



**Love**  
**Windfarm people**  
**Rats (millions of rats)**

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## Chapter 1 - Our windfarm is as good as built already

**R**at bait, half price. Mrs Merce Harcourt put down her marker pen, and stuck the rough cardboard sign in the newly-dusted display of yet another slow-seller. Then she did the same for two more slow-sellers - cheap toothpastes available in grey and in yellow.

As a customer came in - she was widow Barbara Fletcher - Merce punched a button and turned to a life-sized cardboard display of a wealthy Hollywood character. His image was promoting some food. Maybe breakfast cereal, maybe cabbage-flavoured diet pills, maybe that notorious bake that stained your cutlery. *La Paloma* filled the shop, and Merce sang along, sharing a tango with her cardboard point-of-sale dance partner.

Softly, softly, she began to murmur, *'When I left Havana, help me God...'*

An online chandlery had sent her some stainless-steel washers a week before, and sewn into her skirt hem they produced the expected girl swirl.

'No tango under the smoke detectors, please. You're beginning to smoulder,' observed Barbara (call me Babs). The visitor joined in, but sang the Spanish lyrics.

'I think Kennet got frightened on our honeymoon. The Foreign Office has sent him far away. Again.'

'Never mind, Merce.' She nodded to the shop girl's cardboard partner. 'At least you've found a man who won't moan about your cooking, nor your hours out on the dragon's teeth.'

Babs ran her eye over the morning's newspapers and magazines. She shot a sideways look at the man slowly studying a rack of postcards. 'Performing Rights Society come to prosecute you?' she asked the shop girl.

'Nah, this one's brought his son. PRS work alone.'

The boy, far away by the entrance, was slowly browsing mid-November's gaudy Christmas choc assortments.

Babs turned to the shop assistant, pointing with a gesture of her head to the man. 'If you weren't married, would you?'

'Dunno. As he's got a lad, he must be in working order. That wedding ring - thick and broad. That's me really. I'm thick, I'm a broad.'

The older woman, twice Merce's age, continued the barmy banter, 'He's got an ashtray wife. I saw her outside. He'd be tempted by someone clean-living. And there's a car window sticker saying *Vote for Hospices*. Maybe he's feeling mortal and wants something extra in his final days.'

The man kept his ears closed to this goon show.

Babs changed the subject, 'I saw a Dutch ketch in the estuary.'

'Yes, they took the early from Dar, wanted to hit M&S in Ipswich. Eyesight Ian and his guide dog took them to the station in his taxi. They'll be safe; I sold him some duct tape for his passenger door latches.'

‘There’s a Polish couple who come twice a year, haven’t seen them yet. Those two Norwegian yachts last week, lucky to get away before that Force Eight in Fladen and both Utsiras. Each yacht had folding trollies.’

‘Almost cleaned me out of the good stuff. Wouldn’t look at the bargain spirits.’

Babs Fletcher had walked her mixed-breed dog up the main street of Allenhut, for her morning paper and her week’s magazines. The other side of 50, she had a self-confident pose. In colonial days, her chin up, shoulders back pose – not quite arrogant but almost – would have worked in north America or Delhi or Shanghai’s Bund. But not anymore. Her soft brown hair had curls that were almost transparent – a good shake and smile style for late autumn’s winds coming off the North Sea. It was a style that *Hairdressers’ Journal* had named the Marconi: a medium wave. She wore slacks and sensible shoes, topped with a nylon anorak that looked cheap as soon as the price swing-ticket had been removed.

She fancied herself as the matriarch of Allenhut. A brief look, and she had noted that the parking bay was still clean of cigarette ends. That had been one of her successes: motorists would pull in to use their mobile phones. By positioning the litter bin in front of them, the litter problem had been solved. She had standards. Would even use a marmalade spoon when breakfasting alone.

Walking to the shop, she heard the easterly bringing in the faint hiss of small waves on the Suffolk shingle. She stepped around the Southwold truck delivering casks to the Win. The pub sign said Sole Bay Window. It showed an open bay-window by which a woman was filleting a fish. The sign gave a whispered creak in the morning’s wind. In high season, the brewery would deliver twice or even thrice a week or more, to meet day-tripper demand.

The pub – and the older, low-doorway houses nestled around it – had rubble walls that boasted the littoral vernacular of pebbles from the beach. Some of Allenhut’s gates and fences showed evidence of ship’s timbers that must have been blown ashore. One house had a trio of glass net floats mounted above the door as a transom light. The newer houses had more plasterwork, but because of the raw, coastal winds, the inland custom of pargetting had never been adopted in Allenhut. Here the houses gave some shelter from the wind, allowing trees to line the village street. But they bent away from the soft noise of the surf, bent like a retirement home on the march.

Approaching the shop, Battersea had tugged at his lead, seeing the water bowl. That new water bowl, Barbara appreciated, was the work of Merce. In the dry summer weather, a bit of a crisp carton had been stuck behind the adjoining drainpipe with the message *Where beagles dare*. Since moving into Allenhut two months ago, Merce had immersed herself in village life. Once the morning rush in the shop was over, she would go down to the concrete dragon’s teeth in the dunes for her university research work.

As Mrs Fletcher approached the village shop, she had passed an unexpected day tripper’s car. Yes, photographers would arrive out of season, but not day-trippers. The car had a London registration plate, and a window sticker. The newspaper poster outside the shop cried *Actress in Cromer to catch crabs*. While Babs secured Battersea, a fortyish man from the car entered the shop with a boy of about 10. The man had paused to explain the brass line and plaque on the flint wall. The casting stated *Surge tide and Spring High Water level, Saturday 31st January 1953*. In a smaller font was the maker’s mark *Brundish smithy*.

The man sported a quality corduroy jacket that was right for the drive up from London. There was a glimpse of a penny watch that messaged *I don’t care what people think*. He spoke softly, with

confidence, to the boy. A woman, probably his wife, was leaning in through a car window, doing something with the half-full ashtray. She held a copy of *Recruitment Matters* magazine, with the headline *Gig Guinea Pigs*. Both adults had simple wedding rings. The woman's engagement ring looked as though it was worth as much as the car. It was a brilliant white, and not one of those Bessie Wallis Warfield yellows.

Babs Fletcher turned sideways so that her shoulder helped to push open the wind-resistant door to the village shop. The boy was near the entrance, heading for the seasonal come-ons.

Merce had certainly improved things in her first few weeks. In her first fortnight, the dog park had been moved round the corner, shaded from the summer sunlight, and the water bowl was now cleaned and refilled throughout the day. That had got rid of the dog smell inside. Her habit – wind-permitting – of wedging open the door first thing, instead of using a chemical air freshener, had done wonders for sales of fresh produce opposite the Post Office counter in the shop. The newcomer had got the stock under control. Her high-tech system was to run a finger over the displays. Anything dusty was dumped on the penny gondola. Outdated road maps and previous years' calendars had also befriended the Aberdeen-priced gondola. In had come fresh ideas: histories of Sole Bay, nature guides to the Allenhut marshes and an amateur geologist's guide to the famous local granite slipper formation. And she had got rid of that tough artisan bread that was wreaking havoc on people's teeth. The villagers' reaction was immediate: stronger sales, more loitering in the shop and outside it, to chat to friends.

Merce had been visited by her husband once or twice a week since she arrived. Their pairing had scared off any of the single men in the village, who would have to wait for the next season's day-trippers. Love was in the air when the Harcourts were seen together: the usual nuzzling and laughter, and keyrings with each other's photos – passport pix, for some reason, not wedding photos.

Up towards the serving counter, the out of season visitor was slowly browsing a rack of picture postcards of the village, topped by a giant sign saying *Two for £1*. The man lifted, studied, and turned over each design. He moved his lips silently, as he read the captions like a reality TV simpleton. Merce turned to him and called out, 'Those postcards are nothing to write home about. They're two for a quid, but a pound each if you're from London.' The man turned his face up to the can't-miss-it *Two for £1* sign and grunted, but otherwise ignored her. His son was out of earshot.

Merce kept going. 'If you're Welsh, new bylaw. You can't take a leek in the sea. Not after that visit by the Swffryd and Ynysddu Incontinence Choir.'

One of the village gossips had mentioned how the new shop girl worked: seemingly effortlessly flowing her hands as she scanned the purchases, a floating way of walking, her head up as she kept eye contact with the customers or gave the eye to intending shoplifters. Yes, she confirmed that at school she had had regular Enrico Cecchetti ballet training.

Barbara Fletcher had got to know Merce soon after the newcomer's arrival. Merce had been in the Win, and asked the waitress: 'I'm fed up with cooking for myself. Do you have any fajitas, quesadillas?' It was the right thing to catch Babs' attention. The pair started chatting Mexican snacks. Then Merce had shown the seasonal summer cook at the Bay Window how to deliver crisp – not soggy – quesadillas. Her crib sheet – oil not butter, medium heat not high, fresh not warehoused – was drawing-pinned up in the kitchen. (Until the drawing pin turned up in a doctor's ploughman's.)

'Babs, I can make Allenhut one promise. As long as I'm behind the counter, the shop will never again celebrate Cinco de Mayo with a twofer on mayonnaise.'

It was a chance for Merce to open up about her husband Kennet and his recipe library. Babs duly invited her back home, and the pair got to know each other. The pair had tried hard to outthumble each other with their names. The Fletchers, Merce was assured, had – with the arrowsmiths, bowmans, stringers and archers – won at Crecy. And their work was so important that in those days it was illegal to export their wares. Ah, countered the younger woman, my husband’s line is from immigrants. His Harcourt forebears arrived from Normandy on 29th September 1066. Merce did not detail her own line from that uncertain Schleswig-Holstein, where some Danes lived in Germany, and some Germans lived in Denmark.

On this visit to the shop, Mrs Fletcher put some dairy products and bread rolls into her basket, and paused before the magazine section. There were some new publications about marsh birds, the Suffolk brewery malt trade, and an anniversary book – complete with horror photos - about Chernobyl and Two-Mile Island. It looked as though Merce Harcourt had been sharpening her stockturn again.

The shopper cocked her head to one side, gesturing to the tenor on the stereo system.

‘Britten, again?’

‘Yes, *Rats Away*. I suppose they play this in Hameln, over on the Weser.’

Three or four regulars invaded this piece of theatre. One always wore the same hide-my-hair hat. Another dragged his left foot almost imperceptibly. By the time they reached the counter, Merce was already handing over their morning paper or their smokes. Although the counter was set halfway back from the entrance, shoplifting was made tough by positioning won’t-steal items by the door. Detergents and bird feed and screen wash did that job.

Almost on autopilot, she had a word for each regular.

‘There’s a mark on your Park Drive. Have 20p off.’

‘Look at your Reckitt’s Blue – I’m going to scan the barcode. Don’t lecture me about a penny an ounce anymore.’

‘27 down in today’s fastword is *onomatopoeia*.’

‘Father O’Cork – our bakery has short-changed us in a wrap of four croissants. Would you like a packet of three for the weekend?’

‘Always.’ He peered into his leather purse-wallet. ‘I’ve only got tenners. May I give you one?’

‘Hello, Mr Primer. Those shoes are a mess. Waste a couple of quid on some Kiwi.’

‘Efigenia, if you’re rostered for Galeão, bump Kennet up to long-haul First or Business, please. Need him in the mood when he gets back from Rio.’ ‘Does he want a chicken or pastrami main, or maybe something vegetarian?’ ‘Whatever. When he gets back, he’ll cook some loins.’ ‘If I’m not on that run, I speak to two of the First Officers who do Rio. They’re both warm friends of mine.’

Merce handed Mrs Fletcher her usual newspaper and her weekly magazine. The customer turned away when Merce suddenly called her back.

‘Oh, Babs, I see that your magazine’s got a cover feature on Allenhut. Something to do with windfarms.’

The older woman swivelled back to the counter; her eyes lit up. She glanced at the magazine cover. Sure enough, there was a graphic showing wind turbines swamping Allenhut.

‘Over my dead body.’

‘Are they talking about bringing Westwood Mill or Blackshore Mill back into use?’ enquired Merce, putting on her naïve face.

The old woman was already speed-reading the feature inside. ‘Not on your nellie. This is the real thing, using the Allenhut granite slipper for a windfarm stretching through the village and out to sea. We’ll fight this one.’

The man by the postcard rack suddenly interrupted with his first words. ‘Ice creams?’

‘This week, sir, we’re stocking them over in the freezer.’ She nodded towards that cabinet, showing off an aristocratic neck. Robespierre would have loved Merce’s neck.

The man wandered off, but still within earshot.

Merce laid a finger lightly on the magazine, and asked: ‘I expect the village will need a leader, someone respected to fight this. Any thoughts?’

‘Well, I suppose I could get the ball rolling.’

‘You can’t do that alone. You’ll need a volunteer clerk – notices, leaflets through letterboxes, agendas, meeting minutes. You must know someone who can do all that behind the scenes.’

Babs said nothing, reading the magazine feature again. Then she jabbed a finger at the shop girl. ‘You’re an outsider, make an ideal organiser. Would you, Merce?’

‘I’ve got my studies down on the dunes.’ She paused then, ‘Okay, I’d be happy to lend a hand. The shop’s morning rush will be over by nine, we don’t pick up until the day-trippers come at 11. Shall I pop round to your house, and you can get started. I’ll bring a notepad.’

‘Brilliant. Mrs Merce Harcourt – you and I and the villagers of Allenhut have got this madcap scheme as good as killed already.’ Barbara Fletcher nodded a half-smile, and walked out with her eyes again slowly reading the detail in the magazine feature.

Mr Tolly Carnegie, point man of The Healthy consortium, walked back to the sales counter, and put his lips close to the shop girl’s right ear.

‘Well done, Merce. More or less exactly as rehearsed. Our windfarm is as good as built already. You did the unhinged but harmless bit well.’

‘I’m chuffed, Tolly. I did what you advised – act naturally. Unhinged but harmless.’

Carnegie’s son joined them, and Merce pressed the CD player into life, to give the youngster a two-minute tango lesson.

‘When you’ve mastered the tango, young man, you can run away with me to Cuba to learn some danzón steps.’

## Chapter 2 – Victory through the unorthodox



‘Why do I want a crim on the payroll?’ Tolly Carnegie raised both eyebrows. Merce straightened up, her eyes looking quizzical. Not many people were meant to know about that. Carnegie’s wife coughed.

‘My wife is coughing. As a good personnel adviser, I think she’s reminding me that you would be an independent contractor, and not an employee. Deniability. Don’t want anyone to accuse you of working for The Healthy.’

They were meeting in a recruitment agency managed by Tolly’s wife, above a shop boasting the name *Motheaten*. It was a glass-walled 1960s block. The Long Acre part of central London was described as up-and-coming, meaning that most apartments had been sold to overseas millionaires as buy-and-fly. Locksmiths and security guards outnumbered residents. Downstairs in *Motheaten*, a late 1930s Tiger Moth hung high in the ceiling, although it had been upholstered in the modern aviation polyester fabrics. Under a spotlight, catching the attention of visitors stepping inside, was a chrome Italian gadget that made frequent coffee-grinding noises. By the window, pilots and armchair pilots nursed their cups while reading obscure aviation, meteorology, and engineering trade magazines. A noticeboard with many little handwritten or typed card notices was the first stop for most visitors.

On the shop’s mezzanine, a tailor speaking in a soft Norfolk accent had finished measuring a well-known architect and her boyfriend – a minor Royal - for a pair of A2 leather flying jackets. A display stand promoted prescription aviator goggles. The Royal was famous. He was the first in his family since 1914 to risk owning a dachshund. As they moved on to look at aeronautical charts, Merce heard the start of their next conversation with a chart sales assistant, ‘... waterhole near the landing strip, so you may have to chase the nyala off by buzzing to the south-east. If you go north-westerly, they get penned in and panic back onto the landing area.’

‘I’m all ears,’ said the young Royal, listening. ‘Will I need a pith helmet?’

‘Only if you can’t find a public toilet.’

A door to one side of *Motheaten* allowed athletic types to climb two stories to the recruitment agency. Carnegie’s wife earned a good commission from placing wheelchair users in new jobs – they felt pampered being interviewed downstairs in the shop’s coffee bar. Tolly glanced up at Merce, and from under a sheaf of papers, he pulled out a brittle old newspaper cutting and was about to read. There was a rustling crackle as he did so.

The young woman got in first. ‘Well, Tolly, only crim I knew was a school chum, Slender Brenda. Worked as a Saturday girl in a bakery, and kept thieving the Battenberg. Said it was a piece of cake.

Head teacher wanted to present her with the Laziest Student award on prizegiving day. But she couldn't be bothered to go up and collect it.'

Tolly shook his head, and began. 'Macclesfield Express, by Stuart Silkweaver. Headline – P45 for Winking Beak. Subheading - Pop fan threw garment at singer, charged under Litter Act 1983. Schoolgirl Miss M, aged 18, charged with littering with an item of clothing, was found Not Proven at Macclesfield Magistrates Court last Tuesday. Police were called after a midnight disturbance at the house of local pop singer Riff Thadden, lead singer of Fridge Full of Ants (his only hit *I fell for a bungee jumper* reached No 5 in the charts last summer). Reading from his notebook, PC Siren stated that he had heard the defendant shouting *I love you and our first-born will be named Ynwa*. PC Siren stated that when he remonstrated with Miss M, she had reached down for a skimpy garment, and threw it at the singer and his wife. A gust of wind blew the item onto the public footpath. She was then arrested.'

'Magistrate Ewen Dornoch, hearing his first case after leaving his previous post at the Highland panel of Scots sheriff courts, winked at the defendant. He declared that the evidence suggested an intention to gift the garment to the singer, and that his verdict was Not Proven. The Clerk to the Magistrates laid down his pen and was overheard telling the magistrate that Not Proven was a Scots verdict, invalid in English courts. The Clerk phoned a Section 11 complaint to the Cheshire Advisory Committee, after which Magistrate Dornoch was suspended, and then sacked from his new job. Miss M was released after the prosecuting counsel discontinued the case.'

Merce smiled at Tolly Carnegie and his wife, 'Not proven, case discontinued. And anyway, I was a kid in those days. Still had L-plates on my jim-jams. Unmarried and mad. No-one can judge me - *Nessuno mi può giudicare*.

Tolly raised an eyebrow. 'And where was Mrs during this classy encounter?'

'She showed me a gate sign telling crazed fans to not visit after sunset. Anyway, Kennet reads that press cutting out to me when I misbehave.'

'That's every day, right?'

Merce looked serious, avoiding that dreadful fake smile that girls are cursed with if they spend their teenage years working in a burger bar. She was wearing some well-tailored clothes, but there was something slightly eye-catching about them.

'That fabric, that cut looks a bit special. Is it a Dion Lee?' asked Tolly's wife.

Merce nodded. 'When it all went 90 per cent off, my friend from over there, she was at college in Redfern, parked her dad's wagon at an outlet before it all went landfill.'

Tolly put away the fragile press cutting, and took out his leather-bound pad.

The office was determinedly neutral – the electronic whiteboard, ceiling-mounted videoconferencing camera and screens could have been found in any office, any town. When Merce had arrived, Tolly's wife was just closing the windows against the hum of electric London double-deckers leaving a nearby stop. Merce was relaxed. Tolly had been a good employer during the university vacations, trusting her and her new husband Kennet. And he had paid cash for their work. She and Kennet would often be given a task within a few minutes' walk of Parliament – helping out at conferences, seminars, political or industrial briefings and press conferences. The work had been fun. Unnoticed by government ministers and TV crews and journalists, she and Kennet had laid out meeting papers, issued name badges, handed round drinks wherever the power people had met.



‘Mrs Merce Harcourt, Mrs Merce Harcourt; I need to get used to your married name. My wife and I could have made a fortune when we came to your wedding: could have had a little kiosk where for a small donation, we’d have told the truth about the bride.’

‘No use. I don’t do blushing. I don’t do embarrassed.’ With pride, she pushed across a promotional flyer:

*London’s cheapest wedding*

- Registrar
  - Two witnesses
  - Metal ring
  - Two glasses of fizzy drink
  - Garden Centre gift voucher, for one gooseberry bush
- £199 inc VAT (credit available).

As one, husband and wife Carnegie glanced down at Merce’s hands. There was now a proper pair of now-we-are-earning rings.

‘Tell me, why has Kennet has pissed me off? For three years, I’ve been giving you both, and Angie, plenty of work experience during the uni holidays. And now you’ve gone and married him, and he’s scarpered off as a chef with the Foreign Office.’

‘Executive chef. He breezes into the embassies, sits down with the invoices, and counts the stock, and gives the local man what’s called an interview without coffee. His cooking is okay, his spreadsheets are excellent. Three of us worked for you when we were at college. What about Angie?’

‘Outstanding. But our mushrooms grow stronger in the dark. She’s too keen on telling the world on social network websites where she is, who she’s met and what she’s doing. She’s webbed herself out of a job that could have made her richer than her dreams. If I wanted flashy, I’d hire a lighthouse keeper. So there’s a gap. If Kennet ever gets fed up, there’s a guaranteed job here.’

Again, Mrs Carnegie coughed.

‘Er, yes – guaranteed contract, not guaranteed job.’ Tolly leaned forward.

‘Angie - richer than her dreams. What about Merce and Kennet – will we be richer than our dreams?’

Tolly nodded. ‘Why be *alas poor Yorick* when you could be *alas rich Yorick*?’

‘I’ve taken professional advice. I’ll do it.’

‘And what advice was that?’

‘I asked my savings account, and it said *Yes, anything.*’

‘This is what I want you to do. Keep Britain’s electricity safe. You’ll be helping British voters and their families. In their heads they want electricity to power their workplaces, their schools, their police stations, but in their hearts they imagine that there’s no cost if they fight and delay it all. My client – your client - is The Healthy. It’s a windfarm marketing group. We need to complete the country’s programme to get wind turbines up and running. And fast. If we fail – if you fail – this will be the new India: paraffin lamps and kerosene stoves. How d’you run industry, schools, clinics? You’ve listened to the debates at the two political party conferences. You know that Parliament – elected Parliament - wants to keep the lights on.’

‘We had a lad from Chhattisgarh on my course. He was gathering old satellite dishes, hundreds of the big ones from across Europe. Then he gave them a shiny reflective coat, so that his family back in India could make solar cookers. He said they added a simple weighted pulley, so that the cooker turned slowly to follow the sun.’

‘Where you’re heading, the only use for the sun’s rays will be a tan. With Merce on the job we’ll keep the lights burning here. But the idle rich have got other ideas. They march against waste-fuelled power, coal-fuelled power, nuclear power. And the environmental charities, wealthy from their tax breaks, fight solar power and tidal-generation, and waste-incineration power, and windfarms. Then the same voters demand more electric and more reliable electric.’

‘I saw Moscow’s oil export minister on the box last week. Called windfarms *green crap*.’

‘That’s why we need you. The Yanks, the Chinese pour cash into improving their kit, while we waste millions just getting permission to produce electricity.’

‘Americans?’

‘Some of them. Propane – forklift trucks, farms and so on – actually carries a levy on every sale that funds anti-electricity campaigns. Good luck with that, if you’re running a hospital or school with no electric.’

‘You said millions. Turn me loose, Tolly. It sounds like money, folding money.’

The man nodded. ‘Oh yes, and if we get it right, a heap is coming your way. First task is in Suffolk. The Healthy is ready to develop the Allenhut slipper – it’s a long finger of granite stretching from five kilometres inland to about ten k’s offshore. Ideal, reliable footings for the new 175-metre turbines, and windy too.’

‘But I know nothing.’

‘I’d like you to spend a day in Wales, listening to some people who are neighbours to a windfarm. Then a week among the engineers, the towers and the turbines. You’ll be the best-informed person in Allenhut.’

‘So, I’ll be your promotions bod?’

‘Not so straightforward. After some warm-up work, you spend a couple of months in Allenhut’s village shop, cultivating the lady whom I’ve chosen to fight our windfarm. Then you puppet her through the campaign, and will finish next summer, when we get planning permission.’

‘Just another windfarm, but bigger?’

‘No, it’s more than that. It is the last piece of the jigsaw. For the first time, wind will be baseload, almost guaranteeing power whatever the weather. With Allenhut, windfarms will be so spread around the country that there will mostly be at least one feeding the grid. And you will be The Healthy’s heroine.’

‘With granite, you just put a shovel in, and it opens up like custard?’

He laughed, ‘You’re on the right track. Until now, granite has been out of bounds, too expensive for foundations. So the offshore towers are simply driven deep into sand, low cost and fast. But we’re running out of big sites on sand. Allenhut’s granite slipper is yours to facilitate.’

‘Planning consent?’

‘Almost as costly as the hardware, the planning process. And sadly it is widows struggling to pay their power bills who pay. The rich get the poor to pay for planning delays. So we need you.’

‘A few weeks of planning can’t cost too much, surely?’

‘There’ve been a couple of big public enquiries – neither into windfarms. Public enquiries are how lawyers pay for their yachts. One enquiry blew 300 million of your taxes and mine. Look at the M25 – it took 17 years to build a few toilets at Cobham services. The Healthy is not going to be robbed by wasteful enquiries. You and I – Merce and Tolly - are going into battle.’

‘And The Healthy is?’

‘You name them, they’re on board. Turbine factories, obviously, and construction firms and their unions. But all the big electricity users – engineering, food processing, railways. And now we’ve got the haulage industry money; they need electric vehicles for last-mile deliveries, and don’t want a surcharge to fund a broken planning system.’

‘Local firms?’

Tolly Carnegie put on his wistful look. ‘The Healthy had the Chinese manufacturers on board at first, but they laughed and ran when they saw the figures. For every pound and every year they invest in R & D, we waste ten pounds and ten years on planning arguments. You’ve got to stop that.’

Merce glanced up from her notepad, nodding as he continued. ‘Your one-hit wonder Riff Thadden and his wife are big wind turbine contractors these days. They do fall-arrestor and safety nets for towers. When you’re climbing a touch-the-clouds tower when the hoist doesn’t work, their kit will catch you and anything you drop.’

‘Tell me exactly what’s going to be built?’

The man waved his hands, fisherman-like, as he replied.

‘New generation, tall. Hubs at 150 metres, with 120-metre blades. Tall means fewer, and less flicker, less noise, less visual impact. I don’t know the mechanics of it, but taller means less turbulence so the gearboxes and drivetrains last longer.’

‘Allenhut. I went shrimping there once, and saw a crabbing contest. My grandfather drove me there from Newmarket. His father was a horse vet there after the war. Lent a hand to the two milk rounds, until they went electric. Flat fee – one pint of gold top for each episode of care. Allenhut’s a long way from civilisation.’

‘That’s what created the village. Allen was a medieval radical pamphleteer. His appeal in those days was to oiks like you and me, needing leaflets with pictures and cartoons, not wordy essays. The King exiled him to keep 100 miles from London, so he took the Suffolk road, and once he had gone far enough he built a hut in the sand dunes by the North Sea. That was the start of Allenhut village. Planning inspectors have criticised The Healthy for not having a public debate about windfarms. So Merce will run the opposition to us in The Healthy.’

Merce sounded doubtful, ‘A pushover: a stranger waltzes in and runs everything?’

‘You’ll be behind the scenes. There’s a woman who fancies herself as mother hen of the village. You’ll keep reminding people that as an outsider, it’d be wrong for you to express a view on using the Allenhut granite slipper for dozens or hundreds of giant wind turbines. However, if they want a small

amount of clerical help – leaflets, letters, petitions, door knocking, clerking committee or public meetings, then you don't mind helping out.'

Mrs Carnegie made an excuse and left.

'So I'll be her volunteer clerk, okay.'

'Add a bit of reluctance. Don't want her to think that you've turned up just to do that one job. In battle, one gains victory through the unorthodox.'

'Kennet has got a lot of travel in the year ahead, so I'll be alright in Allenhut.'

'Babs Fletcher – she's a laughingstock. It's not that people dislike her – they just ridicule her. She's had two embarrassments. First, the Agriculture minister came to the village to explain the minimum wage and maternity leave. Local farmworkers had put on their best clothes and arranged babysitters to attend. Up pops Babs. She interrupts with *Put in more hours, if you want more wages*, and she tried to slow-handclap the minister.'

'Charming.'

'Things got worse earlier this year. Brett – Brett the Net, they call him - is the last fisherman in the village. He winches up his boat on the beach at Allenhut. In the winter, he carves old sleepers into rollers to protect the keel from the granite. Anyway, Babs starts off a moan at the Parish Council – Brett's selling fish without hot water for handwashing, no wheelchair access, no calibration certificate for his brass scales. The councillors began by smiling at this nonsense, then they broke into grins and finally the whole meeting was laughing at her. The Eastern Daily Press headline was *Babble and Squeak*. My tip – if Allenhut has to choose between Brett the Net, whose family has fished off the beach and off Dunwich for generations – or Barbara Fletcher, don't put your money on Babs.'

'So she's a good choice for a lightweight campaign boss. Does she work?'

'Lives off her son, who's a regular star of police, newspaper and TV exposés. He is a sales agent for Mexican hospitals and clinics. It works like this: if you've got an untreatable illness, young Fletcher will arrange a package of treatment that includes medical flights, hospital treatment, and flights home.'

'Does anyone get cured? Where's the money?' she looked puzzled.

'If you imagine there's a cure, then you're already sucked into the scam. Most people can get a 75 per cent loan on their house, so when you ask Fletcher's boy how much the care costs, he looks up the value of your house on the internet. The price for hospital treatment is always 75 per cent of your house value. He is scrupulous in saying repeatedly that there is a low success rate, and he strongly advises against treatment. This keeps him safe from prosecution. But he just happens to have a package of fund-raising stuff, to do workplace collections, and touch your family for donations. He targets families working in large companies: they can appeal to thousands of people for donations for treatment. Babs Fletcher's lad gets his percentage from every link in the chain – ambulances, medical flights, nursing agency, hospitals. Even flowers for the patient give him a cut.'

'I don't want to sound stupid, but...'

'Yes?'

'Why do people in little houses give their life savings to people in big houses, like her son?'

He shrugged his shoulders, silent.

‘But that’s all of us – earn what we can.’

‘Within the law, sure. The UK and Mexican tax people put a fake cleaning lady into his place for a few months, but she couldn’t dig out any evidence. And he’s bringing gold out of their country. Has this in-your-face 50-peso coin as a medallion round his neck when he comes to see mum in Allenhut. When he leaves Mexico, there are two in his pendant. When he returns, there’s only one. We know where it all goes - a friend of a friend tells me that Babs’ place has a safe somewhere.’

‘Which would all fall apart when he’s stopped at Heathrow.’

‘Last time they tried that, three months ago, he certainly had two coins in the fountain. He left them as a gift for the shake-downers. They were Que Bo! Best chocolate coins in Obrera.’

Merce tightened her lips and nodded slowly.

‘Then there’s the Electricidad. Quietly, the tax people found that his mum in Allenhut had received a routine letter about winter tariffs in his part of Mexico. Hidden somehow in the envelope were a couple of very valuable stamps that ended up in a London philasomething auction.’

‘Is she sharp? Will she dump me as clerk to the campaign?’

He smiled, ‘No, her son’s the sharp one. She’s got enough to live on, and time on her hands. Super stooge, our super stooge.’

‘You don’t trust Babs Fletcher. Do you trust anyone? Do you trust me?’

‘Your tutor at uni recommended all three of you. Angie is the only one I didn’t want. Now, to work.’  
‘I’m free.’

Tolly Carnegie glanced at a paper and pushed it across. ‘Tomorrow, you’re in the music business. Here’s a bloke who’s going to put together a windfarm song and dance for children. Tonight, spend some time looking at current fashions on teatime TV and webcasts. He’s expecting you, but he won’t quiz you if you can’t make head nor tail of that end of showbiz.’

Merce scanned the paper, and briefly stood to tap her finger on the London map on the wall.

‘After that, a briefing day in Wales, in Powys. On your way back, a couple of days for your working at height course. Then somewhere noisy for a small meeting. I need to mess up a parliamentary election, so you must find a place where no-one can record what we’re discussing. The money people from The Healthy need to put a million on the table, so we don’t need our voices on tape. Can you find a meeting place that’s loud? I don’t want anything recorded or overheard.’

Merce thought for a moment. ‘I saw a poster for a screeching woodworking machinery show up at Birmingham. Maybe there’s a flying club or a clay-pigeon shooting school. We won’t, I promise, be recorded or overheard.’

‘Wales – you’ll get a taste of real journalism with a chap called Misty Probert. He’s a good district reporter. Spend time with him. He did an intelligent story last year, when Kennet did a round-table on sheepmeat marketing with farmers, on one of the auction days.’

‘I saw a cutting, yes.’

‘Misty does real journalism: tup and ram prices at Welshpool, or standing in the rain at a churchyard gate to list mourners accurately in the right order, not confusing Davis with Davies. He knows the difference between Llanwrthwl and Llanwrtyd. Misty is cleverer than he looks. Won’t drive a car, so he gets from village to village by taking lifts or on the bus. Meets his readers, hears every bit of gossip, always first, always accurate. And he’s written intelligent stuff about our windfarms. He’s spending this coming week doing a windfarm supplement, talking to The Healthy and to the antis.’

‘Can’t drive or won’t drive?’

‘Won’t. There was an incident last year. His daughter had just started work at the local hospital. He had helped her choose a rather splendid sports car. Misty was then interviewing a farm contractor. The man fell ill, so Misty jumped onto the man’s tractor and drove him a short way to hospital. Motorists were hooting, he waved back. When he got there, he discovered that he had driven the whole journey spraying muck from the tank he was towing. His daughter had to wash down her car, and was not delighted.’

He whiteboarded a rough year planner.

‘Tonight and tomorrow, music. Then Misty Probert, then two days on Merseyside for some working at height training and experience.’

Merce noticed that – after Music, Wales and Height - Tolly was scribbling headings that he was not explaining. Election, York, China, Clydebank. It all led up to a long block marked as Allenhut.

### Chapter 3 – We just clicked



London had survived the Great Fire, the Black Death, and the Great Stink. But this latest unpleasantness put them all in the shade: Malvern Manse was a new block of student apartments for the Royal College of Music. Well-meaning cellists, tuba wrestlers and the like filled the neighbourhood with noise. To Merce's ears, it sounded like a distressing traffic accident involving a truckload of scrap metal.

High-ceilinged four-room apartments with no parking and no lifts had looked fabulous as a CGI impression, but the developer had gone bankrupt. Even the Royal College of Music could not persuade its own students to venture in, until they hit upon the idea of putting a piano into each apartment. Merce Harcourt walked past the warehouses and car showrooms in this bleak suburb, not sure if she was heading the right way. Even without an audience, she moved with the classic stride of someone who had picked up the correct habits from her ballet lessons. Now and then she skipped a bit, humming some of the previous evening's school-age videos.

It was a long, hot walk from the Tube, past parked trucks with their cab curtains drawn and loading doors pinned open to show that there was nothing to steal. A mobile kebab van, with a rich meaty aroma, was being cleaned and closed up. A couple of small shadows scurried to hide behind the trader's waste bin.

Merce walked towards a girl sitting in a beech chair on the footpath, with a large teacup and saucer on the ground next to her. Her chair was tilted back against a corrugated iron fence, in the style that sometimes ends with a pile of firewood and a check-up in orthopaedics. Chair girl's ears may have been on the music from Malvern Manse opposite, but her eyes were on the Racing Post. Uninvited, Merce leaned over and focussed on the Towcester card on the open page. She fingered one of the lines, 'The bookies will misprice this one. They always mark down anything with Inland in the horse's name. Reminds them of the Inland Revenue.'

The girl suddenly called upwards and across the road, 'Geraint! Fortissimo, fortissimo.' Geraint, on a Juliet balcony, was throwing a Schubert Lied down from the third storey. Merce climbed some stairs and rang a doorbell. The bearded young man opening the door looked unexpectedly prosperous for a music student.

'Don't be put off if the great unwashed open the door. There's four of us sharing here. Well, four paying rent, and usually some Saturday night extras. I'm just finishing at the College, but I'll let you know if I get another address. You want some music written, published, choreographed and filmed?'

‘And overnight, please. And I want a tea and kick these shoes off. Whyn’t you move the building closer to public transport?’ The young man shrugged with a grin, and put on the kettle. He gave Merce a quizzical look.

‘Two things. First, and easiest, I want you to publish a pair of community song sheet booklets. Put them under your own name. I’m helping a windfarm promotion group called The Healthy. They want folk at political party conferences to bond with some simple community singing.’

‘Wind songs?’ he asked, raising one eyebrow – then two.

Merce started the loved chorus, and the songman joined in, ‘The winds, the winds, the winds the revels keep.’

She handed over an old edition, ‘This is the style. One for the blues, one for the reds. Back cover must have something about wind or electricity. Separately, I need a signed letter on the copyright status of each tune and all the lyrics. Even the political party logos – you’ll need to negotiate to use those. Turn a rights negotiator loose on it.’

The man was taking notes. ‘*Bella Ciao?*’ he asked. Merce nodded as she picked up the chorus.

‘O bella ciao, bella ciao  
Bella, ciao, ciao, ciao ...’

‘And I want you to test font sizes. In public, singletons won’t wear reading glasses. So, big and clear, please. Here are a couple of good printers in Watford and Reading. Visit them, and get some ideas about first runs, reprints, and paper stock.’

She peeled off some banknotes, ‘This will keep you going until you give me a quotation. And the print risk will belong to The Healthy. I don’t want printers billing you. They’ll be self-liquidators, so if you can deliver them for – say - a quid, then that’s what you should charge. Give the party bookshops five thou each on sale or return.’

He nodded, listening to the crackle of paper money, rather to his visitor.

‘Oh, tip off the printer in case they fly well, and you need an overnight reprint.’

‘And?’

Merce put down her tea mug and stood up. She windmilled her arms slowly.

‘This is your main task. A children’s dance and chant song. Gotta work on children’s TV, in the school playground, on mobile phone screens, on a school bus.’

‘I spent a couple of days listening to samples in a new AI warehouse of forgotten hit tunes.’

‘Hit, yes. But we need something original, not pinched.’

‘Nothing appropriate in there. Everyone knows the old songs that were on the early shellacs, or sold as parlour pieces by the piano dealers. But our friend AI has dug out - mostly from the 19th century - really good tunes; found them in choral clubs, church organ lofts, railway tour party singalongs. But for The Healthy, I guarantee freshly composed, not freshly unearthed.’ The young music student looked thoughtful.

‘*Comfy old boots,*’ said Merce.



‘Tolly Carnegie brought me up to speed a week ago. *Comfy old boots* was my first big success. The walking, rambling, crop-circle people love it,’ said bearded.

‘Sounds promising.’

The young man looked out of the window as some screeching singing came in.

‘How does this sound?’ He paused, and then burst with ideas.

‘Pop song and video - call it *We just clicked*. Boy meets girl as they switch on machinery in a factory – click, click, wind turbine seen through the loading bay door. Then health clinic, happy parents, and baby - with nurse switching on two gadgets – click, click, wind turbine outside the window. Finally, parents take older child to visit a farm, farmer switches on milking machinery and cheesemaking paddles – click, click. It won’t win the Ivor Novello for subtlety, but who cares? I can write this in mid-tempo with a four-four beat. Have a strong lift into the chorus. I’m sure someone here can lyric it.’

Merce nodded, her eyes closed for a moment as she tapped out an imaginary beat, as the man continued.

‘Strategy – three minutes max, and in the voice range for children. Grammatically correct, otherwise classroom ban time, with the vocab attuned to 12- to 14-year-olds. The structure will have the operatic story I outlined, and built up with intro, chorus, verse, another chorus, a middle-eight bridge to take us easily to the outro. And an upbeat melody.’

Merce smiled, and nodded for him to continue.

‘For the performance, I’ve got here the voting analysis of one of those talent shows. For families with young children, there’s an unknown lass who scored really well. She came in about sixth or something, but our target audience loved her voice and her on-camera presence.’

‘Is that the one with wonky teeth?’

‘Yes, she’ll appeal to the bad teeth audience.’

‘Oh, that narrows it down to sixty million of us, all of us except Merce Harcourt. Key – would *F* do it?’

‘Remembering wonky girl’s range, I’d go for *G major*. Now, in the video, I would highlight the click. How does this sound? Giant light switch, three metres high and three wide, really dramatic visual. The percussionist climbs a little stepladder, and at the right moments in the score clicks the switch?’

‘Coda?’

‘Not the usual slow repeat. Let’s try a clear end. Two drum beats, with the children raising their hands above their heads to clap twice.’


‘Stop composing, just do a career in storyboards.’ She turned to her meeting notes. ‘The Healthy doesn’t want to steal your thunder. We assign to you composer royalties, mechanicals in all media – ringtones, advert jingles, downloads, doorbell chimes, computer games. Your name on the work, your name on the royalty statements. And never mention our name.’

Merce gestured to a shortcut on the young man’s computer screen. ‘I see you’ve been looking at Music Space. The Healthy’s got a contractor who did some King’s Cross construction. Would it help

if we paid for a year's rent for a desk there, get you started?' There was a sound of one hand washing the other.

The man continued, thinking aloud. 'I've got a couple of film students who could do the shoot. One detail, though. Don't make the wind turbine too dominant, just subtle, and small in the background. But I'll tell them to shoot a version with a much bigger turbine so that it's visible when kids view it on a small phone screen.'

As she turned to leave, Merce stared at the piano for a moment. She sat, closed her eyes, and played the first three dozen bars of Dmitri Dmitrievich's waltz, reminding herself to get Kennet back on the dancefloor. Downstairs, she could hear that Geraint was still practising. No-one had come out of the nearby factories and warehouses to listen to him.



**W**ales. Looking for the farm, Merce thought that the sat-nav was having a laugh. After passing it twice, she flagged down a slowly-moving van with a local CW Bangor registration. That driver was also hostaged by his sat-nav. But the girl from The Healthy had an Ordnance Survey map, and the pair spread it out to find their bearings. She found Misty Probert's appointment, but on Welsh time, not GMT. Wind turbines slowly waved a greeting to the visitor from almost every part of the soft mountain tops.

But Misty wasn't there. The tenant farmer and her husband invited her in for cuppa. Although the weather was mild, there was a small fire helping with the nursing of a lamb. It was a Torwen, barely in this world, but already pretending to be a badger with distinct black and white patterns all over.

'Misty?'

'In Intensive Care, down at the Fifty-Fifty. His daughter is looking after him. Weil's disease – I warned him that he needs solid leather boots with all these rats. He was taken sick here a few days ago, but he did say that he'd be back to meet you here. He turned as yellow as a pub bog, and some windfarm engineers took him down for treatment. Now it's antibiotics for breakfast and all that.'

'At least my sat-nav will find the hospital.'

'Not until you've finished everything on your plate.'

'Tell me about your new neighbour, the windfarm.'

'We've got the whole package round here. Nuclear, pumped storage, and now windmills. At least we can carry on our farm. My great-grandfather used to be down in the valley, but those Brummies put paid to that.'

Merce nodded, eyeing another home-made slice of cake. The lamb's eyes blinked open for a moment, then returned to a relaxed snooze.

The farmer's husband butted in. 'We got the electric in '52. Without Clause 1d – that's the 1947 Act – we'd have empty acres and not a Welsh lamb breed would have survived. Yes, we all had a genny, and a Tilley lamp. And there were stinking double-wick lamps, that needed trimming. But 1d was

the obligation to bring power to every farm, to all of us in remote areas. Just as Scott recommended in '42. And now a windfarm is a small price to pay to keep the electric on.'

Merce soaked it all in. The farmer's husband went on. 'The first night of the current, my gran complained that the kitchen was shining bright until breakfast. The engineer hadn't shown her how to work the switch by the door. And the co-op had to send over a van with more tea, 'cos all these electric kettles allowed extra cuppa all day, all evening. And lambing was easier, with the hot water needed for clean and healthy.'

'Not often you find someone called Misty.'

The farmer smiled, 'Misty Probert? We've forgotten his first name. In his first week on the local paper, long ago, he ran an obituary for one of us, a shepherd in the next valley. The shepherd did a weekly weather spot on Radio Ceredigion. Probert confused *much missed* and *much mist* and printed his obit. So he's now called Misty. Lovely obit, rhythm and cadence, so we set it to music. I was in a hen choir that sang it. The only thing missing was that our radio weather chum was – and still is – hale and strong. We briefly had a best-seller down at Great Darkgate Street's Woolworths in Aberystwyth. But then Trading Standards ordered it off sale. Our choir couldn't prove the accuracy of calling ourselves the Twenty Maidens.'

Down at the hospital, the serf's car park was full, but she found a space in the don't-park-here, next to a full-price beauty with a sticker saying *Made in Newport Pagnell*.

The ICU clerk switched to English when Merce came to the desk, 'Have you come to measure him, to sell the family a box? The Co-op's already done that. But I think he'll pull through. Tell you what, when I was at school, I had a budgie his colour.'

Misty's daughter led Merce away out of the private room. 'You English are trying to kill us all. Your Birmingham Corporation reservoirs drowned our good pastures and our chapels. No Chamberlain statues here. And now our bird life is being minced by your windmills. Flycatchers and hen harriers and the coal-tit and all their pals don't need your wind turbines. Look at their remains, look at the rats where there've never been rats. Leave us be.'

Merce looked serious and kept her big trap shut. She did not mention that *Rattus Norvegicus* had lived happily on these hilltops for 500 years.

Her car had been boxed in. She exchanged pleasantries with the car park attendant, who requested that she remove the adhesive tape hiding her number plates and VIN stamp. Like a pack animal, the man was weighed down with every gadget – GPS, digital camera, chest-worn evidence camera, tablet, and phone. He had not checked his kit, had not found that a solar flare recorded his sat-nav location as the Kazakh state circus, in Almaty.

'Don't need to, on private land. Contract requirement, not a legal requirement', was the polite gist of her reply. She also gave a traditional South London gesture, which the courts had recently ruled was only an offence if offered to a uniformed police officer on duty. To escape the blocking vehicle, she slowly bumped up the kerb to go forward across a lawn, missing three trainee nurses having a picnic lunch of five-a-day chocolate eclairs.

The parking man looked self-satisfied. He had grabbed her registration number from the etched nearside rear quarterlight glass. It was the only one that Merce had failed to cover. And it was the one she had bought from a breakers yard, after a bonkers boiling-kettle attempt at de-icing.

Chapter 4 – He’s a bosom buddy of The Healthy



Tolly Carnegie wore an ear-to-ear smile. ‘I heard your song on my boy’s games console this morning. Good stuff. In the old day, it was all radio, but the kids pick and mix their gadgets now. He plays some sort of networked game with a boy – who doesn’t speak a word of English – in Korea.’

‘North or South?’

‘You told me on the phone that Wales didn’t happen.’

‘Misty was hooked up to machines in the hospital. His doctor daughter blames our windfarms for a plague of rats and Weil’s disease. Oh, and she blames old Joseph Chamberlain’s reservoirs for everything else.’

‘New to me, rats.’

‘Barren deserted hilltops, dead birds under the turbines. When the wind drops, the rats have no birds to eat, and migrate down and eat everything, every living creature, on their journey.’ Merce looked a bit worried, as she summarised, adding ‘But there’ve been rats on the Welsh hills for hundreds of years. So they’re not something we’ve done.’

Merce fussed over her coffee before continuing.

‘That’s the second time I’ve heard that. I’ve been on one of those Mediterranean holiday islands. This year they’ve got a big new windfarm up in the hills, too barren for farming. Down at the marina, there was a chap who knew his winds, ‘Ospital ‘Arry. He’d had a head injury way back, and hung around the boats. When single-handed skippers needed help mooring in certain winds, he lend a hand. He’d work for the harbourmaster before and after spring tides or storm surges, to keep the yachts secure. ‘Arry told me that the new windfarm was killing so many birds that a colony of rats had moved up there. And when the wind dropped, there was nothing for them to eat, so they spread downhill, eating anything in their path.’

Tolly nodded, pausing before replying. ‘I’ll pass it on. Two countries, two stories the same. Independent as well, not on our industry’s payroll.’

He scribbled away.

‘I want you to go straight to your place in Allenhut. The landlord’s mortgage is held by someone in The Healthy, so he’ll do as he’s told. Day One, get yourself on the electoral roll and get yourself into the phone book. Then I want you to go to Leiston, to the Long Shop visitor centre and get a car sticker. Leiston’s a good place for us to meet, one of the pavement tearooms, away from nosy folk. And get some Southwold car stickers at the brewery and the lifeboat station.’ He sat back and thought for a moment, then his eyes widened.

‘You’ll have your own way of working, but I never miss the chance to slag off the opposition. The Long Shop has got Suffolk’s deepest well, and the brewery’s got its own well. Here’s a question to put to them, quite casually, *Will fracking foul your well?* Just a light touch, not preachy, just a few words they’ll never forget. Fracking’s an enemy to windfarms. So is nuclear, so is coal.’

‘Coal?’

‘In the States, windfarms are under attack from coal shareholders. They’re trying to slow the final decline phase of their company’s life cycle. Politicians are warned that windfarms should pay for road repairs, should pay for property value guarantees, and so on. All rubbish.’

‘Allenhut?’

‘I don’t think many people in the village are visited by helicopter.’

Mrs Merce Harcourt, no longer surprised by anything needed to sell windfarms to a disbelieving public, looked puzzled at Tolly’s next move. He handed over a diecast metal toy bus, red and cream. ‘Put this in your car, it’s Eastern Counties, and like the car stickers it will remind anyone that you’re now a local. Never underestimate the value of dressing your banger if you want to fit in like a local.’

‘This is going to be decided by a public enquiry, and you just focus on three things. Petition, money, evidence.’ He stood and spent a moment staring out of the window before repeating himself.

‘Petition, money, evidence.’

‘Petition – centrepiece of everything. First item on the agenda is how well the petition is going. Someone in the village can knock up a simple online petition, It’s got to be easy and compulsive for lure them in, to put in their names. Not just the signatories. We want their spouses and relatives and neighbours to sign up. If we can jam it with all the tinfoil hat community, that will sabotage the whole thing. The inspector knows that there are only a few hundred people in Allenhut, so he or she’ll get annoyed if there are names from around the world.

‘At school, I helped with a petition to boost local shopkeepers. Found a great website with everything we needed – clipboard, fab ballpoints, our own slogan on the tabards. Ordered Friday, arrived Monday.’

‘Local shopkeepers, eh?’ He shook his head, pausing for a moment.

‘Money - stop them amassing a worthwhile pot. Without money, they can’t hire a legal team to fight. Get families to give, say, £50. That would hardly buy tea and biccies for the committee, plus a couple of toner cartridges for leaflets. Unless they all put £500 or £1,000 on the table, they’ve lost.’

‘Evidence – make sure that it is repetitive. There are just two or three predictable moans, most of them irrelevant in planning law. Spoils the view, cuts the value of my house, will kill all the fishes and birds. The planning inspector has to ignore evidence that just copies what someone has already submitted.’

On her laptop, Merce was exploring the look of the village. ‘What’s that 1950s block? Looks a bit out of place among the local cottages. Gate plate says *Pedestal*.’

‘Tread carefully, there. Tread carefully. It’s sheltered flats for salts who’ve fallen on hard times and have earned our support – and become ex-cons, or soaks, or both. Even the matron is a roll-your-own type. Decades back, a sailor left his tumbledown house to a charity, and they put up the present place, not very comfy, plenty of draughts. But there’s a plan to rebuild – architects, charities, fund-raising – the whole circus.’

‘Okay, so I exclude them from any fundraising.’ She changed tack, ‘You’ve got the environmental groups wanting windfarms, no?’

‘Pretend environmental groups. They’re just following the money. In one town, they’ll fund-raise by campaigning for more railways. In the next town, they’ll campaign against railways.’

Merce’s bullet points went onto her A4 pad.

‘Now, there’s been a mood change in Whitehall. Our friends want to show the public that there has been a full and open chance for residents to debate new infrastructure. So keep a log. How many leaflets and their dates, how many at each public meeting, how many at each committee meeting, and so on. Vital.’

‘You know Whitehall. Do us a favour. Remind them to build a Tube station at Burgess Park. Some folk trust banks. Kennet and I trust that there’s a property boom coming to SE1.’

Tolly Carnegie grunted, ‘Well, you’ll find Allenhut a bit quieter. Nothing goes boom in that village.’

Merce was taking notes as Tolly continued: ‘One other thing. In Allenhut, I may stage a big distraction to stop the locals getting to your windfarm public meeting.’

‘Have I got a windfarm public meeting?’

‘You certainly have. I’ve got the trade attaché at the Brazilian embassy on board, so I’m planning a Brazilian meat promotion in the Win – that’s the village pub - to sabotage your event.’

Tolly was near the bottom of his list, ticking items as he covered them.

‘Now you’ve got a skill that could be a problem. What is it?’

Merce pursed her lips, not sure which problems would slow down the windfarm industry. She shook her head. The windows suddenly rattled as a tired driver and a tired gearbox did something outside.

‘At that Party conference in Blackpool, you took control of the other stewards, after the supervisor and his wife were arrested for that incident at the top of the multi-storey. Alleged incident.’

Tolly paused. ‘This is the problem: you spoke like a leader – clear, convincing, knowledgeable. Go to York for a week. There’s a voice coach there; he can teach you a couple of tricks. When you are in Allenhut, telling people about the perils of our windfarms, your voice can be built to kill your message. Raise the pitch, nasal tone, wrong emphasis, shouty volume, crazy speed, inaudible end to each sentence: Babs will despair but won’t suspect sabotage.’

‘I’ll need throat tablets, a week shouting.’

‘I want to highlight a few Allenhut people that your committee should include or outclude.’

Lists, lists – the ballpoint caught a summary of each.

‘John Primer, smart schoolbook salesman, persuades parents to demand that schools chuck out perfectly good textbooks, to buy new ones. He had a hard time in the military, so he’s angry at anything government. So if Parliament wants electricity or water or sewage works, he’s agin it.

Helen Ravenhead, now she’s smart. Will spend all her time rubbishing Babs Fletcher. Second-hand furniture dealer who had a lucky break, she took a punt on clearing half a dozen filthy pubs in junkie towns that a brewery was closing. She was stuck with a handful of large TVs. So what does she do? Lends them to one of the lovely, crumbling cathedrals in the north of England, and arranges for a one o’clock playing of a single organ tune, day after day, Monday to Friday. Showed the organist on the big screens, and at the end the clergy asked the audience to donate a few coins. Word spread, and now coach parties of tourists join the audience.’

‘And the organists want their share, want a pay rise?’

‘Quite the opposite. Wealthy organ enthusiasts fly in from Frankfurt, Milan, California, wherever, and pay to play. The bishop up there, real one with a mitre – told the Church Times that it’s their seven-minute goldmine. Widor’s Toccata, that’s the tune. Rescued the cathedral finances, and she is now an adviser to people who’ve got an expensive heritage building and no money.’

‘How do you know their stories?’

‘Send them a questionnaire, online or in the mail or on the knocker. First, ask them about their interest, then move the questions on to the real meat.’

‘Banker Casson, lure him in as treasurer. Worked in one of those Mediterranean places far from nosey bank regulators. Fluent Russian, a discreet white, blue, and red flag in his lapel and a smartly-pressed three-piece suit even in that heat. Greeting expensively-dressed newcomers who arrived with large cases chained to their wrists and bodyguards smelling of Georgian tobacco, he had a side-room with bread, salt, and a samovar. He had saved up his gratuities – not his meagre wages - to retire to Allenhut.’

‘So, not really a banker?’

‘A good greeter, but he doesn’t know what double-entry book-keeping is. He’ll be out of his depth, so a useful treasurer. Small donations will kill this.’

Tolly passed over a list of names, circling one of them. ‘Get an early donation from this chap. He’s stinking rich, and if you can get just £75 or £100 off him, that’ll protect you from him telling the rest to dig deep and generously. He developed flat medicine bottles, syringes and tubs so that pharmacists could be deliver things through letterboxes.’

‘Never heard of that, Tolly.’

‘You wouldn’t have. He sold all the designs and patents to some Swiss consortium; they binned, them. They’re no friends of low-cost on-line pharma. Was smart enough to get half his compensation in shares. As I said, stinking rich.’

Merce absorbed all this, occasionally taking to-do notes.

‘Two bits of paper to give you control. First, timetable. Check with the parish council when their objections will be ready, and timetable your campaign’s objections to follow. Because the enquiry only considers the same objection once, yours will have to be ignored. And send out fundraising appeals in bank holiday week. Families will be away, and cannot or will not send in cash.’

‘Second, agendas. First part of the meeting should be filled with rubbish – petition running totals, colour of the posters, size of subcommittees, classroom-style, or theatre-style seating. Then, when we are all tired from Merce’s trivia and want to go home, they’ll rush the important stuff, leaving it in your hands.’

Merce took a break to fetch a proper coffee from Motheaten. Downstairs, there was a short queue at the tills, with the waiting air enthusiasts chatting happily to each other as they edged forward.

‘Before you head for Allenhut, there’s another job in York, a big one, to prepare for a campaign in Scotland.

‘Petitions, torchlight protest marches?’ she asked.

‘Not needed, public opinion is ignored up there. Sure, they do the fighting fund, the petition and submitting evidence, but it’s all theatre. Time-wasting and expensive theatre, and everyone knows that it’s just a school play, a ritual. Scots planning is based on who you know. The Healthy needs to befriend Scotland’s planning chieftain. So we’ll hire his niece – Jinty’s her name - for a charity fundraiser, for the Bothy Box, their big national good cause. It will need a bit of jewellery designed and made.’

‘I could wear it, but couldn’t design it, nor make it.’

‘Let’s look at the elements.’ He slid a folder across, pulling out a photograph and a magazine.

‘This is the main man. He’s the Thane of Dalwhinnie, and controls all the big planning decisions. If he says yes, we’ll have windfarms from Stranraer to Scrabster. No-one knows the origin of his Thanedom, real Thanes are only found a bit further the east, Moray Firth way. Look up the Thane of Dalwhinnie on one of those online legal bookshops. There are three generations listed there as authors. If you need a legal authority on feuholds, crofting rights or udal tenure you will find that the current Thane or his father, or his grandfather wrote the texts on Scots planning law.’

‘Sounds better for continuity, than Parliament making things up as they go along.’

‘It’s a medieval nightmare. Imagine you’re the daughter of a gelateria family with a G34 postcode and you earn a Master of Law at the Bute Hall graduation, and do your devilling under a brilliant member of the Faculty of Advocates. It still won’t be easy to make your reputation and rub shoulders with the likes of the hereditary Thane. Like his forebears, the current Thane is a man for fossilised law. His law books are slow on air rights needed to stop trainee pilots from buzzing hillfarm sheep, or windfarm rights or transmission tower development rights.’ Tolly sighed and added ‘But he’s a bosom buddy of The Healthy from now on.’

‘You mentioned his niece.’

Merce was given a copy of Sporting Gun magazine, opening it at a yellow marker showing a stunning girl who looked late teens. She was photographed on a sunlit grouse moor, promoting some gundog nutrition plan.

‘Jinty’s paying her way through college as a fashion model. She’s doing textile design at the Mackintosh in Renfrew Street, so she knows the score with photo shoots. The Healthy will donate a valuable brooch to the Bothy Box charity. They’ll parade it for a few weeks, whipping up interest and giving bidders time to put some money together.’

‘And the niece, the model niece?’

‘You’ll supervise a local lass who’ll run photo shoots of Jinty modelling the brooch in different situations. Country stuff, office fashions, work overalls, travel wear, and so on. These will be fed to the press, and your local PR lady will get Jinty onto the breakfast telly sofa – wearing the brooch.’

‘Are Textiles Scotland on board?’

‘That’s your local PR’s job, because you will be busy in Allenhut. The photos will reflect all their fabrics – military, education, leisure, sporting.’

‘Hunting, shooting, and finishing school?’



‘Your gofer lass can identify the money people – law society, farmers’ union, Edinburgh money, golfers. Then there’s the diaspora, dollars welcome of course. What about inviting a voluntary fee just for the right to bid? Get Jinty photographed in Hawick: do it at the Reivers’ or the Riding. Then there are the technical fabric people in Dundee, and of course the Highland wool folk, and the Harris Tweed.’

‘If it doesn’t sell, you could donate it to Mrs Merce Harcourt.’

‘Certainly. You could wear it to the JobCentre. The Thane commutes into Waverley most mornings, and he will definitely be at the Scottish country dance beano at Perth. So, on the route into Waverley, and on the Perth weekend I have told the poster contractors to donate a couple of charity six-sheet spaces for Jinty posters at each station. Er, get the posters printed up towards Beardmores, heading to Dumbarton. Make sure there’s a Clydebank Printed tagline visible.’

‘Aimed at one man.’

‘This is the Scottish story. Our windfarm industry wants to say thank you to the community, so we’re lending a hand to the Bothy Box charity. The Healthy donates the brooch; the winning bidder’s cash goes to the charity. And we raise the profile of the Bothy Box, their big national good cause. Classy, dignified photo shoots and starring Jinty, will give a warm glow to her whole extended family – especially our Thane of Dalwhinnie. The credit to the windfarm industry should be in a small font size. Nothing noisy. Speak to a couple of Scots charities, find out which auctioneer is a star at fundraising. And think big – a Scot who owns Midwest oilfields, or has been on the cover of Fortune, and so on. Don’t want someone from the lower ranks who grins and does TV.’

‘The auction – open outcry, or sealed bids?’

‘As it will be on telly, open outcry will look better visually.’

He handed a business card to Merce, naming a lady with an address downwind of Yetts o’Muckhart. ‘I’ll Skype her, draw up a work list, and then do a fly-in to Ingliston. We can rent a small conference room with a whiteboard for an afternoon.’

Merce gestured to the gun magazine photo. ‘This is the real thing; I can ask that photographer to join us for the second half of our chinwag. You can watch us, and chip in if we get stuck. Tolly, tell me about the brooch.’

He added a hardback book to her heap – Haynes Imp manual, complete with a hydraulic fluid stain on the back.

‘This is the brooch: an Imp. Look at those headlights – I want almost one-carat stones. Much cheaper than the full carat, but just as dramatic. The Imp is big north of the border. It’s their modern history. Back in ‘67, the Daily Record reported that Imps had overtaken tenement stairwells as the most popular place for kids to lose their cherry. In York, there’s a historic Imp in an enthusiast’s garage. Meet him with the local jeweller, talk it through with them. A good size, and for heaven’s sake, 18-carat gold – none of this nine-carat stuff. This is Scotland, not Essex.’

‘Expensive.’

‘Expensive? Not getting planning consent in Scotland is what our shareholders and our workers think is expensive. But you’re right. Tell the jeweller to do up a copy - nine carat gold plus paste stones – as a dummy to protect against theft.’

‘Kennet and I are due in Sheffield next week, at the Cutlers. I can go on to York after that.’

He glanced at his crib sheet. ‘Student loans. Don’t want you skint. How much do you owe?’

‘You should have told me.’ She shook her head, ‘I’ve paid it all off.’

‘So you drift out of uni, and you don’t owe any money. And how?’

‘Tourist dog scheme, on one of those Mediterranean holiday islands.’

Tolly looked concerned. ‘Tell me Merce, how and what? Wear your puppy with pride?’

‘I was identifying British holidaymakers – single women over 30 – and persuading them to rescue an abandoned dog and take it home. On my dog rescue leaflet there was always a key phrase that always turned worry into wonga. I’d reassure holidaymakers that only the most humane methods were used to destroy unwanted dogs. And if the leaflets didn’t work, I’d arrange for the dog to be a bit more visible – snooze on the hotel steps, or to eat scraps from the kitchen. The holidaymakers kept falling for it, at around two grand per pooch. Of course, there was commission to the dogs’ home, the vets, the tour reps, but the cash just poured in. Not once did anyone rescuing a dog find it odd that supply and demand were perfectly matched.’

She broke into a broad smile. ‘Once I had a real crisis: ran out of dogs. Had to fly six in from Devon to meet the demand. A vet down there whom I worked with phoned me. He said one of my buyers had actually brought the dog in for a checkup. The animal had flown from Devon and back within a week. The buyer never suspected a thing. The airport manager loved my live freight: he craned-in an air-conditioned hut for animal movements, and posted up a scale of new fees for the business.’

‘So why aren’t I doing this?’

‘Overnight it all got stopped. First, all the birds vanished, and the men with nets had no songbirds for sale, no birds for the pot. The island banned all movement of animals on and off the island. Big wave of rats, although they worked with the tour firms to hide it from the holidaymakers. The harbourmaster banned skippers from mooring if they carried visiting dogs. But I’d made enough to clear my student loan.’

Tolly waved away this what-I-did-in-my-holidays gossip. He pushed across a bottle green report headed *SCPC 2014*.

The initials fazed Merce for a moment. She was not into initials. M.P.H. had stumped her on her first – and fastest – driving test.

‘This SCPC report lists all the French mayors and their adjuncts taking payments from their windfarm industry. Some of them have been jailed. Read and learn. If we handle the process properly, The Healthy doesn’t need to bribe anyone, and doesn’t need the wrong press stories.’

While Tolly carried on, the young woman ran her eye down the index before flipping open the report in a couple of places.

‘I assume you read the language of Voltaire?’

‘Prefer the language of de Vilmorin and Arsan and Colette.’

Merce stabbed one of the entries with a finger. ‘I know that village, the municipal gendarme told Kennet and I that we were improperly dressed.’

‘Unusual that, for their style of sunbathing.’

‘It was, I recall, just before dawn. Kennet would have got frostbite, if we’d been on Kinder Scout.’

‘Yes, over there the mayors are skilled at getting a number two to fish the coins out of the sewage.’

‘Are they behaving now?’

‘Furious. Some of the politicians are now shouty anti-windfarm types.’

He slid a tourist postcard across to her.

‘This is the classic view of Allenhut. The old church, coloured yacht sails in the river mouth, the lighthouse in the distance. Now, see this. This is our straw man.’

He pushed a larger, glossy copy of the same view, this time with rain, with clouds, no yachts in sail, someone fighting an umbrella – and a wind turbine by the church.

‘It’s a laugh. You couldn’t put a wind turbine there. There’s no granite at that point for foundations, and you couldn’t squeeze the cranes and the blades round that corner. And the tower and the yachts at the river mooring block the wind anyway. So the inspector will write a solemn report telling us to remove that one turbine from the plan. And he or she will okay the rest.’

‘And I keep a straight face?’

‘You slag off this individual turbine. Get them angry about it, fight to the death, petitions, marches, MPs pretending to be on your side, the whole pantomime. This artists’ impression – and your quiet leadership – will give us the final part of the country’s power plan.’

‘Batching?’

‘Oh yes, get the villagers to complain about fetching in the concrete by road. We’ll use Glensanda granite, and batch at Great Yarmouth.’

‘Like the church turbine, an easy win?’

He nodded, leaning back, ‘Once you’re settled and connected with Babs Fletcher, I’ll release the windfarm story on the front cover of one of her regular magazines. Now, you need to know what you’re talking about. I’ve arranged – Kennet’s Foreign Office has arranged – a few days for you fussing around wind turbines, understanding them. You had an amah?’

Merce gestured to the whiteboard. The word China was still up there.

‘She hated cleaning up after me, but taught me enough tourist Mandarin to navigate food and drink conversations. Better than my Latin. Failed my GCSE Latin, I confused *rigor mortis* with a type of door lock.’

Tolly nodded. ‘Kennet’s down for some work out East. You’ll know more than I do about his movements. You meet him in Changi and then split. You fly to Chengdu with an intern for one of the contractors.’

She nodded, trying not to show language-panic.

‘I’ll introduce you at Heathrow. Give this intern a break. He’ll probably get airsick as soon as you get pushback from the gate. They call him Sniffles. He’s got a really common name, which I can’t recall.’

‘Clapham Common, Ealing Common?’

‘Probably. From the Cotswolds, but Britain’s quite tolerant these days. You’ll both spend a week or so learning about windfarms. They’re a bit more advanced than we are. We just don’t want you lurking about British windfarms, being photographed or mentioned on the web.’

‘What and why?’

'The Healthy needs you to understand windfarm ops, and not the factory sales stuff. In Allenhut you'll be the silent expert, listening and steering the residents if need be.'

'Kennet won't believe it. Silent Merce.'

'They'll be briefing a wide-eyed Merce, who just wants to find out about life beyond the turbine factories and their marketing spiel. Over there, they're proud of what they've got. They're fed up with us sending blinkered contract people who talk nothing but delivery dates and penny-pinching everything.'

'Nothing wrong with penny-pinching.'

'Everything wrong. We need advanced wind turbines that are delivered on time and are trusted to keep going when the demand soars or the weather gets iffy. When you get back from over there, it'll be York.'

'I'll learn. But first let's get noisy.'



**S**pectacular, but lousy etiquette for a Jacuzzi, Merce,' Tolly Carnegie shouted. Barely clad in that season's Osklen bikini, the girl eased elegantly from a back-starting *rond de jambe* into a front walkover, doing the splits before placing her landing foot on the edge of the club-sized spa bath, as she rolled in to join the others. Stupid. One mistake, and she would be waking up – if lucky – in the John Radcliffe. But she found her place safely, and knifed into the spa with hardly anyone splashed. Tolly and Merce had been joined by four money people from The Healthy. There was Riff Thadden's wife in her 40s, and a young director who was the heir to a family engineering empire.

There was no hoist, so Merce stayed close to a woman who was big in artificial intelligence. She needed a bit of help. One leg was framed in a metal and plastic brace. That was thanks to a motorcycle ride-out a few months earlier. It had ended in a slidefest, thanks to an unexpected hailstorm. It was the first time that the financial press in four countries had detailed a crash story, to reassure readers who had big money invested in the biker woman. The AI lady had the wiry look. She had a private trainer, plus a friendly neighbouring farmer with mid-distance field paths for running. One of her children was doing a doctorate on the origin and theory of numbers at a Saudi university. Another teenager – already seriously rich and based in Helsinki - was doing hands-on migration from datacubes to artificial intelligence processes.

Before Tolly Carnegie moved on to his agenda, Merce talked with her, leaning in close to block out the site noise.

'You've got to deliver, Merce. Data centres need your electricity, so get on with it.'

'Trains? I read about those in the paper.'

'Big profit-maker, AI for zugs, and TGVs, and all the rest. You see a train arrive - maybe 24 doors opening onto the platform. AI is evenly spreading the get-in and get-out, using every door. At the far ends, will allocate seat reservations to students and teenagers. Regular travellers are given reservations close to the platform stairs. Older passengers are stepping out to find the passenger lift

facing them. Happier, quicker customers. But the real winner is shaving a minute or so off every stop, every station, every railway company. Sales up, load factors up, price rises are slightly lower than before. And overnight there are a handful of extra train paths for sale to operators.'

'On my train app, I can see a diagram showing where my carriage door is.'

'That's very yesterday. As you walk to the right spot, your phone now gives a soft beep. The cctv finds seats that are regularly not used; they're cleaner and so AI learns how to allocate them to passengers who film or discuss train travel on social media.'

'Down Burgess Park, we've got electric cars.'

'We've cured that, too. Instead of messaging to free up a charger when an EV hits 80 per cent, we see how far away the driver is. Maybe he's ...'

'She's,' suggested Merce.

'He or she's had a coffee nine minutes away, according to the mobile signal. Well, we can send a come-fetch SMS nine minutes before the motorist is needed. And if the motorist sprints back faster at one particular charging point, the machine learns and responds. No over-staying, fewer moans about charging delays. Get me your windfarms. It's a deal - windfarms for everyone, paycheque for Mrs Harcourt.'

Merce turned to Riff Thadden's wife, who wore a one-piece, 'I'm now a respectable lady. Got a husband to help with my shopping.'

'Of course Merce, spectacle or respectable. I believe you. And what's on your shopping list?'

'Half a dozen eggs.'

'Why are we at Silverstone?'

Merce wiped some water from her eyes. 'Tolly wanted somewhere fast. I think Silverstone does fast.'

'I'd have preferred a sauna, the real Finnish thing.'

'Nah, can't cope with birch twigs.' She gave a hip bump wriggle and added 'Birch twigs bad, roses good.'

'You're a comedian. Do you do stand-up?'

'Only if my husband Kennet and I are in a hurry.'

'Reassure me. You're not one of those Howden women are you?'

'Nah, I was too downmarket for Howden.'

Tolly Carnegie shook his head. 'Every firm should employ at least one crazy. This one fills my quota.'

Their group dip had got off to a slow start. A large racing car transporter had sunk into the soft tarmac. Then the half-dozen folk from The Healthy spent a few minutes on the suntan oil ceremony. The Silverstone race circuit smelt of chlorine, burnt kerosene and that sugary aroma of unleaded. There was a roar as a couple of motorcycles passed unseen behind a fence. Then three shouty voices – also unseen - started an informed but loud discussion about torque settings. Two shiny new H160 choppers in the livery of a newly-famous motor racing sponsor slowly looped around and queued to land, in near silence.

A waitress knelt down to put a couple of plastic beakers of white wine by each guest. She was humming the windfarm song tune. Tolly Carnegie had parked a pair of Italian sandals for which – according to the Financial Times' *You can't afford this* magazine - there was a three-month waiting list. He spoke as soon as the server had left.

'Garrington – he's chair of Parliament's Select Committee on Energy Security. We've got a great opportunity to dump him. But you've got to cough up the cash. His idea of energy security is to not favour renewables or gas or nuclear. He wants to just let the market decide. There's an election due in May, and we'll sabotage his campaign. The law says that if one of the candidates dies during the campaign, voting is cancelled. They hold a fresh election about a month later. In that month, the Energy Security committee will choose a replacement chairman. So, when Garrington gets elected he'll be a month too late to get the chairmanship.'

The windfarm party had their heads pressed together as Tolly spoke. 'This is the scheme. We set up a fund called Vote for Hospices, and make a big donation to the hospice in Garrington's district. In return, the hospice puts up a spoiler candidate who dies between nomination day and polling day. Good value for the hospice patients. Good value for The Healthy.'

One of the captains of industry, whose only joy in life was reading consolidated profit-and-loss accounts, looked up at Merce as she slithered up from the spa bath. He squinted at her in the sunshine. 'Worth the risk? Will it work?'

'If I'm involved, of course it will. That's my prediction, but I'm not a medium.'

Riff Thadden's wife looked her up and down. 'Not a medium? In that coozy, I'd say a large.'



Climbing out, Merce pulled on a T-shirt. The printed photo showed half a dozen newly-hatched chirpy chicks nestling in a supermarket six-box.

Mrs Thadden shook her head. 'Brekkie was eggy bread. Now we've met eggy girl.'

Chapter 5 – The full Wallace Hartley



Heathrow at sparrow-fart was spectacularly chocker. Tolly Carnegie nodded towards a coffee shop. They were queuing for a dawn coffee, prior to the check-in area. A server had already taken their panini order, so that it would be ready by the time they reached the barista. No sign of her fellow-passenger.

‘Bad news, Merce,’ reported Tolly. ‘That graduate trainee I spoke to you about has bailed. Sniffles couldn’t make it. The firm he used to intern for is delighted. He hadn’t bothered to check his passport. So he then paid extra for a quick renew, and had it posted to his old student digs. His boss lady says it has saved her from wasting a year on seeing if he’s right for her industry. And he’s not.’

‘So, sacked at dawn?’

‘Not quite. My wife, my HR wife, has warned that Sniffles’ boss shouldn’t sack him until your flight takes off, and I record proof of the time. Compo if he’s sacked while there’s still time for him to climb aboard.’ He paused. ‘Heard your windfarm song on the car radio on my way here. And just before you arrived, there was a school party going through to departures. They were all doing the rotate-arms dance. Well done.’

Merce smiled over the top of her coffee.

‘Remind me: what does Riff Thadden’s wife do?’

‘Restraints for working at height, and fall arresters.’

Tolly nodded, ‘Windfarms are a new industry. But there’s half a million towers up already, and since 1975, we’ve had over 150 fatalities.’

‘Falls?’

‘Not many. But we need wild, windy places for barges and trucks and cranes to transport awkward parts. Transport – especially cranes are killers – crushing the staff or driving into power cables. They’re meant to learn from the forest industry, how to cut a safe route up a steep hill. But do they?’ He shook his head.

‘And on a hilltop, hypothermia has cost us a couple of people. Your engineer hosts will kit you out, and make sure that you don’t fall, and don’t drop things. So don’t cough it. Anyway, if you do, The Healthy will give you a real funeral, the full Wallace Hartley.’

‘Don’t want anything as modest as a full Wallace Hartley. Fly in my school and college friends. They’re in the States, Brazil, New South Wales. A dozen big limos, plus a dozen diesel flatbeds with



tableaux of my life, my big life. For that bit, you'll want a troupe of mummers from just outside Cape Town. For nosh, a row of smoky fire pits for multiple ox roasts, plus a courgette and cauliflower option for the sensible eaters. For fuel, use the Barnsley Seam. And a chopper to sprinkle rose petals. The big London shops, and Burberry, should only close for two days as a mark of respect. A full week's closure would be over the top. Shroud of ballistic nylon that will last 1,000 years, and a triwall cardboard coffin. Then somewhere with meadow grass growing over. So, a green burial, please.'

Her boss was nursing his coffee and snack. He responded with a non-committal 'Hmm.'

'And another thing Tolly: when I brief you on these important details, don't roll your eyes.'

'Oh, sorry. I dozed off. Have you quite finished?'

Merce pounced: '*Let young people have enough sleep*, the Chairman said. Tell me, what are the ethics of roping in the hospices?'

'If you're ill and struggling to heat your flat and your family struggle to visit you because they can't afford choking 19<sup>th</sup> century petrol engines, then you'll be glad that Merce Harcourt...'

'And Tolly Carnegie?'

'... and Tolly Carnegie are delivering electricity, and at the same time bringing a palliative hospice at home team to your bedside.'

The woman nodded.

'Look, Merce. You've seen photos of wind turbines, shiny, beautifully composed shots. The reality is that a handful get drips or spray from gearbox oil. So the cabinets down at the base may have a few drops of oil, waiting to catch fire. Those spotless rungs on the ladder might have an invisible film of slippery oil or hydraulic fluid, so please don't concentrate on keeping your overalls clean. Priority is to get up safely.'

'Slippery when wet.'


'And keep warm. On a sunny day, the towers are like an oven, and you'll drip sweat as you go up. But as soon as the sun clouds over and north wind arrives, and you're in the nacelle, you'll know it. Merce, come back in one piece.'

'Merce is good at coming back in one piece. My most recent incident was one of those budget all-night taxi firms. The try-your-luck driver was unable to even drive himself to the hospital, once I'd shown him the error of his ways. And he'll need a new photo on his licence now that his cheek boasts a spiral scar from his taxi's ciggy lighter.'

'Well, don't do that to your pilot to Singapore, until you land.'

'Three days at Changi. Eat, swim, and then eat and swim again. Kennet will park my bag at the High Commission, and I've just got some practicals in a small backpack.'

He nodded, 'And for heaven's sake, your hosts may not be happy if you leave handwipes or oily rags or anything up top. One food wrapper or one paper tissue might start a two-million blaze.'



Chengdu was the new China. Modern, efficient, squeeze crowded. Merce was met by Engineer Piao Hán, late thirties, faint cologne smell, with well-laundered overalls. He was confident and authoritative when negotiating three types of unsmiling people in uniform: health, security, and parking.

Someone had been at the truck. The Dongfeng stood parked at the side of the square, the canvas tilt top replaced by a steel body with high side rails around the roof platform, and a step-ladder bolted between the cab and the rear body. It wore do-the-job tyres with the circumferential grooves needed for wet or snowy grip. Although the tyres were a bit battered, they still boasted the glossy patina of modern high-modulus construction needed for good off-road behaviour. Up front, to spread the load evenly, two spare wheels did nothing to improve the driver's view. Racked behind the cab were pale-blue jerrys of water.

For venturing high above the treeline, where nothing grew except the wind and the windfarms, this truck was the business. And with Sniffles correctly positioned at the JobCentre in Cirencester, Merce would not be squashed next to his paper hankies, his inhaler, his breath freshener, or his worrying much-scratched mole (which would be excised a year later, just in time to save his life). And Sniffles would quickly snug himself into a government call-centre, where he became the go-to barrack-room lawyer for sick-leave entitlement.

Across the square outside Chengdu airport, a cyclist wobbled to a halt in front of a billboard. He stubbed out his cigarette and pushed it back into a box, looking up at the poster. Within minutes, the Four Pests poster had been overpasted with a new message about a fast-food restaurant. The final sheet of the new poster covered an angry-looking rat, replacing it with a smiling family, each member holding a cardboard pack of food.

In the Dongfeng, the driver's teeth flashed with gold as he picked at some grapes. Mrs Merce Harcourt shouldered her pack and as Engineer Hán led her over to introduce Knoxy. 'More gold than Fort Knox', he explained to the visitor. The two men sported an embroidered wind turbine on the breast of their overalls. A warm front had passed while the plane came in from Changi, so Chengdu was looking washed and sparkling. Now, an anticyclone was arriving just in time to mess up their week on the windfarm. Knoxy tossed his head skywards. 'Cumulus clearing by the morning. We need more wind, not less.'

Knoxy nosed the truck towards the centre, not rushing in the flow of buses and cars. At one point, half of a soft ripe apple squashed on the windscreen, thrown up by the dual rear-wheels of the vehicle in front. The two men glanced at each other and smiled. Only once did he pull out to overtake, when the city's 5-G mobile phone testbed bus paused at a stop, with crowds trying to climb aboard. After half an hour, he turned down Julong Road, while Engineer Hán gestured at the equipment shops clustered here.

The visitor had worked hard since doors-open at the airport. Walking slowly, she had absorbed the arrivals terminal signs – English and Mandarin. She had absorbed the posters advertising famous brands, certain that the Chinese messages were pretty close to the ones displayed in London. Piao Hán reached out with reasonable English. Knoxy did his bit too, his show-and-tell filling in Merce's knowledge of the everyday nouns of truck, road, sign, bridge, and so on.

‘Right, let’s get you paperworked,’ said Hán. He took scans of her passport, her working-at-heights certificate, and her medical approval. He glanced at the crisp new provisional driving licence from the airport. Pointing to Knoxy, he continued ‘We’re all under 40, at this end of the industry. That’s the realistic climbing age limit. But these new 150 metre towers can’t be climbed, so maybe we can carry on for another decade.’

‘But there’s ladders?’

‘Only for coming down, if the hoist doesn’t work.’

‘Let’s get Mrs Harcourt kitted out,’ suggested Knoxy. They inspected her boots – steel toecaps still covered by the leather - good, high ankles against nature’s unknowns - good. Helmet drawn from a locker at the back of the truck, good fit once the chinstrap was fiddled with. But the gloves drawn from the truck were too big, and the overalls’ legs – new from a sealed packet - a tad short. Knoxy prioritised a cigarette in his cab, flipping open his green Lesser Panda carton. The other two headed into one of the businesses. A tiny seamstress, perhaps the mother of one of the other staff, took down the generous trouser leg hems to give a comfy, smart finish. Merce was treated to a green tea while she waited. She decided that the toilet was okay once she had pushed open the paint-stuck window.

Hán looked over the gloves on sale. Did he want extra grip, or low-temperature flexibility, or electrical insulation, or cuffs that protected the wrists, or ventilated backs to wick away the sweat, or protection from cement burns or chemicals? He found a type that would do the job, and took the last two pairs in Merce’s size. She redressed in her overalls, transferring her phone, and some mints from her travel clothes. Back at the truck, Hán tugged at her sleeves and leg hems.

‘Up top, loose clothing isn’t in fashion in the wind.’

Her two hosts opened a new pack with a safety harness. It was almost the same as the one that Merce had worn on her training. The labels were in Mandarin and English, and dated. She ran her fingers over the carabiners and the stitching, nodding then smiling as it all passed her inspection. The men adjusted the straps, and tugged at her dorsal and sternal D’s. Before uncaging their visitor, Knoxy took her phone to shoot her all togged-up, including helmet, in front of the truck.

The engineer spread a couple of maps across the steering wheel, ‘This is where we’re heading. A night in the roadhouse, and then up, high up, to the windfarm.’ He turned to the other sheet, showing the higher ground.

‘That first map, the road gets a bit wonky once we head north from the expressway to the windfarm.’

‘But the one-to-ten-thou with the five-metre contours, that’s really bringing the windfarm layout alive,’ Merce observed.

She was reassured that they all knew where and when. The trio headed on up Julong Road, and turned north out of Chengdu. Hán took a clipboard that Knoxy had been working on while he had been parked up. It was a rough layout of some sort of certificate. Merce was handed the clipboard.

‘Elegant,’ she observed.

‘Elegant and classy,’ responded Hán. ‘Knoxy could earn his keep as a calligrapher. We’ve a lad in our village. When he goes, we’ll reward him with an acknowledgement of his character and how he’s improved with us. We’ve a room for youngsters who’ve had problems – health or behaviour. This one has learnt his lesson, turned round his attitude. All our own children leave for the big towns.’

They want - they deserve - colleges and cafés. So our village takes in folk who need to be straightened out.'

As they ate the kilometres on the expressway, Merce edited the photo on her phone. She removed the wind turbine symbols seen on her helmet and overalls, before sending the approved, official portrait to Kennet. The three took turns charging their phones from the dashboard socket. The two men had company phones, as well as their own. On his tablet computer, Engineer Hán's screensaver was a composed shot of a teenage girl. In her background was a tall but narrow cabinet with many books, and a fold-down cabinet door as a desk working area. There was a slide-rule and a microscope with both an eyepiece and a camera lead. Almost hidden was a temple tip from some spectacles, and the girl had a tiny red mark on the bridge of her nose. She was holding up a diploma with a large number 1.

'Your daughter?'

'My bridge engineer daughter, one day. Thousands get built, and behind them are the maintenance engineers. Fresh air, and a job for life. Number one diploma.'

'I thought eight was the lucky number.'

'Putting in the hard work to come first is luckier.'

'In one of my classroom exams – hygiene for girls - I came eighth.'

'How many took the exam - fifty, a hundred?'

'Eight.'

'Long trek ahead. Just past Lanzhou, should get to our windfarm tomorrow evening. All you have to do, is get some shut-eye. And tomorrow on the expressway, you can spell Knoxy and I for a few hours. Your mountains, Snowdon, Benjamin Nevis, did you ever drive up them?'

'Not really motorist mountains, more Shanks' Pony.'

'Our windfarm is at 1,600 metres, a good bit higher than those two. Plenty of wind, and the usual roads we put in for construction. I might treat myself to a cigarette when we come back down, but not in that thin air.'

Merce had not yet seen the engineer smoking; she saw the Knoxy at the wheel, doing the eye-rolling bit.

Knoxy murmured to Merce, 'Quingshui river. A few tunnels, and then in half an hour we'll escape at the Muyu tollbooth. There's a good village where we'll have something to eat, and stop the night.'

On the way, they passed a roomy truck stop, new and soul-less and with not many cars or goods vehicles. Then the corrugated mountains began, lush with the tropical rains and humidity, with rivers and villages nestled between. The long tunnels were 2 k and 4 k and 5 k and more.

After Knoxy steered them off the main road, the forests closed in on the road heading back down to a village. The café looked freshly-painted, with washed windows, and a smart row of lidded bins. Some bicycles were locked to some iron rings spaced along part of the wall.

Inside, each corner of the dining area had loops of stainless steel wire locking the flat roof to the adjoining walls. Patched cement or paint showed that this seismic protection was a refit, and not original construction.

‘Russian service,’ promised the owner, as she placed individual plated portions up on the counter. ‘No more shared community dishes. Quicker dining, and we don’t need those old, oversized tables.’

‘Mr Harcourt and I sometimes go to a couple of Sichuan restaurants near us in London,’ commented Merce.

‘The real thing?’

‘They’re run by the same family. There’s a take-it-home that’s built to a price – more rice, less meat - and 100 metres away they also run a sit-and-spend.’

‘Which do you frequent?’

‘The sit-and-spend costs more, but for the extra money, you get to see the staff smile.’ And for a smart learner, the two-languages menu was easier to navigate than a pocket dictionary.

In Muyu, star of the show was shredded pork with garlic sauce, and Knoxy told their host to go easy on the pickled peppers, to avoid the usual false fishy flavour. The bamboo shoots were as good as any Merce remembered from New Cross. Then it was sliced orange time, to finish. With refills of green tea, the three talked.

‘Mrs Harcourt, let me tell you our work plan,’ smiled Knoxy. ‘Get your camera battery charged up, this is the tourist trip of a lifetime. Picturesque mountaintop farming cottages in the old style, viewpoints with a visitors’ plaque to explain what you are seeing, folk dancing, postcard kiosks, and a display of musical chainsaw juggling by forestry apprentices.’

Merce looked doubtful.

Knoxy continued. ‘The finale will be the lady who runs the agricultural welding training workshop. She and her acetylene torch will show how to cook a family meal in 20 seconds.’

‘Will her husband be there?’

‘No. He’s off with food poisoning.’

Piao Hán came to the rescue. ‘Well, that was plan A, Knoxy’s plan A. The reality is a tiny bit different. Up above the treeline, just bare rock and turbine towers fighting some bleak weather. And we have two busy jobs that you can help with.’

‘Help and learn, that’s why I’m your guest.’

‘Priority is to poke inside some gearboxes.’

‘I saw a combine harvester gearbox in pieces, a while back.’

‘Then you’ll know what we’ve got up top. Combine harvesters, rice harvesters – all the same gearboxes. But up in a wind turbine, these weigh many tonnes. Not something to drop on your toes. Let me show you something.’ He poked at a tablet computer screen, and it filled with a spreadsheet of numbers.

‘This is vibration analysis of the windfarm we’re heading for. Now, let’s look at the last 12 months.’

‘From a health and usage monitoring system?’

He suddenly looked serious. ‘You’re spot on. Our gearboxes and helicopter gearboxes have the same ancestors. But ours are many times heavier, more solid.’

He poked again, and the numbers changed. ‘And sort them high to low. And map their locations.’ An aerial view with a tower-by-tower ranking was displayed.

‘Lowest numbers are round the edge,’ observed Merce.

He poked again, ‘And this is windspeed, by location.’

‘Again, lowest numbers are round the edge,’ observed Merce.

‘Exactly. Separate measurements, but the same issue.’

‘Expected?’

‘Oh yes. A year or so before the planning stage we used some laser gadget to map 3-D wind flows. In the centre of a windfarm, the ground is a plateau of fractured but level rock. But out on the edges, we’ve got mountains, valleys, and forests. So the roughness class is about one in the centre of the windfarm, but three around the edges. High roughness means more gusts, and lower windspeeds.’

‘So a taller tower means that the gearbox lasts longer. Where would I find zero roughness?’

‘Out at sea, class zero. But that’s 1,400 kilometres away, and the towns, the farms, the industry, the data centres, need power here. But every sudden gust, every squally hammer-blow is an impact load on the main shaft and the gears in a really expensive gearbox.’

‘Big, open farmland – good for windfarms?’

‘Not really. Tree shelterbelts are the only protection for the villages, when the drought brings a dustbowl. And the drought will one day come. And those trees means roughness, and choppy wind. So when you hear someone asking for good housing land to be used for turbines, it’s the same story. Blocks of flats mean gusty wind.’

‘So, we’re doing a gearbox looksee?’

‘Yes. We’ll start at the worst tower, and slowly see if any of the teeth inside show stress and might crack, or if there’s anything visible. If they were the size of a Dongfeng gearbox, we’d just pull out the gear or the pinion and ultrasound it. On the railways, my grandmother used to tap the wheels with a hammer. She could listen for a flat sound that warned of a crack. Before we go up top, look at these two pairs of photos’, Engineer Hán said, fiddling with his tablet.

‘Look pretty similar to me,’ replied Merce after a slow peer at the screen.

‘Yes, that’s the right answer. The left-hand tooth is good, the right-hand one has the smallest of stress cracks. And you can hardly see the difference.’

Fiddle, faddle. ‘Now look at the next pair.’

‘Ah, the difference comes to life.’

‘And it’s the same pair of good and bad. What’s new is the lube oil that catches the damage better, and then the camera catches it. In a factory, we could use dye penetrant inspection. But 150 metres up, the existing oil will help us out. And it works whether the oil is bit old or fresh. Won’t catch everything, but it is going to point us to any surface problems that are small or quite fine, or unexpected roughness that wasn’t there when it left the factory.’

‘And the other job?’

‘That’ll be our first couple of days. Drone filming of experimental blade surfaces. Ships, aircraft, even weather reporting all use radar, but these tall new towers block their view. Signals bounce back. And workboat radars get so swamped with crazy reflections that skippers ignore them, and then steer into unlit towers. We are testing a fine dispersal coating - it feels like a scouring pad. Reflects back only a tiny amount of radar signal.’

‘Will your drone films win an Oscar?’

‘Pretty boring stuff, close-ups of rough surfaces. We can’t roll it out this new surface until we know that it lasts. Dust, sand, salt waves around offshore towers, snow and ice storms are all going to smooth out the texture. So, might not be worth doing.’

‘But nobody knows yet?’

‘That’s for the lab people to analyse. All we have to do is collect the footage.’

‘But you’ll be losing the surface, anyway. Cavitation will strip off any coating.’

‘We’ve got that under control. If windspeed gets too high, we feather the blades - slow them down – so no real cavitation anymore.’

‘Eighty-twenty’, said Merce. ‘If the towers are laid out so that the radar can see through 20 per cent of the windfarm, that’s enough of a picture.’

‘That’s our Plan B, like a forest firebreak. Effective, cheap and durable, without any short-lived coating.’

‘A bit like Mrs Harcourt then, effective, cheap and durable. What else is on the to-do list?’

‘Day three, we’ll look at gearboxes. And I’ll be back with Knoxy in a few weeks to test a thin coat of connected carbon fibre over the blades. When heated, it stops ice forming and halting the output. Anyway, that’s the theory, but it still needs someone to drive up the hill and test it.’

At Merce’s request, one of the two men fetched the instruction book for the drone. Alongside each section was an English translation, so she spent an hour sipping tea and matching up the two languages. She was relieved that up here, she could follow the Southwestern Mandarin dialect. Her vocab was building, with all the repetition of words about expressway driving, and about windfarms.

For the night, the men hogged the truck, and their guest was treated to a clean, small room, which shook a little when the café’s walk-in fridge compressor coughed into life every half hour. But it was well architected for the summer, with vents on opposing walls, to allow a draught through. Skyping Kennet, she showed him a close-up of a sleepy spider up in one corner, resting on the looped wire. When the newly-weds had allocated the chores of married life, Kennet had refused to take responsibility for removing arachnid visitors. In return, he agreed to sort things out when paper hankies ended up in the washing machine.

## Chapter 6 – Village is family



The flight and the drive had given Merce a solid sleep on the first night of her pre-Allenhut orientation.

She surfaced at five to eight, and the three travellers crowded at the serving counter. ‘Came in just a minutes ago. Look at these,’ the owner boasted, showing off two large flat wicker baskets of mushrooms.

The truck cab was filled with a sweet Virginian-like haze from Knoxy’s smokes. It was a lot classier than the poilu leaf that had given Merce a cough on her first schoolgirl trip to Paris. That had smelt like socks on a bonfire. Now Knoxy led the way through more expressway tunnels, then pulled in. It was time for Merce to risk their lives.

Thankfully, the truck was free from electronic toys. The radio did not display the names of the tunes playing. The rev counter had simple sectors; green – good, and red – bad. There was no stupid beep to tell you that the next truck behind was up your arse. Merce adjusted the seat for height and angle, after a few k’s, she relaxed. Knoxy finished his fag and dozed off, losing his panicking stare at the newcomer’s road skills.

The highway was dry and clear and mostly empty. Merce felt quite at home until the two men woke with a shout. She had punched the hazard warning light switch, and jammed on the brakes. Pressed exactly as instructed. A pack of cigarettes flew forward to land on the windscreen. As they looked ahead, the roadway suddenly filled with sheep, grey and not easily seen in the adjoining shrubland. But Merce had seen them, and earned a smile and a wave from the two shepherds who leapt from their noisy ATVs to shoo back the intruders, and weave shut the damaged expressway fence. The engineer took over, and they drove into a busier district, with more vehicles. Set back a bit were prosperous-looking farming villages and small industrial buildings, with plenty of vans and occasional freight vehicles.

Pointing at the radio, Hán turned to his guest. ‘This truck’s the only one in the depot with all the fancies - short-wave, long-wave, online wave. One of our engineers fiddled with it. She used to listen to Radio Monte Carlo, until it stopped.’ Merce leaned in front of Knoxy and keyed in a couple of buttons on the screen to find *Lilibullero*. The usual stuff: a small African township – renowned for its irrigation projects - had launched a two-day festival to celebrate getting over-the-top compensation in Sovereigns from a Royal whose aircraft had turned a grazing beast into a barbecue treat. And a nun in a contemplative Order of poverty had renounced her solemn vows and left her convent, after a spectacular lottery scratchcard win.

‘My colleague would have been a squeeze in here,’ observed Merce.



Hán shook his head, 'We'd have just taken a long-cab truck, like a fire engine layout with an extra row of seats behind the driver instead of just this bunk. Or he could have travelled in our plastic basket stretcher, strapped down on top.'

After another few hours on the road, Knoxy suddenly interrupted the music from the radio. 'Ten k's.' He gestured to a roadside pillar surmounted by a steering wheel, with the distance displayed.

The straggling, single storey Steering Wheel roadhouse had been painted white a while back, but that colour had lost the battle against blown dust. Even the steering wheels in a row around the entrance were coated in road dust. Simple, big letters advertised *Food, local fruit, rooms*.

The roadhouse was dwarfed by the fleet of trucks outside. A convoy of windfarm trucks were in one line – cranes, minibuses, four-wheel drives, low-loaders. In other lines were farm produce trucks – some with grain, some with tobacco. Three or four empty cattle trucks with trailers were lined up. Those looked as though they had just been washed out, with no smell, and water dripping from their sides. Dust had been blown into those edges where the parking lot had curbs.

Hán pulled in parallel to a school bus. About 20 girls there were singing the windfarm song, keeping time with their arms. Hán had a heads-together with the teacher. Merce took the key to the women's block from the manager at the counter, and headed across the vehicle park for a five-minute shower. She had learnt - on the Dover to Calais - that wherever you see trucks, there are free showers. Hán and Knoxy waited for her return, and the trio settled at a quiet window table, keeping an eye on the Dongfeng. Hán gave a nod and a wave to an older man holding court at a table of six on the other side of the café.

Hán turned to Knoxy and Merce, 'Busy site like this, I could do a real roadhouse. For a start,' he gestured at the ceiling, 'it wouldn't have warm white, white, cool white and daylight tubes at random. And it would even run to an extractor fan or two. And a vehicle wash outside.'

There was a cabbage smell, and condensation stains on the windows. The roadhouse was about half-full, and diners' eyes swivelled to the television when the weather forecast came on, but otherwise the box was ignored. At one table, two men slept with their heads on the table. The café boss removed their bowls, and after bringing them fresh drinks gently shook each one awake, tapping his watch.

There was a low hum of conversation, and clouds of cigarette smoke. Despite the brown ceiling and the smeary windows, the floor, tables, and seats were spotless. Even the plastic tubs of red bean curd sauce were well-presented and fresh-looking.

Back beyond the pass, a thin but muscular chef was hand-pulling La-Mian noodles, methodically and quickly tugging the dough mound. The thick strips were stretched, rested, folded, refolded. And finally the pale and thin pasta was eased into the bubbling stock to simmer before being served. A couple of adjoining empty tables were crowded by the children, with their snacks and drinks. Hán reported that their group had been doing a project on a future windfarm site.

'They are just turned loose, free to study whatever interested them. Some were looking at insects, some wanted to identify the minerals in the gravel, others were measuring how the prevailing wind had left a dendrology fingerprint on the angles of growth.'

The roadhouse manager – order taking, serving, table clearing - was as busy as his cook. With a free sleeve he wiped a bead of sweat from his face before it ended up in someone's bowl. Knoxy had a query.

'Chicken fresh?'

‘Wear some specs. Then you’ll see tyre marks on it, where I ran over it on my way to work. That’s how fresh it is.’

‘We’ll have the chicken, then.’

As the teenagers moved out, one called to the boss. He shot outside. Merce wiped a clear peephole in the condensation. She peered through the window. The café man posed in the group photo in front of his business’s painted signboard. The girls held up a giant name sign shaped like a shovel, Dig Dig School. Then again they broke into the windfarm song, arms flailing as the video had taught them.

Hán did the one-minute explainer. ‘They renamed the school after the last earthquake, when the children paired off to find and dig out anyone elderly. I expect Mrs Harcourt’s school had its proud moments.’

‘Well, they were famous for sending me off on a private study visit to a museum or gallery or visitor farm, whenever the school inspectors were due. And I did get the geometry prize.’ So Merce’s study days, which always included a couple of snooker hours to learn angles and velocity, had paid off.

After the three had eaten, they walked over to the diner to whom Hán had waved earlier. His colleagues left and he stood while the newcomers bowed their heads slightly. A distinguished-looking man, short, bespectacled, wearing overalls that seemed more equal than the rest – tailored, laundered, pressed – shook hands with Merce, Hán and Knoxy. On his breast-pocket, his logo looked as though the Emperor’s embroidery workshop had been using up some spare gold thread.

‘Engineer Chen, meet my English visitor, Mrs Harcourt.’ Merce gave a slight bow. With both hands, she presented Hán’s boss with her card, holding the Mandarin side for a moment for him to read it. The three sat at Chen’s table. Their host smiled and asked Merce: ‘Did your truck have a skilled, safe driver this morning?’ He spoke slowly, enunciating clearly as if at a microphone. His tone was gravelly. With a curious habit, he put his hands up on either side of his face and both forefingers pointed outside to where Merce had parked up.

‘Our driver – she was excellent,’ replied Merce.

Knoxy slowly rose, pulling his sports newspaper out of his overall pocket - it was folded to a dramatic graphic of cyclists, cheering crowds and a route map. He left the talking classes to do their thing.

Chen leaned towards Hán, ‘How was your course, how was Chengdu?’

‘Useful. We talked about output tide. Oh, and how to yaw or feather in a typhoon, but I don’t do offshore – the others did. When my legs won’t let me rush up and down the towers, I shall become master of the output tide software.’

Chen nodded, ‘My father - and my father’s father - were engineers, real ones. Can’t see myself understanding all this new stuff. Spanners are the real thing!’ He laughed as he slapped the table.

‘It’s just speeding up what we already do. If more wind or less wind means that we have to call-up or call-down fossil power stations, then output tide software allows us to make that extra one or two percent income or savings. But it’s work in progress. Will a rise or fall last two minutes or two hours? Unproven.’

The senior engineer saw that Merce’s eyes had been distracted by an east-to-west contrail seen through the window. ‘That’s from Almaty. If we need to talk wind turbine metallurgy – nickel, zinc

or copper – then Almaty airport is always in the mix. Did you have a window seat flying over, Mrs Harcourt?’ he asked.

‘On the leg to Changi, yes.’

‘At the end of your Airbus, Boeing wings, there’s a little upturned winglet, like a broken fingernail. Out in this truck park, Engineer Hán will show you a typical blade, tell you why we don’t have winglets.’ Again, with both forefingers, he pointed to the convoy spread across another part of the truck park.

‘Why we don’t have winglets *yet*,’ emphasised Hán.

Chen bid Hán’s trio goodbye, and Merce and the two men went outside. Merce climbed onto a trailer to look at an old blade that had been coarsely chopped into three parts for disposal. The engineer gave the lecture.

‘Lightning will knock off the winglet, so we get less power on that one blade. The other two carry on unbalanced, and eventually the gearbox could shake itself to pieces. Feel the surface – reasonably smooth. You’ll see the difference this afternoon when we start filming the experimental radar blades.’

‘If more blades mean more efficiency, why stop at three blades?’

‘We get three per cent more power when we move from two to three. But moving up to four only gives us half a percent more power.’

‘But the marginal win is still a win.’

‘Not really, as each of the four would need a thinner root. So it wouldn’t last as long.’

‘What’s all this timber for?’ Merce asked, kicking a baulk before climbing down.

‘Some coroner told us to use timber dogs instead of resting blades or nacelles on the ground. Too many snakes hiding inside. We had a fatal snake bite at the top of one tower, cost us a good rigger.’

All three returned inside, so that Knoxy could negotiate for some fruit. There were five minutes of amateur dramatics. The manager wanted his per-item price. Knoxy wanted a full tray of peaches, and a heavy net of melons. Hearing Knoxy’s accent, the man at the counter knew he was local, and not a big-city visitor. But his overalls and his truck hinted at a secure paid job, someone who could pay full price. They met in the middle; face saved on each side. There would be just space for the peaches in the Donfeng’s fridge, and the three would share a melon before setting off.

‘Did you have a look, Mrs Harcourt?’ asked Chen. ‘Those bits outside, expensive business. TCE is how I’m judged. Total cost of energy – a broken blade, a fire, a dead gearbox. Those catch the headlines, easy to photograph. But underneath, yes, underneath, we also need to squeeze that extra tiny percentage of output to help our people, their farms, their factories. Maybe we should schedule planned downtime just when spot prices are low, maybe bundle repairs to do several on the same visit, or perhaps get a specialised team that just does one repair fix again and again to the right standard, and fast.’

Merce understood now why she had been sent here to learn.

‘This blade outside - a batch of porous blades, damp, then too brittle in an early September frost. A great bustard, 20 kilograms, hit dead centre, and the shear web took the full impact. There wasn’t enough overlap into the spar cap, so the spar broke loose from the shear web. We were back on the

grid – new blade, new bearings, new hub bolts – within 103 hours, not a record, but getting things right helps the budget more than rushed bad workmanship.’

‘Or workwomanship.’

He showed her one of his output graphs, enlarging a tiny section to show an abrupt halt from a turbine.

‘The old blade, will you bury the bits?’

‘Have to. No-one wants old fibreglass. But soon the new carbon-fibre blades can be rescued. Chop them into a six-metre container, for our recycler in Ningbo. He sells them to make airline seats, and light, strong steering wheels, and trim, and car door handles. Oh, and those biker back protectors. It’s all a small help to our total cost of energy.’

‘So, we need more damaged blades?’ Merce laughed. Chen put on his manager face and shook his head.

‘We call them surplus blades. Don’t use words like broken or damaged.’

‘First time for a bustard?’ asked Merce.

‘I’ll tell you what the first time is: all that was left of the bird was the skeleton and feathers. Never seen that up there before. Rat droppings nearby, that bird had been ratted.’

From the Steering Wheel roadside halt, Knoxy was concentrating on his gears. The truck was climbing, occasionally dodging wide farm or forestry vehicles coming the other way. The expressway was hours behind them. At one point, Merce was shown a pair of old wind turbines in the distance. ‘Our village, up that road. Knoxy and I hail from there.’

Bare hills were seen more often, as they approached the tree line, and then saw a col between two small peaks. There was a large, gravelled area, stretching on both sides of the road. Knoxy turned in and stopped. The view was clean and clear and sunny. And cool.

‘Photo break?’

‘Mobile phone break. If you want to call or text Mr Harcourt, this is your last chance before we get to work.’ He gestured to the col. ‘From here on, there’s no phone signal. We had an engineer last year, needed help in a hurry. But until we got back here, we couldn’t call to warn the nurse in one of the big villages that we were coming down with him.’

Knoxy bent over two or three times, shaking his head. He had picked up a broken charger cable, and a few wrappers from sim card mounts and their wrappers. ‘I apologise. This is not really how we live,’ he said softly. The offenders were stuffed into the little box where he carefully gathered his empty cigarette packets and other unwanted. Merce ended her call by pushing the wish-you-were-here app icon, which sent Kennet a text message with her GPS location.

By mid-afternoon, they were deep amid the windfarm. For the first time, the visitor understood the wide, new roads to each tower, where cranes had assembled the Meccano. But the rest was stony ground, territory for boots, not shoes. This high up, the stones were sharp, angular as if they had just split in the night from frosty rocks. Yes, lower down after a couple of years of tumbling down a riverbed, these would be smooth pebbles, beach pebbles, but not up here.

Earlier, their route had taken them past a large borrow-pit, where Knoxy pointed out a hard-standing where a concrete batching plant had taken advantage of such good raw material when the windfarm had gone in. A few green leaves had squeezed through, and the sun had brought some tiny flowers alive. As they slipped past, Hán gestured to the barren, abandoned shallow quarry.

‘Three-quarters of the cost, the capital cost, of each turbine is down there. Lots of concrete needed, but if we compact it properly, getting rid of air bubbles for half a min, we can use a foundation that is ten per cent smaller. But put the vibrator arm in for more than two minutes, and the big bits sink to the bottom, and your strength has gone.’

‘And hand-arm vibration? My old dentist had to retire with that.’

‘Rotate the people, and make sure they’re warm, no bare arms or hands.’

‘You test before mixing?’

‘We have to stop granodiorites stuffed with quartz being used. Looks like good granite, but then the foundations lose up to 70 per cent of their strength. Granodiorites in the mix stand up reasonably well to testing and to some steady compression. But put a wind turbine above, and the cyclic press and relax, press and relax, costs you your 70 per cent.’

‘My husband calls it granola. The builders near us offer it for decorative slabs. Looks pretty.’

They drove on up. First stop was – atop wooden dogs to keep it off the ground – a new blade. There was some complicated story about windage causing a delay in hoisting it. Chen and the book-keepers away in some office would sort out the wind-off money for the crane hire. The crane had been driven off to a more important scheduled job.

‘Do the cranes report their performance in real-time to the manufacturers, a bit like aero engines, monitored day and night?’ Merce asked.

‘I don’t think they do, yet. Crane folk love us windfarm people. Standard cranes, because the kit on each site is identical. Our people are knowledgeable too, keeping an eye on the crane brake, making sure that the top is in free slew at the end of each day. Transport risky, but operations hardly any risk.’

Now Merce was treated to her two companions showing off the new blade, like youngsters with their first showroom-new car.

‘Take a look at this, Mrs Harcourt.’ The blades looked about 100 metres long.

‘This is the future. No more Wright Brothers aerofoils.’

‘So bigger means more electricity?’

‘Er, not just that. Blades gets more efficient, the bigger they are. Beaufort numbers tell us how strong the wind is. Reynolds numbers are used in measuring fluid flow turbulence. For our blades, they tell us that bigger converts more wind into electricity.’

‘And all these add-ons - I thought that engineering needs simplicity.’

‘Come to the blade tip, drain holes there. If they’re too big, they whistle. If they’re too small, they block and trap the water, so lightning then explodes the water into steam, damaging the blade.’

Merce had not heard of whistling problems. Engineer Hán walked her back a little to some teeth on the blade.

‘Same with dentation – extra electricity most of the time, but when the wind picks up there’s a dreadful screaming noise like a banshee in tight trousers. And all the neighbours moan.’

‘Not many neighbours up here.’ Merce gestured around the plateau.

‘We would like dentation on every blade, but we have to choose. Do we scream or do we generate? The wind speed needs to be managed. In a strong gale – force nine – the pitch control will feather the blades. System can’t cope at those speeds. But even much lower than force nine, the dentation noise starts.’

‘If you had a leaf spring on the dentation, centrifugal force would retract the teeth or just change their angle of attack as soon as a stronger wind generates noise.’

Hán dug out his mobile and replied, ‘Say that again, Mrs Harcourt.’ She did.

‘And the birds? Is there a sound that will save them from flying into the windfarm? Or a certain blade colour or reflectivity?’

‘In the cold and empty far north, we know that painting one blade black saves bird lives. So let’s do it all over, yes?’

‘Go on.’

‘First, there are almost 100 million people worldwide with epilepsy or migraine, so you can’t put them at risk. Second, we need to test that in sunny areas, in case a hub is unbalanced with single hot, black blade. That would shake our gearboxes to bits.’

‘Do tall buildings with windows hurt birds more than windfarms do? Great bustards are a fair size.’

He sighed, ‘Different issue. Tall, glazed city blocks are hurting the smaller birds. But out on the windfarms, it’s the big raptors that are suffering, are dying. We need to save the big birds in farming areas. Vultures, ugly, and friendless but vital. They find quiet corners where there’s a carcass – sick livestock that might have died alone and out of sight. If we lose vultures, then their cleaning up will instead be done by rats.’

She walked further up, and reached out to feel a ridge on the turbine blade. The two men caught up with her. ‘What am I looking at here?’

‘Austro-Hungarian triumph. Edward Zaparka’s flap. Like dentation, it captures more power from the wind, but without the noise. Let’s go and fly. Knoxy is our pilot.’

They checked the big windfarm map that Merce had been shown the previous day, and after another half a kilometre they parked up, back to the prevailing.

‘Don’t need to sandblast the wiper blades, nor the windscreen. And unless we want to blow all our paperwork out, we never open both sides of cab doors at once,’ said Hán.

Knoxy carefully worked his way through the drone checklist - battery stored at two-thirds charge before being fully topped-up, check for blade damage that would mean a crash landing, and gimbal set for smooth movement. A couple of stones held open the handbook pages in the breeze.

‘Here, feel this,’ invited the engineer.

‘As you said, like a rough pan scourer.’

‘That’s what we are hoping for. That’s a factory sample. But will it abrade smooth, and be useless after a year or two? That’s two days’ work for us to find out.’

‘And first?’

‘Easiest, is to fit a near-microscope lens, then fly up and photograph the surface in a couple of places. The lab can judge how it looks. Second, we fit a test card on a stick, fly up and measure the light reflectivity of the test card and the surface. If it reflects more light, that’s a warning that the rain and the hail and the dust has smoothed out the surface, and so it needs to be improved or scrapped. That’s as much as I understand. And for both, like using our borescope in a couple of days, we start with a white balance to normalise the pix.’

‘The third job?’

‘I just follow directions for the third job. There are different radar bands, so I’m told. We’ve a heavy gadget that we attach that shoots a beam at the blade when we fly up. Then the lab can judge how the radar bounceback compares to how it was last year.’

The trio worked as a team once Knoxy had mastered the flying bit. Hán would affix the accessories to the drone, with a puffer and soft cloth for lens love. After each tower, he would copy the data onto both his laptop and a hard disk drive. Merce would ballpoint onto a clipboard a simple summary of the tower number, and time and duration and purpose of each flight. She kept her wits about her and at one point warned of an oncoming squall that halted work for a while. They did three towers on the first day, and again on the second day.

That first evening, Knoxy pulled down simple gas ring with a small bottle of gas, for their evening meal. Lunch had been a rushed on-the-go affair, but now there was time to do things properly. He reached into the locker and found two woks. One was three-mouths sized, and well-used. The feed-the-village size was still in the factory wrapping, but the dazzling stainless steel shone through. Knoxy pushed that big one back, unwanted. A short way from the truck was a pair of large timber baulks, and they sat on these to chat and eat. Scraps of cardboard kept them clear of the oily pinewood. Later the stars – some of them faint meteorites – filled the high plateau view from all directions.

Merce turned to the senior man, ‘Tell me about your daughter.’

‘You’ve seen my phone photo. She’s balanced – as well as her studies and her numbers, she takes time out with friends, with dancing. Loves musicals when there’s the right film on.’

‘Is site work really for her, miles from anywhere, out in the rain?’

‘She knows all about it. In the school breaks, she finds a construction site and makes herself useful around the base. Doesn’t wait for them to advertise for a helper – just walks herself in and talks herself in. The structural engineers, the knowledgeable, want someone to empty the waste bins, wash the dishes, and all that. And she watches, she listens. Last winter, she shocked a site manager: pinned up a 15-day weather forecast next to his Gantt chart. Visitors started photographing the side-by-sideness, to spread the idea.’

‘Expressways, railways?’

‘Oh no, those are the famous sites, on the TV news. But there are villages or towns where a new viaduct or bridge is going in, or an old one is being retrofitted to stop it falling down. I found her looking at the scholarship website for Novosibirsk, their civil engineering course. But I think she’ll stay close to home at Chongqing, and study there.’

‘Competition?’

‘She’s confident. That helps. Built a little library of photos, knows that long wordy reports don’t always produce the budget for repairs. A storybook showing trucks ignoring the 18 tonne weight limits, skeletal rebar, spalled chunks of concrete – that sort of thing.’

Merce knew that sort of thing, with her authentic plan to study the spalling dragons’ teeth in Allenhut.

In that summer heat, Merce knew where she wanted to spend the night – she climbed up onto the roof tray above the load space, protected by the high side-rails. Queen of all she surveyed. Hán stretched out inside, on the bunk behind the three cab seats. He left the windows rolled down a couple of centimetres to catch any breeze or shouts from the other two. Knoxy tested the seats themselves, but their moulded cushions were uncomfortable to lie across, and he made himself at home on the ground, with some sack of safety harnesses as a pillow, and a couple of just-emptied canvas bags as a mattress.

Always the doubter, Merce tried to find a signal for her mobile, and failed. The stars seemed so bright, but in the early hours, she rolled over and her eye was caught by the stream of satellites above. ‘Sleep tight, Laika,’ she whispered.

The second day went more quickly. It had begun with a ritual that Kennet had taught her: when dressing outdoors, shake your footwear to get rid of any creatures that may have wandered in. The day’s drone work was smoothly efficient. Each knew their tasks, and they speeded up as the weather turned. Sitting in the truck cab, they checked their files, their records, and closed down that part of their work.

Hán turned up the radio, and tuned in to a scheduled weather forecast. ‘It will still be thirty tomorrow, be like a rice cooker inside. So we’ll climb early, and make sure we’ve each got at least a litre of water.’

‘Heard of an incident where a woman engineer was left stranded up top by some insecure ...’

The engineer cut her off. ‘Not here, not here. It has to be a team, and recorded, like firefighters with an entry control board.’



Merce changed the topic. 'Those archaeologists and this Xiansheng lady, eh?'

Knoxy recalled it well. 'Ah, the year was 911. I was still at school then.'

About a thousand k's west from here,' said Chan. 'Xiansheng was traded for five bolts of silk.'

Knoxy's eyes lit up. 'And what were her skills? 'Mrs Harcourt, are you worth five bolts of silk?'

'Six.'

Light rain began halfway through the morning. With the mountaintop wind picking up, the afternoon heavy rain was blowing sideways. It was summer warm, about the same temperature as an English tea she had suffered in a five-star, not far from the United Nations, by the East River. Knoxy found a less awful, less windy bit of shelter by the truck, where he rustled up something hot and quick. They dined in the truck cab and Knoxy pointed to an undistinguished steel shed that they had driven past the day before. The clouds brought darkness an hour earlier than the previous day.

'We'll hog the cab, you can sleep in there,' he said.

The two men wrestled with bolt cutters to try to force the lock, and a couple of times they ended up swearing as the rain arrived from left and right and below, but never from above. But Knoxy knew his truck. Merce sat in fairly dry clothes, while the two men dripped in their seats. They all looked in the door mirrors as Knoxy eased the winch into life, pulling a cable. Without warning, there was a loud report as the hook on the winch cable flew free, hitting something at the back of the vehicle. As if it were a one or two kilo mortar shell, the broken lock sailed over the Dongfeng and landed a few metres in front of them. The truck was manoeuvred so that the headlights could light up the shed. It was a little way up from the ground, perched on rocks or stones to keep it clear of rain or other troubles.

'Your room awaits.'

Merce briefly checked out her place by the flashlight on her phone. She could put to use masses of empty cardboard cartons, and a soft canvas tarpaulin labelled as the packaging for a tall, narrow one-person service lift. And there was an unpleasant bucket. Merce took it outside to leave it to fill with rain, throwing in some stones to stop it blowing away. She was too sleepy to notice the wind pulsing against the metal walls. Still her phone had no signal. Couldn't call for a pizza delivery to this mountaintop, couldn't summon Kennet for the necessary. Outside, it was what Merce once described in a failed geography exam as *wet rain*.

Dawn left her feeling hot. Her tin hut had caught the early sun of what looked like another brilliant summer day. Not a cloud in the sky, but not baking because of the steady breeze. The night's rain had drained fast, and the sparse plant life gave a faint tinge of colour to the landscape. There was a welcome smell of food. Knoxy was tending to his catering locker. Again, Merce was reading the two-language manual, this time for the day's borescope. The three of them breakfasted on the sunny side of the Dongfeng, leaning back against the wheels.

Piao Hán gestured towards a group of turbines in the distance, perhaps a kilometre away. 'That's our most vulnerable gearbox, says the spreadsheet,' he said. 'Bore scope, then the second gearbox, and after a late lunch we'll look at number three.'

Hán gave Merce a half an hour of familiarisation with the borescope. They found a narrow gap under the Dongfeng's dashboard, and she learnt how to steer with the joystick, how to take stills and videos.

'Am I a good instructor?,' he asked.

She shook her head, smiling. 'That two-language manual I dipped into this morning, that's a good instructor.' He laughed, and they drove to first tower.

'You can't climb 150 metres. We treat the ladder as an emergency tool. If we tried to climb it, we wouldn't be in a state to work once we reached the nacelle.'

Merce nodded, and looked up. Climbing a 50-storey ladder was not on her to-do list..

'If we have to come down that way, there's a rest platform every six metres. And you'd need at least a litre of water.'

He unlocked the tower door, a submarine-like hatch to avoid weakening the tower. Hán pointed to a sharp black line on the top of the frame. Inside, he pointed to an identical line on the far inside of the tower.

'We use these to record the alignment of the tower. A compass would be easier, but with the magnetic fields upstairs, can't be done. So the surveyor theodolites it from a few hundred metres away.'

'So you get precise wind direction data once you are generating?'

He nodded, and then with Knoxy, he checked Merce's harness before the wire-guided cage welcomed their visit. With no signal, she did not bother to take up her phone. The borescope backpack was strapped securely.

And Hán showed off his memory cards, 'I learnt long ago to never take a borescope up without at least three SD's. It's a long way back to fetch one if the only card you took up is already full.'

With a gloved hand, he patted the tower wall, saying 'If you don't have planned inspection and maintenance, then this is all scrap metal.'

'Tell your daughter to use that line in her job interviews. She can punch the bridge abutments, and tell 'em that.'

Near the top, the sun on the tower made a mockery of Tolly's hypothermia tales. First job - once they were through the yaw ring - was to open the nacelle's roof hatch. Carefully, they opened their belt-clipped pouches to get their first sips of water. They looked back down at the droop cable.

'When the droop cables get too twisted from yawing in the same direction again and again,' said the engineer, 'the cable twist counter brings the blades to a standstill. Then the yaw drive turns the nacelle back to untwist them. And these new, tall towers have longer droop cables, so we don't have to untwist so often.'

'You're losing output, losing money on each untwist,' observed Merce.

'Always looks odd on a breezy day, when blades ease to a stop, and the nacelle rotates back. We had a recruit who had been in submarines, and he quit after his first day. Couldn't cope with this cramped space.'

'The fans bar at Charlton Athletic is a bit more of a squash than this, at half-time.'

The first gearbox inspection was a slow task. Hán rhythmically steered the camera head, edging it from tooth to tooth, occasionally pausing to pull it out to wipe off smears of oil. He showed Merce that there were no obvious problems. The view – half a metre deep inside the cogs – was sharp, with good contrast.

‘Nothing visible, so far,’ reported the engineer.

‘What next?’

‘The lab will blow up the images, there may be something that is visible but tiny. Today’s gearboxes are the most vulnerable, so I might be sent back here in six months and take another look. We might leave things alone, or feather these turbines in gusty conditions. Even at low wind speeds, it’s the gusts that do the damage. So we then learn how much we can rely on the mesoscale wind maps to correctly site new units.’

After half an hour, they attacked their water bottles again. Inside the hub, the visitor was shown the yaw mechanism, and the hundreds of bolts securing the blades.

‘Do you bolt to torque or bolt to tension?’ Merce asked.

Hán – halfway twisted through an opening – looked thoughtful. He gestured to the three giant rings of bolts in the hub, ‘These are not a problem, but badly-tensioned bolts in towers have failed in Sweden, in Germany.’

‘Go on.’

‘We’re about to trial direct-tension indicators; these will be load-indicating washers. As soon as they are compressed to the correct gap, we’ll know that the bolt is properly tensioned. Then it won’t matter if the bolt is unlubricated or trapping a tiny bit of dirt.’

‘My grandfather always kept feeler gauges in his old car, so that he could gap the plugs.’

‘As you said, keep it simple. At this altitude and this micro-climate, we don’t need to winterise. But if we did, it would be a heating element on the last two-thirds of the trailing edge. Got to be done in a factory, carefully controlled, otherwise a hot blade would be weaker.’

‘Costly?’

That’s why we only do it for very cold sites with high relative humidity. The two upsides are power when everything else fails, plus very high market price. The downside is armoured roofs on our trucks, if we have to enter the windfarm when chunks of ice are being thrown down.’


Closing up meant checking that their stills and video had been saved. An inspection showed no worries – no leaks, no litter – and Merce climbed up for a quick 360 of the view before she closed the roof hatch. And for every move, it was clip and unclip, like a careful sailor trusting the harness.

After they had finished, and resealed the tower door, all three removed their helmets and headed over to the remains of the great bustard that Chen had spoken of. Golden brown feathers had blown over a wide area. And the skeleton had been stripped to the bone. This was not the usual insect-eaten and sun-bleached skeleton. The desert had enough of those. This was different. For starters, the feathers showed that the death was recent. And the bones were different. Glinting in the sun were tiny, groove teeth-marks. This had been done not by insects, but by rats.

The slow sunset after an evening meal gave Knoxy the chance to pull out his calligraphy four - brush, inkstick, paper and inkstone. He gazed out over the desert, leaning back in the canvas chair. Hán did the gearbox tutor bit – fluid drives waste energy and would overheat in a wind turbine, the wrong oil can run hot, or risk rust or corrosion.

For the warm night, Knoxy would again hug the earth, and the engineer returned to the hot, stuffy cab, while Merce stretched out up on the roof platform. After the day's wriggling around nacelles and hubs, Merce was knackered. The stars, the satellites, were as bright as ever, but her eyes closed within seconds, before she had time to wish *Good night* to any travellers overhead.

Dawn – hot, sunny dawn - reached her early, three metres up on the roof of the truck. There was something missing. There was no early-morning smell of cigarettes, no aroma of fresh tea. Merce sat upright instantly, shouting to Hán, and hearing him shout back. The air was filled with a strange whistling, like a breeze that rattles tall, dry grassland. Something scurried across her, and she swept it off the truck. The engineer clambered out of the cab and up to the roof platform. The pair leaned on the side rail to call to Knoxy. His gold teeth, pride of the finest dentists, smiled at them. There was not much more left. Around Knoxy, the ground shimmered with rats, maybe only a hundred or so. But they had been hungry, and their numbers were enough. Merce and the engineer looked down, shipwrecked aboard their tiny desert island amid a sea of death.



I'm not leaving Knoxy here for one more minute,' promised the engineer.

'We don't need a second victim. Let's think this through,' Merce said. Both of them were scanning around, looking for intruders on their vehicle.

'Basket stretcher up here. Let's get him into it,' said Hán.

'In a moment.' Merce glanced around, an idea coming together. 'That hut from two nights ago. There's a useful big canvas sheet there, and you didn't see it but there were quite a few sheets of cardboard too. Drive us there, I'll take it all, and then you drive us back here.'

'Don't like leaving him.'

'There and back, five minutes, if you're Engineer Hán. Three minutes if you're Mrs Harcourt.'

The rats were still scrapping around their poor departed colleague, their shadows getting shorter as the morning sun strengthened. Merce beckoned Hán onto the vehicle roof.

'Drop the basket stretcher alongside him, so that we are ready to rescue Knoxy.'

'That's the easy bit. What about those fellows?'

'I'll set fire to the cardboard just upwind of them. They hate that, and that will give us a few minutes.'

'They're hungry, they'll rush back.'

'Right. I'll set the smoke, and then toast them in the sun's beam. You take the gas ring, and toast any that come too near. And take down the canvas and wrap our friend in that. When you are ready, I'll join you and we'll lift him into the stretcher, and rest him in the bunk in the cab.'

And it all fell into place. The burning card gave a few minutes respite. H án, feeling secure in his high-ankled boots, took down the canvas and the gas ring. Merce ripped open the cover on the big, unused wok, and caught the sun. After a few moments of practice, she was lasering the rats. Then she realised her mistake. She was aiming at the front of the pack. She switched the scorching beam to the back of the chattering horde. A few of them changed colour and died, and the whole mass turned to devour their relatives. The coast was clear, and with speed and dignity, Knoxy was enshrouded, and rested in the cab.

‘We’ll take him home. And when we get past the col, and into signal range, I shall email Engineer Chen and then phone him. But you drive, and we won’t stop to make calls, we won’t go to the big clinic. Ignore me. I shall just prepare a long and detailed report, and then send it when we get a signal.’

‘Engineer H án, we’ve lost a good man. But it will honour him if your report mentions that thanks to his work, we are bringing back all the images and technical reports that were required.’

He nodded slowly, and thanked her.

The two survivors, safe from the mob, photographed the scene, and walked around the Dongfeng to ensure that the shiny wok and everything else was securely stowed, and that no creatures were hitching a ride. The man reached into a tool locker. He found an old strap – in black – and trimmed it to make a mourning band for the left sleeve of Merce and himself.

She took the wheel. While H án attacked his tablet’s keyboard, he kept half an eye on the concrete tracks to direct her through the kilometres of towers to find the way back down.

‘Tell me about Knoxy’s life in the village.’

‘He was one of the few who could live with us, and still go out to work. He never married. There are so few children with us. Our village is emptying out.’

‘What will be there in ten years’ time?’

‘Enough to get by – we’ll have our firewood, rice, oil and salt. We are saving and investing for tomorrow. Where old houses are abandoned, we try to parcel the land for those who have left. Then they can slowly use their savings to build a simple place of their own with a kitchen garden that they can sow and harvest. If they are between jobs in the cities, they can come home for a while.’

‘Investing in what?’

‘You’ll see when we get there. Nurseries for oak saplings, they used to be old grape terraces.’

When the twin wind turbines of the village came into view, Merce drew to a stop, and H án took the wheel.

‘Odd turbines, those.’

‘Obsolete, with not much scrap value. So I arranged for them to be delivered here. After a few months, we were able to pour foundations and call in some crane favours to put them up again.’

‘Poor Knoxy, I liked him.’

‘You’ll see his place. We’ll go there, and the village can pay their respects. His house is alright, but we’re too close to the Haiyuan fault. We all had a wobble in the ‘95 quake.’

‘So after an earth tremor, you could use your tower alignment marks to check for movement, and to make sure that post-quake wind direction records are accurate.’

Hán stared open-mouthed for a moment. For the second time, he dug out his mobile and replied, ‘Say that again, Mrs Harcourt.’ For the second time, she did.

‘I think the industry should lock you up in some college, and tell you to write a few technical papers for our industry.’

They drove into the village.

‘Over there, a young man. I thought you said they had all gone away.’

‘As I said on your first day, we can help youngsters who need a fresh start, who help themselves. There’s no temptations with us, and we all keep an eye on them, help them take responsibility. Some learn how to get out of bed and do a day’s work. Others just vanish back to the big towns, and maybe months later we hear that they have returned to making their same mistakes again.’

In the phone call – a softly spoken ten minutes, with many pauses – boss Chen had agreed to Knoxy’s house for the formalities. The house had a zigzag crack in the grey front wall, patched with cement. A window frame was noticeably off-square, and the two slanting panes of glass had fresh putty. Four or five villagers – and the young man - were staring at the windfarm truck as it slowed into the village. A gleaming white car, with a roofbar of unlit red, white, and blue lamps was parked there. A lady with three pips on her epaulettes stood slightly forward of a one-pip male officer. Both had the word Police on their jackets. There was a faint smell of smoke, from an untidy house where someone - unseen - with health problems was keeping her fire going despite the summer weather. Hán had explained that the villagers were keeping her supplied with firewood for her final months.

Merce politely presented her card to the lady. Then she and Hán joined the two officers in Knoxy’s room. One of the chairs was shaky, but the other was sturdy enough for the three-pipper to take it. The others sat on the edge of the bed. Chen had forwarded Hán’s earlier report to the officers. For the first ten minutes, Hán had to explain the background for each of them.

Then methodically they recorded the story. What was this team’s task, were they trained, were they experienced, had anything like this happened before, was there first aid kit, what if all three had suffered? Then they turned to the emailed report. They went through it line by line, matching each statement to the photos taken of the rat invasion. With her limited vocab, Merce capture the gist of the meeting, but not the detail.

Finally, all four returned to the Dongfeng, and the junior officer pulled out the large wok. He examined it, measured it with a tape from the car. Then he climbed the truck’s ladder with it, and invited Merce to join him. She stood silhouetted, holding the shiny bowl, for a couple of photographs taken by the lady officer. Suddenly, the valley cloud cleared, and the wok threw out the hot jet of sunlight that Merce had used earlier. She found herself in tears for a moment. Then they photographed Hán as he showed how he had armed himself with the cooking gas ring.

It was time to escort Knoxy from the cab bunk back to his home. Engineer Hán went round to the passenger side, where there was more space. Merce used the driver’s door. She thanked the junior officer who wanted to help, saying ‘He ain’t heavy, he’s no bother.’

With silent, deliberate movements they lifted Knoxy down. Two or three of the onlookers cried out, as their neighbour came home. Merce wanted to remember Knoxy as he was, and not as he had ended up. So she sat on a dusty bench outside the house, while the officers and the engineer worked. And

then Chen arrived in a small four-wheel drive. The whole party came out for the greetings, and Merce joined them inside. For an hour, they revisited the whole story. The junior officer closed his eyes, turning his head to each speaker, as if he were trying to find any discrepancies or new details. And there were none.

Chen asked Merce to stand, and in front of the others he said a few generous words about her attitude and her behaviour, thanking her on behalf of the windfarm industry, the village, and the village's lost son. And in front of the police officers, he promised that the community understood her need for privacy, and would not release her photo. Chen spoke about issuing a few wire-leg canvas cot beds, so that windfarm workers would no longer stretch out on foam camping mats. Then with both forefingers, he turned his attention to the young man who had been stabled with the villagers. The man stood with his head bowed, as Hán showed Knoxy's nearly-complete certificate to the three-pip police lady. The mood brightened slightly, as the officer presented the paper to the man. And the police lady had put on her fierce look and spoken to him in the measured pace that Merce recalled getting from her form teacher, years before. Chen rummaged in his vehicle and found a C4 envelope in which the young man could keep his certificate. The police lady smiled at Merce. 'Did your parents send their daughter to tractor school?' The men chuckled at the old saying from 1954, and then the white car and Chen's offroader left. A couple of hours later, Chen phoned to confirm that she had been booked out of Lanzhou to Chengdu, Changi, and Heathrow for the next day.

The watching villagers joined Merce and Hán. There would be a rota to sit with Knoxy for one night, and the Englishwoman would take the first two-hour shift. Someone with a printer agree to blow up Knoxy's ID card photo, so that it could be displayed in his house, along with flowers and a candle.

As a group, they agreed that Merce would spend the night with them. She knew that once in the village, you must follow their customs.

One of the couples had a room that their daughter had just left, returning to her work on the track at the electric car plant by Lanzhou airport. They spoke of pride of her duties under a clear plastic part of the roof, where she calibrated satnav screens.

Merce was treated to a simple lunch, and afterwards sat outside with Hán to soak in the atmosphere. She shook her head, hardly accepting how the morning had gone. The engineer stood and beckoned to her to follow. The terraces climbed steeply, and within a few minutes they could sit and look down at the village, straggling along a valley. Just off the centre were three new-builds. They were simple concrete, but smart brick or timber had been used to hide their fronts. The inverted roofs had gentle slopes to catch rainwater and to allow rooftop gardening.

'That one on the right,' observed Merce. 'Have they stopped work. It all seems much tidier than the other two. No rubble or wooden formwork on the ground.'

Hán laughed. 'Someone called it the Italian method. If you're building a family home that will last generations, then do it slowly and don't rush into debt for a quick finish. That one's tidy because the man asked us to photograph it in the sunshine last month. He wants to show it to a girl in his factory, somewhere down by the coast. They want a forever house by the time their youngsters start school.'

From one of the vines, they each took a few grapes, sweet and ready for sale. Hán rinsed them from his water bottle before they ate.

'Today, clean air. When it gets cooler, there's smoke from our houses. Always good to enjoy that, our neighbours at home. Village is family.'

‘Why is the village moving away from table grapes?’

‘Knoxy used to love these. But table grapes need hands. It’s a struggle to harvest them quicker than nature can grow them. He pointed to clock that was clear down in the village. That clock is our tool – have to get them in four degrees pre-cool within half an hour of picking. Then we’ve four hours to remove the bad ones, and repack them for the cold store. That’s at minus one.’

‘Farmers need electricity.’

‘Yes, the cold store means we get a hundred times the price compared to winemaking. The airport shop sells them. When we halved the pack size - it’s now a quarter of a kilo - sales doubled. We hadn’t realised that passengers want a snack, not a main course. Tomorrow morning, get all lyrical and praise them to your fellow passengers.’

‘Sorry for Knoxy.’

The engineer nodded.

‘Our retired people keep an eye on the nursery terraces. We don’t grow oaks; the sloping soil and the climate is not right. But the labour-intensive oak saplings, and selling them on after a year or so brings in some cash to the village. Three saplings - alba, robur and petraea. The coopers don’t want the red oak types. About sixty centimetres after a year, and sell them.’

‘Wine trade, for barrel staves?’

‘Probably, but ask me in a hundred years’ time. The immediate – sort of immediate – is the autumn acorn crop at the 40- or 50-year mark. Zoos and bear sanctuaries will pay for a reliable acorn harvest as feed.’

Merce then managed to mangle her vocab. ‘So, the best time to plant a tree was 20 minutes ago’. Respectful to Knoxy’s memory, Hán refused to chuckle. But he did smile.

‘Maybe 20 years ago?’

‘Those look like your nursery glasshouses,’ Merce stood, leading her host towards a stock of large, curved vehicle windscreens.

‘For the saplings, but they still need protective tubes, cardboard tubes. We are trying wool – they don’t shed plastic into the soil when they die. For the glass, we did a deal with the bus companies. If they have a cracked windscreen, we take it. If you run windscreen wipers over a crack, it cuts the rubber, and the smearing makes it unsafe. But the glass is good for what we need – clear and free of charge.’

‘I had a cracked windscreen last year. The repair people came to my college and changed it while I was in a lecture.’

‘It’s dual rear-wheel trucks, they pick up a bit of gravel and throw it back, even at town speeds. So the bus drivers are told by their boss to stay back from those. And then the passengers shout *Faster, I’ll miss my train, my flight, my interview, my clinic*. So another windscreen gets chipped, and then it comes here to protect the saplings.’

‘Your village is the new Dazhai, eh?’

‘Well, we learnt from Dazhai. But they’re for technical training these days, maybe for the youngsters. Our people, they’ve done their bit, they’re not young anymore.’



The next morning's alarm clocks were a couple of harsh, noisy cockerels. Merce looked into Knoxy's house, and paid her respects to the lady in there. She was just replacing a stub of a candle. Outside, Hán found the visiting youngster, young as in mid-twenties, a little older than Merce. His day's task, he said, checking the acidity of the oak nursery soil.

'Can you cook simple food, can you drive? Come down to the airport, and I'll check you out when you drive the truck back.'

At least Merce did not have to make the Lanzhou to Chengdu leg at the wheel of Knoxy's truck. A short flight, and she was back on track for Changi, and retrieving her pack. An hour in the bath, and then the glorious luxury of reuniting with her smile factory, her electric toothbrush. She tried repeatedly to call Mr Busy, wherever he was. She slept in that oversized cotton shirt that she had bought on a Wembley pilgrimage. It had a big figure One on the back. Kennet always said she was a keeper.

Waking at dawn, she found a small scratch where she had fallen asleep with a rose from Mr Harcourt's welcome arrangements. She checked-in and, apart from a quarter-kilo of yesterday's grapes, and some chilled water, took no notice of the front-of-plane luxuries that Tolly Carnegie had funded. The inflight magazine wine page had a photo of a cooper working on an oak barrel. She followed the sunrise to Heathrow, waking when she heard one of the cabin crew murmuring to another passenger that Hamburg was off to the starboard. She reopened her Sanora Babb, for something to read as the altitude ticked down to land on Two-Seven Right.

Back at Burgess Park, Merce stepped around the usual crowd of schoolchildren mobbing the car where a man sold cigarettes in ones and twos. She entered the greasy spoon, where she got a wave from Yellow-fingers at the back of the café.

Both times that he had been bothered for breaking some fussy no-smokes rule, he had faced-down his challengers by digging out his medals from his 'Nam days with the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Task Force. A couple of years before, Merce had quietly worked with the Legion to get him out to his grandfather's trench at Gelibolu. But now he rarely ventured further than the café. At the counter, the hairnetted lady served Merce a mug of tea and some canned tomatoes on fried bread. As she left, she wordlessly left her duty-free sleeve of 200 on Yellow-fingers' table. She was home.

Chapter 7 – Call Bartholomew, after 6 pm



She was not still crying, but her eyes were red. Her windfarm induction had not been meant to end in bad news. A hanky – one of Kennet’s nappy-sized Belfast linen ones – was in both hands.

She got to their shabby place between the Elephant and New Cross just before he returned from King Charles Street on the bus. She filled the flat with Annette Kleinbard singing. If Kennet’s meeting had not been a must-go-to, he would have met her at the airport. His Foreign Office must-attend had been an excellent meeting. His boss had used words like stakeholder, innovative, engagement, dynamic, governance, agile, yawn, yawn. Finally, he tunnelled out to escape, picking up some flowers on the way.

Merce’s hopeful face twinkled from ear to ear. Hopeful Kennet gave a tiny nod. She did a complete octopus, arms around him, and gave him almost an hour, a weepy hour. Kennet did not give a toss about windfarms or rats, but he of course listened and gripped her.

‘Who did he have?’ asked Kennet. Merce was looking at tourist London from the window. Pedestrians were stepping round a visiting card in the middle of the pavement, except for a chap in sandals who almost slipped on his back. Two under-10s were being chased from a shop. A cyclist braked suddenly as a truck turned a corner, with the direction indicators lit just after the turn. A local from the cash-only end of the economy was holding a lit cigarette and a takeaway box in the same hand as she dined. She was leaning against a sturdy pole carrying three cctv cameras, and was paying no attention to two pigeons feasting on what she dropped.

Kennet tried again. ‘Who did Knoxy have?’

‘Village is family.’

‘We’ve got ...’

‘I saw it, a new mattress. You were in Stow-on-the-Wold. Shopping?’

‘Twenty mins beyond Stow, for a lamb barbecue on the banks of the Windrush. Where it emerges from the spring, it’s a stream, not river. It was a lunchtime listen-and-eat. I think their farmers’ll earn

more with what they do, exporting to places like Italy that want smaller animals – not the bigger New Zealand sizes.’

‘Mattresses for newly-weds?’

‘Their wool is too wiry for the rag trade, but Italian mattress firms love it. They sent a thank-you sample through, which they wanted me to have. Compliance said okay, if I paid for it. I gave the money to those Deptford people who are getting youngsters into architecture.’

‘Wales was sheepmeat, too.’

‘Oh, the other thing I found out. Some of the farms have half a dozen geese as intruder alarms. Eggs all year, plus a roast for Christmas.’

‘Prefer a guard dog. Round here, a guard goose equals high tea. Talking of which, let’s eat, let’s buy a box of yuck.’

Downstairs they chose the takeaway with no queue. The public health had scraped that enterprise up from no-star to one-star, but customers still called it the *Sticky Floor*. Only Merce and Kennet and neighbours who couldn’t read English were buying there tonight. And they got a warm welcome, their faces familiar and local.

Outside, south London’s evening hum of electric taxis and hire-cars was – as usual – punctuated at least once by the customary hooting and swearing as yet another stupid pedestrian stepped in front of a silent tyrant EV. Their appetite shot, the Harcourts took back just a single portion, and turned in early.

At about two or three in the morning, Merce shook Kennet awake. Earlier, he had dozed off with one ear pressed against her stomach.

‘What can you hear?’

‘No-one.’

‘Not yet.’

They continued their quiet talking-through of Merce’s trip.

‘Mr Chen,’ said Kennet. That name jolted Merce, big eyed, wondering what Kennet had heard.

‘Engineer Chen, a good man.’

‘Engineer Chen, then. He went straight to our trade person at the Embassy. Praised you to the sky, in fact, said you hold up more than half the sky. Passed on his thanks for your respectful behaviour. He said that you are in the ranks of those who are the first to bear hardships, the last to enjoy comforts.’

She shook her head, remembering Knoxy, ‘I’m just lending a hand to the windfarm people. I’m not Norman Bethune.’ As this was London, Kennet climbed from the pit to make two mugs of tea.

‘He promised not to put anything in writing, and said that Engineer Hán’s report won’t name you.’

‘After Sheffield, I’m for York. And Allenhut here I come. I bring the joys of windfarms on meer and meadow. Within two months, they’ll beg me to clerk their anti-electricity campaign. And reluctantly I shall do it. And you, Heathrow again?’

‘No, Brize Norton. Going somewhere where my diplomats rely on army ration packs.’

‘Don’t get on the evening news, please.’

At nine, arm-in-arm, the pair went down to choose a couple of postcards. For discretion, the only message was Thank you, for Merce’s hosts Chen and Hán. They settled on a view of two or three people using umbrellas to battle the rain outside a Tube station. The price, London price, was 60 pence each.

The sub-post office was a fixture on the main road. Motorists would glimpse the sign, dash in for stamps or phone top-ups, while the traffic wardens hid in a nearby doorway to tick up their quotas. Merce had seen the sub-post office shop mutate from stationers to Somali grocers to off-licence to Addicks fan zone.

The couple knew the long-standing sub-postmaster, not needing his name badge that said Bartholomew. On the way out, Merce paused in front of the noticeboard of advert cards. The dog-eared one for the pet-sitting service had been replaced by a newly-printed copy. The local news website had run a sympathetic story about that pet lady, after one of her charges had sadly ventured through a window of her 18th-floor flat. There was a new card promoting a gentleman masseur, seeking male clients only. The usual offer of immigration advice was no longer in Romanian and Bulgarian, it was now written in Farsi and Bengali. One card promised to buy or sell Sovereigns or other gold coins. Call Bartholomew after 6pm.

‘I’ll email bookworm Bisma to tidy up, but leave those flowers. You know I’m soft on flowers. She’s to take our Sheffield’s to the dry-cleaners, and to wash the sheets,’ was Merce’s final message as Kennet headed for the Paddington to Swindon.

‘She’ll be jealous.’

‘She’s got one, with number two due. I think she’s getting enough.’

## Chapter 8 – Helping the local police with their enquiries



At York station, the municipal pavement Nilfisk had swept through. The hopper was now heavier by the usual fag ends, half a curry from the previous evening, and a newly-issued one-month first class Britrail pass worth a few hundred dollars. The usual crowd milled around. The York district had about half a million residents and visitors. And only five of them - just off the train from London - wore baseball caps, matching baseball caps. The city's wealthiest taxi driver had scooped them up, wearing his reassuring blazer badged with his licensed cab number.

'You lucky family. Taxi fares go up at the end of the week, 20 per cent,' he reassured them with the lie he had worked for decades..

Their three-minute walk to their hotel was replaced by the driver going off-route to idle in a dreadful traffic jam at the broken batty traffic lights. A family of rare bats had taken up residency in the system, preventing repairs and choking the traffic. A quarter of a million pounds had been burnt by lawyers for and agin the bats. To fund this comedy, cash had been taken from three schools to halt recruitment of maths teachers. The taxi driver used the queue waiting time to mention the fifth-passenger fee, two oversize bag fees, one overweight bag fee, and of course a congestion charge fee. And the meter went tick, tick, tick.

Later, the five tourists would be given the seats of honour at the famous medieval Lord Ebor table, in the best window position of a York tearoom. Their waitress had a grandmotherly demeanour, and peppered her broad Scots accent with north-of-the-border phrases and folksy sayings. Actually, she was Plaistow born and bred, and had learnt her trade at amateur dramatics speech training. To ease her workload and avoid mistakes, she was no longer expected to handle bank cards. Her husband - Ladder Larry - was away again, earning frequent-flyer points as a regular guest of His Majesty. The tired-looking Lord Ebor table had surfaced on eBay, after the clearance of a burnt-out manor house in Liechtenstein. The 1950s factory mark and date had been scorched off, after it had arrived at the tearoom.

The station forecourt had a faint smell like a real railway station. With no breeze, there was a lingering aroma of anthracite burned by a visiting Gresley 4-6-2.

The stationmaster called out 'Three minutes'.

The tax man was to blame. The stationmaster at York had been warned that she could not offset her formal I.K. Brunel-style top hat against expenses, unless it was wholly and exclusively used to welcome VIPs. So she stepped into the forecourt to put her topper to work. The stationmaster had

met Network Rail's technical director at an electrification talkathon, and he had referred to this morning's lady visitor as a VIP visitor. An aide helped to clear the driveway. No-one was sure what was about to happen. Pedestrians stopped and waited for some event. Locals as well as tourists whipped out their phones and cameras to film the arrival.

A couple of children – part of a larger group - were attacking a tune that was just right for their vocal range, windmilling their arms as they sang. One of them knocked to the ground a sign held by a middle-aged man. He smiled as he picked it up, displaying the one word 'Imp', and he took a couple of photos, too. A police officer stepped out into the road to signal to a pedestrian to wait on the pavement, while he flagged a car to ease over the zebra and turn into the forecourt.

At that, all the youngsters formed a school crocodile. They burst from the station, marching at their teachers' direction, just in front of the sparkling old brightly-coloured Rolls-Royce. In synchronisation, the crocodile all windmilled their arms and told a tale of the friendly, healthy wind. Their garish tabards warned *Quake in your boots, we are New Earswick Primary*.

The chauffeur had brought Kennet and Merce in from Sheffield, an hour away. The previous evening, the Master Cutlers had given a modest celebration in their honour, with food chosen by the county's National Farmers' Union. Kennet was the hero of the hour. He had put to use the finding that diners associated heavy cutlery with superior food. Every embassy had been issued with fresh, solid flatware and cutlery. And he had instructed the makers to increase the size of the word *Sheffield* on each item.

Tourists and locals speculated as to the identity of the new arrivals.

- She used to read the weather on Harlech television
- I think he came second in Eurovision once
- I saw her on the red carpet at last year's Oscars
- He was in that big city fraud trial last month
- I'm sure she was in our cabin crew from Kingsford Smith last week

That last comment came from a lady speaking with the cultivated Rose Bay Strayan. Her husband said nothing.

Kennet looked tanned, after supervising a series of barbecues in High Commission and embassy compounds near the equator. At one of them, he had reported a guest who was pretending to photograph some undistinguished flowering bushes, but he was actually filming nearby CCTV cameras. While helping the local police with their enquiries a few days later, the man had unexpectedly fallen from a bungalow window and died. His Excellency sought out Kennet to thank him for his chilled drinking water feature – a plywood red K6 phone kiosk with a busy icemaker and plenty of chilled pottery water mugs.

Kennet had ditched his chain-store brogues as they squeaked a little, and was wearing real shoes from Earls Barton. His airport life had brought him swiftly to a crease-resistant lightweight worsted, this time one of his darker grey suits. Merce – shoulders back, head up Grace Kelly posture – was in a Chanel suit from two years ago, via a charity's retail website. Her tough but battered wheeled case held the previous night's ballgown. And she had perfected crease-free travel with her evening wear, even if she sometimes had to dewrinkle using the steam in hotel shower rooms.

As a student, Kennet had worked a lot of banquets, only choosing those with 200 or more covers. Clients asked him back for repeat meals, appreciating that he policed the kitchen get-in. He knew that anyone wanting to steal food or beverages expected to be supervised closely at the end of the night, giving them the chance to blag freebies at the start of the evening, until Kennet stood between the transport and the kitchen.

Another detail that marked him as a pro were the couple of pairs of black shoelaces, short and long, in his pocket. His record was 45 seconds to replace fix one chap's shoes just before he had to staff a banquet receiving line. Learning from Mr Harcourt, Merce found room to store a needle and thread for emergency repairs for guests.

In that era of catering student helpers, banqueting managers had been happy for Merce to change out of her waitress kit, and for Kennet to change after wrapping up his support for the kitchen brigade. They would take to the crowded floor, hiding among the guests dancing, and sticking it out until the evening was over with a slow farewell of *Stenka Razin*. At one of Kennet's do's in west Cheltenham, the young pair had even led the ballroom in singing the anthem in the original language. And they topped it with *By the Long Road*, in the vernacular.

Kennet had picked up the five main dances that his fiancé had taught him. And taught him not to bite her ears while dancing. She was good on anything that involved holding each other in a vice grip. And of course, she was good in that fast dance from Hr Lumbye, whose portrait was her screensaver. Her ringtone tune, Kennet called it. And Kennet had inspired that idea, once she had seen his Monegasque stamp screensaver of his hero Auguste Escoffier.

And so in Sheffield, Kennet and Merce had been the young guests of honour.

In York, their parting included a long, slow hug before going their separate ways. Kennet strode down to the first-class end of the London platform, tugging the big case. His final move before parting was to surprise Merce (helped by the chauffeur) with a busy, fresh bouquet of richly-scented blooms. She plucked one out, and stuck it in his lapel. He murmured that his boss's boss, His Majesty's Foreign Secretary, rarely got that package at any railway station.

Merce greeted Reg Tappet, 'Aren't you meeting me in your Imp?'

'You must be joking. I only take it out by trailer. Only drive it in *Concours d'élégance* events. If your windfarm industry is paying, we'll take a taxi. You're a week early.'

'Sorry about that. I was going to spend some time with a news reporter in mid-Wales, but he's had some nasty bites. He's a bit life-or-death with Weil's disease.'

Her host's garage was more like a shrine than a place to store a car. The steel side door took a few moments of legerdemain with two keys and a code number to enter. The roof included steel mesh to unwelcome intruders. The red sealed concrete floor shone under banks of colour-matched fluorescent strip lights. There was a faint smell of Swarfega that reminded the visitor of a disappointing evening she had once spent with a combine harvester mechanic in Bury St Edmunds.

The Hillman Imp car was gleaming in the light, and Merce walked thoughtfully round it. Small, out-of-date, and typically 1960s, the little four-seater was beginning to grow on her. 'May I take some photos?'

She thumbed through her workshop manual. Tappet smiled and nodded. 'John Haynes, he's taught more engineers than all the colleges combined. Brooch, you say?'

‘Yes, my designer will be coming over to get some ideas, from the posh local jewellers. We’re going to have a big charity auction in Scotland. As a build-up there’ll be photoshoots with a Scots model wearing a Hillman Imp brooch. Linwood.’

Tappet smiled, nodding, when he heard that name.

Merce sat in the car, adjusting the mirror, and settling comfortably behind the wheel. She leaned over to the eight-track and pushed in the cartridge. The opening three-chord circle progression leading to Millie Small’s hit roared out. They both sang along, before Merce popped out the cartridge, replacing it with an Umberto Bindi one.

She noticed Tappet watching her carefully, and raised an eyebrow.

‘Sorry, but I did a photo event last week; someone pinched my Exciters cartridge.’

‘Oh, I quit shoplifting when they shut Woollies. But I do a good Brenda Reid karaoke. That’s what pulled my husband at Uni.’

‘D’you get theft in the windfarm industry?’

Merce nodded, thinking. ‘Mostly cable during construction.’ Twisting her neck to appraise the car, she thought out loud. ‘This Imp, it’s much smaller than I thought.’

‘Oh yes, you’d get two for one with this car. A couple of youngsters in an Imp? First, you’d get to start a family. Second, you’d both get a doctor’s sick note for three days off with bad backs. And...’

Merce looked puzzled, as a new face appeared round the door.

‘And?’

‘And the interior lamp’s only five watts, really dim. So even dogs get lucky in an Imp.’

The newcomer was her jeweller, using the built-in camera in his tablet. They killed most of the garage lights, and under the jeweller’s direction, Reg Tappet moved an inspection lamp around so that the Imp car could be photographed with light from different angles. At last the jewellery designer was happy, and turned to thank the petrolhead.

Then the jeweller asked Merce to strike a couple of poses in her travel suit. Not even the harsh garage strip lights could flatten the texture, and she was happy to show off.

She gave the jeweller a copy of the magazine with Jinty’s photo. ‘She’ll be seen in about half a dozen outfits, no rubbish, all rather upmarket as we want to auction this for folding money. It’s for the big Bothy Box charity up there.’

On the way back to the city, the jeweller explained his plan.

‘As Mr Carnegie instructed, a couple of almost one-carats as the headlamps, obviously, with four matched quarters. All brilliants. I’ll set two of the quarters in yellow gold, but the other four in white gold.’

‘I want 18-carat,’ insisted Merce.

‘Off the top of my head, I envisage four layers. From the back, first there’ll be some stiff tulle backing. Next, a pair of back bars with catches so that the weight on each pin is halved. One will be positioned at the top of the brooch, so that it doesn’t sag forward. And a pair of clutches on each back bar pin, to stop it sliding left or right. Third, a structural skeleton as a chassis. Last, the bit that



carries the car design will be a mesh. Now the mesh acts as the Imp's body, but although it will look solid, it will be three-quarters air. Big weight saver, and it will give a matt finish so that the eye is drawn to the stones, not the gold. That structure will do two jobs. It will securely hold the back bars and the weight of the stones. More important, it will protect the mesh. At some point, the brooch will be dropped or squeezed, and the skeleton will stop it losing shape.'

'With your camera, can you do an illustrated guide to mounting and removing the brooch? And a box? And I want a copy – nine and paste, as a dummy to protect against theft.'

'On the tulle backing of the copy, I'll mark a Saltire so that no-one can mistake it for the real version.'

The jewellery designer pulled up back at York station, so that Merce could transfer to a cab for her next move.

'Good thinking. As it's going via auction, the wearer won't be face-to-face with me, so a how-to crib sheet would help. I've got some Glasdrum ashwood. A pair of oyster shell cases with rounded corners and some finger-grips, then the brooch and the dummy will be safe. Makes it harder to drop, and if it does crash to the floor then there'll be no damage. I guarantee. A half-metre tulle, as well, to protect the wearer's dresses in years to come.'

'Who'll woodwork the box?'

'Don't know his name, don't know his address. He's an illegal from somewhere east. He used to carve children's cots back home. Good chap, if you want your youngster's bed shaped like a Range Rover or a bottle of Clynelish malt or a Mini Moke. He's your man for hardwoods.'

He showed her a photo of a cot shaped like a rat.

'I'm not sure that we want something this gloomy. This his work?'

The jeweller nodded.

'I made a fancy cardboard box for my granddad's bird,' Merce offered. 'Twasn't a cot, it was a coffin. My farewell for his parrot. It was a polygon.'

'I want everything documented,' continued Merce. 'Which mines the stones came from, certificates of authenticity, good-sized hallmarks, precise weights of each stone, and of the white and yellow gold. I'll do plenty of photo shoots of Jinty modelling the brooch. The auctioneer knows how to build a glossy pre-auction brochure. The gold has to go for an Edinburgh hallmark.'

'I'm having training days at the uni until Friday. Can we meet midweek and again on Friday?'

The college rehearsal room had excellent acoustics – the paramount partitions (whose eggbox structure was known to firefighters as pray-and-run) softened the sound. The tutor pulled two folded chairs off a rack, and gestured to Merce to take one five metres or so away, across the room. The tutor slid open a couple of the windows, catching the grebes whistling and the coots croaking on Heslington lake. A light breeze on the water bounced light around the rehearsal room.

Suddenly, a wild screeching arose from the lakeside. The tutor shrugged his shoulders and smiled 'Noisy, noisy in the mating season.'

There was a flutter of wings outside the window, and more noise. 'Mating season: when does it start?' asked the visitor.

'First evening of each academic year', he answered.

The man looked completely anonymous, and Merce ventured ‘I was promised a famous actor.’

‘Clearer, space out each word. Emphasise that final syllable,’ he replied. She tried again, surprised at how a little deliberate effort pushed her voice across the room.

‘Well, my Equity card says I’m a thesp. I was a spear-carrier in a few of Pinewood’s most-forgotten, but now people know me as a hair restorer advert voiceover man. Remind me why you’re here, Mrs Harcourt.’

‘Call me Merce. My boss says my voice is too trustworthy, too convincing. I’ve got a task where I need to talk to people on the doorstep and at meetings, and leave them underwhelmed. How do I switch on a thin, loser’s voice?’

The tutor’s eyes widened ‘I’ll have your voice rebuilt by the end of the week.’

He switched into teacher mode, and began a repetitive rote of breathing exercises, posture, tongue, mouth, and jaw routines. The actor showed a short university training film for law students. First, a jury was unconvinced by a witness dressed in dreck, and scowling at the defendant. By contrast, the next witness dressed smartly, and engaging with the jurors – not the defendant – but using identical words, coaxed his conviction out of the jurors. By the second day, Merce was throwing her new, higher voice into a tablet displaying her target and actual voice frequency and strength. She identified and fixed those words that caused her to slip back into her real voice. Once she had got the basics, she concentrated on removing the vocal variety and energy, producing a lifeless high-pitched hectoring.

‘Even before you open your mouth, Merce, you can show folk that you’re not to be believed, not to be trusted. Try these: avoid eye contact, keep a hand in front of your mouth, and occasionally fold your arms akimbo.’

After a week of practice, she was ready to be unleashed on an unsuspecting village.

Back on the Old Kent Road, Merce retrieved her car from the yard at the back of a nearby shisha shop. Kennet and Merce’s had parked their savings via some ear-to-the-ground property man. He had conjured up some complicated lease. Merce was the tenant. The freeholder landlord had given Merce a rent-to-buy deal. The landlord’s mailing address was in Panama, but he actually lived round the corner.

Below her lease, she had a shisha shop chap as a sub-tenant. But that shop posed as a help-you-quit charity, and so paid no taxes. Below him as sub-sub-tenants for the parking were three owners of London black taxis. And then the leases burrowed deeper. At Kennet’s suggestion, Merce had persuaded The Healthy – as a training project for apprentices – to lay three-phase ‘leccy into the yard. The cabbies now got high-speed charging, and in turn they rented their spaces during the day for fast charging to taxi colleagues as sub-sub-sub-tenants.

Kennet and Merce were hoping that Transport for London would one day seize the site for their new Tube station. The parking yard was secure, London secure. The police had tried to prosecute after the most recent intruder had ended up in A&E with bite marks - but they could not prove who owned the guard dog. As Merce drove out, she smiled and waved at the tax office investigator who was filming vehicles and shisha shop customers, in yet another failed attempt to work out why nobody was admitting earning money from the site.

Wind and rain heralded the move from September to October as she set off for her hundred miles to Allenhut.

## Chapter 9 – Maximum noise, and zero effectiveness



As intended, Babs Fletcher thought that Merce Harcourt was an organised helper. She had hardly finished her breakfast toast, after learning about the Allenhut Slipper windfarm, before Merce had finished her shift, and arrived to feed her ideas, plans, timetables, to-do lists.

‘Gotta move fast. Would you like me to book the village hall or the function room at the Win for seven tonight?’ She forgot to mention that she had known for a fortnight that both would be free, and had even drafted a flyer to invite the public. As recovery from her sad-ending fact-finder in China, she had submerged herself in the detail and how to target the people who needed to be swept up in her campaign.

‘Should we wait and see what the others in the village think?’ Babs sounded a bit hesitant.

‘Yes, you could do that. And the whole community, your friends, your neighbours, would be let down if someone weak and disorganised tried to take on these invaders.’

‘Me on my own?’

‘You might want a committee, make it a team job. Chatting to residents since I began in the shop, I wonder if you want to think about the following for a committee? There’s John Primer – smart, Helen Ravenhead – I think she’d be good against the big construction villains, Casson the banker – we must raise money urgently. And that chap who designs the mail-order medicine bottles – stinking rich.’

Babs Fletcher had not expected to be carpet-bombed by all these sensible plans.

‘I can scribble a note to those, asking if they’d consider volunteering tonight. I can make a late start on my afternoon’s PhD work, so that I can get cracking.’

‘Their letterboxes will be busy.’

‘Oh no, I’ll knock on doors. Smile and explain. Should have half the village sorted by lunchtime.’

The shop girl had only been in the village for two months, but Babs was impressed; she was clearly in tune with what the anti-windfarm campaign needed. Merce did exactly as she promised, and more. The flyer that was pushed around by midday included a rough agenda – committee, petition, fund-raising, evidence preparation. That evening, Merce sat in the front row of the anxious pitchfork army, sipping a mug of tea, and leafing through a brochure for the Harwich holiday ferry, completely disinterested in the proceedings. But her stage props – a chunky A4 notepad and a serious-looking ballpoint – gave her a convincing clerkish look. In her courting days, Merce had learnt to look ready but not too keen, not too desperate. Babs Fletcher, as trained, led the village to recruit a volunteer to take minutes. Within moments, Merce warmed up her bewildered outsider bit, pleading for someone local to do the paperwork and the leaflet distribution. Predictably, there were no other takers.

Merce settled into a busy but easy routine. Mornings in the shop. The regional manager had told his regular shop staff that Merce would be drifting in and out. They welcomed someone keen on the early-morning grunt work. The newcomer opened up, taking in the stocks of newspapers and the baked morning goods.

The travelling maintenance man brought a mirror into the stockroom of Allenhut's shop. Merce heard a few minutes' drilling, and saw the brighter LEDs flooding the shelving with clearer light. Merce twisted her head onto each shoulder in turn.

'Would that also work the other way up?'

The man remounted the glass, now with a Smart and Smiling slogan at the top.

'Alright now, Duck?'

Bashing a stack of prawn cocktail crisps, she posed as Margo Fonteyn in the *port de bras* second position, and corrected the man, 'Swan, not duck.'

After a few hours behind the counter, Merce would a couple of times a week visit Babs' house to keep the anti-windfarm campaign moving. As intended, it moved with max noise, zero effect.

Early afternoons were spent out in the dunes, before the autumn-winter light faded early. Wrapped up well, Merce would walk down with her backpack, and then sit on her stool with a large folder on her knees. Her afternoon PhD workplace was the parade of metre-cubed anti-tank blocks behind the pebbly beach. For more than 80 years, their concrete had grown into a rich test-bench of active and dormant cracks, carbonation, anisotropic spalling, and general disrepair. In places, it was the lichen. In others, it was the frost or the salt air or the heels of children seated atop for a view of the village. Merce took copious notes as she worked. With a one-metre quadrat frame to divide up the lichen on the concrete, she used a magnifying glass to study the concrete.

As Merce explained, she was prepping for a doctorate at some unnamed uni. She seemed well-informed about a propagation theory of how things spread. She wanted something academically rigorous to help industry spread new products, and to help behaviourists determine how new habits form and spread.

Old Professor Maltster, who was just back from Delft's technology university and who was mentioned in one of the standard textbooks about concrete spalling propagation, welcomed this type of original thinking. A couple of times he sat and chatted to her, giving her pointers. Merce and the prof talked about calcite precipitating bacteria, and together looked at the 1940 blocks, the well-mades and the falling-aparts.

Kennet had met Babs Fletcher a few times. On a calm, windless day around the new year, Babs took Battersea down the beach, and again found Kennet. This time he was holding some bright plastic toy, found at the high-water mark. He tickled Battersea on the chin, bowled away the flotsam for the dog to pursue, and the pair raced away south. Merce was working at a concrete block. Next to her folding chair was a clump of sea kale. Babs was in an expensive waxed-cotton coat, open at the neck, which was right for the weather. She stepped carefully in her usual sensible shoes, to avoid any of Allenhut's beach tar.

'Cooking some kale?' she asked.

Returning to the two women, Kennet replied, 'I wouldn't trust Merce with a pan of kale. Nor even a can of baked beans.'

'With Mr Harcourt in the house, I can have proper food, instead of the leaning tower of pizza. This one really knows his stuff on the kitchen front. Explained to me that garlic press is not a publishing firm.'

'If this was midsummer, would you be in the water? My swimming is limited to the doggy-paddle,' said Babs.

'Mine is the crawl,' replied Kennet.

Gobby Merce couldn't resist the moment: 'I taught him the crawl. All men should be taught to crawl.'

'To marry him, did you have to grab him by the throat?'

'It wasn't his throat.'

'Has he apologised to you for being called Kennet?', asked Babs.

'I'm told that the Registrar was going round Maternity with her forms. Then her fountain pen ran dry. So to this day, he's Kennet. He's still got some of his teenage habits, like a wet shave on Saturday mornings, to improve his chances for the weekend.'

'She dazzled me on our first date, showed me something unexpected. She actually knew the difference between PSG and PSV.'

The young couple hugged. 'Time I got out of these winter clothes and put on something sensible. What should I put on?' he asked.

'The kettle.'

Babs smiled at the Londoner. 'Merce, you've sorted out that shop: The village needed a fresh pair of eyes. Tell me, d'you leap on shoplifters, pin them to the ground?'

Merce pointed with her head, 'Only if it's him.'



After Merce had been in Allenhut for a while, she had handed her laptop to the village gossip Gabriel for a couple of days, asking him to clean up her solid-state drive and dump her work onto a DVD. Gabriel duly reported to anyone who would listen that the newcomer was, indeed, doing nothing except work on her pre-doctorate studies.

When the North Sea turned snarl and village hunkered down, Merce would keep away from the dunes, and retreat to the village hair salon. Outside, salt and sand would blow into every corner. Old-timers would park with their car engines facing away from the sea, and check that they had some engine spray to coax the electrics alive after the sea damp cleared. In the salon, the boss had ripped out two unused styling units, and one of the backwashes. In went a proper waiting area, with an honesty box next to the quiet burble of the coffee machine. An inner storm door was swung into position when an easterly tried to blow in. So customers lingered longer, visited more often, and spent more.

In the snug, steaming hair salon, Merce would tap her feet to David Holmes on the sound system as the stylists chatted to their clients. She would vacuum up names, faces and opinions while flipping through magazines. The visitor made herself useful washing mugs and chatting her story, while behaving as a good listener. When she made herself a coffee, she threw a few coins in the box. One day, in the Saturday rush, she helped to empty the bins. Throwing out some cardboard boxes of hair colour, she found a heap of unused plastic gloves, and took them later into her car.

At their campaign one-to-ones, Merce gently nudged Babs, so that the older woman could be proud of her own ideas, her own wish-lists, and actions. She never suspected that The Healthy had composed the whole concert long ago.

As spring came and warmed up, the committee would gather outside in the sheltered garden, under the holm oak, with a scrubbed bowl of clean water for the dog. Merce would fetch in lemons from the shop, for a couple of jugs of fresh and chilled.

Merce quickly perfected the skill of generating meetings, agendae, to-do lists, swot analyses and all the other substitutes for action that had killed a thousand enterprises. The day after each meeting, Merce would return to agree the coming week's actions. The big petition, briefings for councillors and MPs, letters to the press, social media stories, photo calls, TV and online video stunts were all woven into her busy campaign of sabotage. The scheme allowed Merce to keep a grip on the whole direction of the campaign, while her note-taking and silences during the committee meetings left the village with the impression that she was no more than a helpful outsider, a helpful clerk.

At Merce's quiet suggestion, Babs Fletcher asked the committee's inaugural meeting if anyone had worked in a bank. As Tolly had insisted, not *Has anyone worked as an accountant?*, nor *Has anyone got fund-raising experience?*

The planned answer came back, as Casson puffed out his chest and put himself forward. Tolly had been correct. The man was comfortably out of his depth in raising money.

Tolly had been particularly keen for Merce to block the appointment of one fellow, who was the sharpest money man in the village. His empire traded in damaged poultry, and did it profitably. Tache was a generous donor to a fringe political group campaigning against factories: a blight on thatched-cottage England. He had narrowly avoided prison after an incident when chicken beaks and feet had surfaced in a beef curry in the canteen of the government's Department for Food and Farms. The puzzled chef had marked up that dish as *Pollo Economico*. No diners came back for second helpings (but he got a note of thanks from three agency staff from another country, thanking him for

adding their national dish to his repertoire). Headline-writers still referred to him as Chicken Big. He – and a few other fat wallet types – got a personal letter from treasurer Casson, requesting a donation of £50 or £75 or £100. This neatly deterred them volunteering the big-time funding needed for an effective fight.

Tolly and Merce had one more plan to sabotage the fundraising. Merce lured Babs Fletcher into suggesting a small, compulsory donation from every villager opposed to the Allenhut windfarm plan. This left donors with a feeling that they had done their bit, and made it hard to squeeze them later for the tens of thousands needed to hire effective voices for the public enquiry.

Merce settled comfortably into the house on her regular visits to Mrs Fletcher. Quickly she made herself useful – food for the dog, iced drinks for her meetings, and always, always getting the older woman to listen to and nod agreement with each stage of the anti-windfarm campaign. Their chat sometimes drifted towards Babs' praise for her son. After a few weeks, Merce was entrusted with his date of birth (which she had known long before she reached Allenhut), which was used to open the keysafe if she needed to get into the house.

At one meeting she served the committee members scones topped with home-made jam and cream. Afterwards, she assured Babs that it was Kennet's work, not hers. 'But I did help him stealing these blackberries on the common, up towards Sandlings Walk. They're a bit pippy, but he's made a useful jam. Cream is from Walpole, of course.'

'If we all contributed some blackberries, could Kennet do a few dozen jars for fund-raising? We're a bit wolf-at-the-door for cash?'

'Sorry. The Foreign Office have sent him on a tour of a couple of difficult territories. This morning he told me two things, two repeatable things. First, that he's had a few military compo meals. Second, that they were better than some of the chef ones.'

'Sounds like the Win used to be before our new landlord took over.'

Down in the dunes, Merce was a quickly-accepted part of the beachscape. She learned not to be out at weekends – there was no point in wasting her breath on the out of season day-trippers. Twitchers were another nuisance – tripods, ship's bridge bino's, fancy cameras and facial hair on lonely men were a warning to her not to spend time on the bird-watching fraternity heading for the corporation marshes.

One clear and cold sunny day, after a salad lunch, Merce sensed that someone was walking towards her. She was a few metres away from the main path to that part of the beach by Brett's boat, where granite streaked with an icing of sand gave way to the pebbles. Without moving her head, she cocked an eye up briefly. 'John Green, isn't it?' she asked, as the man paused in front of her. 'Hope you haven't been annoyed by all of Babs Fletcher's campaign leaflets?' she asked.

'Not a bit, not a bit. We'll chase those folk out of Allenhut. Barricade the road. Glad that you're on our side. Mind you, Babs isn't much respected round here. The whole district would have preferred anyone else to head the campaign.'

'Well, I'm an outsider. My views don't count. I'll be off to uni for my PhD one day. I'm just in the background, helping out Babs.'

The man nodded around the view of the dunes, the marshes, the old, ruined windmill. 'Money. Just because we're on the granite, they can anchor their Allenhut slipper turbines on land and offshore at low cost. No thought of the view. Babs was right: cut the value of my house, noise all day and night,

and unreliable generation too. Keep up the good work, Merce.’ He nodded a smile, and carried on towards the beach.

Merce was delighted. He had fed back the three campaign messages that The Healthy had promoted. And she recalled his file: John Green had – a year before – been stopped by a clipboarder on his fortnightly visit to the large-print corner of Halesworth library. Innocently, he had sung the praises of windfarms, and told the opinion poll lady that no do-gooders were going to tell him to insulate his house.

One morning in her house, Mrs Fletcher put on her serious face. ‘Had an email from Mexico. My son’s found something odd about you on the internet, Merce. Minutes of some Scots charity – the Bothy Box. Thanking you for some fund-raising thing. What’s that about?’

The youngster switched on her dazzling smile. ‘Funny you should ask, I’m going up for three days to one of the universities up there, for my possible doctorate. They’re interested in how charitable funding can use propagation theory. One donor triggers more from colleagues and friends and neighbours and relatives. But I’ll be back to get out next Monday’s leaflets.’

That same afternoon, a slow-moving man, a regular pipe-tobacco buyer in the shop, stood looking intently as Merce sketched some pinkish-red thrift beside one the of the dragon’s teeth cubes out among the dunes. ‘Rabbits,’ he said eventually. ‘Rabbits.’ The man was thin, and was wearing a promotional nylon top that advertised a Silverstone Grand Prix from a couple of decades ago. On the left breast, he wore a pinned submariner’s badge showing two dolphins escorting a crown and anchor.

‘None here,’ replied Merce. She held down some notepaper as the sea breeze picked up. A gust blew a grain of sand into an eye, and she licked a small finger clean before excavating it.

‘That’s my point. Area’s teeming with rabbits, but not one cube has ever been undermined by their burrows. Why’s that? Too sandy, burrows just collapse down here by the dunes, I suppose.’

Merce nodded as he continued: ‘I remember when I was six or seven. I used to come down here to trade with the soldiers. My mum would do up a hot pastry with rabbit in it. The troops were penniless of course, but they had cigarettes and canned foods and wooden packing cases we could use, so we’d do a trade. Even when the peace came, we had to be careful on the beach, not sure if all the mines had been retrieved.’

The man nodded over to the southwest. ‘And occasionally we had sticks of bombs jettisoned on the corporation marsh. Down in Hoist Covert one of them splashed Westwood Mill when it landed; the whole north side of the windmill was covered in lichen until they cleaned it up in the 50s.’

Then rabbit man Green lurched away, heading to the river mouth, shaking his head, muttering ‘Bombs’.



## Chapter 10 – Small - but glorious - stone castle



The beautiful 19-year-old girl had an old-fashioned peek-a-boo haircut, plain but stunning. She was dressed in the blue 3C Royal Navy female rating ashore general duty rig of pullover and skirt. Jinty stood hitching a lift on the road in Paisley. At her feet was a beige sea sack. The dawn sun was behind her left shoulder, and in the distance the high cloud was a rich twist of gold and purple. Above, commuters on the pricey breakfast flights to London climbed up from Glasgow airport. Away to the left, incoming planes softly curled into the landing pattern. She posed looking hopefully down the road. Behind her, a green sign promised that the next exit was for Linwood, old home of the Imp car.

She kept smiling for two mornings while waiting for the right December sunrise, but Jinty was not alone. The road contractor – who had earned millions from windfarm construction – had closed off one carriageway free of charge. There was the photographer, with his assistant and lady apprentice. There was the stylist, with her assistant and apprentice. The make-up fellow also doubled as the on-site hairdresser. There was the roadie, in charge of the generator and portable khazi. When Jinty had emerged from her dressing and make-up wagon, every eye swivelled to her. Men caught their breath. Women stared open-mouthed. Scotland's future had stepped forward. Then once everything was just right, two security guards unlocked their casket and brought the Hillman Imp brooch to Jinty's navy pullover. And she had won everyone's hearts when, at the first photoshoot a few days earlier, Jinty had insisted that the older lady security guard be photographed first, trying on the diamonds and gold salad.

The photographer was one of the new breed of planners: before setting foot outside his studio, he had filled in his location file. Elevation of sun, angle of shadows needed, the landscape, the vegetation – all were known and planned. He knew what difference in luminance he could accept between the lightest and darkest parts of each shot. And it always paid off. He was known as the no-airbrush man, and in Italy he had been credited with winning at least one bitter *Elezione regionali* where the loser had been mocked for an absurdly artificial election photo. And he had been the director of the gundog nutrition advert which had featured the niece of the Thane of Dalwhinnie.

The photographer's two assistants worked quickly and wordlessly to get the catchlights, hair lights and reflectors set up for each shot, while watching the background for anything distracting that needed to be removed or hidden. The hairdresser and the make-up man came as a pair. The clothes stylist, with her clamps and pins and iron joined in. One of the photographer's secret tools for an outdoor shoot was a roll of banknotes: after warning his models, he would use the cash to pay a local farmer to fire off a bird-scarer or shotgun if he felt that a flock of startled birdlife would add life to a shot. But Jinty's shoot did not require avian support. A dozen photos had been captured in just 20

minutes of sunrise. The chosen one from this shoot captured a delightful blush on Jinty's cheeks, after a girl in a passing white van had slowed and shouted a Glasgow suggestion to her.

Kennet's face appeared – suntanned – after Merce's phone chimed for a video call. She turned her camera slowly to show the roadside photo crowd. It was like an anorak trade fair. The sun had not brought much warmth.

'What time in Linwood? It's nine-thirty here. Look, wonderful silver sand, maybe it's coral. Not clear in the picture, but that's a thin line of breakers out there. I think it's a reef. Indian ocean, of course. Our Consul and I are doing a spot on the telly later, saying that I'll stop sending tea from England, and just serve the local stuff.'

'What about Foreign Office types who want something chichi?'

'They can beg Waitrose website to mail it to them. And good luck with that.'

'I had chilli salmon and noodles here in Linwood last night. The server told me that where I was standing, her grandad used to clamp the exhausts, on the track. I'll be glad to leave: Jinty is genuine posh, makes me look poor-cousin. Anyway, Dundee tonight, without you. Just me, no you.'

'I could do with some Scots weather right now.'

'I'll book it, but not for now. After the public enquiry, when I'm all finished in Allenhut. Early summer, before the enquiry report gives the go-ahead. There's a hut hostel shed thingy up at Lowman, Sutherland. Sutherland? They should call that coast Westerland. Just the Minch, and the North Atlantic. We'll turn left at the Mound, and stop when the Minch gulls try to peck the car tyres.'

'Just you and me?'

'Not really. There's a dame school there by the quay, and kids come in by boat each morning. Scenic hardly does justice to it. And then I'm back here to wrap up, once the planning man has published.'

It would be another three days, after Merce had returned to Allenhut, before Jinty found herself at a shoot in an all-robots factory making uniforms for a pizza chain. Jinty noticed, in the distance, a young man busying himself with textiles on a laser cutting worktable. Staff were quietly following his directions as he calmed down an engineer, took a magnifier to study the fabric close-up, and pretended to ignore a lady twice his age who pinched his bum. It was after their second date that Jinty discovered that he was heir to half a woollens fortune. Soon the couple were spending their weekends together, restoring a small but glorious stone castle – with 1676 engraved above the portcullis entry – at one of the gateways to Edinburgh.

Merce left the Linwood shoot after a quarter of an hour, relaxed that The Healthy's plan was in safe – and skilled – hands. As she crossed over to Dundee, black stumps – probably the work of a London dentist – ran alongside the train as she crossed the Tay. The taxi dropped her at the web man's bungalow.

At their last talk, Tolly had briefed Merce, 'Spend half a day with our wobbly web man. Tell him to build a website for the Vote for Hospices fund. But don't get too close to him. Although he's in a wheelchair, he pesters women. His carers never go there unaccompanied. But you're a married woman, so you'll know how to squelch him.'

Everything was ramps and wide doors, with a keysafe outside. The door was ajar, and already she could smell the slightly-unwashed smell of a bachelor home.

‘Merce Harcourt here,’ she called.

‘I’m just wheeling out of the shower. Come on in.’

‘No chance, mate. I’ll be back in 15 minutes, when you’re decent.’ Merce turned on her heels and walked back to a parade of shops she had seen nearby. She killed some time buying a Courier, and looking at the display of handwritten adverts in the newsagents’ window. A primary school – all single-glazed glass - was a few paces away. She saw the children slowly rotating their arms and heads in a reasonable mimicry of a wind turbine as they sang *We just clicked*.

The web man was nothing if not persistent. He patted a chair next to his wheelchair. ‘Come and be friendly’.

‘I’d sooner be business-like,’ the visitor kept a face that was no warmer than polite. She handed over a data disk. ‘We need a website for a campaign group called Vote for Hospices. I’m running an election candidate in Soothill, West Yorkshire. The local people will be looking up the Vote for Hospices website, so it needs to smell right. Three key messages. One, in business for four decades. Two, funded by donations. Three, run as a charity but cannot be registered formally because charities are not allowed to have a political purpose.’

He looked at the accounts on the screen, nodding thoughtfully. ‘Tell you what - we’ll present these accounts according to the style of the year. In the 1970s, they’d be typed and then Gestetnered. Later, a bit of SuperCalc. Then more recently, PDFs. If you do the whole lot in PDF, folk will smell a rat. Tolly has sent me a picture of the London office block: looks authentic.’

Merce fetched some hot drinks from the kitchen, and leaned back in her chair. ‘Tell me why Tolly Carnegie speaks so highly of you.’

‘My main work is controlling windfarm photos. There’s accurate and misleading, and I’m the czar of accurate, need I say. A news editor needs a picture of a windfarm. I don’t know which online professional photo agency he or she is using, but I feed them all. Big and sharp, free of copyright. And they’re happy. Sunshine, families laughing and enjoying the view, no birds in shot. I don’t do middle-distance. Wind turbines are either photographed close up - blue skies and fluffy cumulus – or they are long view, and almost impossible to see in wide-angle landscapes.’

‘But they sometimes want bad-news photos.’

‘If someone wants windfarm disasters, I’ve got that under control as well. There’s 14,000 abandoned turbines across the USA. Or folk might want a picture of fires, collapses or blade throws. In these cases, I work with a couple of the photo copyright agents.’

‘Copyright trolls?’

‘Er, I’ve heard that phrase. I tell the copyright agents and the photographers to demand sky-high fees, and that deters publishers from using pictures that The Healthy doesn’t like.’

‘I don’t need people looking at the website to do anything. Not collecting email addresses or donations. Just informative.’

The man nodded. ‘Easily done, just look at any not-for-profit website. The action buttons are generally over on the left. The American profit makers put their action buttons over on the right, maybe top right, with primary colours. Enormous difference in the click-through rate.’

## Chapter 11 – Are you going to embarrass the campaign?



Merce had found her helper, after searching the online disciplinary hearings for nurses and midwives. Just finishing a one-year suspension was a nurse now allowed back on the professional register. Merce met the nurse downstairs in the Motheaten coffee bar. A few patrons were clustered around the noticeboard headed Junkyard. Fresh lists of *Spares wanted* and *Spares for sale* had been pinned up.

The nurse and Merce chatted inconsequently for half-an-hour, sizing each other up, before going upstairs to join Tolly Carnegie in his wife's career sphere above. Outside, the air smelled fresh after some early drizzle. The newcomer was a pleasant woman in her late 30s. Half an hour had shown Merce that she was relaxed in the face of an interview, immediately connecting with a stranger. And did not slurp her coffee. Tolly had shown Merce a summary of the nurse's supermarket loyalty-card shopping: fairly healthy, except for a regular purchase of a bottle of cabbies'-friend vodka.

The conference table had been pushed to one side, so that the trio could face each other over a low table set with iced water and some posh cookies. Tolly did the talking.

'Briley Grindale. 'That's not the name you used when the Nursing Council suspended you.'

'This is my maiden name. Too many press cuttings with my old name on.' She spoke quickly, with an East Leeds accent – almost Yorkshire, but with a flatter tone.

'We haven't advertised this job. It's a delicate role in a hospice, runs until election day, the second Thursday in May. As well as making a long-term improvement to hospices, you'd earn a year's pay in two months. I want to find a hospice that could use a few pennies for things like a hospice at home service. It's people, not just premises.'

Briley Grindale glanced at Tolly Carnegie and Merce Harcourt. She nodded at the mention of hospices, The Healthy's duo knew that this was her background and her interest. And she needed the money: her shoes were well polished, but needed reheeling.

'I run a private campaign group called Vote for Hospices. You may have seen our website. My mum died 20 years ago. She was in agony if her IV didn't drip on time. The family came up against a problem. Docs have a professional duty not to treat if it doesn't help cure, although palliative stuff is okay. You know the rest: hospices. She was lucky, had some wonderful happy final weeks with other patients, great medical and nursing staff. Even the forgotten folk on the hospice team – cooks, cleaners, gardeners – made such a difference. And another thing - whenever the family came to see my nan, no matter what time we did it, there was always a free parking bay available. Simple things.'

He paused. Merce and Briley said nothing. 'But then the hospice ran out of cash, the service moved to a hospital ward, and it was never the same. I took over the Vote for Hospices campaign. Now I need your help.'

‘Is my track record reassuring?’

‘Sky-diving?’ prompted Merce.

‘One of my elderly patients wanted one final free-fall jump. He’d been a big noise in the parachute association. Doctor gave him the necessary signed approval, all he had to do was climb out, let go, count to 10, pull the ripcord and steer for the pea pit target. He hesitated. He stood on the little jump platform on the right wheel, the way you do it in a Cessna. I smiled and released his hand from the strut. But my patient’s memory had gone, he was shouting out *one thousand, two thousand, three thousand* and so on. But then he forgot which numbers came next. Opened a bit late, and needed some expensive physiotherapy to get his legs back in use.’ The nurse pressed her outstretched hand down on the conference room table, looking serious, and shook her head regretfully. ‘And I was suspended for a year.’

‘Vote for Hospices is financially stronger than ever. We want a nurse who can be the election agent for a terminally-ill candidate. The campaign is non-party, we don’t want to do this in a marginal seat. I want to get lots of web and TV coverage so that every Member of Parliament understands the hospice movement.’ Tolly gestured to Merce, who spoke next.

‘Sensitive, high-profile job – you need to be tactful. Are you going to embarrass the campaign? Are the traffic police going to stop you for speeding, seat belt, texting, drinking?’

‘I’ve learnt my lesson. A disciplinary, and a year’s sin bin is a bit educational.’

Tolly pushed a list of half a dozen constituencies with the names of their local hospices, and the size of the MP’s majorities. ‘Look, we want to do this stunt in a safe parliamentary seat that has a hospice. Our candidate dies during the campaign, so on General Election day that particular seat doesn’t vote. This just delays that Parliamentary election for a month. And because we are choosing one of the safe seats – and not a marginal - no-one can accuse the campaign of favouring one party or another. Maybe you’ve got some ideas on where we should do it.’

Briley Grindale smiled and took the paper. ‘This is a bit unexpected: being offered a choice of towns to work.’

‘You won a council election yourself?’ asked Merce. ‘Tell us about it.’

‘My ex and I bought an end-house on a new estate. It had a road on three sides of the plot. The builder went bust. As frontagers we had to pay a fortune if we wanted the road finished and adopted by the council. I sabotaged the ruling party’s council candidate and I got elected instead. Got the road sorted within a couple of months.’

‘Sabotage?’ Tolly put on his stern face.

‘No other word for it. If there’s a vacancy for one candidate, ten voters must sign the nomination form. If they sign two nomination forms, the second one is invalid, and that candidate doesn’t get onto the ballot paper. I found out which of the ruling party’s supporters regularly signed their nominations. I got them to sign mine and handed in the form first. Those regulars later signed the other candidate’s form, making it invalid. So I was the only candidate.’

Smiling, she read through the list of marginal parliamentary seats. ‘There’s this one in Wales, been there on holiday, I know the neighbourhood,’ said Grindale.

‘Sounds promising. Is there a TV station there?’ queried Merce.

‘Ah, I understand,’ the nurse read on. ‘Soothill, that’s near Leeds. That’s my part of Yorkshire. Really handy for the radio and TV studios. I know that TV station: my uncle – who can never outrun the police - calls that station The Prisoners’ Friend because of their pretty weather girls. But I don’t know any hospices there. Can we do a web search? Looks like a big parliamentary majority.’ Tolly stood up at the table, and fiddled around to fire up the wall-mounted display screen. He handed the laptop to the nurse, who flashed through a few Soothill web pages.

‘He’s someone called Haig Garrington. Worshipped locally, platitudes about the local hospice there. I like it. What’s in it for the hospice? Last thing they need is some unknown campaign group to turn up for a bit of self-glory.’

‘Click on their fund-raising page,’ said Merce. ‘Vote for Hospices has got the cash to think big if it results in some practical help for the patients, and if it can give this Garry a fright.’

‘Haig Garrington’s his name,’ said the nurse. She read from the Soothill hospice website. ‘They’re about to launch a multi-million appeal for two new projects. They want a wing with new, bigger rooms so that relatives can stay overnight, and want a pod for Hospice at Home doctors and nurses and home-helps.’

‘I like the way you think, sounds a good choice,’ said Tolly. ‘This is the plan. Cards on the table, complete openness. You are the agent; the candidate will be a patient who’s up for a laugh. What we are aiming for is a candidate who is almost certain to die between nominations opening, and polling day. I run this fund – families who have bequeathed us money expect it to be used for political campaigning. So there’s enormous leverage: not only does the hospice get its new projects, but every hospice gets a Member of Parliament who’ll be looking over his or her shoulder, worried that they’re not doing enough to help. I’ll put my donation in to an escrow account at the hospice’s bank. Who’s the MP, again?’

‘Garrington, Haig Garrington,’ responded Merce and Briley in unison.

Briley Grindale had no idea that she had been coaxed into choosing the correct MP for this attack.

After Merce escorted nurse Grindale out of the meeting, she came back to challenge Tolly. ‘I’ve never heard such a heart-tugging pack of lies in my life. Mother in a hospice, indeed.’

Tolly Carnegie lifted the laptop off the coffee table, giving it to Merce: ‘Open the calendar for the 8th of next month,’ he said, almost in a whisper.

*Anniversary of mum’s death, 1985, read the entry. Merce looked puzzled.*

‘My father remarried: a lovely lady who’d cared for my mum in her final three years. So I’m blessed with two nans,’ he added. ‘Y’know what the good hospice has. Family. Plonk the building next to a couple of busy bus routes, with rainproof bus shelters outside the door, and guaranteed parking. Then family can drop in. Makes all the difference. And our million will go a bit further, with hospice at home helping folk in front of their kids, their neighbours.’

Merce nodded, and added her own two penn’orth. ‘A friend whose uncle was in a hospice told me that what eased things were the cool treats. Little catering tubs of ice cream, and the sort of ice-making machine that pubs have.’

Tolly mouthed the word yes, and stared out of the window. He walked across, and looked down at the London street scene. In the doorway of a former bank, the usual short-con man was pulling money from tourists with his three-shell trick. His shill stood some distance away, keeping watch by looking at the street reflection in a couple of shops. He was not bothered by the police officer in his tall helmet, but touched the bridge of his spectacles to close down the game when an insignificant-looking mumsy with supermarket carrier bags toddled along. The uniformed officer had carelessly greeted the plain-clothes lady colleague out of the corner of his mouth. The three-shell capitalist vanished onto a bus, while his four-eyed pal pedalled up an alley. Usually, they would be back within about 11 minutes, takeaway coffees in hand, not wanting to disappoint their clientele.

‘Silverstone was inspired. Perfect meeting, nothing in writing, probably nothing recorded either. Now that they’ve agreed, we need something that looks like a charity.’

Tolly turned back to Merce.

‘Tell you what. Get an accountancy college – Ahmedabad or Pune do ACCA courses – and ask them to work up some accounts for a charity that makes political donations. Start around 1973, and get

plausible accounts for each year to now. The charity will start with a small donation, and in election years it makes grants. The end-point is that it should now have just over £3m. And check that they observe Benford's Law: 30 per cent of the values should start with a 1, or else they'll look bogus. Use an anonymous email address and pay the accountancy college by cash transfer. The Healthy doesn't need a paper trail.'

He paused, 'Oh, and tell them it's for a college audit exam. Otherwise, they might think it's a tad bogus.'

'And?' asked Merce.

'We need a plausible base for Vote for Hospices.' He slid another sheet of paper across. 'This is an old office block that time forgot in a London suburb. One of the construction firms in The Healthy is holding it for a couple of decades, as geologically it's the only place where new tunnels can meet safely. They don't know if they'll be rail tunnels, or water or sewage, but these firms work in decades. One day, they'll name their price when the tunnellers arrive. Tell the post office to redirect the mail to me here. Speak to a signwriter – we want a tired 1970s sign for the fund put up. Maybe a smaller sign offering packages to the Munich Olympics. That will date it well. Then speak to the internet map companies and get them to rephotograph the building to show our sign. Then anyone can see an authentic street view confirming that Vote for Hospices is alive and well.'

Merce found the block in a London atlas. It was in one of those forgotten suburbs where the women treat themselves to home hair-colour kits and second-hand golf clubs. As do the men.

It took a fortnight in Pune, and in the street photography firm, and in Scotland to create an online footprint for Vote for Hospices.



**S**oothill was clean. Merce had been expecting soot and slag heaps. Instead, 1960s office and industrial parks seemed busy with trucks at loading bays, and full staff car parks. The only nod to the area's collier heritage seemed to be chimneys on each house – even the new ones.

At a grand meeting of doctors, nurses, patients, and their families at the Soothill hospice, Briley put her stagecraft to work. Opening up her Sloane Street-sized handbag, she produced a copy of the Vote for Hospices annual accounts. She had already glimpsed that the Medical Director and the chief fundraiser already had printed out the accounts from the web. And to everyone's astonishment, two of the patients volunteered to be paper candidates to fight Haig Garrington's seat.

## Chapter 12 – God bless London Transport



Leiston was bathed in sunshine. Tolly and Merce tried talking in the Long Shop, but the museum was a bit echoey – unwanted ears might listen in. It was briefing time. They sat at one of the pavement cafes, Merce’s eyes alert for faces she knew from Allenhut, who did not need to know her movements nor her contacts. There was hardly any traffic. Shoppers lingered on the pavements, chatting. Merce spread some fourberry jam on her low-sugar cookie that was the size of a UFO. To pay the waitress, Tolly eased out – without glancing at it - his Hindmarch wallet, which had been cordwainered with a slight curve to sit in his favourite suit pocket.

A delivery van pulled up nearby. Doors slammed, the driver whistled the windfarm tune, the diesel ticked over. Merce pulled out a small box of matches, laid it next to the ashtray, and picked up an empty coffee cup. Holding it in front of her lips, she lowered her voice and briefed her boss from a tightly-scribbled scrap of paper. Been to these streets, organised these leaflets, these meetings, spoken to these people. In the weeks ahead, this was her list of plans. Putting down the cup, she then burnt the note. No phone records, no text messages, no emails, no paper trail.

‘I’m about to phone the Nobel committee secretary in Stockholm, Merce. If they award a prize for time-wasting talking, your committee is a shoo-in. Well done.’

They paused while someone passed within earshot.

‘Merce, let me show you the public enquiry roadmap. Because there have been objections, there’ll now be a public enquiry. The Allenhut committee must ask for Rule 6 status – this allows them to present their case. If you don’t, then The Healthy can’t show that the locals have been involved in the planning process, and it will just delay construction. But as I said, if you repeat earlier planning objections, then yours will be ignored.’

She nodded, not interrupting.

‘First, The Healthy is pleased with your three jobs – petition, money, and evidence. The petition has been super. Signatories from around the world, perfect. Cash – with the money you’ve raised, you could just about hire a law student, and certainly not a planning barrister.’

‘We’re helped,’ Merce added, ‘by the church needing money to maintain their tower. This week’s sign for a fundraising fish supper on Friday says *We believe in cod.*’

‘Evidence is going well, with irrelevant objections: construction noise, too many outsiders hired, disruption of the marsh-waders breeding season. And all repeating what the Parish has submitted, so that they not only get ignored, but they get rubbished in public for wasting time.’



‘Villagers are concerned about noise.’

‘That’s a good, irrelevant moan. The Salford study showed that out of 133 windfarms, only one caused a noise nuisance. And councils with windfarms said that they got three times more noise complaints about industry than about wind turbines.’

‘Visual impact?’

‘Ah yes, we have to raise a tethered balloon to the height of a turbine. Show what it looks like. Don’t be surprised if you can’t see it. Our contractor will check the colour of the sky, the clouds, and choose a balloon that blends in.’

She nodded.

‘Remember that absurd wind turbine planned for the old church. The villagers can fuss and demand it’s removal. They save face, and The Healthy gets what it needs.’

‘Shall I do a torchlight march at the church?’

Tolly’s eyes lit up. ‘Do that. Great event for the cameras. There’s an Ipswich anti-everything group with tambourines and dancing - I’ll get them to attend. And there’s a clergyman up the A12 with beard, sandals, staring eyes – he can do a hate soundbite against windfarms. Great television, and he’ll put up the backs of the viewers.’

‘I’ll make it around midday, no torchlight,’ she promised. ‘Unless it’s the news editor’s chums, they won’t shoot anything after teatime.’

‘The A12 clergyman does good television. He talks with a little step in front of him. Sometimes it’s a breeze block he’s found, or sometimes he brings his own. At the end of his show, he suddenly glares around the crowd, big-eyes at the film lens, steps up suddenly, and clearly and distinctly calls, *Satan, leave us alone*. Same old message, whether he’s agin noisy reversing alarms on trucks, or too much tax on menswear, or over-zealous litter prosecutors.’

‘I’ll get Babs Fletcher to suggest it.’

‘You deserve a statue.’

‘Okay, call an electrician. I want it floodlit.’

Tolly Carnegie leant back with his coffee. ‘Well, retail Rita – tell me what you have learnt in the shop.’

‘Two things, three things. Don’t display the lime cordial next to the sunflower oil. And don’t describe the Belgian paté as puppy poo. Don’t felt-tip a sad face on the cantaloupe or galia, to promote them as melon colly.’

‘I’ve had a couple of moans from your shop people. Rochdale, they’re pioneers in stopping staff who’re on the nick. They call it shrinkage.’

‘My husband has never suffered from shrinkage.’

‘Smart and smiling?’

‘Always. Didn’t need a smart and smiling campaign mirror in the stockroom.’

‘They don’t actually care if you are smart and smiling, provided that when you’re serving coleslaw, you don’t pick your nose. No, aim of the mirror is to let the camera peer behind the stacks of crisp boxes. They tell me that when someone returns some products, they’re almost empty by the time you forward them back to the distribution centre.’

‘It doesn’t count as calories if no-one sees you eat. But I shall stop nibbling and swigging the returns.’

‘And they want you to protect their margins. Sales of their immensely profitable Cleansing Spa Refresh have slipped. All they ask is that you stop calling it soap. Oh, when you weigh and price bananas, enter them as fruit every time. Don’t enter them as meat, when the bunch includes a spider.’

‘Okay, Tolly. But the world has run out of posh women. So now you’re stuck with me.’



**B**ack in Allenhut, Merce pressed on with her duties – morning in the shop, rest of the day helping the anti-windfarm campaign. Visitors to the village chose every means of transport. From Holland, they would sail in at high tide, fighting the mouth race to come in and moor in the muddy Blyth. Some came down from Lowestoft, following the coast and heaths path. But apart from film crews years before, Merce’s two visitors were the first to arrive from the air.

Allenhut was spared aircraft noise. Above, the Luton east airway was too high to trouble even the light sleepers. The nearby nuclear power plant made the lower levels out of bounds to military and private aircraft. So villagers were surprised – they mentioned it in the shop – when the whup-whup-whup of a helicopter was heard. This was followed by the noise of the craft landing, and a customer mentioned that two well-dressed men and an army officer were heading their way. Another member of staff smoothly moved from restocking to take over from Merce at the till, as the visitors gestured to Merce to accompany them. She pulled on something warm and left the shop.

‘Mrs Harcourt, our mutual friend Tolly Carnegie told us you’d be here. My name is Bessemer, Scientific Adviser to the health minister. This is Mr Bramley, who advises the agriculture on biosecurity. Can we sit and chat?’

They also mumbled the name of a captain from the medical corps. The captain listened but took no part in the discussion: he was only there to ensure that the defence budget met the cost of the flight. The late morning sun was peeking through an alto-cirrus haze, making it comfortable to wander down to the dragon’s teeth. One of the visitors pulled a tablet out of one of those tired black leather government briefcases, and invited Merce to take a look.

‘Tolly mentioned your stay in the Mediterranean last summer. Interesting enough for us to fly straight up here from London.’ The two men looked serious.

‘Here’s that island’s local paper from mid-June. Talks about the opening of their island’s windfarm. Tell me, when did you arrive there?’

‘I think it was the same day. The opening was on the local radio and newspapers that evening, and the following day.’ A tap of the tablet, and the scan of the island newspaper was shrunk onto a timeline with some strange graph.

‘This is a wind record for the summer. Do you recall how windy it was?’

Merce looked up at the thin clouds, thinking, before replying. ‘The local sailing club ran a whole series of competitions and rallies. I remember someone telling me that it was the best sailing summer for some years. The local radio reported that the yacht club had a record entry of novice sailors because the wind was consistent, not gusty and not too strong.’

‘And then the wind all stopped?’ Bessemer asked. Merce thought for a moment and slowly nodded. Bessemer tapped the tablet again, and showed a graph from a windspeed datalogger. For two weeks, the holiday island had been still, with barely a light breeze.

Merce peered at the dates on the screen. ‘Yes, I remember now. It was the end of the season; the yachties had gone home, and so the sailing club was not too bothered that there was no wind at all. And then we had rats.’

The two visitors exchanged a glance. ‘Did you see any yourself?’ asked Bramley, lifting an eyebrow. There was a soft murmur from the easterly breeze breaking small waves on the shingle. The air was saltier than usual.

‘No. I saw nothing, There was nothing in the local media, either. But my freight forwarder at the airport called me and told me about the ban on animal imports and exports, and half an hour later the animal shelter told me the same thing.’

Bramley tilted the tablet and slid his finger slowly across the timeline on the screen. ‘So, after the first windless week you had a rat invasion, an unreported rat invasion?’

Merce thought for a moment. Her doggy island, then Misty Probert, and Knoxy, plus a great bustard picked clean. Then she told them about ‘Ospital ‘Arry, all about ‘Ospital ‘Arry and his windfree days and ravenous rats theory.

‘Some link, you reckon?’ she asked.

Bessemer responded. ‘Oh, not us, not us. We don’t reckon. The suggestion comes from one of our people on attachment in the far east. The word is that the same thing has happened there. You and Tolly Carnegie in The Healthy - and we in Whitehall - can see the problems. First, credibility. It smells as though rats are feeding on carrion. This may be allowing rats to populate barren areas, where windfarms bring down migrating birds. And when the wind drops, their food supply drops, and then the rats spread and forage. But we cannot prove it. Second, energy policy. If this is all true, the public will demand that we scrap renewables and get our power from filthy coal or gas, imports from filthy dictatorships.’

Bramley looked Merce in the eye. ‘And that’s why an eyewitness from The Healthy is so valuable. There would only be misunderstandings if we asked the wrong people questions about windfarms and rats.

‘Chat to ‘Arry, then. Let’s dial him. He spends all day out by the harbour.’

Merce did the connect thing. One of the visitors had a laptop, and Mrs Harcourt found the marina webcam.

‘There he is, that white jacket at nine o’clock. From his favourite bench he can see the marina entrance, and also the windsock up at the headland heliport.’

Merce dialled the harbourmaster, for the man's number. 'Arry gave the webcam a wave as they connected.

'Where's Kennet, Mrs Newlywed?'

'Catching his breath back.' They then moved on to a two-minute two-hander. Yes, his rat / bird / windfarm tale was what he had witnessed. It was not harbourside gossip.

'Our next step? Back to London, and we'll quietly speak to some researchers, find a solution.'

Bessemer was talking like Whitehall power – objectives, then paperwork, and finally ministerial buy-in. 'Maybe lock down in the migration seasons, or even remove turbines that get too many bird strikes. Or if we do nothing, like carry on building those glazed skyscrapers, so that the birds learn to avoid trouble. We may have to turn the boffins loose on this one.'

They all wandered back to the village shop. As the visitors walked back to their helicopter, Bessemer glanced around and spoke softly to Bramley, 'Gong if she gets things right in Allenhut?'

'For services to community campaigning, I think,' Bramley replied with a smile.



**I**n one of the better, calmer weather weeks in early spring, Merce hid out, again, in the salon. A woman in her 30s, with Musto labels on her ocean wear, plus Poland's white and red shoulder flashes, came and sat next to Merce. She smelt slightly of North Sea salt, and of yachtie fry-ups.

'Welcome back, Wiktorina. What is it this time?' asked the salonista.

'A Joan of Arc shortie, please. All this long hair isn't good where I'm going to work, all machinery.'

Merce reached across to the aromatherapy display, 'Joan of Arc? Here you are,' as she waved a box of matches under the customer's nose.

'You are a student of history, yes?'

'At school, I also was advised to have a Joan of Arc haircut.'

'Good immersive way to learn about the Hundred Years War. Well done, your history teacher.'

'Nah. It was the nit nurse. When they cast the school play about Marie Antoinette, I threatened that if I didn't play the lead, heads would roll.'

'And did they?'

'Er, I was given an important transport job.'

'Tumbrils, big part of French history.'

'Not quite – I was sent out in the rain to the parents' car park, to reduce the usual thieving there of catalytic converters. Was that your husband in my shop yesterday, buying all the motoring magazines?'

Wiktorina nodded. 'I need a haircut before I join an oil change contractor. Windfarms. Both first-fills for new gearboxes, and service fills. They take a truck up to a turbine, hoist a hose for new oil, with a second hose for used gearbox oil, and then take the dirty stuff off to clean it and sell it.'

'And you?'

'I'll be taking a dated and timed photo of the tower number, with the lat and long. That becomes a sticky label on a sealed sample bottle, so that the goo can be analysed. See what particles are there, water content, all that stuff.'

'Water?'

'If it's cold and there's no wind, there'll be condensation. You can get ten per cent water in the wind turbine gearbox. Then in a strong wind, the gearbox heats up and the water boils into foam. Like a bubble bath, the foam traps the heat, and everything catches fire. If there's water, or if we do a change in cold weather, we flush the gearbox clean before the refill.'

Wiktorina finished her bit as she was led to the salon chair.

'Can you predict the water content by seeing what happens after a cold no-wind spell?'

'I suppose someone's doing that, but it's not me, it's not Wiktorina. Windfarms will pay extra if we oil change folk reliably turn up in the coldest winters. They get the best prices for their power then, but the oil viscosity goes a bit treacle. They need oil change folk who do the job instead of moaning about each snowflake. If you can sail out of Gdynia, then you know cold weather. At the interview, they loved my account of clearing a jammed main halyard shackle. Head for heights and all that.'

'There's a plan to put a windfarm here, on the coast and going out into the bay. If it happens, you'll want fresh charts on your nav table.'

'Charts, harbour fees, mooring fees, the lot. It's weep and pay, for us yachties.'



Babs Fletcher's campaign was in the final stage. The public meeting to discuss the windfarm planning application was booked for the village hall, with the parade to the churchside turbine site diaried for the following lunchtime. Sitting in Mrs Fletcher's lounge, Merce and Babs discussed a photo for the poster advertising the public meeting. An ugly grey wind turbine towering over Allenhut church was eye-catching, and Mrs Fletcher preferred it.

'I like this,' Merce nodded with a grim face. 'The wind turbine that ate your village.'

Mrs Fletcher frowned, and shook her head, falling straight into the trap. 'Mm, they're not planning a turbine. They're planning a windfarm stretching to the horizon.' She gestured to another view on the computer screen, a picture that Merce had deliberately left displayed in a thumbnail. 'This tells a truer story – towers wherever you turn.'

Merce sighed and said: 'I guess you're right. It shows the scale much better.' And so the posters went out with a wide-angle artist's impression that showed a crop of tiny, insignificant turbines that

were almost impossible to see on a poster view of the village. Merce made a mental note to thank the man in Dundee who had suggested this.

The older woman had been holding something back, and now she coughed. ‘My son again: says the Bothy Box people are doing something with windfarms. You said your university people had put you in touch. What’s going on, Merce?’

Mrs Merce Harcourt switched on her dazzling smile, to buy a few moments’ thinking time. She was a fast thinker: once – at her dog-selling scam – she had encountered a customer called Romanov. By the time the visitor had reached the cages, one of the dogs boasted a name card Anastasia, and sported a neck ribbon in the Imperial blue and gold colours.

She explained, ‘Nothing’s changed. Your boy asked the same question. As I said, one of the universities up there are interested in how charities can use propagation theory. I guess the Bothy Box have an ongoing fund-raising plan. Could they be touching every possible donor – North Sea oil, shipping lines, whisky distillers, even windfarms?’ She shrugged her shoulders and zipped it. Short lies, Tolly had said, are the only ones that work.

The committee meetings gave Merce a chance to hide in the shadows. Efficient. Each member got their paperwork – agendas, plans, budgets, backgrounders – a couple of days in advance. Once Merce suggested to Barbara Fletcher that she might want to record their thanks to the treasurer, if he could report on a high level of £50 donations from residents. At the meetings, Merce would sit quietly taking notes, at a side table just behind and to the side of the chair. It was clear that she was the servant of the residents, and not their equal.

A week before the public meeting, the helium balloon contractor arrived and parked near Oldtown marshes. Merce accompanied Barbara Fletcher as she walked her dog past the balloon van a couple of times. They saw completely different things.

Babs saw rolls of length-marked tethering cable, a couple of helium cylinders, and some balloons. Merce saw something more significant: the chromameter to check the sky colour, and a colour-graduated set of balloons. In the days leading up to the public meeting, the contractor checked the sky colour every couple of hours, always ensuring that he flew the correct matching balloon fabric. Each test flight was hard to see.

Merce Harcourt had done the rounds of the village, always explaining that she was calling on behalf of Barbara Fletcher. Once or twice, Allenhut villagers had asked if Merce would be speaking. ‘No, I’m an outsider. I’m happy to clerk and take notes, nothing more.’ Unassuming, boring, certainly not influential. Some of the houses on the main road sported posters for the meeting. As planned, the scale of the poster picture made it hard to see the turbine towers.

Even the Sole Bay Window pub had put up a poster. But then Merce noticed that the next poster was for the same evening – a promotion of Brazilian beef for pub meals. The local radio station announced a Brazilian hour, with music and prizes. Then a carnival float arrived in the village. A pair of smiling young promotion folk on horseback phoned each householder as they rode slowly past each door, reminding people to get to the Sole Bay Window inn for their beef promotion. Goody bags flew into grasping hands: chiller bags in which to fetch your Brazilian beef back from the supermarkets in Halesworth, recipe books, laminated recipe cards, money-off vouchers, a football shirt coupon, and the promise of all-you-can eat from the barbeque pit behind the Win. The only thing missing was a film of the slaughterhouse.

One new face attended Merce's windfarm public meeting. He was a clerk from the planning inspectorate. He filled pages of notes as the evening rambled off in all directions. Working from the minutes of the anti-windfarm committee, he realised by the end of the evening that every person attending was a committee member. Not one other member of the public had come along. On his way home, he followed the barbeque aroma to the pub. He took a proffered goody bag after enjoying a serving of steak and baked potato, served on a paper plate in the green and yellow and blue colours of the flag of Brazil.

He came back again the following lunchtime, tagging along behind the march to the churchside site, noting carefully that the choir and the clergyman were outsiders, and so irrelevant to the planning application.

Merce's promise to be the quiet clerk in the background of the anti-windfarm campaign collapsed in the demonstration by the church. Tolly had given her a simple son-of-Radio-Shack PA system, promising 'It's been fine-tuned to give a slightly dodgy sound quality. The experts say that if you hear poor-quality audio, you'll think that the speakers are less intelligent and less trustworthy.'

The prayer parade went well. Two TV crews covered the preacher, who looked suitably unconvincing and deranged. The speaker's crate and the camera positions - four metres apart - had been marked out earlier by Merce. She had prepared the layout for Fuzzy, the usual camera lady, who always struggled with her focus. A good crowd jammed the road, apart from a grey-faced young man who stood back some way, observing, observing. When he caught the light, it was possible to glimpse that he had a polyester suit with shiny elbows. A policeman joined him, as the camera crews left.

'That's her, that's her. Anti-electricity anarchy. Conspiracy to obstruct the highway. Couldn't be clearer. Section 137 - obstructing free passage along the highway.'

'Did she ask for an 1847 procession closure?'

'Course not, I wouldn't allow this anti-electricity gang anyway. Lock her up.'

Babs Fletcher saw that the TV news barely featured the tired rent-a-gob imported clergyman, but the arrest of Mrs Harcourt got good local coverage.

Merce was listed for a magistrate who was known as the softest of soft touches, to the despair of the Crown Prosecution Service, and to the delight of news editors across the water at Kingston's Daily Gleaner. The paper often led on his verdicts. He had first made a name for himself years before, when a widow had shuffled from her hospital bed - in her thin dressing-gown - across the road to a department store from where she had stolen a pair of cheap bedroom slippers. Once the store detective had confirmed that her savings book showed enough for her to pay, it was off to the newly-appointed magistrate to endure justice.

'This shop chain is a generous giver to charity,' observed the beak pointing to document in front of him. He continued, 'I see that each year it donates all of its profits - many millions and millions - to the Retail Efficiency Charity, which shares an address with its Chairman and his good wife.'

He invited the prosecutor to confirm the raw facts. The accused lady had retired from a hectic hotel pot room, where she fished broken glass and gungey food from the automated dishwasher. And now had life savings of around £20. Certainly enough to pay for a pair of slippers.

The press bench, mysteriously overflowing, waited with ballpoints, not to miss one word. The magistrate tried out a new death stare. He enquired of the prosecutor – smart in his waistcoat and bow tie - whether he really wanted to proceed.

‘Nice brogues,’ added the magistrate. Sipping water did not hide the prosecutor’s nervous glance at the court reporters.

The Magistrate finished, ‘Well, I’ve seen no evidence of an intention to permanently deprive the shop of these slippers, so Not Guilty.’

But that was years before. This time was different, the case was Rex versus Mrs Merce Harcourt. Lucky old Rex, eh?

‘I apologise for taking up the court’s time, sir. My late maternal great-grandfather was always strict on morals, and he passed that on down the family. Everyone would be ashamed of me.’

‘And you’re going to tell us all about your great-grandfather? Is he a defendant? Just remember this, Miss - Mrs - just remember this, Mrs. I’ve promised the Ministry of Justice that I’ll wrap this case up before midnight.’

‘My great-grandfather was a man of morals, I’m told. He was a horse vet in Padborg - working horses on the farms. Afterwards, came to Newmarket. Here’s a photo of him.’ She handed an A3 blow-up photo to the clerk, who passed it up to the bench. It showed a smart teenager holding a smoking rivet in a pair of long steel tongs, in front of a sign reading Blohm + Voss, baunummer 492. On his upper lip was an impressive Kaiser Bill.

The Clerk to the court went onto autopilot. He knew what was coming. He started sketching a Routemaster, and on the side included a long advert for a lollipop. He had once sold one of his doodles to a defence barrister. That law man had been slumming it in this lower court, braving the smells, the drunks, the stained clothes, and the swearing. And that was just the legal teams. That had been a case from Vauxhall Cross, that the DPP needed hidden in a country courthouse with no newspaper reporters. The Clerk was master of his paperwork. To hand, in case of a conviction, was Merce’s form with a single entry: Not proven, Litter Act 1983.

‘He came south across the border to pay for his veterinary studies. Worked as a rivet catch boy in the Steinwerder shipyard on Bunummer 492.’

There was a sharp pause in the courtroom.



‘If, erm, if this were an Admiralty Court, we could discuss the Jolly George, Captain Mason’s Ohio. He paused and went on, ‘My, er, my grandmother’s memory of four weeks from Kingston, arriving at



Tilbury. But the name on the stern of our ship wasn't baunummer 492, was it? Grey, the weather at Tilbury. Later she was proud of her clippie's uniform. And didn't mind the split shift, as she could work as a school lunch lady in between. And when she blessed our Sunday lunch, she talked about the chicken or the goat or the fish as family friends to be respected. We got edgy, waiting to dive in, once she had finished with the same four words, every Sunday. Always finished with four words. Four words, and then we'd eat - *God bless London Transport.*'

He peered at the photo before continuing.

'Baunummer 492. Mm, now - this alleged obstruction in Church Lane. Where does the lane lead to?

The council's highways man spoke up.

'Er, it goes to the old cemetery, a dead end.'

'Adopted?'

'No sir, because of my teenage attitude, no-one would adopt me.'

The magistrate sighed. Sometimes – often - the witnesses were more stupid than the defendants.


'The highway, is it adopted?'

Merce scribbled a note to her solicitor. 'My client may have some useful information, Sir.'

The Healthy's very busy legal lady waved the note at the magistrate. 'Not adopted, not maintained. It was concreted in 1940 with leftovers from the pillboxes and the dragons' teeth. Done in a hurry, my client informs me, as the Regimental Chaplain had to marry the senior choirgirl. She couldn't get to the church over the old gravel road, not in her condition.'

The magistrate sucked in his breath sharply.

'The other thing I said to the Ministry was "Give me the power to lock up gobby defendants". Anyway, irrelevant. You can obstruct an unadopted road, if long usage has produced a public right of way. Insufficient evidence that defendant obstructed any funeral in that road. Not guilty, next case.'



The second public meeting – this time with no lure of free steers to steer residents to the Win – was held the week before the public enquiry opened. The hall caretaker grumbled as he unlocked.


'Your meeting's not for an hour. Why so early?'

'Perfection, perfection. Yes, you'll put out the chairs and tables and flipchart stand. But I need to settle in and review the agenda, make sure that the committee can concentrate, and leave the admin to me.'

As soon as the grumbler had mumbled back home, Merce quickly turned to the thermostat and the radiators. A snug, slightly overheated hall would encourage the whole meeting to doze off and want to head home early. Citrine's ABC of Chairmanship was hidden away in her bookshelf, slid unseen

between the pages of her Kennel Club guide to obedience training – a wedding day gift from someone who did not realise that Merce was okay on the obedience training front. Every skill sold by Citrine was systematically sabotaged. Agendas that should focus on money, strategy and actions were out: tedious 25-pointers were in. As Merce had done throughout her campaign, the critical agenda items were always the last two. Skilful manipulation meant that the boring stuff – engaging day trippers, social media plans, pet owner involvement – was spun out until the booked time to end each meeting arrived, leaving a couple of minutes for the meaty items to be messed up.

Merce recalled Tolly's injunction. 'Just before you get to the last two items, nudge Babs Fletcher to ask for a contribution from that old actor from Netstore Cottages. Actors are ten per cent drama, and 90 per cent politics, so you can rely on him to waste ten minutes or more on some hobbyhorse that'll make everyone glance at their watches.'



Kennet had a few days in Allenhut in early December, and Babs Fletcher invited the Harcourts back to hers for her tea and Victoria sponge ceremony. On the way, all three called in at Merce's terrace rental. They paused on the pavement to admire a bird, a red-backed shrike, with a lone-ranger eyemask. Inside, the big room was dominated by a pinboard, an eight-by-four that had been delivered some time ago. It had come in the village building contractor's van adorned with his slogan *Slow but honest*. The panel was decorated with propagation theory deadlines, lists, critical path diagrams and photos, leading to her next-year target of a PhD appointment. And there was a smaller, more portable board too, with handles, that Merce had been displaying at each committee meeting. It too had activity lists, target dates, and all the other MBA flim-flam. There were half a dozen box files labelled with anti-windfarm campaign words like petition, fund-raising, agendas, minutes, and evidence validation.

Any props manager would be proud of this set-dressing. Plausible.

Kennet retrieved some rather moreish pastries that he had been given the day before. He had sat-in on a confirmatory interview for a new part-time pâtissier at the Cairo embassy. The new man had brought along a sample of his work in an Aldo shoebox.

They headed on to the Fletcher place, a Frank Jennings design that a previous owner had used for some years for a series of gardening photo shoots. Again, Merce saw Mrs Fletcher enter her son's year of birth to operate the ancient lock on the front-door. It was the number she always used to validate her card for over-the-limit buys in the village shop.

'It's five o'clock, time for Elevenses.' Merce was showing off the depth of her number skills. She pushed the trolley from Barbara's kitchen. Both Harcourts kept their mouths shut about calling it a doily cart.

'I'll be mother,' announced Kennet, stirring the pot, and racking the three delicate cups onto their saucers. They each took a linen napkin. This was not a day for paper napkins. Kennet and Barbara behaved as though they had worked together as photo-shoot stylists for a decade. Instinctively, they tablescaped the modest tea ceremony: crystal vase of coast-native flowers fetched down from some other furniture, heavyweight silver cake knives and slices and teaspoons in position, cup handles

correctly angled and each serving plate positioned within reach of each of the trio. The crockery was old-money Stoke-on-Trent.

Their hostess was the only one buying new cars for her dentist and her pre-diabetes nurse, by adding sugar to her tea and to her refill. Merce and Kennet were relieved that Babs was not sharing her fingers, plates, and food with Battersea.

Kennet twisted round, examining the room. He rose and walked to a framed photo of their hostess. She was at a formal banquet, next to someone who had once been rich and famous, a decade ago. Kennet raised an eyebrow, not saying a word.

Barbara took the cue, 'Some big dinner near the Mansion House.'

Kennet began his spiel. 'Looking at the lamb mains, I'd guess that was in the late-Spring banqueting season, between the skiing and the beach holidays. The hall is well-spaced, and I can see that the door from the pass is quite wide, so the servers could get things out while they were hot: that would allow delicate porcelain plates. If you serve slowly, you need thick, warmed plates to do a professional job. About 150 covers.'

Their hostess narrowed her eyes, nodding slowly. Mr Harcourt's credentials seemed as solid as those of Mrs Harcourt.

'Good collection of videos here,' murmured Kennet.

'Ancient, but worth watching again.'

He turned his attention to the garden. 'Fruit okay from here?' he asked.

'Blackberries are the big thing in Allenhut. Wild on the common, or trained in my garden here. That way, I don't get scratched at harvest time. Kennet, are you the Norman Harcourts or the Oxfordshire Harcourts?'

'Same family. Those who liked Camembert *au calvados* stayed at home. Those who fancied Red Leicester came via Pevensey Bay, and from the midlands ended up in Oxfordshire.'

'Bore me with propagation theory, Merce.'

'How do things or ideas spread? Look at March 1918, flu in Kansas, Fort Riley. The generals refused to quarantine, so off they went to the Great War. Spain didn't have press censors, so the Madrid papers were the only ones to report the flu that May. Then 20 million dropped dead. And we still call it Spanish flu. Maybe my propagation theory will one day help.'

'And when your PhD tells us all about this, I can put up my feet and stop spending my life in departure lounges,' added Kennet.

'I'll get letters after my name. People will say Mrs Merce Harcourt NBG.'

'Lifelong learning, splendid in a marriage. I learnt two things from my husband, my late husband. First, if you're caught short as a railway station, don't wee on the live rail. Second, the liabilities of the Croydon Merstham and Godstone Railway to bereaved widows were not taken over by anyone. Thank goodness my son is earning.'

'Things going well for him?'

Babs sighed, 'He's plagued by people who are okay, but want his tips on how to fund-raise. They pretend to be ill but never actually book themselves into one of his Mexican clinics for treatment. Blow it all on holidays and cars.' She changed the subject, turning to Kennet, 'What was your last departure lounge?'

'Tonga. But I'm still alive. Someone plonked a short wind turbine not far from the runway. If you lost power on take-off into the prevailing easterly, you'd notice it. A pal asked me for a snap of the blue-crowned lory bird. The Tongans laughed at me, and said that the rats had eaten the last ones. I told my chum to photograph the ones in London zoo.'

'But the Foreign Office needed you there?'

'Foreign and Commonwealth, really. I think they looked at a map and wondered how far away they could hide me. They're fed up with New Zealand dumping mutton flaps on Tongan families. Flaps are 40 per cent fat and that's made them too unfit to work. The High Commission - over in Fiji - wanted a food fellow to wander round and write a couple of pages of A4.'

'Where is it?'

'Turn left when you get to New Zealand.'

'Friendly on Tonga?'

'Oh yes, until they discover you've been sent from London. Then - sensibly - they scarper. I caught up with one chap, only had one leg. He gave me some health advice.'

'And?'

'Don't swim in Shark Bay.'

'Ah, airport and beaches, definitely jets and sharks.'

oak

'Merce, what was that with the helicopter men?' Babs was not used to villagers being visited by whirlybirds.

'I was on one of the holiday islands in the Med, helping to rehome stray dogs. Those men from London had been told by someone that the island had briefly banned dogs from arriving. The island paper didn't mention it, so our ministry just wanted to hear from an eye-witness what was going on. Reassurance about vets, jabs, correct papers if they were rehomed here in the UK. I learnt one thing over there - dog people are kind people.'

'My Battersea certainly needs me. He's a sniff-and-pounce lad.'

'Aren't all men?' observed Kennet.

'He's either short-sighted or stupid. I once had to explain boy-meets-girl to him, when he had a misunderstanding in the garden with a visiting hedgehog.'

There was not enough sugar on the menu for afternoon tea, so Merce was despatched to the freezer in the garage to fetch some ice cream. The two-day blow of Sahara sand had just finished. Throughout the village, buckets of water were rinsing the dust off each car. In Babs' garage, there was a thin film of dust across the floor. And in front of the chest freezer, two castor tracks showed that it had been

pulled forward and pushed back again. Merce leant over the big white box. And discovered a wall safe.

## Chapter 13 – The butcher's boy



West Yorkshire's Garringtons had always been at the heart of Soothill. Haig Garrington's grandfather had served at Havrincourt. In 1919, he had helped the working men's club to set up a small workshop where blind ex-servicemen could bend and rivet braziers. In the 1920s, every road had a repair gang. That gave the lads a steady demand for wrought-iron braziers to keep warm, keep tea'd up, and bake the lunch spuds.

Old man Garrington's grandson, Haig, had been a bit of a pain in the neck at Gregory Street School: he was the only 10-year-old wanting to form a chess club. In the 1960s, when he was elected as the new Soothill Member of Parliament, he took a minibus of colleagues off to Groningen to find out about this new natural gas industry. Within a couple of years, Soothill had become a gas industry jobs hotspot – design, manufacturing, installation, servicing, certification. The Institute of Personnel Management had even warned its members about job applicants who mailed their applications with a Soothill postmark on the envelope, to wrongly suggest that they had trained in the district.

Haig Garrington became a national media celebrity by accident. The Leeds TV station was filming him at the club, with a pint of bitter in his hand. Coming to the oche to christen the new three-board darts area, he picked up his arrows and just before scoring trombones, he said 'This is the Agincourt game.'

The voters loved him. Within a decade he had earned the largest majority of any Member of Parliament. Eventually, Haig Garrington chaired the energy security committee in Parliament. He set the agenda, and insisted on a fair shake for each provider – windfarms, coal, gas, nuclear, tidal. This was not what the windfarm and nuclear industries wanted; this was not guaranteeing indefinite taxpayer handouts.

He got into the habit, after each election, of taking down to London a railway carriage full of local youngsters. One year, he got the Kippax Band to play a Gracie Fields number as the group flooded onto the station platform. Apprentice gas engineers and apprentice chefs – would be his guests at the London Mushy Pea restaurant near Parliament. The unchanged menu – heavy on Yorkshire pudding, Wakefield-Morley-Rothwell rhubarb, Wensleydale and washed down with pints of Tadcaster – was always good for press coverage.

But Haig Garrington never saw The Healthy, and Tolly Carnegie and Mrs Merce Harcourt heading his way, wanting him replaced as chair of Parliament's energy security committee.

The Easter-tide election campaign was one of the quietest for a long time; the only surprise was the extent to which both political parties' rallies featured singalongs, with hundreds holding newly-printed songbooks. Candidates and voters, with freshly-printed songbooks, celebrated 1588's friendly wind that had seen off the Armada, and lauded the winds that had fetched home the Victorian tea clippers.

The Vote for Hospices candidate in Soothill had stirred up the media, and two nights before voting, Merce and Briley Grindale took their candidate along to the TV studios in Leeds for an all-candidate late-nighter. Leeds – tailoring in Burmantofts, worsteds in East Street, finance in Park Lane – was not what it was. Even the TV station had vanished. Merce parked up and Briley got out to ask for directions. The site of the old TV studio was now a block of flats. At street level, a small supermarket was besieged by customers buying lottery tickets and two-for-one chilled meals. On the door a handwritten notice announced *Footwear must be worn at all times, and no nightwear is permitted.*

Briley came back and directed Merce to the modest industrial-estate warehouse to which the TV station had recently moved. The area was vivid with primary colours – system-built cladding in process blue, white roller shutters, red security doors, and black and yellow anti-ram posts protecting the sheds clad in thin tin. Merce and Briley eased their candidate into her wheelchair. Beyond the car park, a security guard patrolled a warehouse with a dog. A rhythmic hissing came from some unidentified workshop down the road.

While the other two went inside, Merce waited in the car park with her tablet. She called Tolly Carnegie. She could see Piers Ponticum, the Farms not Flats candidate, and his lady friend. He was shovelling some food from a cardboard carton into his mouth. He then washed it down with a large fizzy drink. His lady friend helped him out of the car, and she tidied him up, wiping his mouth, straightening his tie, removing a fleck of food from his jacket, and giving him a loyal kiss on the cheek before they went inside. As they left the car park, a small scurrying creature ate clean the food that the man had spilled.

Merce stood in front of a security light, so that Tolly could see her on his screen. 'Been trying to get hold of you. We've got two expensive problems. Where've you been hiding?'

'Wagramerstrasse, Vienna, clinching a new directive with the atomic energy folk. It'll be compulsory for every nuclear power station to have an onsite wind turbine, so that they can draw power in any emergency – ice storms, forest fires, whatever. Please don't tell me we've got an expensive problem.'

'No, it's two expensive problems. I'm a bit gutted.'

There was a grunt.

'The Medical Director at the hospice says he's never seen such good spirits among his patients. Our candidate has perked up. Not only is she going to survive well past polling-day, but the mortality rate across the hospice has fallen slightly, all the TV attention.'

'Good for her.'

'Briley drove her round her childhood streets, her school. She had teas with a couple of mates with whom she hadn't touched base for decades. Otherwise, quality time in her room with her nurses. I'm sold on hospices. But The Healthy has blown it's millions.'

'That new wheelchair car, offer it to the hospice of course. Or they can suggest a local good home for it.'

‘There’s a chap and chapess who run a wheelchair taxi service, but they’re skint.’

‘Okay, you and Briley’ve got local knowledge now.’

On the screen, she could see Tolly pull a face. He was not happy.

‘And it gets worse.’

‘It can’t get worse.’

‘Yes it can get worse. As the Agent, I saw the Notice of Poll. It doesn’t describe our candidate as Vote for Hospices, it describes her as Independent.’

‘Why does that matter?’ asked Tolly.

‘In a Parliamentary election – the rule is that we can only use a party name from the register of political groups. Vote for Hospices isn’t a registered Party. If a political party candidate dies, the election is postponed. But if an Independent - like ours - dies, the election goes ahead. So Garrington looks like heading back as energy security bossman.’

In the Leeds TV studio, contractor Gerard Gestel was at work on the lighting. Above him, grey panels of soundproofing had been fitted to kill the echo delivered by the penny-pinching builder. Gestel had made an early start on preparing the studio for the pre-election talking heads. The extra candidate from Vote for Hospices called for some work up on the lighting rig. The seating would be in its usual arc, with the presenter at left, followed by Haig Garrington.

Next was Garrington’s political rival – a smoothly-spoken lawyer known as the butcher’s boy of Bedford Row, the shady side of Bedford Row. He specialised in fighting claims from widows and orphans after fatal workplace accidents, and was good at his job. His breakthrough came when he successfully got a Supreme Court ruling that a widower with three children had to sell his house to compensate the employer of his deceased wife. Her boss demanded compo for cleaning costs, after a squishy *worker versus biscuit-stamping press* event. The lawyer was going through a phase of chucking into his conversation a sprinkling of tourist Spanish – spoken with a madrileño lisp. He had taken an election management course at Aravaca’s Iese business school. The lawyer had smoothly eased into politics with his unique selling point: he was short and, so was a godsend to low-rise TV chat-show hosts who were fed up with hosting guests who towered over them. This London lawyer – via the Leeds TV studio - was sidling his way towards Parliament. But not with a win in the Soothill constituency.

Third along was the candidate of Merce and Briley Grindale. Her wheelchair could not be positioned at the end of the bank of candidates; that smelt of afterthought, of marginalisation. Piers Ponticum anchored the crescent at the end.

The presenter, as was his habit, repeatedly took a pencil and a folded sheet of A4 from a pocket to note the names of studio worker ants. They would each get a thank-you later. One of the ants was Elbow, the sound man. His childhood left-hand radial nerve damage allowed him to carry things by pressing them between his elbow and his waist.

Gestel needed to add to his lights high up on the pipe grid. His routine rig check included the safety wire on each lantern, which sidelighted each talking head. The key lights over to the left had been positioned and checked. The existing fill scoops were okay, too. The last fill light, though, seemed wrong. He looked at it again: the bolt on the safety wire clamp was missing. He slipped out into the car park and fetched in a box of bolts that he had found at a rummage sale the previous Sunday. He



glanced again at the big, bold test-laboratory logo. Then, with all the preheating finished, all was ready.

In the Green Room, Merce and Briley – in her nurse uniform, even if she had not completed her year out - looked at the two pairs of large monitors. The carpet needed a clean. A smear of dead chewing gum was hanging under a side table. On a pinboard, someone had posted that week's local pages from the TV programme magazine. On one side of the room, one pair of monitors showed the studio preparations with a live feed of sound. The other two monitors showed the network live transmission, and the Green Roomers found they could easily focus on the separate sound channels.

Merce picked up one of Piers Ponticum's election flyers: Farms not Flats – harvests not houses - meadows not mansions - end housebuilding now – stop selfish househunters - beef before bungalows - foreign brickies steal our jobs. Also watching the monitors was Ponticum's lady friend. She had been profiled in a Sunday newspaper as one of those short-skirted central European blondes who made a beeline for fat, lonely, dim British male politicians. She would be a sought-after celeb worldwide, if skanky ever came back into fashion. The Farms not Flats candidate Ponticum was twice her age, twice her weight, Merce estimated. No muckraking reporter – nor Ponticum - had discovered her ties to a fund that bought and sold options on millions of hectares of near-city farms with development potential, squeezing pesky farming families off their land for coppers.

On a monitor, Merce saw the guests settling down. Haig Garrington and the presenter were ignoring the others as they chatted. The floor manager called 'Three minutes.' The Vote for Hospices spoiler candidate tugged out her hearing aid to fiddle with it. Ponticum wore a shiny plastic lapel badge of a red-fringed triangle of a tractor-ahead road sign. He mopped his sweat. He was wearing one of those suits into which a *Fatto in Italia* label had been sewn, allowing it to be reclassified as Italian, and not of far eastern origin.

Paddles, the floor manager, had easily transitioned from aircraft carrier landing signal officer to her role silently conducting the studio team. Her clear and authoritative hand gestures said *don't mess with this woman*. She knelt briefly behind the Bedford Row man to raise his chair, so that all guests came up to roughly the same camera height. From her position on the floor, she gestured to the lights, and Gerard Gestel slid up the dimmers to light the scene correctly. The usual creaking as the lights warmed up was followed by a distinct soft crack. All heads turned up – except the Vote for Hospices lady, who had heard nothing. Then a ten-kilogram scoop fill light crashed past Ponticum, just grazing his nose and landing between his feet. His head bobbed up and down, looking both at the debris on the floor and up at the pipe grid. Above, the broken safety chain swung slowly.

Piers Ponticum then collapsed in his chair. He slumped back, eyes open, a stain dripping from his trousers. His shirt was drenched from the hyperhidrosis. Elbow was the first to react, dialling for an ambulance before the man had even slumped.

As the floor manager pulled open the Farms not Flats candidate's jacket and soaking shirt, the plastic tractor badge pinged off into the mess on the floor. From nowhere, Gestel was holding a pair of defibrillator electrodes.

Ponticum's partner jumped in front of Briley to report, 'Like his father, giant cerebral aneurysm, unclipped, but he wouldn't quit the smokes.'

Paddles waved Briley Grindale forward. The nurse was already blocking Gestel from using the defibrillator he had grabbed from the wall. 'His partner says giant cerebral aneurysm.'

Merce squeezed between the Vote for Hospices candidate and her ill neighbour to block the lady's view, before wheeling her into the Green Room.

The presenter nodded as some instruction came through his earpiece, 'We are unable to bring you tonight's planned look at the election in Soothill. However, still from Soothill, the tale of Tommy Atkins' return from Havrincourt after the Great War: how the community found a skill and a job for every ex-serviceman.'

The floor manager was barking into her phone: 'Front desk? We've an ambulance coming, serious problem in the studio. Lock the front doors and come round to open the loading bay. Would you please wait in the car park for the ambulance crew?'

Piers Ponticum was trying and failing to grasp his head with his hands. His eyes were turned toward his lady friend, before his eyelids shuttered. He tried but failed to speak, and would have slid to the floor if someone had not secured him. The nurse put a finger to her lips: Ponticum did not need noise and fuss right now. A phone rang. It was the ambulance crew seeking directions. They had found a supermarket and a block of flats where the old TV studio used to be. Ponticum died shortly before the ambulance crew arrived.

Merce accompanied Piers Ponticum through the system until she had a doctor's written confirmation of death. The Returning Officer was a stickler for the rules – voting would go ahead unless his hands held evidence that the candidate was deceased.

Tolly Carnegie appeared on Merce's tablet, relieved rather than happy at the reason for Garrington's election being postponed. He had set up his smartphone to alert him to any news stories about Soothill, and had learnt within minutes that election day had been postponed for Haig Garrington. Parliament's energy security committee could safely flounder around for a new boss, with Soothill's man out of the way at chair-choosing time.

'Well done, Merce. Haig Garrington will do the honours when they open the new hospice wing. After all, he'll have time on his hands now that he can't chair his committee.'

'Look who's here in Vienna,' said Tolly, turning his camera round. Kennet's smile appeared.

'What you do?', demanded Mrs Kennet.

'At the embassy here, rushing hither and zither. Problem with the chef. He's Magyar, and he pretends that their language doesn't have a word for vegetarian.'

'Saving face, that's big over there.'

'If he behaves, I'll get His Excellency to present him with a five-year certificate next month. His family can come along, polished shoes day.'

'Buy Tolly a lime juice to celebrate. Oh, and find out the German word for glockenspiel.'

## Chapter 14 – No entry without the kilt



North of the border, the Thane of Dalwhinnie was a family man, as befits someone who learnt his trade at his father's knee and his grandfather's knee. For months now, the family talk had been of how his niece Jinty had put away enough earnings for her college years, as well as meeting the powers behind Scotland's tweed, cashmere, lambswool and the rest of the midges-in-the-mist rag trade. Jinty – and a changing praetorian guard of security people to protect the Healthy's stunning brooch – had made personal appearances across the country.

The format was the same – warm-up on the local radio and community websites, and local newspapers or magazines that could guarantee colour photos, followed by a personal appearance by a spokesperson for the Healthy and by Jinty. The Healthy ensured that appropriate local people spoke up. In Stornoway, the spiel was in Gaelic and the islanders were promised that the fundraising auction of the brooch would not be on the Sabbath. On Shetland, where 200 wind turbines had not earned many friends, a local comedian and folk singer bravely focussed on the Bothy Box charity, and barely mentioned how lucky they were to enjoy their own windfarm. In Aberdeen and Dundee and a score of other venues, speakers with local accents did their bit.

The auction was timed for mid-May, so that the American diaspora would have received either confirmation of their IRS status, or even a refund cheque from the Fresno office dealing with thousands of prospering West Coast Scots. With the Clydebank Titan as a backdrop, and timed to catch the setting sun, the Bothy Box fundraiser was broadcast live on three news channels, and streamed on the web.

As a stunt for the cameras, Merce's local organiser had arranged for a well-known pair of wrestler twins to attend. One stood before a sign warning No entry without the kilt. His brother arrived in slightly-baggy trews. The cameras showed the bouncer scowling, and tapping his arriving twin on the chest. The bouncer gestured to the sign. His brother gave a grim don't-try-it-Jimmy look, and pushed back. The bouncer did not move a millimetre. His chin lifted slightly, opened his eyes wider, and pushed the visitor back. He pushed back, in turn. The one in front of the sign did a very professional hip toss to leave his brother on his back, and with a swift movement unvelcroed the trews, to reveal a smartly-pressed kilt and sporrán, before he cocked a little-finger to haul his brother up. The pair hugged and joined the crowd inside.

Most of the photographs promoting the auction had been high-fashion stagy productions that were given good coverage by the style websites, and the posh magazines and newspapers. And the railway station posters. But the picture that caught the public imagination was entitled Minimum wage, maximum fun. Informally, Tolly and the Healthy called it Light-fingered lass. Shot in a luxury hotel near Hillington Park, it showed Jinty in smartly-tailored and crisply-ironed chambermaid workwear.

With the brooch. Her fore-and-aft forage cap, angled down to her right ear, was secured by a couple of hatpins. Her demure black-and-white came below the knee. Standing by a housekeeping trolley stacked with bedlinens, she held up a long bamboo-handled feather duster in one hand. The feathers fussed around the lens of a CCTV camera to block the view, as her other hand eased open the lid of a box labelled Guest tray refills, sliding out a handful of shortcake packs to hide them in her handbag.

Minimum wage, maximum fun was on a poster around the auction marquee. Near the entrance, a queue were paying into the Bothy Box fund for copies of the poster, autographed by a smiling Jinty. Two solid security people - wearing the kilt - made sure that the glittering brooch remained safe on her lapel. She finally slipped away, ready for her big entrance on stage.

To test the auction software, the evening kicked off with the auction of a large hamper of shortbread, for which bidders had to nominate a school as recipient. This went for a jaw-dropping sum to an engineer in South America, who donated it to a local technical school.

A pair of folk singers ramped up the emotion with some tear-jerkers about emigration. A Harris Tweed weaver later said of the auction that he had never seen so many of his Gilson tablet sleeves in one place.

At a construction company's rooftop lounge in London, Merce and Kennet, and Tolly and his wife and son, joined some of the money-men to watch the charity auction on a stadium-sized screen. The television showed some last-minute confusion among the organisers, as the Healthy had donated to each of the two auction lots a pair of scholarships for overseas engineering students to come to Scotland. Merce and Tolly raised a simultaneous cheer when the camera panned round and showed a table with Jinty's family enjoying the evening. The Thane of Dalwhinnie was tapping his feet and drumming the table, singing along with the entertainment.

With stage lighting and smoke, an Imp drove onto the stage, bringing Jinty and the Healthy's brooch. She was accompanied by a well-known comedian who bantered with the auction professional who was charged with turning the jewel into a donation to the Bothy Box charity fund. With the price ticking up in dollars, euros, and pounds, the bidding slowed after 10 minutes as a bidder from California - visible on a webcam - tussled with one from Boston.

Each slowly-offered bid brought a whooping of yells and applause from the Clydebank audience. Finally, just when Boston edged ahead, and the Californian bidder shook his head and dropped out, the evening came alive again as a single killer bid won the brooch for a committee of Scots expats who were prospering in Texas.

A few weeks later, the Thane of Dalwhinnie had delivered. His guidance gave presumed consent for any future request for single turbines as well as windfarms. It was a typically thorough document, in the manner of other papers that his father and grandfather had written. He gave reasoned legal arguments supporting his case. He also gave a chapter on the ethical issues that, he claimed, arose from incidents in other industries. This chapter was backboned by photographs from Piper Alpha, the 24 years of sheep farming restrictions after the Chernobyl incident, and of course the mining families bereaved at High Blantyre's Dixon, and at Auchengeich.

The report had only a single omission. As expected, there was no reference to the voting public nor their elected planning bodies having any influence on the windfarm industry.

## Chapter 15 – The Parish Council man blushed



Choreographed like a Broadway musical, the public enquiry was scheduled to last a few weeks in the Allenhut village hall. The 1969 brick hall rejected that era's fashion for concrete, and the result was a perfect machine for Allenhut. It boasted good acoustics, okay to heat and insure, and perfect for everything from medical clinics and blood-donor sessions to quasi-judicial windfarm enquiries.

In a soft Welsh accent, the show began. 'Good morning. My name is Meredith Ffordun and I am a Chartered Town Planner. I have been appointed by the Secretary of State to determine this appeal.'

The Healthy's barrister opened the first morning, firing up on the screen an unexpected montage of newspaper headlines and black and white photographs of an old mass funeral. 'Before calling my first witness, let us stand in a minute's silence for today's anniversary of the Gresford report. Today we debate safe and clean energy for industry and families. Mr Chairman – Gresford.'

After the tribute, the chairman rebuked the first speaker: 'We are not debating safe and clean energy. We are fact-finding for a planning appeal. Anything irrelevant will not even make it into the list of evidence. This is a public enquiry, not a pressure group's enquiry.'

Undeterred, The Healthy immediately tried again: 'First witness, Mrs Waspe.' Mrs Waspe was in her mid-20s, and told of how she had given birth during a recent holiday in Sindh, and while her newborn was in a row of four incubators in Larkana, the power had failed, costing the lives of her child and three others. Yes, she wanted wind energy, and soon.

The enquiry chairman knew better than to rubbish a grieving mother, and allowed her testimony.

The next witness had been hand-picked by Tolly Carnegie to put a hex on all of the objectors.

The Healthy's brief led him gently to his doom. 'Sir, most people in Allenhut know nothing about the planning process. But I gather that you have taught yourself. You've a lively civic interest in planning matters?'

'I've no expertise, but I speak for the silent majority. Yes, this is the seventh planning application I've objected to.'

'Tell me more.'

‘I quite enjoy it because you've got a sense of achievement, you see. I love a good row, yeah. My wife and I are both retired, so it's something to fill our time, as well.’

‘Has the High Court,’ the lawyer spoke softly before pausing for five seconds before continuing. The whole public enquiry leaned forward to hear the rest. ‘Has the High Court added you to their list of vexatious litigants?’

At this point, Mr I-love-a-good-row lost it. Mouth dribbling, eyes blinking rapidly, hands tensed, head twisting angrily to appeal for support, and a distorted response that sound like a blocked washing machine gargling, the objector was eventually calmed with a glass of water, and led back to the public seating area. The stringer on the press bench was – as always – fed a steady drip, drip of accurate record of what The Healthy’s barristers and witnesses had said.

As the other windfarm opponents took to the floor, they danced – unknowingly – to The Healthy’s tune. The appeal would be decided on the substance of the objections, and not on their amount. Even the sensible speakers repeated the insubstantial – and contradictory - assertions fed through their committee at Merce’s quiet prompting. Wind power was so consistent that they would generate noise pollution, hum, and flicker pollution without pause. And wind power was so inconsistent that it could not be relied upon for power.

As light relief, The Healthy also ensured that one of the East Anglia politicians was quoted frequently by both sides. Rashly, the MP had spoken pro-electricity in London and at party conferences, but about-faced to oppose wind turbines when visiting Allenhut. After the fifth or sixth weathervane soundbite had been quoted, the audience at the public enquiry burst out laughing when speakers quoted that man.

In the second week, the enquiry briefly hit the national press, when one of Merce’s schemes matured. A petition complaining that the view would be spoilt by wind turbines turned out to include the signature of a villager who had sadly been blinded some years earlier when a tin of decomposing cassoulet exploded in his kitchen.

Luckily for the Allenhut campaign against the windfarm, one of the long-standing residents was a respected lawyer. He was duly kippered under cross-examination.

‘You work as a cereals lawyer?’ asked the lawyer for The Healthy.

‘Yes, if a bakery or a grain trader or one of the big food aid groups wants to contract for cereals, they need a contract that protects both parties. You might get excellent weather, bumper crop, prices collapse, farmers go bust. Or you might get a weather disaster, failed crop, nothing to harvest, prices rocket, and contracted grains are quietly sold on the spot market and the customer takes delivery of a pack of lies. I work from home, here in Allenhut. We’re midway between Manitoba and Ukraine.’

‘Got a bit of newsreel here, 1953 of course,’ the cross-examination continued. The screen showed the lawyer’s father in front of his family home in the village. He was brushing water out of his front door, and he spoke to the camera. ‘My great-grandparents bought this house new from the builder, the year Darsham halt opened. 150 years ago, the year Big Ben first sounded. The sea won’t chase me away. It won’t chase my children away.’

‘Your evidence is that safe, reliable wind energy will cut the value of your house?’

‘Of course it will. Noise, hum and flicker will destroy a beautiful village setting.’

‘Your flint and brick wall is three metres high?’

‘Your turbines will be 150 metres high.’

‘So you need to leave your front door, walk down the drive, go through your gate before you can see any of the planned wind turbines?’

‘I’m speaking for the people without the three-metre walls. For our visitors, too.’

‘When are you planning to sell the house that your great-grandfather built?’

‘As soon as your windfarm blights our village.’

‘Your evidence is that renewable energy will cut the value of your house.’

‘All our houses.’

‘Expensive houses, aren’t they?’ Both sides nodded. ‘Let’s look at this list of donors. You’ve donated to the anti-campaign – am I wrong? – exactly £10. Less than the cost of a fish supper and pint at the Win. I put this to you: in public you will do anything to delay or stop this proposed windfarm. In private, you don’t care.’

Up on the screen, occupying the bottom half, was a picture postcard of one of the Suffolk flint cottages on the Allenhut green. The owner had rashly asked to be a witness, complaining about the visual impact of a windfarm. The lawyer began softly, softly.

‘The publisher tells me that he sells around seven or eight thousand of these postcards a year. It shows your village’s soul, its history. Tell me about your cottage.’

‘Yes,’ said the owner nervously. ‘Grade-two listed. Never had any famous people in it, but it’s of local materials, hand-thrown pantiles. Never added a plastic lean-to nor anything else. This is why we don’t want Allenhut spoiled.’

The screen changed. Above the postcard was a photo of the same cottage. Merce knew that the photographer had planned the shot for weeks, and pounced as soon as the visuals were right. The second photograph told a different story. It was a frosty morning. The ice-covered television aerial bolted to the ancient chimney caught the morning sunrise. The Healthy’s photographer had also caught the angle from which the sun reflected like a laser from a garish yellow burglar alarm. Two ugly black floodlights completed the damage. The lawyer spoke.

‘I understand that these two black floodlights, good against intruders I’m sure, were on a price promotion at a supermarket in Halesworth. Did you get listed building consent?’

‘What’s that got to do with outsiders putting a windfarm in my family’s village?’

‘I put this to you: in public you are the fearless defender of the villagescape. In private, you don’t care.’

Allenhut’s parish council chairman was the next to fry under the magnifying glass.

‘Your parish council asked for a thorough environmental impact assessment?’ asked The Healthy’s lawyer. As he spoke, he made a charade of slowly lifting the first volume of the report. Then the second heavy volume. Then the third. Then he rolled out a sheaf of two dozen maps from the fourth, map volume. Papers were sliding onto his desk, onto the floor. He made a pretence of trying to catch them. He dropped one with a bang: positioned so that it could be seen by the witness, but hidden from the chair of the enquiry was an echoing steel bin labelled *Rubbish*. He fetched the volume from the bin and deposited the whole lot in an untidy heap.

‘Yes, we needed this.’

‘Oh, I forgot. The seagull impact report.’ He hefted three more volumes, emblazoned with Audubon-quality gull photos, into the bin. Clang, clang, clang. ‘Sorry. I should have called this the £15m seagull impact report. Hope that the press doesn’t spill the beans to pensioners and small business owners that they’ve been stung for that waste.’ The Healthy’s barrister shook his head before continuing. He had been a creditable gloom in a Scottish Play at school, and still practised his stagecraft. He continued, now glaring at the parish chairman.

‘In fact, your council voted to oppose electricity from this windfarm before you even discussed the assessment?’ The parish council man blushed and nodded: ‘Er, yes.’

‘Let’s look at some of the details in it. Volume One looks at the marshes, it lists the marsh waders and the insect life. Would you agree that all of this was covered by Barnabas Simonds 200 years ago?’

‘Famous book, still in print, accurate, comprehensive. Of course the new assessment covers the same ground. Or marsh.’

‘Right, Volume Two looks at the marine ecology around the Allenhut granite slipper. Would you agree that the 1886 local fisheries committee had an excellent record of Allenhut’s fisheries – species, commercial value, sustainability?’

‘Yes, without the 1886 committee, there wouldn’t be a single fish left in Sole Bay.’

‘Thank you. So The Healthy and the parish have some common ground – the environmental assessment did not influence your opposition, and it did not produce much that we didn’t know 130 years ago. Lobsters?’

‘Our seabed is not prime lobsterland. None of their larvae to be affected by your cables.’

‘Let me ask you a final question. If the millions blown on this paperwork – producing it, and delaying electricity production for months - had been offered to your parish council, would you have spent it on cutting taxes, cutting electricity prices, maybe a scientific scholarship for local students – or would you have still wasted it on this?’ He kicked the bin, causing the witness to glance down at the *Rubbish* label.

‘You’re exaggerating. I’ve looked at the front cover, there’s no price printed there. These environmental reports are free.’

‘I put this to you: in public you will do anything to delay or stop this proposed windfarm. You want electricity generators to waste money on paperwork and on project delays. And you do this on behalf of the public. In reality, there is not one family struggling to pay their electricity bills that agrees with your waste. You just don’t care.’

The Healthy put up young Ransome as their final anti-windfarm speaker. He was in a minimum wage job, servicing ride-on lawnmowers. Sharpening blades, tuning engines, checking linkages for safe braking and steering – Ransome was the go-to lad for Allenhut’s owners of large lawns. Babs Fletcher never spotted the absurdity of putting up a skilled but skint young man to complain that the windfarm would cut the value of local houses.

In the hands of a skilled barrister from The Healthy, young Ransome did his bit.

‘Most of your customers are in Allenhut?’



‘Yes. If the windfarm ruins the village and they move out, then my income is ruined.’

‘You live here?’

‘I’d like to, but average prices are 33 times my income, so I pay rent on a holiday house out of season, then stay in a campsite during the tourist months.’

‘A lot of witnesses say that a windfarm would cut the value of their houses. Is that your objection?’

‘Well, if they move away, it hits my pocket. But at 33 times my income, I’ll have to leave the district if things carry on like this.’

‘National policy is to stop relying on gas imports, and generate electricity locally. You’ve lived in Allenhut for many a winter. a bitter place in winter, with the wind off the North Sea. If imports were cut off, would you prefer reliable local wind power?’

The youngster nodded, and gave a ‘Yes’ for the verbatim record. Prompted by Tolly Carnegie, the television crews doing a wrap-up at the end of the public enquiry ended with Ransome’s evidence.



One trigger for the Thane of Dalwhinnie's report had been the debate, two years earlier, about planning the Wester Sutherland windfarm on the road out to Lowman. Lowman was a two-hut beach. There was the school, there was the hostel run for the past few years by the Brazilian, and there was the old jetty. Inland, and facing the north Atlantic, wind turbines now stretched inland across the Scourian landform for an hour's drive. The grey stone schoolhouse, with its well-anchored roof slates, sat low on the ground to huddle the children from the Atlantic winds and its horizontal stair-rods of salt spray or rain. Opposite, the hostel was one of those system-built sheds that the oil industry was so fond of giving away to anyone with a truck, once their useful life had ended at the construction sites for oil rigs or refineries or tankfarms.

The bleak landscape boasted a few brave scrubby bushes, but inland from Lowman not a single tree survived in the gales that have forever blown off the Atlantic, over the isle of Lewis. Even the topsoil had vanished in places, leaving grey-blue rock whose grooves looked like million-year-old barcodes.

The Thane of Dalwhinnie's earlier site report dominated the news for about four hours, and was then forgotten by the public. A month after it had been published, at Lowman, Morag at the dame school wondered how much longer she could survive alone. Two years earlier, she had enjoyed a few ceilidh evenings with the coarse, genuine engineers and navvies building the Scourie windfarm. But soon they blew out of Lowman, leaving her to her 20 young pupils.

Young, but curious. Morag did a good job opening the eyes of her pupils to the world of engineering. She encouraged them to muck in with their relatives when sorting out fishing boat engine and transmission hiccups. From her hiking trips through the Highlands, she fetched back small samples of alloy and examples of casting and machining and riveting. Sadly, if you knew where to look in the Highlands, there were too many corners where aircraft bits were hiding. Over at the Robert Gordon in Aberdeen, they had never rejected a student who mentioned Lowman school on their university admissions form. Morag was proud of her alumni. One was number two at the Cold Kelvin test centre at the space satellite factory in Toulouse. Another supervised pull-testing on aviation polyester fabrics on the vintage Shuttleworth planes. One was a junior manager at a bus and coach factory in Holland. Another was self-employed near London, making small souvenir papier-maché buses for the tourist trade.

Across the jetty road, the hostel was hosting Merce and Kennet, on a break while awaiting the Allenhut enquiry verdict. The hostel menu was fish, followed by more fish, and Kennet enjoyed

talking through the catch with the skippers from the islands. The Londoner picked up a few ideas about storage and creating an eye-catching presentation and finding recipes that less-experienced kitchen hands could use to build their skills. In between, the Harcourts beachcombed for flotsam to feed the hostel range. They rejected tar-stained driftwood, but there was – hiding among the plastic – plenty for kindling or cooking.

The hostel boss – in his early 20s – had connected with one of that week’s visiting party of geology students from Montréal. With his new friend, he looked out at the dawn sea; summer days of windless weather had stilled every wind turbine. There was hardly a whisper from the water lapping at the beach. The pair saw a sudden silver flash, as a cormorant swallowed the first part of its breakfast.

The student was not bothered with nightwear, and the man peered at her thigh. ‘That’s not a maple leaf tattoo down there,’ he observed.

‘It’s our Fleurdelysé - je suis Québécoise,’ she smiled. ‘That’ll be the first flag my new-borns will see. Our new-borns. Come ashore at Sept-Îles, there’s eight million of us.’

With a felt-tip pen, she scrawled *Only C\$ beyond this point* on an old sheet of cardboard. She pinned up the notice at the jetty, and ran back inside. Another student, puffing on a Macdonald observed, ‘You’d get frostbite dressed like that back home.’

The girl with the felt-tip laughed. ‘I’ll take him home, spouse visa, plenty of jobs in l’hotellerie back home.’ Coming back from the kitchen with two coffees, and some covering, she asked her man ‘Who were those officials yesterday?’

‘Border Agency ritual. They get a day out, lots of petrol money from Aberdeen, get to enjoy a good lunch at the Pier in Lairg. I give them enough paperwork to avoid deportation and fill out their file. Sometimes I’m Portuguese, sometimes I’m a diplomatic liaison for Brazilian football, sometimes I’m a UNESCO auditor. I’m running out of far-fetched tales that work. I’ve just sent a regularisation letter, but that will only give me eight weeks before they come with handcuffs.’

‘Today?’

‘Cleaning up after your lot depart, and check the bins. Recently, a couple of rats have been nosing around whenever the air is still.’

As Scotland’s only beachside primary school for fisher families, Lowman school was well-known to documentary film-makers. When they came, they enjoyed a morning shoot, as the boats would touch the jetty briefly to deliver two or three young children at a time. The boats came from half a dozen offshore islands with names like Eilean Riabhach and Eilean Garbh, until the 20 children had filled the one-room schoolhouse by start bell. The coat rack had very wide spacing, to hold the children’s life preservers and little trawler crew coats. Any breeze would blow through the lobby all day, so that seawater would dry off before home bell.

Decades earlier, Lowman had been Scotland’s biggest car export port. Every second-hand Lada from Glasgow or Edinburgh would be driven in pairs – one pulling, one on tow – to Lowman, so that Russian trawlers could take them aboard to sell at home as a cash-crop.

And once Lowman had been in the news, when it had hosted almost 100 passengers from a poorly-skipped cruise ship. The captain had told the passengers to abandon ship after telling them ‘Our navigation has not necessarily worked out to our advantage.’ They were put up in the hostel and schoolhouse, while families from the islands puttered up to the jetty and organised a beach céilidh,

with fresh fish grilled on a driftwood fire, to the accompaniment of fiddle, bodhran and accordion. A water baillie who had demanded to know if the salmon had been stolen from his laird's river was persuaded to wet his throat and join the party.

The geology students got themselves packed up for the Postbus and train to Glasgow airport. Morag chatted to the driver, Frosty. He had lost a toe in the big cold of '78. But the Royal Mail must get through, he insisted then, and insisted now. She had handed four job applications – two each to Massachusetts and to distant mirth Perth (not Highland-gateway dour Perth) - to the Postbus man. She wanted out. Morag had been promised some rat bait, prior to a visit by the council's contractor. She had been bothered by some unwelcomes recently. But the bait was not in today's mail run.

'TV last night,' said Frosty. 'Czarist Russia – rural postmen had to provide their own pistols.'

'Highwaymen?'

'I guess so, or bears, wolves and other wildlife.'

'Safe on the Lowman run, anyway. Your passengers today are students on their way home. They've been fussing with their online check-in, heading for Montréal.'

'We've time for a sightseeing pause, they'll want that in all this sunshine. No wind to raise dust or spin those turbines.'

By nine o'clock, the beachside schoolhouse was about to start a Gaelic-language maths lesson, while the Québécoises took a few last photos. The Postbus had just enjoyed a major service, as the Lowman end of Sutherland was not a place to have a vehicle breakdown. The wagon's high-pressure fuel line to the turbo had been correctly refitted. Sadly, however, the workshop had used a traditional click-and-hope torque wrench, calibrated only once a year. A digital angle wrench had been struck from that year's budget. But it looked alright, and the box was ticked on the job sheet.

There was a problem. One of the mothers from offshore – and her son – needed a lift for the first leg of their journey to the Raigmore. The cardiologist, using a remote diagnosis gadget, had said that the lad had an irregular heartbeat. The parents were wondering how far they could get before admitting the truth: the truth that their youngster had shared too much from the illicit still in a culvert, high up on a burn feeding their croft. With too few seats, the girl who had been entertaining the Brazilian volunteered to take a later flight. She would stay on for some exercise, she said. She waved her college friends off. As the minibus turned inland, the wind turbines in the distance remained motionless. Even the seabirds were relaxing, slowly floating up like sailplanes, circling inside the first thermals of the morning above the tin roof of the Lowman hostel.

In Lowman, the energy-saving refit had seen the schoolhouse windows on the north side bricked up, while those on the south side were refitted with triple glazing and wooden shutters. With the wind absent, and no clouds, the classroom became too hot and stuffy. With a couple of gestures, schoolmistress Morag wordlessly asked two of the taller children to slide up the sash windows at each end of the south wall.

One of them unlatched the window, pulled the upper sash down, and eased up the lower one. The other youngster unlatched, lifted the lower sash a few centimetres, saw that the playground outside was awash with rats, and tried to tug the window shut again. And failed. The chattering, starving rats threw themselves into the classroom. The girls were quickest to react, jumping onto their desks. Two children had the presence of mind to try to dial the police. But 999 was too long a number to dial as the grey squeakers invaded.

But one of the children escaped. It was Flaky's turn to tug at the rope to sound the bronze start bell. Although most of the other pupils welcomed the sun with shorts and sandals, Flaky obeyed his dermatologist and was wearing thick and lined long trews tucked into his boots.

After 20 minutes' drive, and still amid the stilled turbines of the windfarm, Frosty called to his passengers in that soft Highland accent that you hear north of Inverness, 'Two-minute photo break, ladies and gentlemen.' He spoke up above the road noise, as his window was open. The vehicle bore right at the Weaver's Bay bend. Ben Stack came into view. The morning sun, the blue sky, the birds wheeling safely – untroubled by the still turbine blades - made it a most-photographed scene. The driver pulled over into the Cnoc nan Eun layby, named for the hill of birds. The students focussed on the peak of Ben Stack, in the distance. Their hands expertly clipped in their lenses without needing to glance inside their camera bags.

The driver was not the only one to see anything amiss. The ground appeared glistening, wet. But there was no dew, and not enough heat for a small mirage

Peter Spike saw it all. He should have been on the Postbus, but he wasn't.

He was a student from an old rue de la Gauchetière family, and studying geology so that he could follow his great-grandfather onto the railways. With the approval from CPRs survey party topographer, Peter's ancestor had begged paper from the site draftsman. With those sheets, he assembled a rudimentary phrasebook mapping Guangdongese into railway English.

When the last spike had been driven in to complete the line, 140 years back, the ambitious young navy had chosen himself a new surname. He was one of the few who chose Québec, selling merchants his knowledge of freight opportunities along the line. His sketched maps highlighted commercial features: springs that still flowed in dry summers, riverside sidings that stayed above floodwaters, barren corners that were safe in the forest fire season, this high-up quarry allows easy downhill delivery to that township below, and so on. The family travel agency boasted a framed photograph of Peter's great-grandfather – serious under his *dōuli* – at the opening of the Port Moody terminus.

But this month, young Peter Spike had missed his flight to Scotland. His smartphone keyboard featured tiny button displays, and he had messed up his online flight check-in. Even his family of travel professionals could not conquer the *computer-says-no*. So his university colleagues had kept him in the loop, and one of them resumed live-streaming once Ben Stack came into view. From four or five thousand kilometres away, he was quick to see the danger.

Too late. As the nearest student opened the passenger door, the folding step opened downwards. The rats jumped up, jumped in. Their tails thrashing, their fur on end with excitement, the hungry rats smelt food, plenty of it. Their backs were arched, as if their normal posture were not frightening enough.

It was their jeans that gave the rats their killing time. Montréal's Uqam student union promotions had done their job. Two, then six, then a dozen rats clawed up the skinny jeans' legs. The men in their khakis lived a bit longer, but not by much. Tearing at the flesh, quickly working into the femoral artery, the first rats were soon sated. Pushing from below, more rats tried to join the banquet, but the early arrivals were trapped by the tight thighs of the seated students. The escape, the screaming students jumped up, freeing their clothing, and allowing the fountain of rats to climb higher, speeding the killing. At this point, the floor of the Postbus held too much blood, pumping out from the

shredded remains of every leg. The red drips from the Postbus door turned into a flow, attracting more rats.

A student from Matagami was sitting at the back of the vehicle. So far his to-do list for Scotland had been a disappointment. Malt Scotch whisky took more getting used to than his budget allowed. The longest he had spent talking to a local girl had been a business-like chat through the armoured glass of the airport money exchange. Her skin had the all-year tanned wrinkles that you see on airport and airline staff, and the budget web dating sites. The fresh fish at Lowman had been good, though. His reactions were fast: as the rats poured in the front, he snapped open the emergency door. This doubled the flood of rats. Choked by the trouser legs, the newcomers flew at any other exposed flesh – hands, wrists, throats, cheeks, ears, and eyes. Next to be torn to death was the richest student. He was paying his way through college as an escalator cleaner. Any escalators – railways, airports, shopping malls – were his patch. Not once had he finished a week's work without his pocket stuffed with the debris of the careless: credit cards, bank cards, banknotes, coins. When the bazouelles came to clear his student rooms after his death, they quickly handed the case to their financial crime unit.

Postbus driver Frosty was the first to react. Pressing his mobile phone on, Frosty opened his mouth to call for help. The first rat to see the movement flew off the steering wheel and choked in his throat, while more ripped at his lower lip and tongue. He slumped between the steering wheel and the door; his foot jammed into the accelerator. The engine screamed out of control, and the parked vehicle started to shake. After a few minutes, the fuel pipe eased away to give a slight leak. The flames spread through the bulkhead into the Postbus. Some comedian had rested a tablet computer on the front passenger airbag. When the airbag explosive blew, the fibreglass polyamide tablet shot through the remains of the students, leaving two headless.

Behind the Raigmore, in Inverness, the operators could only listen as the screams of the schoolchildren, and then those of the Postbus students, got fainter and fainter. Then came the high-pitched soft calling as the rats feasted. The operator clicked the help-wanted red button on the top-right of her computer screen. Her manager took over, quickly bringing up on screen the single mobile phone mast bolted to the end gable of Lowman schoolhouse.

When the firefighters arrived at the blazing Postbus, one crew from Scourie, the other coming up from Lairg, they immediately sized up the situation. Rolling slowly to crush as many rats as possible, they spoke on the radio, and agreed to use their containment berms to isolate and then drown the rats. Without descending into the chattering crowd, a couple of firefighters aboard each tender swung out from their crew cab to retrieve the berms with minimal contact with the ground. Once positioned, the berms formed a pond: as they filled with water, half the rats screamed away. The remaining rats, able to swim but pursued by the firefighters, drowned. At last, the burnt-out vehicle could be approached safely.

Alongside, the existing incident of a plague of rats at the layby, the control room escalated the major incident plan. The civil contingencies lad – hoping for a quiet day after leading a mountain rescue that had ended at midnight - arrived in minutes, carrying the rabies contingency plan. It was his closest guess at what would be needed.

He was a little tired as – on his way back to Inverness – he had been held up at Urquhart Castle. There, the floodlit coach park entrance was being re-marked by men burning the white lines with foul-smelling flame guns. Monthly budgets, he thought, had a lot to answer for. In the last two nights of every month, there was a mad dash of midnight follies, spending highway funds to avoid them being lost as unspent.

He stole someone's secretary and barked out the orders: 'Amber teleconference, escalate to red. Declare infected area. Halt all movements except emergency vehicles. Not many houses out there: call them, we'll starve these rats. Start with the cafés and restaurants.'

Mr Civil Contingencies sat with a mug of coffee. There had been a kitchen crisis: the usual coffee advertised on the telly had run out, but he found an old jar of supermarket own brand. The man sniffed the hot drink. The harsh smell reminded him why he preferred proper coffee. He thought for a moment. His eyes lit up. Holding his mug, he walked through to Mrs Mac. She was a slight, white-haired lady, busy moving papers between trays and an adjoining filing cabinet, occasionally making a computer entry, occasionally turning to a year planner, all in a blur of activity.

'Mrs Mac, where is the highways department today?'

'I am highways. General Wade hired me. All these men with diplomas, just window dressing. I'm the driver, they're the fluffy dice. Anyway, they're doing a team-building at Strathsteven depot.' She gestured to an empty desk decked out in football souvenirs from Inverness Clachnacuddin. The club mouse mat, mug, ballpoints, tablet sleeve and team photo did not hide the fact that the owner was off on a skive. On the desk was a fortnight-old copy of the Daily Record, open at a page that showed a stunning beauty wearing a golden brooch shaped like a Hillman Imp.

'Strathsteven? Fifty tonnes of winter salt and potassium acetate. If no-one has pinched it.'

'They all took their clubs. You could try the Royal Dornoch, or Brora.'

'Road markings – what are those smelly things to burn the old ones off?'

'Hot lances. Rats?' she asked. 'You've got rats on the march up in Scourie. My nephew who steals from holiday houses texted me.'

'Yes, your hot lances could do it. Are they local?'

'Our contractors have got a few here, but we can get plenty from Glasgow. Helicopter them.'

'Nowhere to land. Scourie is one big windfarm. Turbines sticking up like a porcupine shop, nowhere to settle a chopper. Can you join our teleconference?'

'Hot lances are only half your story. Flat roofers use gas torches.' Mrs Mac enlarged a sheet from Yellow Pages and handed it over. 'Look, we've got nine between here and Scourie.'

At the Lowman hostel, Merce and Kennet sized up the situation instantly. The screams from the schoolhouse were followed by the door bursting open as Flaky flung himself out. He raced for the water and jumped in off the North beach. The Brazilian and the Québécoise both nodded their heads to the Lowman jetty. 'Too deep where the boats come in – go to the beach, knee-deep. The coastguard can find out who's about, send them to fish us out. Don't be fooled by the warm morning: the sea is still bitter.'

The two couples from the hostel ran for it, rats snapping at their feet. The screaming from the schoolhouse had died out by the time they got into the water.

'Who are you calling?'

'University TV back home, I can send them some video of all these rats. They won't believe it. All your fault – I should be on that bus to the airport.'

One or two starving rats swam out to the five in the water, so the couple retreated another metre seaward before punching away the swimmers. They waved at an approaching vessel. In these waters, it could only be the Handa tour boat from Tarbet. The Brazilian laughed and said: 'If you'd been lucky enough to squeeze onto the Postbus, we wouldn't be enjoying this dip in the sunshine. What are you doing after uni?'

'What are we doing? Why don't you and I do a tourist hostel? Lakeside in the Laurentides. With a small workboat to clear flotsam, we could welcome floatplanes. When my brothers opened their motoneige workshop and summer storage, they called it a student loan, didn't need a business plan.'

'And when it all freezes?'

'I thought of selling snow sandals and flip-flops. But I got cold feet.'

'Pirañas?'

'Of course.' She broke off and beat away a couple more rats that were swimming out too far. The rescue boat approached, and she raised her voice.

'Of course we have pirañas. They come in envelopes labelled *Revenu Québec*.'

'Where on earth are the Laurentides?'

'It's beyond beyond. If it's snowing, you're almost there. At the airport, I can take in gifts under sixty dollars. I'll tell 'em you're worth fifty-nine.'

'Visa?'

'This is Canada. If you can sign your name, then you automatically get a skilled-worker visa.'

'And if I can't?'

'Easy. If you can't read or write, Monaco will admit you on a sports visa. Provided your bank statement passes the medical.'

Weeks later, when Inverness Road got stuck into their fatal accident inquiry, the Brazilian seized his chance. He negotiated a role as a key witness, and asked for an order forbidding him from leaving the country for six months. Time enough to brush-up his French, and a few Englishisms. The immigration removals in Aberdeen were not happy at yet another delay for their handcuffs-and-boarding-pass ceremony.

The shock of the rat invasion, followed by the icy summer Minch saltwater, cured Flaky's skin problems. His parents then had to abandon their plan for him to have a Hollywood career as the scabby peasant in movies set in the 14th century's Black Death.



## Chapter 17 – Where's Onkel Walter?



**E**ast – 650 kilometres east of Allenhut - in Sömmerda, by Erfurt – Tanzmeister's funeral procession paused briefly outside the Thüringer Hof. There was a weak sun peeping through the cloud. Two or three mourners dabbed their eyes, but that was from the pollen and not the memory of the deceased. As the horses pulled up, the coachman and groom took the pair of steins from the innkeeper, both of them nodding as they saw him sporting the Karl-Marx-Hochschule lapel pin that they all shared. The brauerei Böttner dray had been borrowed from the display in Erfurter Tor, as a reminder of the accident that had saved Tanzmeister's life in the late 1930s. Delivering to the Thüringer Hof back then, a dray had run over the teenager. He lived, but the doctor at the scene commented that the lad would never be a dance teacher, and the Tanzmeister name stuck.

To start his interview at the bomb and shell fuse factory, Tanzmeister had placed a micrometer on the desk. His aunt had suggested that, and the youngster had borrowed the tool from One Ear, who had returned to Sommerda's technical school from a hard time in Langemark. Within a week, Tanzmeister was in quality control, set for a working life in the same factory. After the strike of '53, he was punished with a noisy demotion and dismissal from his training role, but once Berlin looked the other way, he was quietly reinstated. That's how it used to be. The Party had pretended to be angry; the workers had pretended to toe the line. A few weeks later, Tanzmeister was allocated one of the first ground-floor apartments in Schillerstrasse for the well-connected.

Tipped off by the family, the graveside service was filmed by ZDF. One of Tanzmeister's recent apprentices read out the funeral invoice, to cries of *Shame*. Only expensive state-approved coffins allowed. Cremation ashes may only be placed in an expensive urn in an expensive cemetery. Illegal for the ashes to be handled by the family – expensive cemetery staff have to involve themselves. No photograph allowed on gravestones. Granite – but not polished granite - for gravestones. More cries of *Shame*, were followed by contempt for the funeral staff. No-one dared thank the staff, nor shake their hands. Someone shouted '*Where's Onkel Walter?*' The TV crew had their headline.

The funeral director's staff were impassive. Their accountant would judge whether this had been a good send-off. And the youngster's card was marked by these box bullies. One day, decades ahead, they would make sure that his ceremony would be interrupted by a wheel falling off the bier, and the coffin crashing to the ground, and a hearseload of extras padding out the bill.

The country smell of the horses was tempered briefly by a wind gust from the north, bringing a hint of rotisserie from a busy café.



Mourners had been told not to wear the customary sunglasses. Standing out among the sombre Sunday clothes, the pallbearers boasted – also in black - arbeitslatzhosen bib-and-brace dungarees. Each wore proudly their FDGB members' badges – 25, 40, 50, even a grandfather's 60-year badge on a youngster – with the hands of comradeship. Two children who looked about ten - dapper in their tailored arbeitslatzhosen – held a half-metre plaque of the same badge. The ZDF cameraman muttered under his breath *hands of pickpockets* in his native Turkish, as he zoomed in. The clever, clever subtitling software caught his words, translated them, and fed them to viewers. No-one in the control room was any the wiser. Within a year, the cameraman was elected to a new career in the Bundestag.

And at the Tanzmeister's graveside in Sömmerda, no mention was made of the millions of reliable bomb and shell fuses that had long ago flowed from his team, reliable after eight or ten decades.

## Chapter 18 – I shouldn't trust you



The planning inspector did not give the Healthy a clean bill of health. For a start, he refused permission for the turbine by the village church. Then, during the horse-trading at the Conditions session of the enquiry, The Healthy negotiated away a second turbine: the one by the river mouth. The battle of Allenhut was over.

‘All eyes on the Atlantic winds now’, Babs told Merce. ‘My son is getting close to his tax days limit. If he’s here for 183 days, he pays tax. His flight is due in at 1 am in two days, but if there’s a strong tailwind he might land tomorrow. One extra day of residence, and his accountant won’t like that.’

‘He should have been here for your village campaign. All welcome.’

‘My son says I shouldn’t trust you. Thinks it’s suspicious that you suddenly pop up in windfarm week to lead a campaign that we could be doing ourselves.’

‘He’s right. He’s right. There’s a grand conspiracy to get me to push leaflets through doors, pin up posters, and take the minutes of your meetings. I’m paid by a secret group that wants to concrete over the whole coastline. And on my days off, I fake the moon landings. And I also work – Kennet has seen my British Seaman’s Card - as ship’s rabbit on the Marie Celeste. The crew get lonely on long voyages.’

‘My son really ought to wear a neck brace – he’s always looking over his shoulder. Sees tax collectors, health inspectors, compensation investigators, betrayed husbands, in each corner. He won’t stop.’

‘Well, you tell me if I’ve ever got a leaflet, or an agenda or meeting minutes wrong.’

‘He even had to apologise to a cleaning lady whom he imagined was spying on him. It turned out that she was illiterate, and chose her cleaning products by colour. Nearly had a disaster when the bleach packaging was changed. You’ve got serious problems when you think that the lady with the bog brush is a tax spy. He puts the annoy into paranoia.’

Babs Fletcher sighed. She looked as though she might weep. She hugged Merce. ‘You’ve done your best, but the windfarm people were up earlier. We never stood a chance.’

‘Babs, you’re wrong. You won on the petition, got tons of support, worldwide. You probably won on the turbine by the church, got it scrapped. You also look as though you persuaded them to bring in

the ready-mixed from Great Yarmouth, instead of flooding the region with trucks. The village needed someone to steer them in the right direction. Pat yourself on the back.'

'Wait here a moment, Merce.' She broke away, and took a heavyweight C5 envelope from her desk before disappearing.

Merce had explained that her postgrad preparations were complete, and she was off to rejoin Kennet.

Mrs Fletcher returned and handed her the envelope. 'This is a thank-you from me. Take a look.'

Merce fished out a pair of plastic sleeves. The gold of two Mexican 50-peso coins lit up the room. She read the face of one of the coins, slowly turned it over and read the obverse. 'Keep them, sell them, hide them. Don't get sentimental about them. They'll keep you company when Kennet's busy spreadsheets, or when old age creeps up on you.'

Picking up a book, Babs Fletcher then handed that to Merce. 'This is a relaxation book. Quite expensive, my son sells hundreds of these to families he helps. This might help, as I've noticed that when you're under pressure, you sound a bit high-pitched and unconvincing.'

Merce smiled, hugged her, kissed her farewell, and left to tidy up her rental and see Allenhut in her rear-view mirror.



A twitcher – or was he a birdwatcher – was talking to one of the first windfarm site workers.

'My packed lunch is down there, you know', he told the hard-hatted pile-driver operator.

Tape had been pinned around the site of the first wind turbine towers. There would be a four-week pause between the enquiry verdict and the start of work. The contractors wanted to dig in without waiting.

'Metal down here,' said the machine operator. 'You a twitcher?'

'Nah, birdwatcher – big difference. The '87 great storm, lovely big, corrugated bird hide here. I came down that morning, put down my nosh, and then the whole shed took off. I tell you; I took off too. Real nuisance if a sheet of steel tries to give you a haircut in a four-hour blow at 70 mph.'

'My ground survey people We've found a lot of corrugated, all rusty. And the more we probe, the more we get.'

'That's birding for you. We'll spend six hundred for a camera, but won't club together for a few quid each, to build a new hide.'

Back in the village, Barbara Fletcher greeted her son. He was well-tanned, and presented her with one of the better tequila brands.

'I bring you good news. When do you get the inspector's verdict?'

'We knows it's approved, but the official paperwork comes tomorrow.'

'Gotcha. We can still appeal within 28 days. Your Merce seems to have been on the payroll of the windfarm folk.' He pushed forward his laptop, opening it up. 'Paying extra for a 78-inch lie-flat

didn't buy a me shorter flight nor cleaner air. So I drafted an appeal letter on the plane. Everything she did was orchestrated by London. That's why your campaign was a shambles.'

'Work has started, I saw a piledriver this morning. Let's walk over and see. You've never met Merce, I'd look foolish in the village if I'm to tell everyone that I've fooled them. We'll talk evidence when you've calmed down. But I think you're wrong. She drove the fund-raising, got fifty quid from almost every house here in Allenhut. Your draft letter is the easy bit. Evidence, that's what I want if we're risking my good name, telling my neighbours that I've helped to fool them.'

'First thing in the morning then'

Ten minutes from the house, it was not a welcome site. Mud, noise, exhaust smells, so Babs, her son, and Battersea, and the piledriver man were the only ones at the party.

'You're too early, you can't start construction yet,' the Fletcher boy called to the piledriver man. He opened the laminated glass of his safety cab, switched off the roaring engine, and asked for a repeat. Then he shook his head.

'You're right. We've not started work. This is just extra soil sampling, and the safety people require a lined trench. That's this piling.'

'You're having a laugh. That's a cofferdam for construction.'

'It might be next month, yes. But until then, it's trench lining.' The man slammed shut the window, and the engine restarted.

The pile-driver carried on with a soft thump, working the first pile through the soft marsh to the granite slipper below. A few rats scurried away from nests in the marshy surroundings. And then the hammer pushed the SC50 bomb – 24 kilos of high explosive, plus the same weight in steel – onto the granite substrate. Muffled by the matted old reedbed of the salt marsh, the explosion was barely heard. The blast was reflected up from the granite.

After interviewing the shocked piledriver man, the Police moved on to Merce's story. She identified the bodies of the mother and son, and took responsibility for Battersea. The vet – from Halesworth, or Wangford, or Southwold, Merce was not sure which - made a couple of visits. First, he patched up Battersea's right foreleg. Second, he brought happy news that a retired postman widower had finally gone dog-friendly. He wanted to home Battersea with some TLC, and the pair would not walk too far, nor too fast, on their dailies.

As a mark of respect, the Oldtown marsh turbine was repositioned 100 metres further towards Dunwich. After scouring by two or three equinoctial high tides, the North Sea washed the site of the disaster from the memory of Allenhut.

Held back in Allenhut by the deaths, Merce took the opportunity to ease quietly into the late Mrs Fletcher's garage. She began to tug at the freezer.

There was an urgent rattling at the door. 'Freezer, freezer, who's there?'

Merce broke out in a sweat, pushed the appliance back to hide the safe, and rolled off the salon disposable gloves. She wiped the dust from her sleeves, and called out 'Coming', as she took a wet wipe to clean where she had grasped the back of the freezer lid.

A smartly-dressed, unhappy looking man was waiting for her. 'Pet food for Mrs Fletcher.' She could relax. She refused the load, and told the man about Battersea's emigration to posties' place.

The date of birth did not open the combination lock on the safe. So the intruder tried again, with a slightly different sequence. Ah well, maybe third time lucky. At the tenth attempt, Merce finally got inside. With her in town, it was not so much a safe as an *unsafe*.

She liberated half of the coins – surprisingly small and light. Luckily, they were lying loose in an old two-litre ice cream tub, with no signs of countable stock-keeping.

In no rush, Merce made one last visit to the salon. Again, some coffee money in the box and a farewell to the staff, before the road back to London. When she casually threw her plastic gloves and wet wipes into the salon waste, they were immediately lost among the others.

She threw the last of her bags into her big estate car, brushing sand off her quadrat frame before folding it away. Her campaign file archive boxes filled the back of the car. The eight-by-four had found a home, after Merce had pinned up a postcard in the shop to get rid of it. She left a couple of rubbish bags at the gate of her house, and pushed her keys through the letterbox of her landlord. Her last plastic bottle of water went into the chilled glovebox. The A12 beckoned, with the cast-iron *London 97* message from the granite milestone by the Thorington turn.

After 20 minutes, Merce pulled up in Peasenhall, to load a final armful of Suffolk hams into her car. She took her time over a coffee, listening to a family from Spokane talking about grandpa's time in the B17s at Parham. Back outside, she called her boss. Across the little stream running through the village, she could see a tiny, red-faced old man take a wooden ladder to the bus shelter, and carefully lift a fallen pantile from the grass. He refixed it to the roof. As he finished, a green and white wood warbler settled on the bus shelter, as if to inspect the finished work. Merce peeled the Leiston sticker away from her vehicle's rear window. Ladderman recalled Merce's brief appearance next to the mad monk. The pair finished chatting, and the man took away her dashboard toy bus in Eastern Counties colours.

Tolly Carnegie's face appeared on the tablet. 'One windfarm delivered.'

'One last job. Get the car serviced, fuelled, maybe four new tyres. Then The Healthy will invoice you for a tenner, so that you can buy it from us.'

'You're joking. One daft lady owner, a quid,' she responded.

Tolly laughed and nodded. 'South London?'

'Nah, Sarf London.'

## Chapter 19 – Bartholomew, I'll be phoning you



The couple paused on their way to the sub-post office counter. Merce reached for something in the rack of promotional leaflets. Kennet peered at it, and said 'Yes'. She took a second one. It was a bird charity leaflet, with a photo of a beautiful chaffinch and a wind turbine in the background. The heading said *SOB story – Save our birds*.

At the counter, Mrs Harcourt positioned herself so that the lighting produced enough glitter. 'Bartholomew, I'll be phoning you after six tonight. Order a Mexican takeaway. Got some yellow metal for you.'

She discreetly opened a bag to give him a glimpse. The postmaster slid sideways to open the large parcel hatch. Kennet pretended not to notice and stood his ground. Merce leant in to hear a few words, a few decibels.

'Take this pizza bag. A big fuss now about tracking coins from a certain country. Behind this family's pizza oven, they can quietly turn coins into ingots.'

Merce eased a folded bag from Bartholomew's sleeve into her hand. She nodded forward, blocking the cctv. The postmaster pulled down the hatch, and returned to his glass-fronted serving point.

'Merce, Kennet – thanks for the Mên-an-Tol postcard.'

Mrs Harcourt lifted her chin and smiled. 'Three in the morning. We had a happy hour. Now I'm stealing Mr Husband's shirts.'

She tugged at one of the long tails of her shirt, and waved it at the two men. She pulled her husband in, tight.

'Next stop department store shopping, Peter Jones in Sloane Square. Somewhere upstairs, Maternity.'

