

Beetles

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First Edition

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Warning, this text contains some strong language, including expletives. Colloquial words are used to characterise the speech often used routinely. Such speech is not condoned by the author, however for fiction to reflect reality it is often necessary to use such words. "Ouch, oh, dear, oh dear, sugar, I have just spilled the beans." Just does not cut it. Some of the language spelling is to try and capture the rustic nature of country folk. Note: Some spelling reflects colloquial speech.

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1 Looking for Safety

It was a beautiful day, the weather could not have been nicer. The sun shone down glinting on the deck of William Ravensbury's luxury yacht. He needed a break, boy did he need to unwind. One of his staff had come up with a brilliant idea, you know the kind, seems like a good idea at the time. Well to cut a long story short cochineal it was not. Someone had not done the costing correctly. William was none to pleased at procuring raw material at such high prices for so little return.

"Sir, sir sorry to interrupt," said a tall man in a smart suit.

"Yes, what is it Higgins?"

"Captain says there is a storm brewing." Elicited with an air of incredulity, by the very attentive right hand man.

"Really?" Ravensbury was somewhat sceptical too. You would be, surrounded by an azure blue sea with a light breeze and not a cloud in the sky. The sea was calm as a mill pond, a rather large Pacific mill pond.

"So what Higgins?"

"Well sir, he thinks we should head for an archipelago to the south. Said we might find shelter there." The servant, gave a slight nonchalant glance and smile to the woman sitting on a recliner. She put her hand to William's shoulder.

"Is this Captain any good dear?" She said, her eyes meeting William's glance as he reacted to her gentle touch.

"Miss Prichard does have a point sir? He is new, first cruise in a yacht of this class sir."

"Yes, yes man," Ravensbury paused to think, "This is a damn big boat, we are miles from anywhere so no danger of reefs, and the man wants to take us to some islands."

"Where there will be reefs sir!"

"Yes Higgins," W R shook his head, "This vessel can ride out a storm."

William Ravensbury did not suffer fools gladly, with a heave and a sigh he pulled himself up off the lounge. "Be back in a minute dear, staff." He huffed at this remark.

The big man strode with some poise towards the bridge. His aura was one that would hold people, the sort of person who commands attention. You would look at him even if you did not want to. His stature manifested itself on the bridge. The Captain seemingly a little nervous, this was his first voyage with Ravensbury and he wanted it to go well. He was a cautious man, more used to taking smaller boats on well defined routes, in local waters.

There is very little to compare the English Channel with the vast expanse of water in which they now were afloat.

The captain had a frown, he knew that Mr Ravensbury was a boss who was used to getting his own way. He pondered how to explain his concern, if you went down in the English Channel rescue was comparatively near at hand.

"What's this all about, we can ride out a storm in this," Ravensbury glared at the relatively young, and to his mind, inexperienced sailor. "Are you sure there even is a storm man?"

"Yes sir, very reliable report sir. Eleven to twelve on the Beaufort scale. It's not like being in the channel sir, we're a long way off the shipping lanes."

"This is a state of the art, well built ship, we don't need to run for ground at the first hint of a slight breeze."

"But sir," said the Captain stuttering on the last word.

"We will stay on course, the crew are all trained aren't they?" This passing shot, was left as Ravensbury returned to his recliner.

The First Mate looked at the Captain with raised eyebrows.

"Might just as well be monkeys sir. What's the point of hiring a good man such as yourself then ignoring your advice?" The First Mate was a real old cynic, down on his luck and grateful to the Captain for the chance of work.

"I bet he's not the first one you've met?" said the Captain, with a despondent look.

"To right, but who will he blame if disaster strikes." The old man squinted looking out to sea and the bright sunlight, like tiny diamonds twinkling playfully. "Look at Neptune's jewels."

"You'd not believe it could be rough in a few hours, would you Mike?"

"No Captain, but it will, we've both seen the satellite pictures. This is the lull before the storm. I'd best go around and see all the hatches are secure."

"Best double check later."

"Oh, I will," said the First Mate. Mike knew how the passengers loved their sea air. "You'd best take us to safe harbour."

"What and disobey an order?" The Captain showed surprise. "Besides, how do we know those islands on the map will offer any safety. We might end up on a reef."

"Has this ship ever been in a storm before?"

"They only finished building it a few months ago, I've not been in any with her."

"Take it from someone older and wiser, you know some of the stories, you've heard me often enough. You'd think people would learn from history books. He is educated, ain't he?"

"Who?"

"W R. Do we need to spell Titanic to him?" The old man laughed.

"Go on," said the Captain, consoled by the thought of at least one ally. Apart from the engineer the rest of the crew were very inexperienced, taken on more for their appearance and servitude. It was ironic as most of the Captain's choices had been overruled.

When you're on a ship you can usually tell if it changes course, the slight roll as the deck pitches towards the direction of movement. The sun in the sky is a good indicator. Captain Simon Morrison was well aware of his orders, but his first duty was to his ship, her crew and passengers. With skilful use of the fore and aft thrusters he allowed the ship to drift south, not as much as he would have liked, as he edged the bow south. He had set the First Mate to keep an eye on WR, at this moment he was more worried about the unpredictability of the boss. Mike was the nearest he had to satellite tracking, he needed it. He would need time to correct the course enough to appear to be going west. Upon the return of the mate to the bridge, he got the all clear nod. Mike started a conversation.

"That Miss Pritchard, what do you think Ravensbury's wife thinks?"

"She's his PA and with Higgins as chaperone," said the Captain, pausing to check the wind speed.

"It's coming sir," said Mike with a wry smile.

"Sod it, I'm not side stepping any longer, we're heading full speed south."

"Sir," said the First Mate, nodding. "Very wise."

"We'll have a good tail wind."

"That we will sir, that we will."

Ravensbury looked up at Higgins who had just brought two glasses and a bottle of bubbly.

"Higgins, be a good fellow and tell the Captain to come and see me."

"Sir." Higgins relieved of his load, made haste to the bridge.

"Captain, Mr Ravensbury requests your presence." Higgins delivered his message with his usual grace.

"I'm rather busy right now."

"Sir, may I remind you that Mr Ravensbury is your boss and it would be courteous to attend to his request."

"First Mate you have the bridge," said the Captain, who then proceeded to visit WR, Higgins trailing behind, with the air of a hound that has just chased a fox into open ground.

"Morrison, what is the meaning of this, I explicitly told you to stay on course. I'm no navigator but I can tell we are no longer heading west. Are you trying to run us aground on the reefs around those damned islands of yours, hmm?" There was a pause, "Well come on man speak up."

"Sir as the Captain it is my duty," said the Captain cut off mid sentence.

"Your duty, your duty, do you hear what he is saying, my butler does his, my PA does hers, that means they do as I ask." Ravensbury was ready to explode, the financial mess from his failed investment had strained his tolerance. "I asked people to do some sums, they failed, they did not do what I asked, now my company is struggling to get back on it's feet. You will damn well change course and head west."

"But the islands are only a few nautical miles from us, we still have time to make safe harbour before the weather closes in."

"Damn you man, I have business schedules to make." Ravensbury was fuming, "I have a meeting in India, which is why we are heading west, I don't want to go to New Zealand which is where we will end up. You will do as you are told. Is that clear?"

The Captain said nothing, just nodded, and left for the bridge.

"God Higgins, why when you ask someone to do something can't they just get on with it?"

"I have no idea sir," said Higgins, shaking his head.

"Wind is getting up a bit." Remarked Miss Pritchard.

"You go and put something on dear, Higgins will see to lunch won't you Higgins?"

"Already in hand sir."

"Good man, good man." Ravensbury got to his feet, escorting his PA below decks.

Above the wind whistled around the railings. The sky had become decidedly cloudy, white turning to grey, turning to black. Below, those lurching were more focused on the delicious meal that was being served them. Higgins excelled, his culinary skills winning constant praise from his master, only serving to enthuse him to produce perfection.

"You're going to head for the islands right?"

The Captain shook his head.

"But I can see the archipelago, we could easily make it!" The First Mate was beginning to despair, "OK, so you might loose your job, but that's better than loosing a whole...."

The First Mate was cut short, one of the crew burst in, the ship was rolling slightly as the swell grew. He grasped the door frame looking decidedly wobbly as he tried to steady himself. Heading north west the vessel was exposing her starboard side to wind and waves, and going into the advancing storm front at a forty five degree angle.

"You sent for me Captain?"

"Yes, go and check the passengers are ok, and ask Mr Ravensbury if he still wants us to stay on course."

"Aye, aye sir," said the young lad.

He went below down in the cabin area, following through a passageway to the lounge. "Excuse me sir," he said looking towards Ravensbury. "Is everyone alright, alright?" He stumbled on his words as his throat seemed to be almost choking.

"We are thank you."

"The Captain asked if you wanted to stay on course?" The lad took a swallow, his hand grasping the back of a chair, for support.

"Of course I bloody do," said an indignant William Ravensbury. "You look a little queer." The lad nodded back, "Feeling a bit sick sir."

"Not in my lounge your not."

The lad saluted and left.

"He did strike me as being a bit queer?" Ravensbury laughed.

"Very droll sir," said Higgins.

Miss Pritchard smiled and picked a small pastry from the table.

"Have to loose that one Higgins."

"Understood sir."

"Oh, sorry am I being greedy, they are so nice." Miss Pritchard was savouring one of Higgins delights.

Higgins and Ravensbury laughed, then Ravensbury looked at Higgins and nodded.

"Understood sir, now might be a good time." Higgins made a smooth exit, with Miss Pritchard giving William a naughty grin.

Sometime later the conditions had worsened, the ship was like a twig in a raging river.

"I thought the Irish Sea was bad, but this is something else," said Simon, straining to keep some semblance of control.

"Worst one I've been in was in Mid Atlantic," replied Mike, his weather beaten face grimacing as he struggled to keep at his position. Down below the other crew and passengers were also rolling around.

"What's that ahead?" said Simon straining to see.

"Just another black cloud on the horizon," replied the First Mate.

"Could be a ship."

"You're joking right?"

"What about the charts?"

"There is nothing on the navigational aids or the charts, like I say it's just another black cloud."

As the ship maintained its heading that black cloud stayed in position, growing larger.

"It's another island, it must be," said Simon.

"Reefs and rocks, in this weather I'd stay well clear sir."

"We'll go around."

"Aye, aye sir." The First Mate altered course as the Captain looked over the navigation system.

"No you bloody won't." It was the stern commanding voice of WR.

"Sir with all due respect, now is not a good time to head to that island, and we can't go through it."

"Don't be so bloody facetious man, you have sonar don't you?"

"Yes, but," said the Captain, cut short.

"But, you know how to use it don't you?"

"Yes, but," said Simon, "With the..."

"You wanted to go to an island, now we will go to an island, the one ahead, we will make safe harbour and in the morning come what may we will make full speed for the Indian ocean, understood." Ravensbury stood watching the two sailors, as a boss watches over your shoulder while you are working. Off putting, the Captain and the First Mate were having a hard enough time with the ship and the storm, WR was only compounding their misery.

As the island got bigger so did the waves, the First Mate was on the watch for walls of spray, the Captain doing his best to steer a course and monitor the depth of water. More by luck than judgement the two men eased the ship around one edge of the island, and slipped through a reef into slightly calmer water.

With the anchor dropped they, looked at each other, faces still serious, no words, the boss was breathing down their necks. He said nothing and left the bridge. The Captain and First Mate took a sigh of relief.

In the morning the weather although overcast was somewhat calmer. The island was rough, appearing to be volcanic in origin. The Captain was looking through his binoculars, scanning the shore line.

"Don't just stand their man, take us ashore," said Ravensbury, up bright and early and in command.

"You did say we were to...." The Captain was cut short.

"You get the launch in the water and take us ashore," said WR, pointing at Mike.

"With respect sir, after the storm I need to help the Captain check the ship."

"Well get someone else, just get a move on man." Ravensbury was getting very impatient. Mike went to it, while Higgins assisted Miss Pritchard to the stern. They found Ravensbury waiting for the launch to be lowered.

"Excuse me sir, sorry for the delay, but I can't find Mr Casey anywhere," said Mike, with some concern.

"Casey?"

"The young lad sir," said Mike.

"You, yes," said Ravensbury looking at another hand who was busy on deck. "Get this boat in the water and take us ashore. First Mate, go look for Mr Nancy."

"Casey sir, aye aye sir," said Mike, glad to leave the boss in the capable hands of Mr Jones.

The First Mate found the Captain still on the bridge.

"You got them away then," said Simon, watching the launch speed towards the shore.

"Yea," said Mike, his expression belying more to come, "Mr Casey, I can't find him anywhere."

"The lad looked sick yesterday, perhaps he's on the loo?"

Mike shook his head, "Me and the others have been looking for him, I'd have come and told you sooner, only his nibs had other priorities."

The small launch was closing on the island. From the boat they could see it was quite barren, a few scrubby plants clung on to the thin soil. Mr Jones slowed the boat, its prow

sliding onto the beach, the sand blacked with volcanic ash. Higgins was the first to set foot, he helped his master ashore. Both gentlemen proceeded to assist Miss Pritchard, her delicate hands held firmly as she alighted. Mr Jones was ordered to stay with the boat, he watched viewing the trail of two tens, two nines and a neat pair of fives extend towards the edge of the scrub which encircled the lower regions of the island, garlanding the shoreline.

"It seems very eerie," said Miss Pritchard. She had similar feeling one time staying at a holiday cottage. Thinking back to then, the place with those flies, hidden in a valley in the middle of nowhere. She had that same chilly foreboding. Her then boyfriend had teased her, saying that the flies were feeding on the dead body buried under the floorboards. The thought had given her nightmares. Her mind was diverted.

"What have you found Higgins?"

"Just looking at the plants sir," said Higgins examining the foliage.

"Why are you wearing gloves Mr Higgins?" Enquired a puzzled young lady.

"They might be poisonous dear, and we are a long way from a hospital," said William, his focus more on his butlers work. Higgins was a keen botanist, and had found several useful species during a visit to the Amazon. It was one of those that had given Ravensbury's company a new product line, one whose success had made them an international brand.

Higgins seemed to go mad, his hands flaying around, "Ouch, get off you little blighter."

"You alright man?"

Whatever it was Higgins had thrown it well clear, and looked at his bleeding finger.

"The little blighter has only bitten through my gloves sir."

"What was it?"

"I have no idea sir, but it had very strong jaws."

Miss Pritchard looked at the butler, then at Ravensbury, then at Mr Jones who was sitting in the boat, one that was now afloat. "Is the tide coming in?"

Ravensbury looked towards the sea, "Yes, don't worry my dear, that chap will bring the boat onshore when we need to leave."

Higgins was rummaging through his bag which he had placed on the sand away from the bushes. He pulled up a small red bag from within its recesses.

"What's that?" Asked Miss Pritchard.

"A first aid kit," laughed Higgins.

She grinned, "No, I know that. The thing by your foot, near the bag."

"This?" said Ravensbury leaning down to pick up the object. "Looks like a sea shell."

Higgins had a eye for detail, "Begging your pardon sir, but might it be part of a small crab's shell?"

"Why, yes, yes you are so right," said Ravensbury. He pointed to the various features, explaining to Miss Pritchard as he observed each. "Seems to have a chunk taken out of it, see Higgins." The butler looked as his boss pointed to the gouge that was of similar proportions to the cut in his finger.

"I bet it was one of those blighters that tried to take a nip out of me sir. See almost the same dimensions."

Ravensbury pocketed the shell and after Higgins had seen to the wound they moved on walking a little further along the shore. They stopped near an outcrop of rocks, where once larva had flown into the sea, there was now a solid mass.

Looking around the edge of a large lump of basalt Higgins spotted some interesting items.

"Sir, come over here."

Ravensbury moved swiftly, Miss Pritchard following.

"See, more small crab shells with the same damage as the first, but a little further down."

He pointed and picked up a green carapace that was half the size of the crab's.

"Looks like it was attacked, part of a ..." Ravensbury paused.

"That's what I thought sir, looks like it might be the same species, but the elytron is a bit thicker."

"We must get this tested, it might contain more," said Ravensbury, grinning.

"Enough to make it viable."

"Higgins we might yet recoup our losses."

"Indeed sir," Higgins was scanning around near the encroaching waves, "More here sir."

"Good man," said Ravensbury watching Higgins collect various samples.

Miss Pritchard was feeling itchy, she was becoming nervous as they were becoming hemmed in between the bushes with the biting blighters and the waves that were crashing down on the sand.

"I think Miss Pritchard wishes to return to the comforts of our yacht."

"Very well sir, I have plenty of samples, some crab shells as well, you never know."

The trio made their way back along the narrow strip of sand. Glancing out to sea, Higgins noticed a crab scurrying up the beach almost oblivious to their presence. Mr Jones anticipated their desire to leave. With some skill he eased the boat in to allow them to board. With passengers safely ensconced, they headed back to the yacht.

Although the sky was still overcast and the sea, beyond the reef choppy to put it mildly, Mr Ravensbury had a schedule. The Captain was told to put to sea, his protestations at going without finding Mr Casey were overruled. His skill at getting back through the reef by reference to his previously documented sat nav readings went unnoticed. The route to India proved relatively uneventful.

"Ravi my old friend how are you?" Ravensbury had made it, by the skin of his teeth and running the ship at full speed all the way. As the two men commenced their meeting a rather distraught engineer was oblivious to the beautiful Indian shoreline. To such a man his engines were as a beautiful pair of horses that had just been whipped by a cruel coachman.

"So William, tell me how is your new yacht, she looks very efficient?"

"She is which is more than I can say for the Captain."

"Oh, why?"

"Damn fool disobeyed my orders and lost a man at sea."

Ravi shook his head, "That is very bad, you don't need, you have such bad luck lately."

The two men sat supping drinks, both well attended by Ravi's staff. Higgins was given the job of accompanying Miss Pritchard on a tour of the locality arranged by Mr Ravensbury's good friend.

"This is so cheap Higgins, look," said Miss Pritchard, her eyes darting around, "This is so pretty, can you imagine a dress made of this?"

"You would like miss?" Ravi's guide had no trouble sensing his shop owner friend might make a sale.

“Yes please, how much?”

After some negotiation, both parties were well satisfied, and Higgins less than enthusiastic, although too gentlemanly to show it, moved on with Miss Pritchard to the next shop. To Higgins it seemed an interminable time before finally returning to the yacht.

“Good day Higgins?” William had a grin on his face. “Miss Pritchard?”

“Taking a shower sir,” said Higgins, “I don't understand some people, you have business, but we come all this way to India, you give her the day off and all she does is go around the shops.”

“They are different shops Higgins.” WR laughed, shaking his head, “Mrs Ravensbury is no different, you know that. Worse, we go on holiday and she goes to the shopping mall where the shops are practically the same high street chains that she uses at home, and she spends all day there!”

“You're on a flight tomorrow morning sir, you and Miss Pritchard, should arrive at Heathrow around mid afternoon.”

“Excellent, you'll follow on with the samples, and the yacht.”

“Best that way sir, airport security, they might get funny about the samples.” Higgins gave a wry smile.

The plane touched down to a chilly English winter afternoon. Both of them shivered at the announcement of the outside temperature. A smart man wearing a double breasted suit and peak cap met Mr Ravensbury. He immediately took over the task of pushing the trolley loaded with cases, escorting them to the waiting car.

“Won't be a moment sir, just got to loose the trolley.” The man very efficiently parked the unwieldy beast with some of its friends and returned to the car. He slid back into the drivers seat, closed the door and turned to look back towards his boss.

“London office sir?”

“Please,” said William, his attention distracted by Miss Pritchard. She handed him a phone, she had already dialled the number and had a man waiting on the line.

“Rodney how the devil are you?”

There was a silent pause as he listened.

“Terrible, idiot of a Captain disobeyed my orders, nearly had the boat on the reefs, and lost a man at sea.”

He listened again.

“Great, look have you sold the plant yet?”

There was a moment of silence.

“Excellent,” he said, briefly interrupted, “No, no I really mean it, hopefully I have a plan.”

Rodney continued his half of the conversation, then Ravensbury responded.

“I hope it is better than the last one too,” He said, his thoughts on the next matter, “Can you do me a favour, we need to get two very good research biochemists. They must be good after the last lot, and get the lab sorted, all hush hush, so confidentiality, HR can deal with all that.”

In a small town to the south of London a woman sat, looking through the paper.

“Any luck love?” Her mother, showing concern for her daughter, “You've worked so hard to get all those qualifications, why did they have to close that factory?”

“It was cheaper to get it made in India mother, that's why.”

“It seems such a shame, you were doing so well, and they all thought so highly of you.”

The kind lady was stirring a wooden spoon, the smell of the stew stimulating her daughters olfactory system.

"Smells good," She said.

"Your dad has been having a hard time at work today. He rang earlier." The mother's expression said it all.

"Poor dad, still that's his favourite."

Her mother smiled, her attention distracted by the sound of a car. The tyres making a familiar sound on the gravel drive. Some moments later a rather tall man, with a bit of a belly came into the kitchen.

"And how are my two favourite ladies?" He said smelling the air, "Hmm, yumee."

"Dad!" said his daughter.

"What?" He said with a grin.

Mother just shook her head, "He's a big kid at heart." She walked over to him and gave him a big hug. The pot decided to crave attention, the sound of bubbling, as the surface of the thick stew erupted.

"Lucy, be a dear," said mother, her eyes moving swiftly to the pot.

"Highly qualified biochemist, and what do I do? Stir stew!"

After mother had finished attending to her dearest darling husband, she returned to the stove. Lucy returned to the newspaper, and after refreshing himself Mr Hamber sat opposite his daughter at the kitchen table.

"Good day dad?" she asked knowing full well it had not been.

Roger shook his head, "Sometimes it makes me wonder if anyone has any sense."

"Mr Kaplan at it again?"

"The man's an idiot, how he keeps his job I shall never know. He's got less qualifications than me yet he's in a senior position. Beats me, then there's you a highly intelligent young lady can't get a job." Dad shook his head. "Oh, lovely thanks love." Mr Hamber dived into the meal that his wife had just placed in front of him.

"Shall I put the tele on?" said Mrs Hamber, knowing Mr Hamber liked to catch the news.

"Go on then, I expect it will be more doom and gloom."

Lucy grinned, she thought about her dad, he loved to know what was going on in the world then proceed to put things to right.

A very distraught father came on the screen, standing by him were two ladies. The interviewer pushing a microphone under his nose.

"We are here today to speak with Mr Casey, his wife and the girlfriend of his son. They have just learnt of their son's disappearance. Mr Casey is understandably very angry, tell us why?"

"They do ask some bloody fool questions." Mr Hamber's comment was met with subtle hint to shush.

"They left it for days before telling us that our son has been lost at sea. Mr Ravensbury has been kind enough, said he's very sorry and all that."

"Your son's boss?" Interjected the interviewer.

"Yes, but that bloody Captain of the ship, he's supposed to look after the crew. Never even stopped to search." As he spoke the emotion welled in his voice, Mrs Casey was crying and could not speak.

"He was such a nice kind," the girlfriend was choking on her tears, she could not continue.

"As I understand it you are pressing for an investigation."

"Too bloody right," said Mr Casey.

"We will return to this story later in the week, back to the studio."

"Turn it off love, I've had enough trouble for one day." Mr Hamber shook his head, "You be very careful Lucy."

"I am."

"You're all we've got. We care about you."

"Mum, I know."

"Don't look like that, there are a lot of bad things happening these days, especially to young ladies. Your mother worries about you, we both do."

"I know, thanks," said Lucy trying to smile. She knew they meant well, but sometimes they could become too protective, stiflingly so. With the loss of her job, being at home most of the day did not help. When she went out during the day, mother would insist on coming with her. The few friends she had were at work during the day so she could not use them as an excuse.

A few days later she was again trawling the classifieds. The jobs section brought a smile to her face. Loosing no time she sent off a letter and her curriculum vitae. The wait for a reply was excruciating, it was the only suitable job she had seen for months.

"Lucy, it's for you," shouted her mother.

She rushed downstairs, her mother handed her the phone.

"Hello."

She went quiet and listened, occasionally replying. Upon replacing the receiver she rushed into the lounge where her mother was ironing.

"Careful love," said her mother, scared that the hot iron would go flying.

"Mum, mum I have an interview," said Lucy. She was incredibly excited.

"What for?"

"They would not say exactly, it's a research job, confidential stuff for an international company."

"Well don't get too excited you haven't been for the interview yet." These words from her wise mother were echoed by father, who cautioned about getting your hopes up.

"That bloody man," he said.

"Language father," said mother grinning.

"I've been hoping for years that he would win the lottery."

"Wouldn't it be better if we won?" said Mother.

"What and leave him loose in the world of work to inflict misery on some other luckless soul?"

Lucy giggled at her fathers very droll but humorous reflections on his work colleague.

In an office in London, William Ravensbury was surrounded by coffee and his trusted advisers. In front of him lay various notes, and sheets of paper.

"OK I pay you Mr HR and Mr Accountant to look through this lot, so give me the low down."

"Well sir, we have narrowed it down to five people for the second interview." The human resources man was being a bit cagey, after the failure of the previously hired staff he was fighting for his own job.

"Go on," said Ravensbury, his stern powerful voice doing nothing for the HR man's nerves.

"Four men and one woman, not sure about the woman, on paper she's as good if not better than the men, but she has less experience."

"Women have a eye for detail, see Miss Pritchard, arrange the interviews so that I can

attend, I might not have a clue about the science but I'm a pretty good judge of people.”

The time had crawled by since Lucy's first interview, she was overjoyed at getting a second. Smartly dressed she alighted from the tube and made her way along the London streets. Very wary, from her parents' views, she felt like there was a mugger on every street corner, this did not help to calm her before the crucial meeting.

Arriving back home that evening she flopped out on the sofa, it was her parent's night to visit grandmother. She was somewhat relieved to have a quiet house in which to chill. Her solitude was soon broken, upon hearing about Lucy's interview, dear grandmother had insisted that mother and father return to greet darling granddaughter.

Mother was the first in the door, rushing into the lounge with a short pause in the kitchen to put the kettle on.

“Hello dear, did you get the job? How did it go?”

“Oh,” said Lucy, surprised by her mother's intrusion, she had dozed off on the sumptuous old sofa. Normally her mother would have chastised her for slouching on the very well cared for furniture, but under the circumstances.

Father quickly followed. “Well?”

“Dad, hi, why are you both here? Why aren't you with gran?”

“Stop trying to change the subject, tell us all about it,” her mother paused, looked at her dad and indicated, “Kettle.”

“Oh,” he said, getting the message.

Mother sat hunched forward eager to hear her daughter. Father, the fastest tea maker in the west, was soon back in with rattly cups. After the teaspoon percussion, all went quiet.

“Come on,” said her father, “Spill the beans.”

Lucy sighed, “Well I was very nervous.”

“Why, you've no need to be,” said Mother.

“Let her talk mother,” said Father, with his notional sense of authority.

“It was all that stuff about muggers,” she said, trying to continue.

“I hope you are not going to blame us young lady?”

“Mother will you let the girl speak,” said Father becoming exasperated. He loved his wife dearly but there were times when he wished he had a rather large roll of duct tape.

“Ok, where was I,” said Lucy, again interrupted.

“You were telling us about the all the muggers.”

Father did not speak, but mother realised he was getting rather livid.

“There were three men, one was the personnel chap, one was some kind of technical operations director and the other was the big boss. They asked me lots of questions, experience and all that. The boss was very probing, almost overbearing. The technical chap was the nicest. Not much else to tell really. They said the lab was located elsewhere, hinted that it was near a certain town, which was ok because I can get a train from here. They make food products, so now I just have to wait.”

Lucy was tired and sought an early night. Several more would pass before the morning post brought a letter for her.

Her mother rushed to collect the mat full, operating her own mini sorting office. Most of the mail going straight into the recycling bag. “Lucy, one for you.” Her mother had a habit of doing house wide announcements. You could never quiet hear what she said, so it turned into an exercise routine. Like the weather clock with the rain or snow person, Lucy or father

or sometimes both would pop themselves from the bedrooms onto the landing. This morning father was at work, so Lucy was the only figure in attendance.

Her mother heard the bedroom door and was already halfway up the stairs. Lucy looked down, her mother reached out with the envelope. Lucy took it, tearing the envelope, her face lighting like a beacon.

"You've got it?"

"Yes mum, I start next week."

While the Hamber family celebrated, others were not having such a good time. Simon Morrison had brought the yacht into its berth, even with Mike's support he went ashore with some trepidation. The Casey family had not been idle in mobilizing support, the media seeing a distraught mother and grieving girlfriend were milking the story. Each day that had gone by with the Captain away they built another layer of the story. Ravensbury's PR machine were doing their job well, shielding the boss, who was a very nice man. Ravensbury was truly doing a lot for the families affected, Mr Casey was always keen to point this out.

"That's my new boss," said Lucy, sitting with her parents, glued to the television news.

"Oh, no darling you're not working for his company?" Her mother was now very concerned.

"Mother don't worry," said father, "She is not a sailor, she works in a lab, and he's been very decent over the whole thing. If you ask me that Captain should be walking the plank, from what I've heard he's incompetent, probably like the silly sod I have to work with."

At work the next day Lucy and her new work partner, were given their first task.

"John, these look like elytra," said Lucy holding the sample bag up to the light. The chitin based material had a spectral sheen that gave it a certain beauty.

"Yep, and this is crab carapace for sure, although I have no idea which species."

He looked at the elytra, "Can I see one of those?"

She handed him the tiny elytron. He gave it a good look, then looked at another bag, which had a tatty label marked, "Old Sample." Below it was a barely legible Latin name.

"These look almost identical."

"That's what I thought, except the old sample is smaller and thinner."

"It is also approved for use in food production," said John, tugging his goaty.

Analysing things properly takes time, the edict from on high was to test for a compound found in the old sample. Which with a lot of pressure from the technical director and frequent visits from the boss, not to mention some long hours they did come up with some reliable data. They had been lucky that contrary to popular belief, the previous incumbents had left copious notes on various techniques. Thus what might have taken them months or even years took only a matter of weeks. Lucy was keen to point out how the predecessors had been so close to perfecting a reliable technique. John from bitter experience, cautioned her to give only the information that is asked for.

"But the others, they should take the credit John."

"Yes, I know that, and you know that, and we will end up getting the praise if there is any, and that is not fair. Unfortunately Lucy the world is not fair, as you get older you will realise. Also this might backfire on us, we may do well to stall for a bit." He was very serious, Lucy was surprised.

"But we've finished, we'd be lying if we said otherwise."

“Yes,” he nodded, he knew she was right, look you are a good lass, and you don't know me so you're no doubt wondering about my scruples.” He shook his head, “Look, you've only worked for one company and they were very nice to you while it lasted, ok, you were lucky.” He paused wondering how to put succinctly what had taken him years to learn. “The next task we get, could take ages, then they will think we are stalling, when in fact we are not, we may well be struggling.”

“Why would they think we are stalling, surely they would realise different tasks take different amounts of time.”

“They are not scientists, these are business people,” he shook his head slowly, wondering if he was ever as naïve. “We don't know how long they will keep us employed, the task that takes us a long time, could well be our last, we won't know this but they will. They'll think we know, so then things can get nasty, do you see.”

Lucy sat on her lab stool, she wondered about what John was saying, she could kind of see what he was getting at. He did seem so cynical.

Some weeks had passed when the boss got the message that his new Laboratory staff had made good progress.

“So what have they found?” Ravensbury looked at Miss Pritchard.

“The new samples contain more substance than the old sample sir,” she said, not really getting the full gist of the scientific stuff.

“Give me that report.”

Ravensbury was no expert, but he could see that weight for weight the new samples contained a disproportionately high amount of the molecules. This also suggested processing would be easier. The report also indicated that pending genetic tests, the new sample might be a subspecies. “That will make getting approval a whole lot easier.”

He looked at the clock. “Miss Pritchard.”

“Yes sir?”

“One. Organise the following, get my yacht back out to the Pacific, have it berthed in Darwin. Two. Find me a new captain, get Harris on it, he's a yachtsman.” Miss Pritchard noted his requests and turned to leave.

“Oh, and Three, get the technical director to get a team together, to collect more samples.” WR paused for thought, “Yes and when my yacht has captain and crew ready, let me know, we'll need to get them, myself, and the technical lot out to Australia, so you'll need to book some airline tickets. Higgins will need to come along, best you stay here this time.”

Ravensbury grinned at her, she winked back.

“Too many chaperones!”

“Spoil the, quite Teresa, quite.”

In the lab, Lucy and John were puzzled, they were wondering why they had pieces of crab. There were also some strange plant samples, which also intrigued them.

“Lucy, take it from me, being wiser and older, if we go poking into those when they want us to work on a cost effective extraction method. Well they'll take those crab and plant samples and we won't ever know.”

“So we ignore them?” To be a good scientist you have to have plenty of curiosity, patience, be observant and ask a lot of questions. John could see Lucy needed answers.

“Look we are here on the top floor pretty much undisturbed, I want to know just as much as you, but it's like when you've been working your butt off and take five.”

“The boss turns up and thinks you're a slacker.” They both grinned at each other. “You'd

get on well with my dad," Lucy continued. "When we do the PCR on the samples we could also do it on the "Other Samples" could we not? How would they know one end of a Deoxyribonucleic acid from another?"

"They have a hard time with photocopying paper, let alone a Polymerase Chain Reaction."

It took a while, but eventually they found the genomic DNA markers. Lucy was carefully marking the images from the gel electrophoresis analysis. Both of them had mastered the Southern blotting technique. The technical director was becoming increasingly impatient, paying them very frequent, almost daily visits.

"Well?" he said, bursting in unannounced.

"This is the final lot and it's looking good, Lucy is checking markers."

The technical director hovered, he was quite understanding, coming from an engineering background, but he had the boss on his tail.

Lucy looked up at him, "They look almost identical, there are a few gene differences, but these might account for the variation in the size of the insect."

"We have an idea that the increased hardness of the elytra might be related to the higher levels of the molecular substance you guys were after. This might also account for some genetic difference."

The technical director nodded, "Yes ok, very interesting, but in short the new sample is a subspecies right?"

"Probably," said John, "We would need more time to check our results, run new tests on other samples."

"Experimental repeatability, it's crucial to verify data."

"Understood," said the technical director making a bee line for the door.

Lucy looked at John and shrugged her shoulders.

"Are we working for some mad hatters or what?" said John.

Back at the London HQ, Miss Pritchard was a very busy woman, she had copies of some very funny looking bar codes to put into a report. Her rush was even more urgent as William had called a meeting with his friends from the ministry. These men sensing a fine cup of coffee arrived sooner than Teresa would have liked.

The meeting hastily convened, was attended by the technical director, financial director and the boss himself.

"Welcome gentlemen, thank you for coming at such short notice." Ravensbury was keen to proceed, like a child who wants to open Christmas presents before they should. Teresa was handing the report around as he continued. She was feeling fragile, and fraught, she should have been minuting the meeting.

"We have in this report indication that a subspecies of the original has been discovered. The only difference?" He paused for effect. "It has a thicker shell, so it is commercially viable, and we hope with the data provided you will be able to speed through its approval for use in food production. We are up against some major players, we employ a lot of people and are good for the economy."

The men from the ministry grinned, they knew Ravensbury from old.

"We will have to run our own checks."

"Gordon, we know you will," said William with knowing glance.

In the lab the following day Lucy was sitting dumbfounded. "That was preliminary data, we

haven't even perfected the molecular extraction process, and they've had a meeting with the ministry?"

"Yep, and one of us has to go to Australia," said John.

"But we need to, check the plants, and the crabs, suppose they are a food source, suppose that is why the insects have more of the molecules, there might even be toxins we have not yet identified?"

John tugged his goaty. His unkempt look endeared him to her, she knew he was more interested in his profession than superficiality. "I don't know what's so special about that substance but they're acting like junkies."

"They get high on money John, the molecule is just another way of extracting it from the public."

"Well, it is not a colouring agent that's for sure," said John, tugging at his beard, "If we could purify it, be sure there was nothing dodgy in it, I'd give it a taste."

"It's a wonder they have not tried synthesising it," said Lucy, her thoughts wandering.

"Too complex, besides I hear they've spent a small fortune getting it through approvals tests. Pity the old process did not work on the new samples, you'd think if there was more of the stuff it would be easier to extract."

"So there could be some other substances at work, ones that we have yet to identify."

"Yep and that lot are rushing off like they've found gold." John had a very sceptical look.

"It's understandable they want more samples." Lucy looked out of the window, they were having their coffee break and the view from the top floor was a good one.

"Live ones."

"So, they look like a subspecies and we know tonnes about the original beetles. The technical director said they have approval to bring samples back into the UK, so why should we worry. You can be very negative at times."

"I am a tad older than you madam," said John, doing one of his silly voices.

This gave Lucy a fit of the giggles, not good when the boss comes in unannounced.

"Miss Hamber, you are not obeying the rules, you should be working. NOT giggling."

"Sorry Mr Ravensbury, it was our coffee break." She tried appealing to his kind nature.

"Your punishment will be transportation. You will be sent to Australia, Miss Pritchard will elucidate the details." He glared at the two scientists, "Meanwhile you have results to get and a process to perfect, Mr McKenzie is possibly best suited to perfecting the extraction process that is why you young lady will be on the trip." With a final glare, he left the lab, continuing on his tour of the production facilities.

Back at home Lucy came in for some more verbal assaults.

"Mother, it's part of my job."

"She's right dear, besides she'll get to go to Australia."

"It's not a holiday, she's our only daughter, to go all that way. It worries me just thinking about it."

2 The surprise ashore

As Lucy stepped onto the soft sand, she felt uneasy. There was something about the place, it was different than the islands from which they had just come. Quiet, unusual for

an island, where were the birds?

"Come on miss we've work to do." It was Higgins, the butler come botanist, keen to do his masters bidding.

She moved up the shore to the garland of straggly plants. The leaves looked familiar, they were the ones from the samples she had seen in the lab, it was a tiny shrub. The woody stem, short thick and covered in a rough bark.

"Come on miss we have to collect some beetles and I think it was one that bit me right here." Higgins was pointing with the finger that had received the nip. "You leave admiring the plants to me, that's my job."

"Are there any other types of plant on the island Mr Higgins?"

"No, now please miss we have a job to do," said the butler. Ravensbury was heading towards them, he was accompanied by the technical director and carrying some boxes. The two men placed them down on the sand.

"That should do you," said the technical director as he placed a cardboard box by Lucy. She stopped looking for beetles and looked at the box, inside were lots of smaller storage containers. She placed her hand in and picked one out, they were made of a hard plastic, much resembling a clear plastic beaker, with an opaque lid, perforated with tiny holes at the top. A ventilated home for the beetles. Lucy unscrewed the lid, the smell hit her, "Crab sir?"

"Yes, we think it's their favourite meal," said the technical director. Ravensbury was looking around taking in the views.

"The species we saw back at the lab, they ate vegetation," she said, her mind thinking about how this product might be expensive if it needed crab as a food source.

"So, maybe these bushes aren't to their liking, it does not mean they won't eat vegetation for production purposes."

"Suppose the crab meat is supplying them with the chemicals that they need to produce more of the molecule, and we know there are other factors. Mr McKenzie is having a hard time with the extraction process."

"That is why you and Mr McKenzie have been hired, one way or the other we need that molecule in the quantities found in these beetles, your job is to make that so," said Ravensbury, "Now miss I'm sure you would like to ask a lot of questions, but we have samples to collect and a boat waiting, time is money."

Lucy thought about her fathers work colleague, and her fathers idea, but Ravensbury winning the lottery would not help, the man was already worth millions.

Higgins was the first to find some beetles. The plants had some crevices where the tiny branches shot from the stem. Poking with his pocket knife, he loosened some, taking off great lumps of bark in the process, he got his first few. Initially they sat clinging to the remnant in the bottom of the plastic container. However the scent of the crab drew them out, scurrying to it, wasting no time in feasting.

It was mid afternoon, they had scoured the bushes, trying to find as many as possible.

"Higgins, you take these remaining containers and Miss Hamber and go take a look around the rest of the island. We'll get all these samples back on the boat."

"Yes sir," said Higgins, watching as his boss had one of the ships crew load the boxes back onto the motor launch.

"Come on then miss," he said.

"Should we not take a few of the plants?" Lucy stared at him, he was the botanist, wasn't

he?

“What's the point, the creatures obviously don't eat them. You could learn a lot from my boss miss, there's no point wasting time on unnecessary activities, not unless you want the competitors to have an advantage. Efficiency miss, that's why we are checking for more beetles, get a good stock you see, we need a good breeding stock.”

She smiled at him, he turned, she followed. The tide was ebbing. As they walked, their pathway along the blackened sand grew wider. Turning a corner, Lucy looked back, as she stepped forward the yacht at anchor was obscured by a massive basalt formation. Higgins was clambering up over what had once been a lava flow. She scrambled up after him, her foot slipping on a surface still damp from the receding tide. She slowed taking great care, but he continued at his brisk pace.

She looked at the man, “You're just like a little terrier, sent by your master, you do as you are told.” Her mind wandered, not for long, she stood still staring. Higgins was clambering down the other side of the rocks back onto the sand, he was heading to what looked like bones. Shaking herself out of her trance like stare, she followed him down to the beach. He had run to the skeleton, she was swift to reach him. The man was examining the remains.

“Who is he?”

“How should I know miss, must be some fisherman, just some old skeleton.” Higgins stood up, “Come on we've got to go around this island while the tide is still out.”

He turned and continued his march, as Lucy rose up, she started to walk around past the skull, and back away from a few of the bushes.

“There's no beetles in those,” shouted Higgins, clearly growing impatient, “Come on I've looked.”

The man was already half way over another set of boulders and almost disappearing from sight.

“I'm coming,” shouted Lucy, she took a final glance back at the bones. A slimline camera pulled swiftly from her pocket, she took a few images. Her face puzzled, she looked at right hand of the body, thrust deep into the sand, the head almost buried. Curiosity took hold, she knew she only had seconds, Higgins would not wait and he might even return to see where she had gotten to.

She was startled, suppressing a scream, her natural reaction. Pushing her hand into the sand she had felt flesh. She shivered, yet it was boiling hot, the sun beating down, the heat reflected by the sand. Overcoming her desire to leave it be she pulled the hand up, around the wrist was a small metal bracelet on a chain. It had an inscription, she photographed it and removed it placing the bracelet and camera into her pocket. Replacing the hand, then running like the wind to the rocks. As she clambered up, a head appeared.

“Aghh,” she gasped.

“What's the matter with you?”

“Sorry Mr Higgins you gave me a fright,” she paused, “Sorry I'm a bit slow, clambering over rocks is not really my thing!”

“You sound out of breath,” said Higgins, staring at her, then back at the body. “Give you a fright did it?” He twitched his head up, and towards the bones.

“Bit, I guess I read too many pirate stories,” she paused, “My mother always says I've a

vivid imagination.”

“Well miss if you don't want to join the stiff, I suggest you keep up with me, OK.”

“Yes, sure I'm trying, but these rocks are very rough, I don't want to fall and you are going so fast.” Lucy felt a chill again, Higgins did not stop to help her, he just turned and made for a clump of the bushes. While she picked her way slowly back down to the sand, he was busy collecting more beetles. As she walked to his position she looked up, before she had been so focused on the beach, the beautiful azure blue sea and those bushes and beetles. Now she gazed at the huge volcanic mound that thrust up from this end of the island, it's cropped top, cradling a fluffy white cloud. She thought back to a small squat thatched cottage in a village near home, it's chimney at the end, how similar.

“When you've finished day dreaming miss.” Higgins was annoyed, he thrust full containers, in her hands, “Make yourself useful and carry these.” Taking the remaining containers from a bag, that hung over his shoulder, limp almost like a dead deer. He moved to the next clump of the scrubby plants. His back to her, she noticed some knobbly bits on the end of one of the side shoots. Instinct told her to pick it off, pocketing it, she felt the bracelet. She fumbled in her other pocket, finding a tissue she pushed it down on top of her collection, partly to safeguard the contents, but also to dampen any rattle. The pocket had a zip, she drew it closed.

Higgins stood up and turned, “That's it, come on follow me.”

“Where are we going?” she said, staring at him.

“Miss that is a very stupid question,” he looked at her with some contempt, “For a scientist you're not very smart. Back to the boat, where else?”

“But you're going up there,” she said, looking at the barren hill that he was climbing up.

“I haven't got time to have a silly conversation. The tide will be coming in soon, I am not going all the way back around the beach the way we came, and who knows what the rest of the shoreline is like. Give me those bloody samples, I'll carry them in the bag, so you will have both hands free, and get a damn move on.” He huffed, muttering under his breath, “Someone said not to take women on expeditions and they were bloody right. All they do is bloody talk, and get all hysterical.”

Lucy handed him the containers, the beetles were scurrying around like mad things, they were not used to such confinement. Higgins picked his way up over the rocky surface, here and there were soft patches filled with volcanic ash. He was keeping a steady pace, she began to liken him to some kind of robot. It was late afternoon but still hot, the black rock could still surprise you if you touched a piece that had gotten the full strength of the sun. Even after twenty minutes they had not gotten over this hogs back. It was like a hog, imagine one laying down, the volcano end its head, they were trying to get over its broad shoulders.

Higgins did not look back, Lucy was getting slower, she was used to mental exertion, the man in front was very physical. She imagined him assisting Mr Ravensbury on the kind of country pursuits you engage in if you have the money. Her foot slipped, a loose piece of pumice went rolling down the slope, bouncing, bits flying off in the air as it hit the rocks on its decent to the beach below. She steadied herself, looking back she realised how high they were. “She'll see Australia,” she thought of her fathers words, “Right dad, from the aeroplane window. Why did I not bum around at school like all the others, why does Lucy have to be so clever? Oh Tasha, sitting there in that supermarket checkout, nice safe job. So what if the money is crap, she's happy with Rick, he's got plenty of money, good job

plumbing. I've got no boyfriend, and am getting rather scared." Her mind focused back on the climb, they were traversing what was once a lava flow, Higgins was well ahead. The climb was getting steeper and always it seemed further to the top. The rock was rough and cutting, no sea to smooth the rough edges.

She trembled, her palms sweating, not from heat, up here there was a cool breeze. She was frightened, struggling to keep sight of the man ahead. At times Higgins would disappear from view completely. Eventually she lost sight of him, it was just her, picking her way slowly. Relief at the summit of the ridge turned to angst as she looked down towards the coral lagoon where the yacht was at anchor. This side seemed even worse, she watched Higgins bounding down like a mountain goat. By the time she was half way down, Higgins was wandering over the beach towards the waiting motor launch.

Down on the beach the men looked up, Ravensbury and the crew member assigned to the shore party greeted Higgins as he trotted down the beach.

"What kept you Higgins?"

"Women." Higgins huffed, shaking his head.

"Sorry old chap, not cut out to be nanny are you?" Ravensbury laughed, the crewman, a big fellow, roared at the thought of the butler in such a role.

"Got a few more sir," he paused looking up at the woman still a long way up the side of the ridge, "She's so slow, very vivid imagination, babbling on about pirates."

"Yo ho ho," said the seaman, his deep voice echoing off the bare rocks, his big belly wobbling.

Ravensbury glanced at the man, then at Higgins, then began laughing, Higgins joined in. A few minutes later and William returned to a business like seriousness. "Come on get those aboard."

"What about her," said the sailor, looking up at the woman still clambering down, and with some way to go.

"I'm hungry," Ravensbury looked at Higgins, "You hungry?"

"Indeed sir," said Higgins nodding.

Ravensbury looked at the seaman, "Don't look so worried man, when she gets to the beach you can come over and collect her. She'll come to no harm, probably do her good, bit of fun, besides I have to pay your wages, and I can't do that without money. I have to make phone calls, that kind of thing."

"Maybe someone should go and help her?" The seaman was rough but not heartless.

"She wanted to come, women want equality these days, she's one of those modern career women, wants to be like us," Ravensbury could be very persuasive, and very charming when he wanted his own way. The three men and the samples were soon in the boat, and the boat was soon heading to the big yacht.

From the rocks Lucy saw them, she could not believe what she was witnessing. As the boat left the shore she sat on a lump of basalt, tears welling in her eyes. All she could do was cry, she wondered if she would ever reach the beach, would she ever see home again.

On board the yacht the Captain had been watching events. Tom McCormick was much older than his predecessor, a wise old sea dog would describe him well. He had a big bushy greying beard, and the tide was definitely ebbing on his hairline. As the launch came

alongside he called down to them, "Haven't you forgotten someone?"

"Captain McCormick, it might be late afternoon, but it's still very hot. My man here has samples, if we leave them in those sample containers, inside that bag we will have baked beetles, then all his and her efforts will have been wasted."

The old Captain ran his hands through his beard, what the man said did make sense.

"Couldn't one of you have waited on shore?"

"Captain, Higgins has been half way around the island he's tired, your man had to operate this boat, and I've been baking on the beach all day," Ravensbury paused, "We've been watching her, when she gets near the shore, this fine fellow," said WR pointing to the seaman, "Will go ashore, it will take just a few minutes, and he can take her some food and water."

Tom looked down, nodding at the boss, he reached down to help the men on-board. When Ravensbury and his butler were out of earshot, he turned to the big crewman. "Get some refreshments and get yourself back over there."

"Aye sir," said the man, turning from the Captain he descended below decks. Captain Tom McCormick, took a telescope from his pocket, had he been younger and had fewer of life's knocks he would have clambered up those rocks to help the lass. He did not see a happy woman up there, he did not enjoy the look on her pretty face.

Below decks Higgins had the ear of his boss.

"Why are you whispering man?" said Ravensbury in a quiet voice.

"There was a body around the other side, bones were fresh sir."

"Ah," said the boss.

"Made light of it, old bones," said Higgins with a wink.

"Good man, might not be, but then again."

"That's why I mentioned pirates and imagination," said Higgins with a wry smile.

Ravensbury nodded, a grin on his face, almost a smirk. "We must give little Miss Scientist a good time, she wanted to see a bit of Australia, won't hurt to give her a few days off."

"Take her mind off this place sir," said Higgins.

"Hmm, and they'll see it as an apology, might even get her some trinket, explain about the samples getting hot," WR said, with a smile.

"That was a good tale sir, they were probably freezing their butts off in that bag of mine, relatively speaking."

"Yes but that lot don't know, and what they don't know," said Ravensbury, "Does that sound like the launch?"

"Must be going to rescue the damsel," sniggered Higgins.

As the little boat reached the shore, the seaman called out to Lucy, she was just struggling with the last few metres of rough rocks. "Sorry miss, them samples was getting a bit hot, the boss didn't want all that effort wasted for nothing."

The man felt awkward, as though somehow it was his fault she'd been left. He wondered if maybe he should have shown either Higgins or Ravensbury how to operate the boat, perhaps he should have waited for the young lady. He had considered leaving the boat and going to help, but he feared leaving the boat unattended, he did not like this island, it gave him the creeps.

Lucy had quiet a few cuts and scrazes, not to mention the odd bruise.

"You, look like you've been in the wars miss. Sorry I would have helped you but, well, did not want the boat drifting off she's a bit of a handful to hang onto."

Lucy said nothing she almost fell into the boat. The seaman, helped her, as a child might pick up a rag doll and place it in a toy.

Upon reaching the yacht the big man helped her back to her cabin, leaving the bag of refreshments on a small table near the window. She clambered into her bunk. It did not take long for Lucy to fall into a deep sleep, even with the anger that had sprouted from her earlier fears. Those black and blue souvenirs, the aching limbs, things racing in her mind, the gentle roll of the ship combined with exhaustion from the exertion was a powerful force against insomnia. The Captain had the vessel heading south east towards the archipelago, Ravensbury was in no mood to hang around.

Before dusk all the passengers were woken for an early breakfast, Lucy was told to make ready to depart. Down in her cabin she was busy. Bags packed, a quick shower and she was ready to go, but she could not help herself. Her mother did it and she had gotten into the same habit. A final final check around the room, just to make sure that you'd not left anything behind. Lucy was on her hands and knees, her eyes checking around the floor for dropped items. Her movements stopped, eyes focused, she reached out. Using her delicate nails she teased a tiny object from the crevice where it rested at an odd angle, like a beached ship, canted to one side. It was not much bigger than a postage stamp, a thin plastic item with metal strips embedded in one end.

For a moment she was lost in thought, what was it? The object had a certain familiarity, she rose from the floor and moving towards a small bag. Instinctively she reached in and pulled out the pouch containing her camera.

"Is she ready yet?" Ravensbury was eager to leave. That night the ship had anchored near the largest island. It was now morning and he was keen to get back to London.

"Women," said Higgins, "I'll go and see sir."

Some little while later, Higgins, carrying a suitcase and a small piece of hand luggage appeared back on deck. Lucy followed him, she was smiling.

"Sorry boss," she said, her eyelashes fluttering.

"Come on," he replied.

Higgins had already loaded the launch and was waiting back on deck, Ravensbury indicated to Lucy to go down the steps to the launch, "Ladies first my dear."

She smiled at him, and did as he bid her. As Ravensbury passed Higgins, the butler whispered, "She seems happy this morning."

Ravensbury nodded, "Thank you Higgins, I'll call my stock broker."

The small boat headed towards the shore, then veered left parallel to a beach covered with golden sand. Small huts and chalets blended into the lush vegetation. Directly ahead a seaplane waited, a man stood in the open hatch at the back of the aircraft.

"Hi mate, just you and the sheila?"

"Yes," said WR, his polished accent like silk to a rasp.

The Australian pilot, assisted them both into the passenger seats, then effortlessly stowed the luggage. Ravensbury watched as the launch circled around behind the aircraft and headed back towards his yacht. He did not notice the airman return to the pilots seat, Lucy

did.

"You two strapped in back there?"

"I am," said Lucy, with a nice smile. The pilot grinned back, with a slight nod of his head.

"What about you mate?" he said, craning his neck back to look at the other passenger.

"Yes," said Ravensbury, "We will make it back to Sydney today, won't we?"

"Sydney?" The pilot looked amused, "You must be joking mate."

"I specifically requested a fast plane from these Islands back to Sydney."

"Bundaberg mate," said the pilot. His hands moving across the instruments.

"I have a plane to catch to London."

"Yep," said the pilot starting the engines.

"How long to this Bunbug?"

"Bundaberg mate, about five hours, depends upon the weather," said the pilot giving the aircraft full throttle. A trail of spray flew from the tail as the machine took to the air. Lucy was impressed, so smooth, and the view as the plane banked was beautiful. The islands stretching out as the plane circled and headed for the empty ocean ahead.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yep mate," said the pilot.

"This is a nice aircraft, is it new?" said Lucy, nosing at the controls, and interrupting Ravensbury's abrasive line.

"Yep miss, only had her a few months," said the pilot.

"What is she?"

"Make miss?"

"Yes," said Lucy in a bubbly voice.

"You like aircraft?"

"Yes, your one is very cute."

"Cute!" The pilot laughed, "She's a seagull miss."

"That explains why she's so cute."

"Yep, Matt by the way, Matt Peterson."

"Lucy Hamber, pleased to meet you. So where was she made?"

"Russia miss, Canadian turbo props, if your interested."

Ravensbury raised his eyebrows and glanced towards the sea.

"Latest version this the La-8," said Matt, he paused adjusting the trim, his eyes focused on the direction heading, the plane turned slightly. Lucy felt the aircraft tilt to the right, as Matt altered course.

"Why have we changed course?" Ravensbury was alert, and curious.

"Drift mate, have to compensate for the wind. We'd have been blown off course, see the air currents would have taken us too far south, at the current wind speed and direction."

"So?"

"We do need to get to Bundaberg mate," said the pilot with a grin.

"Where is this place, exactly," WR paused, "In relation to Sydney?"

"North."

"How far north, exactly?"

"Too bloody far, that's how far mate," said Matt, with a cheeky smirk.

Lucy was trying to fight bursting out laughing, she could see her boss was getting somewhat frustrated.

"I'm ordering you to change direction and go south," said Ravensbury.

Matt shook his head, "No can do mate."

"I'm paying for this flight."

"Yep, you hired a plane and a pilot," said Matt, keeping his cool.

"Indeed, so I get to say where we go, ok."

"Was that aviation kerosene or diesel in that luggage back there?"

"I'm tiring of your facetious remarks, you'd do well to show me respect."

"Mate, would you hire a surgeon, then tell him how to perform the operation?"

Ravensbury went quiet, putting his right hand to his forehead he stared towards the horizon. Remaining silent for the rest of the journey. Lucy occasionally glanced over at her boss, every so often he would pull one of those gadgets from his jacket. Some hours passed by, she noticed a smile on his face, he was tapping away at the miniature keyboard.

The little Chaika continued its steady path, the twin engines singing in the sky. Hours later and Lucy was admiring the beautiful coastline.

"Matt."

"Yes love."

"Is that the Burnett River?"

"Yep," he said, in his concise manner.

"Isn't that where you find *Neoceratodus forsteri*?"

"What miss?"

"The Queensland lungfish," said Lucy, smiling, amused at the pilots response.

"Oh, you mean the Burnett Salmon," said Matt, with a laugh.

"It's the only member of the Ceratodontidae family."

"Is that so miss, well you'll have to excuse me, I'd love to get to know them, but I have a control tower that just love to chat in gibberish."

"We heard that," came a voice over the radio.

Matt chattered back in a friendly but professional banter. With the landing gear down he made the final approach, the touchdown was perfect.

As the plane taxied to its parking position Ravensbury broke silence.

"Miss Hamber, I have to get a plane to Sydney," he said, "There's one leaves here in just over an hour, so I have to run, you'd like to see that fish, yes?" Ravensbury had abandoned his initial plan to have her see the sights of Sydney. His shrewd mind had picked up on her fishy interests.

"*Neoceratodus forsteri*?" She grinned. "Wow, yes please."

"You, pilot, can you help this lady see those kippers of yours."

"Me mate, sure why not." The pilot was moving to the back of the plane and opening up. Ravensbury almost leaped from his seat, and emulating a frog, he bounded out of the aircraft onto the tarmac and was heading towards the buildings at a rapid pace.

"He almost looks comical," said the pilot, "Polite bastard." Matt was staring at the suited Englishman, his cool manner, striding purposefully to get the next plane. "Lucky bastard too, a few months earlier and he wouldn't have got a direct flight."

Lucy smiled, "Well, that's a relief."

"Why miss?"

"You work it out!" She gave him a nice smile.

"Still you can get to see those members of the *Sarcopterygii*, now there's an old group. Still playing after four hundred million years, do you think they'll have competition from the Stones?"

"Matt Peterson, you did understand *Neoceratodus forsteri*, didn't you?" said Lucy rather cheekily.

"I earn my living flying planes," he pause, "But you know I've loved nature since I was a lad, guess that's why I like being up there, away from the idiots on the ground, like a bird looking down on beautiful mother earth." He sighed, "People."

"You must get to meet quiet a few?" said Lucy as Matt unloaded the luggage.

"Yep, all sorts, some nice, some like him," he said handing the small flight bag to her.

"How do you mean?" She had a serious expression, expecting a considered answer. He looked at her, reading her face.

"He's only interested in one thing miss, and it ain't the usual thing you ladies think we are interested in." Matt climbed from the plane, closing the hatch and securing it.

"It does not begin with S then?" She probed, trying to tease the answer from him. They were playing with each other, almost a game of riddles.

"Not unless the S has two vertical lines through it miss," he picked up the case, "Come on, I'll give you the grand tour."

She could not help herself, she burst into a fit of the giggles. He began laughing, then became subdued, "How'd that happen?"

As Lucy raised her hands to her head, running her fingers through her long hair, the sleeves of her blouse fell back down her pale slender arms. Matt could see the scratches and bruises, and plasters on the underside of her hands. She went quiet, the fun left her, now she felt like bursting into tears, her head spun, looking towards the terminal building. Hands dropped by her side, the strap of the flight bag almost slipping off her shoulder.

"Tell me later," said Matt, his voice calm and reassuring, almost loosing its rough grating texture.

In London in a very plush room two men greeted each other. The décor was antique, the walls were panelled with fine carving embellishing the oak.

"Henry."

"William."

"Good to see you, how are you old fellow?"

"Alright with a drop of brandy in me," the older man laughed, "Project under way then?"

"Not quite, samples are on the yacht, that will take a while to get here. Not that it matters at the moment, the egg head has not perfected a refining process."

"Thought you had one of each?"

"Oh I gave her some time in Australia."

The older man looked puzzled, "Why? and why the devil did you not airfreight the samples? You always want things in a hurry."

"Henry I've known you a damn long time, you know me better than that."

"Can't rush a fine vintage!" The older man smiled filling two glasses, "William you're a damn decent fellow."

Back in Australia: The old pickup(ute) bumped along the track, leaving a trail of dust, grinding to a halt in an open parking area surrounded by scrub and trees.

"I suppose without men like him we would not have jobs?"

"Miss that's like saying without the, and I use the term loosely, "Good Book", decent folk would become immoral."

"Yes but aren't some bad people good because of it?"

"Smoke and mirrors miss, it allows them to look good, but looks can be deceiving. Your boss dresses nice, I expect a lot of people even think he is nice."

"Should we be discussing this, my mum says you shouldn't talk about religion or politics."

"Love when I was your age my parents used to say the same, but do you really think the world is only six thousand years old?"

She smiled at him, he continued.

"Or for that matter, the mustard seed grows into the largest tree?" He looked up at large gnarled old tree. "That would be something hey, plant mustard and get a giant redwood forest!"

"You're very cynical," she said, feeling happy inside.

"I call a spade a spade miss, quite frankly I've got to the stage of life where I don't bloody care what others think. They're a dozy bloody lot any ways."

"They can still be dangerous if you wake them."

"Oh yea," he said, nodding, "I know, but who's going to hear us out here?"

"You never know," she said, in a subdued tone.

"Do you believe then?"

"No." She said shaking her head.

"Because of the age of the earth and evolution, you being a scientist?"

"Yes and no," she paused, "Have you heard of Exeter?"

"Ship goes by that name," he said, scratching his chin as he picked his way over a tree root.

"It's a city in Devon, my parents took me there last year," she said, negotiating the path as it narrowed.

"Go on," he said.

"Well there's a castle and on the wall near the old entrance is a plaque. They put it up as a dedication to the last four women to be hung for witchcraft." She paused for thought, "On the way back through the shopping street, I looked up a side road and saw the castle.

There were two men in the street, not shoppers. One was banging on about sins, both had a black book in their hands. I wanted to go up to him and argue, I wanted to take them up to that plaque and show them. I wanted to tell them they were bad for women's health, to shout, "Not today, THANK YOU." There was a lot more I wanted to say. I wanted to wake them up, to speak like you do, not caring about what others might think, even if I am speaking to Mr Do You Know Who I Am."

"You did then?"

"No my parents cautioned prudence."

When Lucy eventually arrived back to work she was curious as to why John did not have any new samples. Especially as the boss and the technical director had returned weeks ago.

“They seemed in quite a rush to get off the island.”

“Any ideas why? he paused, “I mean, well I suppose they wanted to get those samples on the boat and back to the UK.”

“Then why not fly the samples back?” To her this seemed so obvious.

“We've not got an extraction process perfected yet, so, I don't know, who cares?”

While Lucy had been enjoying Australia, John had been toiling away. He felt like a grape in a press, his juice was being extracted. He was older and had a cynical view as to why Lucy had been taken to Australia by the boss, she was pretty. Before he'd felt like a mentor, now he had begun to resent her. The daily grind had taken the edge off his curiosity, as she continued to speak all he had left was animosity. She noted he'd not progressed any further with examination of either of the original plant or crab samples. Lucy wanted to know why the beetles had not eaten the island's only plant species, when their insects relatives lived exclusively on vegetation, and why were there no birds on the island?

“Aren't you curious as to how the beetles and plants got to the island in the first place?”

“No, not really, I've got people watching, the boss breathing down my neck, and a mortgage to pay. Are you going to help me or what?”

The week went by very slowly, John became more and more frustrated and bad tempered. A stream of phone calls checking progress and several visits from Ravensbury along with his technical director did not help. At times Lucy felt like John's secretary, keeping them informed while John scratched his head. She tried to stay positive, making suggestions, these drove him to distraction.

“I'm trying to bloody think, will you just shut up,” he said one time as the beetles were being boiled.

Her suggestions would meet with, “I've already tried that,” or “That's a stupid idea.”

She began counting the seconds to the approaching weekend, her first week back had been a nightmare. She dreaded the weeks to come.

After an uneventful weekend she worked herself up to going into work. The Monday morning feeling was in her every fibre. Arriving outside the factory complex, Lucy noticed John's car already parked in his usual spot. She walked past it, the morning was cool, she expected a waft of heat from the bonnet, but the car was cold. She surmised, observant as she was that he must have been in for some time. This was unusual, as he very often worked late and usually arrived at an unpredictable time in the morning.

When Lucy entered the Lab it was with some foreboding, she was pleasantly relieved.

“John you're happy.”

“Aye,” he said with a smile, “I had found a way of extracting the molecule with a chemical, but that was toxic, so no good for use in food. Well I tried cooking the little buggers, which had the side effect of killing them, so handy as they are very lively. Unfortunately the heat damages the molecular structure, well the heat needed to kill them and break down those tough elytra. You look a bit sad lassy.”

“The thought of all those beetles being killed.”

“They're only wee critters, any ways where was I, oh I know. So well you know how it's been quite hot lately, I made some ice for me drinks at the weekend, that got me thinking. These wee fellows come from a hot climate, so I put a couple of the samples in a container, boy is that tricky they jump all over the place. Anyway, I put them in the lab's

freezer. Bingo, they end up stiff, literally. The wing cases.”

“Elytra,” said Lucy interjecting with her correct nomenclature.

“Aye, whatever,” he said, with a raised eyebrow, “The elytra just dropped off. This is great, before you see we were going to mush the whole beetle up, which made refinement even more tricky.”

“The goo from the body parts?”

“Aye, and there's not much of the molecule in that lot, it's mostly in the wing cases, so fantastic. We put the frozen lot through a sifter, the wing cases drop through the rest gets wasted.”

“Good,” she said, nodding, “So you still have to extract the molecules.”

“That's the beauty of freezing, whatever the extra binding molecule is, it gets broken down by the cooling process. All I did was crush the wing cases to a fine powder, put that in distilled water, spin in a centrifuge, hey bloody presto, send that lot through a fine filter and you end up with almost pure molecules.”

“How come?”

“The molecules are quite large, relatively speaking to the rest of the suspension.”

“It's a good job it's me your talking too, how are you going to explain it to that lot?”

“Freeze dried beetle, extract coffee bean, grind, stirred not shaken, filter, and what's left is the tasty bit.”

“Yep,” said Lucy, “Near enough.”

“Yep, I think you spent too long down under.”

“Yep.”

John grinned, “Sorry I've had a bit of a nark on, pressure of work, ah you know.”

“You're a grumpy old sod a heart.” She giggled.

“Hey watch it miss or I might look at ways of refining you.”

“Oh, no you'll turn me into a lady?” Lucy feigned astonishment.

“They don't call me the baron for nothing you know,” said John in jovial tune.

Lucy was mulling things in her mind, “You've been using the old beetles, when we get the ones from the island.”

“Sub species, besides wasting those won't be an option until we have a breeding program.”

He looked at her, “You've got one of your funny looks.”

“I'm thinking,” she said quietly.

“Oh!” said John, somewhat curious.

“What about all the stiffs?”

“The dead beetles?”

“Yes,” she said, “Won't there be a lot of waste.”

“You don't need much of the molecule for the product. The technical director said when we've sorted the extraction process the next task will be to check the beetle for toxic substances.”

“Why?”

“Well, he did not say exactly but reading between the proverbial lines, I think they might be going to use the rest as a protein source to add to animal feed.”

“What gives you that idea?”

“Well he mentioned the breeding program and food for the beetles. I explained the ones we have now eat vegetation but your ones eat meat, well we think they do.”

“It would explain the crab, and why the plants on the island were untouched.”

“That's what I thought, although I hope he's not going to feed beetles to beetles.”

Lucy nodded, subdued as other things went through her mind.

“So apart from making ice did you have a good weekend?”

"Aye, I went...." He was cut off.

"I'll get it." Lucy picked up the phone. She listened occasionally making an brief utterance.

"They got your email, that was Miss Pritchard, a delegation is on it's way."

The two of them stared at each other.

John finally broke the silence. "Oh," he said, "What now?"

"Indeed."

It was not long before their lab received its visitors.

"Right what have you got?"

Well these are only preliminary findings, on the samples and the original beetles, but if you have a look at the figures. John handed Ravensbury a report.

William scanned the papers, he was impressed with the neat presentation. "You've increased the yield from the original beetles by ten percent, and with the wing cases by eighty two percent. That's fantastic, I can't wait for the ship to arrive, start breeding those island beetles."

"We would suggest it's too early to celebrate sir. You see we have to make sure the refined material is as pure as possible, as it is for human consumption, so the yield may go down."

Lucy chipped in, "Also we are changing the environment and nutrient source of the island beetles, this might reduce the molecular availability."

"Yes, yes ok, but with this new refining process, even the species we had to start with would be approaching commercial viability." William was intensely positive, his passion for the project overwhelming.

"Sir with due respect we both feel caution is needed, we are moving an animal from it's natural habitat." Lucy said softly, she felt she had to speak up. The man clearly was only looking at it from one angle.

"It's a subspecies, we already have approval. Besides, you two will devise a commercial breeding program."

The technical director spoke, "After they've helped me with a method of utilizing the rest of the beetle." He looked at Ravensbury.

"Of course," said William, "It would be a shame to waste the rest, besides we do want to be good for the environment, recycling, green image, good for the company. You would not grow a cow for the leather and throw away the meat, would you?"

"How long until the beetles get here?" asked John.

"Another couple of weeks, takes a bit longer by sea, even with my yacht," Ravensbury looked at the technical director, "Well that's good news for a Friday, we'd best be off."

For a while after they'd left Lucy and John remained silent, although had you put a microphone in their heads you would have heard lots of cogs whirring.

"They don't get it do they?" said John, remembering what Lucy had mentioned.

"Nop," she said, her manner subdued. "They'll probably make a big splash about the product being natural and GM free."

"You are cynical," said John, his expression part sad part happy. His goaty wiggling as he pursed his lips.

"Must have got it from my Australian friend," she said with a smile.

"Aye," John sighed, "We'll I might have a mortgage to pay, but even so I agree with you. You keep up that attitude, I wish a few more had it."

"Most people are just empty heads, waiting to be filled," she said with a smile.

"Used more like," said John, "That's what gets me, how can people be so accepting."

"I know don't get me started on fluoride or microwaves." Lucy thought about the arguments she had with her parents about both subjects.

"Aye well another quarter of an hour an I'm out of here," said John, looking relieved, "So do you have any plans?"

The fifteen minutes went quickly, if rather unscientifically, on an analysis of the pending activities.

Saturday Lucy was up bright and early, after a brief raid on the muesli she returned to her room. Her mum and dad had been nagging her for the last couple of weeks. The room was small, a bed to one side, and down the end near the window, a small desk, flanked by two large bookcases, both of which had smaller ones stacked on top. The desk was no antique, a metal frame with veneered wood top, some might say a glorified table. Upon it she opened a notebook, powered it up, and waited. Logged on she worked her way through the set of memory cards containing the pictures from her camera, transferring them to the computer. She left one until last, it was different, luckily it fitted one of the memory card reader's slots. She put the pictures from it in a folder called "other".

"Let's have a look at you first," she said quietly to herself. The card had not contained many pictures, most were scenes of ports, a couple of motorbikes with some strange road signs in the background. A sports car, followed by a several groups of men, one of whom seemed familiar but she could not place him. Towards the end was an image of an exotic location, lush plants, the views taken from a distance, as though the person was on the ship. Lucy stopped, she flipped between the last two pictures, zooming in.

"Oh, naughty man," she said, staring at a cavorting couple.

A car approached down a long gravel drive, it stopped close to front door of a large house. The driver's door opened, a man, smartly dressed but with a rough face stepped out. His feet scrunched as he walked to the rear of the car, as he opened the car door, the curtains twitched in one of the rooms. It was early morning, a still mist hung over a field, birds sang, the sky was bright, but you could see no sun. The passenger, alighted, spoke briefly to the driver, took a few items from the back seat, and walked towards the house. The car driven so quietly purred away, around to the side of the house. The front door opened, the man was being watched, the line of his tailored suit cutting a striking figure. Almost at the door a hand moved like lightning, thrusting towards the person in the doorway.

"Oh darling these are beautiful," said a tall elegant woman as she kissed him. They were her favourite, he'd remembered. "It's wonderful to have you home."

The man stepped inside, closing the door, and depositing his briefcase in the hallway.

"Sorry darling, but we have to get the project back on track."

"How are the new people, you said they weren't having much luck?" The lady of the house placed the flowers on a table, "I'll put them in water in a minute, you must be hungry."

"My usual please dear," said the man continuing, "Seem to have it sorted now, once the woman got back they cracked the problem."

"You're not very enamoured by the Scottish chap, what's his name?"

"McKenzie," said the man sitting down, "No, he comes across as being flustered and very dull. When you take people on you wonder why."

"Why what?"

"If they liked what they did and were any good why would they leave their old jobs, the girl I can understand she's fresh out of university, well I think she had a job for a while, they

closed the company, not her fault, but him.”

“You amaze me, how do you remember so much about all those people who work for you?”

“How can I put them to work efficiently if I don't know their capabilities or understand their motivations?”

“William, you are marvellous, and very kind,” she paused, “I forgot to ask you, did the girl enjoy Australia?”

“Yes, she did,” he paused for thought, “She was very positive, even after that hike over the island with Higgins.” William took a bite from some toast, “Yet back with Mr Grumpy egg head she's a bit negative again.”

“How is Higgins?”

“Fiona, Higgins is Higgins, cool, efficient, there when you need him, gets things done. He's about the only person I can ask to do a job and I know it will be done as well as if I did it myself.”

Sunday Lucy went with her mum and dad to visit her dear grandmother.

“So tell me about it, did you go to the great barrier reef?”

“It was fantastic gran, we went diving.”

“Whose we?”

“Matt and me.”

“Matt?”

“He's the pilot, he flew us back from the islands.”

“Us?”

“Mum,” said Mrs Hamber, with a nudge.

“I like to know who my granddaughter's been mixing with,” she gave her daughter a stern look.

“My boss when we came back from where we were.”

“And where was that?”

“Gran she can't say it's part of her work,” chipped in father, “Will you let her continue.”

“I am, go on dear.”

“Well we went along part of the coral, its very controlled, to protect the reef you see.”

“So is he handsome?”

“Mother,” said Mrs Hamber, herself becoming slightly exasperated.

“But you've heard all this.”

“No we haven't she came back and was very tired from the long flight, the next weekend she'd been having a hard time at work so we took her out.” Mrs Hamber was used to explaining things to her mother.

“She must have told you some of this?”

“Father was working late, besides Lucy has to go by train she does not get in very early mum, by the time she's eaten it's nearly time for her to go bed.”

“Oh,” said Gran a little subdued.

“Where was I?”

“Tell us about that park you went to,” said Mrs Hamber.

“So she has told you, I knew it.”

“Mother, she sent you and us a few postcards, now will you please let the poor girl speak.”

“Alright, alright no need to get like that with your poor old mother.”

Lucy was relieved to get back to work, she enjoyed seeing gran, but the frustration of trying to tell of her journey with her parents and grandmother constantly interrupting had driven

her spare.

It was early on the Monday morning, Lucy was writing up some notes in the small office at the front of the lab, when a man appeared at the entrance. Lucy signed his pad, and wheeled a big trolley full of cases into the lab.

“John, the canisters with the samples have arrived.” She looked across the room at her partner, who was rather engrossed with a little curiosity. He looked up, at her after some delay, and spoke.

“Well I think the first thing we need to do with these is to see how we can kill them.”

“What? The boss is going to love you, we don't have very many and you want to start by killing them?”

“I'm thinking red squirrel, grey squirrel. It's fine here in the lab, in a controlled environment but in production, suppose some escape?”

“He said he wants us to help with designing the production processes, so we can.” Lucy stopped mid sentence.

“So we can?”

“Matt told me about rabbits that were introduced to Australia, then they introduced foxes to control the rabbits which only compounded the error.”

“That pilot friend of yours sounds like a fine fellow, look we'll try breeding some, but I say lets take a few of the old sample and a few of these island variety and see what pesticides work and what don't.”

“Shall I start breeding a few, it's what we are supposed to be doing with our foreign friends?”

“Aye, it'll keep the boss quiet,” said John, “Besides having babies is women's work!” He had a wicked grin on his face.

Lucy smiled back, “And I suppose killing is what men do best?”

“Aye, you're about right there, us being all macho like.”

“You verses the beetles.”

“I know I'm so brave,” he laughed, beating his chest.

Later John wandered back across the lab. He had been working in the isolation area, the last thing they wanted was the chemical concoctions he had been working with drifting into the breeding stock.

“I'm amazed, god we can kill the old sample beetles with a good range of pesticides, but these,” said John, concern evident in his manner.

“You'd have thought some of the chemicals banned in the west might have worked?”

“You and me both love,” John looked worried, “You'd have thought DDT.” He shook his head.

They sat in silence pondering the situation

3 Worried workers

Just over a week had past when Ravensbury called a meeting, his glare and anger was all too obvious. "Look I don't want all this negative crap."

"Sir with due respect, the factory is not the same as a laboratory," said John, with a frown. "Exactly which is why I have asked you to assist with the design of the processing plant, because you understand better than any of us the nature of these insects. Look I do not want any problems, I'm a business man, problems cost money, that's why you two are going to help, so we have the necessary safeguards in place."

"Yes but Mr Ravensbury, these island beetles are not the same as the first ones you used, we've tried almost every pesticide known to man, many of which are effective on the original species but none have killed the island ones." Lucy faded, her voice timid in the face of her boss who was staring at her.

"You've been using pesticides?" Ravensbury looked shocked and angry.

"Sir, we are dealing with an unknown quantity, we had to have a backup plan," said John, trying to back up his partner.

"Backup plan, backup plan! That factory not a few yards from here is processing food products, and you have been using pesticides?"

"Sir in tiny amounts, in a sealed laboratory environment," John replied, struggling to keep his cool.

"On whose authority?"

"Well," John paused erring, Lucy looked at him, feeling awkward for having mentioned it.

"Go on man, who authorised these experiments of yours?"

John stood for what seemed like an eternity, his face reddening, "Well you did sir."

"I did," shouted Ravensbury, so loud they thought the whole factory must have heard. "Just how the bloody hell do you think I did?"

"Well sir you told us to check for toxic substances, to be safe, avoid contaminating the food."

"Yes, not bloody bring shit into the the plant," said Ravensbury, his voice pounding John's ears.

"Sir firstly we've not taken any shit near the factory facilities. Second, as a biochemist you need to know what you're looking for in order to find it, so tiny samples of toxins are useful in determining factors by which you can identify them. Imagine I asked you to find a potato and you had no idea what a potato looked like."

"I see, I think, but you were not exactly using the toxins for their intended purposes where you?" He paused, "You're bullshitting me Mr McKenzie, why would you even need to check the beetles for pesticides, especially when these latest ones come from an isolated island?"

"Sir, with due respect your a business man, not a scientist, we know that the island beetles eat meat, and concentration levels of toxins are higher in meat."

"Why?"

"They're higher up the food chain, animals that eat meat, eat animals which consume other animals and so on, the island beetles we suspect eat crab. Crabs are scavengers, they'll eat things on the ocean floor."

"The island is miles from bloody nowhere?"

"Aye, but there are ocean currents that can take biological materials thousands of miles, and how do you know that some government or company has not done chemical tests on such an isolated location?"

"What a load of bull, Mr McKenzie, we are not going to breed the buggers on that island,

we will be controlling the food source, you are talking bollocks.”

After a moment of silence, Ravensbury continued.

“Look I haven't got time to sit here procrastinating, you two will assist with the production plant, surely you can have a sealed breeding area, keep them contained through to freezing after that. God it's not rocket science, we can put a man on the moon but we can't contain a few bloody beetles.”

“Sir I'm not sure you understand what John is saying? When facilities are new things will no doubt be fine, but systems break down, materials wear, just think about a house.”

“A house, oh my what the bloody hell.”

“Sir, look at a new house and go back in ten years time,” said Lucy, trying to stand her ground.

“This is a bloody factory not a house, these are beetles, now enough of this bullshitting. I've spent a small fortune on this project, we know the beetles are suitable, they have commercially viable yields, all that's left is to produce a production process that meets standards. You two egg heads should get out more, in the real world humans do all sorts of dangerous things, we have nuclear power stations, highly dangerous, but they are built with safeguards. I'm going now, I expect your full cooperation with the production and technical director. Good day.”

With that Ravensbury was off leaving Lucy and John in bewildered amazement.

Lucy spoke first, “Sorry John, I put my foot in it.”

“Don't be, the man's a jerk, he talks as though following some kind of procedures.”

“Safeguards,” Lucy interjected.

“Aye, safe bloody guards are all you need.”

“Aren't they?” Lucy said, with an air of conceit.

“Maybe he's right about you.”

“Whatever do you mean?” replied Lucy in a sarcastic tone.

“That madam should get out more and see the real world,” said John trying to imitate Ravensbury's accent.

For a moment the two of them saw the humorous side of the situation, but reality brought them back to earth.

The weekend did not help much, with all that had gone on at work, her new job was playing on her mind. She worried about what she had said, she worried about her work partner, John. He had taken the brunt of Ravensbury's wrath. Her dad had managed to get a few days either side of the weekend, partly to escape Mr Kaplan, and partly to give her mother a treat. The two of them had rented a cottage in mid Wales. She thought how she would have loved to have been with them wandering the Brecons, bliss. She wandered through the local park, its isolated old trees, tall and majestic. Some nearer the road mutilated, their top branches lopped regularly. Near to a small lake, were a row of bench seats, she wandered over to one. Shaded by a small silver birch she sat and watched the people. A young mother pushing one of those smart buggies, stopped. The little toddler decanted, wobbling towards the water. His mother took him by the hand, her other hand held a crunched up carrier bag. Ducks, being smart birds, knew their luck was in and headed over towards the little human. They did make a noise, Lucy almost smiled, the child was so funny, the expressions on it's little face. She could not decide if it was a boy or

a girl, no matter. The ducks shouting, "Me please, me." and funny noises emanating from the tiny tot, who almost fell over trying to throw the bread. It's aim needed improvement. One duck was showered with breadcrumbs, as it went round in circles the other ducks positively mugged it trying to feed off of it's feathery plate. The ducks back was soon clear of crumbs. With the bread gone, the ducks wandered back to the lake, and the mother persuaded a reluctant child to continue its journey through life.

Lucy was trying to think what to do. She wanted to go somewhere nice, but with mum and dad away, and none of her friends really interested in her more energetic pursuits, she could only sit and daydream.

"Hi, you alright?"

"Yes thanks." Lucy turned towards the direction of the voice.

"Sorry, that sounded a bit casual, I just wondered if you were ok, just you looked a bit down."

"There are some places I'd like to go but, I don't know I just feel a bit, well not sure about going on my own."

"Aye well I guess a woman on her own," said the man, he looked a bit older, maybe in his early thirties.

"Yes," she replied, her tone melancholy.

"I'm not, well, you know, I'm, well that's to say I like woman, but well at the moment. So I would not want to be your partner, right now."

"Oh, have I got a sign over my head, boyfriend wanted?"

"No, no, sorry I'm not saying it very well. I have just broken up with a, well I don't like to say. I'm just a wee bit, well taking it easy, I've had a bit of a bad time, so being friends with a woman I can handle but."

"Sorry," she said, thinking how awkward he seemed.

"Oh, my own silly fault, should have read the manual first, typical bloke."

"She laughed, So do you like hiking?"

"Aye I do."

"Really?" said Lucy surprised.

"Aye, not that she did. That was one of the many things that caused, well not sure how to say it," he said stopping himself.

"I understand, was she not keen on walking then?"

"Not keen," he sighed, "She considered it a hike if she had to walk more than a few yards to the supermarket."

"No!"

"Aye, if we could not get a parking space just outside the entrance, I had to drop her off, park the car. Then after I'd found her, I would have to take the trolley back to the car, unload, while she went for a coffee, take the trolley back, tell her, go and get the car, and drive around in circles until she deemed herself ready to exit the emporium."

"Surly if she knew you were waiting?"

"Oh, the excuses, "I had to go to the toilet, that coffee, met a friend, thought I'd lost my purse."" He raised an eyebrow. "Rather ironic really, the miles she must have walked around that supermarket, yet she could not go for a walk even in the local park."

"Ah, but you're forgetting something," she said with a cheeky grin.

"I am?"

"Yes, she had the trolley for support."

"Oh, aye, that would explain how she was able to walk around for so long."

"And why she took so long to get out of the supermarket," Lucy added.

"Oh, my god you're right, I'd taken away her support when I got the pound back." The man looked at his watch, "Oh, shit, bugger, oh I am sorry swearing, I'm supposed to be meeting my mother at the station. I did not realise the time, god I best be off, nice meeting you, sorry." His voice trailed off, as he rushed away.

Lucy thought about him, she wondered about all the people we meet just once in our lives. She thought about Matt, wondering about him, wishing she could be off exploring Queensland's wild places with him. It was no good this just made her feel low, yet what could she do, apart from watch the ducks and the people, and wonder which of them had more sense.

In a rather large country house other people were relaxing, though not all.

"Good article sir?" Higgins noticed a jovial grin on his boss's face.

"Just listen to this Higgins," Ravensbury's eyes moved back up the page. "India and China set to become the worlds two super powers. The worlds largest democracy will go head to head with the largest remaining communist state." He paused, looking at the butler, "Who writes this stuff?" It was a rhetorical question, he continued, "This is the best bit, the USA will decline to become a mainly agricultural supplier to the two global players."

"Better let that Alex know sir."

"Don't you just love these people who have a crystal ball, I can tell you the future rubbish."

"Indeed sir, always a sooth sayer in Rome sir."

"I suppose, it is to be expected, it is a newspaper," Ravensbury looked at his butler, "You're being very negative Higgins."

"I wonder why sir?"

"Something I read Higgins?"

The butler grinned.

"Good combination, really rather clever."

"Sir?" said Higgins.

"Tell people bad news and advertise a product that makes people feel good."

"I get it sir, I need something to cheer me up." said Higgins with a grin.

"A drink perhaps?" said WR.

Higgins eyed the open paper, "Why sir there's a new one advertised right there on the opposite page."

"Non alcoholic, with a unique taste," Ravensbury added.

"First day sir?"

"Yes rather expensive."

"Let's hope it's a hot one then."

"Higgins my advertising agency are geniuses. I wanted to launch as soon as possible, Andrew persuaded me to wait a couple of weeks."

"Baked pheasants sir?"

"You are making my mouth water Higgins, but in this heat best opt for a salad."

Higgins busied himself about the kitchen, he was beavering away preparing lunch.

Ravensbury checked the big brass wall clock, then returned to his thoughts. "Damn clever."

"Andrew sir?" said Higgins, chopping vegetables with speed and finesse a machine would find hard to match. "Saturday is a good day I guess, people out shopping."

"They buy the Saturday papers for the television pages, and we've got adverts in those."

"So they might go and get some refreshments on Sunday sir."

"If they miss the in store promotions today Higgins."

The butler come chef come chauffeur, tidied his work place, glanced at the clock. "Lunch is all prepared, won't take long, should we go and fetch Mrs Ravensbury."

"Tad early man."

The butler gave him a certain look, the frown spoke louder than words.

"Quite, she does get a bit nasty if left waiting."

"Like cheese sir."

"Explain man?"

"It tends to go off if you leave it out to long, especially on a sunny day."

"Ah," said William, "We don't want bad smells around here do we."

The butler shook his head, and it took them both just a few minutes to get to the car and head off.

The four by four took the rough lane in its stride. This was the back way into Ravensbury's estate, a useful short-cut at times. It joined a small road opposite the gateway to a farm. As they reached the exit to the road, Ravensbury ever attentive, noticed a man standing, looking rather hopeless.

"Hold on a minute Higgins," said Ravensbury. The vehicle halted and William climbed out, wandering over to the despondent chap.

"What's the matter man?"

"Oh sorry sir, did not see you," said the old farmer, dobbing his peak cap. He turned to look back at the horse laying in the stable.

Ravensbury looked at the man, then at the horse, "Your wife's isn't it?"

"That's right sir." The man looked sad.

"Problem?"

"Vet can't do any more, says it should be put down."

"It does look rather ill."

"The wife wants me to do it." The old man shook his head.

"You can't?"

"No sir, not Sal here." He showed great affection for the old horse.

"Why you, why not the vet?"

"I don't know sir, she won't say, just made me promise."

"She'd never know, besides you're the man of the house."

"She'd know sir, besides I promised."

Ravensbury stood for a moment looking at the horse languishing in the straw. It's head sullen, resting on a bale of hay.

"One moment," William turned and walked back through the yard to where his car waited.

"Everything ok sir?" Enquired his attentive butler.

"Soft bugger is letting a horse suffer."

Higgins looked thoughtful, "Why is the vet busy?"

"His wife wants him to do it, made him promise not to let the vet near the animal."

"Oh!"

"Higgins would you mind? His wife must not know of course."

"Mind sir?" Higgins stared at William, "It would be a pleasure sir."

Ravensbury waited by the car. He watched Higgins wander off into the yard. Saw the farmer return to the house. Several minutes later the farmer appeared gun in hand. He went back to the yard, moments later a shot rang out. The birds went silent, only the slight

rustle of leaves in the breeze that tickled the hedgerow, broke the quiet.

Higgins returned, he looked pleased. "Job done sir."

"Thank you Higgins."

As they drove away, Higgins remarked, "Nice few joints on that sir."

"Higgins, this is Britain not France, besides it was their pet."

For a moment the butler went silent. "Funny sir, isn't it?"

"How do you mean?" Replied Ravensbury, sardonic.

"We, I use the term loosely, love animals, get all sentimental, yet each year millions of cuddly bunnies are killed to feed pets."

This time Ravensbury went quiet, taking time to reflect. His mind wandered, as the car sped along the lanes. His eyes caught sight of some young lambs sucking at their mother's udders.

"Roast lamb tonight Higgins."

"Very good sir." The butler, flicked the indicator as he drove towards a junction. The slow ticking sound out of time with the music of the engine. The two men arrived just in time at the local railway station. Fiona, William's wife was very pleased, the train had been quite crowded and not without incident.

"You look flustered my dear."

"Darling, I am so glad to see you. It was a nightmare, they are doing some kind of, oh you know engineering work. Well we all had to get off at some tiny out of the way place, get on buses, oh it was so crowded, you would not believe. They took us to the next small station, my god, I had to stand all the way, in this heat. Oh, and there was some youth staring at me, he was sitting down. No manners, typical, mind you with his sort sitting down I'm not sure I'd fancy the seats. Oh, and then the carriage, you'd think they'd put more on, oh no. I had to stand again, some horrible youths, sitting giggling, with their parents, can you believe it they let their kids disturb the whole carriage. Oh and then there was this chap, god what did he look like, and smell, my god darling. He had this, oh, well horrible beat music going, you know what that's like. What I had to put up with, oh and ..."

"Sorry to cut in dear but I think Higgins wants a word."

After a run of success William could cope with his wife's incessant chatter, and he did remind himself of her other compensating attributes. Few men could boast having such a beauty, however as the weeks went by he needed to escape. During the week William would immerse himself in business, working long hours. They say behind every successful man there's a good woman. This made him laugh, perhaps if he was not always looking for a reason to escape from home, he would not have made so many business deals. His wife hated golf, she could not see the point. He had to admit, the long hours on the green, and a few in the rough had paid off numerically and he was not alluding to the scores he achieved, which were pretty good.

It was another very hot weekend, his wife had invited what he could only describe as a gaggle of friends to stay over. He had to grin and bear it on Saturday, which interspersed with their period of retail therapy, followed by a disappearing act upstairs to try on dresses and compare manicures, he could tolerate.

Sunday William made good his escape, and after a round of golf returned with a long time friend and confidant to a house hidden down a valley. The old building, mostly stone was

like its owner, rough around the edges, well worn, but oozed quality.

It did not take the two men long to slide comfortably into some old well worn leather upholstered seats. William handed a bag to his friend. "Try some of this see what you think."

The man, reached down inside the bag, his weather beaten hands grasped something all together smoother. He raised his hand to reveal what it was clasping, his eyes took in the design of the bottle. Ravensbury could see he liked it, but what about the contents, he watched as the man poured a glass full and took a slurp, then another.

"This is some tasty stuff William," said a man supping drink, "From what I hear you are having trouble meeting demand." This man had links, he knew what shifted from the retail shelves.

"Not for long Charles, our UK plant is small scale, in this country we can hike the price and make it a bit exclusive."

"And make a killing in the process." The man laughed.

"A cool, refined exclusive taste, have you got it?" Ravensbury smiled.

"International?"

"Need you ask? We are building factories in Mexico, Macedonia, Mozambique, and Mumbai"

"Low cost locations on every continent, close to major markets."

"All with ideal climates and raw materials."

It was early Monday morning, John sat at home, he looked at his bills, checked his online bank balance. He should just keep taking the money, do his job, keep quiet. He was stalling going into work, finally he made a hasty drive to the factory. Almost out of breath he burst through the laboratory door. Even before he had changed into his lab coat he was blurting out his thoughts.

"I'm worried Lucy, it's all too rushed."

"We don't want to disappoint those nice customers." Lucy replied with a bit of sarcasm. She continued working, finishing off what she was doing.

"Any news?" Lucy's remark was ironic.

"What do you think?"

"They do receive rather a lot of advertising revenue," she replied.

"Aye, and Ravensbury is well connected, the only thing that my letters are going to do is stop my pay packet."

"Could we mobilize people power?"

"What, tell the environmentalists?" John said in a sceptical tone.

"Yes."

"I tried, but they're busy with disasters in progress. As one guy said, if they go around scaremongering they will loose support."

"Scaremongering?"

"Think about it Lucy. The product is all natural, fully approved, non GMO and providing a lot of people with a lot of work. There must be loads of facilities that might, could, may, possibly, someday never cause a problem."

It was some days later, when Lucy came into an empty Lab. Oh there were plenty of things, but one item was missing. John, where was he, she wondered, he had been pretty

gloomy, but not ill. As the day passed by Lucy dwelt on her comrade's fate. It had gone time to break for lunch, she had been immersed in work. Grabbing her bag she left for the park, hoping to see the friend, she needed to be with someone, and the morning had been very lonely indeed.

"Hi." Lucy looked up from her perch on the park seat, she recognised the voice. "Sorry about last time. You still look, well, kind of low." The man was finding difficulty looking for the right words.

"Oh, yea," said Lucy with half a smile, "Did you meet your mother OK?"

"Oh aye," he said nodding.

"You're Scottish, aren't you?"

"Aye and you must be using your feminine intuition."

"I work with a Scottish chap."

"Oh aye, what's his name?"

"John, John McKenzie."

The man paused for thought. "Has a wee goaty and seems quite dull at times, no disrespect he's a good sort."

"You know him?" she said, somewhat surprised.

"Small world, aye. Oh my name is Mack or Mr Grant, if you prefer."

"Mack will do nicely. Lucy Hamber, pleased to meet you, again. So how do you know John?"

The two of them sat talking, Lucy expressing her concern that John, had not been at work today. This time it was her apologising, as she had to rush back to the lab.

That same evening Ravensbury had called in on his friend again, the two men sat in front of a big oak table. Charles, had lost his wife some while back and had lapsed into a permanent routine of snacking, the table was well stocked, both men dipping into it's collection of nibbles.

"Since I sacked the fellow he's been nothing but trouble."

"They are only beetles William, what is all the fuss about," said Charles sensing his friends exasperation.

"Exactly Charles, exactly, makes me damn mad."

"I expect they are a load of veggies," said Charles.

"A good steak, that's what they need," Ravensbury continued.

"Steak or stake?" Charles grinned.

"Very droll. What a bunch of hypocrites they are."

"Who William?"

"Vegetarians."

"Why?" Charles suspected he knew the answer but played along.

"How the hell do they think you get milk, cheese and butter?"

"From cows dear boy."

"I know that, but to get milk you have to have calves." Ravensbury was clearly in a foul mood.

"Yes and most of those end up going for slaughter. Still look on the bright side old chap, plenty of pet owners need to feed their cats and dogs."

"Animal lovers," Ravensbury scoffed.

"Of course now your Macedonian facility is up to speed you do have a good excuse to close the UK plant."

"Always looking on the bright side, a Charles?"

"Well it is expensive to run. Isn't it?" Charles knew the answer.

"Indeed and not my fault it has to close because of the security risk from animal rights nutters."

"The world would be a poorer place without them," said Charles, "Another malt?"

"Yes, thank you." William waited while his glass was refilled. "Cheers. That reminds me are we shooting grouse this year?"

4 The boss is always right

Ravensbury's euphoria at the initial success was soon dampened by the following morning's news. Lucy was getting breakfast when she heard it.

"Good morning minister," said a probing voice.

"Good morning John," said the bland minister.

"Is it true that the ministry rubber stamped the use of this other beetle?"

"Well you must understand that in all fairness, when you consider that the circumstances and available data at the time, that it could hardly be called that, such a description." He was interrupted.

"Yes or no, minister, come on did the government departments fully check this beetle before allowing it to be used?"

"Well as I was saying, and in retrospect, hindsight is a wonderful thing, as you know the government takes such matters very seriously."

The interviewer interjected, "Come on minister, we all know that the company in question has made donations to your party, are the allegations being made true?"

"Now I think that is unfair, the donations to the party were made some considerable time before this current debate."

"This is hardly a debate, if the fears of the scientist are correct it could have serious implications, now please answer the question."

"We, as I was about to say, we are going to launch a full independent inquiry into the safety aspects, however I must state clearly that the beetle is perfectly safe for use in food products, there is no question about that."

"You still have not answered my question, was it rubber stamped?"

"Look, with due respect."

"Minister, please come on."

"If you'll let me speak John, the question is about containment, which the company had done more than necessary to ensure that these insects can't escape into the wild."

"Sorry to cut you short, but we are running out of time, thank you for coming on this morning."

"Thank you, John."

There was a pause, "Good morning, John McKenzie."

"Hello," John replied the rather nervous but distinctive voice. Lucy smiled, now she understood things better.

"You heard the minister, the government is taking this very seriously, they are going to launch a full enquiry, and the company is acting very responsibly. Surely you are making rather a fuss about a harmless beetle, which according to some sources would not survive in our climate, aren't you just a trouble maker?"

"Well firstly I have lost my job because of my concerns, that should tell you something."

"Yes, Mr McKenzie, are you not just a disgruntled employee, trying to cause trouble?" The

tone was sarcastic but cool.

"No, certainly not, as a scientist I take my responsibilities very seriously. It is important that the public trust people such as myself and the only way I know to earn such respect is to be open, and declare any concerns."

"So you really believe there is an issue here, why?"

"I tried a vast array of pesticides as a test, for any future issue, these beetles were immune to them all."

"Ok, fair point, but our climate is not suitable for them, that's what the government and the company are saying. Are they wrong?"

"Our winters are much milder, the summers can be quite hot, these beetles have only been in this country for less than a year, to my knowledge no one knows, and species have escaped before and cause problems."

"So you think, if they did escape, and if they could survive, they might cause a problem?"

"Aye, I do."

"Lots of ifs Mr McKenzie?"

"Precisely why we should not be letting this happen."

"Well there we must leave it, thank you Mr McKenzie."

Lucy clapped, the sound echoing through the empty house. She switched the radio off and headed off for the station.

As usual the journey into work was crowded. Lucy stood between the ends of two sets of seats. She had quite a few shoulders to look over, newspapers of most flavours open at various pages. Many displaying the story, most seemed to be calm, playing down the issue, not that she had chance to read everything. Passengers were most inconsiderate turning pages before she had finished. One man in the seat nearest her glanced up, glaring, he gave her a dirty look. Closing his paper and folding it neatly, placing it inside his briefcase. Lucy focused her attention on the sounds in the carriage.

A rather loud voice carried in her direction.

"Load of rubbish, bloody scientist, helps create a damn nice drink then wants to stop us drinking it. Bloody selfish bastard if you ask me."

Lucy could not quite make out what the other people he was with were saying. She waited for his next offering.

"People are always blaming the government, I'd like to see them do any better."

There was another pause.

"Oh, come on Nigel."

Various voices muttered.

"Turkeys, cows, chickens, chaps," wait for it thought Lucy, "These are beetles." He concluded in a rather epic tone.

Mutter mutter.

"Oh come on, okay so I have not seen how they grow them, okay okay."

Further musings.

"Oh, get real guys, you are at more risk in a car than a train, nobody does the maths, the probability is tiny."

She almost heard the raised voice of a respondent.

"Okay so there is still a risk, how many years have we had nuclear power, right my point exactly."

At this juncture, Lucy had to get off the train as it had pulled into her town of work.

As Lucy approached the factory facilities she noticed more people than usual, lots of vehicles and a strong police presence. As she walked forward to the gate she had a sense of foreboding. Her legs trembled, she looked as though she was following some invisible trail, her head low, pace quickening, her heart pounding. Inside the perimeter fence she could see a lot of vehicles, many vans with various media companies logos.

She entered the office building, going through the usual checks, the security guard was well known to her, which was a relief. He smiled, it was nice to see a friendly face. He raised his eyebrows and nodded towards the conference room. Lucy smiled back, and nodded, she ambled slowly by, earwigging.

“Quite ridiculous, these beetles in our tests have been subjected to typical British winter conditions.”

“In laboratory conditions?”

“True and they did survive a short period of cold, however over a simulated full winter they expired.”

“They all died?”

“That is what I said.”

It was the Production Director, doing his bit.

Lucy had a fairly uneventful day, all the top brass were busy entertaining the press. At the weekend she popped in to see John. He was interested to hear what she had gleaned at work.

“What no one has asked is how the beetles got to the islands in the first place.” said John
“Migration?”

“Beetles can fly and these can, oh not very far but over a period of several weeks, and ours are on dry land.”

“Now I see why you were so concerned, thought it was just pesticide resistance.”

Lucy if they off shore this, to get optimum growth where would you do it?

“Somewhere hot!” she smiled, “And optimum profits.”

“Aye and it wouldn't be British standards for sure. Remember Bopal?”

She shook her head.

“Aye well I do and some of the others.”

“Drinks come with other price tags,” remarked Lucy.

“Exactly.”

“I'm not even supposed to talk to you.” She looked a bit worried.

“Why not talk to Mack?”

“What's the point? I'm going to quit,” she said in a determined tone.

“No, no you can't.”

“John are you mad, I can't work for them. I agree with you.”

“We need to know what they are up to.”

“I'm the last to know, the media know more than me.”

“Aye, but it might be one vital clue, one thing they get you to do. It won't be obvious, but you must continue those tests. I mean the other tests, the ones I started.”

“I don't know,” she frowned, “My mum and dad are very worried.”

“Lucy please. Maybe this will blow over, maybe and god I hope I'm wrong, but if I'm not, might be years from now, who knows.”

“With this bad publicity it might not even continue,” she said in an optimistic tone.

“They've clever marketing and the public love the taste. Have you seen the backlash in the

press at the "Threat to the economy and jobs from paranoid greenies.""

Lucy and John were not the only people feeling low. The first Captain of Ravensbury's vessel, Simon Morrison was at the lowest point of his life. He sat head in hands. His sense of despair and hopelessness overwhelming his emotions. The weekend was moving along a second at a time. His wife was terribly worried, she had never seen him like this before. Nothing she could do or say made any difference. She turned, her heart pounding, leaving her husband and running to the front door.

Mike watched as the door swung open, a tired, worried woman stood before him.

"God, thanks for coming Mike."

She beckoned him in, hastened as she noticed a few twitching curtains. The family was being avoided, ignored and by some verbally abused. Only the staunchest friends remained loyal and supportive. Mike followed her upstairs.

"Darling its Mike."

Her husband did not respond. She pulled back allowing Mike to go to his friend. He nodded to her, she nodded back, whispering, "Tea?"

Mike shook his head.

"Not much I can say a. Those bastards, really stitched you up mate."

The first Captain of the Sea Raven, Ravensbury's yacht, remained frozen like a statue.

For a while Mike tried to talk to Simon, he turned to the Captain's wife.

"He just does not respond, I've tried but I guess with what's been happening. Have the doctors been able to help?" said Mike looking at her then back at his former Captain.

She shook her head.

"Oh."

Ravensbury sat at his desk staring out of the window. The view across the London skyline always amazed him, an endless sea of structures. His meditation interrupted, a buzzer sounded, it was Miss Pritchard. He swung around in his plush swivel chair, now facing the desk his hand reached for the intercom. "Yes."

"They are here sir."

"Send them in," he replied.

Two men appeared in his doorway, ushered in by his PA.

"Sit down gentleman. Well?"

The Production Director was first to speak, "Well sir we have some good news and some well, er, not so good."

"Yes, yes man, get on with it." Ravensbury grew more impatient after each passing day.

With the enquiry over he wanted to get on with things, the project seemed to be losing momentum. William Ravensbury liked to be in control and at times he felt he had none.

The technical director chipped in, "The good news is we have four prefabricated production lines ready to ship."

"We have also acquired factory sites in all the countries." Added the Production Director.

"Good, good, so?"

"The Indian government has told us we can't proceed." The Production Director felt like a pyromaniac who had just put a match to a large firework. He waited for the explosion. All he got was a damp squib.

"Oh." There was a pause, "Have you spoken to Ravi?"

"First thing we did sir, even he has his limits."

"I see, alternative?"

"We have identified a possible island in Indonesia sir."

"Well done, any other issues I should know about?"

The Production Director nodded, "With all the media coverage, well the Macedonian government and the Mexicans are messing us around, its quite probable they will deny us facilities.

"Mozambique?"

"We are not sure."

"You have alternatives?"

"Sorry only for the Indian site sir."

"Damn," said Ravensbury, "Bloody damn." He was so annoyed, and one man he knew was responsible for all this. "Bloody McKenzie." Half of London must have heard him.

"Sir," said the technical director speaking without thinking.

"You took the sod on," said Ravensbury, glaring at him.

"How were we to know sir?"

"Okay, okay." William knew he had also been at the interviews, also he needed these directors. They were generally very good at what they did. "An island you say."

"Yes sir."

"Should allay fears," said WR.

The two directors glanced at each other, then at the boss. He stared back at them. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Well, er," said the Production Director.

"Good PR man. Suppose there was a disaster. On an island we can contain it, can't we?"

The men nodded in agreement. He looked at them, he could hear Andrew's voice, what would he say?"

"That might be a blessing in disguise, we are a responsible company, we do listen to concerns of environmentalists, so we have decided for added safety to build any new facilities in areas that would be easy to contain, in the unlikely event of an accident."

Ravensbury gave a firm command, "Find alternative island sites for the other countries. I'll get Andrew on board, we will get some mileage out of it."

Mack's house was a bit of an untidy affair, possibly a reaction to his previous partners, meticulous cleaning routines, combined with a stream of instructions that kept him tidying every five minutes.

John nabbed a bean bag, combined with a tin of beverage, he was quite comfortable.

"Looks like you've scored a bit of a victory my friend," said Mack.

"Sorry I don't follow," said John, wondering what his fellow countryman considered as a victory.

"Internationally, the countries where he wanted to build factories, have all said no."

"Aye maybe."

Mack looked at his downhearted friend, "You look glum mate."

"He's going to build facilities on islands," said John in a dejected voice.

"Surely that's good and keeps everyone happy."

"It's good PR."

"Aye but if the beetles did escape at least it's only one island." Mack was trying to look on the bright side.

"It only needs a few to hop on board a ship, and they'll have a wee few bringing supplies and returning with drinks, and possibly bugs."

"They may also get sloppy, I've seen that." Mack had worked in a few facilities so he knew how things generally went.

"Aye, don't worry we're on an island. Your right."

John was also worried about his mortgage, the publicity had not done his career any good. No employer would touch him, and the environmentalists had no vacancies. His friend Mack was looking for ways to keep him cheerful, and later in the week was pleased to meet up with Lucy.

They sat together on the park bench, she explained in some detail the research she had been doing.

"Oh wait till I tell John, that's great news."

"The toxin may not kill the beetles."

"Aye maybe but it does explain why they did not eat the bushes."

"Yes and possibly why they took to tackling crabs."

"Finches, why not beetles?" said Mack with a smile.

"You are obviously a fan of Mr D."

He nodded, "Aye. So do you think you can try it?"

"Mack I have a tiny sample of plant and an even tinier amount of toxin."

He pondered the situation, "Did they not bring any plants back?"

"Higgins brought some seeds."

"Higgins?" He pause, "Ask him then."

"Were have you been, Higgins is Ravensbury's butler."

"Alright, I don't have a tele, so don't have ago at me, I can't know everything. Is there no way of getting more?"

"Seeds?" Lucy looked at him.

"Aye, seeds."

"Mack, you me and John are poor, unless you've won the lottery, we can't go half way around the globe on a jolly."

He had to agree with her, his boss was stingy with holiday as it was. Where he worked getting two weeks off in a row was a miraculous event.

The two of them sat, foiled in their mission. Lucy was so, so almost bitter. She was so close, just thwarted by a lack of resources. In the scheme of things, the funds needed were peanuts compared with her company's weekly spend on advertising.

It was only when she returned home that she had a spark of inspiration. "Matt," she said to herself. How to contact him? She had grown paranoid that calls and emails could be monitored.

Matt was surprised, a letter, a real letter, from England. He was however even more taken aback with the request. Sending a letter back that Lucy received some weeks later.

She sat with Mack.

"No good, missy?"

"No," she said handing him the letter.

He read it, studying it carefully. "We'll with the price of fuel what it is."

"Mack this is vital," she said, feeling thwarted and angry.

"Look, he has his plane to pay for, and it would be out of range, it would be dangerous and expensive, and you don't even know if the plant does contain a beetle killing poison."

"I know Mack," she huffed, "I know, Matt's probably right, but..."

Mack cautiously took her hand, she turned her head from staring at the ducks, to look into his eyes. "You're a sweetie."

He smiled back at her. He pointed at what had once been a flowering bush, "Plenty of seed on that, I might even collect a bit."

"Mack."

"Yes?" he replied.

"Are you good at growing plants?" Something was nagging at her mind, something she had forgotten, hidden, after Higgins had scurried off and left her on that island.

"Reasonable, why?" he said, with a smile.

"I think I've got some seeds, but I only have a small bedroom, and," she hesitated,

"Parents!"

"Ah"

"Besides I probably should not have them, so," she said with a grin. She had remembered.

"These from that island?" Mack was now puzzled.

"Yes."

He nodded, "Ok but just a few seeds, I don't want to get into trouble."

"They're not the evil weed."

"How do you know, besides, how would anyone know and if they've been brought into the UK unofficially."

"You don't have to."

Mack smiled, "Look, as long as only you and I know."

"OK thanks, Mack."

"I'm doing this for John to," he said.

"I know."

Outside the village post office two women watched as Mr & Mrs Ravensbury pulled up in their four by four. Higgins had the day off so Fiona was driving.

The elder of the two women squinted at the vehicles.

"They have been recarperated." She continued to stare as she spoke.

"That sounds nice, I could do with some new carpet."

"Yes but they are very deqident." The elder lady frowned.

"Well he has a busness."

"One of them bloated capatists." The elder lady was enamoured by these incomers.

A young lad, sat on his bike, smirked as he listened to the two women. He thought how he was told off for his bad English, "Just listen to these old dears."

Inside the quaint post office, Ravensbury handed the man behind the post office counter, a plain package. It was strongly wrapped in brown paper with copious amounts of packing tape. While he was doing this, his wife was looking at the headline on the newspapers. The in bold letters emblazoned across the tops were variations on the theme of the Careless Captain Canned. She bought a copy from the lady behind the counter.

"Very bad that, Mrs Ravensbury," said the lady in a consoling manner.

"My poor husband, he tries so hard to find good people."

"It's no wonder companies are going abroad, people in this country don't want work if you ask me, or they're no good like that captain. Amounts to the same thing."

"Quite," said Mrs Ravensbury, now joined by her husband. They bade farewell to the locals and headed down the lanes in their four by four.

Back at the Ravensbury's home, the couple settled down in the lounge, William reading the headlines. Fiona, was startled from her magazine by the sound of the letterbox. As she got up, her husband remarked, "I'm glad that thing with the Captain is all sorted."

She smiled at him, "It won't be long before all your island facilities are operational."

It was only a few moments before she rushed back into the room, post in hand. She thrust one of the letters towards her husband. He was rather bemused.

"For me?"

"Look at the post mark dear."

He grinned, opening the letter. "My my, Charles is well connected, he said he could wangle it and he has."

"What dear," said Fiona, hardly able to contain her excitement.

"I'm getting a gong dear, a nice big gong."

"Really," his wife was beside herself.

"For services to British Industry, a Lord no less."

Mrs Ravensbury, was in hysterics, "I'm Lady Ravensbury."

"A few days my dear, don't get too excited my darling."

"Wonderful."

While Fiona was planning events to celebrate at Blackhollow House, their ample abode. A rather stressed production manager was sweating buckets, as he tried to get some sleep. His task of installing yet another facility on yet another location was as with all the previous ones, fraught with local difficulties. The natives were proving to be problematic in the least, and the British installation workers, were as on previous occasions, either down with the runs or propping up the local bar. Though the installation workers main topic of conversation was the Production Director's idea of a working day that did not seem to include sleeping or eating.

The following day the Production Director set up a meeting in the local hotel, where he gathered the workforce. He blew his stack. "Look, I have tolerated a lot with you all and your antics. Those natives are one thing, but you have all been told about the food, and not getting pissed. If this goes wrong we are in serious trouble, you don't have to answer to Ravensbury, I do."

"Yea, yea," muttered one disgruntled worker.

"This facility is shit, whoever designed it is a twat," said his workmate.

"To right," said another colleague, "and they have the cheek to blame us."

"Fucking real," said a rather big bloke, his whisper not so quiet as the other men.

"Mr Gurney, did you have some contribution to make?" said the Production Director.

"Feel ill," sir.

"Well, perhaps you should follow company policy. We are well behind schedule. We have to have this done by Friday is that understood."

"Well we can't help it if them natives ain't got the site ready on time." said another outspoken member of the assembly crew.

"Blame others, blame others, just get on with the work."

As they shuffled out of the hotel towards the waiting mini bus, the men were moaning

about the meeting. "Fucking cock up with the natives then blames us, wastes time in some shitty meeting." "Yea we have to dig him out of his balls up." "What's new mate." "They couldn't run a bath!"

5 Cheap off shoring

Some days later, the Higgins was in WR's office.

"Sir we have bad news, our man in Calibon Island has locked down the factory. There has been an incident. He says security is having trouble keeping the natives out."

"Why?" said William, his voice stern.

"He says there has been an escape of beetles," said the Higgins.

"So, did they escape the factory?"

"No sir, the facility is sealed."

"Then that's ok." WR was calculating the situation.

"There are a lot of dead workers," said Higgins, almost expressionless.

"How come?" He now had some addition to his woes.

"He would not say, not over the phone. Says he needs more men and guns, and someone high up to come here and sort things."

"Look man, I can't go, not now not with all the product launches, can you go, you know what needs doing."

"Yes sir, should I take some of my pals?"

"Good idea, I'll see if Ravi can send a crate, he should be able to get a few pieces."

Higgins nodded, and while Ravensbury got Miss Pritchard busy with flights, Higgins, called up some of his old chums.

Higgins and his friends landed at the small island airport. A wiry Indian greeted him and took them to a nice house hidden in the hills. He opened a couple of old crates. The men stared into the boxes, "Ravi has done well."

The Indian smiled at them, "Ravi, he know what you need Mr Higgins, he good man."

Higgins looked at the man, "So why couldn't you say?"

"You best come, I know you only just arrive, but my men, they have big trouble."

Higgins understood, he had a sense for these things. He and his well armed friends, climbed aboard a couple of old Land Rovers and the group headed away from the secluded property, and down into the valley to the factory. A group of angry natives, were outside the protective electrified wire fence. Behind the closed gates stood some very nervous guards.

When their boss arrived with the well armed British men they cautiously opened up. The natives rushed at the open gates, Higgins fired an AK47 just above their heads, the trees behind them shattered as twigs and small branches were shredded.

With the two vehicles safely in and the gates closed the protesters, who had fallen to the ground, picked themselves up and began shouting even louder. Their leader had a feeling that if they were using guns, then they were hiding something bad, that they did not want other people to know about.

The head of the factory guards, was still looking nervous. Every so often he would look

towards the generator room for reassurance. It was the factories source of power, and the only thing keeping the electric fence live. Higgins looked at the man, then at the manager, "Why is he so worried?"

"They are very angry," said the manager pointing to the people, his voice trembled. "If generator fail then they break down fence."

"Your guards have guns," said Higgins.

"Yes, but Mr Higgins, these good people they innocent."

"Not if they break the law," said Higgins.

The manager shrugged his shoulders. He wondered about this man from England. Higgins told his men to stand guard.

With his men in position, he gestured to the factory manager, and walked towards the main building. "Look through window sir."

Higgins looked through one of the inspection windows.

"Very bad, I don't know what to tell them, they want to know why they not come home." The manager was shaking his head.

"Good god," Higgins stared at the bodies strewn throughout the production line, or rather what was left of them.

"I tell them it is freezer unit malfunction, gas escape, but they will want to see bodies." The Indian factory boss was very uneasy.

"Was it the freezer unit?"

"No, no, beetles escape look, beetles do this, they eaten alive. Very bad. That why we must keep people out, can you imagine they don't understand, beetles will eat us to Mr Higgins." The manager was very nervous, he hated being at the factory it gave him nightmares. "What we do, beetles still loose, they still alive?"

"Can they escape?"

"How should I know?" The manager, was looking at Higgins with incredulity. He thought to himself, "You are stupid, you mess with things you don't understand, you put up factory then you ask me?"

Higgins turned to look at the manager, the man was trembling. "Don't worry we will kill them and get this mess cleared up." Higgins lost no time in calling London.

One minute Lucy was pouring over some research data, the next she was facing a distraught Production Director. "We are going to Calibon Island."

"Where?"

"Off the coast of Africa, the last facility to go live."

"When?"

"NOW," he shouted, the strain was telling upon him.

"But?" Lucy wanted to ask questions.

"Our flight leaves in three hours."

"But." Lucy could not believe they were leaving, when she did not even know why or have any time to prepare.

"Come on."

"I haven't got any things." Her mind raced.

"There's no time."

"Why?" Lucy's mind was racing.

"Because we have to contain some beetles." He was starting to sweat.

"I'm still working on a way of killing them." She tried to put her foot down.

"Well you will have to continue in the field, now shift your self."

"But." What was this man thinking, she could not believe it.

He grabbed Lucy by the arm, and rushed her downstairs to a waiting car.

The two of them were sat in the back. As the driver sped off, Lucy blurted, "Passport, I" Before she could finish, the Production Director shook his head. It was dusk when they reached a small airport. An executive jet stood ready on the runway, Ravensbury's chauffeur drew the car up, and the Production Director grabbed Lucy and within minutes the plane was off down the runway.

"He's well connected, okay, so don't worry about customs okay. We have had enough bad publicity what with that stupid Captain and your loud-mouth Scottish friend."

When the plane touched down, it was met at the airport by a small group of well armed military men. The Production Director and Lucy were taken in an old Land Rover, and they followed behind two army lorries full of troops. Lucy was tired and frightened, it was dawn as the vehicles sped along a rough road, in places no more than a dirt track, clouds of dust whirled up as the lorries ahead whipped up the surface.

As the vehicles slowed the troops began to ready themselves. Lucy caught sight of the protesters. The military personnel dismounted from the lorries, their guns menacingly pointing towards the unarmed civilians. The military commander shouted at the protesters, who within minutes started to melt away into the bushes. While the troops took control of the perimeter, Lucy and the Production Director were driven into the factory complex. Higgins came over to greet them.

"You two with me," he said, taking them swiftly into a small office block. "Sit," he said, closing the door.

"First things, I have covered all the windows, so no one here, except the manager, myself and you two know what has happened and that is the way it will stay. The official story is the freezer unit malfunctioned and the gas escaped killing the operatives. All you need to know is that there are beetles loose within the factory. It is sealed but we must act fast to kill those beetles so we can recover the bodies and restart production."

Lucy was half asleep, it had been a long night flight, this man's last words kept, ringing in her head, "restart production, restart production." It seemed so surreal.

"Miss Hamber, your job is to work out how to kill them."

"You sir," he said, looking toward the Production Director, "To analyse how the beetles got out. All the facilities are constructed the same, it is vital we get a solution and quick."

"Why don't you just freeze them," said Lucy.

"Because it is bloody hot here and we can't freeze the whole factory," said Higgins giving her a condescending look.

"She's tired," said the Production Director.

"We all are sir," said Higgins. He took Lucy into a small room, it was what passed for a lab. In a couple of containers were some live beetles. Lucy looked at them and shuddered. She could not believe how lax the containment of these specimens were. Just the plastic boxes between them and the rest of the planet.

"Mr Higgins, are there any poisonous plants on the island?" she said, hoping to appeal to his botanical mind.

"I have no idea, but I'll ask, okay."

A few days went by on the island, Lucy felt like a beetle, she was dirty tired and had not been let out of the room with her beetles. All the poisonous plants had been tried in a futile attempt to kill these creatures, but nothing worked. In desperation, Lucy looked out of the window at the old army lorries. The troops were sloppy and showing signs of boredom. Every so often a bird or monkey would be shot from the trees with a burst of machine gun fire. This terrified her, and from what she could see the managers guards were not looking any less relaxed. Only Higgins and his men seemed to be calm.

The Production Director walked in, "Miss Hamber, you don't have time to eye up those men out there."

"I was thinking," she snapped.

"Well," he stood impatiently looking at her sat on the rickety old stool, "Solution?"

"Yes, hmm, carbon monoxide," she was clutching at straws, but what else could she say.

"They are still alive," he said pointing at the beetles in the containers.

"Yes, I know, that's why I'd like to pump carbon monoxide into their containers, I can work out the volume and concentration then apply it to the factory."

"If it works." She shrugged.

"Alright."

Within an hour, an old hose pipe had been rigged up to the exhaust of one of the Land Rovers and one of the containers of beetles to be saturated with the fumes. When she saw Higgins with a beaming smile on his face she sighed with relief. "Well done dear."

While Lucy longed for home, the Production Director set about drenching the inside of the factory with the fumes, one of the military lorries was commandeered. Lucy could not rest, she had to calculate the time needed to reach the optimum levels. Her worry was that there may be pockets of air that the beetles might hide in. Also that this solution was no real solution, because it would only work in a contained space.

The men did not seem to be worried by the conditions, but Lucy was feeling the worse for the lack of hygiene and the strange food. The hours went by at such a slow rate. Nearly a week had passed before the Production Director announced the beetles were all dead, and that he had found the fault in the freezer unit. With some haste he issued instructions for some new parts to be made and all the factories were to be refitted. Higgins meanwhile cleared the bones out of the factory under increasingly difficult circumstances. Although the island had initially been taken off limits to visitors, the country which it was part of was keen to allay international fears. The president had allowed the world media access at the first opportunity. Higgins and the manager had hardly removed the evidence before there were hoards of press where earlier there had been protesters.

When Higgins returned, so had the protesters. The manager was now even more worried, and this time so was Higgins. He turned to one of his men, "What bloody fool let them in?"

"The president sir."

"We can hardly gun that lot down, with the media all over us," said Higgins in a cold voice.

"No sir and the men don't like it, we don't want our faces out in public."

"Let the military and the manager's men handle things now, I'll get you lads out, later ok."

The man nodded.

"Keep out of sight for now."

"Already are sir."

By the time Higgins and the rest of the people arrived back in England, Lord Ravensbury was fraught. His Production Director assisted by Higgins had done a good job of sorting out the mess at the production facility on the small island off the coast of Africa, but with the deaths of all the factory workers, the local press had stirred up an international hornets nest. In the conference centre the press were waiting, while he tried to work out what to say.

"What the hell do we tell the press."

"McKenzie sir?" said Higgins.

"He's a bloody pain in the arse, what's he got to do with it, are you suggesting sabotage?"

"No sir," Higgins paused for thought, "Didn't he develop the production facility?"

"Yes, why Higgins that is brilliant."

Moments later, William took his place on the podium, to answer questions.

"Lord Ravensbury what do you have to say with regard to the incident?"

We have been doing an investigation into the partial escape of the beetles. Our findings indicate that they were contained within the factory, it was only a minor escape from one of the freezing units."

"How did it happen?"

"Well unfortunately we were assured by the scientist who developed the process that it was safe. You have to understand that it was necessary for us to rely on his expert advice."

"What action will you be taking against the employee."

"He has already been fired, and that was before the unfortunate incident." Ravensbury said with some well concealed glee.

"How did the workers at the factory die?"

"I believe they were overcome by the ill effects of the freezer gasses."

Lucy sat in the park, she looked toward the ducks but her mind was elsewhere.

"Have you seen John?"

She looked up it was Mack.

"No," she replied.

"Where have you been, I've missed you." He said with a concerned look.

"I can't say."

"Why?" He asked, trying to read the glum expression on her face.

"Didn't you see the news?"

"The island?"

She nodded, "They're trying to say it was John's fault."

"That's bullshit," said Mack. "What about that factory manager?"

"What about him?"

"The one on the island, they say the natives murdered him, he was found strung up in some posh house up in the hills."

"He was a nice bloke," said Lucy thinking back to the only man who had seemed to her to have a conscience. "He helped me, got me some nice food." Her voice trailed off, sad, she started crying.

Mack put his arm around her and hugged her. She turned and looked at him, a tear rolled down her face.

"Do, do you think John might have gone back to Scotland?"

"I doubt it, both his parents are dead, although I think he might have an uncle." Mack looked at her. "Bastards, I bet that Captain was innocent to."

"Captain."

"The one who committed suicide in the mental hospital, he went crazy and they transferred

him there.”

“Sorry?” Lucy looked puzzled.

“The one who lost the lad overboard.”

“Shit, shit, my god it all fits,” she snuffled.

“What?”

“Not here, can we go back to your place?”

“After work, come round, I've got to get back now.” He said standing up, torn between work and Lucy.

Mrs Hamber was concerned her daughter had not been the same since she returned from that island.

“Where are you going, you've hardly eaten?”

“Mother, I'm going to see Mack.”

“When are we going to meet this fellow,” shouted father, breaking himself away from the football.

“Roger,” shouted mother.

“What?”

“Take her in the car, then you can meet him.”

“You take her.”

“I've got Mrs Willow and the others coming around tonight.”

“Oh all right.”

“It's, ok dad I'll walk.”

“The nights are drawing in love, I will take you.”

After a brief drive and an even briefer introduction, Lucy's dad left her with Mack.

“You look pleased,” said Mack.

Lucy looked at Mack, “I love football, it's why my dad had to rush. We're lucky mum had her ladies from the committee visiting tonight.”

“Ah,” Mack understood.

“Have you got a camera memory card reader?”

“Yep,” he said, and it was not long before he was swearing.

“Look at this,” said Lucy handing him the chain with the inscription. She explained where she found both.

“Have you been to the police with this?”

She shook her head, “Do you really think it would prove anything?”

He shook his head, “Only that the body was that young fellows and that Ravensbury is a dirty old sod.”

He swung around from the computer and grabbed a book open on his desk. “Don't you just love libraries?”

She took the book and looked at the title. “African West Coast Tribal Customs” written by an eminent anthropologist.

“Second paragraph down on the page you've got your thumb on.”

She looked up at him, then back at the book.

“Makes you think, doesn't it?”

“Mack,” Lucy said, looking very worried.

“I know, and people think I'm nuts when I go on about conspiracy theories!”

Ravensbury was a happy man, his visit to the United States was paying off. The marketing and distribution deal with a major retail chain was the icing on the cake. Henry, his old chum was well connected with some very influential Senators and Congressmen, the big prize of FDA approval was his key to world markets.

"Higgins, we have it."

"They liked the research data we provided."

WR was like a child with too many toys, not knowing which one to play with.

"Miss Prichard," he beckoned her, "Will you arrange a few things for me, we have some people to thank."

When she had left the room, he gestured to Higgins to come closer.

"Sir," said Higgins in a whisper.

"Mr McKenzie?"

"His unauthorised experiments on the crab shells and plants?" said Higgins.

"We know he had some data, the Production Director found some DNA data whatever that stuff is, you know, gene whatever, anyway he asked Miss Hamber, who denies any knowledge of McKenzie's research."

Higgins, could not understand the worry, "Surely we should be focused on the distribution and your media appearances? The greenies don't want to help McKenzie and with all the advertising revenue the media know which side their bread is buttered, and the government has the state media dancing to our tune."

"Sabotage?" Ravensbury paused, "What has he left, we don't know what he knows, suppose he knows a way to devastate the beetles?"

"What can he do?" said Higgins in a dismissive manner.

"Sell information to a competitor."

"If he knows how to kill them, might not that be useful if we have another problem?" said Higgins.

"You sorted it last time, besides our Production Director's idea of installing liquid nitrogen tanks so we can flood the facilities and freeze them before they do any real harm, along with the carbon-monoxide system." Ravensbury was in a confident mood.

Higgins grinned, "Maybe we should help Mr McKenzie?"

WR gave the nod.

Mr McKenzie had his own problems, with lack of money and no employers willing to take him on, and he had tried plenty of jobs. He finally sold his property, paid off the mortgage and moved into a very cheap property in Scotland. The house was small and needed more than one DIY enthusiast. A whole army of DIY enthusiasts would have found it a challenge, but it was at least dry and one room was warm, and he had a bit of money left over. His only regret was not saying goodbye to Lucy or his fellow Scot, Mack Grant. He thought about Maslow's hierarchy of needs, he was down on the bottom. As time had faded getting data via Lucy had seemed more and more pointless, what could they do against an international corporation? He looked at the remnants of his stuff, in an old box where the scraps of data, and his research on killing beetles. "Those indestructible little..."

Some weeks later there was a plethora of headlines. Such as "McKenzie does it again!" and "McKenzie's Explosive End." The newspapers were milking the story. The long row of old terrace houses had been devastated with many dead and others injured as a night time explosion had virtually taken down the entire row. Reports from the fire service indicating that the centre of the explosion had emanated from the middle property, recently

purchased by a one, John McKenzie. The house was so devastated that any chance of finding a body were slim to none. Police were treating the incident with suspicion, forensic experts were expressing concern over the pulverisation of the building materials. Originally they had suspected a gas explosion, but the amount of dust and the huge crater that extended into the road and the tiny gardens at the rear, suggested he may have been doing something with explosives.

Almost oblivious to any news Ravensbury was having a celebration at home. Fiona had called in some very professional caterers. With a huge marquee in the grounds and guests to match, the world wide launch of Beetle Juice was well under-way.

7 Waste not want not

A month or so later and Lord Ravensbury was reviewing the situation with the Production Director.

"Excellent news sir, we have been trying out various food sources."

"And?"

A rather excited Production Director continued, "They will eat pretty much anything, the cheapest crap, and what's more the protein waste from their bodies..."

"You've found a high profit use for that as well?"

"Yes, sir, you may remember some years ago, it was suggested people might even have to start eating insects. Well we have produced Beetle Burgers!" He could not believe it himself, he was elated.

WR was beside himself, "Wow, excellent we must get Andrew on that too."

"Sir, they taste great," said the Production Director, "And we have full approval in the EU."

"Well they would, and what of the US?"

"Could you, sir perhaps."

"You get me the data like you did for the drink and we will get it through the FDA." William was like a kid at Christmas, "Excellent."

At home Lucy was not feeling so good, she had wondered about John McKenzie now known as the Beetle Bomber. Slumped on the sofa, her parents were in deep discussion, and she felt trapped. As she went to leave the lounge: "You sit down young lady this concerns you," said her mother.

"I don't think she should keep working at that place," said her father.

"Why not they are doing so well now, besides they were very pleased with her work on those burgers." Mother was Yang to fathers Yin.

"After what Lucy has told us about that Higgins character, and she does not believe those stories about that McKenzie chap. I don't like it, she's young she can get another job, if I could I would; that bloody Kaplan." Father was getting very rattled, "Have you been listening to a word our daughter has said?"

"Yes."

"Well, then let her decide, I have to work with Kaplan, I know what idiot bosses are like and from what she said it is only a matter of time before one of those idiots blames her for something. They blamed that McKenzie enough, I have my doubts about that Captain what's his name."

"You, said he, he..." mother was trying to recall what he had said.

"Well I have my doubts now, I should have known better. When things go well Kaplan takes the credit, when they don't he blames me," said Lucy's father.

"You and that bloody Mr Kaplan," said mother, shaking her head, and letting out a huff.

"Mother," said Lucy, finding it hard not to giggle. "Let me think about it, Dad has made some good points, John could not even get a job after they finished with him. You could both help by trying to keep me cheerful."

"What with Kaplan hovering over me like a demented fly!"

"Shut up about that bloody man." Mother was becoming exasperated.

"I have to appear happy at work, the boss and his minions pick up on it, they noticed when I was on that retched island, and they were always picking on John because he was so negative. I had to appear cheerful when they got rid of him."

"I know what you mean love, believe me," said her father. Cut off by mother.

"Don't say it," she growled.

Lucy burst into the giggles.

The following day, Lucy became concerned. She was called into the Production Director's office, with him was Ravensbury, with Higgins hovering in the shadows.

"Sit down Miss Hamber," said Ravensbury, "Working hard?"

"Yes sir." She tried to seem keen.

"Well we have decide to promote you to Laboratory Head. You will be getting two new people, we have select them and they will be starting with you next Monday."

"Wow, thank you, that is excellent news." She tried her best to seem pleased, trying to think of when she was with Mack, so she had some true emotions.

That concluded the meeting, Ravensbury had a tight schedule.

The following week Lucy had the pleasure of two new employees working for her. Keith Bellinger was a quiet soft spoken and soft looking, rather timid character. Veronica White was rather more outspoken, almost clingy to Lucy, asking questions faster than a Gatling gun spews bullets.

That evening Lucy confided in her dad. Luckily mother was around with the ladies at Mrs Willow's house.

"Dad," she said softly.

"Yes dear."

"These new assistants, well the chap he's kind of alright, a bit green, fresh into the industry, gets on with what I tell him. It's the woman."

Her father sensed an uneasiness, "Suffering from the same disease as Kaplan, is she?"

"I tell her what needs doing, then just as I settle into my work, she comes buzzing around always interrupting asking lots of questions, it's difficult to work."

"Picking your brains and trying to stop you working, sly very sly, makes you look bad when your work is poor. If you complain, she will say you have it in for her and she was only trying to ask a few questions, make you seem like a bad boss." Her father shook his head, "My mate Ron, nice bloke, got promoted, slimy bastard did something similar to him."

"How should I deal with her?" she paused, "I've noticed she makes loads of notes, always making notes, even when I show her how to do things, some of which I would have thought she should know from her previous job and University."

"This other one, the lad."

"Keith," she said.

"He just gets on with it, does a good job?" said her father.

"Yes, his lab work is excellent."

"He knows what he is doing, she does not, but she sounds like the type that wants to be the boss because she can't do the work!" He said with a huff, "Kaplan, that idiot does not know diddly squat, but he knows how to talk to the bosses."

"Yes but how do I deal with her dad?" Lucy seemed flummoxed, she had never been a boss before and she had no training or experience, she really just wanted to do the science and not have to do all the paperwork and planning.

"Do the same to her."

"What?" Lucy did not quite get what her father meant.

"Start digging at her, politely ask her why she needs to ask; didn't they teach you that at University, or even better if you can get a look at her C.V. question her experience against what she told them."

"I won't be able to look at that, confidential held in the Human Resources office up in London."

With some success Lucy managed to keep Veronica at bay, she gave her technical problems with the line, "An easy one for you, no questions needed with your resume, hey?" What she noticed was Veronica cosying up to Keith. She did not need to ask her dad why, and it wasn't his good looks she was after. So next Lucy manoeuvred Keith into situations where Veronica could not ask him questions. Miss White's work output slowed and often it would be several days later before the work was done. This suggested to Lucy that she was tapping an outside source for information.

The bosses though were happy, the company profits were up again, and the quarterly report was positively glowing. Lord Ravensbury was high on success. Over the year with the installations being updated with extra systems and the very successful marketing campaign was doing wonders for sales. Not to mention the ever expanding Beetle Burgers, and the newly created Beetle Bangers which gave sausages a new twist and a new unique flavour.

8 Marketing dream

In the following spring coming up towards the end of the tax year Lucy was called into the lounge, after a tiring frantic Friday at work.

"Your dad has been offered early retirement," mother paused, "I think Kaplan's had enough of him!"

"I'm not going to be pushed out by that idiot," her father retorted in defiant mood.

"Dad, don't be silly, take it move somewhere cold, a Scottish island, with no road link to the mainland. Make sure you have plenty of provisions."

He could see his daughter was deadly serious, "Why?"

"The beetles don't do cold and if they ever escape they will eat everything, which means society will collapse."

This made both her mother and father think. They knew their daughter was smart and they knew she should know better than most what could happen. They had heard her tale of what went on in the island facility.

"Where will you stay," said her mother showing genuine concern.

“With Mack.”

“They don't like us up there,” said father with a wry look.

“Tell them your daughter has a Scottish boyfriend.”

The following week the Production Director called a meeting. Lucy and her staff were all present as were some production process designers.

“Lord Ravensbury has given the go ahead for further expansion. Demand is outstripping supply. As you know so far we have just been duplicating the old system, which is not the most efficient way of proceeding. So we have come up with this new design, these gentlemen here have done the work. It does look excellent, however we would value comments from the Lab team before going ahead.”

Lucy and her people poured over the drawings, Veronica making notes, Keith remaining quiet almost trance like.

“You can't just scale up the feed tubes sir,” said Lucy, looking at the Production Director.

“Why not, it's simple just scale everything up. We need bigger feed tubes it is more efficient to supply the proportionate increase in food.” The Production Director looked at her as though she was stupid. He remembered how negative McKenzie had been.

“Sir, the tube size was determined to stop the beetles getting up it and flying out should there be a problem with the feed supply system,” she said, smiling to try and keep it positivish!

“The idiot that designed it did not prevent the escape on Calibon Island, did he, you sorted that.”

She remembered the nightmare facility with the bare bones of the dead workers.

“Yes but the design had been rushed, and with minor modification it was sound. It was the delayed building construction and the hurried installation of the plant that was the underlying cause of the problem.”

“Well it was not sound because we had a problem didn't we? Lucky for us it was in a tin pot dictatorship and not health and safety gone mad Britain.” He was not amused and the process designers were visibly agitated.

The lead designer spoke out, “Miss we are professionals, designing food processing plants is what we do, and we are well aware of the need to contain these beetles.”

“Well with due respect to my manager Lucy, I must say it does look like a very well thought out design,” said Veronica.

Keith was still sat in his trance like state. However the director was quick to pick up on Miss White's positive attitude. He looked at Keith, “What about you young man?”

Keith had not been long out of University and though he enjoyed the science, this meeting stuff was not really his thing, he just wanted to get on with lab work. He tried to reply, though rather nervous, “Well, in the laboratory we do have to have lots of safeguards, so well, hmm....”

“Yes, thank you Mr Bellinger, we take your point, don't we gentlemen,” he looked towards the design team. They all nodded in agreement. “So I think we can say that the Laboratory staff have given the thumbs up, lets get cracking.”

Lucy arrived home in a foul mood, though she knew she could not show it at work, dear Veronica would have made a note if no one else did, once home she had to let off steam.

“You know what I told you the other day, well do it and soon.”

She explained the meeting, the scaling up plans.

“That reminds me of work, I told Kaplan it would not work.” He paused for effect. “Oh, the design team say it is ready for production. Later when it did not work, they had to scrap a

whole load of parts, and redesign it, or as they said, the wrong drawings had been issued.” His tone was rather sarcastic.

With the expansion of the factory, people were looking for properties, the Hamber house sold quickly, and father lost no time in locating a nice cottage on the Isle of Lewis.

Lucy moved the last of her things into Mack's after seeing her parents off. She was too busy at work to take time off to visit them, but decided to try and plan something once they had settled in.

“Thanks for letting me stay with you Mack,” she said hauling in a few tatty old bags.

“No, problem,” he said, he was both glad of the company and the extra money she was paying him towards her keep was also welcome.

Over time the two of them found they got on well together, unlike his previous lady, Lucy was both active and not in anyway house proud.

As the months rolled by, so did the installation of the scaled up production systems. She felt more and more desperate to find another job. Mack was keen to help her leave too. Then disaster struck.

“Sorry Lucy, we've all been let go.”

“What?” Lucy was taken by surprise. “I don't understand.”

“They kept things under their hats, the bosses,” he shook his head, “Agh, bastards were...” He was lost for words.

“Sorry.”

“Aye, problem is there's no way I can afford to keep paying for this place.”

The rent on the property had kept increasing, with the booming factory demand for housing had sky-rocketed. “Before you say it, no I don't want a job where you work.”

“Neither do I,” she said, “What will you do?”

“It's you I'm worried about.”

“I'll find something.” She tried to reassure him, touching him softly.

“Shit, just when everything seemed to be going great, you me.” He looked dejected. “I made a call to ma Uncle, he lives up near Loch Long, works in a hotel, reckons he can get me some work there during the summer.”

“If you get stuck or something happens,” she said.

“I know make for Lewis,” he nodded, “Thanks.”

She paused for a second, “The plants!”

“Oh, aye they are doing quite well, mind you'll not be wanting them here. I know I could drop by your folks, then I'd know how to get to them,” he said.

“Do you mind?”

“Ach no, no worries.”

“Can you explain to my dad, he's taken up gardening, calls him self a shed exile.”

“Hot, dry, and no putting them in the local horticultural show.” Mack grinned. “Your father is here by appointed guardian of the world!”

“Hey don't joke.”

“Have you been able to?”

She sighed, if it was only Keith no problem but with Miss Veronica White, or Miss Bluebottle as my dad calls her.”

“Bluebottle?” he said, then the penny dropped, “Oh, aye buzzing around you like a pesky fly. Does she take holiday?”

“A day here a few days there,” said Lucy, with a very telling expression. “I have enough

plant samples prepared in powdered form, if I get chance I may experiment with that. As to isolating the active molecule.”

He wished her best of luck, packed for the journey in his beat up old van, the time flew by, soon he was just a memory.

Lucy managed to find herself a grotty bedsit, she took most of her stuff with her to Lewis when she visited her parents, several weeks later.

“I did not fancy leaving much in the bedsit mum, it is a bit of dump.”

“Why don't you leave, you can stay up here with us,” said her dad. “The locals are not so bad once you get to know them, your mother has even gotten onto one of the committees.” He smiled.

“Wow, mum for dictator of Lewis?”

Her mother burst into laughter. When she finally calmed down, “Your fathers right, resign, tell them you have to look after your parents.”

“Just tell them the truth love, your mother is sick, sick of your father being home all day!” said father, which got them all giggling.

She was glad to relax. Dad gave her a tour of his domain.

“Very nice dad, this is coming along.” Lucy was admiring the borders.

“Come with me,” he said, taking her to what looked like cold frames, “I have them in there with some heating, did not want to put them in the conservatory, or the green house too obvious, you know what your mother's like with those committee meetings, all those women clucking around. You can just hear them asking what are those?”

“Well done dad,” she said peering in, “Nicely hidden amongst other shrubs.”

“If you want to hide a tree?”

“Hide it in a forest, dad,” she said with a big smile.

“Have you had a chance, to...”

“No, Miss Bluebottle, and if I resign,” she sighed.

They continued talking for some time. The days flew by mother took great pride in introducing her daughter to the neighbours, what few there were.

On the journey back down south Lucy mulled over what they had said. “If Veronica wants to be the boss, why not let her.”

“Sorry did you says something?” the passenger next to her, gave her an inquisitive look. She shook her head.

9 Beetles bite

In the director's office at the beverage plant.

“Resigning, what the devil for?” Ravensbury was not expecting this.

“She has handed in her notice sir.” The Production Director felt awkward, when WR was in a foul mood.

“WHY? Why Rodney, why now?”

“Her mother is apparently sickly and her father is having trouble coping.”

“Well I suppose at least she's not got herself pregnant.” WR sighed, “Better get HR on a replacement, that Miss White, she any good.”

“I think so, definitely management material, very diligent, and very positive.”

“Decision, get another cheap graduate, preferably not so wet and wimpy as Bellinger, and

promote White to Laboratory Head. Let HR know.”

“Thank you sir, I will.” With that he made a smooth exit.

They made Lucy work out her months notice, getting Veronica up to speed in her new role. “Look Lucy with Veronica off sick and we have yet to get another graduate, could you stay a week or two longer. Please?” The Production Director was being quite persuasive.

“Sir, my mother, well okay for a bit, I suppose.” Lucy had an idea, secretly she was actually quite pleased.

Miss White seemed to be ill for nearly two weeks, Keith just did what he always did, keeping diligently to his task. Before Veronica returned, Lucy who was now quite pleased and glad that the higher ups, had been distracted with amongst other things the task of finding another lab assistant, had a word with Keith.

“How are you doing?” she said.

“Fine thanks,” he said, in his usual not very talkative way.

“It has been nice working with you, I appreciate people who know their stuff, and you do.”

In a way she felt sorry for him, she almost wanted to warn him to leave, but then what about the next luckless soul and so on. As her dad had said, “You can't be responsible for everyone, if they are grown-up then they have to work things out and be responsible for themselves.”

It was a couple of days after this, that her nemesis returned. Lucy made sure everyone knew of the copious notes she had left, including all the fully documented procedures. She did not want people casting any assertions. Or as her dad was so fond of saying, “Casting any nasturtiums.” Lucy remembered how Miss White had been so positive about the new scaled up system, well she was welcome to it.

After the hand over and a brief send off, Lucy made for the bedsit, she had already packed her gear and was ready to go. The landlord had been forewarned and was all paid up. It was not long before she was on a train to London. An arduous trek across the capital and she was on another train bound for Glasgow.

The train made its way through the Lake District, she was taking in the delightful views. This tranquil journey was shattered by an announcement, “We are very sorry to announce that this train will be terminating at Penrith. Please alight from the train and await further announcements.” This started a gaggle of chatter, with people asking each other what was going on. The conductor was as clueless as everyone else, “Sorry ladies and gentlemen, all I know is that we have been told the train won't be going on beyond Penrith.” He continued his slow journey through the carriages.

A whole mass of people were waiting on the station, it was not just their train. Lucy thinking ahead had made swift use of the toilet on the train. She was glad of it, the queues on the station were excessive. Worse no one seem to know what was going on, or had any idea how long it would be. After several hours, and it getting late in the afternoon she was starting to think of a plan B.

With just a rucksack, Lucy headed off from the station and found a small B&B that had one tiny room left. It seems other passengers had had the same idea. Luckily it was not the holiday season. After calling her parents to let them know it might be a few days before she arrived home, she retired for the night.

In the morning she learned that local halls had been opened up for temporary accommodation. Her plan B only worked for that night, the room was not available for the following day. There was still no clue as to what had happened. It was still early in the morning, after checking for more information at the station she wandered back outside. She waited by the taxi rank. A cab pulled in, the couple in front of her were quick off the mark. Lucy listened to the cab driver who had just returned explaining that all the roads north including the M6 motorway were closed.

The couple were clearly frustrated, "All the roads? Can't you take us up the east coast?" "Mate of mine tried that, ended up in Durham," said the driver, "I can take you to Durham if you want?"

"No," said the man, leaning forward, "What is going on, you must know?"

"Sorry mate." The driver shook his head, and the couple wandered off.

Lucy went over to the cab driver.

"Excuse me please," she said, "I know it is a bit late in the year, but are there any campsites nearby?"

"Yes, miss."

"Is there a shop that sells camping gear here?"

He gave her directions, "Anything else?"

"Well I don't suppose there is a bus to the campsite, and even if there were," she paused, "Well you are bound to get nabbed by other people wanting a taxi, would you mind taking me to the campsite via the camping shop please?"

"Nice to meet a sensible person miss," he said with a smile, holding the door open for her.

The camping shop were exceptionally helpful, and the campsite very welcoming. It was some way from Penrith but that in a way suited her, the town was like a heaving refuge camp. Apart from the twenty minute wait for the shop to open the taxi proved a good option, she made a note of the drivers name and number for future use.

Several days passed, there was still no news and the road and rail links were still closed.

"So nothing?" she asked the man in the campsite shop.

"No, look not even in the newspapers, nothing on the television, not a peep even on the local radio and they are usually pretty good," he said, "So what do you do?"

"Well I don't have a job right now, just heading back home to my parents up on the Isle of Lewis."

"You sound well educated, you any good at paperwork?"

"Yes, I've done some reports, budgets that kind of stuff."

"Mate of mine, nice chap accountant down in the village, he's got more work than he can handle right now. If you're interested, who knows how long this whatever it is will last!" he said, with raised eyebrows.

The weather was not that special, and it would help to keep her solvent. So she found herself doing the menial work for a very jovial accountant. The work did not interest her, but at least she had a good boss. She wondered if it were ever possible to find a job you like with a boss you like?

After a week or so they started allowing people north on selected routes, with only a very few shuttle trains operating.

"Look I know you are staying in a tent at the moment and you want to visit your parents, if I sorted out some accommodation, would it be possible?"

"I'll call my parents and let them know, I've been delayed by a bean counter." She smiled,

he had a great sense of humour and took it all in good part.

She was still there several months later. It was a Monday morning, she was all bright and bubbly until she saw Mr Waite's paper. INDONESIA IN CRISIS, BEETLE RAMPAGE

"Sam," she said, "Please may I read your paper, when you've finished."

"Oh, yes dear, terrible news. The UN has called for the whole of Indonesia to be quarantined. Look at the satellite photos," he said pointing to the huge barren patches, "Seems they have no way of stopping them, nothing seems to work."

10 Headline news

The following day the headlines were even worse.

ALL FLIGHTS CANCELLED

ARE BEETLES IN LUGGAGE?

BEETLES CAUSE WORLD WIDE PANIC

ALL BEETLE SITES NOW CLOSED

LORD RAVENSBURY CALLED TO ENQUIRY

Lucy hardly needed to read these articles the paper was almost exclusively devoted to the devastating problem. She did not see any mention of her name, and she was glad she had taken photos of documentation including her memo of concern over the new feed tube design.

"Mr Waite," she said in a very delicate way, "With the travel restrictions and my parents being on an island, well..."

"You go visit your parents, if you have any problems you can always come back here," he smiled, "Don't worry we are through the worst of the accounts." He was not quite there but given the circumstances, he understood.

She had not gone very long, just a few hours and two men almost banged down his door.

"What is it?"

A rather cold looking man was staring at him, the big man behind looked mean and nasty.

"Lucy Hamber, she here?"

"No, why, who are you?" The men pushed past Mr Waite, searching every room, cupboard and cabinet.

"Where?" The cold man stared at Sam Waite.

"I have no idea, I had to let her go, no more work for her."

"What kind of work?"

"I'm an accountant, I had too much to do, she was staying at the campsite and a friend of mine asked if she needed any work."

The cold man looked at the nasty one, "We've been there, nothing." He then turned back to the accountant, "What did she tell you?"

"She was going to look for more work elsewhere, she did know where though." He shook his head.

"Where did she work before she came to you?" his voice was chilling.

"I don't know she never said, all I know is she used to live down near London. We had so much work to do, I didn't have time to chat to her." He shrugged his shoulders.

The man stared at him, a piercing stare, Mr Waite wanted to ask who they were, but he thought better of it. "So what did you talk about, you must have talked about something?" The big nasty brute moved in closer, closing in on Mr Waite's space.

"What?" barked the cold man.

"Work," he replied.

"What else?" The cold man edged closer, his face just inches from Mr Waite's.

"The weather, places of interest around here, she had never visited the Lake District, she was keen to learn more about accounting, I showed her some books that she read during her lunch breaks, very studious young lady. Nice to have a woman that does not constantly chatter and nag," Sam, wondered if a bit of banter about woman might ease the situation, "The last one, my god, she, well it is a wonder they never seem to get arthritis in their jaw." The big brute cracked a smirk, the cold man looked at him and back at the accountant, "Fucking women, fucking bitches," he said, moving his face even closer, "You sure, she never said anything else?"

"I'm a boring accountant, not a counselling service!"

"Nothing technical," said the cold man, his hands pushing Mr Waite's shoulders against the wall, "Nothing?"

"No, can you see a psychiatrists couch? I am not here to listen to a babbling bint, I have been working all hours on accounts because some idiots leave it to the last minute then expect me to work miracles, if they didn't then I would not have to find numerate women to do the tedious stuff." Sam Waite had decided in his mind to stand his ground and be insistent. He knew how predators can smell fear. He thought, nothing to hide, nothing to fear, and how I wish these mean bastards would leave.

The man let go, they both backed off, "We were never here, got it."

"Sure, I just want to get on with my accounts, thank you."

The two men left, Sam Waite closed the door and thought, "Lucy what have you done," then he took a book off one of the less frequented shelves, he could not warn her, but having worked with her, his bet was on her not them. "God please keep that young lady safe," he stood silent, clutching the book.

The taxi drivers number was unreachable, so Lucy decided to take a trail, she had a tent and there were plenty of campsites around.

Ravensbury was back at his home, the company had been closed. The authorities were all over his offices and the UK facilities.

"Sir," said Higgins, "My chaps have tracked her down. Penrith."

"Not a her parents then?"

"No first place they went, place was empty parents had gone out to some evening thing, they found a note, she was working for some accountant, temporary job."

"We have to get her before the authorities, Higgins."

"Sir, I can't go around looking myself, we have to be careful," said Higgins, pointing to the wall then to his ear. "They know what she looks like they were on Calibon Island."

Lucy was terrified, the car had almost run her down, then two men abandoned their vehicle

and started chasing her down the narrow track. Only a fork in the track slowed them down, at first they went the wrong way, buying her valuable seconds.

"Hey miss you nearly knocked me over."

Lucy was almost collapsing, she could not reply to the man her breathing so laboured.

"Ple.....," she gasped, "Please, I need help."

The man looked at her, "Are you running from someone?"

"They're behind me, track... on the track."

He looked at her, he did not know who she was or why she was running, but he sensed danger. "Come on." He took her a short way along the track to his home. "In there quick." He grabbed his old gardening jacket that had been hanging on the wheelbarrow, and stooped low.

It was only just in time, two men in suits, came racing around the bend in the track. They saw him and rushed towards his position.

"You old man," said one of the suits.

The hunched up old fellow in a ragged jacket, shuffled towards them. He spoke in a quite, frail voice. "Yes sir."

"A woman, came this way, where is she?"

"I was tending me cabbages sir, so I was."

The other suit approached him, "You stupid bastard, we don't give a shit about your fucking cabbages, have you seen a bloody woman, yes or no?"

"No," he said, the suit grabbed the old man's jacket and pushed him to the ground. He turned to the other suit, "We're wasting time."

"Come on then," said the other man. The two of them chased up the lane.

The hunched up man, slowly got to his feet, brushed himself off, and watched them as they disappeared over the brow of the hill. He turned and collected Lucy from her hiding place. "Come on, you'd best come inside," he gestured for her to enter his home.

"Your all hunched up?" she said looking at him, "Are you alright?"

"Yes," he said standing straight and removing the scruffy old jacket. She smiled, the man was lean, but not mean, he had a nice face, the beard made him look old, but his skin was not that of an old man. "Who were they?"

"They might come back," she said, still a bit out of breath.

"Yes, but who were they and why were they chasing you?"

"If they come back is there somewhere to hide?" She was panicking.

He could sense her fearful state, and took her to a very difficult to find and get to place in the house. "That any good?"

"Yes," she said, "Thank you, those men, I think they were some mercenary types, I had this job, the boss had this man, he knew others, we went to this island, they were there."

"Not the sort who would want to talk about God on your doorstep then?"

She shook her head, "No they might want to send you straight to Satan himself."

The man was very attuned to his surroundings, "Hide I'll explain later," he whispered.

Donning his old coat, he went back out into the garden, stooped he continued to tend his cabbages.

"She must be in there, that stupid old bastard wouldn't know, she could have snuck in," said the cold man.

They did not even ask, the door was not locked, they went in. It was over twenty minutes the man continued to tend his cabbages, the two men emerged from the dwelling.

"Fucking idiot is still tending those bloody cabbages," said the cold man, "Deaf fucker." The two men strolled past him back up the lane.

The man continued to tend his cabbages and the rest of the garden for several more hours. If they were watching the area, he did not want to give them any clues.

Several days later, Higgins was being briefed.

"So you lost her?"

"We nearly had the bitch, nearly ran her over, then she went down this rats maze of tracks."

"Damn, I should have been there." Higgins was visibly frustrated.

"Sir, you can't," said the big mean man.

The cold man tried to reassure Higgins.

"We have some of the lads, hiking in the area, she can't get far, we know where she was so we have that as the centre and are keeping the rest of the area under close watch."

"She might have got a lift with a bloody motorist. She could be miles away by now. Call off your men."

"Why?"

"You know damn well why, suppose the authorities go after her, your men are known in certain circles, especially the sort that might be assigned to extract some stupid bitch."

11 World wide worry

Several days later her new friend told her to relax a little. "Sorry you've been cramped up in there so long they've finally gone."

"Who?"

"Some rather military looking hikers, who seemed also to be very keen ornithologists. You'd have thought there was some rare bird sighting."

"How do you know?"

"Attention to detail, that's how I knew those two thugs were coming back, the natural sounds change."

"Thank you." Lucy was very relieved, and she could tell someone who knew their stuff.

"Not government operatives," he said with some certainty.

"How do you know?"

"They would most likely use the police, like beaters flushing out pheasants. Unless of course you were some kind of spy?" He grinned at her.

"No," she said almost with a smile, "Probably more of Higgins friends."

"Why would they want you dead?"

"Dead?" She was understandably taken aback by this statement.

"You don't send mercenaries to play tidily winks."

She remembered, "The enquiry."

"Ravensbury?" he paused for thought, noticing her nod in agreement, "Cover his arse, I bet you know a thing or two that he does not want aired in public."

"Oh yes, and," she paused, "Shit, that bastard probably had Higgins kill the lad who took the photos of adulterous Ravensbury."

"Lad?"

"Do you remember, what's his name Casey, the Captain Morrison, hmm."

"The bad Captain, oh yes."

"Well we went to this island his body was on the shore, Higgins made light of it, some old fisherman, when he was out of sight, I found a name bracelet on his wrist. Then on leaving the ship I found a camera memory card, I was in the cabin he had occupied. All circumstantial though not enough to bag a powerful man like Ravensbury."

"Well you best stay here it's out of the way, so long as those goons don't come back."

"What about the beetles though," she said, worried about them spreading, "I have a sort of solution, though they would never grow enough of the plant to kill the beetles. Oh, it is hopeless."

"Plant?" This fellow was a keen gardener so this really got his attention.

"There is a plant that grows on the island where the beetles came from, they don't eat it, there is a poison in it that kills them, about the only thing that does."

"What is the poison?"

"That's just it, Mr Bloody efficient, Higgins would not let me collect plants, and Ravensbury wouldn't let any unauthorised experiments on killing beetles go ahead. That's why John McKenzie got thrown out, he was concerned."

"Then they blew the poor bastard up." The man looked at her in a cynical way, she understood that he was getting clued into what was really going on.

She explained the whole story in lurid detail, the man listened attentively for hours. Her biggest worry though was they would all be eaten, it gave her nightmares, that's why she explained she did not think it was safe to stay in his house.

"So why do you choose to live here?" Lucy wondered why anyone would want to be so far from the shops and the things you need.

"Combination of things, I used to wonder at people who would put in vast amounts of effort destroying plants that grew easily, then planting other plants, and surrounding them with bare earth. When the exposed soil dried out they would endlessly water it to keep the plants growing, then poison the ground to stop weeds to defend these plants? Then tell me I should dig the ground over to bare earth, like they had some desertification disorder. How many forest floors, or wild pastures dig themselves over each season?"

"None, the stuff, just collects on top, leaves, poop, dust and stuff," she said smiling at him, "So you got away from the neighbours."

"Yes," he said, "All the folks who know what everyone else should be doing, the world is full of control freaks."

"But you do grow cabbages!" Lucy could not resist teasing him.

"True on a H \ddot{u} gelkultur and permaculture type system," he said, taking it as a serious question.

"Is that legal?" She was still keen to tease, the tension of the last weeks had left her fun deficient.

"Ah, the beloved government legalizing the unjust and making illegal the just."

It took her a moment to let that sink in and figure it out what he meant.

"I know permaculture is where you grow things that work for where you are, but.." She had forgotten the other name.

"Oh H \ddot{u} gelkultur culture, that is where you emulate what happens in a forest, pile up dead wood and such like then some soil, helps to add nutrients and retain moisture."

"Neat."

"No digging," he said with a grin.

"I bet my dad would like to learn a thing or two from you, he has taken up gardening," she paused, "He hates digging, not used to it. Being tall does not help."

In Whitehall two senior civil servants had managed to get together amidst the continuing flap.

"Good news they think they have the Indonesian situation under control."

"Well we can't stop trade too long, I have had to take a lot of flak from retailers, and there is some concern as to food stocks, I'll put it to the cabinet hopefully they will see sense and ease the trade restrictions."

"Just ban imports from south east Asia, surely, makes most sense and restrict travel to and from that area."

"You've heard about the energy committees recommendations?"

"No," he said looking quizzically at the other man.

"There is some concern as to what would happen if beetles got into a Nuclear facility, given what happened on Calibon Island."

"Ah, you've been privy to the enquiry too?"

"Yes, can you imagine the mess if we had a melt down?"

"Don't they take a while to shutdown? Nigel was telling me the other day, can't remember what he said, but it was something about allowing those rods to cool. Think he said it takes months."

"Well if we had a major emergency, nationwide?"

"The little problem up north was bad enough, can you imagine the entire nation?"

"Don't even go there my friend."

The march to ever more dependence on international trade with globalization, meant that Governments all around the world who had in a knee jerk reaction halted or severely restricted travel were feeling pressure mostly from the corporate sector. People had not really noticed much, with a few exceptions the shops had continued as normal. It was the warehouse managers who were showing some concern, their fears allayed by more senior figures not wanting to cause further problems.

On the Isle of Lewis Mr Hamber was having a rest, or as he called it doing research. It just started with a simple gardening question when he was searching on Startpage dot com. He clicked on the link and had been spellbound for weeks by what he found on NaturalNews dot com. This had led him to Infowars dot com and it was there when he was intending to download the podcast that the red linked article attracted his attention. Having read it once he called in his wife.

"It says here, The island where the beetles were found was used by the military during the cold war nuclear tests, it was off limits and not even on the map. The beetles a relatively harmless bug with a vegetable based diet, but quick at breeding, were modified. Hey, they added crab genes to make the beetle stronger, and fly genes to make the beetle live just a few weeks. The bright yellow beetle became green after the addition of broccoli genes," said Mr Hamber with rather cynical tone, "Camouflage dear, hide the little sods from the enemy, clever these military boffins."

She stared back at him, as only she could. He continued reading the article.

"The plan was to replace defoliation chemicals with a Bioengineered bug, that was bigger and tough enough to be dropped from planes, the bugs would then eat crops and trees, weakening the enemy's food supply and cover. The problem that they never solved was how to kill the beetles. Oh, now I get it. So the project was abandoned. Another side effect

was the new beetle would eat anything including meat, including living flesh.”

Mrs Hamber's expression telling of her thoughts on the last bit. She had been making them a seafood salad, her next thought, “Did you say they used crab genes?”

“Yes dear, so it might explain a few features. Get this; The beetles expected lifespan of a few weeks did not appear as a trait, in fact the opposite was true the beetle lived longer than the original unmodified beetle.”

“No who would believe it!” She said with a good deal of sarcasm.

“You won't find that on the Make Dream Media,” he said, “Sounds like they've cloned Kaplan, the planet is run by idiots.”

“Do you think Lucy knows about this?” she paused, she was worried, “Roger we have not heard from Lucy for ages, and the trains are running again, I checked.”

“Well what can we do dear?” He was obviously concerned but pragmatic.

It was some time later that Ravensbury, confined to his house was reviewing the newspapers with Fiona.

“I'm glad things are getting back to normal,” she said smiling at her husband, “Look at this darling, I guess they don't want a disaster here.” She handed him her paper, with the headlines.

GOVERNMENT TAKES PRUDENT ACTION ON NUKES.

The government inquiry into safety fears of ageing reactors has called for an immediate decommissioning. In light of recent studies and following the example Germany has set including concerns for the environment the government is taking a responsible stance. The public has been reassured that with the increase in renewables combined with the current energy efficiency drive there should not be a significant effect on supplies....

“Very interesting dear, nothing back from the enquiry though.”

“No dear.” She shook her head.

“Damn,” he said, “I'm glad we have extra security here, after what happened to the Production Director.”

“Well he was responsible darling, the newspapers highlighted his prominent role in the design of the new facilities.” Fiona was very supportive, and very defensive and vocal about it in the community.

It was just a few weeks later and the newspapers were full of praise for Lord Ravensbury. There was a huge article full of pictures of the Lab team, paying rather a lot of attention to Miss White. She had provided plenty of evidence that she and her team had been warning the Production Director and that as scientists her team had been exemplary in their concerns for safety.

When this news reached Lucy she decided it was a good idea to head for home.

“Are you sure that is wise?”

“You just like having me around don't you?” She knew he had grown rather fond of her.

“You heard what happened to the Production Director, and you know about that lad on the boat, and McKenzie,” he said, giving her a long hard look.

“Well,” said Lucy, her excitement at visiting her parents, now like a damp firework. “I've got to chance it.”

She knew this man had probably saved her life, so after giving him a well meaning lecture

and her parents address she started off on her journey north.

Upon arrival and a rather lengthy chat to her mum, she proceeded to ask about her father.
“Your dad is down the shed, probably listening to another podcast.”

“Okay, I'll invade his sanctuary.”

“Hi dad.”

“Hi love, how is my lovely Lucy?” He gave his daughter a big hug.

“What are you listening to?”

“Ah, Jack Spirko.”

“Who?”

“The survival podcast.”

“Hey I was staying with a chap who would appreciate that sort of thing. You'd two would get on really well. He taught me about Hügélkultur culture and”

“I have already got that going, come and have a look, listening to Jack, no dig gardening, brilliant.” As they walked over to the patch, “New boyfriend then?”

“No dad.”

“How did you meet him?”

“You're worse than mum....” she grinned, “I strayed off the official track.”

“Naughty.”

“I was being chased by two thugs.”

“Ah, so go on.”

“Well he was great, reckon he saved my life, he hid me until they had gone, then let me stay as long as I wanted. I told him he could come here if things got bad, hope that's okay?”

“We'll be starting a hotel if you invite any more stray men to stay.”

“Dad he saved my life, and Mack well,” she said with a twinkle in her eye, “you know.”

“Still have a soft spot for him?”

“You know I do.”

“So this other chap what was he like?”

“The sort of resourceful chap you'd be glad of if, dare I say it you got stranded on a desert island. He wore a multi-tool on his belt, and he knew how to make good use of it.”

“Well I hope he does take up your offer, I would like to meet him.”

“I doubt he will, bit of a lone wolf.” Lucy turned her attention to her parents, “How are you two settling in?”

“Your mother has been continuing her genealogy studies, her great great great grandfather was from Scotland. The local ladies have been duly informed.”

“Has she been boring them?”

“She says they were all very interested. Says she thinks we are in with a chance.”

In Ravensbury's home things were getting a bit tense.

“It's been over a year sir.”

“Higgins?” said Ravensbury.

“You know who sir.”

“No you stay here,” said Ravensbury, with his undiminished air of authority.

“But she...”

“No Higgins, we may have been exonerated by the enquiry, but there are still people out there who blame us. There are Indonesians living in this country you know, and by all accounts the Chinese and other South East Asian countries are none to amused.”

Both men were used to doing things, and with Ravensbury's business finished, enforced idleness was not taken well. This did not mean his Lordship was not thinking ahead, and he still had his yacht and a considerable personal fortune distributed discretely around the world.

In the corridors of power a secret meeting was convened.

"Reports gentlemen?"

"Sir the RAF is stretched to breaking point. We are trying to maintain air defences while helping with airport security and keeping our own bases secure."

"Don't ask the Navy, with half the fleet in the South China sea and the rest assisting the coastguard with their operations."

"Well what about the army?"

"We have all the TA (Territorial Army) and all the regulars and it is still not enough sir. You have us trying to secure military bases, government facilities, power stations, factories," he said, pausing to take a deep breath, "Warehouses and distribution centres which are our biggest nightmare, not to mention helping the police with looters and rioters."

"How many have left over the last year sir?"

"We are not sure given the unknown number of illegal immigrants, but we estimate the current population at around fifty or so million."

"Still too many," said the army man.

"Yes, but some of us are concerned about the brain drain."

"Sod the brain drain, it is still too many."

"That's what the Prime Minister said sir."

"Flu?"

"We might have to, the strain is ready."

"While we have enough medical staff and the majority of the population are still cooperative."

"And enough fear."

"We had to let Lord Ravensbury and that head of his Laboratory, Miss White come up smelling of roses. Couldn't risk a backlash against corporate science."

"Mandatory shots?"

"Good god, no man, these are not troops, the public are a funny lot. If you make it mandatory you'll get some of them resisting, if you need to force something it must be bad."

"It bloody well is sir."

"Yes, we know that, as I was saying, making it voluntary should do just fine, so long as enough get the shots they should spread it to a good portion of the rest. We will need to plan it carefully. Timing," he said taking a sip of water, "might not be a good idea to do it right now, people have had enough of scientific break throughs."

The men laughed.

Several years later. Mack turned up as he now seemed to routinely over the winter, after the tourist season wound down. Some times he would spend Christmas with Lucy and her parents, others he would spend with his Uncle. The dull weather brought it's own problems.

"Mum don't be complacent. Yes they sorted it in Indonesia but they literally carpet bombed

entire islands. The environmentalists are still freaking out about the extinction of species." "Lucy, there must surely be birds and other animals that will eat these beetles?" said her mother, who was feeling rather low.

"John found if you attack one it emits a chemical and others will attack whatever its predator. Like if someone attacks you mum, Dad and Mack would come and attack your attacker." Lucy was herself become frustrated with her mother.

"Yes but those in the laboratory were confined in real life wouldn't they be scattered?" Her mother did think her daughter was being rather too intellectual about the whole issue.

"They are worse than locusts mum, they hide in crevices and breed like flies."

"Yes but what about the poison?"

"Mum how do you get them to eat what they clearly know not to eat?" Her mother could be so dense at times. She had already explained this weeks ago.

Changing the direction of the subject, "Surely they would know by now if there were any more?"

"Mum you can hardly hold a census," said Lucy, her mind boggling at her mothers inability to grasp the potential danger.

Her father had walked into the room and had caught this last remark, "Kaplan would he'd demand the little sods comply."

"Yes dad well maybe you can get mum to work her charm on him and get him on the case."

"Well I still think it would be better to move back to the mainland, maybe a compromise, Edinburgh is a rather nice place."

"Mother," said Lucy, with a growl, turning to look at her dad.

"To visit dearest wife?" said Roger to his beloved.

"No to live Roger, to live." Mrs Hamber was not amused.

As the autumn rolled on so did the seasonal events. Lucy stormed into the the kitchen where both her mother and father were listening to an announcement on the radio.

"I hope you two are not getting that."

"We listen to Mike Adams dear," said her mother.

"The Health Ranger, he talks a lot of sense that man," said her father.

"So he has your approval then dad?" She smiled at her dad.

Her dad took the bait, "Those officials say we all live longer and are healthier, yet the health service takes more and more money. Apparently it is because of more technology and treatments becoming available. Yet everyone has to wait forever to get treated.

Propaganda, pure airy fairy Mr Kaplan land."

In high places two senior civil servants were in conversation.

"We are spinning it that last years flu was not as bad as in Europe due to the large take up in vaccination."

"Vaccination rates went down last year dear boy," said the more senior man.

"The public don't know that," said the other man with a grin, "We are also saying that the vaccine does not guarantee you won't get it infected, but it greatly reduces your risk and the symptoms may well be milder than if you were not vaccinated."

"Timing it with the world flu vaccination week?" The senior man was putting it all together.

"Indeed, and making the vaccine free during that week."

"Incubation period two weeks, hurry while you can get flu causing vaccine free, very neat." The senior civil servant was impressed.

"Voluntary," said the other man.

"Of course, don't want us forcing us to have the thing do we?"

“No and it might help reduce numbers.” said the other man.
“Pensions department will be pleased,” said the senior man with a rather sly look,
“Excellent plan.”

12 Panic in the streets

The senior Whitehall civil servants once again had the opportunity to talk.

“The minister was worried,” said the elder of the two.

“Why, I thought we were back to normal?”

“Had a meeting with some very high ups, seems a lot of money and a lot of smart educated people are still leaving the country.”

“Immigrant workers mostly, returning home to buy properties and set up businesses with the money they saved. Special report on the television last night.”

“That’s the spin old boy. I’ve seen the numbers, I can tell you there are corporate heads bleating about it. I’ve spoken with Nigel, he says there are plenty of British scurrying off. Well educated, lot of money leaving too.”

“Whatever for?”

“Wake up old chap, many of them know how close we came, it is an open rumour how empty the warehouses were.”

“That was years ago. You planning on leaving?”

“Wife is making decisions, suggest you do too old chap. Imagine it had been in Winter, and the wrong kind of snow!”

“That reminds me, do you know they’ve finally found the cause of leaves on the line.”

“The rail service cracked it have they?”

“Trees old boy, trees.”

“Now who would have though it! Did we fund this laudable research project?”

“On a more serious note have they got anywhere with that beetlecide?”

“Not according to Nigel, he says every University on the planet is working on a solution, all ours are beavering away.”

“All trying for that prize money,” he said, making a money hand gesture.

A few years with the exception of trade with East Asian countries, life was almost back to normal, people were getting used to the loss of cheap goods from China, though the multinationals were ramping up production in Mexico and some South American countries.

“Have you seen this dad?”

“What is it Lucy dear,” said her father looking at the article.

“Calls for more control on the internet finally to be heeded, as alternative media and conspiracy theorists cause panic buying.”

“Government and corporate incompetence more like,” said her father.

“Hey dad maybe Mr Kaplan has been promoted to the head of a world government?”

“This is serious stuff love.”

In the centre of town on a road descending down into the shopping centre trouble was

brewing.

"Sir we are stretched too thin down here, we are having to fall back," there was a pause in radio communications, "Romeo one, not reading you sir." A pause the commander on the ground looked at the officer standing next to him, "Bastard ordered us to open fire on that lot."

"Idiot sir, that could be your family down their, kill people over some cheap crap," he shook his head, "Those that give the orders haven't got a clue sir."

"We'll wait it out up here, all we can do."

"If it's any consolation sir, one of my lads has relatives up north, couple moved into the cottage next door to his folks. This bloke goes on and on about the idiots that run things, he had a daft boss, forget the name something like Catman."

From a small side road, in a row of bungalows the curtains were twitching.

"They still rioting down there?" said a very frail voice.

"Yes, it is a worry."

"You keep away from that window," said the frail voice.

"She never came, she has not been for two days now."

"Looters and there's that fuel shortage, so they say anyway," said the frail voice, "Those police and soldiers still down there?"

"I was worried if she is okay with all this going on, she is a nice lady, the best carer we've had."

"Are they still there?" he said, straining his frail voice.

"Yes dear but they've move back."

"Why?" he said, his hands trembling.

"Have you had your medication?"

"She was supposed to bring it?" he said, his tone shallow almost fading.

"I hope she is alright dear, she is such a nice lady."

"Yes, dear are they still there?" he asked again.

"Yes, yes they are still there."

Back at the top of the road, the men were passing the time.

"Bloody stupid timing to introduce fuel rationing," said one of the men.

"At least the idiots have backed off ration cards for food."

"This makes the Christmas rush and January sales shopping nutters look civilized. Can you image what would happen if they thought there was a problem with fuel."

"Don't," the man said looking away from the seething crowds, and back to his colleague, "All this over some cheap shit, because some idiot predicted cheap shit would be in short supply."

"Hello Henry,"

"William how is your new venture?"

"Going very well sir,"

"Excellent, very smart idea to exploit the cheap labour in Africa, and good timing to start importing when people are clamouring for cheap cloths and gadgets."

I has not been easy,

History," said Henry, his mind on those Beetles.

Infrastructure, we've had to concentrate around the coastal regions, ports mostly, still transportation costs are kept lower that way.

"Always a silver lining a?"

Winter was on the way, Mack was talking to the Hamber's neighbours.

"Fuel rationing has helped then?"

"Are you being sarcastic?" said Mr Campbell.

"Have you seen the news, truck drivers are all on strike, they are refusing to work. That's making things worse," replied Mack.

"Do you blame them the number of hijackings is through the roof?" said Mr Campbell.

"They are demanding police protection," said Mack, almost as though it was a cheek to do so.

"They'll be lucky," said the neighbour.

"This is getting serious, the military are saying they have no more manpower to spare, the police have told the truck companies to hire private security."

"Can you believe it, what do we pay taxes for?" said the elderly and somewhat bitter Mr Campbell, "Then they tell us to do it ourselves. Aye, those..." The old man looked up upon the horizon, towards the mainland. "Aye and yonders not so good, farmers are having their cattle go missing."

"You're not safe anywhere Mr Campbell."

"I have a friend down in Glasgow, he says the shops are in a terrible state, those that have not been looted are empty, no deliveries."

"Mr Hamber reckons they'll bring back marshal law like they did before during the Indonesian crisis."

"Wise man, for and Englishman that is," said the canny old scot.

Days later marshal law was introduced, though not totally effective. Once again the military and police were overstretched.

"Sir with due respect this is not like the fuel tankers going on strike. When we babysit the delivery trucks, they raid the shops and warehouses, when we play nursemaid to them they raid the farms." The senior Ministry of Defence official was standing firm against the cabinets demands for more assistance to keep the economy going.

"National Service," said one of the more elderly ministers.

"Brilliant, and who will train them?" The MOD man was not amused.

"You must have some retired men you could call up to assist with training," said an insistent minister.

"What about the prison riots, the lack of food supplies to those establishment is cause for serious concern."

"Yes minister, your point?" said the MOD man.

"What about NATO?" said the minister.

"Sir, we are not the only country struggling with the lack of goods from the far east and other countries restricting food exports. There are plenty of other countries dependant on imports that are struggling with reduced supplies."

"Those bastards should be made to supply us like they used too."

"Sir those countries are no longer threatened by our military might, they know our military is at breaking point just trying to maintain order at home. Argentina has just walked into the Falklands unopposed. Israel has been overrun and neither we nor the Americans could do anything about it. The Arabs are selling most of their oil to the Chinese, and our oil giants have been thrown out, the loss of Indonesian production did not help. The chancellor and the bankers are in crisis, because there is hardly any tax revenue, people either can't get to work, or there is no work for them to do in empty shops, or they are too frightened to go to work."

"Shoot the bloody looters."

"More and more of them are just ordinary people who have nothing left," said the civil servant who still had some empathy.

"So, they are breaking the law, shoot the bastards." The rather rotund minister was quite adamant.

"Sir, looting is not a capital offence."

"We'll let it bloody well should be, hang the lot of them."

The civil servant who still had some knowledge of life in the real world was at a loss as to how to continue.

The cabinet however made two decisions, to bring back national service and gear up for war.

"War sir," said the civil servant.

"Damn it man, don't you read history?"

The MOD man chimed in, "If crisis at home then make war abroad."

"Bloody right, give your chaps a go at those bastards who won't cooperate with us."

As the days passed the discussions with European and US leaders focused on the recovery of Israel and the Middle East, the UK would have to wait with regard to the Falklands. A conventional war was still possible, and preferred by NATO high command.

At the turn of spring, Lucy was glad to get a few weeks off work. The very kind Campbell's had sorted her with a low paid but bearable job.

"Where are you off to young lady?"

"Mum I have two weeks off, I have not seen either Sam or Don for years."

"Sam and Don, sounds like a comedy duo," said her father earwiggling the conversation

"The Accountant and Don, the chap down the lane."

"Oh, them," said mother, "You've heard Mack's news, he should be around later to say goodbye."

Lucy was taken aback at this and Mack did as promised turn up before his departure.

"What," said Lucy, "you are not seriously going?"

"I have to Lucy, I don't want them thinking I'm a coward."

"Mack, it takes more strength not to go along with this?"

"You're listening to your dad, don't worry there's not going to be a war. They've said it is because of a lack of manpower, they need conscripts to maintain order while industry and importers fill the gaps and the economy gets back on its feet."

"You really believe that?" Lucy was less than convinced.

"It's only for a couple of years, besides I have no work right now."

Lucy wished him well but in her heart she was not pleased. After some last minute packing changes, she was saying her farewells.

"I'll be off to visit Don now," said Lucy feeling downhearted.

"Smart lad, when's he going to visit us?"

"Maybe later, spring you know what that is like."

"I do with the shortages I have been growing vegetables like they are going out of fashion," said Mr Hamber, "Hey Lucy you will never guess what, Ken and I have a new source."

"Source for what?"

"Podcasts, Mr Campbell's grandson has found a way of getting some of the podcasts that we can't access via the internet."

"How?"

"I have no idea," said her father, "He says he will not be letting the lad join up, the lad is wise enough not to want to either. Ken tried to talk Mack out of it."

Two men were watching, the rugged countryside afforded plenty of hidden gullies. They were looking down upon the village, where Lucy was visiting Sam Waite the accountant. "Not here too many people," said the cold man, "We'll follow her."

"Where?" The big man was curious.

"My guess is we watch the cabbages," said the cold man, his almost monotone voice would have given any ordinary folks chills.

They did not have to wait long, Lucy's visit to the accountant was short and sweet.

"She can't have been there more than an hour or so?" said the big man.

"Higgins was right," said the cold man, "He is not our problem, boring fucking bastard bean counter. Mr Cabbage man, if she's told anyone it will be this git."

"Donald March the out in the middle of nowhere man," said the big man.

"They both will be in the middle of nowhere, quiet," said the cold man. Lucy was getting much closer, they had chosen a spot where there was a bend in the track. It gave them a clear view both up and down the rough trail, and across to the house. The straggly row of gorse bushes that lay on the slope below a dry stone field wall, gave them plenty of cover.

Lucy was relieved to see her friend hard at work in his veggie patch.

"Hello Don, how are you?"

"Hey Lucy, great to see you again, how's your dad's garden?"

"He already knew about Hugelkultur," she said smiling.

"Good job too with what's been going on, folks just have no idea how fragile the dependence is on imports. Well I guess they do now, a bit late though."

"Are you affected by this silly national service?" Lucy still could not figure out how old he was and it intrigued her.

"Not sure, don't worry I do have a plan B." He gave her a sly wink.

"You're not going to..."

"No, I have no intention of helping to enrich the Bankers or the Military, Pharmaceutical, Industrial complex. So where have you been?"

"To visit Sam, the accountant. He told me how just an hour or so after I left, the first time that was. These two nasty pieces of work ruffed him up trying to get to me. I told him what had happened, we think it was probably the same two that chased me and roughed you up Donald."

"How's he surviving?" Don was always eager to get intelligence on what the rest of the world was doing, even though the impact on his lifestyle was minimal.

"Sam is struggling though with the economy like it is, most of his work has either dried up or is just a trickle," said Lucy, shrugging.

"Doing okay here," said Don.

Lucy could tell he felt a bit smug, though she doubted he would admit it, "You sort of do your own thing."

For a bit Don went quiet, just pointing at the ground, occasionally nodding his head, he would look at her and mime things. She was puzzled, shaking her head.

"Lucy," he whispered, almost not moving his lips.

"What is it Don?"

"Those two men are back," he said under his breath, pretending to cover his mouth as though covering a cough.

"Oh, no, sorry." Lucy began to regret her visit, he was such a nice man, the last thing she wanted was to bring him trouble.

"It's not your fault. They have been there a while."

"Watching for me?"

"No they were there before you arrived."

"Why didn't you say?"

"If they had wanted to do something they would have made their move, you know you said about Mr McKenzie, what happened to him." Don's head was down, he pointed to some potatoes that were in the opposite direction to the men.

"You think?"

"Well why not wait until it gets dark, this shack is made of wood?" Don was running possible scenarios through his head.

"Oh, yes an accident, must have caught fire," she said pausing, an angry look came upon her face.

He pulled up a few onions, and some beetroot handing it to her, then collected up his tools and went into the shack he called home. Once safely inside he, pointed to the table.

"Leave them there a moment," he said sneaking a peak towards the two men, "We'll go into you know where."

"How will that help?"

"I'll show you," he said, as she followed him. Not having a fridge, Don had made a root cellar.

The two men were watching, unaware that they had been rumbled.

"She's been in there a while," said the cold man.

"You smart bastard, you said it was the cabbage man."

It was some time later, the sun was low in the sky as dusk approached.

"You realise this will add to global warming," said the big man in a whisper.

"It's okay," said the cold man in a deadpan voice, "Wood is a sustainable resource."

The big man wanted to laugh but he knew they were too close to the targets.

It was a few days later when Higgins ensconced at Lord Ravensbury's was reviewing the newspapers.

"Problem?" Ravensbury could tell something was wrong.

"Idiots, I should have been there," said Higgins, noticeably infuriated. "The investigation into the fire at the property, said that at least there was no one in it at the time. They found no bodies."

"Damn." WR shared his butlers, annoyance. "Any suggestions?"

Higgins, would have liked to say a few expletives regarding William Ravensbury's previous insistence that he and most of the men stay around the house. Though in hindsight he realised why WR upon whom he depended had been insistent, and with good reason.

"Now things are looking up for the Raven Holdings," said Higgins pausing to choose his words, carefully.

"Leave a few good men here, you and the rest go, eliminate the threat, she could bring us down."

"Understood sir," said Higgins, loosing no time, he was soon on route.

In a forest in Galloway, Lucy was relieved to be taking a rest. Don had been pushing a cracking pace, so much so that he had left her breathless.

"Very impressed," he said, as he made a very well concealed encampment.

"Great location," she replied, assuming he meant the the general area.

"With you, keeping quiet and holding the pace, if they have twigged that they did not get us the further away we are the better, and talking can only attract attention. It only needs some ramblers to hear us talking and well,..."

Lucy got the gist.

"Hand me the BOBs," he said, pointing at the rucksacks.

"Will he mind?"

"Who?" said Don, looking perplexed.

"Bob?"

"Bug Out Bag, we have two BOBs," he said with a grin.

"Oh," she said, the penny dropped, "Why did you have them?"

"Only an idiot would not be prepared, you hear about so many natural disasters, not to mention man made ones like nuclear power stations going critical."

"Sellafield is not that far away as the crow flies from your place?"

"Correct, Windscale now called Sellafield, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Fukoshima, and I bet there are plenty of lesser issues that never reach the news." Don put the final touches to the interior of the well hidden night den.

"The route we've been following, how? I mean it's like you know it and we've hardly been near civilization." said Lucy, who was rather impressed, if somewhat tired.

"Pre planned, when you go in a building don't you always checkout the evacuation routes? Say in a hotel, if you're half asleep at night and have to leave, the last thing you want to do is be scrabbling around in the dark, panicking about how to get out, do you?"

"Yes, but this route?"

"You were the one that offered the option of staying at your folks house, so it made sense to work out how to get there, preferably without being interfered with by the sheeple or their masters."

"Sheeple?"

"The folks who moan about government then go and vote, like it will change anything! They watch television, practice the tenth plank of the communist manifesto, then complain about God when things go pear shaped." There was a distinct note of sarcasm in his voice.

"Noah was a prepper, and grains are cattle food. When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet. Proverb 3:24" he said giving a subtle hint.

"How the bloody hell did they escape?" said Higgins to his two operatives.

The cold man spoke, the big man standing a bit uneasy. "Sir, first time, and this chap she is with, he's smart."

"That is bloody obvious," said Higgins, "Any news on them?"

Both men shook their heads, and both were pleased to have some of their comrades to help out.

"The bitch knows too much," said Higgins, "You were all on the island, you all know what she looks like and without Ravensbury we all go down."

"Sir my guess is she will be heading to her parents," said the cold man.

"I have that base covered, she is not there, any other ideas?" Higgins, looked around the

small group. They were near their off-road vehicles parked in a turning circle to one side of a track that went through a forest.

"Do we have anything on this Donald March sir?" said the big man, feeling a bit more at ease.

"Nothing other than he was a former engineer, probably burnt out, smart but not that smart, academically he was not the brightest button in the box." Higgins, had little else to say.

"Sounds like a loser," said the cold man.

"Well he fucking lost you didn't he," said one of the other men.

"Does he have any other property they might go to?" said the cold man.

"No, neither does she," said Higgins.

"Can't we just wait for her to go to her parents?" said the cold man.

"Do you know how long that might be or what she might do during the meantime, or what the world might do that could change our plans?" Higgins was very calculating with regard to the situation. "Besides they got away from one property there is no guarantee that they won't do the same again. We've dug out two foxes, if they are out in the open, we have the advantage, especially if my hunch is right."

"Hunch sir?" asked the big man.

"This cabbage man, likes remote places look at where he was living, people are very predictable." Higgins, grinned.

"That's why you brought us to a forest," said the cold man, his chilling tone like an ice wind on your fingers.

"He has no vehicle, neither does she," Higgins paused, "Tonight I have a friend gathering some data, tomorrow we hunt." With that the team dispersed.

The cold morning and the rising sun greeted Don and Lucy. Don quickly made the camp vanish, and they were on their way.

"Don," whispered Lucy, "Won't they expect us to go to my parents?"

"Probably," he said, clambering up over a rock strewn ridge.

"So why are we going there?"

"Think of your parents home as a wasp trap, we can't run for ever." He drew a forefinger to his lips.

It was sometime later when they stopped for lunch.

"Why did you shush me?"

"There were hikers following a nearby trail, do we really know who to trust? The last time they disguised themselves as bird watchers."

"So if they expect us to go to my parents how is it a wasp trap?"

"Well, if they expect us to go there, and we expect them to know that, perhaps we can surprise them, if they don't see us coming." Don was not sure he really knew what to do but he could not think of any better plan.

Higgins had spent all morning pacing up and down, the team had reassembled, based on the probability that their prey was moving north, at a location he predicted would be roughly in the right area.

"At last," said Higgins, beckoning them over. He had satellite data and it looked good.

Don pushed Lucy to the ground, and made the sign to shush. Two men one of whom Lucy recognised, walked across their route only twenty metres ahead. Luckily where Don and

Lucy lay hidden by thick bushes. When the men were safely out of sight, Lucy, whispered to Don, "How did they find us? I recognised the one at the back, he was on the island when we had the problem at the factory."

"How well connected are this lot?" said Don.

"Ravensbury was extremely well connected," she replied.

"Could they be using some kind of satellite tracking? Do you have a mobile phone?"

"Yes," she said.

"Remove the battery, quick."

She did as he said, after some time they resumed their journey with great caution. It was getting towards evening the light was fading and Don was keen to get to his next camp site. Don waved his hand down, Lucy instinctively crouched behind him, as they froze in the tiny gully.

"They are around here somewhere, and close," said Higgins. Lucy recognised his voice, the shadowy figures seemed to be all around them. They then moved off, towards the direction of Don's planned camp location.

While they had been waiting, Don's mind had raced, "Thermal, he whispered, must be tracking our body heat. Whatever they are using we must be sufficiently hidden down here. Then he had an idea, pulling out a couple of reflective survival blankets.

Lucy looked at him, "Have you gone nuts, they will see that a mile away even in this fading light."

"Take off your coat," he said, folding the blanket into four, and cutting off the most folded corner. When he handed it to her it was like a poncho. She put her head through the top, then he gestured to put the coat back over the top, and tuck the bottom edges into the top of her trousers, placing the square cut from the corner under her hat. He then did the same for himself. They huddled together and waited, during the night a torrential downpour did not help, the bottom of the gully filled with water, though overhanging branches from small trees and shrubs gave them some cover.

A startling sound awoke them in the morning. It was Higgins and the men. The rain was still pouring down.

"This is the last area we had them tracked."

"Sir, there is a road nearby," said the cold man.

"Shit," said the big man.

"Okay we will have to go wait on communications from Lewis, there is no sense in getting soaked in this pissing rain." Higgins said almost snarling.

Lucy remembered how he was on the volcanic island where they first found the beetles. When they had gone, she wanted to move but Don cautioned that it might be a trap. "You know how they hunt pheasants, they send in beaters to flush them out. They may have wanted us to hear them say they were leaving," he said in a barely audible whisper.

"Now we know they are going to wait for us in Lewis, suppose we did not turn up?" said Lucy.

Don, gave this some serious thought.

Higgins returned back to Lord Ravensbury, leaving his men to monitor Lewis around the clock. As the days passed, William Ravensbury was becoming impatient. Higgins, came

into the drawing room with post for his master.

"How long do we wait Higgins, your men still have no signs that she has returned home?" said an indignant Ravensbury.

Higgins had no clue, "Perhaps the two of them have gone on holiday somewhere, maybe they don't even realise we were there?"

"Find them," said WR in his stern masterful tone.

"They could be anywhere sir!"

"Damn it, find them man," said WR, cooling a little he continued, "I know you can do it, I'll check with my friend, see if we can pick up any plastic purchases."

13 Can they be stopped?

"Hello Roger, any sign of your Lucy yet?"

"No, thanks for asking Ken," said Roger Hamber.

"My cousin reckons your house is under surveillance, probably best not to tell your misses."

"Really?"

"Aye my friend, he though they were after his sheep, but he notices things," said Ken,

"Probably in connection with the news I wouldn't wonder."

"News?" Mr Hamber was genuinely surprised.

"Auch have you not heard, the Chinese have nuked half of south-east Asia, allegedly because of a beetle escape from one of the universities doing research on killing them."

"No?"

"Aye, they say the Chinese think this is a western plot to destroy their crops."

Several hours later the two of them were again talking.

"Did you just listen to that podcast Ken?"

"Aye, I was just coming around to tell you."

"The Chinese are denying it, they are saying it is a false flag to blame them." Mr Hamber had done plenty of thinking, "Ken, who would benefit?"

"Auch, so that's why they've been mobilizing our lads, destabilize the far east, create some chaos and take back the middle east. Next they'll be saying no beetles escaped it was all a rouse by the Chinese to launch nukes. Very canny, then other countries will hate the Chinese and flock to NATO and the UN to do something." Ken looked at Mr Hamber, who nodded. He did not need words, they both knew that Ken was pretty much on the right wavelength.

Speaking of wavelengths, the government had taken control of the media, as much of the commercial media had collapsed due to the economic situation, along with workers in the industry not having been paid or being too frightened to travel to work during the riots. The government had also clamped down on the internet, which was now so highly regulated that only a handful of social media networks remained. Such networks were only useful if you wanted to show all your friends what you sicked up after last night's party. Anything meaningful, such as political analysis and your channel would go down and at the very least you may face some serious questions.

In some very secret corridors of power, those operating with the dark side were engaged in some serious debate.

"Are you sure sir, what is in this report," the man paused, "if the timing goes astray?"

"I share your concern gentlemen, but we are pretty certain we will have a solution by then, and we know the winters are predicted to be very cold over the next few years."
"Exactly, we have some well stocked secret locations, besides there are too many people."
"So we use drones to drop beetles inside the far east principally China."
"Won't that give credence to the story that the Chinese nuked to stop escaping beetles?"
"Yes but think of the precedent that it gives us."
"Oh, brilliant, absolutely brilliant."
"Then we send conventional troops in to take back our resources in the middle east, with the pretext of containment of the far east."
"And if the beetles do survive then we will have a massive population reduction if we can't stop them from eating all the crops."

14 The cut price

Things seemed to be going as planned, with all civilian travel heavily restricted and almost non-existent foreign travel, the power elite in London were feeling quite buoyed. The freak accident that had flooded the channel tunnel was of course greatly mourned and politicians vowed that as soon as peace returned to the world they would ensure funds were made available to restore the vital link to the continent.

A big propaganda campaign was announcing the tragedy of having to nuke China, with much positive spin about how Chinese culture still survived in communities around the world, and how the UN would make it a priority to rebuild China and the Far East as soon as was practicable.

As UN NATO forces re-established control of the world resources once again slowly began returning to the Western powers. Though the price of fuel was cut, it was not by much because of course the carbon tax on top of the fuel duty and value added tax made up the lions share of the price.

The biggest price drop was a massive reduction in freedom worldwide. It was like they had used the cover of war to have rights give-away, of course this was only temporary, honest. Support the war, give up everything, it is for national security. Those in power knew full well that what was done unto the far east could be done unto them, and they still had no way of stopping the beetles other than creating a nuclear wasteland.

The Endor is it?

(Please let me know by emailing more at dorsetauthor.co.uk with the story title in the subject line. Thank you.)

Noah was prepared for the worse are you?