

## *A Retreat of Truths*

**By: J. Lynn Stapleton (aka Ceridwyn2)**

*This is the first "Spooks" story I've written, though not the first fanfic written. This story came about after recalling some stuff from a trip I took this spring to Oxford. The story is set post-Ep 505, though Ruth is still present.*

**Tuesday Morning, 7th November 2006**  
**Thames House, London**

Life in the Grid of MI-5 was in its usual organized chaotic state. Intelligence officers were moving about collecting and retrieving files to study and analyse. Or at least appeared to be doing so. When in actual fact they were unobtrusively keeping watch on Harry Pearce's office to see when the figures inside would implode, or just kill each other. The section chief had been visited by Juliet Shaw, the National Security Coordinator, and for all intents and purposes, the meeting was something neither of them relished. Suddenly the office door swung open and everyone made quick haste to make themselves look busy.

"I'm telling you, Harry, it wasn't my doing. If you don't like it, take it up with the Home Secretary." Both Juliet and Harry seemed to wear identical expressions of loathing. Perhaps Juliet more so, as the effect of storming out of an office had kind of lost some of its effectiveness when one was in a motorized wheelchair. Malcolm, Ruth, Zaf and Jo watched as Juliet disappeared beyond the pods.

"What did she want?" Ruth asked pointedly, fearing the answer she might get.

"If you've got any plans for this weekend, cancel them. Mandatory working retreat for secret intelligence services. MI-5, MI-6, Special Branch, and Joint Intelligence Committee must send delegates for this. Non-negotiable." Harry managed to growl out. It was most certainly not on his priority of things to do in this, or any other century. "Apparently they also decided to spring it on us without much notice, so that we'd have no opportunity to pull out of the retreat."

Ros lifted her head from the screen she was viewing. In her usual dry manner, she quipped, "Oh, wonderful. An opportunity for Britain's intelligence services to wipe each other off the planet. Why wait for the terrorists to do it, when the Home Secretary can do it for you."

"Where is this little retreat supposed to be?" Ruth asked.

"Oxford."

"Not in London?" Adam queried.

"No. Apparently the powers that be decided that should this retreat be held in London, most of us would be at Thames House (and respective other parts of the city) rather than be at the retreat. So no, it's being held at Malmaison Oxford. Here's the list of staff that are expected to be there from Thames House: Ros, Zaf, Ruth and myself. Staying in London are Adam, Jo, and Malcolm."

Something clicked in Ruth's memory of what Juliet stated before she left. Then she sighed. "Oh, please tell me the wicked witch is not going to be there all weekend as well?"

The edge of Harry's lips curled up almost imperceptibly as he acknowledged Ruth's comment. But she saw it. "Sorry. But Juliet will be there as well. Not willingly, I can assure you."

"I suppose it's fitting then, that we're staying there," Ruth noted quietly.

"Pardon?" Jo asked.

"The Mal Oxford used to be Her Majesty's Prison Oxford before it got decommissioned. When I studied in Oxford, the prison was on the bus route I often took. Apparently the place is all rather posh now, but still with a prison theme."

"Why fitting?" Adam asked sensing the direction of conversation, and he smirked.

"Because if I have to spend too much time around Juliet Shaw this weekend I'm going to get done for GBH, and end up in a prison. None too swank as that, I can guarantee."

Harry put his hand over his mouth to cover the smile. But the half-laugh died as quick as it started as Ruth looked over at him. The others weren't so reserved and laughed heartily. Eventually Ruth joined in on the humour of the situation. Hell, she figured, she might as well laugh than cry.

After things settled down a bit, Ruth, being quite the pragmatist, asked why the retreat was being held so quickly. "I mean it's not like counter-terrorism has nothing else to do. Especially as Special Branch keeps piling on the reports by the truckload."

"After the Director General's speech on terrorist threats, the Home Secretary decided that it was in the country's best interests if the intelligence agencies worked with more co-operation, rather than passing the buck." Harry walked around the room so that he stood behind Ruth at her workstation.

Ruth scrunched up her face. "All very well and good. Until you remember that someone in the JIC tried to frame me for the murder of Maudsley." She looked briefly up at Harry, slightly exasperated. "I never did get the whole truth on how that was resolved."

"Not now, Ruth." Harry understood her frustration. He felt it as well. But as much as he felt, right then was neither the time, nor the place to discuss it. He gave her a glance, leaning down he quietly whispered in her ear, "Later." He then walked around and headed into his own office.

A lot of discussion followed between the colleagues about the retreat, the possible goals and outcomes that might be brought up, and how much surveillance equipment they'd be bringing. "Just to be on the safe side," Malcolm quipped. After a look from Jo, he added, "You don't think we'll be the only ones intending on covert intel at this retreat, do you?" he asked rhetorically.

"Spooks spying on each other. Sounds like fun," Adam smiled. "Too bad I'll miss it."

Zaf threw a crumpled sheet of paper at him. "I was supposed to have a date this weekend. Gorgeous girl, too."

"I feel for you, buddy," Adam grinned and replied, in a tone that said anything but. "Now, we've got some work to do in advance of this retreat. Let's see how much headway we can make." Each of the officers grabbed some files and headed to the conference room. Hours went by, discussions grew and finally most everyone packed in for the day.

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Harry was just coming out of his office when he saw the light on in the small office kitchenette. A moment later, he heard the sound of a ceramic crashing against the counter, and onto the floor. It

was followed by a slew of curses. Quickly he made his way over to find Ruth bent over trying to clean up the remnants of a broken mug. It was then that Harry noticed droplets of blood falling to the floor.

"Ruth, stop. You're bleeding." He inwardly cursed as she flinched. "Sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you."

"It's okay, I was just getting a mug to have some tea. I mustn't have had a good grip because it slipped out of my hand. I'll just get this cleaned up."

"Ruth," Harry added in a low tone that brokered no arguing. He grabbed a clean cloth from the drawer, wrapped Ruth's hand, and then he directed her over to the chair in the corner of the kitchenette.

"It's really not that bad, Harry. Shouldn't even require stitches." Ruth disliked most people fussing over her. And she was a little embarrassed that it was Harry fussing over her.

"Ruth, it's all right. Just sit back and let me do this for you." After a moments hesitation he continued, "Now, don't take this the wrong way, but why didn't you leave when the others did?"

"Why didn't you?" she playfully shot back. It had become a rather frequent discussion between the two.

"Paperwork."

"Tell me about it. I swear Special Branch has nothing better to do than make my life a living hell. Do they not have their own bloody analysts?" she asked, knowing full well that there were analysts in the newly formed Counter-Terrorism Command. Ruth sighed, very frustratingly.

As Ruth talked, Harry had found the first aid kit in the cupboard and called her over to the sink. He turned the water on to warm then unfolded the cloth that had been wrapped around her hand. "Here, let me see the cut." Harry gently turned her hand over and examined the extremity. A long thin sliver ran across the palm of her hand. "Put your hand under the water, we need to see if there's any shards in there."

Ruth did so, only because in doing so she found herself less flustered by the attention. They were very much aware that they were interested in each other. They'd had one dinner date that seemed to go fairly well, except for the nervousness both of them felt. After becoming aware that others were talking about them, Ruth stopped wanting the relationship to go any further. She felt it undermined Harry's authority and she felt uncomfortable with their colleagues talking about their relationship, especially as he was her boss. That being said, she was still in love with him, and could tell that at least some of that affection was reciprocated.

After a few moments, Harry dried off her hand and took a look. Then he placed a bandage on her hand and wrapped it with gauze. "There, that should be all right." He smiled at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he did. After a few moments they both realised he was still cradling her hand in his. The break was enough to break the spell that had kept them entranced. He remembered that she'd originally come in to get some tea.

"Ruth, do you still want a cup of tea? Or would you like me to drop you home? It's long past time of the last bus."

"I probably should. The cats will be wondering whatever happened to me. Wanting to be fed and all that. I think that's why I got the kitten, to keep Fidget company for the long hours I'm at work." Ruth knew she was babbling some. She knew it was a coping mechanism when she was flustered. And having Harry Pearce this close to her was doing all sorts of crazy things to her insides. "I need to lock down my computer for the night and put away the files I was working on."

"I'll be back in just a moment. I need to get my coat." Just as he said after about five minutes, he'd turned off his own computer, dimmed the lights, retrieved his coat and closed his office door. He placed his hand along the small of her back after Ruth put her own coat on and led them over to the pods before leaving the floor.

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### **Friday Morning, 10th November Oxford, UK**

The usual hustle and bustle around MI-5 kept things flowing. Over the past few days, the security services closed in on a domestic terrorist plot in Manchester, wherein more than a dozen suspects were taken in and interrogated. It was now up to the Home Office to lay charges. It was probably just as well that was wrapped up as Thames House was going to be short a few of its officers over the weekend. By ten o'clock, the paperwork had been completed, and Harry, Ruth, Ros, and Zaf had piled their rucksacks into the boot of the hire car and left for Oxford. By mutual agreement, they decided to talk about anything other than work, as it would be the topic of discussion and debate for the next two days.

To their surprise, Zaf and Ros found they had similar likes in choices of music, sharing similar CD collections. Topics also touched on theatre, film, television, and travel. Given their intended destination, Harry recalled that Ruth had read Classics at Corpus Christie College in Oxford. They'd pretty much finished debating favourite classicists and their philosophies when they arrived at the hotel and dropped their belongings off with the concierge. Harry left to take the car to the nearest car park, as the hotel did not have its own. When they got to the hotel, they worked out the accommodation arrangements that had been made. Two double rooms on the top level of A-Wing with Ros and Ruth in one room and Harry and Zaf in the other, on opposite sides of the hallway. After settling their belongings, Zaf and Ruth swept the room for any surveillance equipment. The actual start of the retreat wasn't to commence until the evening, so they had plenty of time to kill. Harry had asked Zaf and Ros to check out the interior of the hotel, while he and Ruth walked the perimeter.

It was overcast and about twelve degrees out, with a bit of a wind clipping through the buildings. As Ruth gathered her coat around her, she looked up and regarded the stone masonry of the old castle and prison.

"It remains rather foreboding from the outside. I remember when this was still the prison. Had a much different look to it then. There were these large wooden doors at the entrance with a smaller door within the large for pedestrian entrance. The Guards always stood at the gates. It was all rather terrifying at times, as I took the bus home. Not that I was ever afraid of anyone breaking out or some such thing. But rather to think of being incarcerated with so many others, without the freedom to move about without restriction." Ruth shivered. And she was fairly sure it wasn't entirely from the wind that swept around her.

Harry moved closer to her and gently wrapped an arm around her back. "Are you cold?"

"Not really. Let's just keep moving." While Ruth quickened her pace, she found she also leaned more into Harry's side, taking comfort in his presence. To the right of the A-Wing building, a series of adjoined shops, and restaurants to form an external atrium.

"I spent some time in a prison once. In Beirut, during its civil war in the early 1980s. Another intelligence operative and I had gone undercover. We'd gone in search of two men who'd been transporting weapons and cash into and out of the UK via a smuggling ring. We thought we had one of them but couldn't be sure. Anyway, for whatever reason I wasn't privy to at the time, our cover was blown. Kyle and I were convicted of a drugs possession though none were ever found. We were in there for three months. Kyle was killed on the op by one of the inmates. He was one of the first friends I lost in the service. I was able to get word out to the British Embassy via a sympathetic Lebanese guard. Not long after MI6 got me out of there and back on British soil. I can tell you from personal experience, it's not something I'd ever want to repeat. On British soil, or anywhere else for that matter."

They'd walked around much of the perimeter, getting familiar with the new surroundings and ended up with walking through the exercise yard, to sit on a bench. The wind had abated somewhat with them being surrounded on most sides by buildings. The dismal grey of the sky lent itself to the atmosphere. But hopefully not foreboding the weekends retreat.

"The tower there," Ruth pointed to her right, "is St. George's Tower. Dates back to about the 10th century. This prison and castle has quite the story behind it, as I'm sure most do." She knew she was talking a lot but she was never really comfortable with long bouts of silence.

"Ruth, relax. I can feel the tension surrounding you," Harry commented with a smile to set her at ease. "Everything will work out."

"I just don't like the idea of people talking about us, like we're having some kind of sordid affair. Or that I was just sleeping with you to get ahead in the job. It undermines your authority. Never mind what they'd think of me."

As usual, Harry thought, she puts others ahead of herself. He took Ruth's still bandaged left hand in his, "They'd know you were bright, intelligent, witty, resourceful and beautiful. And they'd realise you were good for my sanity. You keep me grounded when I need to be, and you're a fantastic sounding board." Ruth turned her head slightly to look at him.

"Your sanity?" She remarked with a smirk.

"Ask Malcolm. He was there at the time." A chirp from Harry's mobile phone cut their conversation short. "Yes, okay. Thank you." He concluded the call and put the phone back in his coat pocket. "That was Ros. Six have arrived, as has Juliet."

"Agh. Don't remind me."

"Ruth, be good." Harry laughed slightly as they stood and made their way up the stairs from the exercise yard into A-Wing.

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Up in the room that Harry and Zaf shared, the four of them reconvened to review their strategy for the retreat. The previous morning, they'd been e-mailed with a tentative agenda for the retreat. There was a gathering in the hotel bar at 1600h for a Meet and Greet Your Peers. Harry was sure

that whoever came up with these Retreat Agenda titles had nothing better to do than annoy the people they're intended for. The rest of the evening was left up to the participants in how they wanted to spend it. No specific plans had been made at that time as they figured it might well depend on the outcome of the Meet & Greet. The attire required was set as dress casual, and most of them had decided to change out of what they had on for different clothes.

Zaf had opted for a pair of black dress pants and a forest green v-neck fitted sweater while Harry went with a navy sport jacket and pants with a white polo shirt underneath. When Ros and Ruth emerged from their room, Zaf and Harry stood leaning against the white rails overlooking the lower levels. Both straightened up as they met, each appraising the other. Ros had on a slim black long sleeve dress and high boots, while Ruth wore a similar long black skirt and a deep red silk top with a capped sleeve. The effect on Harry was what she'd hoped - a sudden intake of breath. The short low whistle from Zaf was appreciated as well, but a bonus.

Harry led them all off to the lift. "Let's go join the melee. See what we can learn."

"Try not to kill each other while we're at it, you mean?" Ros quipped with a smile.

A short ride down in the lift and they arrived at the low-lit visitors lounge that was the site of the Meet & Greet. Mingling amongst the crowd were Juliet and her attaché from the JIC, four agents from MI6, and a couple from the Counter-Terrorism Command.

Juliet directed her wheelchair over to where Harry and all had congregated over by the bar. They'd all ordered their drinks. "Harry, so nice of you to come."

"Yes, well, when you've been given directives from the Home Secretary, it's probably best to follow them. What do you make of this little exercise in futility?" Harry asked Juliet, as he took a sip of his single malt.

"Remains to be seen. The Home Secretary and the Joint Intelligence Committee would like the different agencies to work together more effectively to combat terrorism, both domestic and foreign as it pertains to the UK. After the public reaction to the DG's speech, there's been even more pressure to capture terrorist suspects, gather concrete evidence and make arrests."

"All very well and good in principle," Ruth commented rather indignantly, "but with limited budgets for staffing, technical equipment required for intelligence work, and extensive paperwork, there doesn't seem to be an end in sight. The field and operations staff workloads have increased nearly tenfold. And I know we're not the only ones feeling the pinch."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

Ruth sighed and took a breath. She was about to speak and then stopped. What she had in mind to say would probably only get her fired. So she turned and moved over to where Zaf and Ros were speaking with two of the Met's Counter-Terrorism Command officers. Juliet meanwhile kept up her verbal jaunting with Harry.

"So, Harry, have you done anything with my suggestion?"

"And which one might that be?"

"The woman you've been watching all evening. Please tell me you've at least done something."

"Why this sudden interest in my love life, Juliet? Something you're not telling me?"

"Hardly," Juliet answered. "Just answer the question."

"We went out to dinner. It was very nice."

"And?"

"And nothing." Another sip.

"Why the hell not? Are you blind?"

"She has her reasons. And I can see her point." He didn't quite agree with it, but he did concede that she had one.

"For heaven's sake, Harry. This is not junior high school. Don't waste time." She leaned in closer to Harry. "If you love her, make it work. Yes, it is obvious to anyone who observes the two of you that you're attracted to each other. Sod the bloody rules. If having the two of you together makes you happy, then that makes me happy."

Harry looked at her askance, not really sure what she what game she was playing at. Then he looked over at Ruth, who feeling his gaze looked up at him and smiled. He returned that smile with one of his own. Juliet just shook her head.

"Because, right now you're bloody miserable, which in turn makes my life miserable." Juliet downed the remainder of her glass of red wine.

"Ah, so now we're getting at the heart of the matter."

"Just remember what I said. Or else I'll take matters into my own hands. And you don't want that." Juliet pushed off with her chair in the direction of the senior representative from MI6, not even giving Harry a passing glance.

Another hour passed with small talk discussions and some mingling between security service agents. Gradually everyone left to head off for supper plans. As they left, Harry directed Ruth towards one end of the atrium.

"Ruth, would you join me for dinner?"

"Harry," Ruth started. Then her stomach rather audibly growled. "That's probably a very good idea. I fear I've had a bit too much to drink, and not enough food today. Not a good combination. I think I want to change though."

"Do you have to?"

"Pardon?" Ruth looked closely at him, tilting her head slightly.

Harry put his hand on her shoulder. "You look very lovely this evening. If it's not too uncomfortable to wear, I would love it if you would consider leaving that outfit on a bit longer."

Ruth smiled and ducked her head, her face blushing slightly. "All right...Thank you." Raising her head, she asked, "Did you have any place in mind?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you could recommend a place."

"Well, there is a pub my mates and I would go to called the Eagle and Child. They've got some good food and drink. Relaxed atmosphere, if a bit loud at times. University crowd and all."

"I'll just let Zaf and Ros know that we're off." Harry took his mobile phone out of his pocket and switched it on. After relaying the message, they headed to the front lobby and asked the registration staff if they could order a taxi for them.

The ride to the restaurant was quiet, yet not uncomfortably so. The pub, being supertime was very busy and they ended up waiting by the bar for a table. They hung up their coats and waited to be served. The bartender asked for their drinks order, so Harry ordered himself a single malt and for Ruth a glass of red wine. About half an hour later they were directed to a small table. They'd ordered their meal and then just sat back and chatted. Harry had asked her some of her favourite things she liked about going to university in Oxford, favourite places to go, things to see and do. The lively chatter about them and the cozy atmosphere served to relax Ruth more than Harry had seen her in quite some time. She smiled more and that warmed his heart more than anything.

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As the evening passed, the pub had become louder and more crowded with the usual Friday night clientèle. Harry and Ruth, having finished their meal, settled their bill and proceeded to the exit. Harry fixed the collar on her coat as he faced her. A shy smile crossed Ruth's face. A nod of thanks and they left the pub heading out into the chill evening air. The wind from earlier in the day had ceased so while it was a little cold, it was comfortable enough. The sky had darkened to a deep purple hue and the city's night lampposts shone over the streets.

"Ruth, would you mind if we walked a little back to the hotel? It seems like such a lovely evening not to waste," Harry asked. He wished to continue their conversation and enjoy their closeness.

"That sounds wonderful."

They headed down St. Giles Street towards Broad. As they walked, Harry gently pulled Ruth closer to his side and wrapped an arm across her back. Ruth briefly rested her head against his shoulder and caught a hint of his cologne as she breathed in. It was a smell that always seemed to comfort her. After some time, Ruth's curiosity got the better of her.

"Not that I'm complaining, Harry, because I'm not. I really like being here and I'm damned good at what I do. But how..." Ruth tried to articulate her thoughts but they weren't coming as clear as she'd hoped. She lowered her head briefly, then raised it with a mixture of curiosity and anxiety. "What happened? Why am I still here, still at MI5?"

They quietly came to a stop and Harry turned to face her. He gently laid a hand on her shoulder and with a calm smile he spoke. "Relax, Ruth."

"I just wish I could make sense of it. One moment I was crouched down along the river front by the barges with Zaf in the early morning hours, the next thing I know I'm being herded into a black unmarked car and taken to a safe house and told to wait there for further instructions. For three days, Harry, I had to wait, not knowing what was going on. I can't remember the last time I was so scared. Then Adam came and picked me up and brought me back to Thames House." Ruth was aware that Harry knew much of this information already, but she needed to vent. She'd heard the official story, the resignations of the Defence Secretary as well as JIC Chairman Oliver Mace, but

she knew there was more to the issue than that.

"I am sorry that I hadn't told you this before. You deserved the truth then."

"That's fine, Harry." Ruth looked up at the guilt that seemed so prevalent in his brown eyes. She understood him more than most that the guilt itself would eat away at him. She reached up and placed a gloved hand on the side of his face.

"While you were waiting out with Zaf, after I was released from police custody, Adam gave me the microfiche and the supporting documents and satellite photo surveillance. I called in a few markers within the JIC, those who disagreed with the special interrogation measures that Mace and his associates used. Special Branch had been told to release the false report on Cotterdam to implicate Maudsley. Following the fallout of resignations, I was able to clear you of charges of murder and conspiracy to treason. We had to wait out the decisions by the PM before we could bring you back into the service safely."

"Harry, if Mace can use me to get to you, don't you think others will try as well?"

"Not if they know what's good for them."

"Now who's being naïve?" Ruth smiled at him, returning a familiar exchange between them.

"I'm serious, Ruth. I know we're still navigating the beginnings of this relationship, but I've already nearly lost you once." Harry looked at her face, the light from the lamp post shone over her face, making the grey irises of her eyes almost invisible. She smiled at him and he continued. "I don't know what I'd do if you had left for good. Look, there are things I should have told you years ago."

Ruth moved her hand from his cheek to cover his lips. "Shhh, Harry. It's okay. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere." She understood what he was trying to tell her. It also confirmed something for her that her own feelings were reciprocated. Ruth removed her gloves and placed her hand back on his face before reaching herself up and towards him, bringing their lips together in a tentative kiss at first. That first kiss became two then three, before she broke it and leaned into his arms in an enveloping hug. After several minutes they separated themselves from the hug, but maintained contact through their linked arms. They'd picked up their pace to a brisk yet comfortable walk back to the hotel.

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In the hotel room that she shared with Ruth, Ros leaned back in one of the plush lounge chairs and tucked her long legs up underneath her. On the desk next to her was her laptop with the web browser opened to the Sky News on-line news service. A small folded stack of papers was nestled in between Ros and the arm of the chair. She'd been writing notes on a legal pad which lay on her lap. The BBC 24 news service was running a continuous replay of the days lead stories on the wide-screen flat-panel television on the wall.

*"...in the news today, British National Party leader Nick Griffin and party activist Mark Collett have been cleared of inciting racial hatred after a retrial at Leeds Crown Court...Chancellor Gordon Brown has told the BBC race laws may have to be revised in light of the acquittal....An internal investigation into the abuse of prisoners at Wormwood Scrubs prison from 1995 to 2000 has just been made public. They were suppressed for years by the Home office... In other news, MI5 knows of 30 terror plots threatening the UK and is keeping 1,600 individuals under surveillance, the security*

*service's head has said. Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller warned the threat was "serious" and "growing". She said future attacks could be chemical or nuclear and that many of the plots were linked to al-Qaeda. Prime Minister Tony Blair said the terrorist threat was "very real" and spoke of "poisonous propaganda" warping the minds of young people...."*

While the news continued to play, Ros gathered her sleepwear from her suitcase and headed into the bathroom for a nice bath. She'd turned the water stream on as hot as she could stand it. As she waited for the deep claw-footed tub to fill, she undressed, folding her clothes and placing them on the narrow table. After a few minutes the water level was to a point where she could get in and start to soak as it continued to fill. She allowed her thoughts to wander as the heat seeped through her muscles, relaxing them.

Ros was generally secure in her abilities for work, yet most days she still felt as though she had to prove herself to the team at Section D. She'd felt that she was right in following Ruth at the time when she'd gone to Maudsley's place. She'd informed the JIC and Harry on Ruth's suspicious activities, as she'd not been privy to the circumstances in which Maudsley had dropped information to Ruth. Unfortunately reporting on Ruth had resulted in some serious trust issues with regards to Ros's continued presence on the Grid. She'd realised her error nearly too late. Whilst Ruth was being monitored by the police services, Ros showed up at Ruth's place unannounced and undetected. Though she had stated that she didn't apologise, Ros had effectively done so by volunteering to act as a decoy so Ruth could slip out to meet with Zaf and Adam. It was a small step to regaining some of the trust she'd lost. It was difficult enough coming into an established team, especially when the initial circumstances of her being recruited followed the treasonous actions of her father and his cohorts resulted in the death of one of the members of the MI5 team. Some days, Ros felt like she was swimming upstream in treacherous waters. Slowly but surely through her actions and team work, she'd been building respect amongst the team. She was more than hopeful that the Home Secretary's engineered exercise in joint intelligence information sharing would continue to build on that trust and respect.

The sounds of voices in the outer room startled Ros as she rose from her submerged position in the tub. She was briefly disoriented as she took in her surroundings. Directly above her was the rounded stonework of the old cell ceilings and the high three paned window that let in a modicum of light. The softly lit lamps left a glow around the room. She took a deep calming breath when the voices she heard to be her colleagues, Ruth and Harry. A knock rapped on the bathroom door.

"Ros, Harry and I are back from dinner. We're going over to his and Zaf's room if you care to join us when you're finished."

"I'll think about it and let you know," Ros called out. Truth be told, she really didn't feel like being much of a third wheel. However, an extended olive branch went a long way.

"All right. Just give a ring when you do. See you later." A few moments later she heard the heavy room door close. A little while later, she'd emerged from the tub, dried herself off and dressed in a comfortable pair of jeans and a shirt and pullover hoodie. It was one thing to socialise with your boss off hours, it was something completely different to show up wearing pajamas doing so. Grabbing her room key card, and pulling her hair up into a ponytail as she went, she headed out.

Throughout the late evening, they were chatting about this and that, including a debate on the DG's speech earlier that day and what if any changes would be coming down the pipeline for MI5 in general and Section D in particular. Frankly, if they were able to get further funding for more recruits, both field and intelligence officers, that were sorely needed, it would be a bonus. But the

likelihood of that occurring was about as likely as Mace becoming the next PM. Ros had noticed that whether by conscious choice or unconscious design on both their parts, gradually over the course of the evening, Ruth and Harry had moved closer so that towards the end of the evening they were curled into each other. Ruth's head rested on Harry's shoulder as his arm wrapped around the back of her shoulders. Ros wondered if their outward show of affection towards each other was something they were simply becoming more comfortable with displaying in general or if she was being entrusted with this aspect of their growing relationship. At any rate, she felt honoured.

When Zaf returned a short while later, Ros quickly ushered him out of the room before he could say anything stupid.

"Whatever you're thinking, don't. Let them have some semblance of privacy. They deserve this bit of happiness. And if I catch wind of you running a book on this, it won't be Harry you have to worry about."

"I never would have taken you for a romantic, Ros."

"When properly motivated." Ros stopped, a wry grin on her face, and looked down at him. "Not on your life, Younis."

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"Do you think...I mean --" Ruth started as she half turned and glanced up at Harry, and she sighed.

"Not if he wants to live to tell the tale."

"Harry," Ruth shot him an exasperated look.

"Not by me," he smirked at her. "Come here." He dipped his head down and kissed her gently. A soft moan of pleasure escaped Ruth's lips, which encouraged him to intensify the kiss. Several long and heated kisses more passed before both reluctantly broke apart. Their breaths coming in rushes. At times like this, Harry felt like he was still a young rebel in university, when the world seemed so much broader and love was this vast great concept that he had much to learn about. A gentle glance and a smile at Ruth and he realised that he still had much to learn. But this time he had the wisdom and the experience to enjoy the relationship and not to take it for granted. To nurture this love and not let it die. Harry lay a small sweet kiss on Ruth's lips, before standing and reaching his hand out to her to pull her into a standing position.

"Come. We mustn't let Mr. Younis think that there won't be reprisals if this little tete-à-tete becomes part of a betting pool."

Ruth smiled. If Ros's quick actions hadn't already scared the crap out of Zaf, he was in for a rude awakening.

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**Saturday, 11 December 2006, 0830hrs  
Malmaison Oxford, Meeting Room**

Representatives of MI-5, MI-6, Special Branch, and the JIC had gathered in the assigned executive meeting room. In the centre of the room was a large round table, around which was set twelve chairs and thirteen settings, allowing for Juliet's motorized chair. Glasses of water were set around

as well as legal notepads, and pens and a couple dossiers.

Ruth and Harry shared a glance and smirked.

"Knights of the Round Table. Someone has an interesting sense of humour," Zaf commented, with snickers emerging from most of the attendees. They'd all gone to their assigned seating and awaited the instructions for the morning's exercise.

"If you'll all open your folders," Juliet started the session off. "This morning's exercise will involve analyzing intelligence data reports, photographs, linkage reports, immigration status reports. The purpose of all of this is to combine our knowledge, instinct as intelligence officers, and skills to determine likely suspects for a terrorist attack. Now, we've only got the materials in front of us to use as our resources."

They got cracking on the work ahead of them. Discussion on the reports, surveillance pictures taking them well through the morning. Whereas most of the intelligence officers present were field officers, each officer had some specific area of expertise in which to lend the exercise.

From within MI-5, there were diverse backgrounds. Harry looked round at his officers scattered around the table. Both Zafar Younis and Ros Myers had been recruited from their sister organization, MI-6. Zaf had many aspects to his career having spent the past three years as an MI-6 officer in North Africa. And as he had quite pointedly put it to Harry, not many young Asian men sought out employment in Her Majesty's Intelligence Service, thus he was able to fit into some communities where others may not. No one would suspect that he was an intelligence operative. Ros was still a bit of an unknown quantity. While she had not been privy to the details of her father's treasonous activities alongside Michael Collingwood (the previous head of MI-6), it did somewhat paint a bit of a dark cloud over her own history. While Harry himself was willing to overlook that part of her past, in lieu of her current work with MI-5, he was not blind to it either. His own history in the military and his work as an MI-5 officer gave him a fair insight into operations and playing politics, something which he loathed but was oft required to participate in whilst keeping atop his counterparts.

Harry smiled when he thought of Ruth. Ruth's lateral thinking and data analysis were key to pointing out several components, and in cross-referencing points. In addition, her love of mysteries and puzzles, along with an innate abilities to pull some otherwise inconsequential detail out of a myriad was uncanny. Her experiences at GCHQ helped narrow down some specific detail elements. Suddenly Ruth got up and came over to Harry. She held a few documents and photographs in front of him and pointed to something in particular. Something had twiggged her memory.

"Harry, are we sure this is just an exercise?" Ruth asked him quietly.

"Ruth?"

"It's just...this man here. His face is familiar. I'm sure it came up in some Interpol report I was looking at earlier this week. The name here is wrong though, but I can't put my finger on it."

"Are you sure?" he asked, casting a sideways glance at her.

"Yes. I need to check a couple things, but I remember the face."

"Something wrong, Harry?" Juliet called over to him.

"Hopefully nothing." Harry looked down at his watch. "As it is getting towards noon, I suggest we take a break for lunch, if that's all right by every body else." After brief consultation, all agreed that it would be a good time to break and reconvene at 1300hrs. A quick nod of Harry's head and all four representatives from MI-5 met at the internal atrium in the middle of A-Wing.

"Upstairs, now," was all Harry had to say. Ruth went into her room to retrieve the laptop she brought with her. Once they'd all arrived at Harry and Zaf's room, he let the rest of the team in on Ruth's information. She opened up her laptop and accessed via secure connection the MI-5. Pulling up recent Interpol reports she scanned them for the photograph they'd been given as part of the morning's exercise.

"Here," Ruth pointed at the screen. "Jamal Hassan, arrived in the UK on 3rd November by way of Syria. Interpol sent out a green notice earlier this week as he was wanted in connection with charges of bombing a civilian hospital in Northern Iraq. He left Iraq under disguise but was picked up again by Syrian Intelligence the week before. Whilst waiting extradition back to Iraq he slipped past the Syrian officers holding him. Gone underground, until he arrived in the UK under the name of Mihyar al-Basri."

"What's he doing here?" Ros asked. "And how did it come under our radar for this exercise?"

"I don't know, but I'm betting Juliet might," Harry said before ducking into the bathroom to make a quick call on his mobile phone. A few times Harry's raised voice could be heard before silence and Harry walked out of the bathroom. "Ruth, keep working on this. See if Adam, Jo and Malcolm can pull up some additional information. We need to keep on top of this. I'm going to go have a little chat with Juliet and Charles McIrney."

McIrney had taken over the directorship of MI-6 after Michael Collingwood's 'unfortunate' demise earlier in the year, and as far as Harry was concerned McIrney was treading in his predecessor's footsteps. Harry had hoped this director's ambitions wouldn't lead him to such an illustrious end as said predecessor, but quite frankly Harry wasn't hedging his bets.

After Harry departed, Ruth went to work, running through the reports she'd compiled. After tinkering around a bit in a few databases, she got some more information she needed. A few phone more calls back and forth to Thames House. Twenty minutes passed and Ruth was avidly pacing the room as she worked her way through analyzing all the information in her head.

"Bloody hell. Tell Harry to meet us down in the meeting room in five minutes!" Ruth quickly packed up her laptop and headed down to the room.

"What is it?" Zaf asked her, as he and Ros followed quickly behind Ruth.

"I'll be able to tell you more when I get the papers in front of me. But I think I've just uncovered something about a planned terrorist attack. For real. Not some bloody exercise!"

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### **Malmaison Oxford Internal Atrium**

"Juliet, what the hell are you playing at?" Harry stormed towards the woman, his fury vibrating off his very being.

"Harry, what are you talking about?"

"Jamal Hassan, also known as Mihyar al-Basri." Harry handed her the photograph from the exercise. "Do you want to tell me how he got included in this morning's exercise? And don't tell me you didn't know anything about it."

"I'm sorry, I still don't know what you're talking about."

Harry relayed the information that Ruth had uncovered. Juliet went white as a ghost. The last time Harry had seen her like this was immediately following her accident.

"Shit."

"Juliet, when were you given the folders for this retreat?"

"They arrived by courier from London this morning. I was given strict instruction that the folders were not to be opened until this morning's session."

"Who were the instructions from?"

"Special Branch. Jesus."

"I really don't think he can help us at the moment." At that moment, both his and Juliet's pagers went off. Harry looked at his. Ruth's mobile number came up. He opened up his mobile and rang her. He didn't get a chance to say anything. Ruth simply and quickly gave him instruction.

"Harry, meeting room, now. Red Flash."

Harry relayed the information and he and Juliet were headed to the room promptly. Once all the MI-5 officers and Juliet had arrived at the room, Ruth opened up her laptop.

"Ruth?"

"Not good. We've got two definite terrorist plots aimed at London within the next forty-eight hours. Given the information we've managed to gather, Adam's uncovered Hassan's location. He's sent Malcolm and a couple of techs over to set up surveillance in and around the community centre where Hassan's set up, as well as his flat. We don't know the how and when yet where the attacks will occur. Vague details just yet." A look from Harry. "I'm working on it, Harry. Information is still coming in."

"Juliet, get the Special Branch Anti-Terrorist representative in here now. I need to know when they got this information and why weren't we informed of this before now. And why we were played as stooges to find out information that they couldn't be arsed to compile on their own. This is their cock-up. We get this figured out and soonish." Harry started to pace back and forth the room.

"Harry?" Ruth gently stopped him after several turns and placed a hand on his arm. A questioning glance regarding the next part of the plan and answering nod.

"We need to get back to London. Now." Harry was determined. He turned to Ros, as he didn't want to distract Ruth from her coordinating information coming in. "Ros, can you make arrangements for us to return to London asap?"

"Done," Ros clipped in return and quickly left the room, with her mobile in hand.

As he left, Paul Thomson, the Special Branch representative entered the room. If looks could kill, Thomson would be at the bottom of the Thames with concrete boots. He bore the full brunt of Harry's rapid fire questions regarding Hassan, when and where Special Branch knew of his entry into the UK, why Hassan was included on the exercise, and the current threat of terrorist attacks.

"Harry, you know as well as I do, that there are at least a dozen terrorist claims that come across our desks on a weekly basis. Some of them are more well developed than others. Hassan's information came across our desks on Monday morning. We pulled his photo and data imagery from Airport Security. As you know from the exercise this morning, Hassan was only one of several that we had our eye on."

"So Special Branch decided to use this farce of a weekend to do their dirty work for them."

"Hardly, we need all the services to work together to combine our knowledge to combat terrorism. MI5, MI6, Special Branch, and GCHQ."

"That's a load of political bullshit, Paul. If we'd been informed of what was going on from the beginning we wouldn't be in the mess we're in now."

The meeting room door opened and Ros entered, headed straight for Harry. She quickly whispered in his ear the travel arrangements that had been sorted. Harry quirked his eyebrow when she'd mentioned a helicopter, but appreciated her initiative.

"The helicopter will be here in forty-five minutes. There's room for four people on the flight. You and Ruth take two of the seats. You can work out who else goes. Zaf and I will take the motor pool car back."

"Ruth, any more news from the Grid."

"Malcolm's got the surveillance all set up. Hassan's arrived back at the Community centre but so far it's been quiet."

"Okay, time to move." Despite his initial misgivings, Harry agreed to have Thomson aboard as well as the senior representative from MI6. The rest, including Juliet, would return in the same manner they'd arrived. Harry left Juliet with the task of cancelling the hotel reservations for that night. It would be expensive as they'd booked a block of rooms and cancelling on short notice. But frankly Harry could care less about the bureaucratic aspect of conference dealings. He had more important things to focus on.

With great efficiency, the MI-5 officers had returned to their respective rooms, packed up their hold-alls and met down at the reception desk. They'd returned their key cards and called for a taxi which would take Ruth and Harry to the helicopter landing pad at the hospital. Harry gave Ros the keys for the motor pool car and gave her instructions for the location of the car at the nearby car park. When the taxi pulled up, Ruth and Harry quickly departed, along with the other two representatives.

Ruth leaned into Harry and quietly remarked, "I kind of wished I'd taken my camera. Now that I've seen how this place as it's changed, it's quite beautiful in its austerity."

"There'll be plenty of time for that later, Ruth." The smile on his face belied the tone. So much work to be done in the next forty-eight hours depended on the security services capturing Hassan and his cohorts and stopping them from blowing up as yet unknown areas of London. He wanted to be able

to guarantee her some measure of comfort, but couldn't afford to do much at the moment. For the rest of the duration to the hospital, he made do with discretely holding her hand.

When the time came, they loaded their hold-alls into the secured baggage compartment of the helicopter and climbed in. The engine was loud and they could barely hear themselves think. Once they were on board, buckled in and headphones put on, they set upon running through part of the next part of the plan. Once a decision had been made, Ruth quickly texted Ros's mobile with the details before they took off. The day was clear and looking out the window, Ruth could see the city that she'd become reacquainted with (albeit briefly).

Harry nudged her to get her attention. She smiled at him in return. He mouthed, "We'll return here soon." He nodded his head towards the others. "Without the entourage." Ruth grinned at him broadly. And for just a few brief moments, allowed herself to dream of the possibilities that lay beyond terrorists and bombs, national emergencies, conspiracies and the like.

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**Saturday, 11 November 2006, 1830hrs  
Thames House, Meeting Room, London**

The tension in the air of the room was palpable. There was nothing so urgent as an imminent threat to national security to focus the anti-terrorism division of MI5. Folders were piled up on the table in front of each of them. They'd been working on collecting as much information as they could since their return from Oxford. Harry as usual took his place at the fore of the table, whilst down the sides were Ruth, Ros, Zaf on the left and Adam, Jo and Juliet down the other, and Malcolm at the other end, opposite Harry.

"All right, I need information. Adam."

"We've got audio feeds coming in from the community centre. From what we've gathered so far is that there is a two-pronged simultaneous attack scheduled for tomorrow afternoon at 1500hrs. The first of the sites targeted is Westminster. As of yet, there has been no mention of suicide bombers, so we need to assume that the bombs will be attempted to be placed shortly before the attack. We've had Bomb Squad all over the Parliament building so far and no explosives devices have turned up. We have ordered increased surveillance around the parliament, but so far it's quiet. CCTV coverage showing nothing out of the ordinary at present. We have more teams to go in tomorrow. The second prong of the attack is a hospital, but we're still awaiting confirmation on which one.

"Has there been any mention of a motive for the attacks?" Juliet asked.

"Do you think this is some kind of retaliation or point to be made following the DG's speech yesterday?" Jo questioned.

"Nothing specific has been mentioned aside from the usual rhetoric of the continued UK presence in the middle east, interfering in policies of Iraq," Ruth started. "GCHQ has been receiving Intel from this cell for a while now, but there'd been no movement until Hassan arrived in the UK. Since then there's been covert communications between this cell and a source in Northern Iraq. They've got analysts reviewing the transcripts as we speak. As soon as they have confirmed translation, I will have it."

"Malcolm, I want you and Ruth all over this, in addition to the feeds coming in from the community centre. Ruth, I want you to also keep me apprised of our cousins over at GCHQ. Adam, I want you

to liaise with our friends at Special Branch. See what they're not telling us. Zaf and Jo, work with Adam and Ros for the time being then I want you to get home and get some sleep for a few hours. We'll need you on deck early, once we have some more concrete information."

"If I might ask, why would they plan the bombings for a Sunday? It doesn't make any sense. Parliament's not even in session until Wednesday. If they're looking for maximum casualty, you'd think they'd plan it for a day when there'd be more people present. In addition, there are no tours of Parliament on the weekend. Even if there were, visitors are heavily monitored and searched by security," Ros remarked.

"Unless it's an anniversary attack of some sort." Zaf responded. A look from Harry and Zaf continued, "Yeah, I'll get right on that."

"And why a hospital?"

"Hassan's previous bombing attack a month ago in Northern Iraq was a civilian hospital. We have to assume that he's got reason, whatever that might be. We need to find out which hospital, and sharpish," Harry spoke with conviction.

The team members slowly piled out of the meeting room and retreated to their workstations to gather more information. Juliet spent a few more minutes talking with Harry, then she, too, left the Grid for her own office.

As there was going to be an indefinite period of time left in the office doing work, Adam checked in with Jenny to make sure Wes was okay, and then placed orders of soups & sandwiches and caffeine for all of them. The overall atmosphere of the Grid remained tense as it usually did previous to a probable terrorist threat.

A little past 2000hrs, Ruth and Malcolm emerged from Malcolm's technical support section with printouts and an audio recording. While Malcolm stayed out on the Grid, Ruth quickly headed for Harry's office. She poked her head in this office.

"We've got it!" Ruth noted with some excitement.

"You've got what, Ruth?"

"Harry, look at this," she pointed to a specific section of the printout. "The hospital target in question is Charing Cross on Fulham Palace Road. No word on why that hospital but we have been able to piece together some Intel that his brother, who had been severely injured in an air raid, had been treated at that hospital in Northern Iraq. The brother had subsequently died, and Hassan blamed the doctors for not working hard enough to save him. The doctors, some of whom were British, were shot in the head and chest, before Hassan had the hospital bombed. Over six hundred people lost their lives in that attack." Ruth appeared to have run out of steam. During which time Harry called for Adam to come to his office.

"Ruth, any information on type of explosives used in the Northern Iraq bombing?"

"IED's. Specifically pipe bombs. Charges placed in specific areas in the base of the building. There's possible links to the anti-British protests earlier in October down in Basra. But so far Hassan hasn't been connected with those. The timetable would be tight - given his flight into Syria following the northern bombing, but possible. The passport that he entered the UK with, under the name Mihyar al-Basri, puts Basra as his place of birth."

"Adam, what were you able to get out of Special Branch?"

"Nothing useful so far as the hospital attack. However, they were able to nail down some information with regards to the attack at Westminster. The plods have been going over every inch of the place with a fine tooth comb. Nothing yet, but security measures have been tightened. A joint Special Branch / Security Service raid has been planned on the community centre tonight. Ros and I will be in charge of that."

"Good. Get back onto Special Branch. The hospital attack is aimed at Charing Cross. Get them to check out the building for explosive devices, and keep monitor. Hopefully we can get these bastards long before the attack will occur. The hospital will need to be notified for contingency measures."

"Done." Adam said quickly before heading back to his workstation.

"Thank you, Ruth." While it was a dismissal, Harry had smiled. A crinkling around his eyes belied the seriousness of the matter at hand. Now it was a waiting game as things were coming together. And with any luck there'd be no casualties. When Harry looked up again through the glass windows of his office out onto the Grid, his eyes briefly met Ruth's. A mutual smile before they returned to their duties.

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**Saturday, 11th November 2006, 2300hrs**  
**Islamic Community Centre, Central London**

On one side of the community centre was an abandoned building and a vacant lot, on the other side a small park. On the far side of the park was a shaded alley, where Ros and Adam were set up in a dark surveillance van. They'd been monitoring communications from the centre for the past hour and a half. It had been mostly quiet, its occupants playing cards, and there were sounds of music playing in the room. There hadn't been any conversation regarding the attacks thus far. A crackling on the mobile communications unit sounded.

"Alpha 2 to Alpha 1. We have movement. Two men carrying duffel bags entering the community centre," the Special Branch officer called. The plods had fixed themselves up in unmarked vehicles.

"Either of them look like Hassan?" Ros asked

"Unconfirmed. Unable to see their faces clearly. Do we move?"

"Hang on a minute. Let's wait until they get inside," Adam responded.

A few moments later, Ros could hear over the surveillance bugs that they'd entered the centre meeting room. Words in Arabic flew fast and furious, then silence.

"Fuck!" Ros shouted. To Adam, she quickly noted, "Tell them to get in there, NOW! Hassan's in there. They're wiring up the community centre with explosives."

Adam immediately pulled on his ear-piece that would link him to Ros and the Special Branch team. Relaying the information to the Special Branch, he took off out the back of the surveillance van. In the meantime, Ros contacted Harry back at the Grid to let them know of the current situation. There wasn't much that Harry could do at the scene, but he could get the Explosive Ordnance Personnel team on site as soon as possible.

All was quiet on the communications line for a few minutes as the team got in place. Then there was nothing. *What's taking them so long? It's too quiet.* Ros was anxious. Then from inside the van, Ros could hear gunfire, and then a deafening explosion. The van rocked slightly. The reverberation from explosion had taken out one of the rear window panels. Once she'd gathered her senses, she barely made sure she was okay. A few scratches from glass were all she noted. She put on a communications device over her ear and packed her gun to her side then she pulled open the back of the van. Quickly shutting it, she took off to see what was going on.

The front of the community centre had a large gaping hole in it, where fire whipped through. Concrete, glass and stone debris scattered over the ground and a heavy dust hung in the air as she neared the building she could see bodies lain in and around the debris.

"Adam!" Ros called out, getting closer. Nothing but an eerie silence. She looked around frantically. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye she spotted movement. A black-and-grey covered body moved from beneath some rubble. She identified him as one of the Special Branch officers, then returned her sites to trying to find her fellow security officer.

"Adam!" Still nothing. Her conscious SB partner started checking for his fellow officers. They began picking through the rubble. A body. A shock of short blond hair standing out against the soot and ash covering most of the head. Ros dropped to her knees and quickly checked the body out, identifying it as Adam's. A quick check of his pulse revealed he was still alive. Unconscious, but alive. Within a few more minutes, the sounds of sirens could be heard. Ros leaned back on her legs and dropped her head, whispering a quiet prayer of thanks that Adam was alive. A few more minutes and the emergency service vehicles pulled up as close as they could. Backboards came out and supplies as they went to retrieve the conscious survivors.

Ros pointed Adam out to them. "He's alive. Barely. He hasn't regained consciousness."

Quickly two of the emergency service personnel checked out Adam, while another attended to Ros.

"Come with me, miss," the young attendant tried guiding her to the back of the ambulance.

"Never mind me, just make sure he's okay."

"Miss..." she tried again.

"Myers. Just do your job," Ros said, irritated.

"I'm trying to," the attendant stated, just as frustrated. "You've got a large gash on the back of your shoulder. Let me take a look at it."

"What?" Ros was puzzled. She hadn't even noticed that she was injured. She stopped to think. Then she realized that when the glass panel in the van broke, a shard must have dug into her shoulder. She sighed, then allowed herself to be led to the ambulance. While she sat in the open ambulance she could see more and more emergency service personnel sort through the debris and rubble for other bodies, alive or dead. She noticed the ambulance that they'd piled Adam's injured body into take off, sirens blaring.

"Where are they taking him?"

"St. Thomas's Hospital. Sit still." The attendant took her scissors and cut away the material from around the wound. The steady pour of blood had slowed to a sludge as it had begun to congeal. "I

need you to lie face down on the gurney there." She then worked on cleaning around the site. A moderate piece of glass was still embedded into Ros's shoulder. She dressed the wound until they got to the hospital. The other attendant closed up the back of the ambulance and started to move the vehicle off to the hospital.

"Where are we going?"

"St. Thomas's. Hospital. You need to have that removed."

"But I..." Ros started.

"Need to stay still." The attendant looked down at Ros, "Are you always this stubborn?"

Ros was frustrated. She needed to know what was happening. Furthermore, she needed to inform Harry.

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**Sunday, 12th November 2006, 0145hrs  
St. Thomas's Hospital, Central London**

Harry and Ruth stood at the intake desk of the hospital's Accident & Emergency Unit. When the communications clerk returned to the desk, Harry asked to find out information on his officers.

"And you are?"

"Next of Kin. Harry Pearce."

"Mr. Pearce, the doctor will be out to see you as soon as he can. Mr. Carter is still unconscious, and they're still working on him. Further than that, the doctors will fill you in."

"And Ms Myers?" Harry asked.

"I'm fine, Harry." Ros said emerging from behind the enclosed A&E department. She was wearing a nursing scrub shirt as they'd had to destroy the shirt she had on in order to get at her injury. Ros shivered. "Just a small cut." She downplayed her own condition, and briefly winced as she pulled on a sweater that Ruth gave her. "How's Adam?"

"We're still waiting."

"How? When did you get here?" Ros directed them to a side room so they could talk freely.

"Ken Moffatt, the Special Branch officer that was on scene, called in his report to his department. They called me. We just got here."

"It just happened so fast. Moffatt called the van telling us there was movement, two men entering the community centre. It went quiet. Next thing I heard was gun shots and then the explosion. What happened?"

"Moffatt said that he and his team went in. Hassan and two others were putting the explosive devices together. When they tried to apprehend them, weapons fire was exchanged between Special Branch and Hassan's companions. One of the ammunitions containers was hit. Set off a chain

reaction explosion, which blew out the building. From what Moffatt gathered, three of Hassan's men were injured with gunfire as well as one of his own officers. That was before the explosion. Only two of Moffatt's officers survived the explosion, in addition to Adam. All the bodies have been accounted for. Neither Hassan nor his men survived."

"Is there any indication that tomorrow's planned attack is completely cleared?" The three of them moved over to the chair and couch.

"Unknown yet," Ruth spoke up. "Zaf and Jo are still back at the office, checking additional surveillance Intel.

"Has anyone called Jenny yet to let Wes know?" Ros asked. She and Adam may have had their differences on work issues, but she respected and admired his relationship with his son.

"I'll do that in the morning. No sense worrying her and scaring him. We'll wait until we have more information on his condition." Despite Harry's outwardly calm demeanour, he was worried for Adam. Two serious injuries in the past year. Especially when he had a young son to look after. When Adam's wife, Fiona, had died a couple years ago, Adam had, with Harry's agreement placed Harry as his next of kin and guardian for Wes should anything happen to him.

They'd briefly talked of other things before weariness overtook them all. Ros curled up in the plush chair, while Ruth fell asleep sitting up, her head resting on Harry's chest. He'd curled his arm around her back and placed a gentle kiss on her head before tilting his head back against the rear of the couch and closing his eyes.

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**Sunday, 12th November 2006, 0230hrs  
St. Thomas's Hospital, Central London**

"Excuse me, Mr. Pearce?" The young nursing sister stood in front of a sleeping Harry Pearce.

Harry quickly blinked himself into wakefulness. "Yes?"

"Mr. Carter's surgeon will see you now."

"Thank you." Harry looked down gently at Ruth who had maintained her position snuggled into his shoulder. Quietly he leaned down and whispered into her ear. "Ruth, I have to go meet with Adam's doctor."

"Hmm?" Ruth barely stirred.

"Ruth, I need to go meet Adam's doctor." Gently, he dislodged himself from the couch and settled her lying on the couch, her head resting on the cushioned low arm-rest. He took his coat off and wrapped it over her shoulders, and in doing so placed a quick kiss on her forehead.

The nursing sister looked back at Ruth. "Is your wife all right?"

Harry paused. "She's just tired." He hadn't much thought to correct her mis-assumption, "It's been a long day." He followed her down a series of corridors, until they arrived at a consultant's office. "Thank you." Harry knocked on the door.

"Come in," called out the surgeon from inside. When Harry came in the doctor stood and introduced himself. "I'm Dr. Macey, Mr. Carter's surgeon."

Harry proceeded through the door. "Thank you for seeing me. I'm Harry Pearce, Adam Carter's next of kin. How is he?"

"He's got a rather severe concussion, a couple of cracked ribs and some internal bleeding. The latter of which we've been able to relieve for the most part with drainage tubes. His ribs have been wrapped to limit movement. The primary worry at the moment is the concussion. We're keeping close watch on him for the next thirty-six hours. I noticed some relatively recent scar tissue on his chest."

"He was shot in the line of duty last year."

"Pretty dangerous profession you have there," Dr. Macey replied.

"Security of the nation can be that, indeed. What is Mr. Carter's prognosis?"

"At the moment, that depends on his concussion. He'll be admitted to one of the medical wards this morning."

"Thank you. I'd like to check on him before I return home."

"Yes, but briefly. I'll have one of the nurses show you to his room." Dr. Macey called the Nurse Administrator to have someone take Harry to Adam's emergency ward.

Harry briefly checked in on Adam just to assure himself of the younger man's condition. The cardiac monitor's leads were attached to his chest; the monitor itself displaying a regular rhythm. He looked pale, and as such the bruising marks that covered portions of his torso stood out in marked comparison. There was a sizeable bandage on the left side of his head, presumably where mortar and stone had impacted causing his unconscious state. Harry felt for the younger man. He'd been through a lot in the past couple years. In general, the security services took its toll on its officers, but when families were involved, it made it much more painful for all concerned. While Harry hated to lose a well-trained senior operative, however, he was certain if Adam remained in the active service Wes would certainly be orphaned. But that conversation would have to wait until another day. Quietly, Harry removed himself from the room to return to the sitting room where Ros and Ruth were resting.

Ros felt a heavy hand on her arm and she jerked awake. Taking a deep sigh on seeing that it was Harry who'd woke her then took a deep breath. He then moved over to the couch where Ruth was sleeping. Gently, he lifted her head and shoulders and moved to sit down.

"Ruth," Harry leaned over to her. " We have to leave shortly. You need to wake up."

Ruth murmured but began to stir. "Harry?"

"Yes, I'm here. So is Ros. We're at the hospital."

"How's Adam?" she asked slightly slurred, as she was still a big groggy.

"Alive. He's got quite a severe concussion that's left him unconscious." Harry relayed the rest of the information that the surgeon had told him.

"He's a lucky sod," Ros replied.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news but we do need to get back to Thames House to see if all threats for today's planned bombings have been neutralized."

"What about Adam?"

"There's nothing we can do here. Adam's unconscious and the surgeon has said the hospital will notify me of any changes." The three of them bundled themselves up in their coats and left the hospital for the familiar surroundings of the Grid.

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**Sunday, 12th November 2006, 0340hrs  
Thames House, London**

The muted blue and grey tones of the Grid's night time lighting cast interesting shadows over everything. The occasional light from computer monitors and desk lamps brightened the area somewhat. The main area of the Grid itself was quiet, as Jo, Zaf and Malcolm had gathered in the meeting room to review some of the transcripts sent over from GCHQ. They were discussing the latest intelligence information when the door to the meeting room was pulled open.

"What's the news?" Harry asked without much aplomb. Ruth and Ros piled in behind them and stood behind their usual seats.

"DSI Michael Cuilhain, Moffatt's supervisor at Special Branch, called over about half an hour ago. The Fire Brigade and the SOCOs have sorted through the wreckage. They're going to send you over the initial report in the morning. The Forensics team is still autopsying the bodies recovered from the scene. Their report will be included in the packet being sent over."

"Malcolm, has there been anything from GCHQ to indicate whether Hassan had any back-up for the attacks today if something went wrong?"

"Nothing so far. We've been monitoring their transcripts from the past few days and all the data thus far just indicates Hassan and four other of his team were all killed tonight. There's been no further communication made in regards to today's planned attack."

"That sounds good. If Cuilhain does call back, I still want a security detail around Westminster and Charing Cross Hospital as a precaution."

"Not a problem. I'll let them know," Zaf responded.

"How's Adam?" Jo asked once the initial business was taken care of.

Harry repeated what the doctor had told him. There was quiet among the team members as they took in the news. The seriousness of their profession in protecting the nation created a bond between them. It was always difficult when team members were injured, even more so when they died. The amount of time that they worked together created an extended family.

"Look, it's late. We need to be back on board for nine o'clock. Go upstairs to the residential rooms and grab a few hours sleep. There's not much more needs to be done at the moment. We're just going to be running in circles."

Resigned nods came from all. Zaf returned to his desk and placed a call to Cuilhain's office with Harry's instructions, then gathered a few things and headed off the Grid. Most of the others had followed suit, only too happy to be able to grab some sleep. They were exhausted.

Some time later, the Grid was in near darkness. A low lit lamp and a computer monitor illuminated Ruth's face. A concentrated expression crossed her face, as if she was trying too hard to focus.

"I thought I told you to go lie down for some sleep, Ruth."

"I just had to..."

"Just had to nothing," Harry responded with a smile.

"I could ask you the same thing. Why didn't you go get some sleep," Ruth countered.

"I can't. Too much to do, too much to think about."

"Do you want me to put on a pot of tea?" she asked.

"That sounds lovely. Though I will retrieve the mugs this time," he said amusedly, remembering the last time Ruth attempted to get the mugs off the upper shelf.

"Fine." Ruth disappeared into the little kitchenette and put the kettle on. As they sat at the small table they spoke of inane things, mostly to keep themselves awake despite their protestations of not being tired. Both of them yawning. After fixing themselves some sweet tea, they'd retreated to Harry's office and sat on the couch. It wasn't long before the conversation died off and the sweet tea abandoned that they'd fallen asleep, leaning against each other.

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**Sunday, 12th November 2006, 0830hrs  
Thames House**

The sound of Harry's phone ringing loudly gave Harry a rather rude awakening. He was loathe to get up and answer it as he was rather comfortable where he was. At some point during the past few hours he and Ruth had shifted positions. Or rather he'd remained sitting and she had lain across the couch and used Harry's lap as a pillow, her face towards Harry's desk. His own hand had rested partially on her shoulder and her back. She looked so calm. It was only when the blasted phone rang for the second time did Harry dislodge himself. Ruth woke to Harry exclaiming over the phone.

"Damn it, Juliet, of course I'm sounding tired. I've had all of two hours sleep in the past thirty six..." Harry updated her on the situation the previous night. "Look I don't care if the news reporters are beating down my doors, all they'll get is the official line from the security services. No, there has been no indication that Hassan had any other operatives in on this little plan of his... Yes, security forces are set up around Westminster and Charing Cross Hospital as a precaution. Good bye, Juliet."

"What did the wicked witch want now?" Ruth asked as she had righted herself and stood near Harry.

"Oh, the usual."

"I should get going. Get cleaned up before calling the rest of the team down." Ruth stiffly got herself to a standing position. She ran her fingers through her hair. "Oh, God. I hesitate to think what I look like at the moment. I feel like I've been run over by a lorry."

"I happen to think you're rather beautiful."

"You need your eyes checked, Harry." Ruth was prevented from saying anything else at the moment when the phone rang again.

"Yes, this is Harry Pearce...How is he this morning?...That's wonderful news. Thank you, Doctor Macey. How soon might you expect to release him? Yes, that will be looked after. Thank you, again."

"Harry?"

"Adam's awake. Tests done so far indicate no lasting effects as a result of the concussion. He'll be in hospital a few more days until his ribs heal some more and to monitor him for any further internal bleeding. Otherwise, things look good."

"That's fantastic news, Harry."

"Yes, it is. I need to call Jenny to let her know what's going on. I'm going to go over to see Wes this afternoon. Care to join me?"

"That sounds good. Now, back to the here and now. I've got to go get cleaned up, then I'll call up to the rooms and get the other team members back to the Grid."

"Ruth?"

"Yes, Harry?" Ruth stopped at the doorway and turned back.

"Thank you."

"Thank you?"

"For being here."

"Anytime. I've got to get going. See you soon." Ruth headed off to her desk and grabbed a few things before heading towards the staff locker room.

Forty-five minutes later, Harry greeted his team as they piled into the meeting room. Despite having little sleep, they were all alert and ready to discuss any new information that had come in. Harry had received the Forensics Report and Special Branch Report on the explosion at the community centre and had a brief chance to review it before relaying the news to his staff. He'd also passed on the good news with regards to Adam's condition.

The overall atmosphere on the Grid for the rest of the day had improved immeasurably despite the continued heightened watch for terrorist activity. Special Branch officers had been covering both Westminster and Charing Cross hospital all day and no suspicious movement observed. For all intents and purposes the present terror plot had been foiled, though with some casualties. The MI5 team plodded onwards with their usual routine of intelligence gathering on suspected terror plots, piling through yet more Special Branch and CIA reports. Harry looked out the glass windows of his

office at the usual hustle and bustle of the Grid and smiled. Normalcy or whatever passed for normalcy had returned.

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## **Epilogue**

**Saturday, 9th December 2006**

**Oxford**

The afternoon held a slight chill in the air as Ruth and Harry walked along High Street and down Oriel Street towards Ruth's alma mater, Corpus Christie College. They'd spent much of the day playing as tourists, venturing through a few shops and cafés, taking a walk amongst the various colleges that made up Oxford University.

They'd finally managed to take some time away from the daily grind in London. Harry had left Ros and Adam in charge of Section D, with strict instruction that Juliet was to get nowhere near Harry's office. Adam had healed well from his recent injuries and was slowly starting back into the routine of active duty. While there was plenty of work to do, the team worked smoothly, and Harry had felt it time to take a break while it was relatively quiet.

Harry had kept his promise to Ruth to take her back to Oxford once there were no pressing attacks to counter. He was enjoying taking the time to, as he put it, properly court her. He missed doing that with his ex-wife. Harry looked down briefly and gently laced his fingers through Ruth's. He glanced up to see her smile. After they'd arrived at the college, Harry found a park bench to sit on. He guided Ruth to sit down next to him.

After a few moments of quiet, Ruth prodded Harry. "Harry, what are you thinking?"

"That I don't want this to end."

Ruth thought Harry seemed the most unsure of anything that she'd ever seen. It threw her a little off balance. She wasn't used to seeing him this unsettled. "Why should it?"

"Given the track record of relationships of the security services members, including my own history, it's less than stellar. I don't want to mess this up."

"Harry, we're two grown adults. We've had good and bad past experiences. That's bound to happen. What we do with this relationship is up to both of us."

"Very true." Harry quickly smiled. Tilting his head, he asked her, "Forgive me for being an old fool?"

"Harry, you're hardly old. And yes, you're forgiven."

"Now, I tried to tell you something the last time we were in Oxford, but I was interrupted." Harry smiled, and continued, "I almost lost you once. I do not intend to let that happen again. I love you, Ruth. I don't take such things lightly."

"What are you saying, Harry?"

"This might sound rather silly, but I would like to court you."

"Court me?" Ruth asked, with a quirked smile. After a moment, she nodded. "That actually sounds rather nice. Who would have thought Harry Pearce was a romantic soul?"

A wind picked up through the buildings and the heavy grey clouds threatened rain. Making notice of the changing weather, Harry and Ruth stood up to make their way back to Malmaison Oxford where they were staying. A quiet meal and a night in were looking very good at the moment to both of them. Ruth stopped rather suddenly. Their linked hands meant that Harry soon stopped as well.

"I love you, too, Harry." She leaned up to capture his face in her gloved hands and laid a gentle kiss to his lips.