

MARK ARUNDEL

FILE NO.1

**code
name:
Money
man**



Codename: Moneyman

[File No.1]

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Laughing Gulls

Dedicated to the memory of Ann

Chapter 1

Deal thirteen cards each to four players.

THE NIGHT WAS BLACK like the wing of a lifeless raven. I stared forward into the darkness and my eyes saw with an unnatural light. It was eerie, ghostly, unnerving. I lifted my hand to my face, felt night-vision goggles tightly fastened and set to maximum. I realised it was raining. Heavy drops fell from the canopy and slapped gently against my battle helmet. My jungle combat boots felt wet, and my boots fought for grip in the mud. I looked down at my waist and saw I held an LMG [*LMG: light machine gun*]. Secured around my hips was an ammunition belt and below that a scabbard that held my fighting knife. My fingers left the gun and automatically touched the handle of the knife, mentally reinforcing distance and position. I held my concentration. My eyes searched forward and I listened. The only sound was the falling rain. I lifted one boot and moved ahead. One-step, slowly, and then another. It seemed the jungle had consumed me. All I saw was vegetation. There were no other soldiers, no buildings, no lights, just the eerie abnormal glow through the night-vision goggles. I stepped forward again and then stopped. Had I heard someone move? I listened. There was silence. Then the man dropped on me from above. The weight and force of his body took me down with him. He was over me, grabbing at me; his fist was clenched and preparing to strike. He pulled his arm back and I saw the silver blade flash pale green. Unconsciously, I pushed my body forward using every muscle in my abdomen and struck his knees with my feet. His balance went and in the mud, his feet slipped. I was already up, already pulling my fighting knife, already advancing on him. He tried desperately to rebalance and defend the attack but it was too late. I could smell the sour tobacco on his breath. My knife sank deeply inside his throat. He made a death sound low in his chest and my hand found his mouth. I watched his eyes search for something that wasn't there and then lose focus. His head turned heavy and I let him fall. My eyes searched the jungle and the canopy, and then I stepped away. He made a sound. I looked back. He was dead, I was sure of it. My eyes stayed on him. I wanted to pull myself away but I couldn't. Something held me fast, and then he lifted his head. His eyes opened and they burned into me. His lips parted, his black mouth gaped wide and he screamed the words 'Your mother is dead.'

With those shocking words, the malevolent power of my nightmare broke and I jolted awake. My heart thumped in my chest, I gulped desperately for air and I felt the running sweat turn cold against my burning skin. I shivered and tightly closed my eyes.

The vivid emotion stayed with me as though it had buried deep inside like an alien life form and wouldn't leave. I willed it to go but it was morning before it finally left.

The day had begun like those before it. I wondered how many more of them there would be. I didn't want to think about the answer.

I shifted on the sofa and tried to get relaxed. The thin duvet was mostly on the floor. It was the most uncomfortable three-seater sofa ever. Trolls had probably built it in the dark.

I was still restless when Tom came in. It was already time for him to leave for work. He was dressed in an office suit and a bright tie with a golfing motif. I don't like ties but if you have to wear one then it must be plain. Only working clowns should ever wear bright or motif ties, as they are the only people with a good enough excuse.

He walked across the room, opened the curtains, then came, and stood by the sofa. He looked at me for a few seconds while he fiddled with the offending knotted silk and then he said, 'How's the job hunting going?'

'It's only been a week,' I said.

Tom said, 'I know, but are you trying, really trying?'

I didn't answer.

'Don't you have any contacts, you know, who could give you a job?' he said. 'Like a mercenary or maybe a bodyguard or something.'

I failed to stop the uncivil laugh.

He frowned at me.

'It's not me, you know that,' he said. 'If it was just me you could stay as long as you liked, but with Linda, and with the baby due in less than two months.' He was being apologetic. He needn't have been. After all, it was his flat, his wife and his second kid on the way. He needn't apologise for asking me to leave. We hadn't seen each other since school. Sure, he owed me plenty of favours from back then but that was years ago now. Turning up as I did, out of the long and distant, I'd been lucky he'd let me stay at all.

'I hear you,' I said. 'I'll sort something out today if I can. It's good of you to let me stay as long as you have.'

Tom didn't say anymore. As a way of covering the awkwardness, he turned around and then switched on the radio. He gave me a half smile as he left.

I let my head fall back onto the clammy pillow and wondered what I was going to do.

'Overnight the Nikkei fell again for the fifth straight day dropping to a two year low, and the Footsie is expected to follow suit when it opens in just under thirty minutes. In America the Dow Jones is at one year lows with banking stocks coming under increased pressure as the financial markets struggle with losses and a fall in world confidence.' The radio newsreader's voice rang with earnest importance. I listened to the grim financial report and realised the economy was on a major slide. That wasn't going to help me either.

I got up and went into the kitchen. Linda wasn't up yet so I didn't have to see her.

I carried a mug of tea and a packet of chocolate biscuits back to the settee and tried to get comfortable.

The radio was giving out the day's weather forecast. It was the Monday morning after the clock had gone back, almost November, almost winter: dark and cold, wet and windy. An English winter was not a bright prospect. I took a bite of the first chocolate biscuit followed by a mouthful of hot tea. The forecast was predicting a dry day with light cloud and a freshening breeze from the southwest. That meant it was probably going to rain. I've often thought that British weather forecasts should carry a disclaimer, something like, *this program is for entertainment purposes only and any resemblance to the actual weather in the day ahead is purely coincidental*. Perhaps I'm being unfair, given the notoriously changeable English weather, but if you're going to try to forecast it then it's only reasonable to warn people.

The telephone rang. I thought Linda would get it but after the sixth ring, I got up and answered it.

'Hello,' I said.

A woman with a confident voice replied, 'Who am I speaking with?'

I told her who I was which seemed to be the answer she wanted.

She said, 'My name is Charlotte Miller. I'm a government departmental civil servant. Please confirm your military serial number so I can verify your identity.'

I told her the number, which was memorised.

She thanked me and said, 'I'm calling on behalf of the Foreign Office.'

I interrupted and said, 'The Foreign Office?'

She continued as if I hadn't spoken.

'Would it be possible for you to come to a meeting later today?'

'A meeting, later today, I...'

She cut in and said, 'It's most important that you attend.'

'Oh, is it? Well, I...'

'Good, can you come at four o'clock?'

'What's this about?'

'Don't worry, everything will be explained when we see you.'

She told me the address. I found a pen beside the radio and jotted it down on yesterday's newspaper.

'When you arrive ask for me by name, Charlotte Miller.' Her goodbye was still sounding in my ears as she ended the call.

I'm not usually a curious man, perhaps because I can normally come up with a satisfactory explanation, quickly, for most things. This telephone call, though, I had to admit, had made me curious. I read my scribbled note and realised the address was in Whitehall. I thought for a moment but nothing came immediately to mind. I didn't know who Charlotte Miller was, her of the confident telephone voice and no immediate idea what the Foreign Office wanted with me. It was curious indeed.

Mrs. Carlson, from flat eight, was in the lift with Pepper, her Pekingese. I noticed the toy dog had a bright, gold and red ribbon tied in its hair. It further confirmed my assertion on ties, not that it was necessary.

Mrs. Carlson smiled and said, 'We're off to the park, dear. Pepper enjoys her walkies.' I attempted to smile back but my face seemed to be stuck, so I just nodded. Unperturbed by my unenthusiastic response, Mrs. Carlson said, 'It's a lovely day dear, dry and sunny with a mild breeze.' She smiled again as if this news would somehow free my face and return the power to my muscles. The weather forecaster's predictions had obviously convinced her. It was no good my face remained stuck. I simply nodded my head again. The lift sounded its arrival on the ground floor and the doors slid open onto the lobby. Mrs. Carlson smiled one last time, but less enthusiastically than before, and said, 'Goodbye dear, it was nice to talk to you.' Pepper flicked his little pink tongue over his wet snubbed nose and eyed me cautiously. I nodded one last time and went ahead, through the glass-panelled door, down the steps and onto the pavement. It was raining.

I pulled up my jacket collar and hurried on my way. The pavement was crowded. Bustling city workers jostled with shoppers in an elaborate game of tag. They failed to draw me in and at the crossroads, I had to stop and wait for the lights.

A passing bus tried to poison me with a toxic blast of diesel fumes from its grumbling exhaust. More queues of noxious traffic edged slowly by with their windscreen wipers arcing monotonously and their occupants hidden behind misted, wet glass. A slightly wider gap between two cars allowed an energetic young woman to make a dash for the other side. She made it safely. Perhaps I should have tagged along. Danger is, after all, an aphrodisiac. The green man eventually lit up and the traffic stopped. I walked across with the herd and felt my enthusiasm vanish like the magician's prettiest assistant—you know she must be there somewhere but you just can't see her. All the other people around me seemed empty of excitement too. A rainy Monday had successfully dampened everyone's magical spirits.

Charlotte Miller had already spoiled my day. All I could think about was the mystery four o'clock meeting. I focused my mind and thought hard. It must have something to do with my job. At least that one I had up until a week ago.

It was ten to four and the city was already beginning to get dark. I crossed at the t-junction and quickened my pace.

Whitehall was still about a fifteen-minute walk away. The pavements were easier now, less like sand on Bond Street, so I made good time. I reached the park and quickened my step, passing the subway

lit boutiques and upmarket jewellers without a glance. I needed to cross the road but a solid line of noisy traffic made me stop. Curiosity replaced my annoyance while I waited for the road to clear and found myself eager to discover why they wanted to see me.

I turned left and hurried past a restaurant with its warm lights shining across the damp cobbles and a wine bar with a chalkboard outside smudged by the rain. The chateaus had taken on a ghoulish theme.

The fine drizzle drifted on the breeze like the spray from a hosepipe and a faint rainbow appeared in the mist above my head.

I passed the entrance to a small museum that looked closed and crossed at the junction. The street turned sharply and as it straightened, I saw my destination. The old building had once welcomed guests arriving in horse drawn carriages.

A serene hush greeted me as I pushed open the door. Before I could go any further, I had to pass through a security detector like those at airports. No alarm went off and the uniformed guard gave me a blank look and an official nod of approval. He checked off my name against his printed list, which he held on an old clipboard. At the desk, I was welcomed with an enquiring smile.

I said, 'I'm here for a meeting with Charlotte Miller.' The neatly dressed woman with her hair tied up in a bun checked her screen. She smiled again and politely asked my name. I told her and she said, 'Yes, sir, you're in meeting room number six.' Realising, from my lack of immediate movement, I didn't know where meeting room number six was she said, 'It's through here, then through the waiting area, along the corridor and then right at the end. The door is numbered.' She assisted her verbal directions with the pointing of her left hand, aimed vaguely in the general direction I was to go.

I said, 'Thanks, I'm sure I'll find it.'

In the waiting area, well-dressed business people and academic types sat in the plush surroundings reminiscent of an English stately home converted to use as a conference centre. Many of them were drinking tea and some were eating biscuits. It made me feel hungry. Resisting the urge to sit down and join them I pushed on, finding the corridor and eventually meeting room number six without any further distractions.

I opened the door without knocking and went straight in. The floor covering was thick, grey carpet tiles and the wallpaper was in two-tone cream. The centre of the room held a shiny-topped mahogany table and against the far wall, opposite the tall veiled window, was a sideboard supporting a vase of plastic flowers. The room was quiet and warm with a faint scent of wood polish. On the table were a coffee pot and a plate of biscuits. The room was soulless. I checked my wristwatch. It was four o'clock.

Before I could decide what to do, the door opened and a woman entered. She didn't seem surprised I was there. She approached me. I didn't get a smile but her eyes were warm and friendly. She was confident in the same way a film director might be with a strong cast of actors at her command. She wore a tight skirt and matching tailored jacket. Tied back and held by a black ribbon was thick auburn hair. Her white blouse was undone at the neck. She extended her right hand and we shook. It was difficult to pull my eyes away from her face. I glanced at her left hand and didn't see any rings. She held my gaze and thanked me for coming.

'I'm Charlotte Miller,' she said. 'You're very punctual.'

'The rain made me walk fast,' I said.

Her eyes remained on my face for a moment and then she said, 'Shall we sit, coffee?'

We sat and she poured two cups.

'Is it raining?' she said. 'I've been inside all day.'

'Working hard on the affairs of state?' I said.

'There always seems to be something that comes along to keep me busy.'

'Like me?' I suggested.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘like you.’

~~Just then, the door abruptly opened and a man entered. His tightly pulled face gave the impression the day was causing him stress and he muttered something about the right room. He sat down beside Charlotte and poured himself a coffee.~~

‘This is Stephen Bradshaw,’ Charlotte said. The man nodded at the introduction but didn’t extend his hand. ‘Mr. Bradshaw is from Military Intelligence.’

‘Is this him?’ he said while openly assessing me over his raised coffee cup.

Charlotte didn’t respond.

‘I don’t know what’s wrong with the existing list; all of those men are perfectly capable...’

He didn’t finish the sentence because Charlotte cut him off.

‘We’re just waiting for one more,’ she said.

We sat in silence while we waited and drank our coffee. I sensed the tension between my two new friends. It hung in the air like the harsh smell of burnt toast. Bradshaw made an unnecessary call on his mobile and Charlotte offered me a biscuit.

The door opened again.

‘I hope I’m not late,’ the man said. ‘It was the damn traffic in this rain.’

‘This is Sir George Winchester from the Foreign Office,’ Charlotte said.

‘How do you do,’ he said and shook my hand. He sounded like a cricket captain on a summer morning, meeting a new junior player.

He acknowledged Bradshaw while he sat and poured himself a coffee. His eyes settled on my face.

‘You’re probably wondering why we’ve asked you here today,’ he said.

‘It had crossed my mind.’

Without pausing he said, ‘I am sure you must have considered the possibility of it having something to do with you being a British soldier.’

‘...ex-soldier. They booted me out. Didn’t you know?’

Sir George Winchester remained unruffled. He was wearing a navy blue, three-piece suit with a thin pinstripe. The Saville Row tailoring was obvious. His face was pastel grey, as though it rarely saw the sun and his skin was smooth for a man in his fifties. I wondered if a lack of emotion had avoided his features suffering unnecessary creasing. When he spoke, only his mouth moved and even then, his thin lips remained economical.

He said, ‘Before we continue, I must remind you, that as a British soldier you signed the Official Secrets Act which you remain bound by and therefore, anything discussed here today must remain confidential. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, I understand.’

Winchester nodded his approval.

‘Are you missing the army already? What will you do now?’ he asked.

We both knew the answers to those two questions. I didn’t respond.

Winchester’s face remained emotionless.

He said, ‘I expect the army may prove difficult to replace.’

I didn’t like him. I was beginning to get annoyed with the formalities and his pompous attitude. As if he sensed this, he offered me a second cup of coffee, and then said, ‘Have a chocolate biscuit.’

I took one. I sipped my coffee and ate my biscuit. Neither Charlotte Miller nor Stephen Bradshaw had taken their eyes from me, although, neither of them had spoken.

‘Are you a patriotic man?’ Winchester asked. ‘I find soldiers are normally loyal and committed to their country.’

I’d never really thought of myself in terms of patriotism. I said, ‘No more so than anyone else.’

‘Quite. A consideration to once again serve your country would be considered positively though

would I be correct?’

I said, ‘I suppose so.’

By now my curiosity was venting through my ears like steam from Stephenson’s rocket and although I’d promised myself I wouldn’t ask, and that I’d let them tell me, I couldn’t wait any longer. I put my coffee cup on the table and said firmly to Sir George Winchester, ‘What’s this all about?’

In response to my demand, Mr. Stephen Bradshaw sat forward in his chair, placed his elbows on the table and fixed me with an intense stare.

‘We’d like you to kill somebody for us,’ he said.

SIR GEORGE WINCHESTER

He didn't want to be there but he had to be.

It was his responsibility. He wanted to make sure it was correct. How long before he could leave. He resisted looking at his wristwatch.

His eyes remained on this new man and he watched him eat his biscuit and drink his coffee. They all looked the same, he thought, these soldiers. Human copies of *Action Man*; this one even had a scar just above his cheek.

He vowed to get away as soon as he could. He would make an excuse for having to leave promptly. They wouldn't know it was a lie; they didn't know what he was really doing later.

His mind drifted for a moment. He was looking forward to the bridge game at the club on Wednesday night. Even though he had drawn one of the weaker players as his partner, his own abilities were more than enough to compensate and he would still win. He was the best player. They all knew that.

He forced his mind back to the briefing. He controlled everything with such skill. It was a gift, a natural talent to be in charge and to be the master of events. Inside, he smiled but he never allowed it to show on his face.

This new man was confident, he thought, even self-assured as if he knew things he couldn't possibly know. For a brief moment, George Winchester felt a twinge of anxiety but then his supreme composure returned. Nobody had noticed; they never did. He was the master. This new man knew only what he wanted to tell him, and nothing else. The other two, the attractive woman, Miller and plodder Bradshaw were SIS drones [*SIS: Secret Intelligence Service*] who would do his bidding with glee and be content in their ignorance.

The new man made a flippant remark; a witticism. Winchester ignored it. This was unusual. The *Action Men* never showed cognitive ability; most of them could barely talk in complete sentences. He didn't like this one; he was an anomaly. Winchester didn't like anomalies. They could prove unreliable and inconsistent, perhaps dangerous even. He didn't want that. Why were the woman and the plodder using this new man and not one of the existing ones with greater experience? They wouldn't be any anomalies then.

No matter, this one would do what was required, Winchester was confident of that. Just look at him.

Bradshaw had interrupted. What an annoying little man he was. Winchester regained control. He would get this over with quickly. He wanted to be finished and then he could be gone.

Chapter 3

Each player looks at his or her hand and sorts the cards into their own preferred order.

Meeting room number six was as silent as the altar during communion. I could tell from the demeanour of all three of my new friends that Mr. Stephen Bradshaw from Military Intelligence wasn't joking. I felt I should say something, so I asked what seemed reasonable.

I said, 'Kill somebody, who?'

I hoped for a moment that at least one of them would smile, but not one of them did. Instead Winchester shot a glance at Bradshaw, unhappy at his intervention, before telling me, 'We can answer that question once we have determined your acceptance of our proposal.'

I nodded and said, 'All right, what is your proposal?'

Sir George Winchester returned to his prepared script. He spoke in a considered voice.

'This country, as I am sure you are aware, along with other countries such as America, Russia, China, Israel, France and many more undertake, when necessary, officially sanctioned killings of individuals who pose an identifiable and verifiable threat to national security.'

Winchester paused to let it sink in.

I said, 'It doesn't surprise me. Don't the Americans call it wet work?'

'Targeted killings,' said Bradshaw, interrupting.

Winchester said to me, 'An unfortunate phrase. The Americans can be so graphic with the terminology. We prefer to call it sanctioned termination.'

'That's much nicer,' I said.

Winchester ignored me and said, 'We employ a number of individuals, professionals, mostly ex-military forces, to carry out these assignments.' His eyes stayed fixed on my face like a judge in a small town beauty contest. 'We are always looking to add new members to our roster. Your file came up for consideration and following extensive investigation, analysis and research has been cleared for inclusion should you agree.'

This was what they wanted. My curiosity was satisfied with the same release as pus from a lance boil. I wasn't certain how I felt. My mind ran through some scenarios, most of which weren't pleasant. It wasn't anything like killing the bad guy, saving the free world and getting the girl. I'd seen that film once. What they were actually asking me to do was commit cold-blooded murder for and with the permission of the state. No questions asked. Receive an assignment, plan and execute in both senses of the word. It didn't matter who, it didn't matter where, and it didn't matter why. Don't ask it's not your concern. How, though, might be a consideration. You know, make it seem like suicide or an accident. We don't want any come back. I stopped before I had completely talked myself out of it.

As though he was reading my thoughts, Mr. Stephen Bradshaw from military intelligence said, 'It's not a pleasant job, as I'm sure you can imagine, but essential, and vital to both the security and safety of this country and the millions of its inhabitants.'

I stared at him, into his muddy brown eyes, and could see he was being genuine and sincere. I guessed he based his entire life, which was probably his work, on this one premise. He believed in it. This kept him doing what he did, instead of growing mushrooms or orchids, or whatever else he might secretly wish he could do instead. I continued to stare at this civil servant, Mr. Bradshaw. He was also in his fifties, like Winchester, but he was less sophisticated and a little less polished. Perhaps a grammar school instead of public school, but just as capable and intelligent nevertheless. His suit wasn't Saville Row and his haircut didn't look as if he paid for it. I didn't much care for either of them.

No one was saying anything so I thought I should ask a question. 'How does it work, exactly?'

Mr. Bradshaw cleared his throat and answered, 'We pay twenty one thousand, seven hundred and fifty five pounds per assignment plus all expenses.'

It was a very exact amount. I repeated it. I said, 'Twenty one thousand, seven hundred and fifty five pounds?'

Mr. Bradshaw said, 'Yes, it's an odd amount, isn't it? Government bureaucracy, percentage increases and budget constraints—you understand.' He paused briefly and then said, 'Anyway, the payment is transferred, free of tax, into your bank account. We estimate expenses and provide them in advance and most of the known arrangements and costs are organised directly by my department. Operatives receive, on average, two assignments per year.'

I thought of Tom and his pregnant wife Linda. I could still feel the uncomfortable settee. 'That's over forty three thousand pounds,' I said.

Mr. Bradshaw nodded, 'Yes, that's right. Most of our operatives continue with their day jobs and carry out their assignments while taking their annual holiday entitlement. Many of the assignments are abroad, so the operative combines the assignment with a paid-for break, away from their work.'

For a moment, I thought he might be joking, but I could see from his eyes he wasn't. He said, 'I believe some of our operatives actually pay the money into a personal pension scheme, planning for an early retirement.' I laughed. 'It's true,' he assured me. 'I know of at least two operatives who've retired at fifty and moved to a nice little spot they discovered whilst away on an assignment.'

I didn't respond.

Bradshaw stopped talking. I said, 'How does the communication work and what happens when something goes wrong?'

Bradshaw folded his hands on the table. I noticed his fingers. Heavy smoking had stained them with nicotine. He bobbed his head while he gathered his thoughts. 'You will be issued with our latest communication device, which is especially designed and supplied for the purpose, with all the usual communication features. It has some extra benefits as well. A connection links it to the British military intelligence satellite system. It's a highly sophisticated tool.'

I nodded back, with images of super spy flashing through my head again. 'And when something goes wrong?'

Bradshaw bobbed his head again. 'We hand pick our operatives, and as we've already said, they're mostly professionally trained ex-soldiers. Mistakes are rare. We undertake careful vetting of the men we choose. Our procedures are thorough. Like yourself, they are proven men from the armed forces, all capable and all aptly suited to this type of work.'

He was calling me a cold-blooded killer. I should have been insulted, but I wasn't. It's very hard to insult a British combat soldier. They tend to be thick skinned.

I said, 'But mistakes do happen.'

Mr. Bradshaw wasn't perturbed, he said, 'Yes, of course, things can go wrong. Each assignment is different, with distinct aspects to it: the target, the location, timeframe, specific requirements. And these can pose fluid risks during an active assignment, which may affect a successful outcome. We approach each problem as it arises, individually, applying our best efforts to achieve a satisfactory resolution.'

These were pleasant, comforting words, but not detailed enough for me. I said, 'Just tell me what happens if I get caught, in a foreign country, with a dead body at my feet.'

Mr. Bradshaw unfolded his hands, scrunched up his stained fingers and then held one hand with the other. He said, 'In that specific situation we would do everything we can to assist the operative and secure his expedient release.'

I said firmly, 'How?'

He immediately said, 'Diplomatic means...'

'Diplomatic means!'

Winchester interrupted, and in a soft voice said, 'The reason we use civilians for overseas assignments is because they do not have a connection with the British government. There is nothing link them directly to the authorities. If we used active soldiers and something went wrong, there would be potential diplomatic problems. If caught, you are just a British tourist abroad, not sent by your government. That is why we use your real name, your real passport, your identity. Certainly, discovering you were once a British soldier is possible, but that was all in the past. You would be on your own except for the normal legal and international protocols, and, of course, diplomacy.' Winchester deepened his voice and said, 'But, none of this matters, because you won't make any mistakes and you won't get caught. Will you?'

It was difficult to answer that. I would be a civilian killer behind enemy lines, without even a dog tag, no serial number, nothing to save my skin if the worst happened. I simply nodded in understanding and acceptance. I thought Winchester was going to smile, but he didn't. His face remained smooth and crease free.

Mr. Bradshaw asked me if I had any further questions.

'Yes, I do,' I said, 'why me?'

Mr. Bradshaw separated his hands and bobbed his head, 'As Sir George has said we select professional ex-soldiers.'

'Yes, but why select me specifically?'

Mr. Bradshaw linked his yellow fingers again and said, 'According to your file and the verbal testimony of several senior officers you are, were, a capable soldier in Her Majesty's armed forces. One officer from your regiment even described you as being exceptional. Your record was exemplary up until the incident that led to your departure. Your army-tested IQ scored in the top one per cent and most importantly for us, professional independent analysis of the personality tests you took as a soldier show you have a very high instinctive disposition for this kind of work.'

Didn't he just call me a cold-blooded killer again? This time he added the word instinctive. Oh well, it was time for me, again, to ask my original question. 'Who do you want me to kill?'

Mr. Winchester replied with a question, 'Can we take it that you accept our proposal of employment?'

I thought of my years as a soldier with the army and the missions, when I fought with my unit and carried out my orders with cold professionalism just the way my training taught me. I missed already. I realised with a certainty, with clarity, just as I suppose I knew from the moment I heard what they wanted, just as Sir George Winchester and Mr. Stephen Bradshaw and Miss Charlotte Miller all knew I knew what my answer was going to be. I said, 'Yes, Sir George, you can take it I accept your proposal of employment.'

Sir George Winchester nodded once. Then Mr. Bradshaw spoke. He answered my question. He said, 'We do have an assignment for you. One to get you started straight away, as it were.' Winchester looked at Mr. Bradshaw and interrupted by saying, 'Well, I don't believe I'm needed any more.' He looked at me and said, 'Bradshaw and Charlotte can take it from here.' He told me it had been a pleasure meeting me. I didn't reciprocate. He stood and extended his hand across the table. 'Good luck,' he said. We shook hands. His face remained untroubled. 'I have a dinner engagement,' he explained, adding, 'with the ambassador to Hong Kong. He is a formal man who demands punctuality in others.'

'Try not to choke on the sushi,' I said helpfully.

'Don't worry I won't,' he said. He left and I wasn't going to miss him.

Mr. Bradshaw turned to Miss Miller and asked, 'Shall we get started?' In response, Miss Miller opened her briefcase and took out a leather bound document file. The type old-fashioned solicitor

still use. I poured myself another coffee and watched as she undid the clasp and then carefully pulled it open like it was the Magna Carta. Charlotte Miller had been remarkably quiet during proceedings so far. I wondered what her exact purpose was. Winchester represented the Foreign Office, as overseer and Bradshaw was operations controller through Military Intelligence, but what about Miss Miller? She had told me she was a civil servant but that could mean anything. Perhaps she was new to the whole thing, like her first time on the job. Anyway, she was about to get involved now, so perhaps a purpose would become clear, or perhaps not.

I sipped my coffee and then realised Charlotte was waiting for me. I put my coffee cup down and she smiled.

She said, 'Your target is a white, British male, aged thirty-three, originally from Oxford but now residing on the Spanish owned island of Tenerife. His name is Geoffrey Button.' Charlotte held up a small, glossy, colour, head and shoulders photograph. He looked like a coot. He was a bald man with small, glassy eyes and an open, searching expression. 'He's living in a resort area on the west coast of the island. We don't have his exact location, but we expect to find him before you leave.'

I interrupted and said, 'Before I leave; when do you want me to leave?'

She replied, 'We have you booked on a flight to Tenerife tomorrow morning. Is that a problem?'

I thought of Tom again.

'No, no problem.'

'Good; this assignment is time critical.'

I held her efficient eyes and said, 'You're very good at this.'

She ignored me.

I already knew the answer to this but I decided to ask anyway.

I said, 'What's this guy done to warrant such personal attention?'

Before Charlotte could reply, Mr. Bradshaw said, 'You don't need to know any of those details. Your job is to carry out the sanctioned termination to our specification, plain and simple, agreed?'

If I wanted to avoid losing my new job, I knew further discussion on that subject was over. I said, 'Agreed.'

Mr. Bradshaw seemed satisfied and bobbed his head. Charlotte continued. She waited until our eyes were fastened and then said, 'Although Tenerife is a member of the European Union and our relationship with Spain is good, we need the death to seem natural. It mustn't raise any suspicion of an unlawful killing.'

I smiled at her. 'What did you have in mind?'

She didn't smile back. 'I'm sure you can think of a suitable answer yourself, but failing that we have something you can use to make the death appear natural.'

I said, 'What like the best boo-scare ever?'

There was still no smile. She said, 'It's a drug which induces cardiac arrest. Few pathologists know of its existence and none would test for it without good reason. It comes already prepared with the correct dosage in a syringe with the needle attached. You only have to inject the target. We recommend between the smallest two toes where the puncture wound is less likely to be seen.'

I liked her. She was fun.

I said, '...and this little piggy goes wee-wee-wee all the way home.'

Still nothing, not even a flicker. She produced a small plastic box with a snap shut hinged lid. Inside were two small syringes with the needles attached. Both separated in a purposely-designed moulded casing. She said, 'There are two in case of any mishap.' Then her eyebrows lifted just a little and she said, 'Make sure you don't accidentally inject yourself.'

That was better. I smiled again and said, 'Thanks, that's a helpful tip.' For a moment, I thought I saw a tiny laugh behind her eyes but then she glanced away and it was gone. She indicated for Mr.

Bradshaw to continue. He lifted his briefcase onto his knee and opened it. He took out two white rectangular boxes and placed them on the table. He put his briefcase back on the carpet tiles and opened the first box. Inside was a largish, black, handheld device that I realised was my new mobile phone. The communication equipment Mr. Bradshaw had told me about earlier. He switched it on and then held it up. The screen lit up. He told me, 'This is the K106, your communication device for use between us and you. Leave it switched on at all times, no matter where you are. The batteries are very powerful but even so, it will require charging exactly like a normal mobile phone. He lifted up the second white box and told me, 'The charger and assorted electrical adapters are in here. There is one suitable for Tenerife, although you may not be there long enough to need it. The K106 has embedded encryption software. It comes pre-programmed with contacts, numbers, template messages, coded keywords and an individual ring tone. Mr. Bradshaw looked at the K106, pressed a sequence of buttons and an electronic rendition of "Rule, Britannia!" filled meeting room number six. I sang, 'Rule, Britannia, Britannia rules the waves, Britain never, never, never shall be slaves.' I smiled. Neither Mr. Bradshaw nor Charlotte joined me.

I suggested, 'Shouldn't we stand up? And maybe salute or something?' Still, two unsmiling, sober faces looked back at me. They were tough nuts to crack.

Mr. Bradshaw said, 'It comes with an instruction manual. Please study the manual and then destroy it before you leave in the morning, understood?'

I said, 'Perhaps I can practice by sending Charlotte some text messages?' Mr. Bradshaw ignored me, but I noticed just the faintest of smiles crossed Charlotte's lips. She was very attractive with skin like a hand carved marble statue. Maybe I was getting to her.

She opened a manila envelope and said, 'Three thousand Euros for pocket-money expenses.'

I said, 'I haven't had pocket-money since I was a boy. Can I buy sweets with it?' There was the pursing of her lips again and this time a faint dimple appeared in her cheek. I wondered if the marble statue had a softer centre.

She continued and said, 'We've arranged a small villa for you to live in, instead of a hotel, as it will be much more private. The villa is on the edge of the town, close to the beach and the shops. I have all the details here. A local estate agent called Island Properties has rented it to us. Your contact name at the estate agent is Alicia de Cortes Silver. Already programmed into your K106 are the estate agent's details and Alicia de Cortes Silver's mobile number. When you arrive at Tenerife airport, you will find a rental car waiting for you. We've booked it under your own name with the local rent-a-car firm. It's about a forty-minute drive from the airport to the villa. We've received detailed driving instructions from Alicia and have a road map of the island. She has agreed to meet you at the villa when you arrive, to give you the keys and show you around. Here is your detailed travel itinerary.' Charlotte held up an A4 sheet of paper. 'This contains all your flight arrangements and every other detail you will need,' she told me. She paused for a moment, thinking, and then continued by saying 'As I said, the only thing we don't have yet is the exact location of where your target is living.'

I interrupted and asked, 'Is there a problem with that?'

Her eyes were sure. She answered, 'No, no problem.' End of discussion. I let it go. After all, I was going on holiday.

Chapter 4

Once the players have organised their hands, the game begins with the opening bid.

I said, 'I don't have a car.'

The chair I was sitting on in meeting room number six was beginning to feel as though the trolls had been at work again, and all the coffee and biscuits were gone. I was getting tired of this briefing despite Charlotte's attractive presence.

Mr. Bradshaw was unhappy with my answer. He looked at me as though I had crawled out of a council dump. His large nose itched with annoyance and he rubbed it vigorously with the back of his hand.

I thought I should explain, so I said, 'I didn't have a car as a soldier. I've only been out a week. I'm still getting used to civilian life. I like walking, although, not walking all the way to the airport, of course.'

Charlotte stepped in and said, 'Your flight leaves at seven thirty tomorrow morning and you have to check in an hour before at the latest and it's a one hour drive from where you're staying. I can take you. I'll collect you in the morning at five-thirty.'

Mr. Bradshaw looked at her as if she had lost her mind. I suspect he would have suggested a bus or train, or failing that a cab.

I said to Charlotte, 'Okay, sure, if you don't mind, thanks.'

She said, 'That's okay, I don't mind.'

Mr. Bradshaw stood and lifted his briefcase. He gave Charlotte a sour look and said, 'Well, I shall return to Vauxhall Cross then, Charlotte. I'll leave you to finish up here.' Charlotte nodded her agreement. Mr. Bradshaw turned to me and extended his hand. 'Good luck,' he said, which I suppose was his standard line in these situations. Winchester, I remembered had said the same thing. We shook hands and I said, 'Thanks.' He left the room and pulled the door shut. I looked at Charlotte and still hoping to get a proper smile said, 'That was fun.' She didn't smile.

She said, 'You should go home and pack. Don't forget passport, driving licence, money, summer holiday clothes because the weather's warm and sunny in Tenerife, and your new K106.'

I ignored her and said, 'I haven't got any food at home. Why don't we have dinner together? I don't want to eat alone tonight and, anyway, I might think of some more questions to ask you.'

She said, 'I'm surprised you're hungry after eating all the biscuits.'

I smiled. That was a yes. I said, 'Do you know a good restaurant around here?'

'Fortunately, I do,' she said. 'I didn't eat any biscuits. I'm starving.'

The restaurant had a small bar with everything served from bottles through those silver pourers that attach.

'What do you want?' I said.

'I'll have a gin and tonic, please.'

The barman nodded.

'And I'll have a Coke.'

'...yes, sir,' he said.

When he returned with our drinks, Charlotte told him to charge them to the bill.

We found a small, round table against the far wall and sat down, sipping our drinks.

Charlotte said, 'Keeping a clear head for tomorrow?'

I didn't reply.

We were silent while we looked at each other. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. I wanted to ask

her whom she was really working for and what hadn't she told me but I forced myself to show restraint.

Charlotte broke the silence. She said, 'In your army file it said you were given a dishonourable discharge for gross insubordination, but it didn't say what you had done.' She widened her eyes slightly, making it a question. I wondered whether she really didn't know. Maybe she just wanted to see what I would say.

I told her the truth. 'I nearly killed a senior officer.'

'Who was he?'

'A man named Stafford.'

'Why did you nearly kill him?'

'He took me on a mission when he knew my mother was dying in hospital. He didn't tell me.'

'What did you do to him?'

'We fought and I almost broke his neck.'

'What happened?'

'When we got back from the mission and I found out my mother had died and he hadn't told me she had been ill in hospital, I asked him why he hadn't said anything. The reason he gave me was that it wasn't anything I could do about it anyway. I lost it. The next thing I remember I was being pulled off him.' I paused and then added, 'They asked me to leave. I was surprised.'

'Their loss is our gain,' she said. She sipped her gin and tonic and watched me. I studied her face.

'Yes, I suppose so,' I said.

There was a silence. 'You wouldn't know anything about it, would you?' I asked. Her eyes never left mine. I didn't get an answer.

She said, 'How difficult was it for you to leave?'

'The army's been my life. Being booted out is the worst thing that could have happened to me.'

'So what did you do?'

'I contacted my only friend from school and asked him for help.'

'What did he say?'

'I was lucky. He's been letting me stay with him.'

'How's that going?'

'It's a good job I'm leaving for Tenerife in the morning.'

Finally, Charlotte smiled. It had been worth waiting for. Her attractive face lost its serious edge and she appeared to relax, for the first time since I'd met her.

I asked her, 'Do you meet many of the men on Winchester's roster?'

Charlotte delayed her answer for a moment while she thought. 'You're the first one I've met. I'm new to this line of work.' Before I could ask her more she said, 'I'm really hungry, shall we go through to the dining room?'

I nodded and said, 'Yes, of course.'

At the table for two, the helpful waiter took our order. Warm smoked salmon starter followed by fillet steak for both of us. Charlotte ordered a glass of claret and I had another Coke, brought with a slice of lemon.

Charlotte was right about the restaurant, the food was good. When we had finished our starters, she said to her, 'I have thought of another question.'

'Oh, yes, what?'

'Does Geoffrey Button have any idea he's a target?'

'I don't think so.'

'He's not expecting me then?'

Charlotte sipped her red wine and smiled. She said 'Are you worried he might be waiting for you?'

I laughed and left it there. Charlotte Miller was clever. I knew there were things she wasn't telling me; I just hoped they weren't important things.

Our fillet steaks arrived on big white dishes with a spoonful of vegetables that looked like a rabbit was missing its lunch. This was the best meal I'd had all week. We both ate faster than was strictly socially polite. However, neither of us minded and we both smiled at each other in mutual contentment.

After five minutes or so, Charlotte took a break and drank some wine. She watched me, and then asked, 'What do you think of the present financial and economic situation?' That was an odd question to ask.

I said, 'Most people are selfish and greedy which always leads to financial booms followed by economic busts. It's just the way it is.'

'Do you think it matters?'

'It matters to all the people who lose their jobs and lose their homes. Capitalism forgets that economics is really about the people, not just the money.'

'Do you think things could be done better?'

'Things can always be done better. Progress is the living history of mankind.'

'What would make it better?'

'Badly regulated capitalism makes the selfish think their right and allows the greedy to steal at the expense of others.'

'So what's the answer?'

'A good start would be an honest, intelligent and independent government and the enforcement of strong controls.' I smiled and said, 'Plenty of stick.'

Charlotte smiled and nodded at me before resuming her meal. She looked up at me again and said, 'That's what I thought you'd say.'

I wasn't sure how to respond to that, so I said, 'Oh good.'

She smiled at me again and carried on eating. It felt like a test for something, but I didn't know what. I watched her eat and figured I'd passed.

The waiter returned and asked if we wanted desserts. We both ordered the sticky toffee pudding with ice cream. After eating it, despite feeling very full, we both managed a coffee and a chocolate mint.

I sat back in my chair and rested. A good meal was just what I needed. I said, 'Are you paying for this?' Charlotte nodded her confirmation and said, 'Expenses.'

'I like my new job.'

She smiled and said, 'We better call it a night. You have to get home and pack. We've got an early start in the morning.'

It was dry and cold outside. We shook hands. I said, 'Do you know my address?'

'Yes, it's in your file.'

I'd only been there a week.

'Do you know how to get there?'

'I've got sat nav in my car.' She turned and walked away. I watched her go. She turned back and said, 'I was watching her. She smiled and waved, then carried on walking.'

Outside, standing on the pavement the night air curled around my body like a chilled glove. I pulled up my jacket collar and did up a button. The area was busy with people out for the night. I walked fast back across the city, to keep warm and to get back to Tom's quickly. My lungs filled with the fresh air and my heart rate quickened. I thought about all that had happened since four o'clock, my recruitment by Her Majesty's government and meeting Charlotte. I smiled to myself. I felt excited. It was a good thing—for me anyway. I thought of Charlotte again and smiled. However, the closer I got to Tom's flat, the more I had a nagging sense of unease; as if something was not exactly, as it should be. On the

surface, everything was completely genuine; there wasn't any doubt about that. Still, there was something. I didn't know what, but I knew it was there.

Back at the flat, Tom and Linda were already in bed. I found my passport and driving licence. I packed my bag and then wrote them a note explaining something unexpected had called me away. I thanked them and said I'd be in touch. I knew I would be gone in the morning before they were up.

The settee didn't feel so lumpy now and I quickly relaxed. A second before I fell asleep an unfamiliar electronic bleep sounded. I checked the K106 and there was a message from Charlotte. Don't forget to set your alarm. Be outside 0530hrs on the dot. Sleep tight, Charlotte. I dropped the K106 back into my bag and returned to the settee. The lumps had come back.

Before I fell asleep, I pictured the face of Geoffrey Button and I wondered what it was he had done

MISS CHARLOTTE MILLER

I hope I've chosen the right one, she thought. He certainly looks the part, she told herself, but she knew there was much more to it than just that.

Her selection process had been thorough, although rushed, due to the urgency of the situation. She had studied his face and it fitted. She could always read faces. His confidence in dealing with Winchester was a good sign too. The F.O. was so formal. They always followed protocol. Charlotte was always amazed that they still got away with being so old fashioned. It wouldn't always be like that, she thought.

She gave the cab driver her address in Mayfair, sat back and called Bartholomew Meriwether.

'C, my dear, how did it go; was everything satisfactory?' Charlotte often thought that Meriwether's voice sounded exactly like an old English actor's but she didn't know which one.

'It went well; he flies out tomorrow morning at seven-thirty.'

'Excellent, well done, you're sure he'll go?'

'I'm going to drive him to the airport myself.'

'Yes, of course.'

'I hope I've chosen the right one.'

'Don't worry my dear, I'm sure you have. Did S.B. ask any difficult questions?'

'He tried, but he was torn between admitting he didn't know what was going on and the desire to find out. I know he's frustrated but I don't know what he's going to do. I'm going to have to watch him closely.'

'Whatever may happen you'll know what to do. Your judgment in these matters is impeccable, my dear.'

Charlotte ended the call. For all of Meriwether's kind words she knew the chances of things working out, as she wanted were slim at best.

There was nobody waiting for her at home. She lived alone. She sent her chosen soldier a message on his K106 and then went straight to bed and fell asleep thinking of all the permutations that could unfold. She comforted herself with the thought that Chaos Theory explained so much.

Chapter 6

The bidding continues in a clockwise direction with each player either raising the bid or passing

It was too early, too dark and too cold. As a soldier, I should have been used to it. I was used to it. I switched on the table lamp and got off the settee.

After drinking a mug of coffee, I fastened my bag, pocketed my passport, driving licence and wallet and then picked up my K106. I slipped it into my jacket pocket.

It was five twenty-nine when I stepped out of Tom's flat and onto the pavement. The street was lonely except for a Siamese cat caught in the orange glow from the overhead street lamp. The Siamese cat gave me a laconic appraisal and then looked away with that particular disdain only felines have.

Charlotte was already waiting for me. Parked at the curb, she had her lights on and the engine running. Her car was a big German saloon; one of those with a powerful engine that made it as quiet as an Italian super car. She saw me and popped the boot lid from inside. I threw in my bag and then jumped into the passenger seat. Charlotte pulled away immediately and accelerated rapidly through the traffic lights with smooth efficiency. She glanced across at me and said, 'We don't want to miss your flight.'

Inside Charlotte's Uber-saloon the air was climate controlled, warm and dry, and I noticed the bright display of her sat nav. There was gentle music seeping through the speakers. I recognised it as Mozart. The seats were leather, comfortably padded and heated. I'd never had such a good mini-car ride.

'Why do the Germans make the best cars?'

'They developed the knowledge from their experience of building armoured vehicles in the war,' she said.

I noticed she was wearing casual clothes. Jeans and a silk top had replaced the business skirt and blouse. It made her look younger. Still tied back though was her hair.

I said, 'You look different today. Jeans suit you.'

She glanced at me and said, 'I always try to wear trousers when I drive. I find my skirts ride up and I always end up showing off my knickers.'

'That's a shame,' I said.

'Which,' she said, 'that my skirts ride up or that I'm wearing jeans?'

I didn't reply. Charlotte was different this morning. She was even more confident, more assured, but relaxed too as though things were going her way.

She said, 'I've got the assignment file, the one from yesterday, you need to take it with you, of course, it's got all the details you need. It also contains the two syringes.'

I nodded. 'Where is it?'

'It's in the boot. It has a brown leather cover. Once you've finished with it, get rid of it. You don't want it on you.'

'I understand. Destroy the evidence. No keep sakes, eh?'

'It's procedure.'

There was a pause and then she asked me, 'Have you had any breakfast?'

I replied, '...just coffee.'

'There're some pastries on the back seat. I got them from the bakery on my way.'

I didn't know any bakeries open at that time.

'Thanks, maybe later.'

She seemed to want to placate me for some reason and said, 'Sorry about the suddenness of all this. We haven't given you much time to think or get organised, have we?'

There it was. Realisation, in that moment, as she spoke the words, I knew why I'd felt uneasy, why I'd had a nagging doubt. It was the speed of it. It was all too quick, wasn't it? Fly out the next morning at seven-thirty. If they had an assignment ready, surely they would have given it to an existing operative, not the new boy. Hire the new boy, sure, but give him time to get used to the idea; time to think and prepare for a first assignment, sometime in the future. Not send him the next day. Not drive him to the airport.

I was quiet while I thought this through. What reason could there be to send me, specifically? Was it something personal? That was unlikely. Was it something only I could do? That was unlikelier still. Anyone on Winchester's roster could go to Tenerife and kill Geoffrey Button, surely. I thought hard but I couldn't reach a satisfactory explanation. Not one I knew was right, anyway. Perhaps I should ask Charlotte and then again perhaps not.

As if she sensed I was thinking about something important, she said, 'You're quiet,' and then joked 'you're not scared of flying, are you?'

I laughed quietly and then said, 'No, I'm not scared of flying. I'm just scared of going into combat with only half the story.'

She didn't respond.

I said, 'In my experience, as a soldier, that's a sure way of getting killed.'

She asked, 'What is it like in the army?'

I wasn't certain if she was genuinely interested or just wanted to change the subject and move the conversation away from what I was thinking. I said, 'It's like Christmas when you're a kid, only better.'

She smiled. 'You must have been upset to leave?'

It was my turn not to answer.

She said, 'Maybe, one day in the future, there'll be something else, something even better than being a combat soldier.'

'What? Sanctioned termination?'

'For now, yes, but maybe something more, who knows?'

I didn't let myself think about that. I wasn't getting my hopes up. Perhaps Charlotte knew more than she was telling, and I was sure she did. However, I wasn't thinking she had any influence that she could use to help me with my career path. She was just being friendly.

I reached onto the back seat and grabbed the paper bag with the pastries in.

'Do you want one?'

Charlotte shook her head and said, 'maybe later.'

I pulled out a croissant and began eating. We were silent for a while. The eastern horizon was beginning to lighten and a few more cars were appearing on the roads, along with the ten-ton trucks that had always been there. It was a quick run to the airport at that time of day. I finished my croissant. Charlotte said, 'There's a bottle of water in my bag.' I found it and took a swig. She put her hand out and I passed her the bottle. She tipped her head and swallowed a couple of mouthfuls. She handed it back. I drank some more and then said, 'Have you received the intelligence on Geoffrey Button's address?'

She shook her head. 'Not yet,' and then she added, 'it'll be sent to your K106 when we have it.'

I nodded my acceptance.

She said, 'One thing we didn't mention yesterday was to make certain you have a correct identification before carrying out the termination. In the past, there have been incidents of killing the wrong man. I know it sounds ridiculous but it can happen, it's easier than you might think. Just be careful of that, okay.'

'Sure, try to avoid killing the wrong person, check,' I said in a jokey way.

Charlotte said, 'It's really embarrassing when it happens and causes no end of extra work.'

~~'I thought you were new to this. Don't worry I won't make any extra work for you.'~~

She smiled. 'I'm not so sure about that.'

I didn't know what she meant.

We were quiet again and getting close to the airport so I decided to ask my question.

I said casually, 'Why is someone like you, a civil servant, involved with this? Do you really work for the Intelligence service?'

I watched Charlotte's face, which remained relaxed. She said, 'I'm just helping out in military intelligence because they're snowed under with work. There are a lot of bad people out there.'

Before I could respond, she said, 'We're here.'

We weren't quite, but we were getting near. She glanced across at me and said, 'You've got your K106, haven't you?'

'Yes.'

'Keep it switched on the whole time.'

'Yes, you told me.'

'Have you got your own mobile with you?'

'Is that allowed?'

She didn't answer. 'My direct number is saved into your K106. If you have your own mobile with you, then copy it over, just in case you need to use it to call me.'

'Why would I...'

'Back up.'

'...right.'

Charlotte pulled up outside the terminal building at the departure entrance.

I said, 'Okay, now we're here.' I got out and she popped the boot lid. I found the assignment file and put it in my bag.

I leaned back through the open passenger door, grabbed my jacket off the seat and said, 'Thanks for the lift.' I wondered whether she was going to wish me luck like Winchester and Bradshaw had done. She leaned toward me and motioned with her hand for me to move closer. Then she did something which surprised me, something which I hadn't seen coming. She kissed me. She gripped my shirt, pulled me down and pushed her lips against mine. It was a kiss, which lasted three or four seconds. She smiled at me but didn't say anything. I smiled back, and then closed the car door. Carrying my bag, I walked through the departure entrance into the airport. I felt good.

Still thinking about the kiss, I found my way through the crowd to the check-in desk. I was flying with a cheap budget carrier, and had to check myself in using one of their floor standing computers.

The queue was short with only an elderly couple in front of me. I handed over my suitcase and the uniformed check-in girl said, 'You should go straight through, sir, into the departure lounge. Your flight will be called in ten minutes.'

I joined a longer queue and went through the security check without any undue delay. In the departure lounge, I checked the information board and heard the announcer call my flight. The terminal was crowded and the shops and cafes were all busy. I had to step carefully to avoid collision, as a young woman broke away from the horde of other travellers, directly into my path.

It was a long walk to my gate number, almost to the very end of the terminal building. I joined the queue where the flight attendants were checking the boarding tickets and passports. I followed through, out of the building, into the weak, early morning sunlight and walked across the tarmac to the waiting plane.

The white Boeing 737 rested patiently, like a faithful packhorse, ready to carry us to the Canary Islands without fuss or complaint.

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