a few moments.

"If you run that gig like we planned for Manchester a few years ago" Keynes continued "we can use the plans from the records office I picked up the other day".

He looked around nervously and noticed two Security Service officers enter the Reception Area and begin to look around.

"It'll be a doddle" Keynes continued quickly before he suddenly changed his tone "Great Mum, I'll look forward to it".

"And just where do you think you are going matey?" one Security Officer inquired as he placed a firm hand on Keynes' shoulder just as he was hanging up.

"Calling my Mum" Keynes defensively replied "Why? Got a problem with that Officer?"

"I don't know, two ruined uniforms in three days" the Commander muttered to himself as he slung the battered jacket over the back of his office chair. He looked at the picture of Tracy on the desk and his mind began to wander to matters outside his life as an Officer, a rare occurrence but one more common since she had come into his life.

His train of thought was suddenly interrupted by Longton knocking at the door. "Morning sir" he announced "Collins has asked for a solicitor, you are not going to like it....." he tailed off.

"All right who is it, not that wally Branson again is it?" the Commander responded picking up on the bad news tone of Longton's voice.

"No, our old friend Hamilton-Smythe".

"What that overpaid toe rag! He's bent, besides he is also ruddy expensive, how on earth is Collins affording him?" the Commander demanded.

"Don't ask me Sir, Collins must have some heavy financial backer of some kind, probably the person who originally contracted him to do the jobs in the first place".

"Check out previous clients of Hamilton-Smythe, chances are that he may have represented Collins benefactor at some point, I want a list".

"Likely candidates, or the whole lot?"

"Oh well better have the whole lot I think" the Commander confirmed.

Longton turned to leave, "By the way, I like the ring you bought Commander Caverner, very flash. Trouble is my wife will want one if she sees it!"

"She'll have a job, it's the only one the jeweller in Holborn made, it is nice though isn't it?"

"I'll get working on that list" Longton confirmed as he left the office. Stepping out into the bustling corridor, he made his way to the General Office he shared with most of the section's investigating officers and sat down behind a tidy and well organised desk, a stark contrast with the office of his Commanding Officer.

The phone on his desk rang, the display confirming it was the Commander ringing from his office.

"Hello Sir" Longton responded.

There was a slight pause as the Commander did a double-take before he responded. "How did you know it was me?" he asked.

"Modern technology Sir. What can I do for you?" Longton asked.

"We have an address where Collins was staying from his belongings don't we?" the Commander asked. Longton looked over at the evidence bag that was lying in the in-tray on his desk reading the open black leather-bound diary that was contained within.

Reading the address marked on the open page, Longton confirmed the location "It says '64 Longfellow Road, Bognor Regis' Sir".

"Right then" the Commander concluded "Whilst we are waiting for Mr Hamilton-Smythe to turn up, let's go kick some doors in."

Longfellow Road in the seaside town of Bognor Regis a few miles from Haychester was a fairly typical semi-urban residential area street. The houses, built upon the site of the former railway goods yard, were only a few years old and well kept in appearance. The normally quiet tranquil atmosphere of an early Boxing Day morning was however disturbed with the arrival of a number of Security Service vehicles, their bright red livery clearly marking them out in this normally idyllic street.

A few net curtains twitched at the arrival of the Commander, Longton, Barrett and about ten other officers, the banging of car doors being the first that some people in the street knew of the arrival of these unusual Christmas visitors in the area.

Longton pointed out number 64, a typical red brick house of two up, two down design. The garden contrasted with those houses either side however, being unkempt, long tatty grass lawn and cluttered borders making for a sorry sight.

"Barrett, take a few of this lot and go round the back" the Commander ordered, "Longton, get the skeleton key". Longton opened the boot of the patrol car and removed a battering ram and a large red crowbar, bringing them to the front door where the Commander was ringing the doorbell repeatedly.

"Either nobody's in or they have legged it!" he commented after there was no response to the door bell. He turned to Longton who handed him the crowbar which the Commander positioned next to the door's Yale lock. Longton positioned the battering ram up against the door whilst two officers drew their guns and trained them forward.

"On three" the Commander indicated.

With a crash of splintered wood and metal, the cheap door gave way to the joint efforts of the ram and the Commander's boot.

"Hello, anybody home?" the Commander asked loudly, his voice partially echoing around the deserted and dusty hallway, its yellow and white decorations showing signs of recent neglect and water damage.

"Sir, aren't we supposed to announce that we are armed Security Service Officers?" Longton asked curious at why the Commander had not announced their presence as was usual.

"Eh?, oh I forgot, must be getting old." The Commander cleared his throat "Armed Security Officers by the way, just in case you were wondering" he added to no avail as there was no-one home to hear his words.

Together the officers looked around the dusty hallway with disdain as they entered the house, guns still trained forward in case of any surprises. The Commander indicated to Longton and one of the officers to commence their search downstairs, the

Commander meanwhile with the other officer proceeded upstairs.

Barrett upon receiving the all clear came in the back door and started to search the kitchen, the foul smell of rotting food scraps filling the room almost beyond any tolerance.

After kicking in a few doors around the house and finding nothing more than untidy rooms, the check of the house was called off and they reconvened in the front room.

"Must be the cleaning lady's day off" the Commander remarked surveying the mess, "Right, lets turn the place over".

It wasn't long before Barrett searching the kitchen came across items of interest, "Sir, you had better get in here!" she called.

"Strike a light! Was it that stink?" The Commander was startled at the obnoxious atmosphere in the kitchen as he entered.

"Dead mouse sir?" Barrett proffered the dead and decaying rodent that had been lying on the top of the rubbish bin for the Commander's inspection.

"No thanks, already had breakfast" he retorted. "Anything more appetising around here?"

"Let me take you on a tour of this lovely classic late 1990's kitchenette" Barrett announced with a Longton like sense of humour. "Firstly that essential for the modern house wife, the sawn off shotgun in the fridge" she opened the fridge with a dramatic flourish "with a side garnish of semi-automatic pistol in the freezer compartment".

"I'm impressed, anything else I should know about" the Commander asked.

Longton came in from the front room "Jenkins reports that there is a pile of Haychester's missing drain covers in the garden shed".

"Well that's another crime cleared up, perhaps he collects them or something" the Commander remarked with a chuckle.

"And" Longton continued "I found these tatty blueprints, I'll need to take these back to the office for analysis really". He proffered the dog-eared sheets of blue printed paper for the Commander's initial inspection.

"Right" the Commander ordered taking charge of the scene "bag everything and check the lot for finger prints".

Soon the house was a scene of mass movement with officers sifting through the contents, a painstaking task of examination of everything present, cataloguing, bagging and removal. After almost an hour of sifting through cupboards and drawers in the front room, the Commander was interrupted by his radio.

"Lima Tango Zero One from Haychester Control, receiving over". The Commander initially did not react, he had not yet got used to his new designation and was a little surprised when he did realise it was him they were calling and that Haychester were using it.

Needless to say not being one standing on ceremony, the Commander responded with a non standard radio reply.

"You rang?"

"Commander Caverner reports that they have the id's of some of the bodies in the British Museum's basement and Collins's solicitor has arrived Sir".

"Right I'm on my way".

Longton looked across at the Commander and instinctively tossed him the keys to his patrol car which with the usual demonstration of his dexterity the Commander dropped spectacularly into the debris that littered the floor of the room and disappeared through a hole in the floorboards.

"Never mind" he replied philosophically "I'll catch a bus". He turned to leave handing over a handful of papers he had found in a drawer to Longton, "rip the floorboards up before you go will you!" he called as he left.

"You took your time" Tracy remarked as the slightly bedraggled Commander arrived in the office that the two shared.

"Slight technical problem, a car with no keys and the buses are running a Sunday service" he replied in explanation of his lateness.

"I would've picked you up on the bike but it's in London, anyway Collins solicitor is screaming to see you, and also we have a list of Hamilton-Smythe's previous clients".

"Anyone we know?" the Commander asked hopefully.

"Well two of them are currently lying in the British Museum's basement those being a Mr Jones and a Mr Ayling". Tracy announced.

"A connection....."

"Two others are locals which may be of interest" Tracy handed the paper she was reading from over to the Commander who read the next two names with growing interest.

"The Duke of Haychester and his Gardener?" he responded incredulous.

"The same" Tracy confirmed "Both some years ago on motoring offences, both got off too".

"Small world isn't it?" Longton added as he peered around the office door. "The sawn-off shotgun may be one that was stolen from the Haychester Estate about a year ago, with its barrel still attached at the time mind".

The Commander turned his attention from Tracy for once to concentrate on the job in hand. "What about them blueprints and diagrams?" he asked.

"Step into my parlour" Longton asked as he showed Tracy and the Commander into one of the two somewhat spartanly furnished conference rooms across the corridor from the main offices.

Laid out across the tables within the conference room were the diagrams and blueprints found earlier at Collins house. As the Commander cast his eyes across them, he could see that many were crumpled and torn.

"Most of these have been obtained from Public Records offices" the Commander remarked as he looked at some of the markings on many of the papers.

"Well we have here diagrams of several premises," Tracy remarked.

"Local locations?" the Commander asked.

"Haychester Museum, the Post Office, Town Hall, College of Technology, only one of those has not had any unwelcome visitors in the last three months".

"What was stolen from the College?" Longton asked racking his brains to recall facts that he could not remember.

"Oh it was some remote control robotic thing they were developing, it was supposed to be able to crawl through small spaces and use a robotic arm to grab objects if I recall rightly" Tracy replied calling upon her photographic memory of cases past.

"Didn't have sort of tracked wheels by any chance did it?" the Commander asked with anticipation.

"Now I come to think of it..." Tracy began. The Commander and Longton both realised suddenly how the gang had managed to squeeze through the smallest space into the premises they burgled. It was a fair bet that some of those odd tracks in the dust and dirt at the crime scenes were caused by the aforesaid equipment.

"Check with the various records offices around the south east" the Commander requested "see what blueprints, diagrams, documents relating to subterranean access, etc have been accessed recently".

"I'm on it" Longton announced by now half way out of the door as if on a mission.

"Most of these are public buildings of some kind" Tracy commented as she looked through papers. Then one in particular caught her eye, she held aloft the paper to raise its attention.

"This looks familiar"

"Any identity on it?"

"Course not, but the layout rings bells, tell you something though, this is a photocopy whereas all the rest appear to be semi-original".

Barrett knocked politely at the door "Collins solicitor is screaming for us to interview him sir".

The Commander took the unidentified photocopied plan and shoved it in his pocket for later study before following Barrett and Tracy upstairs to the interview room area.

"Barrett, welcome to the interview suite" the Commander announced. It was a complete contrast to the rest of the building as it had benefited from a recent refurbishment.

The Commander was feeling sarcastic as he quoted from the Security Service Publicity Section press release as he told Barrett to mind the "decorative features to enhance the calming ambience".

"The what sir?"

"The potted plants" Tracy whispered "which are plastic so as not to breach the fire regulations".

Barrett had realised in the short time that she had been at Haychester that a strong sense of humour and a surreal approach to life were a vital part of the CV of any officer allocated here.

The Commander consulted a clipboard on the wall, seeing that Collins was scheduled for Interview Room 2, he made his way there not bothering to knock on the door as he entered the spartan room, closely followed by Tracy.

"Mr Collins, Mr Smythe, good morning!" he cheerily announced.

"Hamilton-Smythe" Collins solicitor corrected. He was a stout man in his late fifties, a dark grey suit of significant value was offset with a maroon tie of equally expensive taste reflecting his financially high success as a defence lawyer.

The Commander hated lawyers, he wasn't too keen on Collins either especially as it was because of him and his associates that he spent most of Christmas Day afternoon crawling around the underground passageways of central London.

The two officers had developed a sort of double act when it came to interviewing major suspects and for this occasion they were to give it the full works.

"Commander Caverner, has the gentleman been read his rights?" the Commander asked in polite tones.

"I do believe he has."

"My client" Hamilton-Smythe interrupted "wishes to have his rights read to him again on tape in the presence of his legal counsel".

"Really?" the Commander responded as if he didn't care, which as a matter of fact he didn't "well that's a pity as I only do one reading of rights per customer".

"It's the cutbacks, and what with being the Christmas holidays and all" Tracy added sarcastically.

"My client wishes to make a statement" Hamilton-Smythe continued.

"Oh we are all ears aren't we Tracy love?"

"Can't wait to hear this" she added feigning enthusiasm and leaning forward with eagerness. She reached across and started the tape recorder. After the initial legal introductions for the benefit of the tape the Commander indicated to Hamilton-Smythe to begin.

Hamilton-Smythe began to recite from the file in front of him with authority. "My client wish it to be known that he has nothing whatsoever to do with the crimes of which he is being accused and further wishes it to be known that he will not, following legal advice be speaking to any officer or other representative of the Security Service".

"All right then matey, how do you explain the drain covers in your garden shed, and that is just for starters" the Commander asked sternly.

"My client has nothing to add...."

"I am showing the suspect exhibit TC3" Tracy announced lifting a large evidence bag from below the table at which they were all sitting. As the bag hit the table with a loud clang, she continued by proceeding to describe the obvious contents. "One large man hole cover marked 'Haychester District Council', needless to say Mr Collins there are another forty odd of these in your shed, and that's nothing compared with all the stuff which we can connect to you that you left behind in the British Museum's basement".

Collins gruff voice spoke for the first time at this point, "All right the drain covers I nicked to get a bit of cash for the scrap metal, the rest has nothing to do with me".

"My client is correct, he is willing to admit to the theft of the drain covers and I will press firmly for bail on that matter" Hamilton-Smythe announced as snooty as ever "the rest of the charges being levied are however based on nothing more than circumstantial evidence and I insist that they are dropped immediately, furthermore we wish this interview terminated with immediate effect and arrangements made quickly for my clients unconditional release".

The Commander noticed the way Hamilton-Smythe was looking at his watch

nervously, it was clear that he wanted the interview to end at that moment no matter how well or badly he hid his intentions.

"All right, this interview is terminated" the Commander announced. As he and Tracy turned to leave the room he looked round at Hamilton-Smythe and Collins, "We'll talk again, don't go away".

Outside the interview room, the Office Clerk called Tracy over, "Commander Caverner, phone call for you".

The Commander winked at Tracy and motioned her to go on, "I'm off downstairs to see if there's any more news from London, Metropolitan Division's forensic team should have got some preliminary results by now".

"I'll be down in a minute" she replied sneaking a quick kiss from the Commander in the process. As she watched the Commander leave the Interview Suite she called after him "It's your turn to buy lunch!"

The Commander waved his hand behind him in acknowledgement before making his way down the stairs past some heating engineers who were heading past him in the direction of the top floor.

Tracy reached the nearby desk where the phone was lying off the hook on the surface.

"Hello, Commander Caverner" she began, however to her surprise the line was dead. Her thoughts were quickly drawn elsewhere however when she suddenly felt her gun being pulled from her side holster and placed against the side of her face.

"Please don't struggle Commander, we are here to see Mr Collins, co-operate and no-one gets hurt" came a calm voice as she was silenced by a hand across the mouth.

"Is it my imagination or is it getting cold in here?" Longton asked the Commander as he walked into his office.

The Commander reached over his desk and felt the radiator under the window, "You may have a point, mind you I did see some heating engineers just a few minutes ago".

Longton handed the Commander a fax "List of those dead members of the gang at the British Museum and also a provisional list of what was taken".

"No sign of the artefacts yet?" the Commander asked looking up from his desk with a worried frown. It was peculiar that somewhere between the British Museum and Charing Cross, the cases containing the artefacts stolen by Collins' gang had vanished, despite being in the Commander's vision for much of the time.

"Not a dicky bird" Longton replied typically.

"Is it my imagination or is it cold in here?" the Chief Superintendent asked as he put his head around the office door.

"It's cold in here!" Longton and the Commander responded in unison.

"I hear Collins isn't co-operating" the Chief Superintendent commented woefully.

"With a lawyer like Hamilton-Smythe are you surprised?" the Commander replied similarly woeful.

"What gets me" Longton commented "is how a bloke who claims to nick council drain covers to sell for their scrap value because he is desperate for the cash, can afford a £500 an hour lawyer".

"Our Mr Collins has a benefactor with a bottomless cheque book" the Commander concluded "probably the person who contracted him to nick all the antiquities from their various locations".

"If anyone can solve this one, you will Commander" the Chief Superintendent told him confidently "anyway I'm off to lunch so keep up the good work".

"Have a good lunch sir!" Longton announced as the Chief Superintendent left before in turn leaving himself in pursuit of sustenance or whatever it was that passed for food in the Staff Canteen.

The Commander sighed a little as he read over the faxed reports on the desk, outside the office corridor was fairly quiet, the air was filled with the distant ringing of telephones and a few murmuring of distant conversations and footsteps on the floors above and below could be just made out.

However as he looked over at the picture of Tracy on his desk the quiet ambience was suddenly spoilt by a loud thud and a crash from outside. The Commander got up and was about to look out of the window to see what the noise and subsequent commotion that could be heard was about when the air was suddenly split apart by an ear splitting siren.

Recognising the wailing siren as the fire alarm, he quickly grabbed his radio from the desk and stepped out into the corridor to assess the situation. Within moments of the alarm having begun, most of the building's occupants were making their way towards the fire exits and the Control Room had already handed over command to the reserve Control Room in the 'B' Building on the site.

Smoke soon started to appear from the direction of the north stairwell and percolate through the corridor. Seeing the seriousness of the situation for himself, the Commander ordered out those who were still in the building over the radio although selecting the right general channel for the announcement proved difficult with the increasing intensity of the smoke.

"Code blue, confirmed fire alert, all personnel out now, use ONLY the south staircase and go immediately to your designated rendezvous areas". The Commander's voice boomed out over all radios and tannoy announcement systems in the building.

By now most of the building appeared to be evacuated as the Commander struggled coughing through the smoke to check all the rooms and offices on that second floor, closing all the doors as he did so. It was only when he was certain there was no-one else left on the floor that he made his own way down the stairs through various layers of smoke that was percolating throughout the building by now.

Outside there was a scene of confusion and chaos, people were running around trying to get away from the 'C' Block building, in the distance the sound of approaching sirens heralded the imminent arrival of the fire brigade whilst most of those who had been in the building were now gathered on the adjacent field in groups according to their divisional allocation.

The Commander joined Longton and the Chief Superintendent and looked back at the building, seeing for the first time the source of the emergency alert.

"Boiler room's blown up" Longton shouted trying to make himself heard above the accompanying commotion.

The Commander could see smoke pouring from the boiler room area situated on the ground floor adjacent to the north staircase entrance, oddly he noted that flames appeared to be absent however.

"Commander!" Barrett called from nearby waving a clipboard.

The Commander turned to see what was wrong, he quickly realised that all was not well by the look on Barrett's face, and then he realised who he hadn't seen since the alarm was raised.

"I have done the headcount twice now and we are missing Collins, Hamilton-Smythe and Commander Caverner" she announced, the tone of her voice clearly one of deep worry and concern.

The radio in the Commander's hand suddenly sprung into life, the message being for the Commander himself.

"Commander, this is Collins, I hope you are enjoying our little fake smoke demonstration, we have a hostage, no-one comes near the building, we can see all around the perimeter from up here, co-operate and all will be well, I'll stay in touch".

The Commander looked up at the top floor of the building, the interview area was situated at the north end and this was where Tracy, Collins and Hamilton-Smythe were last seen so it seemed logical that was where Tracy was being held.

With the grunt of powerful engines, the red and white liveried Fire Engines arrived pulling up outside the north entrance to the building. The Commander realised quickly that they would be a target if the fire fighters went towards the building, quickly he ran forward waving his arms and shouting at them to keep their distance.

It was to no avail as the both he and the fire-fighters were all forced to instinctively duck for cover behind the fire appliances as a ream of automatic weapons fire

ricocheted off the ground just a couple of feet in front of them.

The Commander's radio played host to the gruff determined voice of Collins again, "I said no-one approaches the building, I trust we have an understanding now?"

"As the man from the railway company once did say, Euston we have a problem" Longton murmured as he entered the reserve control room to see a somewhat concerned senior management including the Chief Superintendent, the Commander and the County Security Administrator General hunched over the central control desk watching CCTV monitors.

"Looks like they used smoke bombs in your ventilation system" the Chief Fire Officer announced as he too walked into the control room and placed a red steel canister on the desk, "we found this one in a blue transit van out the back of the building".

"Could we storm the building" the Chief Superintendent suggested pointing at the screens.

The Commander glowered "Tracy would be dead before we got near the door, they can see right round from up there".

"...if she's not dead already" the Administrator General murmured.

"She's not dead, Sir" the Commander insisted.

"Are you sure?" Longton asked.

"Oh yes, I can still feel her presence" the Commander added softly looking ahead out of the window towards the 'C' Block building where she was being held.

He looked down towards the grassed grounds that surrounded the building opposite. Amongst the bushes were hidden specialist teams of Security Service marksmen, their dark uniforms and bullet proof vests marking them out from normal officers. Their sights were trained on the top floor of the occupied building, ready pensive waiting for the command to act.

"Has anyone got a bit of paper I can borrow?" Longton asked. The Commander fumbled in his pocket and pulled the screwed up plan that he had picked up in the conference room earlier. As he unfurled it, the unnamed plan suddenly began to register with the Commander.

"Hang on, this plan we found at Collins place, its here, this site".

The Chief Superintendent looked over the Commanders shoulder at the plan which he was flattening out on the desk. "Look's like it predates the Security Service taking over the site in the 1980's but it is definitely the three main blocks of this site".

Longton looked more closely, eyeing carefully the detail difference between the

building and site he knew and that shown on the attached plan. One feature he definitely did not recognise certainly attracted his attention and he quickly pointed it out.

"What's this passageway entrance into the basement?" he asked.

The Commander tried to flatten out further the crumpled bottom edge of the plan to get a clearer look at the feature Longton had highlighted. He turned to the Chief of the Armed Response Unit who was chattering over the radio nearby.

"Steve can I borrow your plan?" Steve turned and passed a large sheet of white paper over to the Commander who proceeded to look at the current Security Service plans of the building and compare them.

"Well the door on the old plan is sort of indicated on the new current one but there is no indication as to what it is" he concluded.

Longton interrupted the Commander's train of thought, "If this is some sort of alternative access we could make use of it, I think I know someone who may be able to help".

Hamilton-Smythe looked concerned out of the window at the gathering marksmen that could be seen surrounding the building, "Collins, I hope to Christ you know what you are doing!"

Collins picked up Tracy's radio from the desk in front of him, "Relax!" he ordered and fiddled with the controls changing the frequency, he paused momentarily for thought.

"What's our scrambler code?" he asked one of his accomplices stood nearby keeping a gun trained on Tracy who was seated in the corner with an angry and determined look.

"Erm, 3369 boss!"

Collins tapped in the code into the keypad of the radio and proceeded to call another of his associates. "Bluebird, this is Golden Eagle, over".

There was a brief pause before the reply came, partially crowded by the background sound of a helicopter in flight. "This is Bluebird, receiving over".

"Some transport please, you know where we are?" Collins asked.

"On way, e.t.a. approx one hour" came the reply.

"Where are we going?" Hamilton-Smythe asked slightly nervously, the thought of travelling by helicopter did not exactly fill him with enthusiasm.

"Oh just for a little ride" Collins replied calmly surveying the scene outside.

"What about the woman" Hamilton-Smythe nodded towards Tracy.

Collins looked around at Tracy who glowered back with a stare of death. "Oh she's coming with us, insurance you see".

"Heaven help you when the Commander down there catches up with you is all I can say" Hamilton-Smythe added ruefully.

"Who said anything about him catching up with me" Collins was by now defiant and cocky, "he'll be too busy burying one of his officers" he added eyeing Tracy menacingly.

"Yep that'll be the old Nuclear Bunker access" Thomas Graham announced as he lifted his head from the desk upon which the plans were laid out. He put the spyglass he had been using to study the papers down and looked up at Longton, the Commander and the Chief Superintendent gathered together in Graham's small jewellers shop in the East Street section of the city of Haychester.

"Told you he'd know didn't I" Longton said confidently "he is the expert on old subterranean tunnels and cellars around here".

"Most public buildings built in the late 1960's such as what is now the Security Service building had bunkers of various sizes incorporated in the basement design" Graham explained "Many of these had interconnecting tunnels so that at least in theory local government could continue its business during a nuclear crisis."

"And these bunkers and tunnels are still there?" the Commander asked as a potential plan began to form in his mind.

"Well after about ten years they were largely forgotten about, most were abandoned and sealed up, terrible waste of money if you ask me".

The Commander had just one question "Can we use any of the old tunnels to get into our own basement?"

"Theoretically yes, I think the access is still unsealed over County Hall, you could try there".

The Commander did not hesitate, within seconds he was on the radio back to the reserve control room.

"Lima Tango Zero One to Haychester control" He didn't bother to wait for a reply just issued the orders, "Get the Specialist Firearms Unit and the seized equipment from the British Museum over to County Hall, now. Oh and chase up the helicopter I requested some time back".

He turned to Graham, "Thank you, your services are greatly appreciated".

Graham barely had time to respond before the shop door bell heralded the three officer's rapid departure.

"I don't care who you are, you are not coming in without authority from my Chief or a council permit". The jobs worth car park attendant was resolute as he blocked the path of the Armed Response Unit's Ford Transit van at the entrance to County Hall's manicured car park with its exquisite flower borders.

"Commander, we have a problem!" the van driver announced into the radio.

"Yes?" the Commander asked running up alongside the van to be faced with the jobs worth "What's the problem".

"Muggins here won't let us in, we haven't got a Council permit or some such cobblers" the ARU Chief replied, indicating the uniformed official.

The Commander turned to the jobs worth and made his case clearly and plainly "Listen matey, I'll make it simple, get out of the way or you'll find yourself nicked for obstruction".

Seeing the determination in the Commander's eyes, the jobs worth wisely decided to step aside, however as the officers made their way past him, he summoned up one last burst of defiance. "You haven't heard the last of this, my superiors will be demanding answers, you see if they don't!"

Longton looked back with a wry smile. "They'll have more to complain about in a minute when we start wrecking their basement" he commented to the ARU Chief with a wry chuckle.

"Ere boss we're on the news!" one of Collins accomplices called, waving a pocket television wildly in the air as though it was a flag.

"Where did you get that?" Collins asked as he squinted to see the small picture on the television's LCD screen.

"Property store down the corridor" the accomplice turned to Tracy "You know you really should get better locks on your doors".

"I'll mention it at the next Buildings & Finance Committee meeting" she replied wryly, twisting herself slightly to try and make herself more comfortable within the bounds of the rope that held her hands to the back of the chair on which she was seated.

"Quiet!!" Collins barked "I'm trying to listen".

"This is BBC News 24, the main news headlines at 3.45. An armed siege is still in progress in the Security Service building in the City of Haychester, reports indicate that about an hour ago three men disguised as heating engineers freed a prisoner and took one Security Officer and a leading defence barrister hostage on the top floor of the building. For the latest we cross live to Sally Woodward who is outside the main entrance to the Security Service building in Haychester".

The picture changed to that of a young woman reporter standing in the cold blustery wind, clearly not very happy about performing an outside broadcast in the wintry weather but maintaining her professional demeanour.

"Sally, have there been any developments there?"

"Not much seems to have happened since the siege began almost an hour ago. It would appear that the building was evacuated following an elaborate hoax fire alarm which gave the three intruders the chance to liberate their arrested colleague. At the moment, the building is surrounded by specialist firearms officers and we do know that the kidnappers have two hostages and are heavily armed".

"Do we know who is involved"

"It is believed that this is connected with the arrest yesterday of the robbers of the British Museum, the hostages are believed to be the gang leader's defence barrister, a Mr Hamilton-Smythe and also the soon to be Deputy Commanding Officer of the London Transport Security Division, Commander Tracy Caverner".

"What efforts are being made to bring about a successful end to the situation?"

"Well details are sketchy, it is believed that a trained negotiator has been sent for whilst, the Commander of this division, who is also scheduled to become the new head of the London Transport Division tomorrow is taking charge of the operation to end the siege".

"Well I'll be damned" Collins muttered "I hadn't realised who we were dealing with".

"Well I did try to warn you" Hamilton-Smythe added "The Commander is one of the Security Service's most respected and dedicated officers, don't you read the papers?"

"Usually it's all bad news so I avoid them as a rule" Collins looked across ruefully at Tracy and noticed the 'LT02' insignia on her epaulettes. "That must make you the Commander's Deputy".

Tracy looked up startled at Collins addressing her in a tone that was less confrontational for the first time. She quickly realised that here just may be an opportunity to make use of the situation to save her life.

"Needless to say, if you were to kill me, the Commander would never let up chasing you, and when he did catch up with you, and don't doubt for a minute that he would, I wouldn't bank on being alive by the time he got as far as reading you your rights" she advised with a serious frown. Collins looked at her grumpily as he realised where this

line of conservation was heading.

"So if I was you, and make no mistake I am glad I am not, I would keep me alive as a valuable hostage, that's of course assuming you and your associates want to get out of here alive".

"I'm not sure" Collins mused running his fingers through his silver grey beard with thought.

Seeing his deliberations and himself not wanting to be accused of accessory to murder of a Security Officer, Hamilton-Smythe added his tuppence worth "You do realise how close Commander Caverner and the Commander are don't you?"

Collins shrugged his shoulders in ignorance.

"Good grief, you really don't read the papers do you?" Hamilton-Smythe threw a copy of the Haychester Gazette at Collins. "The local rag has been speculating on when these two are likely to get married for the last six weeks, its about the only newsworthy thing they print these days".

"You have got to be kidding" Collins responded.

Tracy held up her hand to show the diamond ring the Commander had given her. "You don't think this came out of a cheap Christmas cracker do you?" she asked pertinently.

"Has anyone got the key to this door?" the Commander asked County Hall's site manager as they stood confronted by a pair of heavy metal doors, grey painted and with the remains of signage indicating its originally intended role as a fallout shelter and emergency bunker.

"Well no, no-one has wanted to get in there for years" the Site Manager replied looking somewhat perplexed.

"Great!" Longton muttered "We get the four minute warning of nuclear Armageddon and the local council spend twenty minutes looking for the key!"

"Look on the bright side, no more County Council, its not as though anyone would miss them" the Commander commented ruefully. His low opinion of and contempt for members of Government, both local and national was a matter of well documented record.

"Needless to say none of this helps, can we jemmy the door open?" the Chief Superintendent asked.

The Commander looked around the doorframe and noticed something slightly amiss. "If this is a standard Council bodge job done on the cheap, I'm willing to bet that the door was the best money could buy but then the money ran out to put the door frame

in so they did a cheap bodge job on it".

He decided to test his theory and with a crowbar in his hand proceeded to attack the door frame rather than the door itself. Quickly it became obvious by the level of damage he was managing to inflict upon it that his theory was correct. The outer layer of the frame had rusted badly with years of neglect as had the cheap wood that had been used beneath where there should have been solid metal.

"Well don't just stand there, give me a hand" the Commander ordered. Quickly there were many people working on dislodging the door frame which after a few minutes work with crowbars, axes and whatever else came to hand, started to give way.

"Right everyone up against the door and push this bugger for your life". Within moments the door was under the combined onslaught of over a dozen officers and the Council workers whose office the Commander was in the middle of wrecking.

"She's going!" Longton called as the tearing screech of splintering wood and wrenching metal grew suddenly and one of the two double doors gave way under its own weight collapsing into the void beyond at an angle, leaving a hole big enough to get through.

The Commander reached for his radio, "Control, we're in, send that equipment down".

The rooms and corridors beyond were dark and foreboding, cobwebs decorated its grey concrete walls, the facility's bulkhead lights were of little use as many did not work, however there was sufficient light in the room to see ahead.

"Sir, over here!" Longton called.

The Commander walked across the cold concrete floor and joined Longton by an old plan of the site that was posted on the wall. Longton shown his torch on the faded and peeling diagram as they both studied it.

"If I have read this correctly Sir, we are here at the top right. There are four ways out of here, one is the way we came in through County Hall, one is south towards wherever, probably the High School as that was built around the same time, third goes north so I would hazard a guess at the old City Council buildings, the one we are interested in is this one heading south west".

"How far?" the Commander asked as he studied the elderly plan with Longton.

"Can't be more than half a mile, maybe three quarters as the crow flies".

"When was the last time you saw a crow flying underground?"

"Been pigeons seen travelling on London Underground".

"Longton, get back to the office, I want you to take charge of things outside if and when we make our move from the inside" the Commander ordered.

"I'm gone sir!" Longton quickly departed back out the way they had come in.

Torches penetrated the gloom of the dark passageways as about a dozen officers made their way onwards towards the exit Longton had indicated on the old plans. The Commander's legs ached with pain, he had still not recovered fully from his exploits of the previous day, he also could not believe he was stuck in yet another abandoned tunnel ruining his third uniform in four days.

Just the tapping of footsteps and the clink of the ARU's rifles broke the dead silence down there, you would never have known that a busy and noisy city was but a matter of feet above.

It was some ten minutes of walking through dark identical concrete passageway before the torches made out a doorway ahead, similar to the one through which they had earlier entered the abandoned complex.

The Commander examined the old rusted locking mechanism and was surprised to find it slightly open. The door was however seized in place with rust and age but a few pulls of the crowbar soon released the door from its position and permitted entry into the next chamber.

"What now?" the ARU unit Chief asked as together they looked around the small dark chamber into which they had just passed.

The Commander shone his torch on a rusty metal ladder set into the end wall of the chamber, "We go up in the world" he announced as he began to climb.

"Is it safe?" the ARU unit Chief asked slightly nervously. The Commander paused a few feet up the ladder and looked down at the Chief bemused.

"Well apart from the fact we are trapped in an old decaying bunker complex with a couple of gun toting nutters ahead of us and have to use a ladder that could give way any minute, yes we are perfectly safe" he replied with a wry smile before recommencing his ascent.

The Chief Superintendent and the ARU officers duly followed the Commander as he overcame his usual fear of heights to reach the top of the ladder. When everyone was gathered together in the small room at the top, the Commander pulled out his gun and proceeded to slowly open the small door that was the only other exit from the room.

"Welcome to my basement!" the Commander announced as they entered what could only be described as a mess with miscellaneous clutter strewn all over the place.

"Someone's turned this place over" the ARU Chief commented surveying the piles of old boxes and disused filing cabinets that filled the room.

"Nah! It always looks like this, anything we can never find a home for gets slung down here, no wonder we never noticed this door" the Commander replied ruefully as he accidentally knocked over a heap of old community notice leaflets that he should have been distributed four years previously.

"We can do this the quick way or the slow way" the ARU Chief announced. "The slow way is to work our way up through the building floor by floor, room by room".

"That'll take time, time we don't have" the Commander interjected.

"Exactly so I think it would be a lot wiser if we made directly for the top floor but leave a couple of my men following behind just to make sure they don't slip away".

"Sounds good to me" the Commander responded, "I'll lead the way".

"Not without a bullet proof vest you won't" the ARU Chief said throwing a Kevlar vest to the Commander. Its weight meant that the Commander promptly dropped it, the weight of these vests was also one good reason why he never wore them if he could avoid it which he did on numerous occasions as the three bullets in his body from some years earlier could testify.

"Its ruddy uncomfortable" the Commander commented as he struggled to make it fit as comfortably as possible.

"More comfortable than being shot dead though" the ARU Chief added as they officer all checked their weapons and prepared to move off.

Longton looked up into the sky as the whirl of the blades of the Security Department helicopter filled the air, gradually building up from the south west as it approached. Suddenly there was a roar as the blue and yellow helicopter burst over the top of the office buildings and the sound of its twin turbine engines reverberated off the concrete walls of the buildings that made up the Security Department complex.

"Blimey he's late isn't he!" Longton called out as the helicopter circled overhead. He had trouble making his words heard over the din and many of the officers around him were holding their ears.

It was only by pure luck that Longton managed to hear the Commander on the radio.

"Lima Tango Zero One to Longton receiving over!"

Longton picked up the radio and acknowledged the call, at the same time cupping a hand to his other ear in an attempt to block out the sound of the helicopter.

"We are about to make some coffee." the Commander announced, meaning that he was about to go into the target area where it was believed that Collins, Tracy, et-al were but did not want them hearing about it in case they were listening.

Tracy was listening and she knew what it meant too, the Commander hated coffee so it was obvious to her that this was some sort of operational message.

"And tell that helicopter that if they want any coffee, they had better get in closer" the

Commander added.

"Will do, mines two sugars!" Longton responded. He then waved his arms in the direction of the helicopter to indicate that the balloon was about to go up, although there seemed to be no discernable reaction from the crew despite the fact they were pretty much looking straight at him.

"Time to leave my dear" Collins announced as he grabbed Tracy forcibly by the arm and led her away with the others towards the far end of the building.

"Where are we going?" Hamilton-Smythe asked nervously clearly seeing the sudden change of pace in Collins actions.

"Our ride is here" Collins announced indicating out of the window in the direction of the Security Service helicopter as it hovered outside.

"Now just a god damn minute" Hamilton-Smythe interjected "please don't tell me you have stolen the Security Service helicopter?!?"

Collins shrugged his shoulders and looked out of the window at the blue and yellow machine as it made another low pass over the top of the building, "I liked the colour".

With a clatter of metal, the roof access ladder had been pulled down from the ceiling aperture and Collins ordered his associates to go on ahead.

Tracy realised that they were about to leave and had to do something quick to give the Commander and the ARU team time to get to them.

"Ahhgghhh!" she called out as she faked a twisted ankle in the bottom rung of the ladder, however her effort was to be in vain.

"Nice try!" Collins replied seeing through her deception. He grabbed her roughly by the arm and hauled her back on her feet, "Come on" he ordered "or you really will have a bad leg". He waved his gun in her direction to emphasise his point.

Outside the double doors that led though to the custody area, the Commander was tackling a slight problem with a potted plant that was blocking his view. With him were the officers of the ARU, all ready for the word.

"Did you bring the equipment?" the Commander whispered back. A large steel box was slid over to him which he opened. The Chief of the ARU looked sceptical as the Commander removed the robotic unit that had been recovered from the British Museum crime scene and placed it at the foot of the door.

The controls for the unit were mounted within the casing that carried it, and the Commander passed the control over to one of the ARU officers who knew better about technology than he did, which was not to difficult.

"Take it in slowly, I want to see what is going on without any unnecessary disturbance".

The officer who was controlling the robotic unit, nodded and with a whirr of electric motors that was almost silent, the little wheeled unit pushed open slightly the doors just enough to get through.

The Commander watched the unit's progress as it made its way down the main corridor of the interview suite, however no-one appeared to be in sight.

"Nobody home by the looks of it"

"Does that helicopter sound close to you?" the ARU Chief asked out of curiosity as the sound of the blades reverberating through the air became so loud it was threatening to drown out their voices.

The Commander suddenly stood up and burst through the doors, "Where the hell are you going?" the ARU Chief called after him.

"I just realised what colour our chopper is!" he called back.

The turbulence from the helicopter buffeted Collins, his three accomplices, Hamilton-Smythe and Tracy as they made their way across the roof.

Collins looked up and waved the helicopter down, the pilot acknowledged his signal and proceeded to set the machine on the roof. Once it had landed Collins dragged Tracy forward and threw her on board the helicopter. With the others on board Collins was about to climb into the co-pilots seat when the Commander and the ARU unit appeared on the roof.

His thoughts of surprise at being pursued by the Security Service were quickly overcome by the need to make a rapid getaway.

Within moments he had opened fire in the direction of the approaching officers, two of the ARU unit stumbled to the ground as they received hits, while everyone else instinctively fell flat to the ground.

The Helicopter took off and as it began to pull away, the Commander got up and tried to grab the landing rails, for which he was shot at, causing him to fall backwards onto the ground with blood starting to pour from a bullet wound to the leg.

Tracy could only look on horrified as the view of the Commander sprawled on the ground being assisted by ARU unit officer got smaller and smaller as they pulled away.

"Commander! Are you all right?" the ARU Chief inquired.

"Oh yes, bloody marvellous thank you very bloody much!" the Commander retorted gritting his teeth at the pain from his injury.

"Medical emergency, paramedics to the roof level!" the ARU Chief called on the radio.

"Get onto air traffic control at Gatwick, I want that chopper followed" the Commander ordered.

"The entrances have been booby trapped Guv!" one of the ARU officers reported as he came out onto the roof, "the only way we are getting out of here is by a helicopter if we are in a hurry".

"Where to sir?" the pilot asked.

"Keep her low so they can't pick us up and then I want you to land at these co-ordinates initially" Collins ordered passing a marked map over to the pilot.

"Right you are Guv!"

"Solent Coastguard Rescue Helicopter Juliet Kilo to Haychester Control, over."

Longton picked up the radio headset in the Reserve Control Room and put it on. "This is Haychester Control, receiving you Juliet Kilo".

"Can you point us in the direction of our passengers over."

Looking out of the window at the 'C' Block building, Longton could see the ARU team and the Commander, still clasping his bleeding leg whilst he received medical attention from one of the ARU officers.

"Roof of the third building from the east end entrance, you can't miss them" Longton informed the Coastguard helicopter pilot.

The large red and white air sea rescue helicopter landed gently on the opposite end of the roof from the officers and the winch man, dressed in full flying suit jumped down from the side door and came over to them.

"Afternoon, someone order a taxi?"

"We would appreciate a lift" the Commander muttered "but any chance of you having a look at this first?" he indicated the leg, the trouser material surrounding the entry wound soaked in blood although the bleeding was now receding somewhat.

The winch man was joined by the helicopters on board trained paramedic dressed in a similar but green jump suit. He quickly assessed the Commander's injury and administered an injection to alleviate some of the pain.

"Lucky there, the bullet seems to have missed any bones and gone out the other side, your going to be limping for a while though" he advised.

"Nothing new there", the Commander grumpily muttered. "What about those two?" he motioned towards the two ARU unit officers who had been hit earlier.

"They are all right, bullet proof vests did their job" the ARU Chief replied relieved that everyone involved here was going to be fine.

"Right lets get out of here" the Commander ordered and tried to get up. The winch man and paramedic intervened and propped him up as they made their way over to the waiting helicopter.

Just as the Commander was being helped inside, Longton came onto the roof looking understandably concerned.

"Is he all right?" he asked.

The distant call of "Do you mind where your sticking that needle, it ruddy hurts!" from the direction of the helicopter quickly answered Longton's question and while the winch man shrugged his shoulders with bemusement, Longton went over to the helicopter to converse with the Commander.

Inside the helicopter, the Commander was sitting up looking a bit put out as the Paramedic bandaged up his left leg. "Have we got our trace on our nicked helicopter?" he asked.

"Heading north west at a moderate speed but flying low in an attempt to duck the radar" Longton informed him.

The Commander spun round towards the pilot, "This contraption fast by any chance?"

"Fastest rescue chopper in the fleet" the pilot replied beaming with pride.

"Right then lets get going" he ordered.

"Sorry you've lost me..." the pilot replied.

"Much as I hate flying, I am commandeering this here helicopter and you are steering".

The pilot looked back but could see from the look of determination in the Commander's face that they were going to be following his orders for a while whether they liked it or not.

Collins re-boarded the helicopter and motioned the pilot to take off again. As the craft lifted off the grass covered ground Collins reached back and removed the blindfold that he had put on Tracy just before they had landed, this being in order to

prevent her from identifying their intermediate destination.

She looked down at her left hand from which Collins had removed her ring earlier and let out a heavy sigh.

"Our financial sponsor was very pleased with that little trophy, you needn't worry it has gone to a good home" Collins smirked as he observed Tracy slumped semi-resigned in the rear seat, her concern for the Commander still obvious from her body language.

The pilot started to look concerned as he realised that now they were not alone in the sky.

"Hey boss, we got company!!" he called.

Collins looked back out of the side window, ignoring the buffeting turbulence as it made more of a mess of his hair than it usually was, his temper and fury was obvious as he realised that an Air Sea Rescue helicopter was catching up on them fast.

"God damn it! does nothing go right round here!" he exclaimed as he reached between the front seats to grab the machine gun he had placed there earlier before turning to address the pilot.

"Bank hard right when I give the word!" he ordered before sliding open the side door and positioning his weapon ready to defend himself from his pursuers.

The Air Sea Rescue helicopters pilot recognised the craft in the distance. "Sir, we've got them!" he called back.

The Commander got up, against the on-board Paramedic's advice and positioned himself between the two front pilot seats so he could see out of the cockpit windows for himself.

"That's odd" he commented "we shouldn't have caught them up that quick, they must have diverted or landed somewhere".

Suddenly the pilot realised that their quarry was not only now aware of their presence but also now starting to turn towards them. "What the heck is he up to?" the pilot wondered.

The Commander quickly realised exactly what was happening, "A little evasive manoeuvres may be in order gentlemen" he announced.

Whatever action they were going to take was to be too late anyway as Collins fired upon them. Being an excellent shot, it was easy for him to strike his target, the co-pilot's side windshield shattering with the impact of the bullet, it was a miracle that no-one inside the craft was hit.

A second hail of bullet strikes was hurled at the craft, the clanking of the ammunition as it hit the helicopters engine and rotor sections echoing around inside the cabin.

Quickly it became apparent that they were in trouble, the tone of the engines started to change, smoke began to fill the cabin and alarms sounded as the pilot was forced to wrestle with the controls of the aircraft as it began to bank and roll to port like a wounded animal.

Calm professionalism in the face of danger was second nature to the crew as they calmly went about the matter at hand of recovering the aircraft from its dangerous position and summoning assistance over the radio.

"Kilo Lima to any station, Mayday, Mayday, have been struck by gunfire, engine and rotor damage, making emergency landing approximately twelve miles south west of Crawley".

"Gatwick Air Traffic Approach, Kilo Lima, message received, emergency services on way, good luck" came the reassuring response.

"Now what?" the Commander asked.

"We crash!" the pilot replied semi-jokingly "controlled mind but technically a crash nonetheless".

"Now I remember why I avoid flying..." the Commander muttered dejectedly.

"What do you mean you lost both of them?" Longton demanded. He looked around the control room in disbelief for a few moments at the news he had just received, he could tell by the way that others in the room stopped what they were doing and looking towards him, that they shared his concern.

Longton listened for a few more moments before grudgingly thanking the caller from the traffic control office. He turned to the control room and prepared to announce the bad news.

"Ladies and gentlemen, can I have your attention please" he called, most turned to watch him but a few were clearly not listening and this caused Longton to momentarily excerpt a little more force, "Oi, open your lugholes over there and listen!"

This had the desired effect, even on those who were passing by the door of the Control Room and gathered just outside the corridor to receive the news.

"About twenty minutes ago the Coastguard's Air Sea Rescue helicopter with the Commander on board, made an emergency landing in a field near Crawley after it was fired upon. We don't yet know the condition of anyone on board".

Murmurs of shock and concern filled the room as he continued.

"In addition we have also lost track of the captured helicopter and as a result

Commander Caverner is now officially recorded as missing. We do however have one tiny lead, the helicopter Collins stole did land or divert somewhere between here and near Crawley where it was last seen, so I want all of you to get out your county a to z's and draw a straight line on it, then start searching".

There was a suddenly bustle of activity as everyone went about their task. Longton now in charge of the division in the Commander and Tracy's absence moved to the main briefing room and studied the map of the county that was mounted on the wall.

Barrett joined him, "They have to be on their way towards London somewhere I'll bet" she commented as Longton placed a line of map pins into the map to form the probable flight path of Collins and his associates.

As he moved down the map with the pins he put in the last one he had in his hand but more slowly than the previous ones as he realised the location that he was highlighting.

Barrett leaned forward and looked at where this last pin had landed and raised an eyebrow with surprise, "Isn't that..." she began.

"Grab your jacket, we are going for a drive" Longton announced as he strode purposefully out of the room.

Blindfolded and tired, Tracy was led from the helicopter down various steps into the back of a waiting van. The journey was short however and it was not long after she felt the vehicle go down a downhill slope that the engine stopped and the door opened.

More corridors, footsteps echoing on the narrow walls and more steps led eventually to her destination which she discovered when the blindfold was removed was a small dark and damp room, the only light coming from the doorway she had just come through.

"Enjoy your stay" Collins called as the door slammed shut followed by the sound of a key being turned in the lock.

Tracy was now completely in the dark, only a slim crack of light from outside was visible around the door frame. As her eyes adjusted to the dark she could just make out an old wooden chair in the corner of the room, she sat down and pulled her uniform jacket tighter around in an attempt to keep out the worst of the cold clammy air.

Her eyes were wide with fear and her hands trembled as she could feel the walls closing in, for years she had suffered from a fear of cold small dark enclosed spaces and here was her worst nightmare.

She tried to listen to any background sounds that may be able to identify where she was, a distant muffled voice which appeared to be recorded as it repeated itself

exactly every couple of minutes, a dripping of seeping water from above and the hum of something like electrical machinery but nothing obvious to indicate her whereabouts.

There seemed to be no hope for her now. The only thing left got her to do was wait and hope for rescue.

The crunch of suddenly propelled semi-frozen gravel broke the cold air of early evening as Longton's patrol car came to a sudden halt on the gravelled driveway of Haychester House, still some half a mile from the house itself.

"Barrett, look over there and tell me what you see." he asked pointing out of Barrett's side of the car at the still partially snow covered grassy field nearby.

Barrett looked with a mystical expression, whether it was the impending gloom or Longton's imagination, she couldn't immediately see anything.

"Snow?"

"Markings in the snow," Longton urged.

Looking again, Barrett suddenly saw what it was that had attracted Longton's attention, a pair of clear markings in the otherwise pretty much undisturbed snow that was still lying on the ground around and about.

"Do you think that was made by what I think it was made by?" she asked.

"Well let's put this way" Longton retorted as they resumed their journey up the driveway "I am beginning to smell a very large rat here somewhere".

"Mr Longton, a pleasure". The Duke of Haychester warmly greeted Longton and Barrett as he met them in the hallway of Haychester Manor.

Dressed in smart country hunting dress, the Duke himself had only just returned from a long trip from the airport, a fact backed up by the Butler who was unpacking a number of suitcases from the back of the Duke's Rolls Royce.

"I expect this about my missing coin collection?" he enquired "Do come in, I have only just got here myself, I expect you might like something to drink?"

"Well sort of, I was wondering if you had seen any unusual activity on the estate this afternoon Sir" Longton asked.

"Oh well as I said I have only just got here myself but my wife was here, she may know something" the Duke walked up to the bottom of the grand staircase and called out to his wife.

There appeared to be a distant muffled reply from upstairs. The Duke turned back to the two officers, "She won't be long, what was it you were hoping to find?"

"Stolen helicopter, kidnapped Security Officer, nutters with guns, stolen garden gnomes, that sort of thing" Longton replied.

The Duke raised a surprise eyebrow but before he could reply the door opened and in walked his wife, the Duchess who glared at Longton.

"Exactly what is the problem my dear" she asked her husband.

"Lieutenant Commander Longton here wants to know if we have seen or heard anything unusual around the estate in the last few hours" he explained "as you were here and neither I nor the butler were, I thought you would be the best person to ask".

Longton looked at the Duchess with intrigue, Barrett could see something had attracted his attention but wasn't sure what.

"Well I have seen nothing, nor have I heard anything either" she responded with a flourish and waving of hands around and about.

Unlike the Duke, the Duchess seemed keen to get rid of her guests as soon as possible, maybe it was because she hadn't seen her husband in over a week but Longton wasn't convinced but he kept it to himself.

"Well in that case I won't keep you any longer" Longton announced, "Thank you for time".

Longton turned to leave but Barrett delayed slightly as she saw something that attracted her attention as well however just as she was about to ask the Duchess a pertinent question, she was called upon.

"Barrett! We are leaving!" Longton called from the hallway.

As the patrol car pulled away down the driveway Longton turned to Barrett, "Well what do you think?" he asked.

"She's a lying cow" came the frank response "I take it we both spotted the same thing" she added.

Longton heard a familiar voice call his name as he reached over for the radio from the central dashboard console.

"Commander? are you all right" he asked relieved at hearing his voice.

"Yes, bruised and battered and we owe the Coastguard a new set of rota blades and a coat of paint but I'll live, what the hell is going on around here?" he asked.

"We reckoned the helicopter that Collins commandeered was possibly London bound,

however we also have a theory as to where it landed in between" Longton informed him.

"Oh yes?"

"You'll never guess where".

"I say we finish her off and get it over and done with" one of the gang responded as the heated discussion in a small cramped room continued. For almost an hour the gang had been discussing the situation they were now in.

Collins had been listening to the various theories and ratings of his colleagues for some time and decided to intercede and assert his authority.

"She is useful, not only as insurance but also potential bargaining material if any of our plans go awry".

"But we must have the entire Security Service onto us by now" a junior member of the gang pointed out.

"Once our client has made the arrangements, we will be moving to our pick up point and then onward transfer overseas as per the arrangement" Collins emphasised "there is nothing to worry about at this time".

"Are we safe here?" came a pertinent question.

Collins sighed as he explained for the umpteenth time about their situation, "This location has the advantage of not only being centrally located but it is also not on any current plans or maps, it is the last place that anyone will look" he assured.

Most of those gathered seemed mildly reassured, at which point Collins beckoned to an associate and together the two men left the room.

Outside in the dingy corridor, Collins retrieved the mobile phone from his jacket pocket and began dialling.

"Who are you calling?" his associate asked.

"Our mutual sponsor" Collins explained as his call was answered at the other end.

"Hello?, we are ready for the final phase. We do still have the hostage, advice please" he asked.

A problem with the reception meant that Collins was forced to repeat his last request, "I'm sorry it's the electrical equipment down here, I said we still have the hostage, advise please".

A pause followed whilst he took on his instructions.

"All right, I'll make the contact now, it should throw our friends off the scent a little". Collins hung up and proceeded to dial once more, "Hello, directory enquiries? Yes Haychester Security Department please" there was a pause "Yes please" he responded.

"Commander, I think you had better take this" Longton called waving the radio in the air. The Commander limped over to Longton's patrol car parked at the driveway entrance to Haychester House and took the call.

"Hello yes?"

"I'll keep this short" Collins announced "You have one of my compatriots in Charing Cross Hospital under guard, I propose a fair exchange, your lady friend for my colleague do you agree?"

"I need to know she is all right, can you put her on?"

There was a pause but then a familiar voice came on, "Hi, it's me" Tracy called out "I'm all right, nice of you to ring" she was abruptly cut off.

"All right, where and when" the Commander asked, obviously relieved that she was still alive but still deeply concerned for her well-being, he had already seen how ruthless Collins and his associates could be.

"That will be revealed later, we will talk again" Collins concluded the call and the line went dead.

The Commander was quickly on the radio to the Control Room, "Tell me you managed to trace that and recorded it?"

"Traced it, well only as far as Directory Enquiries so far, we do have it recorded though" Chief Superintendent Edwards replied.

"Great, get a copy up to Simon at Holborn" the Commander instructed "He'll know what to do with it, I am heading up there as soon as I have finished here"

"Is Commander Jameson there yet?" he enquired.

"Yes, she arrived about ten minutes ago" Edwards confirmed "That means you and Commander Caverner are now officially Londoners." he announced in a congratulatory manner although he was still sad to see them leave the Division.

"Good grief" Longton remarked "It's the end of an era".

"And you" the Commander pointed at Longton "are now Deputy Divisional Commander of Haychester so enjoy it!"

"Great! I can get a new uniform at last! The missus will be pleased." Longton exclaimed as he and the Commander got back into the patrol car.

"Right lets see what you found up at the big house" the Commander announced as the tyres of their car crunching the gravel of the long driveway were joined by those of the wheels of two Security Service vans.

The Duke of Haychester came out to greet the Commander and Longton as they approached the main door of Haychester House.

"Commander? So glad to see you are all right" he pronounced as the two men shook hands.

The Commander shivered a little, the cold clearly affecting his leg which was still painful, "Look can we go inside, my leg is killing me and we need to talk." The Commander, assisted by a walking stick, and the other two men made their way inside.

"Is your wife at home?" Longton asked.

"Well I think so" the Duke replied "I expect she is upstairs or something".

"We need to see her, or more precisely her left hand" the Commander added.

The Duke was by now puzzled beyond comprehension, "Darling!" he called, however after some moments there was no reply.

"That's odd" he commented as he started to make his way up the grand staircase with the two Security Officers following.

"Darling, are you there?" the Duke called again growing increasingly concerned.

As he entered the Duchess's bedroom however it became rapidly clear that not only was she not in the house but it was also increasingly unlikely she would be returning either.

The two officers followed the Duke into the room after a few moments and Longton was quick to surmise the situation as he saw the empty open wardrobes and dresser drawers, clearly indicating a rapid but permanent departure.

"Uh oh!" Longton murmured slowly as the Commander turned to him.

"This ring you saw on the Duchess's finger" he asked "You are positive it was Tracy's?"

"Unless your Jeweller made two of them, it was definitely hers all right." came the earnest reply.

The Duke was by now looking even more bewildered "Would someone please explain what on earth is going on around here?"

"Does you wife...:"

"Ex wife now..."

"All right, ex wife know by any chance a Mr Bryan Collins"

"Mmm, describe him, the name rings a bell" the Duke pondered.

"Six foot, grey hair, beard, moustache, attitude problem?"

"Sound a bit like our temporary Assistant Gardener we had a few months back, fired him after the wife caught him trying to break in through the cellar".

"Did you report it at the time?"

"Couldn't be bothered, nothing taken and I changed all the locks so as far as I was concerned that was the end of it, odd thing was, the wife kept talking about it though, almost as if she admired this chap's bravery, anyone would think he was her fancy man or something".

"Uh oh!" Longton murmured again.

"Right we had better get going, if you hear from you wife, I want to know about it straight away, I'll be in Holborn" the Commander called as he and Longton made their way down the stairs and out of the house into the cold wintry night air outside.

"You had better ring your wife" the Commander advised as Longton drove on down the road leading away from Haychester House.

"Already did, she is expecting the overtime pay though you know" he replied ruefully.

"Well that is a problem for your new Guvnor to sort out in the morning, meantime best speed to London, and don't spare the horses".

"Aye sir!"

The newly equipped Control Room of the London Transport division of the Security Service hummed with the sound of active computer equipment. The rooms only occupant, an exhausted Lieutenant Commander Fuller was working at one of the new computer terminals he had completed installing only a couple of hours previously.

Through headphones, he replayed repeatedly a section of Collins phone call to the Commander, analysing and attempting to make out a key sound in the background. The software he was using isolated the key sound that he was trying to identify and he proceeded to work on it, trying to clear it up and recognise it.

It was then that the Commander limped into the Control Room assisted by Longton as he had managed to aggravate his leg injury climbing up the Holborn escalator as they

had caught the last Piccadilly Line train of the night from Hyde Park Corner where Longton had parked the patrol car.

However as Fuller was wearing the headphones, it wasn't until he got a firm tap on the shoulder that he realised he was no longer alone.

"Any luck?" the Commander asked.

Fuller jumped, startled out of his intense concentration on the job in hand, "Oh sorry sir, didn't hear you come in" he responded.

Longton looked around the gleaming control room in admiration, "I'm impressed" he commented.

"You wait until you see the interactive video wall" Fuller added.

"The what?" the Commander asked.

Fuller moved over to the central console mounted slightly higher than the remaining control desks and pressed a large green button.

The fifteen by twenty foot rectangular screen mounted on the front header wall illuminated and displayed a huge version of the familiar London Underground tube map

"I thought I would use the map as a base of reference for the whole system" Fuller explained as he continued the demonstration "seeing as it covers the entire area that falls under our jurisdiction".

Longton and the Commander continued to look impressed.

"By clicking on any station on the map, we can call up the local CCTV cameras, plans of the station buildings including all passageways at platform level, street plans, you name it" Fuller explained as he demonstrated by calling up at random the plan of Morden station at the southern end of the Northern Line.

"Everything except the bus timetables" Longton commented.

"Option 3" Fuller added "along with all Bus Lane layouts and Traffic Cameras. I am working on a way to link to the Bus Lane cameras they have on the front of buses as well".

"Did you get the details of the Duchess of Haychester's business interests from Haychester?" the Commander asked.

"Yes, she has major shareholdings in a number of companies ranging from the Capital Heat & Power Co. through to property management and airport cargo handling".

"Many fingers in many pies" Longton murmured still impressed by the technology.

"My guess is that Collins is using something owned by her Ladyship as cover until he can get out of the country" the Commander added as he perused the list of businesses that she had interests in.

The Commander turned to Fuller, "What about the phone call?"

"I have been washing it through some software of mine for the last hour or so, there is a lot of distortion, probably caused by one or other caller being close to some sort of high powered electrical machinery or a sub-station of some kind".

"Well it wasn't me so it must be Collins" the Commander interjected.

"Three key sounds in the background that I have been able to isolate but not identify" Fuller announced "this is number one".

With the press of some keys on the keyboard in front of him, Fuller played the first sound extract over the speakers in the room. The three men listened intently as they heard a muffled thudding noise.

"What do you make of it?" the Commander asked.

"Well its a series of pairs of dull thuds, there is one pair, then a pause followed by two pairs close together, then it pauses and you get that pattern repeated another four times followed by a single pair at the end, gradually getting faster as they go, and then nothing".

"Could be anything" Longton remarked "mice with jackhammers?"

The Commander smirked "The way this week has been going, nothing would surprise me".

Fuller continued his briefing, "The second sound is more distinctive". He played it and all three instantly recognised the sound of seeping and dripping water.

"Easy one, next!" the Commander urged

"This is the third sound, rather odd it occurs three times on the recording, you get the end of it at the beginning of the call, the whole thing then in the middle followed by the very beginning of it at the end of the call, listen."

At the touch of another button, Fuller played the third sound, a somewhat muffled series of distant murmurs interrupted by two pauses which broke the sound down into three segments.

"Play that last one again" the Commander asked. Fuller did as he was asked and the mysterious third sound once again filled the room.

The Commander looked on thoughtfully, Longton looked confused and Fuller looked at his watch.

"Well it could be anything, odd thing is the pattern sounds familiar" the Commander commented between yawns. It was obvious that the last few days were starting to take their toll on the Commander's health, however he was holding up a brave face even with Tracy missing.

"Can you project on this here screen the location of all properties owned by companies associated with the Duchess?" Longton asked.

Fuller tapped away at his keyboard for a few minutes before bringing up a standard map of London with about twenty five different locations highlighted with animated red flags.

"How's about that then?" he asked triumphantly.

The Commander looked all over the map at the locations indicated., "Heathrow, Golders Green, Canary Wharf, Shadwell, Beckton, several locations in the City itself, doesn't exactly narrow it down much does it?"

"Most of the divisions officers will be in at 7.30 tomorrow morning, I have arranged the briefing for 7.45" Fuller informed, "You should get some sleep" he added looking at the state of the Commander whose combination of badly battered uniform complete with blood stains down the left leg made him somewhat of a sight.

"I'll be in my office" he announced as he limped out of the control room.

"Is he all right?" Fuller asked concerned after the Commander had left.

"On the outside the Commander will always be the Commander, well apart from the leg. As to the inside, well who knows, one thing is for certain until we find Tracy, he won't be his usual old self".

Collins walked sternly into the room, everyone present quickly awoke from their varying states of slumber as he prepared to announce the day's plan.

"Gentlemen, later today we will be making our way to Heathrow to hand over the merchandise and receive our final payments".

Cheers greeted his words however Collins quickly held up his hand for silence before continuing.

"Upon arrival at Heathrow, we will make the swap and also collect our hospitalised colleague, a small matter that I am about to arrange. Then it's off for some sea and sand in sunny Rio!"

The feelings of sheer delight after the weeks of hard work they had put into the project were obvious and the celebrations continued as Collins made his way out of the small room into the dingy corridor outside, taking out as he did so his mobile phone.

No signal was available where he was, it was variable down there at the best of times so he was forced to leave that part of the complex and move out into a more public area.

“Good morning” the Commander announced propping himself up against the desk at the front of the briefing room. He looked across the room at the one hundred or so officers of the London Transport division, all resplendent in their new uniforms with the exception of the undercover section that were seated plain clothed in a huddle down the left hand side.

Although he had now managed to lay his hands on a fresh uniform, his leg was still in a bad way and there were blood stains across his left shoe, a fact not unnoticed by many present, there concern was obvious.

“Are you all right sir?” one officer seated near the front asked clearly reflecting the concern of many in the room.

“Mmm? Oh yes I’ll live as usual” he retorted whimsically although his leg still hurt badly despite the medical officer having administered a painkiller a few minutes earlier.

“Right then to business. As you may or may not be aware, yesterday the Deputy Commanding Officer of this here division was taken captive by a gang of nasties led by this gentleman”.

The Commander lifted over the first page of the flipchart to show the Security Service mug shot of Collins.

“Ladies and Gents, this is Bryan Collins. Specialist field is burglary usually by unusual means. He is an engineer by trade, a skill he uses in many of his crimes. Lately he has moved on to the old fashioned pursuits of kidnap and extortion”.

The Commander readjusted his stance to try and ease the discomfort from his injury before he continued.

“He is connected with and working for no lesser mortal than her Grace the Duchess of Haychester who has done a bunk. We believe he is using the business assets and interests of the Duchess in the London area as cover for his nefarious activities”.

Fuller activated the view screen behind the Commander to show the location of the various places connected with the Duchess in the greater London area.

“As you can see from this and your briefing notes, she has many fingers in many pies all over London. I have Metropolitan Division checking the more outlying ones, we are going to cover the Central London ones”.

“Do we have anything to narrow down the search?” one officer asked.

The Commander handed control of the briefing over to Fuller, if nothing then at least to give his leg a rest.

“We have a recording of Collins somewhere in the greater London area over a mobile phone, in addition to some form of electrical disturbance from nearby heavy equipment, we also have three key sounds, two of which we are as yet unable to identify”.

Fuller played the three sounds that he had recorded over the speakers in the briefing room. As the sounds were played, those gathered listened intently trying to recognise the sounds.

“Don’t suppose they ring any bells by any chance?” the Commander asked more out of hope than expectation.

“It’s near an Underground Station” Cassini blurted out, “The knocking noise, that’s a train of six carriages accelerating over a rail joint”.

Fuller removed, cleaned and replaced his glasses as he thought. “Well that knocks off the Metropolitan, Central and District lines, they all have eight car trains. What about the other sounds?”

Cassini looked up to ceiling for inspiration or in attempt to recall some long forgotten memory, “Nope, can’t place them at the moment” he replied.

The Commander could feel his heart sink momentarily, it didn’t exactly narrow down the field much but he turned back to Fuller for further inspiration.

“All right lets delete locations not near to those lines that use six car trains”.

Fuller spent a few moments tapping keys and the list of approximately 30 locations was shrunk to about 20.

“All right ladies and gents, we will split up into teams and each team will take each location, thorough and discreet search of each location, Fuller you are with me and bring your tape recorder”.

The audience began to shuffle and move from their seats.

“...and the second you find anything remotely suspicious, I am to be alerted directly” the Commander added sternly.

As the room emptied, one of the Division’s administrative secretaries came in waving wildly to attract the Commander’s attention.

“Sir, Sir! Phone call for you, its him”.

The Commander moved around the desk to the telephone and picked up the receiver but promptly found himself confronted with a wealth of different buttons. The look of confusion which the Commander always expressed when confronted by anything

vaguely resembling modern technology was quickly noticed by the secretary.

She leant across the desk and pressed the right buttons to re-direct the call to that extension and soon the Commander was confronted by a familiar voice.

“Good morning Commander, are we ready to make an exchange?”

The Commander was straight to the point, “Where, when?”

“One hour, the old warehouse in East Durant Lane, bring our colleague and yourself only, anyone else and the lady dies”.

Although the Commander was concentrating on the instructions, it was clear that something else was attracting his attention as well.

“I’ll be there” the Commander confirmed grimly and hung up.

“Fuller!” he called “Play the second sound again quick!”

Fuller reached over to the nearby computer console and the second sound, that of a muffled distant voice broken into three parts could be heard once again.

“This is Holborn.... Change here for the Central Line.... The next station is Russell Square.... Please stand clear of the closing doors” the Commander repeated over the sounds, a perfect match and now obvious what they were.

“The bugger is right underneath our feet” Cassini cried out in disbelief.

“I’ll summon the cavalry” Fuller added.

“Heathrow Airport, two o’clock” Collins announced to his associates. By now they were getting a little restless but the news that they would soon be moving on was greeted with cheers.

He beckoned to his leading associate who accompanied him outside. Ensuring that not only the door was closed behind them but that they were well clear of earshot, Collins proceeded to announce more pressing intermediate matters.

“We still have the outstanding matter of our missing colleague and our guest in there to deal with first” Collins motioned down the dark dingy corridor toward the room where Tracy was being held.

“What’s the plan Guv”.

“A simple exchange, however we must be quick as well as discreet”.

“I’ll get the van”. The deputy made his way away down the dark dingy corridor until he was out of sight having disappeared into the gloom.

Collins turned the other way and was about to set off in the opposite direction when a distant announcement caught his attention. It was repeating itself over and over but being inside the darkened complex, he couldn't hear anything clearly. He opened the door at the end and as the contrasting bright light shone in, so did the announcement now clear for him to hear.

“Will Inspector Sands please report to the Control Room”. The obviously recorded message repeated itself a number of times but once was enough for Collins who quickly closed the door and rushed down the corridor to where his compatriots were assembled.

“Swift exit please gentlemen” he requested.

Fuller narrowly managed to avoid getting run down by a bus as he ran across Kingsway from the Security Department offices to the entrance to Holborn Underground Station. Inside near the ticket barriers, the Commander was conversing with the Station Manager, who had just run up the escalators from the Central Line platforms in response to the recorded announcement.

“Is there a problem?” he asked clearly out of breath.

“I need the station evacuated quickly but discreetly and all services to run through the station but not to open their doors”.

“You are kidding aren't you?” the Station Supervisor replied.

The Commander gave the Supervisor his sternest look.

“I guess not then. Gerry, get the line controller for Central and Piccadilly and tell them we have a Code 3 on our hands” the Supervisor demanded.

“Armed response units?” the Commander asked Fuller.

“Stuck in traffic, they were dealing with an armed robbery in Whitechapel”.

“Down to us again then I suppose”.

The Supervisor returned from the adjacent office, “All services are now non-stopping, I've got the Platform supervisors ready to move everyone upwards and out when you give the word”.

“The word is given” the Commander replied.

Picking up his radio, the Station Supervisor issued the orders to his staff “Right everyone out but quietly please. Gerry, all escalators up!”.

The Commander looked on as the entrance gates were closed and the down running escalator was stopped once there was no-one on it. With a few clanks and grinds the

steel steps began to move upwards and soon the ticket hall filled with confused grumbling passengers who were guided out of the High Holborn exit.

It was a few minutes before the all clear was received from the platform level and once all the staff had been accounted for, it was left to Fuller and the Commander to proceed down the now halted escalators to the intermediate level.

At the bottom, both officers drew their weapons, Fuller a little more clumsily than the Commander as being more of a technical support officer as opposed to front line, he was a little rusty on weapons handling.

“How’s your aim?” the Commander asked on seeing Fuller’s discomfort with his weapon.

“Lousy” came the matter of fact reply.

“Well that makes two of us”.

Fuller swallowed nervously and proceeded to follow the Commander down the second set of escalators towards the Piccadilly line platforms. Two options faced them at the bottom, to the right the access way leading to the eastbound platform, ahead the small flight of steps leading to the westbound platform.

The Commander pushed open the small access gate that barred their path to the westbound platform and indicated through hand gestures where Fuller was to go.

Each taking one side of the stairway, they both inched towards the corners where it met the platform wall. Carefully peeking around the corner in each direction revealed no immediate presence so on the Commander's signal they moved out onto the platform.

The only sound audible was the rustle of a newspaper trapped between the tracks whilst the chocolate wrappers and discarded drinks cans stood testament to the rapid enforced departure of the passengers from the platform minutes earlier.

Carefully the two officers made their way down the platform checking the two passageways that led off it for signs of life. When they reached the north end platform wall, the Commander leaned forward to peer around the corner into the dark running tunnel.

“Nobody down there” he concluded after a few moments. He motioned to Fuller to head for the other end of the platform where an old gated off exit led away at the south end platform wall. Looking through the dusty disused gates that blocked their path ahead, they could see the old style tiled passageway tunnel lining which contrasted with the newer refurbished metal finishes of the rest of the station complex.

“Where does this go?” the Commander asked Fuller who was consulting the station’s internal layout on the crumpled diagram he had printed off before he left the office.

“Old passageway to platforms 4 and 5 I think” he replied.

The Commander rattled the gate trying to open it, "It's at times like this that a locksmith's daughter comes in very handy" he muttered.

Just then the rails began to emit a clear low pitched hiss and the rumbling of an approaching train accompanied by the rush of cold air being forced ahead of it. Moments later the six car train of 1973 tube stock burst from the north end tunnel mouth and slowed as it made its way through the station platform at near walking pace.

Fuller looked on with amusement as the passengers on board peered out through the train's windows at the empty platform, especially those stood by the doors all poised to get off and looking mystified as to why they were not stopping.

As the last carriage passed them, the Commander took the opportunity of the noise of the train to cover the sound of the gunshot as he shot off the lock of the lattice gate. Before proceeding however he made a radio call.

"Lima Tango Zero One to control, when I said stop the trains, I meant stop them not just run them through without stopping!" He wasn't sure if the message had got through but he didn't care at that time, there was a job to be done.

The cold wind from ventilation fans blew gently down the old passageway into the faces of the two officers as they made their way up the short flight of steps and round to the right. Fuller's 6' plus frame meant that he was forced to duck down in order to avoid banging his head on the ceiling mounted cable ducts that were a more recent addition to the passageway, the Commander being noticeably shorter than pretty much everyone else in the Security Service at 5' 7" had no such trouble.

Another flight of steps upwards faced them as they reached the end of the small passageway and turned right, ahead at the top lay the other two Piccadilly line platforms. The two officers advanced slowly one up each side of the tiled dusty stairway until they were at the top, lattice gates, this time unlocked and slightly ajar the only obstruction to their onward progress.

Fuller could see all the way up and down the disused Platform 5 which was silent and deserted, "Nothing Guv" he whispered.

The Commanders view of the northbound platform 4 was however obstructed by modern additions such as chocolate machines and telephones so there was no choice but to proceed out onto the platform as cautiously as possible.

Fuller used the limited cover of the platform wall whilst the Commander walked out on to the open platform, both officers with their weapons trained ahead. Moving slowly and cautiously towards the north end of the platform, each access passageway leading onto the platform was checked carefully but again there was no sign of any life.

When it became obvious that the immediate area was clear, the Commander dropped his guard and wandered slowly back up the platform, past the passageway where they

had entered the platform and to the far end where the platform wall was narrower with the presence of grey metal panelling protruding some two or three feet from the tube profile of the rest of the platform.

The Commander kicked one of the grey panels just out of interest, "Engineers access panels?" he asked.

Fuller consulted the plan again, "Yes I think so, they aren't clearly marked, probably electrical equipment....." he tailed off.

"Electrical equipment that would interfere with a mobile phone transmission?" the Commander asked as he realised the same conclusion as Fuller.

"Yeah but these are just access panels" Fuller replied scratching his head in confusion as the Commander walked up and down looking at the four panels before realising that something was different about one of them.

"Is it my imagination or is the second panel different to the other three?" the Commander pondered as he reached for the handle on the panel marked 'PRIVATE' and 'Danger High Voltages. "This looks more like a door to me".

To their surprise the door turned out to be unlocked and as the Commander opened it slowly he narrowly missed being hit by the three bullets that were fired in his direction.

"Looks like we found them" Fuller replied as he trained his gun inside and fired a couple of warning shots in reply.

"Security Service!" the Commander called "Come out with your hands up!".

The echoing sound of scuffling footsteps were heard but they appeared to be going away from them rather than towards them. The Commander peered cautiously around the corner into the dark dingy corridor and repeated his order but there was no sound or reply.

"After you sir" Fuller muttered as he followed the Commander into the darkness. As their eyes became used to the gloomy conditions, they could see that they were in what appeared to be an old platform tunnel with the left hand side area converted to old office accommodation now long since disused, however there were signs of recent activity.

"Where the hell....." the Commander's remark was cut short when he heard movement from nearby. A cautious look around determined that the sound was coming from behind the second door on their left looking down into the dark corridor.

The first door was open and inside apart from an old table, a discarded pack of dog eared playing cards and a few tatty chairs, nothing remained, the second door however had a new padlock on it, its shiny metal finish contrasting with the damp rusty finish of all the other metallic surfaces around them.

Fuller put his gun away in order to be able to kick the door in, the Commander trained his gun ahead ready to respond to whoever or whatever they were to discover inside. The Commander counted down with his fingers from three and on cue Fuller's boot made light work of the rotted doorframe which shattered around the padlock mounting.

Just a couple of steps inside the dark room and Fuller suddenly was knocked to the ground as a wooden chair was struck across the back of his head by an unknown assailant who had hidden behind the door.

Tracy quickly realised her mistake as she saw the 'LT' Security Service epaulettes glint in the limited light and quickly flustered an apology.

"Oh! Sorry!"

The Commander stood behind Tracy and looked over her shoulder at the dazed Fuller as he began to get up. "Glad I insisted you go first, Tracy have you met Simon Fuller by the way?".

Tracy swung round, startled by the Commanders presence but relieved to see him and embraced him.

"I missed you so much" she began to sob momentarily but her professionalism got the better of her and she soon was back to her usual professional self.

"I never want to go through that ever again, I don't think I could ever live without you" the Commander affirmed re-enforcing their embrace. Fuller wasn't impressed though.

"This is all very touching but shouldn't we be looking for Collins and his gang sir?"

"You're right" the Commander replied business like as the three officers stepped back out into the dingy damp corridor, "The question is where the hell did they go?"

"I don't know" Tracy replied "all that I know is that there must be another way in somewhere as I didn't come through the station itself".

"How did you know you were in an Underground station" the Commander asked out of curiosity.

Tracy pointed to the curved former platform wall behind him, there was part of the old Holborn station name spelt out in grimy tiling, "I thought it was quite ironic being held captive right under our new office" she mused as they made their way further down the corridor towards a big steel door built into the end wall.

"Access to London Underground and Capital Heat & Power Employees Only" Fuller read from the comparatively new sign that adorned the door.

"That explains some of this" the Commander mused as he and Fuller prised open the heavy steel door which after some effort gave way and opened with a metallic

creaking.

The buzz of electrical equipment hit the officer's ears as they proceeded inside onto a small section of dark open platform area separated from the Aldwych branch running line by dust laden heavy duty security fencing. A large electrical substation lay in front of them and above them a steel ladder leading up to an access hatch in the curved roof of the tunnel section that they were now in.

Fuller was realistically the only one of the three fit enough to climb the ladder upwards and so went on ahead watched by the other two from below, as Fuller disappeared from view through the hatch, the Commander decided to climb up anyway despite the additional pain to his leg injury this would cause.

Tracy followed and they were both soon together up at the top inside the hatch, Fuller could be heard running on ahead in the distance down another even more damp and disused passageway which after a few yards curved around to the left before opening out into a large cavern like area.

"What the hell...." Tracy muttered as she looked around at the dark interior, what light there was came from a distant opening some 500 yards or so to their left, that small amount of light just illuminating two sets of rails set into a cobbled like surface onto which the Commander and Tracy stepped, the Commander sweeping around the area with his gun in case of unfriendly company.

"Fuller?" he called.

"Over here" came a slightly distant call, Tracy looked over in that direction to see the outline of a Transit van in the gloom, Fuller suddenly appeared from behind it.

"Somebody was here recently but they've legged it." he announced.

"Where the hell are we?" the Commander looked around mystified.

"The old Kingsway Tram Subway, it runs under the entire length of Kingsway down to Aldwych and Waterloo although the last two thirds of it are now the Aldwych underpass these days". Fuller explained as the Commander with Tracy supporting him and his now increasingly weakening leg joined Fuller by the van.

"Still doesn't explain where...." the Commander's thoughts were cut short by the sound of a distant creaking like a rusty gate being opened.

Fuller pulled his gun back out of its holster "That way I think" he indicated towards the distant light.

The Commander was in no fit state to continue, his leg injury had finally halted his progress despite his best efforts. He waved at Fuller to go on ahead and watched as the young officer made his way towards the distant light, using the shadows of the side wall as cover.

The noise of central London's incessant early morning traffic came as a shocking

contrast to the eerie echoing silence of the tunnels as Fuller came out into the daylight at the bottom of the cobbled ramp that led up to street level and Southampton Row.

Being careful not to slip on the wet cobbles with their old disused tram rails still set into them, Fuller reached the top and was able to push open the wrought iron gates that blocked his path onto the main road.

He looked on ahead trying to see if there was any sign of Collins or any of his accomplices but there seemed little hope in identifying anyone in the crowds of pedestrians that were mingling up and down the busy pavements.

"Lima Tango control to all units" Fullers radio suddenly crackled into life as it was now able to receive a signal having been underground for some time and effectively cut off from the outside world.

"Several suspects are believed to have boarded a Piccadilly line service from Holborn just before the station was closed" the Transport Division Control Room Dispatch Officer continued, "Cassini and the plain clothes team are waiting to board the train at Knightsbridge and we have units on guard at all stations between Leicester Square and Earl's Court".

"What about Covent Garden?" the voice of the Commander asked.

"Closed due to overcrowding so that rules that one out",

Fuller turned down his radio as the Commander informed the Control Room he was coming back in to the office for he had just recognised Collins' Deputy in the crowd some hundred yards or so ahead. Both he and another taller individual were making their way north up Southampton Row on the left hand side in a way so that they would attract the least attention.

Removing his uniform cap so as not to attract their attention, Fuller proceeded to merge into the crowd as he followed the two potential suspects. As they crossed the road Collins looked up momentarily and Fuller could see clearly he had the right man in his sights.

Collins narrowly missed being run over by a bus as he and his accomplice made their way across the road to the other side, hurdling a pedestrian barrier as they did so.

Fuller was not far behind but had to remain careful not to attract their attention, if they caught sight of him in pursuit, the game was up and there was no telling what either of these two highly dangerous and probably armed men would do especially with so many innocent members of the public about.

"Where the hell is Fuller?" the Commander asked as he limped into the control room supported by a battered and grubby Tracy who for once had a uniform in a worse state than the Commanders but not by much.

"Your guess is as good as mine Sir" the duty Despatch Officer replied as she continued to familiarise herself with the new technology of the Control Room "He

hasn't answered his radio for the past ten minutes".

"All right then lets see what's happening" the Commander announced as he sat down, Tracy joining him alongside.

The Despatch Officer called up the CCTV link to the westbound platform of Knightsbridge Underground station, "There is Cassini's team ready to board the train" she explained. "We think the majority of the gang are aboard, that should arrive in the next three to four minutes".

"They'll have to change trains somewhere" the Commander commented as he pointed out the next train indicator on the screen, "They're heading for Heathrow but the train they are on is heading for Rayners Lane".

"Wrong direction?" Tracy asked.

"Different branch entirely, they'll have to change trains at Acton Town or somewhere" the Despatch Officer added.

"I need to get to Heathrow before they do" the Commander added "Call the Piccadilly line controller and have him delay Heathrow trains from Acton Town for as long as possible".

"You know what they'll say!"

"Probably...."

Fuller observed from across the road as Collins and his deputy made their way discreetly through the crowd of people that were entering and leaving the red terracotta tile faced Russell Square Underground Station.

As the two men he was pursuing passed through the entrance, Fuller crossed the road briskly and entered the booking hall, the characteristic sounds of a busy station, the beeps of the ticket barriers, announcements and the hum of passengers filling the room.

It was busier than normal with Holborn, the next stop south on the Piccadilly Line closed and making his way through the booking hall was difficult. Fuller used the smart card reader pad on the top of the ticket barrier with his warrant card to open the gate and moved round to the lift area.

He could see the top of Collins head at the back of lift No. 3 as the doors closed with their whirring alarm noise and the creak of scraping metal. The small windows in the doors darkened as the lift began its descent to the platform level below.

Fuller looked across at the No. 2 lift as its doors opened revealing the empty compartment awaiting the next load of passengers for their ride down into the depths. He was carried forward in the rush to get into the lift before the short period of time

that the doors were open ended.

Once again the doors slowly closed with their accompanying alarm before the slight downward jolt heralded the beginning of the crowded lift's descent. Fuller remarked to himself how quiet the lift was despite there being at least thirty other people in there with him.

The doors at the opposite end of the lift slid open and being up against them, Fuller was one of the first out and soon was making his way along the tiled passageway to the platforms of the Piccadilly Line.

Arriving firstly on the southbound platform, all was relatively quiet, a train had just departed and its rumbling could still be heard echoing from the running tunnel portal at the far end. Collins was nowhere to be seen so walking down the platform a little, Fuller used one of the cross passages to access the northbound platform, a contrast to the southbound with crowds gathered three or four deep pretty much for its entire length.

"We apologise for the delays customers are experiencing on your northbound Piccadilly Line service today, this is due to a Security Alert at Holborn and signalling problems in the Acton Town area".

The announcement was frank and apologetic, the hardened commuters on the platform just looked unimpressed at the news as Fuller moved discreetly through the crowd looking carefully for Collins or his associate.

In the background over the din of chattering voices, the rumble of an approaching train, accompanied by the steadily increasing rush of air forced ahead of it began to filter through the platform, a signal for all those waiting to begin the move forward towards the platform edge and look on into the tunnel in anticipation of their train's arrival.

Realising that time was short before Collins and/or his accomplice might disappear from the station, if he had not already done so that is, Fuller increased the pace of his search squeezing his tall but thin frame through the crowds.

The train of 1973 tube stock emerged at speed from the tunnel and quickly slowed with the whine of decelerating electric traction motors. Once at a standstill the red doors slid open with their characteristic metallic clanking that echoed around the platform above the background noise of passengers boarding and leaving the train.

"This is Russell Square..... The next station is Kings Cross..... Please stand clear of the closing doors".

As the last syllables of the automated announcement died away, the final few boarding passengers squeezed aboard the tightly packed carriages and those who had alighted made their way along the platform towards the lifts.

With the platform clearing quickly, Fuller had a better view up and down and moved quickly along its length, looking into the train's windows as he went. Reaching the far

end, he found nothing as the train closed its doors but only for them to open again quickly indicating something or someone was obstructing one of the doors.

The door closing alarm sounded once again as the driver closed the doors successfully. With the hiss of air and the whine of the electric traction motors, the train began to pull away. Then suddenly, Fuller recognised a figure in the doorway window of the second carriage as it pulled past him.

He didn't have time to react as the barrel of a gun appeared through the rubber strips separating the pair of doors and two shots were fired.

Fuller staggered back and hit the platform wall, with the last carriage of the train disappearing into the running tunnel, the red, white and blue enamelled station name roundel on the wall became smeared with his blood as he slumped to the platform floor.

The patrol car swerved to avoid a couple of tourists who had stepped out into the busy traffic despite the approaching siren and blue flashing lights, the Commander seated in the passenger seat just held on for what seemed like grim death.

"I'd forgotten how bad you were on four wheels" he told Tracy as she manoeuvred the car through Knightsbridge trying to avoid running over the swarms of holiday sale shoppers as she went.

"Your leg is no fit state for you to drive" she responded "Anyway if you want someone who can drive better, you should have got my sister, I told you I was better on two wheels".

"Lima Tango Control to Lima Tango Zero One". The radio call in the car diverted the Commander's attention away from the worry of Tracy hitting anything or anyone.

"Lima Tango Zero One, receiving over".

"We have a report that Fuller was shot on the northbound platform at Russell Square" the duty Despatch Officer informed "He's unconscious and in a serious condition at Charing Cross Hospital, but they are hopeful that he will make it".

"Thanks for letting me know. Can you make sure that any next of kin are kept informed?"

"I don't think he has any, at least nothing on record".

"Well make sure at least somebody is at the hospital with him. Hang on, did you say the northbound platform?"

"Affirmative"

"Tracy, stop the car!"

The screeching of brakes as the car was brought to an abrupt halt sent various nearby pedestrians scattering. "What's up?" she asked as she accidentally stalled the engine.

"We are going to Paddington".

"Right." Tracy responded as she restarted the engine and began to manoeuvre out of the tight spot in the traffic she had managed to get the car stuck into, "Err why?"

"Collins boarded a northbound Piccadilly line service, whereas if you were heading there direct, you would use a south west bound train".

"So why Paddington?" Tracy enquired as she honked the horn loudly at the traffic that was seemingly meandering totally oblivious to the sirens and blue flashing lights behind them.

"Heathrow Express runs from there" the Commander explained "take a northbound Piccadilly line train and change to Circle or Hammersmith & City at Kings Cross and you are there. Probably fathomed out we would delay the Piccadilly service en route to Heathrow if we found out."

"Wiley old fox isn't he"

"Oh yes, he's clever all right, probably why he has managed to evade capture for so long".

"Get out of the way!" Tracy yelled at the driver of a battered old Volkswagen Beetle that was obstructing her progress through the thronging traffic.

"Or what?" the driver asked begrudgingly as Tracy pulled partly alongside.

"I'll nick you for obstruction!" the Commander replied with his sternest stare. The driver realised the Commander meant what he said and quickly pulled over, colliding with a rubbish bin as he did so and clearing the road ahead for Tracy to put her foot down.

With one of the three escalators out of service for refurbishment, Collins and his accomplice were forced to join the thronging crowd that were all trying to cram onto the one up escalator that was available from the Piccadilly Line platforms at Kings Cross. It was some time before they finally made it up into the booking hall proceeding through the ticket barriers and on towards the Metropolitan, Circle and Hammersmith & City line platforms.

The long hall that ran between the east and westbound platforms was echoing to the sound of many passengers and trains arriving and departing. At the ticket barrier however someone was waiting for Collins arrival.

"Your late" the Duchess of Haychester barked.

Collins looked apologetic, "Sorry dear, we had a few err technical difficulties".

"The rest of your men?"

"On a slow train to Heathrow, probably get stopped at Acton Town and they have the entire Security Service following them".

"But not us?"

"Exactly, shall we go my lady?"

Passing through the ticket barriers onto the westbound platform, the three collaborators made their way down towards the far end of the platform just as an eight car train of Metropolitan Line 'A60' stock arrived and came to a stand.

The clanking of the opening doors was the signal for the usual bustle of alighting and boarding passengers, among them Collins, his associate and the Duchess who discreetly boarded the furthest carriage and took a seat at the very front of the train.

A shrill whistle alarm heralded the closing of the doors and with a hiss of air as the brakes were released, the train moved off.

The original Great Western Railway arched train shed roof of Paddington Station echoed to the sound of humming diesel engines and milling crowds as Tracy and the Commander arrived on the concourse and made immediately for the Heathrow Express platforms.

"Lima Tango Zero One to Lima Tango Three Zero One, receiving over"

The Commander continued to use the radio as he and Tracy walked briskly down to the front most carriage of the sleek silver Heathrow Express train, although she still had to support him as his leg was still in a bad way.

"Lima Tango Three Zero One Receiving over" Cassini responded discreetly using his hidden earpiece radio so as to avoid giving himself away.

"What's happening at your end?" the Commander enquired as he and Tracy took their seats on board the train.

Cassini looked along the busy Earls Court Piccadilly Line westbound platform at his undercover squad officers who were distributed discreetly along the length of the platform, "The train we are scheduled to intercept is just approaching now, seems the 'accidental delay' is working Sir".

"Keep on their tails but don't get too close" the Commander ordered.

"Will do, Lima Tango Three Zero One out".

The doors of the train closed as the Heathrow Express service serenely pulled away from the platform just as a few last moment passengers arrived.

"Damm it we missed it!" Collins called out in frustration as the red tail lights of the Heathrow service disappeared into the distance.

"Never mind dear" the Duchess intervened to calm down Collins' slightly frayed nerves and also avoid attracting any unnecessary attention "There will be another in fifteen minutes".

"There had better be, we are cutting this fine".

Cassini discreetly raised his newspaper in the air to signal to his officers that this was the train to board. Six in total, all in plain clothes boarded the train mingling amongst the crowds, one in each of the six carriages of newly refurbished 1973 tube stock.

The London Underground platform staff attempted to hurry the crowds along with prominent announcements, as usual to little avail.

"This train is all stations to Rayners Lane, change at Acton Town for the Heathrow branch, next station is Hammersmith. Move all the way down inside the cars please!"

Despite the crushed conditions on board with barely enough room to slip a cigarette paper between those on the train, Cassini managed to make out a group of men all similarly dressed sat down in the front end of the carriage behind the bulkhead wall of the drivers cab, however the number of people on board meant that it was going to be difficult to get the other five officers in his team down this end.

"PLEASE MOVE RIGHT DOWN INSIDE THE CAR!" the platform supervisor announced once again not that anyone was taking the slightest bit of notice still, which was not unusual.

"Please stand clear of the closing doors Mind the doors!" This announcement and the sounding of the door closing alarm triggered the usual desperate arrival of the last moment passengers who jumped on as the doors closed, resulting in two of them becoming obstructed, a re-opening and closing of the doors and a sharp announcement from the unimpressed train driver achieved the desired result.

However with the few extra people cramming onto the front carriage, Cassini found himself being pushed further into the carriage until he was standing in the aisle immediately in front of the gang that he was supposed to be discreetly following.

A quick check made sure that his radio was well out of sight along with anything else that might give him away as a Security Officer, he had heard about Fuller's shooting at Russell Square and was anxious to be careful especially as they were in a very crowded train full of innocent members of the public, any incident here would wind up in a bloodbath.

Cassini braced himself against the g-forces of the train's acceleration by holding onto the overhead grab rail, all the time concentrating on the advertisements and the Central London Tube Map above the heads of the seated passengers so as to avoid eye contact with his quarry.

At Paddington, the platform was announced for the next Heathrow departure, the waiting passengers on the concourse suddenly rushed forward as one body, in amongst them Collins, his Associate and the Duchess. They quickly found a seat and soon the train was signalled away by the platform staff. Collins swallowed slightly nervously when he saw the Security Service car parked in the street near the station but decided it was just co-incidence. Nether the less he removed his gun from his coat pocket and beneath the table checked it before returning it to its resting place.

At Acton Town, Piccadilly line trains were everywhere which meant that the hoped for delay to the gang's progress was not as long as it had been hoped. Cassini organised his officers so that they were in the carriage next to the gang, the reduced number of passengers on board now plus the end carriage windows allowing an easy discreet view of the gang in the next carriage as the train made its way along the Heathrow branch until the gang alighted at Heathrow Terminal 1,2,3, station.

As both the gang and Cassini with his team alighted the train, he used his radio to signal which terminals the gang were heading for, a hidden microphone on the inside of his jacket providing a running commentary back to the control room in Holborn which was in turn being relayed to the Commander, Tracy and Heathrow Security.

The Commander looked around the busy terminal buildings, passengers, luggage trolleys and staff all filling the hall making it difficult to see anyone individually.

"We need a better vantage point" Tracy commented as something caught the Commanders eye on the balcony above.

"Come on love!" he called as arm in arm the couple made their way up the stairs to the restaurant level overlooking the main terminal floor.

"Hamburger, only ketchup, extra large fries and large tea please" the Commander asked.

"Breakfast?" Tracy asked not in the least bit surprised, she was well used to the Commander's somewhat legendary diet by now, despite her best efforts to introduce him to hitherto unknown substances such as fruit and vegetables.

"With instinct like that we should get married" the Commander jokily responded.

Tracy turned suddenly with surprise and smiled as the Commander proceeded to munch on fries to his hearts content. "Now there is an idea!" she commented but the Commander didn't hear as he was interrupted by the radio.

"Lima Tango Zero One, this is Lima Tango Three One Zero, receiving over?"

The Commander had a mouthful of burger and chips so Tracy reached over, pulled the Commander's radio off his belt and took the call.

"Lima Tango Zero Two receiving" she responded "The Commander is a little err busy at the moment"

"Our targets our approaching the top of the escalators, should be on the main terminal floor in a few moments" Cassini informed as he stood at the base of the escalators from the Underground station looking up.

Tracy walked over to the balcony and looked down, quickly joined alongside by the Commander who having downed his 'breakfast' in record quick time suddenly remembered he had a little problem with heights and instantly recoiled from the balcony edge.

"What's up now?" Tracy asked.

"It's a little high up here."

"Don't tell me you are afraid of heights?"

"It's not so much the height as the fear of impending gravity".

"I don't believe it!".

"It's a very common fear height you know".

"No not that, look who's here".

The Commander tentatively moved forward and looked down slightly nervously at the individual Tracy was indicating on the main terminal floor below.

"Well if it isn't Madam high and mighty herself" the Commander reacted seeing the Duchess of Haychester down below dressed in an expensive looking coat.

"Looks like she's heading for the shops" Tracy commented as she watched the Duchess glide along with a self imposed sense of over importance.

"Lima Tango Zero One to Heathrow Control".

"Heathrow Control receiving over"

"Is there any booking under the name Collins or Haychester, Lady of, on any flights due out of here in the next two or three hours?"

"We'll have to check with individual airlines, give us fifteen minutes".

"Narrow it down to flights departing from terminals 1, 2 and 3 and call me the moment you've got anything:" the Commander added.

"Right who wants to follow the Duchess, you or me?"

"Oh.." Tracy responded with enthusiasm "allow me, I want my ring back".

"All yours, I'm going to have a wander, well limp around to see if I can see anything".

Tracy kissed the Commander and made her way down the steps to the busy terminal building floor, quickly sighting the Duchess through the busy crowds, she followed at a discreet distance.

The Commander watched Tracy as she walked off until she was out of sight before turning away from the balcony. He did consider another burger and chips for a moment or two but decided against it for now, however his thoughts were interrupted by Cassini again on the radio.

"Yes go ahead" he responded as he brushed off some spilt tomato ketchup from his battered uniform tunic.

"The gang are heading out of the main terminal building towards the bus station" Cassini announced, "I'm following but something isn't right here".

"I'll be right there, any sign of Collins".

"Not a jot!"

"I'm coming over, stay there". The Commander walked as quickly as his injured leg would allow out of the glass doors of the building and across to the bus station area. A variety of services, both long distance coaches and local buses were arriving and departing all the time and in the mellay the Commander found it difficult to locate Cassini especially as he wasn't in uniform.

As one large red and blue double deck bus departed from the stop opposite the Commander at the beginning of its long local journey to Harrow, Cassini came into view sheltering from the increasingly strong and bitter cold wind in the adjacent waiting shelter.

"Morning Guv." Cassini acknowledged quietly as the Commander joined him.

"Where are they then".

"Over there" he nodded in the direction of the far side of the Bus Station area to a small group of men, all similarly dressed to each other and hanging around trying not to look too obvious "I've got two of my team standing right behind them, we have them covered from the roof above us as well, they are not going anywhere without us".

"Well at the moment it looks like they are not going anywhere at all" the Commander commented "Any sign of Collins yet?"

"No, I've got officers all over the place, if he is here, he's well hidden".

Tracy watched as the Duchess entered the main Duty Free outlet in the terminal building. Giving the Duchess a few moments to get inside, she followed carefully, making her way through the crowds of shoppers that filled the shop, many laden with heavy bags and suitcases that turned the passage through the aisles into more of an obstacle or assault course.

Keeping her eyes transfixed on the back of the Duchess's head as she went up the escalator to the upper level, Tracy had a good mind just to shoot the cow, she certainly had a score to settle.

Unfortunately she was concentrating too much on the Duchess not to notice the sudden appearance across her path of a trolley of large luggage. In an instant Tracy was knocked flying as she, the man pushing the trolley and luggage went flying in all directions knocking over display stands, furniture and other passers by in the process.

Upon hearing the commotion the Duchess looked back and realised that someone was onto her. She quickly re-doubled her steps as made for the nearest exit over on the far side.

Tracy managed to extricate herself from the tangle of bodies and bags and saw the Duchess making a hasty exit, but quick movement through the crowds meant she was able to cut off the Duchess at the door.

"Stop right there!" she ordered stopping dead in front of the Duchess. She attempted to look as menacing as she could bearing in mind her 5 foot nine height was well below the Duchess who was well over six feet tall.

"I'm sorry you must have the wrong person, now if you'll excuse me". The Duchess began to push past Tracy but she grabbed her arm and pulled her to an abrupt halt.

"You're going nowhere!"

"And exactly what is it I am supposed to have done may one ask?"

Tracy held up the Duchess's left hand and indicated her stolen ring still in place on the finger "How about handling stolen goods and conspiracy for starters?"

With her other hand Tracy reached down her left side to her gun holster only to discover it was empty, she assumed it must have been lost in the collision moments before.

Realising that this was about to get awkward, she began to radio for backup but the Duchess had other ideas as she kicked Tracy in the leg and then tried to bite the hand that was restraining her.

"You cow!" Tracy responded as she thumped the Duchess across the face with her fist.

"Lima Tango Zero One from Heathrow Control"

"Receiving over"

"There are no persons matching your search criteria booked on any flight out of here in the next three hours, we will keep looking though".

"Right thanks" the Commander replied. He put his radio away and looked across the cold bus station complex at the gang still gathered over on the far side only now they were looking expectantly down the road at something that was approaching.

"Hello" Cassini commented "something's up".

The two men watched as an unmarked blue mini coach pulled in adjacent to the gang, blacked out windows hiding the identity of the driver or any others who may have been inside.

"I think we are in business" the Commander commented as he and Cassini began a quick pace in the direction of the mini coach whose doors were about to close prior to pulling away for an unspecified destination.

However fighting their way through moving vehicles, clouds of exhaust fumes and milling passengers meant they were only there in time to see the registration number on the rear as it pulled away down the road.

"Lima Tango Three Zero One to all units" Cassini announced "Attention is drawn to a blue Mercedes mini coach registration number Lima Indigo Lima Six One Four Eight currently heading south out of the Heathrow bus station area. Approach with caution, occupants may be armed and dangerous".

"We need some transport," the Commander commented as he looked round. "Back in a minute" he added as Cassini continued to observe the disappearing mini coach in the distance.

His observations were suddenly interrupted when a red and blue single deck bus pulled alongside him and the double glass doors opened with a characteristic hiss of air.

"Come on" the Commander urged from behind the steering wheel.

"I take it this isn't the 143 to Harrow then?" Cassini asked slightly bemused as he boarded the Metroline Dennis Dart. The doors closed behind him and as he grabbed the vertical stanchion adjacent to the drivers cab for support, the Commander set off down the service road in pursuit of the mini coach transporting the gang.

"Code three, shopping area six" announced the Terminal building tannoy system as a general notification to all duty personnel in the building. Quickly internal and Security Service personnel made their way to the source of the alert.

"Commander Chambers, Heathrow Security" announced the broad shouldered Security Service officer that was greeted as he arrived in the shopping area by the store's general manager "Hear you have a problem".

"Just a tad mate!" he replied indicating the rear part of the store. Going on through in the direction indicated, Commander Chambers was stunned to see a brawl in progress between a well dressed tall lady and a female Security Service officer. Various parts of the surrounding shop fittings were in disarray, another crash and tinkling of breaking glass echoing around as Tracy was flung into a set of shelves, however far from enabling the Duchess to make good her escape, it just made Tracy more mad.

"Right that's it you bitch!" Tracy yelled uncharacteristically, "You are going to jail!"

"Over my dead body!" the Duchess retorted deflecting Tracy's attempt to grab her by the arm.

"That can be easily arranged!"

Commander Chambers looked on uncertain whether he wanted to get involved with the contretemps that was unfolding before him. As he considered his options, he was joined by another junior member of the Heathrow Division.

"Do you think we should separate them?" the young officer asked nervously as he surveyed the ongoing scene.

"By all means after you lad, I want to stay healthy".

"You know I could have sworn we passed this part of the airport ten minutes ago" Cassini commented.

The Commander looked around at the passing buildings and on ahead at the mini coach that they were continuing to discreetly follow, "I am beginning to think the same thing".

"Wild goose chase?"

"Possibly but we have nothing else to go on".

"Lima Tango Zero One from Heathrow Control".

"Lima Tango Zero One receiving over".

"Message from Commander Caverner, Duchess had boarding documents for a private jet scheduled to leave in ten minutes from the VIP Departure Gate".

The Commander picked up a Heathrow Airport information leaflet from the drivers cab side and thrust it in Cassini's direction, "See if you can find the VIP Gate section will you" he requested.

"Near terminal four, it's the other side of the airport" he replied showing on the small map in the leaflet the exact location.

"Figures" the Commander muttered as he slammed on the brakes, "Collins is abandoning the gang but gets them to lead us on a wild goose chase into the bargain".

The Commander negotiated a three point turn as Cassini picked himself up off the floor having been flung there by the emergency stop.

"You think my diving's bad, you should meet my Deputy!"

"What's the fastest way to the VIP Gate?" Tracy asked as she tried to straighten out her now considerably bent and slightly torn uniform.

"Come with me" Commander Chambers urged pointing in the direction of the exit where his patrol car was waiting outside.

"You better drive" Tracy urged "Believe me you'll be safer".

"So I have heard, your reputation has preceded you!" he replied as he started the engine, slammed the door shut, started the sirens and lights and pulled away.

It would normally be a ten minute drive to the VIP Gate but with Chambers driving and the sirens forcing other traffic to swerve out of the way, they were there outside the distinguished smoke glassed building in just five.

"Which berk parked this bus here" Tracy commented as she and Chambers had to run around it to reach the building's entrance.

"Here watch who you are calling a berk!" the Commander retorted as he exited the doorway of the bus. She had to admit to herself that she was not really that surprised it was the Commander who had commandeered it.

"Shall we gentlemen" Tracy urged leading the way into the building.

"Security Service radio frequency," Collins associate announced waving a radio scanner unit that he was holding "they are reporting that the Duchess has been arrested".

"Blast!" Collins rebuked as he flopped back in the luxury leather lined passenger seat in the main cabin of the chartered private jet, waiting on the tarmac adjacent to the Heathrow VIP flight building.

"Shall we go now?" the accomplice asked nervously.

"Yep, lets go" Collins announced as he followed him forward to the cockpit taking the co-pilots seat alongside.

"Right Cassini and err..."

"Commander Chambers"

"...yes stay here and make sure nobody leaves" the Commander instructed. "Direct the rest of the cavalry if they arrive, Tracy you are with me".

Tracy and the still badly limping Commander made their way inside jostling past various dignitaries and personnel who were around the highly appointed building, looking around as they went, there seemed to be no sign of their quarry.

"Can't see anything, Tracy?"

"No, mind you there are so many people around he could be anywhere".

"Well we'll just have to arrest everyone then" the Commander joked.

"Oh yeah and wind up with the biggest diplomatic incident in twenty years, there must be half a dozen ambassadors and foreign dignitaries in here" she replied looking around.

The Commander walked across towards the windowed balcony that looked over the main departure area below.

"Where are you going?" Tracy enquired.

"Just playing a hunch, I reckon that Collins probably knows the Duchess isn't coming by now so he is probably going if not gone".

"Well there are four aircraft out there" Tracy summarised surveying the scene outside "and three of them are blue so there goes one way of narrowing it down".

The Commander looked around for some sort of employee he could grab and enquire with about scheduled departures.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where all this lot is heading".

The assistant looked on unimpressed, "I am afraid we are not permitted to give out such confidential information" he replied and proceeded to walk on in an officious manner.

The Commander limped after him and grabbed him firmly by the shoulder, swung him round and grabbed his collar firmly.

"Let me re-phrase that, either you tell me what departures are scheduled from here in the next hour or I nick you for obstructing the course of justice, got it?"

"Egyptian ambassador on one, a delegation from Singapore, some special

archaeological group from South America and the US Secretary of State".

"Thank you" the Commander replied releasing the assistant "now get lost!"

"Mmm subtle!" Tracy commented "Where does that leave us now?"

"Do you see any South American archaeologists?"

"Heathrow tower, this is private flight Golf X-Ray 233 for Rio de Janeiro requesting permission to taxi over" As he radioed his request Collins accomplice started up the twin engines of the jet aircraft. Their high pitched whine added to the general background drone of aircraft that constantly enveloped Heathrow and its surrounding districts.

"Flight Golf X-Ray 233, you are cleared for taxiing to runway 31 right, follow the standard route, wait at the runway entrance road and await further instructions over".

"We're off!" Collins declared as the plane began to move slowly forward turning away from the VIP Centre towards the taxiway that led to the distant runways.

"Can't this thing taxi any faster?" Collins asked as he observed the slow progress which they were making down the taxiway.

"Speed limit Guv, we wouldn't want to get pulled over now would we?"

The sound of a warning alarm from the overhead centre control console filled the cabin, accompanied by a flashing indicator stating the nature of the suddenly imposed problem.

"Now what?" Collins asked furious at yet another potential delay so close to his final escape as his pilot stopped the aircraft in the middle of the taxiway and climbed out into the back cabin to investigate.

After a few moments a muffled cry and a thud were heard in the distance which caused Collins to express some concern, "Are you all right back there?"

"Yes!" came a muffled reply, "I just hit my head on something".

Collins leaned back in the seat and looked round, parting the curtain that separated the cockpit from the cabin slightly. What he saw was not what he wanted to see as the feet of his Deputy disappeared out of the open cabin door, pulled away by the uniformed arms of an unidentified Security Officer.

"You have the right to remain silent, which given that you are unconscious would probably be a wise move, in the meantime get your self a good lawyer" Tracy informed the unconscious body lying face up on the tarmac in front of her.

The Commander climbed aboard muttering something about 'another ruddy aircraft' but it was of little consequence to the job in hand as he made his way forward to the

cockpit, the way ahead led by his gun in case of trouble.

Flinging open the curtains, the Commander was stopped in his tracks when to his surprise the cockpit was empty and the escape hatchway through the floor was hanging down open showing the tarmac of the ground outside below.

"Bugger!" the Commander murmured as he realised that Collins had escaped yet again.

"Don't tell me you lost him?" Tracy asked as she came up behind the Commander clasping his shoulders in comfort.

"Come on" he urged as they made a hasty exit from the aircraft and looked around outside, weapons drawn.

Outside was a massive complex of buildings, moving vehicles and airport ground staff, finding Collins in this lot was going to be difficult so the Commander summoned some assistance.

"Lima Tango Zero One to Heathrow Control and all units, be advised that we have a suspect on the run somewhere inside the airport complex" the Commander announced with authority. "Last seen a few minutes ago in the area near to the VIP Centre, white, six foot tall, grey wispy hair, beard and moustache, possibly armed, certainly dangerous and now really starting to get on my nerves!"

"This is Heathrow Control, all exits are now secured and extra security is on its way to all departure gates, we'll call you if anything turns up".

"Roger that, we're heading back to the terminal buildings." The Commander turned round and looked back at the VIP Centre a few hundred yards away, "Suppose we better take that bus back before we get rude phone calls from an irate engineer in Harrow".

Tracy looked round suddenly realising what was missing from the scene "Err what bus?"

The Commander grabbed his radio and made another urgent call "Cassini have you moved out borrowed transport?"

"No sir" came the reply "it should be right where we left it".

"Well it isn't, meet us outside the VIP Centre entrance in two minutes".

Tracy supported the Commander on her shoulder as he was forced to take some of the weight off his badly injured leg and together they limped back the way they had come.

"What would you do without me?" Tracy asked.

"Probably die of a broken heart if I had one".

It was clear to Cassini and Chambers that the Commander's increasingly battered condition meant it was going to take a lot longer than his estimated couple of minutes to reach them even with Tracy's help so they drove out to them in Chambers patrol car.

"Where to Sir?" Cassini asked as the Commander was helped into the back seat by Tracy before she herself sat alongside and closed the rear passenger door.

"Head towards the nearest exit road and look out for a bus, I don't suppose Cassini you remember the number plate of it by any chance?"

"P25 GLW, aka Metroline Travel Services Harrow fleet number DLD25, Dennis Dart SLF 10.5 metre with Plaxton Pointer dual door bodywork" Cassini replied.

"How..." Tracy began.

"Just one of those useless facts I carry around, I could give you the chassis and body numbers if you like, I've got them in my little book here somewhere".

"I think we have enough details, hang on, how many of them are there around here?" the Commander interjected.

"Including the later series two version of the bodywork the DLD class stretches to about one hundred and eighty examples in Metroline's fleet".

"All the same colour?" Chambers asked.

"Pretty much yes".

"Ah! Well let's hope he doesn't get out of the airport complex then" the Commander replied anxiously, "Hang on, head for the bus station area".

"What's the plan?" Commander Chambers asked.

"Well when I last looked the best place to hide a bus is amongst a lot of other buses".

A squeal of brakes and the rushing of booted feet heralded the end of the gang's journey as the mini coach was brought to a halt by being surrounded with a number of Security Service vehicles out of which some thirty members of the Armed Response Unit disembarked in full body armour and with weapons trained firmly on the vehicle and its occupants.

"Armed Security Officers, stop the vehicle and turn off the engine!" the Commanding Officer of the ARU team barked through the megaphone from his position standing behind his patrol car.

He continued to bark orders in the strict procedure set down for arresting a group of armed people contained within a vehicle or building.

"Drop all weapons on the floor of the vehicle and walk out slowly with your hands on your heads".

The door of the mini coach slid open and the first of the gang started to disembark, all with hands on heads as ordered, with some thirty expert firearms officers aiming directly at them they were sensible enough not to argue.

Within a few moments the entire gang were lying face down on the cold concrete surface with their hands secured behind their backs before they were led away to awaiting Security Service vans in silence.

The latter part of the operation was witnessed by the Commander as he was on his way back to the bus station area, with the gang driven away, he returned to the patrol car.

"Right that's the Duchess and the gang in the bag" he concluded "Now where the hell is Collins?"

Cassini was on the radio to Heathrow Control and reported what they had just told him "No signs of anything untoward except some brawl between a senior female Security Officer and some rich looking lady in the Terminal building a while back".

The Commander looked across at Tracy who just shrugged her shoulders and smiled meekly.

"Well that explains the state of you".

"I was hoping you would write it off as over aggressive shopping".

"Nay chance lass".

Cassini announced their arrival back at the bus station area which brought Tracy and the Commander's thoughts back onto the job in hand.

"There be buses here" Cassini declared.

"It must be that one" Tracy pointed out one single decker parked at an angle that was in opposition to the other vehicles parked and passing through at that time.

All four officers went over to it and the Commander looked up at the small white fleet number above the drivers cab side window.

"DLD25, this is the one" he declared.

Tracy drew her weapon and looked around the busy area, being discreet so as not to draw too much attention or panic from members of the public around.

"Lima Tango Zero One from Lima Tango Three Two Two, receiving over?"

The Commander watched Tracy as she wandered around the area just ahead scanning the surrounding area whilst he took the radio call.

"Lima Tango Zero One, go ahead".

"There is an IC-1 male not far removed from the description issued waiting in the queue for the Heathrow Shuttle Bus on the far side of the bus station".

"What's he wearing?"

"That's the odd thing, he's got a bright yellow Day-Glo jacket on, hardly blending into the background".

The Commander looked back at the abandoned bus, in particular the interior of the drivers cab as he was joined by Cassini.

"There was a high visibility jacket hanging up in there when we were on board earlier" Cassini commented indicating the now empty coat hook that was fitted up and behind the drivers seat, inside the vehicle.

"Got to be Collins" the Commander concluded as he signalled with his hands to Tracy to join them "Lima Tango Three Two Two, sit tight, we are coming over".

Collins felt around in his pocket for some change, finding a few loose coins he looked through them momentarily before returning them. Suddenly a moment of fright came over him and he began to frantically pad his pockets with the palms of his hands in search of something before letting out a sigh of relief when he located what he was looking for.

However he was now worried his sudden movements may have attracted unwanted attention but looking around as he pulled the jacket collar up a bit, he could see that those gathered waiting around him were merely interested in keeping out the cold bitter wind that was howling in and around the various buildings and street furniture around that busy area.

In the distance he could see the Heathrow shuttle service pull around the small roundabout that stood at the entrance to the bus station area, the green and white 53 seat coach rocking slightly as it negotiated the speed humps in the roadway before pulling into the bus stop.

A couple of minutes passed as a number of passengers alighted, some retrieving luggage from the under floor mounted baggage lockers before those in front of Collins were finally allowed to board the comparatively narrow stepped entrance into the coach.

Some boarded quicker than others as those with tickets were waved through by the driver, those without having to tender their fare took longer, especially the elderly passenger immediately in front of Collins who proffered a £20 note for a £2.50 fare, not an unusual event on a public service vehicle, but one which always caused

problems.

With the whirr and click of the ticket issuing machine mounted adjacent to the driver, the passenger took his ticket and moved aside down the aisle to a vacant seat.

Collins stepped forward and looked up towards the driver.

"Single to Luton please". The characteristic gruff voice provoked an unexpected response as the driver pointed a gun in Collins chest and a second gun barrel suddenly appeared pressed up against his head.

"Gotcha!" the Commander triumphantly announced as he removed the coach drivers uniform cap from his head.

"Don't bank on it Commander!" Collins calmly replied before suddenly thrusting his arm back behind him striking Tracy in the stomach. The Commander momentarily distracted by Tracy's fall backwards down the steps of the coach doorway, had his gun knocked out of his hand before Collins bolted down the aisle of the coach knocking the elderly gentleman who had preceded him over.

Tracy was dazed from her fall but was quickly helped up by Chambers and Cassini as the Commander climbed out of the drivers cab and retrieved his weapon before looking down the steps with obvious concern.

"Are you all right love?" he asked.

Tracy indicated with a thumbs up that she was all right if a little bruised and battered "Get after him will you!" she urged.

The Commander sped as best he could down the aisle towards the stairway that led down to the offside emergency exit and on board toilet about half way along the vehicle's length.

Once there the open doorway made it obvious where Collins had gone and the Commander quickly followed exiting out into the busy traffic with its omnipresent exhaust fumes filling the air, mingling with the cold atmosphere that accompanies the onset of the early afternoon winter darkness.

Dodging between moving buses and coaches, the Commander did his best to cover as much of the area as possible even with his increasingly painful leg injury but there was no way he was going to let Collins slip through his fingers this time.

As one bus pulled away from alongside him, the Commander looked up to see Collins standing looking around for the best means of escape, this was his chance, drawing his weapon, the Commander fired two shots at Collins, his usual pretty dire aiming easily ensuring that both shots missed, embedding themselves in the bus shelter assembly adjacent to his target. The shots alerted Collins who immediately started to run.

Pursued swiftly by the Commander with Cassini and Chambers right behind him,

Collins was now a desperate man, unarmed and alone he came to the main through road stopping only briefly to let a coach by before darting out behind it and then across into the opposite run of traffic.

As if released by a jack in the box, Collins suddenly found himself in the opposite carriageway, the coach had shielded his view of traffic coming the other way and he had subconsciously assumed that all the roads around the bus station area were one way, an assumption that proved to be fatal as he was suddenly confronted by the approaching front end of a speeding double decker bus.

The sound of screeching brakes and the horn of the bus preceded the impact as Collins body smashed into the front dash and windscreen, shattering the latter before he disappeared under the front, the contents of his pockets scattered onto the roadway with metallic tinkling.

It all happened in an instant and somehow in slow motion for those who witnessed the accident before the bus came to rest and there was a rush of people forward to the scene to offer any needed assistance.

The Commander got there first but it was obvious to him that it was too late.

"Pratt!" the bus driver called unsympathetically through his side window looking down below the vehicle.

"Lima Tango Zero Two to Heathrow Control urgent message" Tracy began as the Commander knelt down at the front of the bus and peered underneath at the somewhat mangled body beneath.

"Ambulance and Fire Brigade required at the Bus Station complex to attend an RTA collision between bus and pedestrian, over".

"I shouldn't bother" the Commander called out.

"Non-runner then?" Tracy enquired.

"Totally brown bread" Cassini confirmed.

Tracy bent down to pick up a gold coin glinting on the ground, "I think we have our man though" she announced holding the coin aloft for all to see.

"Yep, pity the only way we'll get him into custody is to jet hose him off the underside of eleven tons of Dennis Trident bus though" the Commander mused "There is going to be an engineer in Harrow Bus Garage who will not be impressed mind".

"Cassini!" Tracy called over "Get the sightseers moved on".

Cassini went about dealing with the crowds who had gathered to witness the ongoing events, a number of uniformed officers brought in from the terminal buildings soon sorted out the onlookers and kept them away from the gold coins that littered the ground around the front of the bus from where they had spilt from Collins pocket.

"Cogidugnus" the Commander said as he examined one of the coins he was in the process of picking up.

"Who?" Tracy enquired as she joined him taking his arm in hers.

"He was the big Roman chief in England at one time, practically founded Haychester and lived in the palace down the road".

"Which reminds me" Tracy added looking at her watch in concern "aren't we supposed to be in Haychester this evening for the Command hand over?"

"Good point, however there are still one or two matters here to deal with first".

"Get your stinking paws off me you brute!!" the Duchess cried out as she was led through the Airport building by two of the largest and heaviest officers Heathrow Division could muster. Her appeal fell on deaf ears however as the two officers were having none of it.

They stopped just short of the exit when they met the Commander and Tracy coming in.

"There you are my Lady!" the Commander greeted her sarcastically. If there was nothing he liked doing better it was winding up the gentry, especially the guilty ones, they only came second to politicians in the Commander's all time dislike list.

"You can't pin any of this on me you cretin!"

"Charming....." Tracy remarked.

"I tell you what, lets settle this here and now shall we?" the Commander suggested "Hold up your left hand".

The Duchess appeared a little confused at first but reluctantly she raised her left hand before the Commander turned to Tracy.

"Miss Caverner, do you recognise anything in this building as belonging to you?" he asked still in a sarcastic tone.

"Well apart from you my dear, I do believe that is my diamond ring that the lady there is wearing".

The Commander reached forward and removed the ring from the Duchess's hand and placed it in Tracy's palm before he turned back to the Duchess

"Well I reckon that makes it at least conspiracy to kidnap and handling stolen goods, take her away and make it very public".

Still protesting the Duchess was dragged away "Get yourself a good lawyer!" he

called after her.

Tracy saw the Commander grimace with pain and looked down to see blood seeping through the material of his trousers and running down his left leg.

"Come on, I am going to get you looked at" she insisted taking the Commander firmly by the arm.

"But..." he started to protest but it was no use.

"Nurse!" Commander Jennifer Caverner called "He's coming round".

The duty ward nurse came in and looked over Fuller who had begun to stir for the first time since he had received an operation to remove a bullet from his shoulder.

"Simon?" Jennifer asked "Its Commander Caverner, can you hear me?"

"What happened?" he asked blearily as his vision slowly returned, presenting him with a slightly fuzzy view of the room and those in it.

"You got shot, luckily your vest took one bullet and the other went into your shoulder and missed anything vital, lost quite a bit of blood though" Jennifer confirmed.

At that point Tracy and the Commander, now having had his leg properly attended to, entered the room, concerned at how Fuller was, a question to which confused would have been a good answer as Tracy joined her twin sister by the bedside.

"I think my eyesight is buggered, I'm seeing double".

The Commander smiled as Tracy properly introduced her twin sister to Fuller who was grateful that what he was seeing was correct and not just the figment of a deranged imagination.

"Did you get em?" Fuller asked.

"Well.." Tracy summarised "the gang got arrested, the Duchess got her just desserts and Collins got a bus, well under a bus as it happens".

"...and we and better get going ourselves." the Commander remarked to her.

"Good to see you are all right then," Tracy told Fuller before turning to go "...bye Sis!"

The Commander just waved his hand in goodbye as the couple left, bound for Haychester and an historic ceremony for the City.

Although it was cold, the Commander was thankful that it was at least dry, the formal dress uniform that all Security Officers are expected to wear to these formal events was not exactly designed for cold wet conditions and the ceremonial swords that all those officers of at least Command rank were issued with were sometimes prone to rust.

As they passed through the familiar aluminium framed doors that led to Haychester's office reception area, the Commander turned to Tracy and reached into his pocket to retrieve Tracy's diamond ring that he had liberated from the Duchess earlier in the day.

"You know I've been thinking a lot lately about you, well us" he began in an unusually soft tone, "With you gone for over a day and not knowing whether you were ever coming back I realised how much I would miss you if you were ever gone forever".

"Careful love, I might start crying and I don't usually do that".

"Well I wanted to ask you well perhaps you would consider marrying me, that is if you want to of course I mean I don't know whether you are the marrying type...."

"Yes of course I will"

"... of course if you say no I'll understand fully but...."

"I said yes you know!"

"Sorry what did you say?"

"YES you barmpot I will marry you!"

"Oh well right err..." the Commander looked round nervously wondering what he should do next before remembering the ring he was still holding in his hand "You had better have this back then".

He placed the ring back where it belonged on Tracy's left hand before they kissed briefly, however he was still uncertain whether Tracy really meant yes or no.

"Are you absolutely sure?" he asked.

"Yes of course I am sure, if you had been any longer I was going to ask you myself, especially after the last couple of days".

"Oh well erm right then".

"Besides Jennifer has got May in Longton's office sweepstake!" Tracy added cheekily as the couple headed into the building past the reception desk and through the complex to the 'C Block' building to the rear.

The Commander's now former office looked a little empty now. All of his and Tracy's

possessions were packed away in crates out in the corridor waiting to be moved up to the Holborn office the following morning and their successors had already moved in, although at that time the division's floor was relatively quiet and deserted, not unusual at that time of the evening with almost everyone either off duty or out on patrol.

"Do you know I have been Deputy Commander and then Commander in this office for the best part of seven years" the Commander remarked looking around for probably the last time.

"I only managed three months or thereabouts" Tracy added "but at least we are together".

"I'll drink to that".

The Commander looked at his watch, now somewhat battered after the last couple of days of subterranean misadventures, "Come on, we are supposed to be downstairs by now".

Commander Elizabeth Jameson was waiting at the door of the main lecture hall to greet Tracy and the Commander as they arrived up the staircase from the main reception area that was situated directly below.

Dressed in full dress uniform, she already wore the Commander's old WSX101 branded epaulettes as his successor. Longton meanwhile was similarly attired in his brand new dress uniform but with Tracy's old WSX102 number on his shoulders in gold plated numerals, with him was his wife Caroline Longton who was probably already working out what to spend her husband's pay rise on.

Warm welcoming handshakes greeted them as they arrived, in the hall nearly every civic dignitary in the County was present, many to see the Commander off in style, no doubt many more there to make doubly sure he was actually going.

The droning hum of many conversations echoing around the hall began to die down as Longton, who had been put in charge of this event, took the lecture stand at the front of the hall and held his hands up requesting silence and attention.

"Ladies and Gentlemen.... " he began but naturally failed to get the attention of some of those who were not really paying attention so he repeated his words in a school master like tone with more emphasis.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.... " the desired effect was duly achieved as Longton now had the entire Hall's attention, so with that sorted he began his introductory speech.

"It has been a great honour for me to be a part of the Haychester Security Service team over the last few years and an equally great honour to have worked under the leadership of the two officers who we are saying farewell to today".

"I think I'm going to cry..." Tracy jokily murmured.

"Don't do that love... " the Commander responded "...you'll wind up flooding most of downtown Haychester".

"The Commander has for seven years been first Deputy Commanding and then Commanding Officer of this division and during that time has successfully reduced the crime rate in this area to unprecedented levels through sheer hard work and determination. Joined by Commander Caverner just a few months ago, together they have formed what has been described by the BBC as 'The best law enforcement partnership in history' and their immediate superior described as 'Fine except when things kept winding up in my car park space'".

The room erupted with laughter at this reference to the recent incidents whereby the Chief Superintendent's car park space had been filled with rubble, buses and fire engines amongst other things by the Commander and his officers, and that was just in the last four days.

"Now these two rascals are leaving us for pastures new and we wish them both the very best and assure them that the old place is perfectly safe in our hands... honest!"

Longton stepped down as the hall filled with applause, handing the proceedings over to the Commander who was prompted to make a speech. He looked a little apprehensive about it but after a prod in the ribs from Tracy he stepped forward and began.

"Right then.... " he looked around for some inspiration but instead decided to ad-lib it for a while "Thank you Al for the kind words, no doubt you'll be announcing the results of the office sweepstake on what I am going to say later".

More laughter, after all Longton's office sweepstakes were the stuff of legend nowadays in the Service.

"It has been a great honour to serve most of the people of this division, and a even greater pleasure to arrest everyone else over the course of the last eight years that I have been here in various roles up to and including Commanding Officer".

He looked across at Tracy who smiled back and encouraged him to continue.

"Particular thanks go to all those officers who have supported me throughout that time, too many to mention but particularly Al Longton for his sense of humour which has cheered us up even at the worst of times, Simon Fuller for persuading me to adopt technology eventually, my Chief who encouraged me as a youngster to join the service in the first place and last but not least Tracy here who despite only having been at my side for just a few months, has been the most inspiring and supportive person I have ever met and I for one am delighted she is continuing alongside me up in London".

Another round of applause filled the hall, when it died down the Commander began to close his part of the proceedings.

"Two final orders of business...." he removed a red velvet bag from his uniform jacket pocket "these are the Haychester Roman Coin Collection which with permission I would like to hand back to the Mayor this evening, returning them to their rightful home after their brief excursion around the country".

The Mayor stepped forward and received them thanking the Commander as he did so.

"Finally from me I believe that you will find that the answer to one of Al's most popular sweepstakes will shortly be announced, thank you and have a pleasant evening".

The Commander smiled with clear amusement as he stood down from the stage and rejoined Tracy. Retrieving from his pocket his diary, he flicked through the pages and with her they started examining dates in the next year with a deliberately furtive manner so as to get Longton, who was looking on from nearby with a concerned frown, even more worried.

As their mysterious deliberations continued, it was the turn of the Chief Superintendent to make his speech, usually the cue for everyone to make a hasty exit for fear of being bored to death.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, tonight we say farewell to what must be two of the most well respected officers the Security Service has ever seen in its twenty odd years of existence".

"Oh here we go...." the Commander muttered.

"Some of the qualities these two have shown have set an example to us all in their professional approach to the job and have inspired many of the officers under their command to aspire to their standards".

"He's descending into cobbler's mode...." Longton murmured to his wife who along with half the hall were starting to feel ever so slightly sleepy.

"I won't ramble on....." the Chief Superintendent continued.

"Oh that'll make a change..." Tracy thought sarcastically, she wasn't alone in her sentiments.

"I would just like to say it has been an amazing time working with these two, sometimes hilarious, sometimes tense, certainly never dull. Your successors have a large act to follow however I feel that they too will make us proud. One thing is for certain London will never know what's hit it".

With that the Chief Superintendent stood down to covered sighs of relief from those who had just been subjected to his usual rambling speech style which this time was mercifully short.

Longton was by now getting somewhat curious as to whatever it was the Commander and Tracy were consulting about and decided to sidle over to enquire casually.

"So what are you two planning then?" he asked brimming with new confidence now he was the second most powerful officer in the division and living up to the name with ease. As he waited for the reply he obtained a glass of champagne from one of the waiters who was passing around with a tray.

Tracy and the Commander decided to keep up the jokey pretence. "Oh nothing just a wedding" the Commander casually replied barely looking up from his diary

"Oh right". Longton replied, the answer clearly not initially registering as he walked on back towards his wife.

The Commander looked up and counted down to the inevitable "Three, two, one...."

Evidently the penny suddenly dropped as Longton stopped dead in his tracks and nearly coughed up his drink in sudden shock realisation at the meaning of this statement.

"About time too, you two were made for each other" Jennifer Caverner remarked as she joined her sister having rushed down from London to be there, "Al you owe me twenty quid!" she added as if any reminder were needed.

Eventually after much conversation with the various dignitaries, officers and guests in the hall, the Commander and Tracy slipped quietly out the back into the side service road that ran along the north side of the site.

Their breath produced clouds in the cold air outside as they put their arms around each other whilst above the lights from the windows of the three main blocks of the complex shone out into the dark night like miniature lighthouses, providing a tinge of light in the air in what was otherwise a very cold and dark winter evening.

"You know when we get married, does that make me Mrs Commander?" Tracy asked out of curiosity.

"Well technically we would be Mr and Mrs Divisional Superintendent" the Commander replied trying not to giggle too loudly.

"So what do I call you then, I mean I know your name but what were you before you were adopted and had to change it?"

"You really don't want to know" the Commander began. Tracy stopped walking and stood in front of him looking him square in the eyes with insistence.

"Try me"

"All right" the Commander took a deep breath "I was born Eddie, I got inflicted with Samuel when I was forced to be adopted by the witness protection programme, and ever since I joined the Service I have always been called simply Commander even when I wasn't a Commander, I suppose now you could always call me Chief".

"Chief it is then" Tracy replied "Shall we go?"

"Why not." They began to walk together towards the long slightly curved driveway that ran away from the front of the site towards the main City ring road looking on ahead to the city's medieval Cathedral floodlight against the cold night in the distance.

"New Year in a few days time" Tracy mused.

"Yep, and it will certainly be nothing if not interesting" the Commander responded.

To be continued.....

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