

Cthulhushire

The Serpent's Casket

By Stephen J Dutton



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Private investigator Michael Lester hires a new assistant called Prudence Brent just as he is about to begin a new investigation, looking into the activity of a local antiques dealer whose wife has grown suspicious of his changed attitude. However, rather than the pair being able to begin their working relationship with a simple investigation that will demonstrate to Prudence what the job of a private investigator involves the pair soon discover that the quiet county in the North West of England harbours the darkest of secrets...

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1.

When Jane Brown came down the stairs in the morning she was surprised to find that not only was her house mate Prudence Brent already downstairs but she was dressed in a smart suit while she made toast. "What's going on Pru?" Jane asked.

"I've got an interview." Prudence told her, smiling as she turned to face her friend.

"An interview? Which job? No wait let me guess. The local paper is willing to take you on." Jane said.

"No. They never replied to my e-mail. It's the detective." Prudence told her.

"Pru really? An assistant to a detective. That's a nothing job, you know it." Jane said.

"Maybe but it's still a job. Right now I'm paying my share from my savings and those are getting so low I may have to start dipping into my car fund. This will at least get me by until I can find something more suitable to me. It's local and I can get there on the bus. Besides maybe I'll help out with an interesting case that I can write an article about that will get me noticed by one of the national papers." Prudence replied.

"You haven't even got the job yet. When's your interview?"

"Eight-thirty." Prudence said and Jane smiled as she pointed to the kitchen clock, "Oh crap!" Prudence exclaimed when she saw that it was almost quarter past and she grabbed the toast that then popped up from the toaster and ran from the kitchen, pausing only to pick up her purse and a coat before rushing out into the street.

There was a bus stop just a few yards from the end of the drive and Prudence saw that the bus that would take her into the centre of Wellslaw was already there.

"Wait!" she called out as she ran towards it, making it to the bus just in time to avoid missing it, "One to the centre please." she said to the driver before gripping the toast between her teeth so that she could get the money from her purse. Then after taking her ticket she made her way to an empty chair, sitting down heavily as the bus lurched into motion. Looking out of the window as the bus drove away she took a bite from her toast and began to chew, wishing she had been able to make herself a drink as well before leaving the house.

The trip from the estate where Prudence shared a house with Jane into the centre of the small town of Wellslaw would take only five minutes by car but by bus she had to contend with the other stops along the route and at each one she became acutely aware of how close to the time of her interview it was getting. By the time the bus reached the town square where she got off it was already eight thirty-five. Fortunately for Prudence the office building where the private detective worked was just across the road and she hurried to the front door.

The office building was occupied by numerous different companies and Prudence read down the list of their names beside the buttons on the intercom, searching for the one she had come to visit. None of the names read 'Lester Security Services Ltd' and there were enough empty slots that she could not simply determine which button to press by eliminating the names of the other companies. However, she did have her mobile phone with her and since Michael Lester the private detective she was here to see had rung her on it the previous evening to offer her an interview she had an alternative way of contacting him. Looking at the call history she returned the most recent call received and held the phone to her ear.

"Lester Security." a man's voice said when the call was answered.

"Hi, I'm Prudence Brent. I have an appointment for an interview but I can't find your name on any of these labels on the door." Prudence said.

"Hold on, I'm buzzing you in now. Come straight up the stairs and it's office fourteen." Michael told her and as he hung up the call there was a buzzing sound from the door.

Prudence quickly pushed this open and hurried inside. She was about to make her way up the stairs in the hallway inside when she remembered that she had not been able to brush her teeth yet and she quickly took a pack of mints from her pocket and pushed two into her mouth. Then as she crunched down and chewed on these to freshen her breath she rushed up the stairs. These led to a long landing with numbered doors along one side and just as she got to the top of the stairs the one labelled '14' opened.

"Prudence Brent." he said, holding out his hand, "Come on in. I'm Michael Lester."

"I am so sorry I'm late. I hope you don't think I make a habit of this." Prudence replied, briefly shaking Michael's hand before entering his office. Inside Michael's office was small with just one desk and three chairs while a row of cabinets ran along one wall.

"That's fine. You're only a couple of minutes late and you passed the test I set." Michael replied as he made his way around her.

"Test?" Prudence asked.

"The intercom." Michael replied, "I removed my name label to see what you'd do. You can't have been down there two minutes before you realised that you had my phone number. Can I get you a drink?"

"Oh yes please. Coffee if you have it. White, no sugar." Prudence said, smiling while cursing having just eaten the mints.

"Okay so why don't we start with you telling me something about yourself." Michael said as he walked over to where a kettle stood on the window sill and he switched it on, "I've seen your CV obviously but I'd like to hear it from you."

"Okay then I have a degree in journalism from Liverpool." she began.

"Why did you pick there?" Michael asked.

"It was close enough to home that I could go back easily at weekends and holidays but far enough to justify moving out in term time." Prudence answered.

"Okay, go on."

"Well after I graduated I applied to a number of major papers but they all wanted me to get experience first so I started taking temporary assignments and submitting freelance stories to smaller papers. The Wellslaw Post accepted quite a few and I thought I might be able to get a full time position before moving onto a national paper. They're owned by the group that prints the-

"Yes I know who owns them. Here's your coffee." Michael interrupted, handing her a mug before sitting down behind his desk. Prudence took a brief sip and winced.

"Wow that's strong." she said.

"Sorry. I've always taken it strong. It helped keep me awake in the army." Michael said and it was then that Prudence noticed a number of photographs on the wall that showed Michael in military uniform. In two of them he was in battle dress with a pistol holstered on his leg and surrounded by other armed men while in the third he and the other soldiers in the picture stood in a line in dress uniform, "If you want another feel free to make one."

"No thanks. This will do. I just wasn't expecting it." Prudence said, "Now where was I?"

"Trying to get a job at the Wellslaw Post." Michael reminded her.

"Right, so that's when I moved to Wellslaw. I found a house share with a woman called Jane. She's a para-legal here and I managed to write a few more stories for them. I don't know if you've seen any but-

"I don't read newspapers. Or watch the news on television either. It's all fake to convince us of what the editors want us to think." Michael said and Prudence hesitated.

"Err, okay. Well in that case I was hoping to get a permanent job making things up for the editor at the Post but unfortunately not only did I not get a permanent job with there but the freelance work dried up as well. I haven't had a story accepted in three months so I've decided to look further afield for work." she said.

"And what made you consider becoming my assistant Prudence?"

"I thought it sounded kind of exciting."

"Being my assistant? I assure you it won't be. I'm regulated by the Security Industry Authority so I have to adhere to their rules. Any reckless or questionably legal behaviour and they could revoke my licence. Occasionally I get asked to investigate a criminal case where the victim isn't happy with inaction by the police but most of the cases are civil matters. You may come out with me on cases but I really need you to act as an intermediary with clients. I can't always take calls when they come in so I'll be needing you to answer the phone instead. Then you can let me know who called and what they wanted. It's better than relying on voicemail." Michael explained, "If that's not what you're looking for then-

"Look, I really need a job. Any job really, even just answering your phone will do and if you don't like me then you can always fire me." Prudence interrupted and Michael smiled.

"Drink up while I get my coat." he told her, "We're going."

Going? Going where?" Prudence asked before gulping down more of the coffee.

"To visit a new client. You're hired." Michael told her.

"Wow this is nice." Prudence said as she climbed into the Range Rover Michael had in the car park behind the office building, "I'm trying to save for a small hatchback."

"The result of hard work." Michael replied as he fastened his seatbelt and then started the engine, "Hard work and a bonus from a grateful insurance company."

"Is that who we're going to see today? An insurance company?" Prudence asked but Michael shook his head.

"No. There's a woman called Andrea Farrow in Elder Edge who thinks her husband may be having an affair. She rang two days ago and we're going to ask her a few questions before we start looking into her husband's activities." he told her.

"So what do you want me to do?" Prudence said.

"For the most part just watch and listen. I'll give you my phone just in case anyone else calls. If they do I want you to take a message. Let them know I'll get back to them later today unless it's one of those scam calls in which case you may be as descriptive as you like with what you tell them to do as long as Missus Farrow doesn't hear."

"Are you expecting any calls?"

"Possibly. I have a few other active jobs, mainly background checks so the people I've reached out to for references could call back or send a text." Michael said as the car reached the road heading south out of Wellslaw towards Elder Edge. It took only a few minutes to reach the neighbouring village and Michael turned off the main road into one of the narrow side roads lined with large houses set back from the road, peering out of the side windows as he hunted for the correct house number, "Here we go. Number eight." he said as he pulled the car up at the side of the road, parking it in the street outside the house.

"Why not use the drive?" Prudence said, seeing that the house had a wide driveway that currently stood empty leading up to a garage obviously built to take at least two cars side by side.

"Missus Farrow's husband leaves for work at seven every day so he ought to be gone by now but we can't be sure he won't come back unexpectedly. If he does we'll slip out of the back and sneak back here without him realising that we were inside the house. If he sees my car in his driveway he'll know his wife had visitors." Michael told her and she smiled as they both got out of the car, "What's so amusing?" he asked.

"You only hired me ten minutes ago and already we're going to a cloak and dagger meeting. I thought you said this job wouldn't be exciting." Prudence replied.

"Here, take my phone." Michael said, handing her his mobile phone and the pair then proceeded to walk up the driveway to the front door where Michael was about to ring the bell when the door was opened by a grey haired woman, "Andrea Farrow?" he asked and she nodded.

"Yes, are you Mister Lester?" she replied.

"Yes, Lester Security Services. You wanted to discuss your husband." Michael said, taking a business card from his pocket and handing it to her.

"Yes do come in please. And who is your lovely lady friend?" the woman said, stepping back from the door to let Michael and Prudence in and at the same time she grabbed hold of the golden retriever that came walking up to them, sniffing.

"Prudence Brent." Prudence replied.

"Prudence is my assistant. She'll be your point of contact with me whenever I'm busy." Michael said.

"Very well. This way, we can talk in the lounge." Andrea said and she led them into the adjoining room where they all sat down, the dog following Prudence and sitting on the floor right in front of her. Smiling, Prudence began to stroke the animal. Michael took a quick look around the room and saw that it was decorated with a large number of antique ornaments.

"Perhaps we should start at the beginning Missus Farrow. Why do you suspect your husband is having an affair?" Michael said, leaning back on the couch he and Prudence were sat on.

"Oh do call me Andrea please."

"Very well Andrea. I take it your husband's behaviour has changed somehow?" Michael said and Andrea nodded.

"Yes it has. Harold imports and sells antiques and he often goes abroad to gather more for his customers. He travels all around the world, buying and selling them but since he came back from his latest trip he's been different." Andrea began, "He's been distant, he's working much longer hours and he's avoided seeing any of our friends and family. Frankly I'm running out of excuses to tell people to avoid offending them. He's been different at home as well. He just doesn't seem interested in us any more. It's strange but Kingston seems wary of him as well now." she continued and she looked at the dog Prudence was still stroking. Running her fingers through the animal's fur she found the collar and saw that the small metal disk attached to this had the word 'KINGSTON' etched on one side with contact details on the other.

"That certainly does sound strange." Michael said before he heard the sound of his mobile phone alerting him to the arrival of a message and he looked at Prudence.

"I'll just go and see who that is." she said, getting up and leaving the room while Michael turned back towards Andrea.

"How long is it since your husband returned from his last trip?" Michael asked her.

"About six weeks." she replied.

"And where did he go?" Michael added.

"Oh this was a long trip. He was away for about five weeks. He went to several places in the far east and Australia. He was due to head on to South America for a couple of weeks as well but he came back early. That was strange as well, I've never known him cut a trip short. He didn't even call to tell me either, just showed up at the door. Normally he'd ring me from the airport and I'd drive to pick him up. It's not like it's very far away." Andrea told him as Prudence returned and sat back down.

"It wasn't urgent." she said.

"Obviously I can tail your husband to see where he goes each day." Michael said, "But it would help if you could give us some more information. For example does he have an office or somewhere that he stores the antiques he sells?" and Andrea nodded.

"Yes, we have a lease on a building he keeps his antiques in. He used to maintain an office here at home but he stopped using that when he got back from his trip. I think he works entirely out of his building now."

Andrea said.

"We?" Michael commented and Andrea nodded.

"Yes, the business is in both our names. A relic of when he was just starting out and I helped him run it. Now I don't really get involved but my name is still on everything and every so often I have to countersign papers for him. The building is just a few minutes away and he doesn't open until nine but now he leaves here at seven in the morning and he doesn't come back until at least seven in the evening. Sometimes midnight. I don't know what he can be doing there that would explain that if he isn't up to no good." Andrea explained.

"I take it your husband has a credit card?" Michael asked.

"Yes, two of them." Andrea answered, nodding.

"Are the statements sent here?"

"They were. I don't know if Harold has changed that though. I don't normally deal with that sort of thing any more. Harold's always taken care of it for both of us." Andrea said.

"Could I ask you to look and see if you can find the most recent one?" Michael said, "A bank statement as well if you don't mind."

"Of course, if you think it would help." Andrea replied as she got to her feet, "Come with me. The statements were all kept in the room Harold used as his office."

Michael and Prudence also got to their feet and Michael noticed a photograph on the table beside the couch of Andrea and a man, both of them smiling.

"Is this a recent picture of your husband?" he asked.

"Yes, it was taken just before he last went away." Andrea said and Michael looked at Prudence.

"Snap a photo of that would you? We'll need a picture of him if we're going to follow him." he told her and she quickly used the camera built into his phone to take a photograph of the picture in the frame before following Michael and Andrea from the room.

Andrea led the pair up the stairs and then up another flight to a room that had obviously been converted from an attic into an office. There were several filing cabinets in the room along with a desk that had a telephone on it and cables clearly meant for a computer, although there was no sign of the computer itself.

"He keeps all the bills and such in here." Andrea said as she opened one of the desk drawers and took out a file stuffed with paper. Opening this up she removed the top five sheets of paper and handed them to Michael, "Here you go, the credit card and bank statements for the last month."

"These are just personal I see. Is there a business account?" Michael said when he checked to see exactly what he had been given.

"No, Harold keeps all that on his computer for his accountants. I haven't looked at the business accounts for years." Andrea told him and Michael began to look more closely at the papers she had given him.

"The credit card bill comes to more than sixteen thousand pounds. Is that normal?" Michael asked as he studied the two documents more closely, jumping to the summary of the credit card statement and Prudence inhaled sharply when she heard this, the amount being far greater than she could imagine spending in a month even when she had been getting more regular work with newspapers.

"Sometimes, yes. Harold will sometimes buy antiques on his credit card for convenience instead of organising bank transfers. Most people won't take a cheque nowadays. Harold doesn't like them either every since someone tried to trick him with an overpayment." Andrea said.

"An overpayment? How is that a trick?" Prudence asked.

"Someone writes a cheque for say ten times what they really owe and send it to you. When you tell them about the mistake they ask you to return the extra money. If you do then you'll find that the cheque you were sent will bounce and you'll have paid back money you weren't sent in the first place to someone who will have disappeared." Michael explained.

"Oh right." Prudence replied as he turned back towards Andrea.

"Has your husband ever been successfully conned out of money?" he said.

"On no. Harold was very smart about that sort of thing. He's lost money on a few sales where he made a mistake about the value of an item but nobody's ever been able to make a fool out of him. Why, does that matter?" she said.

"Perhaps. If he was feeling guilty about being conned out of a large chunk of your life savings that could affect his behaviour." Michael told her.

"Working late to try and earn it back?" Prudence commented and Michael nodded before looking back at the papers Andrea had given him.

"Your bank balance looks healthy enough though. It's gone down by about two hundred pounds over the month but that's not a great amount considering what's left in there. I'd like to take copies of these if I could." he said.

"If you think it would help." Andrea responded.

"Prudence get pictures of these would you?" Michael said and then he placed each sheet down on the desk one at a time so that she could photograph it. Each time though he held his hand over the part of the paper where the bank's name was printed.

"Why are you doing that Mister Lester? Don't you need the information you're covering?" Andrea asked,

"I know the name of the bank. This makes sure that no-one can print out a copy and try to use it impersonate your husband." Michael answered just as Prudence finished photographing the last sheet and he handed them back to Andrea, "Here you go, you can out these away again now. Before we go any further I'll just confirm that you want to proceed with having us surveil your husband. If you do then you'll receive an update from me once a week as well as if I find anything significant."

"My husband and I have been married for more than thirty years Mister Lester. I have to know why he's suddenly changed." Andrea replied.

2.

"So do you think that woman's husband is having an affair?" Prudence asked as she and Michael returned to his car and Michael sighed.

"It's possible." he said, starting the engine, "Of course there are other alternatives."

"Such as?"

"Money trouble is always a possibility. Their personal account looks healthy but there could be a problem with the business one that Harold Farrow hasn't told his wife about."

"That would explain why he's moved everything to do with the business out of the house I suppose."

Prudence commented.

"Yes it would. There could be something wrong with the business that isn't so innocent though." Michael said.

"Such as?"

"Well our Mister Farrow imports and exports, right?"

"Right."

"So there are a lot of shady people out there who would like to import and export things the government doesn't want them to." Michael pointed out.

"You meant like drugs?" Prudence said.

"Drugs are one possibility, yes. But there are also guns. The government likes to keep those to itself as much as it can." Michael said.

"They won't get an argument from me on that." Prudence commented.

"Have you ever fired a gun?"

"No. The only time I've ever seen one in real life is going through an airport and abroad where the police carry them. I expect you've fired lots in the army though."

"And every time I visit the colonel."

"You keep in touch with your old commanding officer from your days in the army then?" Prudence said.

"No, sorry. 'The colonel' is what I call my father sometimes. I'm from a military family and he was a colonel.

Not my regiment though." Michael told her.

"So do you mind me asking how come you didn't stay in long enough to become a colonel yourself?"

"Not at all. My father has a much stronger stomach than I do. He could put up with doing politicians' dirty work for longer than I could. I decided it was better to get out rather than keep taking orders from them."

"Was your father upset?" Prudence said.

"No, not really."

"So you shoot together?"

"Yes. My father shoots clay pigeons on a nearby farm and I go out with him." Michael said, "But there are a lot of people who would like to get guns that aren't going to want the police poking around their homes to see if they are a fit person to own one and they'll pay to get them through other channels. Bringing banned items into the country could be more closely related to his business as well, ivory for example, or they could be stolen. Or the goods themselves could be legal but subject to high taxes that he's trying to avoid. The list goes on."

"And we're supposed to find out exactly what he's up to just from a credit card bill and a bank statement?"

Prudence said, "How will we do that?"

"For starters we'll look at what he's been buying. If he's buying cryptocurrency then that could be a sign that he's dealing with criminals, although he could just be trying his hand at investments. I'll run a general background check of course, check with Companies House to see if he has any other business interests registered with them and look for any court judgements against his name and so on. Then there's the direct work."

"You mean following him around?" Prudence asked and Michael nodded.

"Exactly. If he is having an affair then the easiest way to find out is to catch him red handed. We'll photograph anyone he meets that seems to be more than just a business acquaintance and see if we can find out who they are. If we're going to cause our client to serve her husband with divorce papers then we need evidence that we can stand by in court." he said, "Before that though you'd better tell me what was in that message that arrived while we were at Andrea Farrow's house."

"Oh yes, about that." Prudence responded, smiling as she took his phone from her pocket, "Do you ever find that any of your clients become somewhat, how shall I say this? Amorous? A young woman whose listed in your phone as Emma?"

"Emma's not a client. She's my girlfriend." Michael told her, "What did she say?"

"It's not so much what she said. It wasn't a text message, it was a picture. A naked picture." Prudence said and Michael winced.

"I'm sorry about that." he said.

"Don't be. She doesn't have anything I don't."

"I'll let her know that you could be answering my phone." Michael said, "I'm sure she'll be horrified that you saw it."

"Not as much as if you told her I'm a guy." Prudence commented.

"Oh no. If I do that then it will make me look bad when she finds out the truth." Michael replied, "I've seen enough of what happens when people lie to their partners to know that it never leads to anything good. In the meantime I think you ought to just delete that picture."

"Jane I'm home." Prudence called out when she returned home that evening, finding her house mate already there.

"In here Pru. You're just in time to help me make dinner." Jane responded from the kitchen.

"Let me change first okay. I don't want to spill sauce on this outfit." Prudence said, hurrying upstairs and changing into more casual clothes before returning to the kitchen to help with the cooking.

"Well I've had a horrendous day." Jane said, "I got home to find the bins tipped over. I think there must be a stray dog around. So tell me, did you get the job then." Jane said.

"Actually no, I spent the day wandering around Wellslaw bemoaning being unemployed still." Prudence joked, "Of course I did. I walked into that office a strong and confident woman and the job was mine in ten minutes."

"So what's your boss like? Is he handsome?" Jane asked.

"Very. Smart as well. He was in the army for a while. I don't know what he did though."

"So are you going to try and sleep with him?"

"No Jane, not everyone is as obsessed with office romances as you are." Prudence said.

"So if he's that good looking and you're not going to sleep with him can I?"

"I think his girlfriend might have something to say about that. She's really pretty."

"So you met her then?" Jane asked and Prudence smiled.

"No I just saw a picture of her naked." she said and Jane dropped the spoon she was using to stir the pan she tended.

"Damn it Pru! Don't joke like that." Jane responded as she hunted for another spoon, "So how is the job anyway?"

"Most of it is going through papers and forms to build up a picture of someone's background but tomorrow we're going to be following some guy around to see if he's having an affair. Mike's going to pick me up at seven. Can you promise me that you won't embarrass me by 'accidentally' walking in on us half naked?"

"Hey this is my house too. I can wear what I like in it." Jane replied.

"Oh God no." Emma, Michael's girlfriend said when he explained over dinner to her that Prudence was now checking the messages on his phone.

"She thought you were a client sending me pictures of herself." he added.

"So what you tell her?" Emma asked.

"Just that you were my girlfriend and that I'd let you know that she would be seeing most of what gets sent to my phone from now on." Michael said.

"So I didn't scare her off then?"

"No, though you certainly made an impression on her."

"I'll bet. What about you?" Emma said.

"What about me?"

"Did the picture make an impression on you? That's what I sent it for. Of course I didn't realise that it would get to you after you'd taken on an assistant."

"To tell the truth I didn't see it." Michael admitted.

"What do you mean you didn't see it?"

"I mean I could hardly look at a naked picture of my girlfriend with a female co-worker right there with me now could I? She'd think I was a pervert as well as you."

Emma frowned and tossed a napkin at Michael's face.

"You never thought I was a pervert when I sent the others." she said.

"That was when you were sending them to me, not to random people I work with. Perhaps I should see about us all going out for a drink this Friday and you can get to know one another in person and clothed. I'll check if she has a boyfriend and maybe he can tag along as well."

"That sounds like it could be a good idea. Now eat up we've got a busy evening ahead of us." Emma said and Michael looked at her.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I need to show you what you missed in that photo." Emma told him.

3.

The next morning Prudence opened the front door quietly at half past six, just as Michael was walking from his car towards her.

"You're eager." he said and Prudence raised a finger to her lips.

"Shush. Jane's still asleep." she said.

"Sorry. Does she not like to be woken up early?" Michael replied.

"No its not that. I told her you were picking me up at seven. That means that that's when she comes walking down those stairs with just a towel wrapped around her that barely covers anything. If she hears us she won't have time for the towel and will probably just run down with nothing on at all to remind me about something pointless."

"A bit of a forward personality then?"

"Two great big forward personalities she likes to use to attract men every time she gets bored with her old one. I've got my bag ready." Prudence said and she picked up a small holdall from just inside the door, "A change of clothes and spare shoes. I don't have any wellingtons though so I'll have to get a pair of them."

"That's okay, I doubt we'll need them today." Michael replied, holding out his hand to take the bag Prudence had picked up from just inside the door and he carried it to the car for her, opening the back and putting it inside beside a holdall of his own, "I've got a few other things you may find useful." he added, pulling a cardboard box close and opening it to reveal the contents. The most obvious item inside the box was a large black metal torch, "This should be left in here with your things, but first feel the weight." he told Prudence, handing her the torch.

"Wow that's heavy." she said and he smiled, "Exactly. Hold it up over your shoulder with your hand near the front. Carrying a weapon is illegal but you can still carry this and it's heavy and tough enough to be used like a baton, but only as a last resort you understand?" he added and Prudence nodded as she returned the heavy torch to him.

"Don't worry, I'd rather not get into the habit of cracking people's heads open." she said."

Good. Now this one is probably going to be more useful. I suggest you keep it in your bag with you. I've got one in my pocket." Michael said and he handed her a much smaller torch that was just the right size to fit in the palm of his own hand. In Prudence's hand it stuck out more but it was still relatively small yet once again made of tough metal, "You can use the lanyard to keep it secure. It will still make a better club than nothing and the contoured end will hurt if you jab someone with it. Finally you should keep this with you as well." he said, handing Prudence a small canvas pouch.

"What's this? A cigarette lighter that doubles as a flamethrower?" she said as she opened the pouch.

"No. You can get yourself a lighter if you want but that's just a multi-tool. It's got about twenty different tools on it. You may never need any of them but I've always thought it's better to have them and not need them than need them and not have them. I've got couple of walkie talkies as well but I'll leave them charging until we need to move away from the car." Michael explained.

"Okay so now I've got all my secret private eye equipment what next?" Prudence asked.

"Now we head for the Farrow's house and wait for Harold to leave for work." Michael answered and he checked his watch, "Which if what his wife told us is accurate will be in about fifteen minutes. So get in."

As soon as he and Prudence were inside the range rover Michael started the engine and drove away, noticing that Prudence was looking back towards her house.

"I think Jane was watching. I'll have to apologise when I get home." she commented.

There was very little other traffic on the road at such an early hour and Michael was able to drive the short distance to Elder Edge in just a few minutes, turning into the road where the Farrow's lived and then pulled up not far away from it.

"Now we just wait." he said.

"Don't you think that a car like this will get noticed?" Prudence said and Michael smiled.

"This is one of the most expensive areas of Elder Edge, home of the wealthy. Any car that isn't a luxury model would attract attention." he said.

"So what do we do when he leaves? Just drive after him?"

"That's right. Trust me, I've been trained to do this." Michael said.

"Private detective school?" she said.

"No, the army."

"I thought that was more about firing big guns. I never pictured the army trying to follow someone in a Chieftain tank." Prudence said.

"Well for starters the Chieftain tank left army service in the mid nineties and secondly I wasn't in an armoured regiment. I served in what was the Cheshire Regiment before I transferred to the Special Reconnaissance Regiment. That's where I learned most of the skills I now use." Michael told her and she frowned.

"The what?" she replied.

"The Special Reconnaissance Regiment. It's an intelligence gathering unit that works closely with the SAS, SBS and other special forces units." Michael explained before he saw a car driven by Harold Farrow come out of the Farrow's driveway and turn away from them, "There he goes. Now sit back and watch."

Michael drove after Harold's car, keeping his distance from the other vehicle then speeding up each time it rounded a corner so that Harold did not get away from them. Meanwhile Prudence ran the positioning app on her phone, studying the route they were taking.

"Well according to this we're heading towards his business." she said as they headed towards the outskirts of Elder Edge.

"Looks like he's turning in." Michael added as Harold pulled into the entrance to a fenced off area just off the road.

"So what do we do now?" Prudence asked.

"Find somewhere to park out of the way. Harold Farrow came to work early, maybe to meet someone else who has somewhere to be later." Michael said as he drove past the gate while Harold got out of his car to unlock it. There was a side road a short distance away and Michael pulled into this, looking over his shoulder at the building Harold Farrow had now gone inside, "Yes this'll do. It looks in range."

"In range of what?" Prudence asked and Michael smiled as he reached over to the back seat and took hold of a small case.

"Remember Andrea said that she was a cosignatory on the lease?" he said and Prudence nodded, "Well that means we can get away with planting a few of these." he continued and he opened the case to reveal several small electronic devices, each of them mounting a tiny camera lens and antenna.

"Are they spy cameras?" Prudence said.

"Yes, bluetooth cameras. We can plant these on behalf of the owner or in this case the leaseholder in any part of that building where someone can't expect to have privacy, a bathroom for example. Then we can sit back and watch what he's up to in there."

"But how do we get inside? Surely we can't just break in?"

"Of course not But that's a business that is open to the public so when it gets to nine we'll just walk right in and act like we want to buy some antiques."

"So are we pretending to be lovers? Do we need to hold hands or anything?" Prudence said.

"No I think we can just walk in without any need for that. He may leave us to just look around on our own. If he comes up to us though I'll need you to ask him plenty of questions. Keep him talking and distracted while I hide the cameras. Then we'll be able to see what he does after work if he stays there."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then we'll follow him to wherever he does go. Since he came straight here though I'm hoping that he uses this place to meet someone before and after his opening hours. Obviously we can't spy on anyone who turns up before he opens today once they're inside but we can photograph them and their car if they arrive in one." Michael told her.

"Well here comes someone now but I don't think that Harold Farrow is having an affair with the delivery driver." Prudence said as a courier's van drove up to the gate and pulled into the car park, "Well I suppose that getting deliveries early would be a good reason to get here at this time." she added.

"Every day?" Michael replied, watching Harold appear at the door to sign for the large package that the delivery driver unloaded from his van and wheeled to him on a trolley. The driver then pushed this inside just long enough to deposit the package inside before returning to his van and driving away.

"Interesting." Michael said.

"Why?" Prudence asked.

"That package wasn't very big but the driver needed a trolley to move it. I wonder if it was because it was too heavy to lift or because it was fragile and he didn't want to drop it?" Michael said.

"So that package could have been the guns or drugs or whatever he could be smuggling into the country?"

"Possibly. We'll see if we can see it when we go inside." Michael answered, nodding.

Michael and Prudence waited in the car, watching as the occasional other vehicle drove past Harold's building but none of them even slowed down, let alone pulled into the car park and stopped before it got to nine o'clock.

"So are we going in now?" Prudence asked.

"Give it a couple of minutes. He's not seen us out here so let's not let him think we've been waiting." Michael replied and he continued to watch the building before he saw Harold appear and set up a sign outside the entrance that simply read 'OPEN' before going back inside again, "Okay I think that will do. He didn't even look this way." Michael added and he started the range rover's engine.

"It's right there. Why not walk?" Prudence said.

"We're supposed to be shopping for antiques. We'd have a car." Michael pointed out, turning the car around and then driving out of the side road and across to the small car park where Harold Farrow's own car was

parked.

Getting out of the car Michael and Prudence entered the building together and they heard a chime as Michael opened the door. Rather than lead straight into the area of the building where the antiques Harold sold were displayed the door led only into a small hallway and there was a second wooden door on the other side. The hallway was not empty though, with a leather couch along one side and a pair of paintings on the opposite wall.

"Wait a moment." Michael said as he slipped one of the cameras from his pocket and wedged it behind one of the pictures so that just the lens stuck out while he tucked the antenna behind the picture. Even knowing what she was looking for Prudence noticed that once in place she could barely see the camera.

The pair then walked to the interior doors and pushed them open, entering a large room that was filled with antique furniture as well as modern display cases that contained older ornaments. At first they were alone in the room but a few moments later Harold Farrow appeared from a side room.

"Good morning. Are you looking for anything in particular?" he asked.

"No not really." Michael replied, "We've just moved to a house from our old flat and with all the extra room we thought it would be a good idea to include at least a few antique pieces of furniture. Something with a bit of history to it."

"Of course. I will do my best to answer any questions you have." Harold replied and he backed up against the wall behind him.

"Of course. Prudence what do you think of these?" Michael said, pointing Prudence towards the far corner of the room.

"Yes that is interesting isn't it?" she responded and then as they both began to walk across the room she leant closer to Michael and quietly she whispered to him, "Is it me or is it warm in here?"

"No it's not just you, I noticed it as well." Michael whispered back to her.

"Maybe it's something to do with the antiques. That could be why he has that little hallway, it's to keep the heat in." Prudence suggested.

"I've been in a few antique shops in my life and I've never heard of that before. Mind you if he is using this place to meet a mistress then it would mean neither of them would need to worry about getting cold if they undress." Michael replied and Prudence winced for a moment.

"All of a sudden these antique beds aren't so attractive any more she said.

The antique store was laid out so that the larger items were grouped together by era and origin so that they matched adjacent pieces while the display cabinets formed dividing walls between these. This meant that although Harold was watching Michael and Prudence as they moved around the room looking at the various items being offered for sale Michael was still able to plant three more of the cameras he had brought with him. However, the fact that he had to conceal what he was doing meant that he could not place any within Harold's line of sight.

"I want to plant two more cameras," Michael told Prudence, "but I need him distracted."

"So what should I do?" Prudence asked.

"Go ask him about all those funny little African statues." Michael said.

"Oh you mean the little wooden men with big-" Prudence began.

"Yes them." Michael interrupted and Prudence smiled as she turned away and calmly wandered over to where Harold still stood.

"Excuse me," she said, "could you tell me something about these statues in the case over here?"

"Ah yes, those are very interesting items that are often overlooked." Harold replied as he and Prudence walked towards the display case that contained a number of different objects of African origin while Michael continued to appear as if he was looking elsewhere in the store, inspecting the larger pieces of furniture on display. In reality he was subtly putting another pair of the remote video cameras in place. Then when he was done, having just wedged the final camera between the seat cushions of a couch he looked up and turned around.

"I think this could be just what we're looking for for the hall." he called out, "Is it okay if I photograph it?" he said, "A few other things as well."

"Feel free." Harold said and Michael smiled at him before taking out his phone and using it to photograph the antique couch. Then he returned to several of the other pieces of furniture he had pretended to take an interest in while planting the cameras and photographed them as well while Prudence and Harold watched him.

"Have you got all we came for?" Prudence asked.

"I think so, yes. We'll take a look at what fits in at home and then come back." Michael answered. Then he looked at Harold and added, "Do you have a card I could take?"

"Yes, here." Harold replied, dipping his hand into his pocket to produce a business card that he handed to Michael.

"Thank you." Michael said as he took the card and as he did so his hand brushed against Harold's and he frowned for a moment, "Shall we go?" he asked, looking at Prudence.

"Of course." she responded before they both walked back out of the room, passing through the hallway before leaving the building entirely.

"So what was wrong back there?" Prudence said, "I saw you frown when took the card from Harold."

"I touched his hand for a moment and it was cold. I mean really cold. It can't have been much above room temperature." Michael answered.

"Could that be why he kept the heat up? Maybe he just gets cold easily. He must be in his sixties easily.

Older people suffer from poor circulation after all. I don't know about you but I don't think I could have stayed in there much longer." Prudence suggested.

"That's possible I suppose. Now let's see what we can get from the cameras." Michael replied.

4.

Returning to the car, Michael drove them back to the side street before taking a leather folder from beneath the driver's seat and opened it to reveal the computer tablet that was inside. He promptly turned this device on and called up the application that displayed the feeds from the cameras he had left inside the antiques store. However, when he started this up there was no signal from any of the cameras he had planted.

"Shouldn't we be seeing something now?" Prudence asked, looking at the tablet from the passenger seat.

"He might not be in the room." Michael replied.

"What difference does that make?"

"The cameras are motion activated. Harold or someone else has to walk past them to get them to switch on and transmit. It helps preserve the battery life." Michael explained.

"Well he's going to have to come out now because someone else is here." Prudence said when she saw another car pulling into the car park, "Someone with a lot of money to afford a car like that."

Michael turned his head to watch as a middle aged couple got out of the car and went inside the building. Looking back down at the tablet in his lap he then saw the camera he had left in the hallway activate, showing the couple walk through into the main room. This triggered another camera and Michael frowned when he saw that the feed now showed Harold himself standing just inside the inner door to welcome the couple.

"How the hell did he get there?" he said.

"Could he have just been standing right inside the door all along? As weird as that sounds if those cameras of yours are triggered by movement then maybe he didn't move." Prudence said.

"I don't know. Maybe I didn't lay them out quite right. Perhaps there's a gap in the sensors' fields of view."

Michael said. However, as he watched the feed switched from camera to camera without any gaps in between them as the couple moved around the room with Harold guiding them around and explaining the background of each object they stopped to look at, "This is just too weird." he commented, "Wait, they're leaving. Let's see what happens."

As the couple left the main room of the shop and entered the hallway the camera there instantly picked them up and the feed from it came on. At almost exactly the same time the feed from inside the main room turned off though, despite it having shown Harold turn around and walk away from the door.

"What the hell?" Michael said.

"He was definitely moving there. So how come your high tech gadgets didn't pick him up?" Prudence asked.

"I don't know." Michael replied and he handed the tablet to her, "Here, take this." he said.

"Why, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going in for a closer look." Michael said as he got out of the car and walked around to the back, opening up the boot. From inside he took a pair of walkie talkies and returned to the front, handing one of them to Prudence, "Here, take this. I need to know if the cameras show anything or if anyone else turns up." he said as he then connected an earpiece to his walkie talkie and inserted it into his ear. Then he closed the car door and darted across the road towards Harold's antiques shop. Rather than go inside after he entered the car park though, Michael crept around the side of the building, crouching down as he went to stay below the level of the windows.

"Okay I'm in position now. I'm going to take a look inside." he said quietly into his walkie talkie and then he took his mobile phone from his pocket, switching on the camera function and slowly raising it up until the lens was just about able to see through the window into the store. This enabled Michael to see what was happening inside by looking at the phone's screen without having to look through the window himself and risk being seen, "I can see him, he's walking towards his office now. There's no way that the cameras aren't picking him up." he said into the walkie talkie.

"Well what do you want me to say? I'm not seeing anything here." Prudence responded.

"Hold on he's gone into his office. I'm going to move along and see if I can get a picture inside." Michael told her.

"Picture? What are you doing Michael?"

"I'm just using my phone like a periscope. As long as I don't record anything I think I'll be fine if I'm caught."

"Fine or fined?" Prudence commented but Michael ignored this as he made his way further along the building until he reached a window that looked in on Harold's office and once again he slowly raised his phone so that he could use the camera to peer through it without giving away his presence.

Inside the office Michael saw that Harold was sat with his back to the window and he appeared to be reading from a large book on the desk in front of him. To his side, also on the desk was a box that Michel recognised, it being the one delivered early that morning and as he watched Harold reached into it and took out another large book, bound in what looked like leather and he pushed the first book aside as he set this one down and

opened it.

"Well I know what was in that box he had delivered. Or at least part of it." Michael told Prudence.

"What?"

"A old book. He's reading it now." Michael said as he lowered the phone, "I think I've seen enough. I'm on my way back now. I don't know why those cameras aren't picking him up but there's not much point hanging around all day if we're not going to learn anything from them."

Putting the phone away he turned around and started to creep back towards the front of the building but as he did so he noticed something metallic tucked away in the long grass close by and he stopped for a closer look. Moving closer to this he saw that it was a box made of a metal mesh. There was a small entrance at one end fitted with a door that was obviously intended to spring shut when a creature entered while at the other end was a glass jar that held a live frog. Michael could tell that this was a trap but he struggled to think of what might need a live frog as bait and so he moved on, creeping the rest of the way to the front of the building.

"Is the coast clear?" he said into the walkie talkie.

"Roger that. Over and out." Prudence replied.

"Yes would be fine. Oh and it's either 'over' if you want a reply or 'out' if you don't. Not both. Out." Michael said and then he broke into a sprint, hurrying out of the car park and then back across the road to the range rover.

"So what now if we aren't going to be spending the entire day here?" Prudence asked as he got back into the driver's seat and fastened his seatbelt.

"We head back to the office and take a look at those statements Andrea showed us yesterday morning. I want to try and find out exactly where Harold has been spending his money and what he's spent it on."

Michael told her.

"You mean other than books?" Prudence said.

"Yes. Books and traps it seems."

"Traps?" Prudence responded, confused.

"Yes. When I was coming back to the car I found a trap that had been set in the grass. Harold must be concerned about some sort of pest. Something that eats frogs but is small enough to get through a gap just a few inches across." Michael said, starting the engine of the car.

"Rats maybe? I heard you're never more than a few metres from a rat. They eat anything don't they? Even one another." Prudence suggested.

"Yes but since they do eat anything why use a live frog as bait? A bit of meat would have done." Michael replied and then he sighed, "Oh well, I don't suppose that really matters."

Returning to the office Michael and Prudence began to go through the credit card and bank statements that Andrea had shown them at their meeting the previous day, starting with the bank statement. Michael's office had only a single desktop computer in it so while he used that he gave the tablet to Prudence for her to use.

"You know I'm not really sure what I should be looking for here." she said as she read down the lists of payments in and out of the account.

"Anything overseas is an automatic red flag. Plus anything to do with travel and accommodation." Michael told her.

"Would they make him invisible to the cameras?" Prudence asked.

"No, I still don't understand how he managed that. The sensors work the same way as ordinary burglar alarm PIRs. In theory you can use a barrier to hide from them but it would stand out like a sore thumb." Michael replied.

"PIR?" Prudence commented.

"Passive infra red." Michael replied, "A lens channels heat energy to a sensor element at the centre that watches for the source of the signal changing. They don't work as well if you walk straight towards or away from them but sooner or later you'd cross from one input to the other and be detected."

"Didn't you say Harold's hand was cold to the touch?" Prudence reminded him, "What if he's not warm enough to be picked up?"

"No-one is that cold. Human beings are warm blooded creatures. Even animals like cats and dogs can set burglar alarm off if they aren't set up to ignore smaller signals and those cameras definitely aren't. The only way Harold Farrow could not be giving off any body heat would be if he was either cold blooded or dead. Both of which disqualify him from being human. I suppose he might be wearing something under his suit that masks infra red." Michael said. Then a smile appeared on his face.

"What? Did you just think of something?" Prudence said when she saw this.

"Perhaps. I have something here I bought a while back for another case but never got round to using it." he said, opening his desk drawers until he found the small box he was looking for and he opened it up to remove the small electronic device it held.

"What's that?" Prudence asked.

"An attachment for my phone that turns it into a thermal imaging camera." Michael told her, plugging the device into the bottom of his mobile phone and activating the program that controlled it. Then he held the phone so that Prudence could see the screen. Instead of the usual image that was shown when one of the built in cameras was active, the screen now showed a pattern of bright colours that showed how much heat was being given off by what the attached thermal imaging camera was pointed at, "Look what happens when I put my hand in front of it." he added, moving his hand in front of the phone so that the shape of it showed up in red and orange in contrast to the largely blue and green of the office that was disrupted only where electrical appliances were located.

"That's clever." she said.

"Yes, the image quality isn't as good as a dedicated thermal imaging camera but it's adequate for anything I could want. I'll go back to the Farrow's shop when it shuts and see if I can see if I can tell why Harold doesn't trigger infra red sensors as well as why he's staying out late." Michael said.

"You'll go back? What about me?" Prudence asked.

"It could go on until midnight if what Andrea told us is right. You don't need to come as well, I can handle this on my own. I'm used to it." Michael told her.

"Hey you can't leave me out of this now." Prudence protested, "What's the point in letting me have these gadgets for following people around at night when the first time the occasion arises you leave me out?" Michael sighed.

"Okay then you can come too. We'll need to grab some things first though." he said.

"What like more spy equipment?"

"Actually I was thinking sandwiches and drinks. Seven or eight hours is a long time to go without either." Michael said. Then he looked back at his computer screen, "In the mean time I think we should move on from the bank statement to the credit card. Harold's been spending a lot of money so let's see where he's been spending it."

"You said that package contained a book. Did you see where it came from?" Prudence said as they both opened the images of the credit card statement.

"No I didn't have a good angle to see a shipping label but looking here I see a purchase from a company called 'Ancient Faith Books' for-" Michael began before he hesitated and then added, "the best part of nine thousand pounds."

"That's an expensive book." Prudence commented, "Unless he was buying a lot of books. Say enough to open his own library."

"I didn't notice any books on sale in his shop." Michael commented.

"No, neither did I. I expect that dealing in antique furniture and ornaments is somewhat different to dealing in antique books." Prudence agreed.

"Let's try taking a look at this Ancient Faith Books and see what they're all about." Michael suggested, entering the company name into an internet search engine, "Here we go, they have a web page." he added as he clicked on the link that took him to the company's web page.

This did not lead to a modern appearing web store where a complete catalogue of the books sold by the company could be found though. Instead the main page consisted largely of text that described the company and Michael read a portion of this out loud.

"We specialise in religious publications from the ancient world. Both the books and in many cases the religions themselves are long forgotten by the wider world and a number of the items we sell do not even exist in places such as the British Library, US Library of Congress or National Library of France. We are also able to acquire books and other writings that predate mass publication and may be unique." he said.

"What like a first edition Old Testament?" Prudence said and Michael smiled.

"Written on copper and personally autographed by God no doubt. 'To Moses, all my best.'" he said.

"You don't think Harold sees himself as some Indiana Jones type do you? Preparing to rush off around the world to all sorts of exotic places to recover ancient artefacts that melt the faces off bad guys." Prudence said.

"I wish he was." Michael said, "That way we could follow him and our client would pay our air fare."

"Think we can make him think the Holy Grail is hidden on a beach in the Seychelles?" Prudence added and she and Michael smiled at one another before he turned back to his computer.

"Harold has also been spending quite a lot at Amazon recently, but it's mainly on smaller purchases. I wouldn't be surprised if that trap I saw came from there." he said.

"They do seem to sell pretty much everything." Prudence said, "I suppose there's no way we can ask Amazon about them is there?"

"No. They're like a bank. There's no way that they'd divulge information about a customer's account without some sort of court order and we can't get anything like that for a simple case of suspected adultery." Michael said.

"Well there aren't any payments that I see that look like travel or accommodation. Whatever he's spending his money on is coming to him." Prudence said.

“No, I think this case is going to be solved the old fashioned way. We're going to have to catch Harold Farrow in the act of whatever it is he's up to.” Michael replied.

5.

Harold closed his store at half past five each day and Michael and Prudence returned at just after five to wait. Michael parked the range rover in the same side street while Prudence turned on the computer tablet and started up the remote camera application.

"Looks like there's someone in there with him." she said when the feed came on immediately and showed Harold speaking with a young looking woman while wrapping up some of the African ornaments that Prudence had noticed in the shop that morning.

"At least he hasn't found the cameras then." Michael said.

"Yes, how do you intend to get them back exactly?" Prudence asked.

"Probably just walk back to take another look around so I can just pick them up from where I left them." Michael told her.

"So what do we do when he closes?" Prudence said.

"The same as we did this morning. We sit here and wait to see what happens. If someone else turns up we photograph them and make a note of their vehicle. Alternately if Harold leaves we follow him and see where he goes to."

When it got to half past five Harold had another customer and so it was not until he had helped them load their purchase into their car that he took his sign inside and began to turn off the lights.

"Looks like he's getting ready to leave." Prudence commented and Michael nodded.

"Unless he's intending on romancing a lady by candle light." he said before he saw Harold emerge from the building and walk around the side he had crept along earlier to look through the windows. Then less than a minute later he reappeared with the animal trap in his hands and went back inside.

"Trust me candle light is not going to make up for serving rat." Prudence said.

"Don't knock it until you've tried it." Michael said and Prudence winced.

"Remind me never to let you cook me dinner." she said.

"That reminds me Emma thought it would be a good idea for us all to go out for a drink on Friday so you and her can get to know one another." Michael said, "Bring your boyfriend if you-"

"I don't" Prudence interrupted, "I'll be glad to come along though just as long as you promise she won't bring up that picture."

"I think that can be guaranteed." Michael said, "I was thinking of the pub just down the road from the office."

"That sounds okay. I think I'll keep it a secret from Jane though. I'd hate for her to 'accidentally' turn up." Prudence said.

"Well if you want to bring someone else just me know." Michael replied and then he held out a supermarket carrier bag to Prudence, "Sandwich?"

"None of them are rat are they?" Prudence said.

"It's a posh supermarket, they only used the finest pedigree rat meat I assure you. Although I did get egg and cress as well. Everyone likes egg and cress." Michael replied.

From the angle they watched from neither Michael or Prudence could see any activity inside the building. The office faced away from their position so the lights were not visible as they watched while the sun set.

"For a man supposedly up to no good he's been very well behaved." Prudence commented when she noticed that it was now approaching eight o'clock and the sun was setting but it was then that Michael suddenly started the car's engine.

"Looks like he's on the move." he said as Harold came out of the building again and loaded a pair of bags into his car. Then he returned to the building just long enough to make sure that it was properly secured before getting back in his car and driving off.

As soon as Harold had driven past the side street Michael had parked his range rover in he turned on his headlights and pulled out after him, this time getting somewhat closer than he had in the morning. The poor light meant that recognising a vehicle was harder now and not only did Michael doubt that Harold would notice being followed as easily, he did not want to lose his quarry.

Elder Edge was named for the area of high ground overlooking the village that was known simply as 'The Edge' and it was towards this that Harold now drove. The land here was thickly wooded and as he drove along one of the narrow roads he unexpectedly pulled off into the trees.

"What the hell is he doing?" Prudence said.

"He may have spotted us and be waiting for us to go past." Michael said.

"So what do we do?"

"We go past." Michael replied as he drove past where Harold had parked his car at the edge of the woods close to a gap in the undergrowth.

As they passed Harold's car Prudence looked out of the window and saw him now unpacking the two bags

they had watched him load into the car before he set off.

"I don't think he's trying to shake us." she said.

"Okay I'm going to pull in as well. We'll see what he's up to." Michael said.

"Think he's burying a body?" Prudence said.

"I doubt it. Trust me, bodies are heavy. I've carried more than my fair share of them. He lifted those bags into his car without any effort at all." Michael said as he too pulled off the road when he spotted a point where he could drive far enough into the trees to conceal his vehicle and he turned off the lights, cutting their speed and driving further into the woods before finally coming to a stop, "Okay let's go." he said and he and Prudence got out of the car and walked around to the boot. Opening this up they both took the large torches from the bags containing their spare clothes and Prudence turned hers on.

"No don't do that. He'll see." Michael told her.

"So how do we see?" she asked as she turned the torch off again.

"Your eyes will adjust enough don't worry. Just watch out for the mines."

"Mines?" Prudence exclaimed.

"Yes didn't you know people mined this area for centuries? I don't want you falling down one in the dark."

"Oh mines." Prudence said, "You mean mines as in digging things out of the ground not mines as in 'kaboom'."

"I'm not even going to ask why you think this place would be mined in that sense." Michael said, "Now come on, we've got someone to hunt. Are you sure you'll be okay in those heels? You can wait with the car if you want." but Prudence just stared at him, "Okay, no leaving you behind." he added.

Michael and Prudence then began to make their way through the woods, heading back towards where Harold had parked his car. Despite it being switched off Michael held his torch over his shoulder as he had shown Prudence, ready to deploy it like a club but Prudence instead kept hers by her side as they crept onwards until Michael came to a stop and waved at Prudence to duck.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"I think he's coming this way." Michael replied, "I heard something move."

Prudence listened and she too heard a rustling sound from close by but as they both turned towards the source they saw a badger come walking out of the undergrowth and pause to sniff the air before continuing.

"So not Harold Farrow then." Prudence commented.

"No, not this time. Come on, his car can't be far away now." Michael said before they continued through the darkened woods.

Harold's car was just a short distance away and Michael and Prudence stopped as soon as it came into view. There was no sign of Harold himself though and Michael looked around, searching for any indication of where he may have gone.

"I think he's gone that way." he said quietly.

"Why? Can you see his tracks?" Prudence asked but Michael shook his head.

"No but if he was going to go the other way then he'd be doubling back on himself and I didn't notice him coming past us. That only leaves him heading deeper into the woods." he said.

"So what's that way?"

"The Edge itself I think. If he isn't careful he'll walk right off in the dark." Michael said.

"There's a proper car park at the Edge isn't there? People go there all the time so why park here and walk through dark and creepy woods?"

"All I can think of is that he doesn't want anyone to witness his being here." Michael replied and then he started to walk deeper into the woods, looking out for Harold.

They found him as they approached a small clearing in the woods that he had come a stop in the centre of. Surprisingly he had removed most of his clothing and as Michael and Prudence watched he instead put on a long robe.

"What's he doing?" Prudence said as they positioned themselves behind a large tree for cover.

"I think that's the stone circle." Michael replied.

"So he's some sort of druid then?"

"If he is then he isn't a very good one. That's not a Druidic circle. It was put there in the eighteen hundreds." Michael pointed out.

"Who by?" Prudence asked and Michael shrugged.

"Who knows?" he responded.

"So what about that thermal imager?" Prudence added, "He doesn't look like he's wearing anything that will block his body heat now."

"Thanks. I almost forgot." Michael responded, reaching into his pocket for his mobile phone and the device now attached to the socket on its base. He activated the thermal imaging attachment and then pointed the phone towards Harold as if he was about to take an ordinary photograph, expecting the green, blue and black background of the woods to be broken by the heat given off by Harold's body. However, although Harold was visible on the image shown on the screen the shape of his body was also made up of green and

blue, "What the hell?" he said in amazement.

"Are you using that thing right?" Prudence said when she saw the picture on screen for herself.

"Of course I'm using it right!" Michael hissed back at her and he waved his hand in front of the thermal imaging attachment's lens to demonstrate that when he did so it showed up clearly in red and orange, "We're going to have to get closer." he said.

"Closer?"

"Yes closer. He's up to something fishy out here and if we can get closer we might see what." Michael said and the pair of them began to move towards where Harold stood within the circle of stones.

The stones themselves were not the tall standing stones of more famous places such as Stonehenge but instead appeared to be simple lumps of rock, some of which were more than a metre across but none of which came even that high. This meant that it was easy to place objects on top of the stones and as Michael and Prudence watched that was exactly what Harold did, removing a number of small candles from one of the bags he had brought with him and putting one down on each of the stones. Then he began to speak and as he did so he lit the candles. His speech was not in any language that either Michael or Prudence understood but they saw that Harold spoke several words, then lit a candle before speaking some more and lighting the next candle and so forth until he stood in the centre of a ring of small flames. It was at this point that Michael looked at the screen on his mobile phone again and he saw that the dark outline of Harold was surrounded by tiny white blobs where the candle flames burned hot and he showed this to Prudence.

"What's he saying?" Prudence whispered.

"Beats me. If it's not English or French I don't have a clue. I can't help but think I've heard something like it before though. What about you?"

"Sorry it's pretty much just English and French for me as well. I can ask for a nice cocktail in Italian though." Prudence replied.

All of a sudden Harold stopped his speaking and reached down into one of his bags again and took out a small metal bowl in one hand and an ordinary looking kitchen knife in the other.

"I don't like the look of this." Michael muttered, "Seeing someone with a weapon in their hands makes me nervous. Do you have that flash light handy?"

"Right here." Prudence said, holding up the unlit torch.

"Good. If he attacks us don't hesitate to smash him around the head with it." Michael told her.

Reaching the end of his next lines of speech Harold then set the bowl down on the ground in the centre of the stone circle and reached back into one of his bags. This time what he took out through was clearly alive.

"Is that a snake?" Prudence said in surprise when she saw the long, thin creature taken from the bag and then held up high along with the knife above Harold's head. The snake wrapped itself partially around his arm, squirming in an obvious attempt to get free of his grip but he held it tightly as he spoke again in the mysterious language.

"It must be a grass snake." Michael said, "That's what the trap was for."

"But what does he need a grass snake for?"

"My guess is that he's going to sacrifice it as part of whatever this ritual is that he's performing.

"Ritual? How do you know it's a ritual?" Prudence asked.

"What else can it be?" Michael answered, "Look at my phone though." he added and Prudence looked at the screen again to see that the snake appeared on the thermal imager in the same way as Harold, blending in closely with their background. All of a sudden Harold slid the point of the knife into the struggling grass snake just behind its jaw. Then, still speaking he began to drag the blade along the length of the snake's body, holding it so that as the blood was collected in the metal bowl on the ground as it poured out of its body. Casting the dead snake aside Harold bent down to pick up the bowl while putting the knife down on the ground.

"Please tell me he's not going to drink that." Prudence said and she winced at the thought. However, rather than lifting the bowl to his mouth and drinking the contents, Harold walked forwards to the nearest stone right in front of him and spoke more unintelligible words as he dipped his fingers into the bowl. With the ends of his fingers now covered in blood he began to write on the stone, making several quick strokes before he moved on to the next one and he marked this one with blood as well.

"You know in old magic circles were often associated with summoning." Michael commented, "The circle granted protection from the creature that a wizard wanted to communicate with."

"I take it you had to be inside the circle to be protected, right?" Prudence replied and Michael nodded.

"Oh yes. You had to be inside."

"While anyone caught outside?" Prudence added, taking a quick look around.

"Supposedly they'd be killed horribly by whatever it was that was being summoned." Michael said.

"Then I suppose it's a good job that those are all fairy stories without a grain of truth to them. Right?"

Prudence said, looking straight at Michael.

"Right. Still got that flash light handy?" he replied.

"Not letting go of it." Prudence said.

When Harold had finished marking each of the stones with snake's blood he stopped speaking and returned to the centre of the circle as if waiting for something to happen while in the darkness of the woods Michael and Prudence watched.

"How long do you think it will be until he gives up on this?" Prudence whispered.

"I think he has." Michael replied, seeing Harold bend down to the bags by his feet again and this time he took what looked like the book Michael had seen him read through his office window from one of them and began to read it again, "Probably wondering what went wrong."

"How can anyone believe in magic nowadays?" Prudence commented before there was a sudden 'snap' as something close by stepped on a dry stick that promptly broke underfoot, "What was that?" Prudence said, looking around nervously.

"I don't know. I'd say it was just an animal but it seemed loud. It would take a large animal to break something that could make that sort of sound." Michael replied.

"I don't think its an animal. I think its a person." Prudence said and she pointed to where a dark shape was moving through the woods nearby, approaching the stone circle in which Harold still stood.

As the figure came closer it did not appear to be a man though, instead it seemed badly malformed. Standing not much more than five feet tall it stooped forwards as it moved and its head seemed to stick out too far in front of it to be human as well as being wide and flat. As the figure continued to approach the circle it also became apparent that it had a thick tail behind it, suggesting that this figure was anything but human.

Michael suddenly remembered his mobile phone with its thermal imaging attachment and he pointed this at the inhuman figure to try and get a better look at it. However, just as with Harold Farrow and the grass snake it barely showed up against the background of the forest.

"Michael what the hell is that?" Prudence hissed.

"It has to be some sort of reptile." Michael replied, "But nothing like that lives in the British Isles. Hell nothing like that lives anywhere. Crocodiles and alligators can easily get that big or bigger even but they don't walk on two legs."

"Michael I don't think its alone. There's another one." Prudence said as she spotted another dark shape moving in the forest.

"Not just one." Michael replied as he looked around and saw more deformed shapes all converging on the stone circle and gathering around it while Harold remained motionless inside, "Stay here." he said, shutting off the thermal imager fitted to his mobile phone and switching to the regular camera.

"Where are you going?" Prudence asked.

"Closer. If I can get near enough then maybe I can get a decent photograph of one of those things." he answered and then he darted forwards, moving towards another tree that he used for cover.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Prudence muttered to herself and she peered around the tree again at where the mysterious figures had gathered around the stone circle.

Moving from tree to tree, Michael advanced towards the stone circle and at each point along his journey he took a photograph using his mobile phone. He was not certain that any of the pictures would reveal anything in the poor light but he took them anyway just in case. As he got closer he heard a string of grunts and hisses coming from the deformed figures and it occurred to him that this was some form of speech although he did not know how a human throat could produce those sorts of sounds. When he was close enough to see Harold's face more clearly he held up his phone and switched the camera to video mode before tapping the record button to try and capture as much as possible of what was going on out here in the woods. From this distance he could tell that the malformed figures all appeared to be clad in crude clothing that looked like it was made from a mix of cast off fabric of various types, colours and patterns and also basic animal skins and Michael frowned as he thought about this. None of the figures looked even remotely human but he could not think of any animal that would walk on its hind legs as these did or that spoke or wore clothing.

Meanwhile Prudence remained where she was, looking back and forth between the stone circle and the tree she had watched Michael make his way to, waiting for him to return. All of a sudden she heard a crunching sound from behind her as something approached out of the woods. Nervously she slowly turned her head and to her horror she saw one of the figures now standing right behind her. As close as she was to the figure, Prudence could see that its skin was made up of scales that were a shade of green it was almost indistinguishable from black while its eyes had slit like pupils that stared straight at her. Standing shorter than Prudence, the creature had to lift its elongated, flat head to look her directly in the face. Prudence tried to back away as the creature came even closer but all she managed to do was back into the tree she had been hiding behind and she pressed herself against this as the reptilian figure moved even closer, its tongue darting in and out of its mouth as it tasted the air. Then she flinched and turned her head aside as the creature's tongue struck her cheek and it hissed as it pulled its head back and began to reach out with a clawed hand. Prudence then noticed that there was a crude stone knife in the creature's other hand and she let out a sudden scream. At the same time she remembered what Michael had told her when he gave her the heavy torch she still held and she swung this upwards in an arc as hard as she could. The end of the torch caught the reptilian creature under its jaw. This produced a 'crack' and the creature let out a high pitched

shriek as it staggered back away from her.

The combination of Prudence's scream and the inhuman shrieking made Michael turn around suddenly and it also attracted the attention of Harold and the rest of the creatures gathered around him. Pointing towards the source of the scream Harold spoke a series of grunts and hisses himself before some of the reptilian creatures around him began to move away, all of them producing a variety of axes and knives from under the cloaks they all wore.

"Prudence run!" he called out, charging out from behind the tree and rushing at the closest of the figures.

The creature moved more slowly than Michael anticipated and it did not have time to turn before he had the chance to swing his flash light in a sideways arc, striking it at about knee height. The blow caused the creature to shriek as it dropped to its knees and Michael followed up his first strike with a blow to the top of its skull and the creature promptly collapsed in a heap on the ground.

When Prudence heard Michael tell her to run she did not hesitate. However, before being able to escape she still had to deal with the knife wielding reptile and she swung her flash light again. Her attack was crude but the creature was already dazed by the first blow and when the second struck it at the side of its head it staggered sideways, hissing as it clutched a clawed hand to the wound that was now bleeding. Seeing an opportunity to escape Prudence broke into a run, heading back the way she and Michael had come and not daring to look behind her out of fear of what might be following her.

Back nearer the stone circle Michael heard a hissing sound as another of the creatures lumbered towards him with an axe in its hand. Using his flash light like a baton again, Michael struck at the creature's hand and struck it with enough force to get it to drop the axe it held and when this landed on the ground he kicked it away before the creature could retrieve it. All of a sudden Michael was jumped from behind as Harold leapt onto his back. Michael promptly rolled forwards to shake him off before getting back to his feet while swinging his flash light at another of the reptilian figures and knocked it backwards when the blow connected with its head. Harold was also getting back to his feet through and with a strength that surprised Michael he lashed out with his fist, striking Michael with the back of his hand and sending him tumbling over one of the rocks in the stone circle knocking over the candle still perched on top of it in the process. Michael winced and gasped as he landed painfully inside the circle, realising that he had landed on top of the metal bowl. He was not seriously hurt though and he was able to quickly get back to his knees in time to parry a blow from a stone axe aimed at his head. Grabbing hold of the axe just above where the reptilian creature wielding it held it to prevent it from attacking him again Michael thrust his flash light forwards into the creature's abdomen. This appeared to have a similar effect on the reptile as a similar blow would have on a human and the creature doubled over in pain and released its weapon. It was then that Michael realised that the book Harold had been reading from was now within arms reach and he tossed the axe aside before diving towards the book and scooping it up.

"No!" Give that back!" Harold yelled when he saw this and he charged at Michael with his knife held high.

Michael side stepped the attack and used his flash light to knock one of Harold's legs out from beneath him before elbowing him in the side as he fell. Then he began to run, leaping over the stone circle and heading into the woods after Prudence.

6.

Harold turned around and snarled as Michael vanished into the darkness then he hissed at the reptilian creatures close at hand, ordering them to pursue Michael and retrieve the book. Obediently all five of the creatures began to follow Michael into the woods, lumbering through the darkness.

As Prudence continued to run she saw the shape of a car up ahead but it was not the range rover that had brought her and Michael here, instead it was Harold's car and she remembered that they had first located this before following Harold to the stone circle. She knew that the range rover was just a few hundred yards further up the road but instead of immediately heading in that direction she paused and looked back into the woods to see whether Michael was close behind. However, instead of Michael she saw another of the reptiles lumbering towards her with a knife raised ready to attack.

"Back off. I know how to use this." Prudence said, holding out her flash light and hoping that the creature did not notice how much she was shaking in fear. The creature continued to advance though and Prudence leapt forwards to attack, swinging her flash light at it. Her attack was ill timed through and the flash light passed through the air just in front of the creature, causing it to hiss as it struck back at her. Prudence pulled the flash light back to try and block the knife blade coming towards her and the two weapons struck one another, the force of the impact broke the stone blade when it hit the modern alloy of the flash light while also knocking the flash light itself from Prudence's hand.

The reptile then lunged at Prudence and she screamed as it knocked her to the ground, landing on top of her and attempting to claw her face, however she reacted in time to grab the reptile by its wrists and she held them tightly as she wrestled with the creature. The creature was clearly attempting to claw at Prudence's face, trying especially to get at her eyes but she was able to move her head back and forth to avoid these attacks and pushed the creature's claw away. The creature did not give up though and Prudence felt a sudden pain in the back of her head when she jerked it aside to avoid its claws only to hit a rock. She did not let the pain distract her though and she kept her grip on the creature's wrists.

"Prudence!" Michael yelled from in the woods while she continued to struggle with the reptile and she looked towards the source of the shout.

"Michael help me!" she called out and Michael came rushing out of the darkness with his flash light in one hand and the box he had taken from Harold in the other.

The reptile pinning Prudence to the ground turned its head to look at Michael as he came charging out of the darkness and it hissed at him as he ran towards it.

Without hesitation Michael brought his flash light down on the reptile's head while it was being held in place by Prudence and there was a loud 'crack' as he struck it. This prompted the creature to let out a shriek as Michael then kicked it off Prudence and looked around for any signs of any more of the creatures.

"Are you okay? Was it alone?" he asked.

"I'm fine, I don't know if there are any more though. I didn't see any." Prudence replied as she retrieved her flash light from nearby.

"Okay, let's get back to the car and get out of here." Michael said and Prudence nodded quickly.

"You won't get an argument from me." she said, breathing rapidly as she got back to her feet. Then the pair of them began to run through the woods in the direction of Michael's car.

"Here take this." Michael said, thrusting the book he had taken from Harold into Prudence's arms as the car came into view and he reached into his pocket for the key. However, he did not unlock the car immediately.

"What are you waiting for?" Prudence asked.

"When I unlock the car the lights will flash. Are you ready to move?" Michael answered.

"Ready to move? I'm ready to run all the way to Cornwall if it will get me away from those things." Prudence replied.

"Then let's go now." Michael said as he pointed the key at the range rover and pressed the unlock button.

Immediately the car's indicators flashed bright orange, revealing its position to anyone close by and Michael and Prudence rushed up to it. Pulling its doors open they climbed into the front as quickly as possible and Michel inserted the key into the ignition and started the engine before even putting his seatbelt on. Not bothering with headlights either, Michael put the car in reverse and backed up out of the wood onto the road before he finally turned on the car's lights and drove off. Rather than head back the way they had come though he instead carried on in the same direction they had driven in to get here.

"Shouldn't we be heading the other way?" Prudence asked but Michael shook his head as he fastened his seatbelt.

"No, if Harold makes it back to his car he could back out and block the road. Then we'd be trapped while his lizard friends rush the car." he said.

"Yes what the hell were those things?" Prudence said.

"I don't know but I'm hoping that the answer could be in that book you've got there." Michael said and Prudence looked down at the large ancient looking book he had handed to her.

"I can't even read the cover." she said, "What language is this?"

"The letters look Greek." Michael replied, "I think that's why I remember hearing it before, I served with some Greek troops on a NATO deployment. But they spoke differently to how Harold was talking so I don't think we're looking at modern Greek here, perhaps an older form."

"So how do we read it? Does Google translate this?"

"I doubt it but I know of a retired university professor who might be able to help us. First thing tomorrow we'll take that book to him and see what he makes of it. Assuming you don't want to quit of course." Michael said.

"Quit? Michael after what's just happened to us both I'm going to have nightmares for the rest of my life already. They'll only be worse if I don't get some answers. I'm in all the way." Prudence said and Michael smiled.

"I knew I made the right decision in hiring you." he said.

The reptilian figures gathered by the edge of the road where Harold had parked, looking in the direction they could hear the sound of the range rover's engine coming from but unwilling to give chase to the vehicle. Then Harold appeared out of the woods from behind then and they all turned to face him instead, a number of them hissing at him.

Harold hissed back at the creatures and then looked down at the disturbed ground when one of them had wrestled with Prudence. Returning briefly to his car he unlocked it and turned the headlights on to illuminate the area and the reptiles all hissed again, backing away slightly from the car. Harold ignored this and returned to the ground that had been disturbed by the fight and he smiled when he saw a piece of stone on the ground that reflected the light from his car's headlights. Crouching down he picked this up and looked at it closely, confirming that it bore traces of Prudence's blood.

"God Pru, what happened to you?" Jane asked when Prudence came in through the front door while she was sat watching television.

"Would you believe I was attacked by a lizard? Well lizards actually. Plural." Prudence replied and her house mate frowned.

"Fine, don't tell. I'm just trying to take an interest you know but you just lie about what time you're being picked up so I can't meet your new boss." she called out as Prudence went upstairs to shower and change.

"I already told you he has a girlfriend. A really pretty one who sends him naked pictures of herself." Prudence responded.

"Then you have nothing to fear from introducing him to me." Jane said, "Call it payback for leaving me to battle wild dogs."

"Wild dogs? What wild dogs?" Prudence asked, peering down the stairs with just a towel wrapped around her.

"I think there are strays wandering around and going through the bins. They're leaving a real mess. The neighbours have noticed as well. We're going to have to call the council to send someone to catch it and take it away." Jane said.

"Is that all? Well unless it's a werewolf it can't be as bad as what I saw tonight." Prudence said before disappearing back into the bathroom and there was the sound of the shower running. Meanwhile Jane remained on the couch and snorted.

"Lizards. Right." she said.

7.

Michael did not collect Prudence the next morning until after Jane had already left for her own work and so Prudence had to set the burglar alarm as she left.

"I hope that code isn't one two three four or some combination." Michael said as she closed the front door behind her and she frowned.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"That's the default code on most alarms and too many people don't change them. You know I can do you a full security review." Michael told her as they walked towards the car.

"Let me guess, you were trained to break into people's houses." Prudence replied.

"If it was needed, yes." Michael said, unlocking and getting into the car.

"So why would it be needed?" Prudence said.

"Normally for planting surveillance devices. It's not as easy to just walk into someone's home and plant bugs or cameras as it is at a business. Although in Northern Ireland the Army did once set up a fake TV repair shop so they could plant bugs in any that belonged to suspected terrorists." Michael told her.

"Would your security review deal with stray dogs?"

"Not really. Why?"

"Jane says that we've got one making a mess of the bins around us. Her and the neighbours are going to call the council about it." Prudence said and Michael snorted.

"Good luck with that. Unless you've got a local councillor living in your street they'll just claim that resources are too limited. You're better off all clubbing together to buy a big trap then call a dogs home." Michael told her.

Prudence then looked into the back of the car where the book she and Michael had taken from Harold the previous night was lying on the seat.

"So you've found someone to translate that for us then?" she asked and Michael nodded.

"Yes. John Midland was a Classics professor at Manchester University before he retired. If anyone can tell us what the book says it's him. He lives right here in Wellslaw, down the road towards Quarry Side and the airport and he's agreed to speak to us." he said.

"Which hopefully will include what those creatures were." Prudence commented.

"With any luck yes." Michael replied.

The road that John Midland lived on was long, winding and narrow, pre-dating the common use of motor traffic so when Michael reached his house he could not park on the road. Instead he pulled over to the closed gate where there was an intercom, wound down his window and reached out to press the button.

"Yes?" a man's voice asked.

"John Midland? I'm Michael Lester." Michael said.

"With Prudence Brent." Prudence added loud enough that the intercom would pick her up.

"I spoke to you on the phone about a book I wanted you to take a look at." Michael said.

"Oh yes the book. Do come on in." John responded and then the solid wooden gate began to swing open.

"Looks like he takes his security seriously. I bet he doesn't need to worry about stray dogs or lizard people." Prudence said.

The home of John Midland was large and had plenty of room in front of it for several cars to park. As Michael brought his range rover to a stop the front door opened and a balding man with grey hair emerged.

"Good morning." he said, "I'm John Midland. Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you professor." Michael replied, shaking the man's hand and he handed him a business card, "Michael Lester. Lester Security and this is my assistant."

"Yes, Prudence Brent. Now what about this book you have?" John interrupted impatiently.

"Here it is. Michael thinks it's some sort of Greek." Prudence said, taking the book from the car and carrying it to the professor.

"Yes, yes it is." he said, "But no ordinary Greek. Please do come in and we'll take a closer look at it." he said, beckoning for Michael and Prudence to follow him inside.

"After you." Michael said, letting Prudence enter the house first and then closing the door behind them after he entered behind her.

John led his two guests into a room that was lined with bookshelves and set the book they had brought him down on his desk, turning on a table lamp that cast a bluish light instead of the usual yellow to closer match sunlight and adjusting it for the optimum position and then he put on a pair of white cotton gloves before starting to study the cover of the book more closely while Michael and Prudence both sat down.

"Remarkable. It's incredibly well preserved for its age." he said.

"It's age? How old is it professor?" Michael asked.

"Well the language here on the cover is Byzantine Greek and that hasn't been a spoken language since the fifteenth century."

"So it's six hundred years old then?" Prudence said.

"I think far older. Possibly as old as the fifth or sixth century AD based purely on its use of Byzantine Greek but probably around the ninth or tenth from the general style." John answered, "The Necronomicon." he added.

"The what?" Prudence said.

"The Necronomicon. That's the title right here." John said, running his finger over the writing on the cover. Then he opened the cover of the book and looked at the text on the first page inside, "Ah yes, here we go. The Necronomicon. Translation from the original Arabic by Theodoras Philetas. There's no date sadly but it looks like this book is a copy of an older work. It is printed but the style suggests woodblock rather than moveable type."

"Does that help you date it?" Michael asked.

"Not really. Moveable type wasn't introduced to Europe until the fifteenth century anyway, by which time Byzantine Greek was being replaced by a form of the modern language." John said without looking up from the book as he began to turn the pages, studying the layout of the book rather than paying close attention to it.

"Pictures." Prudence commented when she saw a diagram.

"Yes it looks like the author thought that some of his information required illustrating." John said.

"What's it a picture of?" Michael said.

"Actually it looks like a star chart." John said, looking at the nearby text, "Xthulhu."

"What?" Michael said, "What does that mean?"

"It's a name. The Latin equivalent would be Cthulhu. Great Cthulhu." John said.

"If the original was in Arabic could he have been some sort of Arab king?" Prudence suggested.

"Oh no I don't think so at all." John responded, "I don't think that Great Cthulhu was a person at all. More like some sort of pagan god and this star chart supposedly predicts a time when he will be free to walk the earth again."

"I don't suppose there's anything in there that mentions lizard people is there?" Prudence said.

"Lizard people?" John replied, confused.

"Professor what would you say if I told you that we took that book from a man who may have used it to summon a group of lizard people to the stone circle up on the Edge last night?" Michael said.

"That you were insane and I don't like having my time wasted by practical jokes. Now this book is clearly very valuable. Are you telling me that it is stolen property?" John said and Michael smiled as he took out his mobile phone and as he held it out towards the professor he started the playback of the video he had shot the previous night.

John watched this in disbelief, unable to reconcile the reptilian figures with everything he knew to be true.

"This has to be fake." he said, shaking his head.

"It's genuine I assure you." Michael said.

"One of them tried to claw my face off." Prudence added.

"And what about this man who had the book. Who is he and where did he get it?" John asked.

"He goes by the name Harold Farrow and he runs an antiques shop in Elder Edge." Michael told him and John nodded.

"Yes I think I know it." he said.

"But I'm starting to think that he may not be what he seems." Michael said.

"You mean because he has no body heat?" Prudence said and Michael nodded.

"Yes." he said before he looked at John again and added, "We've been asked by Harold Farrow's wife to find out why his behaviour changed following a trip abroad. She suspects he may be having an affair so we followed him around and placed some cameras in his shop."

"Cameras that are triggered by heat sources moving past them." Prudence said.

"Yes, I know how motion sensors work." John commented.

"I was curious as to why the sensors didn't pick him up but did pick up customers in his shop so I used a thermal imaging attachment for my phone and he just showed up at the background temperature, exactly the same as these lizard creatures."

"A number of cultures have had myths of serpent people but that's all they're supposed to be and as far as I know none of them come from Europe." John said and he looked back at the book, "May I borrow this?" he asked, "I need to study it closely and it's hundreds of pages long. If you want detailed information about what it contains then it's going to take time."

"How much time?" Prudence said and John shrugged.

"Weeks. Months maybe." he said, "Remember there's no-one left alive who actually speaks this language any more and it may take time to decipher the context in which certain words have been used."

"Like Great Cthulhu?" Michael said and John smiled.

"Exactly. There could be references to other texts that I will need to check this against." he said, turning back to the start of the book and glancing at the beginning of the main text, "These introductory passages for example, they appear to claim this this book details events that took place millions of years ago, not all of them even here on Earth. I can't just take this at face value."

"Take as long as you like professor. That book's no good to us without a translation." Michael replied and then he looked at Prudence and added, "I think we ought to let the professor get on with his work." and she nodded as they both got to their feet to leave.

"I'll show you out." John said, also getting out of his chair.

"You have my card." Michael said.

"Of course. I'll call you as soon as I find out anything interesting." John said as he escorted Michael and Prudence to his front door.

"I'm sure I don't need to tell you that the book can't be replaced." Michael replied.

"Don't worry Michael, I'll take good care of it." John assured him, "I'm used to handling valuable books."

"Thank you professor." Prudence said as she and Michael stepped outside the house and then returned to the range rover. Meanwhile John waved at them before closing the door and then opening the gate for them to be able to leave. As soon as that was done he returned to his study and sat down in front of the book. Flipping through the pages he stopped on the page that showed a star chart and read one of the passages underneath, translating it out loud.

"That is not dead which can eternal lie and with strange aeons even death may die."

8.

"Okay so now that Professor Bunsen has got our carefully stolen book what do we do while we wait for him to translate it? Oh and how does your stealing the book fit with the rules you're supposed to follow?" Prudence asked.

"To answer the second question first I didn't think that Harold Farrow was going to go either to the police or the Security Industry Authority and make a complaint about having his expensive book stolen while he was conversing with lizard people in the middle of the night." Michael answered.

"Good point. So what about our next move?"

"We call Andrea Farrow. Her husband will be at work now and there's something I want to know." Michael said and then he activated the interface between his car and mobile phone, "Call Andrea Farrow." he said out loud.

"Calling Andrea Farrow." the car's synthesised voice responded and after a few moments there was the sound of a phone ringing.

"Hello?" Andrea Farrow's voice said."

"Andrea it's Michael Farrow, are you free to talk." Michael said.

"Ah Michael, do you have news?" she asked.

"Perhaps. Andrea has your husband ever expressed any strong views on religion or the supernatural? Especially anything to do with the occult." Michael said.

"No not at all. He was raised a Catholic but we've never attended church regularly. Why, what is this about?" Andrea replied.

"Just a theory that we're looking into. Right now though I need to ask what access you have to your husband's shop. You said that your name was on the lease as well. Could you provide us with a key and the means to shut down the alarm? I'd like to take a look around when he isn't there just in case there is anything in his office." Michael said.

"Yes there's a spare key here the office upstairs and unless Harold has changed the alarm code then it's still the first two digits of our telephone number followed by the last two in that order." Andrea said.

"Thanks. If its alright we'll come by now and pick up the key." Michael said.

"Of course. I'll have it ready for you." Andrea told him.

"Do you think we should ask her about how her husband seemed when he got home last night?" Prudence asked as she and Michael walked up the drive towards the Farrow's home.

"It might be an idea, yes. I'll leave it to you." Michael replied, ringing the bell and a few seconds later the door was opened by Andrea.

"Ah you're here for the key. Do come in." she said, backing away to let the pair inside and as they entered the house the Farrow's golden retriever once again walked up to Prudence, I think he likes you." Andrea commented.

"Thanks. By the way, how did your husband seem when he got home last night Missus Farrow?" Prudence asked while Andrea was picking up a key from a nearby sideboard.

"I can't say, he didn't get home until after I'd gone to bed. I didn't see him until this morning and he seemed just as distant as he has been. Why, did something happen last night?" she responded.

"We followed your husband after he left his shop." Michael said, "We didn't see clearly what happened but we weren't sure if he'd got into some kind of altercation."

"An altercation? You mean a fight? Even now I wouldn't expect that of my Harold." Andrea said, holding out the key to Michael, "Here you go. Now you've got the alarm code?"

"The first two digits of your home phone followed by the last two in that order." Michael replied.

"That's it." Andrea said.

Thank you. We'll get this back to you as soon as possible." Michael told her before he and Prudence walked back out of the house and got back into the range rover.

"So now I suppose we wait." Prudence said as she fastened her seatbelt.

"No, not entirely. Obviously we can't take a look around the Farrow's shop while Harold is there but there is one other place we know he's been that I'd like to take another look at in daylight." Michael replied, turning the key in the ignition.

"The stone circle at the Edge." Prudence said.

"The stone circle at the Edge." Michael repeated, nodding, "Are you okay with that?"

"Remember I said that I didn't have a problem with the government not letting people have guns?" Prudence replied.

"Yes."

"Well I take it back. I'd rather have a gun if I'm going to go somewhere that I might be attacked by lizard people."

"Sorry, all we have are the torches." Michael said and Prudence sighed.

"Okay but this time I'm sticking to you like glue." she said.

Following the same route up towards the Edge that they had taken the previous evening when they followed Harold Farrow, Michael drove through the woods as far as where Harold had pulled his car off the road and parked in the same place.

"You're not worried about the car being seen then?" Prudence asked.

"No, not this time. The stone circle is just a short walk in that direction and if there are still any of those lizard things around then I want us to be able to get out of here quickly." Michael replied as he walked to the back of the car and opened it to take out the flash lights.

"How do we explain these if we're caught here in broad daylight?" Prudence said as he passed one to her.

"We say that we were hopping to find and explore an old mine we'd heard rumours about." Michael said, "Oh and I thought you might want this." and from the back of the car he took what looked like a black waistcoat but was obviously much heavier.

"Is that a bullet proof vest?" Prudence said.

"It'll slow a bullet, yes. It's really intended to protect from knife attacks though. Ex-police issue. Here put it on, just in case." Michael replied, opening one of the velcro closings at the sides of the vest.

"Wow this is heavy." Prudence said and Michael nodded.

"Yes, it's not really a very good fit for you but it's what I have available. We can get you one of your own if you want." he said.

"What about you?" Prudence said.

"I'll be fine. I only have one vest so you can take it." Michael said, closing the boot of the range rover and then walking into the forest, glancing down at the disturbed earth. Then he paused and took out his mobile phone.

"Seen something?" Prudence asked as he pointed the phone's camera at the ground.

"The lizard people left tracks here." he said, "Maybe this will help us find out what they are or if there have been any other sightings."

"Wouldn't strange footprints like that be major news?" Prudence said.

"You're a journalist, would you come rushing out here if told you I'd found the tracks of a lizard man?" Michael asked, looking at her and she smiled.

"No. I'd think you were crazy. I get your point." she admitted.

"So we won't be going to the papers with any of this." Michael said and he continued to walk through the woods towards the stone circle with Prudence walking beside him.

When they reached the ring of stones they found that someone or something had acted to clear up the evidence of the ceremony that Harold had performed the night before. There was no sign of the snake he had killed and all traces of the blood had been removed.

"Someone's tidied up." Prudence said, "If I hadn't been attacked by knife and axe wielding lizards here last night I'd swear that no-one had been here for a while."

"So Harold is concerned about his activities coming to light then. Whatever their purpose may be." Michael said.

"You mean was the lizard people coming here his final objective or just part of something larger?" Prudence asked and Michael nodded as he poked at the ground with the end of his flash light to see if there was anything hidden just under the top layer of soil.

"I think we need to look further afield." he said, standing up straight again and he looked around.

"Okay, what are we looking for?"

"Anything they might have dropped or more tracks we may be able to use to follow them back to wherever they live. To have remained hidden out here all this time it must be pretty well camouflaged." Michael said.

"But hang on, we don't know how many of those things are out here." Prudence pointed out, "If there are a hundred or more of them then I don't rate our chances of getting out of here alive."

"I didn't intend for us to follow them into their lair, only figure out where it is." Michael replied as he looked around, "The ground here is too hard though. There aren't any tracks."

"Well the one that crept up on me from behind must have come from somewhere over there." Prudence said and she pointed in the direction the reptile had approached her from.

"Okay we'll start over there then." Michael said and they both began to walk through the woods again.

The ground remained too firm for meaningful footprints to have been left and although the covering of vegetation had been trampled in places there was no telling what had caused the damage. However, as they continued they saw a large mound of loose earth up ahead.

"What's that?" Prudence asked.

"Possibly just what we're looking for." Michael replied, "I think it's a spoil heap, earth dug out of an animal

nest. It could just be a badger set but then again-

"Then again it could be the entrance to a nest of lizard people." Prudence interrupted and Michel nodded.

"I think observing from a distance might be a good idea." he said.

"Oh I agree. Where from?"

"Over there I think." Michael said, pointing to a clump of dense vegetation, "That puts us between the spoil heap and the car. I don't want us getting cut off. If they do attack we'll just run."

"Yeah, they didn't seem that fast last night. Even in my heels I outran them easily until I stopped at Harold's car." Prudence commented.

"They're cold blooded and the weather is getting colder. That will slow them down." Michael replied as they reached the bushes he had selected as a suitable hiding place. From here they could see that beside the mound of earth there was what looked like a burrow of some kind and Michael produced a pair of compact binoculars from his pocket that he used to study it.

"Any signs of our lizard people?" Prudence asked, peering over his shoulder.

"No but the entrance to that burrow looks too big for a badger. I think you might just about be able to squeeze in but we'd have to get closer to be sure."

"Plus there's no way I'm crawling into a hole in the ground that could be full of lizard people. Body armour or no body armour. Which is really uncomfortable by the way." Prudence said.

"Not surprising, it's not made for a woman. If we get you a vest we'll get one that fits properly I promise. Now keep quiet, if there is anything around I don't want to give away our position." Michael told her and the pair crouched behind the bush silently as Michael watched the entrance to the burrow through his binoculars. At least until the sound of singing came from Prudence's pocket.

"Never gonna to give you up-

"Oh crap!" Prudence exclaimed as she pulled her phone from her pocket, "It's Jane. I better see what she wants." she said, accepting the call, "What is it Jane? This isn't a good time." Prudence whispered.

"Sorry but I thought I'd let you that dog's been back again and knocked over all the bins."

"Right okay but this going to have to wait I'm on a stakeout. Sorry, bye." Prudence said and then she hung up the call before turning her phone off entirely, "Wow," she added, "I just got to tell someone that I was on a stakeout. Which I've probably ruined."

"Putting your phone on silent would have been fine. In fact if your ring tone is going to be Rick Astley then keep it on silent."

"Oh look whose talking mister theme from Captain Pugwash." Prudence responded.

"Actually it's from Tubular Bells, but when we get back to the office I'm changing your ring tone to something more suitable." said Michael before he noticed movement in the vegetation surrounding the burrow, "Wait, something's happening." he whispered and Prudence tightened her grip on her flash light. However, moment later a fox emerged from the undergrowth and walked towards the entrance to the burrow and Prudence breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's just a fox. A rather mangy looking one at that." she said as the animal disappeared into the hole in the ground.

"I think we're done here." Michael said, putting his binoculars away, "Let's go." and he and Prudence both stood up and turned back towards their car, neither of them heard the 'crunch' of breaking bone or saw the small spray of blood that came out of the burrow as the fox was quickly killed by the creature guarding the entrance from the inside.

"There, that's much better." Michael said, handing Prudence's phone back to her across the desk, "But don't worry, I didn't rifle through the pictures you've got on it."

"Thank you, now let's see what this amazing ring tone you given me is." Prudence said as she checked the settings on her phone, "Dear Prudence?"

"By the Beatles." Michael said and Prudence smiled.

"That is kind of cool. Okay then goodbye Rick Astley, hello the Beatles. Promise you'll call me when I get home so Jane can hear it." she said.

"Why not just play it?"

"Because I want to be cool about it. Like 'Oh what? A song about me by the greatest musical group ever?'"

"Okay but the Rolling Stones are better." Michael said before his phone went off.

"Aye aye Captain Pugwash." Prudence muttered as he picked it up.

"Professor." he said, seeing that the source of the call was John Midland.

"Michael I've been studying that book you left with me and there's something in here that connects to something you said about the man you were following." John said.

"Hold on I'm just putting you on speaker so Prudence can hear as well." Michael said, setting the phone down on the desk, "Okay go ahead."

"Hello professor." Prudence said.

"Hello Prudence." John replied, "As I was saying, I've been looking through that book. I was just skimming

through to try and get a feel for the contents when I found an entire section that details a number of strange and monstrous creatures that are supposed to exist in the dark corners of the world and I noticed a reference to what the author of the original text had called 'serpent people'. He said that they were a race of intelligent reptiles who had a civilisation that existed millions of years ago. For some reason it collapsed and all but a handful of them were wiped out. The book also says that many of those that remain are stunted and degenerate. Most of them are supposed to live in desert regions but they can live in more temperate climates as well."

"That sounds like the creatures that attacked us." Prudence said.

"You said it concerned Harold Farrow." Michael added.

"Yes," John replied, "the book also says that the serpent people who weren't primitive degenerates were powerful sorcerers and one of their powers was the ability to create an illusion that would make them appear human."

"Are you saying that Harold Farrow is one of these serpent people?" Michael said.

"I'm just telling you what this book says. Frankly I'm having a hard time believing what is written here. For starters the Greek who claimed to have translated this edition from the original Arabic names the original author as Abdul Al-Hazrad, a name that may sound Arabic to most westerners but in fact makes no sense."

John explained.

"Could they take the form of specific people?" Michael asked.

"I don't know. It just says that they could take human form to walk among us." John answered.

"Are you thinking that's why his behaviour changed when he got back from Australia?" Prudence said, looking at Michael, "Because he isn't Harold Farrow any more?"

"He does seem to be cold blooded." Michael said, "I bet whatever they do to blend in, it as developed at a time before infra red motion detectors were invented. Thank you very much professor, that information could be very useful. Please keep reading and let us know what else you find."

"Oh I will. Goodbye Michael. Prudence." John said and then he hung up the call.

"So do we tell Andrea Farrow that her husband is a lizard person that just looks human and may be here with a secret plan to steal all our water?" Prudence asked, looking straight at Michael.

"No, I don't think that is going to get us paid. We need proof that Harold Farrow is an imposter and I think that if we're going to find that anywhere it will be in his office." Michael said.

"So we're still going to break in then?" Prudence said.

"We have a key and the code to the alarm, plus with permission to be there from someone who may be the only surviving lease holder, we aren't exactly breaking in." Michael pointed out to her.

"Okay but can I go home and get changed before we do this? I just feel that a formal dress isn't the right thing to be wearing. Plus if we need to run away quickly I'd rather not be in heels again." she said.

"Okay then, I don't see the harm in it. In fact if you have some gloves you may want to bring them. We may not be committing a burglary but the fewer signs of our presence we can leave the better and that includes fingerprints on any surfaces."

9.

Pulling up outside Prudence's home Michael turned off the engine and began to get out of the car.

"Jane's home. Are you sure you're ready for this?" Prudence said.

"Prudence last night we fought serpent people in the woods. I think I can take care of myself no matter how much of a man eater you think your house mate is." Michael replied.

"Okay but please don't hit her over the head with a torch." Prudence said and she got out of the car.

When she entered the house Prudence saw Jane sat eating dinner while watching television.

"Hi Jane I'm just back to get changed then we're off again." she said.

"We?" Jane commented and she looked around just as Michel followed Prudence through the front door. Smiling she put her tray down on the coffee table and stood up, "Well hello, have a seat while Pru gets changed."

"Thank you. I didn't mean to disturb you while you were eating. Please do continue." Michael said as he sat down.

"Oh never mind that. I wish Pru had called ahead though, I must look a mess." Jane replied.

"No not at all." Michael commented and she smiled at him.

"Thanks. So Pru tells me that you're like an ex secret agent, licensed to kill and all that." she said.

"I don't know where she got that from. I was in the army for a while."

"Yes but it was a secret unit. Special forces. SAS."

"No, I wasn't in the SAS. The Special Reconnaissance Regiment provided intelligence support to them and other units."

"That sounds like a spy to me. It all sounds very exciting, you must have a lot of stories to tell. Are they all secret?" Jane said, moving to the chair beside Michael.

"Generally, yes. That actually makes a lot of what I did sound more interesting than it really was.

"What about the things you do now? Are they secret as well? Pru just fobbed me off with some story about lizard people in the woods." Jane said.

"Hopefully tonight won't be that bad." Michael replied and Jane frowned before there was the sound of footsteps as Prudence came rushing back down the stairs.

"Okay I'm ready. How do I look?" she asked and as Michael and Jane turned around they saw that she had replaced her dress and formal shoes with tight black trousers and a top along with matching trainers while her hair was now tied back. She then grabbed a black leather jacket from the coat rack at the bottom of the stairs and put that on over the top.

"Like a gimp. Shouldn't you have a leather mask that can be used to zip your mouth shut with that?" Jane commented.

"You'll be fine. As long as you're comfortable, we could be quite a while." Michael said as he stood up again and walked to the front door. Prudence opened this and let him leave first before she looked at Jane again.

"See you later. I'm off to do gimp things." she said before following Michael outside and closing the door behind her, "So what did you think of Jane?"

"I think if you hadn't come back downstairs when you did she would have moved so close to me she'd have been sat in my lap and Emma wouldn't have liked that." Michael answered and Prudence smiled.

"Same old Jane." she said as they both got back in the car. Then she frowned and added, "Should I have a mask though?"

"What, a leather one that zips your mouth shut?" Michael said.

"No, like a balaclava or something." Prudence said.

"We're not breaking in. What we're doing is perfectly legal so we don't need masks. In fact masks would just make us look guilty to anyone who saw us." Michael pointed out as he started to drive off.

Once again Michael parked the range rover in the side street close to Harold's shop, where despite the sign to indicate that the shop was open being absent his car was still visible in the car park.

"Looks like we're early." Michael said.

"I guess we wait then. What do we do when he leaves?" Prudence replied.

"We'll give him ten minutes or so just to make sure that he isn't coming back and then walk over there." Michael said.

"Walk? Yesterday we parked in the car park." Prudence pointed out.

"Yes but even though everything we're doing is legal I still don't want to draw any attention to us. If anything goes wrong, if the alarm code has been changed for example then we'll just walk away and I'll come back for the car tomorrow." Michael explained.

"There he is." Prudence said suddenly when she saw Harold appear and Michael looked back around.

"Okay then, ten minutes starts now." he said, pulling on a set of gloves and Prudence did the same as they both watched him walk straight to his car and get inside it before driving off, pausing only to lock the gate. Waiting the ten minutes that Michael had decided on suggested that Harold was not coming back and at the end of it opened his car door.

"Let's go." he said, "Do you want the stab vest?"

"No thanks. I'll wait until we can get one my size." Prudence replied.

"I'll contact the guy I got mine off and see what he has then." Michael said as he locked the car and with their flash lights in their hands they both crossed the empty road and approached the gate.

"Does that key fit the gate as well?" Prudence asked and Michael held the key he had been given up against the car park gate lock.

"No. I should have thought to ask. Oh well, over we go." he said, "Around the side first though. No sense advertising what we're doing to anyone that walks past."

"I'm so glad I'm not in a dress and heels." Prudence said as Michael led her around the same side of the building he had crept around to spy on Harold through the windows the previous day.

"Here, this'll do." he said when he was satisfied that they were out of sight of the road and then after tucking his flash light into his belt he jumped up and grabbed hold of the top of the fence before climbing it and dropping himself back down onto the ground on the other side.

"I'm not sure I can do this." Prudence said as she looked up at the top of the fence.

"Toss me your torch then just jump up. It's easy." Michael told her and she nodded then threw her flash light over the fence to Michael and then looked again and sighed.

"Well here goes." she said before leaping upwards and grabbing hold of the top of the fence. Then she scabbled to get herself to the top, perching there with one leg either side.

"Now just jump down." Michael said and she frowned.

"Michael I'm not sure about this." she said as she leant to one side to lift her leg over the fence. However, in the process she overbalanced and suddenly fell, letting out a squeal before landing on top of Michael and knocking him to the ground, "It's okay. I'm okay." she said, breathing heavily.

"Good. Now get off me." Michael said, his voice muffled from having her chest pressed in his face.

"Sorry." Prudence said as she got up and Michael crawled out from beneath her.

"I think that's something else I won't mention to Emma." he said.

"I thought you didn't lie to her." Prudence commented.

"Not telling is not the same as lying." Michael replied as he got up off the ground as well, "Now come on, let's get inside." he added and then he hurried to the front of the building where he tried his key in the lock, "It fits. So far so good." he said before turning the key and the door promptly unlocked. Pushing the door open Michael dashed inside to the alarm control panel in the hallway and entered the four digit code given to him by Andrea, reciting the numbers as he did so, "Five, seven, three, three." he said and the chiming sound of the alarm as it warned him he had only a limited amount of time until the main alarm was triggered stopped as he entered the fourth digit.

"So Andrea came through then." Prudence said, reaching for the light switch just inside the door.

"No, don't turn on the light." Michael told her and he turned on his flash light, "The office is hidden from view from the street. We can turn that light on but not this one. Now hurry up, let's lock that door again so we aren't disturbed, take back all the cameras and then see what Harold has hidden in his office."

Michael then locked the outer door while Prudence took the camera from behind the picture on the wall before they made their way into the main shop and using only their flash lights for illumination they recovered all of the other motion triggered cameras from where Michael had hidden them the day before. Only then did they move on to the room adjacent to the main shop where Harold maintained his office.

The lights in the office flickered as Michael turned them on and both he and Prudence looked around at the contents of the room. As well as being a room where Harold could take care of all of the administrative tasks required to keep the shop running it also contained a large number of objects that looked like they were waiting to be put on display. Among these there were a number of strange objects that did not fit with any of those on display in the shop though.

"Wow this place is big." Prudence said, looking at the unusual contents of the room, "What is all this stuff?"

"I think Harold Farrow, or whatever looks like him has been using his business to acquire more than a few very interesting items." Michael replied, picking up a statue that depicted a hideous creature that resembled an octopus on top of a humanoid body but with large wings emerging from between its shoulders, "There's writing on this." he added.

"What does it say?" Prudence asked.

"It's not in English but the lettering uses the Latin alphabet." he said and then he looked at the writing on the base of the statue closely as he did his best to determine how it was supposed to be pronounced, "Cthulhu R'lyeh gwah'nagl fhtagn." he said, frowning as he spoke.

"Right." Prudence said, "So where do we start?"

"We'll begin by looking for documents of any sort." Michael told her, "We need to know who he's been in

contact with. I'll start with his desk."

"Okay. I'll see what else there is lying around." Prudence said and while Michael headed for the desk he had seen Harold sat at the day before she made her way to a nearby shelf where she could see papers tucked between a pair of small conventional looking statues, "Looks like he doesn't think opening his post is urgent." she said as she picked up the papers and saw that it consisted largely of envelopes but there were also a number of leaflets among these and she read one of the leaflets, "An advert for Thor's Gym, opening soon. Think that's important?"

"No, ignore it." Michael said as he sat down and he frowned when he saw a map spread out on the desk, "What does he need a map for?" he said.

"A map? Where of?" Prudence said.

"Looks like the area surrounding Wellslaw and Elder Edge, It's burned."

"Burned?" Prudence commented as she walked across the room towards him to look at the map for herself.

"Yes there's a burn mark that looks like it's over the street you live on."

"Me?" Prudence exclaimed, hurrying to Michael's side and he pointed to the small burn mark on the map.

"Here." he said.

"Yes that's where I live but why would there be a burn mark right there?"

"Normally I'd say coincidence but after what we saw last night I'm not so sure." Michael said as he examined the rest of the map closely, paying particular attention to the spot on it where his own home was located. This part of the map was unmarked, however he did notice some small white blobs towards the edges, "Wax." he said as he looked at one of the blobs more closely.

"As in candles?" Prudence said.

"I think so. Harold put five candles on this map and the wax melted and ran off." Michael answered.

"But what for? And why did it burn where I live?"

"Another of his rituals maybe." Michael suggested, "I'm afraid to say that he may have been able to track where you live."

"That security review of yours is looking better. Perhaps I should warn Jane." Prudence said, reaching for her mobile phone.

"Would she believe you?" Michael asked and Prudence sighed.

"No. She'd ask why I thought someone was after me and I could never come up with a credible excuse. She doesn't believe in serpent people. Oh well, I suppose what you don't know can't hurt you." Prudence said.

"I think perhaps we should get finished here as quickly as we can and get you home." Michael suggested and he pulled open the desk drawer right in front of him.

"Anything interesting?" Prudence asked.

"Looks like a set of letters." Michael responded as he took a bundle of papers from the drawer, "No, the same handwritten letter written by different people." he added, laying the letters out on the desk on top of the map. Then he frowned.

"What's wrong now?" Prudence said.

"Look at the handwriting of each of these letters." Michael said, pointing to each of the sheets of paper in turn, "See how it differs."

Yes you said, written by different people." Prudence pointed out.

"Yes but with each sheet the style gets closer and closer to that of the original." Michael said and then he got to the last piece of paper in the stack and frowned again, "What the hell is this?" he added.

"Let me see." Prudence said and he held out the paper for her to see that written on it was just the name Harold Farrow over and over again and that as with the letters each signature differed slightly from the previous one until it reached a constant form of handwriting near the end, "He was practising signing the original Harold's name." Prudence said, "Don't you see Michael? When this thing took Harold Farrow's place it was able to copy his appearance and voice but it didn't have the same handwriting. It's had to practice to get it right."

"Very smart." Michael said and Prudence smiled.

"Well I have practised signing a different name myself once or twice. I thought my boyfriend at the time might propose and wanting to make sure I could sign my new name without having to think about it. Prudence Benz. I wrote it over and over again."

"Hold on your middle name is Mercedes, it was on your application form. That would have made you Prudence-" Michael began.

"Mercedes Benz, yes I know. Fortunately he didn't ask me to marry him before I decided I didn't want to be with him any more anyway." Prudence interrupted while continuing to search for anything that looked like documentation, "Hey, isn't this that box that he had delivered yesterday?" she added when she saw the box under a table.

"Yes, yes it is. That's what had that book in. I saw him unpack it. The Necronomicon." Michael told her and she crouched down to inspect it.

"There's something else in here." she said and she pulled the box out from beneath the table.

"What?" Michael said, getting up and hurrying across the room to see what she had found, thinking about the possibility of another book like the Necronomicon.

"They look like paper rolled up in tubes." Prudence said as she removed three transparent tubes each about a foot long and three inches in diameter. Inside each of these were a number of sheets of paper that appeared discoloured with age.

"Hand me one." Michael said and Prudence passed him one of the tubes. Carefully he slid the papers out of the tube and unrolled them on the table. Each of the sheets had a mix of hand drawn pictures, diagrams and writing on them. The writing was not in the Latin alphabet though so Michael could not even attempt to pronounce it but it did look familiar to both him and Prudence.

"Is that Indian writing?" Prudence said.

"It looks like it yes. Though whether it's a modern type or not is another question. Maybe Professor Midland can help us out with it." Michael answered, nodding.

"Can we just take them?"

"No. That would be too obvious. But we can take pictures." Michael replied as he took his mobile phone from his pocket and turned on the camera, "Keep searching while I handle this." he added, photographing the first of the sheets.

While Michael continued photographing the sheets of ancient paper Prudence continued to search the room for anything else of interest and her attention was drawn to a large object under another table at the side of the room. She could not tell what this was because of the fabric that covered it but she decided to take a closer look. On closer inspection the fabric turned out to be a finely woven tapestry that depicted a family sat at a meal table. The colours of this were faded with age and it seemed strange to Prudence that such an apparently valuable object would be treated in such a way by a dealer in antiquities, unceremoniously stuffed under a table instead of being placed on display. Then she realised that this meant whatever was hidden beneath the tapestry must be especially important to the creature now impersonating Harold Farrow and she lifted the tapestry to peer underneath.

At which point she let out a scream as she was thrown backwards by what felt like a massive jolt of electricity.

Harold Farrow sat watching television with Andrea but he was not really paying attention to what was happening in the program, nor was he interested in conversing with the woman sat in the room with him while their pet dog cowered beside her.

All of a sudden he sensed a pulse of energy, brief yet powerful and he knew exactly what the cause of this was. Snarling he got to his feet and strode towards the door leading to the hallway.

"Harold where are you going at this time?" Andrea asked the man she still thought was her husband.

"I have work to do." he said flatly, taking his coat from the wooden stand in the hall and checking that his car keys were in the pocket before walking out of the front door and getting into his car.

10.

"Prudence!" Michael exclaimed, rushing to check on her and he found her lying on her back looking up at the ceiling, "Prudence are you okay?"

Prudence's eyes moved to look at Michael but she remained motionless.

"I garnt oove." she uttered, her lips not moving.

"Here let me get you up." Michael said, picking Prudence up off the floor and she hung limply in his arms as he carried her to the chair behind Harold's desk, sitting her down in it. When he let go she began to fall forwards though and he had to push her back into place, "Okay Prudence can you blink for me?" he asked and Prudence blinked, "Good. Now one blink is yes and two is no. Okay?" he said and Prudence blinked once more, "Can you feel this?" Michel continued, taking hold of one of Prudence's hands and again she blinked once, "Good." he added, "Hopefully that means there's no permanent damage. If I was a doctor I'd try testing your reflexes but I'm not sure I can do that right. Stay here, I'm going to take a look at what did this. Okay?"

"Kay? I garnt oove Ichael." Prudence responded and when Michael let go of her she began to slide from the chair and she let out a muffled squeal before he caught her again and lifted her into a standing position, "Goo you old Enna ike iss?" she asked and Michael frowned.

"What was that? Emma?"

"Ges. Enna. Goo you-" Prudence began and Michael smiled when he noticed a slight movement of her head at the same time.

"You nodded." he interrupted, "Not much but I definitely saw a nod there. I'm going to set you down on the floor. Just relax and see what you can move." he added before he lowered her to the floor, lying her face down and then turning her head to the side. Then he started to rub her hands again, trying to get some sensation back into them.

"I gromise not to ell Emma if you gromise not to tell Gane agout iss." Prudence said.

"I think you're getting your speech back. Now I'll be right back." Michael said and he left Prudence on the floor while he went over to the table where the covered object was located and he ripped the tapestry away to expose it, "What the hell?" he said as he stared at the ornately carved metal box that had been hidden underneath the tapestry. The box was a reddish gold in colour with some areas showing slight signs of greenish oxidation and about seven feet long. Its surface was covered in serpent designs, giving it an appearance as if a multitude of snakes gathered together had had molten copper poured all over them that had cast them all in place.

"What... is... it?" Prudence said slowly, her ability to speak returning more now.

"I'm not sure. I think it's some sort of sarcophagus." Michael said, "In fact I think I saw something related to it in Harold's desk." and he looked back into the drawer he had taken the handwriting samples from. There where it would have been concealed by these he saw a sheet of paper that had a photograph of the box stapled to it and he took this out, "This is a form from customs clearing it for import." he said.

"Wh- where... from?"

"Australia." Michael said and he began to look around the room again, searching for something he could use to try testing the box to see if it would shock him if he tried to touch it as it had done to Prudence. Spotting a small wooden statue nearby he picked this up and used this to extend his reach as he poked the side of the ornately carved box. However, whereas there had been a powerful discharge of energy when Prudence had touched the box with her gloved hand there was no reaction when the statue made contact, "I think that could have been a one shot trap, whatever it was." he said, setting the statue back down where he had found it and then he slowly reached out with his own.

"What are you doing?" Prudence asked, the effect of the shock wearing off even further now and she was able to turn her head slightly to get a better look at what he was doing.

"Getting a look at what someone doesn't want us to see." Michael replied and he gently touched the box with his hand and then smiled as he was not thrown backwards as Prudence had been. Moving to one end of the box he reached under the table to grab hold of it and he began trying to drag it out to get a better look at it and if possible, open it. The metal box was heavy though and Michael was barely able to move it, "I think I might be better moving this table instead." he commented before he heard a 'thunk' and suddenly turned to look at Prudence, "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Just tried to get up. My arms and legs are still a bit wobbly." she replied and Michael returned to her side.

"I really think you should rest." he said.

"I have to know what's worth electrocuting me for." Prudence said, rolling onto her back and holding up a hand, "Help me up will you?"

"Fine. Have it your way." Michael said, reaching down to take Prudence's hand and pulling her to her feet. At

first Prudence wobbled slightly but she soon found her balance and nodded.

"Okay shall we get this box out to take a look at it?" she asked.

"It's heavy." Michael warned her as they returned to the box and crouched beside it and then they both began to pull.

Dragging the box out from under the table revealed nothing more about it than had already been obvious.

The snake designs obviously covered the top and all four sides and here and there were markings that could have been writing but that were not in any alphabet that either Michael or Prudence recognised.

"So how do you think this thing opens?" Prudence asked.

"Let's see." Michael replied and he began to run his hands along the sides of the box before he suddenly stopped and smiled, feeling something move under the fingers of his left hand, "I think I just found a catch." he said, before pressing down and hearing an audible 'click'.

There was a humming sound as the lid of the box lifted open and immediately Michael and Prudence recoiled from the smell of what was inside.

"What the hell?" Prudence exclaimed.

"Harold Farrow I presume." Michael added, looking down into the box at the corpse it contained.

The body was beginning to decompose but it was obviously that of Harold Farrow and there was an obvious wound to his chest that appeared to be the cause of death.

"What happened to him?" Prudence asked.

"He was shot. Trust me, I've seen a lot of gunshot wounds." Michael said, "From the state of this body he can't have been dead for more than a day though."

"But how is that possible?" Prudence said, "Andrea said his behaviour changed when he got back from Australia weeks ago."

"Frankly this is now beyond our remit." Michael said as he took out his mobile phone, "I can't believe I'm about to do this but when it comes to murder I don't have a choice." he added as he dialled and held the phone to his ear.

"Emergency, what service do you require?" the voice of the emergency operator asked and Michael sighed before he spoke.

"Police." he said.

The thing that was now Harold Farrow stopped his car outside the gate of the shop car park and got out to unlock it. Looking around he could see no signs of any intruders in the building, all the lights visible to him were out, the front door was still closed and there were no broken windows through which a burglar could have gained access. However, someone had definitely triggered the protection he had left on his most valuable possession so he knew that someone was inside who should not be and as soon as he had opened the gate he drove his car into the car park and parked it right outside the front door before turning off the engine and getting out again.

As soon as he opened the front door his suspicions were confirmed when instead of the burglar alarm starting to buzz while it allowed him time to shut it off there was only silence, telling him that someone had already disabled it. Smiling to himself he took a step forwards and let his coat fall to the floor. Then his smile became much wider, far wider than was possible with a human mouth and at the same time his eyes changed to possess dagger like pupils. Then his skin began to darken and the texture changed as it became scaled.

"That should do it. Even the police around here can't ignore something like this." Michael said as he hung up the call, "Mind you I won't put any bets on their response time."

"And will they be able to explain how the body looks like this?" Prudence asked, looking at Harold's corpse.

"That I'm not so sure about. It must have something to do with this box." Michael said.

"Well it's obviously not refrigerated. We'd have felt the cold if it was." Prudence pointed out.

"The technology of the box is far beyond your ape science." the voice of Harold Farrow said from behind Michael and Prudence and they both turned around to see the reptilian creature standing in the office doorway, an ordinary looking revolver clutched in one of its hands, "Put your communication device down please." the creature added, pointing the gun at Michael and pulling back the hammer.

"Of course." Michael replied, holding up the mobile phone before placing it down on a table. However, instead of lying it flat he placed it at an angle so that the main camera lens pointed towards the serpent man and unknown to him, recording everything he said and did on video.

"Now step away from the stasis box. If you have damaged it I promise you that you will suffer for it. You cannot possibly imagine what I had to trade to a Yithian scientist to get him to create it for me, but the two hundred million years I slumbered to escape the cataclysm that destroyed my civilisation passed in just a day to me." the serpent man said.

"So are we about to end up like the real Harold Farrow then?" Michael asked.

"That depends on the answers you give me. I remember the pair of you from last night, you disrupted my meeting with my kin. You were also here in the shop yesterday, claiming to be shopping for antiques. I don't

believe that your presence at the circle was just a coincidence though and if you knew much about my people then you would have come better armed. Therefore, I must conclude that you are working for someone else, someone with superior knowledge. You will tell me what it is that led you to me.” the serpent person said.

“Sorry but I’m afraid that we’re bound by client confidentiality.” Michael responded and he smiled.

“How unfortunate. Then I will have to be more persuasive.” the serpent person said, advancing on Michael and Prudence and keeping them covered with the revolver, “Perhaps if I shoot your mate you will be more forthcoming.”

“Hey look I am not his 'mate' or least not in the way I think you mean it.” Prudence protested.

“Nevertheless I suspect that he will not just stand by while you bleed to death.” the serpent person responded and he moved his weapon towards Prudence.

“Prudence down!” Michael snapped, diving into her and knocking her out of the way while he reached for the revolver and grabbed hold of it. In response the serpent person pulled the trigger but as the hammer fell Michael had his thumb in the way to block it before the firing pin could strike the bullet's primer. Michael winced as his thumb was trapped between the hammer and the frame of the revolver but he achieved his intention of preventing the weapon from firing.

Meanwhile Prudence quickly got back to her feet and grabbed hold of one of their flash lights from where it had been set down and as Michael wrestled with the hissing serpent person she ran at it from behind and swung her flash light at the back of its head. The serpent person staggered under the blow but it kept hold of the revolver and was able to pull it free from Michael's grip, at which point it went off as the hammer fell onto the back of the cartridge in front of it. Luckily the revolver was pointing at the floor when it went off and the bullet hit no-one but Prudence was startled by the sound of the shot, dropping her flash light and covering her ears with her hands.

On the other hand Michael was more used to the sound of gunfire was not affected by it and he charged at the serpent person again, grabbing the arm used to hold the revolver by the wrist and gripping it tightly. Rather than try to make the serpent person drop the weapon though, Michael moved his hands over that of the serpent person and while the revolver was pointed at the floor he tightened his grip so that the creature's finger was pushed down on the trigger to fire a second shot where it could do no harm to either himself or Prudence.

There was a third shot as Michael tightened his grip again and the serpent person hissed loudly before his head shot towards Michael, aiming for his neck. Michael let go of the gun and leapt backwards just in time to avoid the creature's jaws snapping shut on his throat. Not having time to assess what obstacles were in his path, Michael simply threw himself out of reach and he struck a set of shelves with his full weight, causing them to come crashing down and showering him with the contents. Fortunately nothing heavy or sharp enough to cause injury landed on top of him but he did cover his head with arms as objects rained down upon him. While Michael was distracted the serpent person turned towards Michael and pointed his revolver at him but before he could fire he was suddenly struck by a carved wooden bowl that Prudence hurled in his direction.

“Take that!” she yelled.

The bowl hit the serpent person in the chest and caused him to twist before he fired again and the fourth bullet shattered an antique vase on a shelf in the corner of the room. Prudence then grabbed hold of a nearby lamp and hurled that at him as well before diving for cover as the revolver swung in her direction. The serpent person held his fire when Prudence disappeared from view and hissed as he advanced towards her. However, all of a sudden something struck his leg and he collapsed. Falling to the floor he saw that it was Michael that had used a piece of the shelving as a club, swinging it under the table to hit him. Without pausing to take proper aim the serpent man fired at Michael again only for him to roll out of the way.

“That was a mistake Harold. I may call you Harold may I?” Michael said, “That only leaves you with one bullet left in your gun. So who are you going to shoot? Shoot Prudence and you'll have nothing to protect you from me. On the other hand if you shoot me then Prudence will escape. Are you okay over there Prudence?” “Just fine. I never thought those years playing netball at school would come in so useful. If only I'd known I'd have done PE at A-level instead of English literature.” Prudence responded.

“Do you think me so foolish as to not bring extra ammunition?” the serpent person said as he got back to his feet, steadying himself on the table beside him.

“Ah but if you open that weapon up to reload Prudence will escape while I attack you.” Michael said before there was the sound of a police siren.

“At last.” Prudence said when she heard this.

“What is that?” the serpent person asked.

“That is Wellslaw police proving that as useless as they are, not even they can ignore a report of a murder.” Michael told him, “Oh and since I actually told them that Harold Farrow had been shot it's quite likely that that's an armed response unit on the way. Think your little revolver will hold up against men with semi-automatic carbines and body armour?”

The serpent man hissed again and spun around to face the windows at the back of the office before firing the last shot from his revolver into the glass. The bullet punched a small hole through the window and caused large cracks to appear around this hole. The serpent person then charged at the window and dived through it, the remains of the glass just shattering.

Michael immediately ran to where Prudence was hiding and crouched beside her.

"Are you okay?" he asked and she smiled at him.

"Fine." she replied and Michael offered her his hand to help her back to her feet. As they stood up though there was the sound of a door being thrown open as someone charged through it and they both turned towards the doorway leading to the shop floor just in time to see a pair of policemen, both wearing heavy armoured vests and helmets and carrying short rifles appear.

"Armed police! Hands where we can see them!" one yelled.

"The thing you're after is getting away." Prudence told them and she pointed towards the broken window.

"I said hands where we can see them." the policeman ordered and Michael sighed.

"Better do as he says." he said and both he and Prudence slowly raised their hands just before three more policemen entered the room. All three of these were also armed but only with pistols and one of them was a detective wearing a black cap and body armour that clearly marked him out as a police officer.

"Detective Constable Mark Jackson." Michael said when he saw the CID officer.

"That's detective sergeant now Mister Lester." the detective responded.

"Ah so you're still floating to the top like-" Michael began.

"And you're still pretending to be a detective are you?" Jackson interrupted, "If you really wanted to be one you should have joined the police."

"Well my IQ is too high for CID and I shoot too well for armed response." Michael responded and Jackson scowled. Then he looked at Prudence.

"I don't think I know you though." he said

"Really because I was just thinking that we met at a Christmas party last year. You were wearing a fez." she replied.

"It wasn't me. I've never worn a fez." Jackson told her as he walked across the office, stepping over the debris left by the fight carefully until he saw the corpse in the metal sarcophagus, "Now how about one of you explains to me why I shouldn't be arresting the pair of you for aggravated burglary and murder?"

11.

DS Jackson tossed Michael's phone back to him while he and Prudence sat side by side on a bed in the shop.

"So we're looking for a guy in a Halloween costume then." he said.

"Serpent person." Prudence said, "He said he was two hundred million years old or something."

"You may have been dumb enough to fall for that nonsense but I have far more sense." Jackson replied.

"I think it's obvious that neither Prudence nor I had anything do with the death of Harold Farrow and our presence here is perfectly legal." Michael said.

"Yes now that is interesting. An officer has visited Missus Farrow to inform her of the tragic death of her husband and she confirmed that she asked you to investigate him and that she gave you permission to be here. Oddly though she also said that her husband left home just over two hours ago." Jackson replied.

"Yet you can clearly see that the real Harold farrow has been dead longer than that." Michael said, "So what's your explanation for that?"

"Obviously someone was able to impersonate him but I don't believe for a moment that it was some lizard man from the land that time forgot or an alien here to steal our water." Jackson said.

"We've done the alien joke. The land that time forgot is a new one though." Prudence commented.

"Mister Lester your reason for being here ended when you found the body of Harold Farrow. This is now a crime scene and you have no business being here. We'll be in touch if we need any more information from you but I suspect that we won't."

"We're free to go then?" Michael said and Jackson smiled as he held out his hand towards the exit.

"The sooner the better." he told him and Prudence.

"Come on Prudence, let's go. I'll take you home." Michael said.

"The guy in the fez was far more interesting." Prudence muttered as they then both got up to leave.

"So what happens now?" Prudence asked when she and Michael returned to the range rover, leaving the police to commence their investigation.

"Now the case is over. Harold Farrow is dead so there's nothing more we can do." he replied, "I suppose I ought to point out that I've never had a case like this before but I'll understand if you decide that you don't want to stay as my assistant after it."

"Are you kidding?" Prudence said, "The past couple of days may have been terrifying but they're also the most amazing of my life. Being held as a murder suspect was actually pretty cool. It would have been more exciting if the police had actually handcuffed me."

"The police have rules about that." Michael pointed out.

"Maybe next time I should slap one of them then." Prudence said.

"Do that and they'll charge you with assault." Michael told her.

"Okay maybe not such a good idea then but there's no way I'm quitting. I want that review of my home's security though. That thing is still out there with a gun and it knows where I live." Prudence reminded him and he nodded.

"How about tomorrow when your house mate is at work?"

"Sure. No changing any locks though. Jane will be really angry if she gets home and finds out she can't get in. But what about that book and the things that are in it? Are we just going to ignore all that?"

"For the time being we don't know if John Midland will find anything in that book of consequence. If he does then we'll just have to play it by ear. For now let's get you home." Michael said and he started the range rover's engine.

After dropping Prudence off at home Michael returned to his own apartment and as soon as he had locked the door behind him and shut off the burglar alarm he was already calling Emma from his mobile phone.

"Hi Emma I just wanted to let you know that I am home safely." he said.

"So how did your evening go? Or can't you tell me?" Emma asked and Michael sighed.

"Well my client's husband is dead and Prudence and I got held at gunpoint twice before we were temporarily held on suspicion of murder but all that's sorted now."

"Murder? Michael what have you got yourself into?" Emma asked him as he was walking into his bedroom.

"Don't worry Emma. The police are in charge of the case now. Much good that will do. I'm out." Michael said while opening his wardrobe to reveal a pair of metal safes, one squat and the other tall and narrow.

"What about Prudence? I expect she's quit and you'll be looking for another assistant." Emma said.

"Actually she hasn't. Although she does want me to check her home security."

"Oh God Michael. You're not going to turn her into a paranoid like you are you? Always assuming the

government is out to get her." Emma said.

"The government is out to get people. All of them are." Michael said, opening the tall safe and removing the double barrelled over/under shotgun it contained, "Look I just wanted to let you know that I am alright before you saw anything on the news and worried that I was hurt." he added, opening the squat ammunition safe.

"Fine. Are we still on for tomorrow evening or are you planning on getting accused of arson or espionage or something like that?"

"No I'll see you tomorrow night. It's my turn to cook." Michael said, inserting a pair of shells into the shotgun.

"Okay then. Goodnight Michael. I love you." Emma told him.

"I love you too. Bye." Michael replied and he hung up before propping the loaded shotgun up against the wall beside his bed where he would be able to reach it easily without having to get up.

"Jane give that back!" Prudence shouted as Jane ran down the stairs with Prudence's mobile phone in her hand and moments later Prudence followed her, naked apart from the towel she held up in front of her and still dripping from the shower.

"I'm doing you a favour Pru." Jane said, "Now where's Michael's number in here?"

"Jane no, you can't." Prudence said as Jane ran around a table and stopped on the far side so that no matter which way around Prudence went she could go in the other direction and keep the phone out of Prudence's reach.

"Oh you know you want him. Why else would you be keeping him from me? I think a nice photograph of you stepping out of the shower is just what it will take for you to land him."

"Because he has a girlfriend and I don't want to lose my job. Now please don't send that photograph."

"You know what I don't think I will."

"Thank you, now can I have my phone back so I can delete it?"

"Video would be much better." Jane added, smiling as she turned on the phone's camera in video mode and pointed it at Prudence.

"No Jane!" Prudence exclaimed, making sure the towel covered her properly.

"Come on Pru, drop that towel and dance."

"No Jane. Give it back to me." Prudence said but before Jane could respond there was a crashing sound from the rear of the house and Jane frowned.

"It's that stray dog at the bins again." she said, "I'm going to deal with it once and for all." and she put the mobile phone down on the table before turning around and storming into the kitchen, leaving Prudence to snatch the phone up off the table and rush back up the stairs.

Jane picked up a mop from beside the back door before she opened it and stepped outside into the darkness, looking around for the stray dog that had been knocking over bins in the neighbourhood.

"Come on you mangy mutt, show yourself." she said, holding the mop ready to use it as a club against the dog.

From the darkness the serpent person watched Jane, clutching the stone that was covered in Prudence's blood that had guided him here in his hand and he let out a hiss. Hearing this Jane turned towards the source of the sound and she let out a gasp when she saw the outline of the serpent person in the darkness.