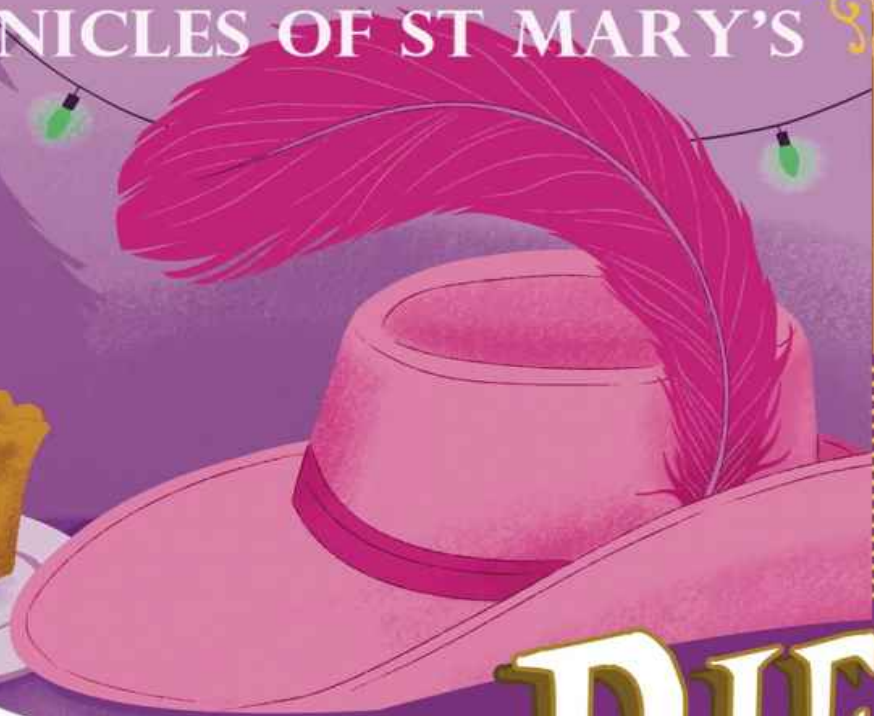
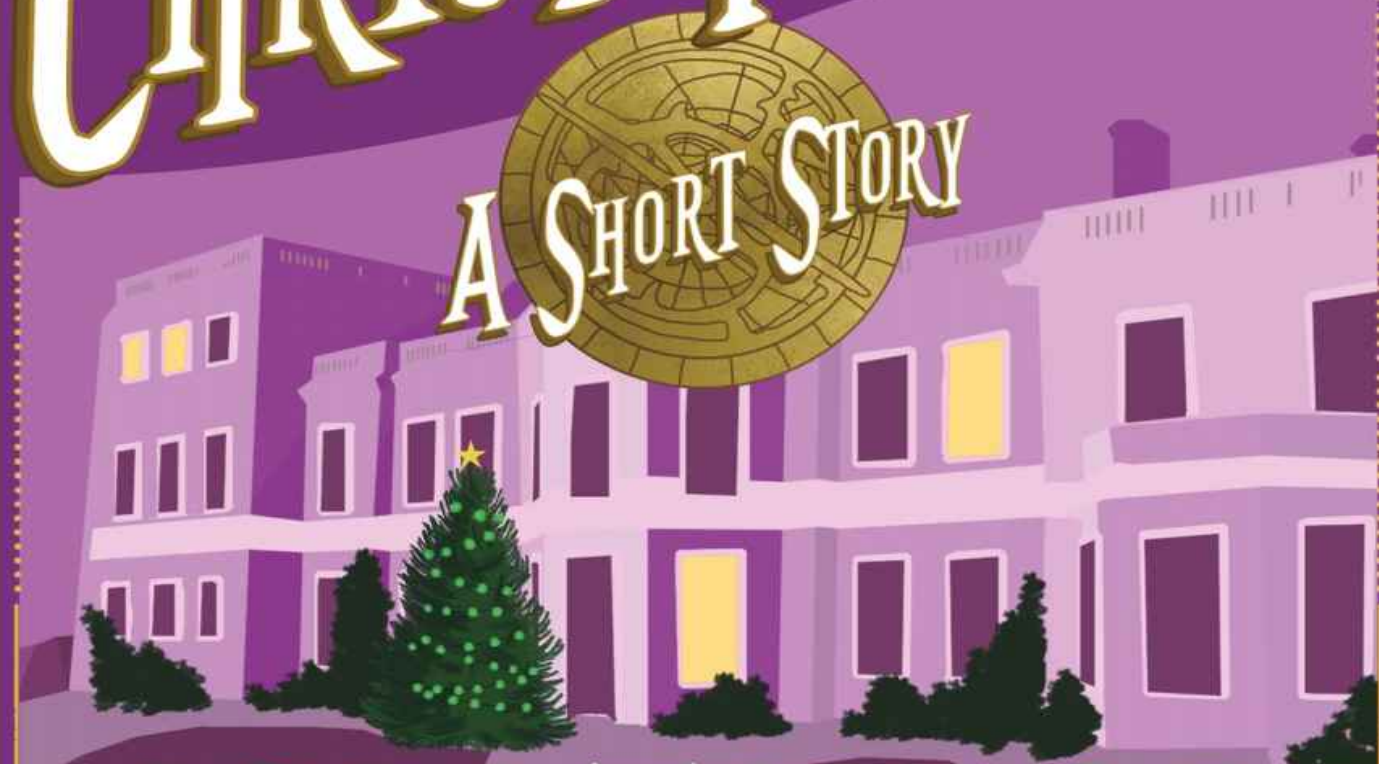


THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S



CHRISTMAS PIE

A SHORT STORY



JODI TAYLOR

ONE MILLION COPIES SOLD

JODI TAYLOR

CHRISTMAS
PIE



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About the Author

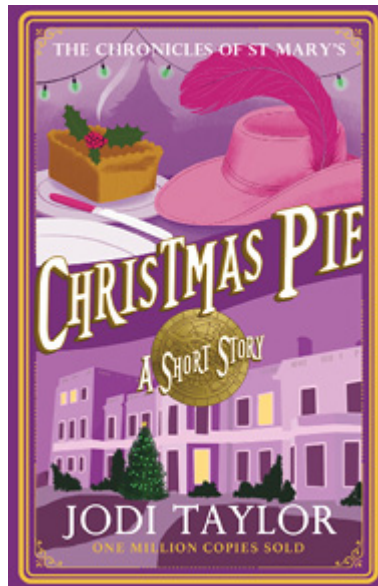


Jodi Taylor is the internationally bestselling author of the Chronicles of St Mary's series, the story of a bunch of disaster prone individuals who investigate major historical events in contemporary time. Do NOT call it time travel! She is also the author of the Time Police series – a St Mary's spin-off and gateway into the world of an all-powerful, international organisation who are NOTHING like St Mary's. Except, when they are.

Alongside these, Jodi is known for her gripping supernatural thrillers featuring Elizabeth Cage, together with the enchanting Frogmorton Farm series – a fairy story for adults.

Born in Bristol and now living in Gloucester (facts both cities vigorously deny), she spent many years with her head somewhere else, much to the dismay of family, teachers and employers, before finally deciding to put all that daydreaming to good use and write a novel. Nearly twenty books later, she still has no idea what she wants to do when she grows up.

About the Book



St Mary's has never lacked for enemies, but danger has never been closer to home. A state of war has broken out between St Mary's and the Women's Institute – the Raffia Mafia

Markham, Max, Peterson and Miss Sykes must jump to Restoration London in search of real Christmas pie – the honour of St Mary's is at stake.

At least that's how it all begins, but this is St Mary's after all . . .

By Jodi Taylor and available from Headline

TIME POLICE SERIES

DOING TIME

HARD TIME

SAVING TIME

ABOUT TIME

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S SERIES

JUST ONE DAMNED THING AFTER ANOTHER

A SYMPHONY OF ECHOES

A SECOND CHANCE

A TRAIL THROUGH TIME

NO TIME LIKE THE PAST

WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

LIES, DAMNED LIES, AND HISTORY

AND THE REST IS HISTORY

AN ARGUMENTATION OF HISTORIANS

HOPE FOR THE BEST

PLAN FOR THE WORST

ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER PLACE

A CATALOGUE OF CATASTROPHE

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE HISTORY

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

LONG STORY SHORT

THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S DIGITAL SHORTS

WHEN A CHILD IS BORN

ROMAN HOLIDAY

CHRISTMAS PRESENT

SHIPS AND STINGS AND WEDDING RINGS

THE VERY FIRST DAMNED THING

THE GREAT ST MARY'S DAY OUT

MY NAME IS MARKHAM

A PERFECT STORM

CHRISTMAS PAST

BATTERSEA BARRICADES

THE STEAM-PUMP JUMP

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR FATHER?

WHY IS NOTHING EVER SIMPLE?

THE ORDEAL OF THE HAUNTED ROOM

THE TOAST OF TIME

CHRISTMAS PIE

TIME POLICE DIGITAL SHORT

SANTA GRINT

ELIZABETH CAGE NOVELS

WHITE SILENCE

DARK LIGHT

LONG SHADOWS

FROGMORTON FARM SERIES

THE NOTHING GIRL

THE SOMETHING GIRL

LITTLE DONKEY (DIGITAL SHORT)

JOY TO THE WORLD (DIGITAL SHORT)

A BACHELOR ESTABLISHMENT

Dramatis Thingummy

Mrs Mack	Kitchen Supremo. I've put her first because she'll cut off my supply of Spotted Dick if I don't.
Dr Bairstow	Has regained control of St Mary's and is probably wondering why he bothered.
Mrs Partridge	PA to Dr Bairstow.
Mr Markham	That's me. Narrator. Security Supremo. Hero. Minor vandal.
Max	She was the one in charge so technically everything is her fault.
Peterson	Remaining calm as yet another assignment disintegrates around him.
Sykes	Wouldn't know calm if it jumped up and savaged her ankles.
Major Ellis	Time Police. Just sits back and enjoys this one.
Lt North	Another stunning performance. Literally. Where did the tray come from?
Smallhope and Pennyroyal	Bounty hunters par excellence.
Kester di Maggio	Lesser bounty hunter slightly out of his depth.

An elderly keyholder

Probably the 17th-century equivalent of a verger. Gets more than he bargained for tonight.

Brother Edward

A passing Benedictine monk.

A couple of temporal hooligans not important enough to have names.

My name is Markham and this is a bit of a meandering story because a lot of things happened to a lot of people. Including me. In fact, for me, the story turned out to be about something completely different altogether.

You'll find some parts are a little vague owing to me having hit my head – we didn't have accident-prone Bashford with us on this jump, so for some reason the universe decided it was up to me to fill the vacancy – but most of it is pretty clear. I think. I should probably warn you it wasn't our finest hour. There must be finest hours out there somewhere – it's just that none of them are ours.

But there are some really clever plays on words and jokes with a baking theme, which I know people will enjoy, although Max tells me not everyone might get them and to be sure to signpost them sufficiently. So I have.

Anyway – it all happened thusly.

Oh, sorry – I nearly forgot – the Rules: one mince pie to be consumed for every title recognised. Off you go ...

I was on my way to lunch with Max and Peterson when I caught the dying echoes of what would ever after be known as the Battle of Bashford and Sykes. Although not to their faces, obviously, because she's not known as Psycho Psykes for nothing, and Bashford's usually only conscious for half an hour on the third Thursday of every month so you have to pick your moment.

It seemed likely, given the size of the audience, that there had been a full and frank exchange of views, during which the original, and probably very minor, bone of contention had been lost in the massive fossil graveyard of irrelevance.

The collective noun for a group of historians is an argumentation and this had certainly been an argumentation of historians. I was annoyed to have arrived too late for the really good bits. You know – when both sides list the catalogue of catastrophe that has been their relationship to date. And, believe me, Sykes and Bashford's relationship has been just one damned thing after another right from the moment she had arrived at St Mary's and Bashford's boots had tried to set fire to his feet. Right in front of her.

I was disappointed to have missed it – the row, I mean. I had actually been present for the flaming-boots thing – although in my experience, most rows are very disappointing. Usually the combatants just mutter furiously at each other and you can't make out the interesting details and it's so annoying. I always want to shout, 'Speak up, will you? We can't hear exactly

what his mother said that time in Port Talbot and they had to call the fire brigade.’

Let me insert a Markham Top Tip here. I might once have said that out loud – the bit about speaking up, I mean – and both combatants immediately united and turned on me, would you believe? Be warned.

So, anyway – Sykes vs Bashford had run the full ninety minutes and then through extra time – and now seemed well on its way to being a no-score draw, as far as I could see – and I had only arrived in time to hear Bashford ignite the sinking flames by enquiring plaintively whether it was Angus who was the problem.

Sykes drew herself up. I don’t know why she bothered; she’s nearly as short as Max. Just as a matter of interest – has anyone else noticed how terrifying short women are? I’ve long had the theory that Hitler was actually a short woman. I think I might have mentioned that once when I was at school, and the next moment everyone was banging on about psychiatric reports and there was another window I had to climb out of. My formative years were full of similar excitements but I survived and now, here I am, Chief Security Officer at St Mary’s. I told Major Guthrie I’d been promoted and he laughed like a drain, but he was pleased. I could see it.

Anyway, back to the thing with Bashford and Sykes and Bashford’s unfortunate Angus remark. Never mind St Mary’s, the entire world held its breath – but as I said, Sykes drew herself up, threw him a scorching look, informed him that actually Angus was the only reason she’d let him hang around for so long, and stalked magnificently towards the bar. Which I think they opened especially for her. I know I would have, because she definitely did not look happy. When you’re as experienced with women as I am, you can easily spot these little signs.

Bashford hovered indecisively. He actually functions best in a kind of semi-conscious daze – his higher motor functions aren’t that high. He probably wanted to follow Sykes but had no choice other than to hang around because it was that time

of day – the time Angus comes in from the stables for her afternoon nap.

He scooped her up – she can't handle the stairs like she used to – and they crooned a greeting to each other that was actually quite touching. Then he carried her off to his room, where she would be tenderly placed on top of his wardrobe to snooze away the afternoon in a snug nest made from his old cricket sweater.

Have I mentioned Angus is a chicken?

I once asked Bashford if he covered her up during ... you know ... those intimate moments ... with Sykes. Covered Angus, I mean – anyone attempting to throw a cloth over Sykes would lose his front teeth, both arms and the ability to father children, and then she'd really get stuck in – but apparently she's a sound sleeper. Angus, I mean, not Sykes.

'She's very well behaved,' he said when I'd questioned him more closely.

To this day I'm not sure which of them he was referring to.

'Although there was that one time she made a funny noise.'

See the above comment concerning confusion over who was actually the subject of this conversation.

'So I got up and ...'

'You stopped what you were doing?'

'I thought there might be a problem.'

'There and then? You stopped there and then?'

'It was rather an emergency, don't you think?'

I didn't know what to think and said so.

'What *was* the noise?' I said, hating myself for asking, but somehow unable to resist.

'I thought she might be laying.'

Again ... unsure ... etc.

'And was she?' I enquired cautiously.

‘No,’ he said sadly, and at that point I’d been at a loss as to how to proceed, so I’d left him looking for his other sock and pushed off to find a sentient member of the human race.

Anyway, back to Sykes vs Bashford – again. Now that the show was over, everyone went back to work and I wandered into Max’s office and threw myself into a chair.

‘Is it safe to go out there now?’ she said, clearing her desk by sweeping everything into her top drawer and locking it. It’s an old Insight habit she can’t seem to rid herself of.

I indicated that, since she would be accompanied by the Security Supremo himself, she could now proceed to the dining room in complete safety. We in Security take our job very seriously, you know.

‘Was it the eternal square again?’ she asked and I nodded.

‘Probably.’

Other people have eternal triangles – we at St Mary’s have gone one better. We have the eternal square. Bashford, Sykes, Angus and Roberts. I do occasionally feel very tempted to add in someone else just so we could have the eternal pentagon. Or the eternal rhombus. Even the eternal decagon – although I think that might be classed as an orgy. I wondered if I should mention this to Max – she loves hearing my little Fun Facts – but I decided against it. She hadn’t had lunch yet and she can be a trifle unstable when she hasn’t eaten for a while.

The Sykes/Bashford thing had been going for some years now (plus Angus, of course), and then Roberts returned from deepest, darkest Wales and I don’t know what they’d done to him there – perhaps the Druids had got hold of him or he’d slept in a bluestone circle or something – but the Roberts who came back wasn’t the same Roberts who’d left us.

He’d been invited back to St Mary’s for a second chance, and far from being the skinny, weedy, beardless boy who couldn’t hold his beer that he once was, he was now the tall, well-built, handsome, mysteriously Welsh Roberts. Even Hunter had said ‘Wow’ when she first clapped eyes on him, and I’d had to speak sternly to her. Or I would have, but she

walked off laughing before I could make my views properly known.

She hadn't been the only one. Both Max and Kalinda had been struck all of a heap and even Sykes herself had ... well ... expressed an interest. Fully reciprocated by Roberts, I might add, leaving Bashford – and Angus – somewhat confused as to how to respond. Let's face it, Bashford's perpetual state of semi-conscious concussion had not been helpful in furthering their relationship. Plus, as Max had once pointed out, not that many women are happy to share their man with a chicken, however lovable she might be.

Anyway, now it would seem there was the very real possibility that Bashford and Sykes might be a thing of the past. The eternal square had been broken. I wasn't sure what that left us with. Four eternal straight lines, I suppose.

I put this clever theory to Max, who very rudely said she was too hungry to listen to such claptrap – standards here at St Mary's aren't always maintained, you know – and we went off to collect Peterson, who, despite his exalted position as Deputy Director – or possibly because of it – frequently can't find his own way from A to B without assistance.

The three of us went down to the dining room and sat at our usual table near the window. I was concentrating on my spag bol. The challenge is not just to get it all wound around your fork in one enormous glob, but to transfer said glob to mouth without catastrophe. It's tricky and needs a certain amount of concentration. And coordination. And then, out of nowhere, an arm came down over Max's shoulder and deposited a plate of mince pies.

Just for the record, we were in September.

'Odd,' said Peterson, showcasing a lightning grasp of events rarely seen among senior managers, but he wasn't wrong. There were twelve tables in our dining room and every single one of them now bore its own plate of mince pies. Six pies per table.

'Seventy-four mince pies,' said Max, fully justifying criticism of the educational system in general, and historians

in particular.

‘Why?’ asked Peterson, puzzled.

Max shrugged. ‘Because six multiplied by twelve equals seventy-four, idiot.’

I couldn’t be bothered to argue. In her universe that probably made sense. We should just be grateful six twelves weren’t forty-two.

‘It’s September,’ I said, sticking to incontrovertible facts. ‘Why are there mince pies in September?’

‘Who cares?’ said Peterson, abandoning his spag bol in favour of this latest culinary phenomenon. He picked one up and bit into it with the air of a connoisseur, uttering thickly, ‘Mm ... flaky pastry. Delicious. Just a hint of whisky in the filling. Perfection.’

Max grabbed another. ‘Mm – shortcrust pastry. My favourite.’ She bit into it. ‘Yuk. What the hell? Tastes like dog shampoo.’

I was determined not to ask how she could possibly know that. Across the table, I could see Peterson doing the same.

Somewhat gingerly, I picked up another one. This was an open pie, topped with a small pastry star and dusted with icing sugar. ‘Mm ...’ I said. ‘It’s a mince pie.’

What can I say? I have no culinary qualifications of any kind and everyone knows it, so what’s the point of pretending?

Uttering the traditional cries of appreciation guaranteed to get you second helpings at St Mary’s, Peterson and I finished ours. Max laid hers back on the plate and poked it. I don’t know what she thought its response would be. There were still another three on the plate, but before they could be subjected to the same rigorous, in-depth analysis as their brethren, Mrs Mack arrived. Normally she’s holding either her battle ladle or the Tea Towel of Doom, but on this occasion, she was clutching the Clipboard of Controversy.

‘Table Six,’ she said, making a note.

‘Are we?’ said Max, astonished. ‘I thought we were the table by the window.’

‘I thought we were the cool table,’ said Peterson.

I picked up the little plastic Table Six thingy. ‘I’ve often wondered what that was for.’

‘You’ve been sitting here for years,’ said Peterson. ‘You never noticed it before?’

‘Of course I did,’ I said, really quite offended. ‘We in Security are famed for our ...’ I stopped, lost for words.

‘Table Six,’ said Mrs Mack. Again.

Peterson nodded. ‘That’s us. How may we be of assistance?’

‘Market research. Now let’s see. You were served two each of Pie A, Pie E and Pie G.’ She flourished her clipboard. ‘What did you think?’

‘Delicious,’ said Peterson, who, in addition to having beautiful manners, is slightly scared of Mrs Mack. Along with the rest of us.

‘Which one did you try?’

‘He had the flaky one,’ I said, grinning at him. ‘Like called to like.’

He scowled at me.

‘Which makes Max the short one,’ I continued. ‘And I was the star. A very fair representation of the three of us, don’t you think?’

Everyone opened their mouths to argue with my rather clever analogy but Mrs Mack got in first. ‘Marks out of ten?’

‘Ten,’ said Peterson, who only looks stupid.

‘Ten,’ I said, because I don’t and I’m not.

‘One,’ said Death Wish Maxwell.

Peterson and I leaned away from her, but Mrs Mack only said, ‘Drat. I thought so,’ and shot off to the next table.

Peterson watched her go. ‘What on earth was that about?’

‘Dunno,’ I said, picking up my fork and preparing, once again, to address the complexities of eating spag bol in public. ‘Just one of St Mary’s many mysteries.’

Lunch over, both Peterson and I grabbed for the remaining mince pies, leaving Max with the second dog-shampoo specimen, which she wrapped carefully in a napkin.

‘I thought I’d take it back for Miss Lee,’ she said innocently. ‘A nice treat for her. She certainly deserves it.’

Miss Lee is Max’s PA. Please see my previous remarks concerning terrifying women.

Peterson pushed off. ‘A meeting,’ he said importantly, jutting his chin and striding away.

Max and I poured ourselves cups of tea and took a moment to enjoy ... well ... the moment. It had been a lovely summer. Still was, actually. Mr Strong was outside cutting the grass and the smell was wafting in through the open windows. I was certainly in no rush. My in-tray was nearly empty – only because most of it was stuffed into a box and shoved under my desk, but no need to mention that. If it was important, someone would come and shout at me about it. Better still, no one from the History Department was horribly injured or missing. St Mary’s had enjoyed nearly two working days without a serious incident. Only because Bashford had been away on a course at Thirsk for those two days, of course – but nevertheless, all was right with my world, and I intended to take a moment to appreciate that fact.

Actually, Peterson had had the right idea. We really should have left the dining room while the going was good. Our post-prandial peace was rudely interrupted when Mrs Mack flung herself into the chair opposite, sighed deeply and slammed down the Clipboard of Controversy.

‘Problem?’ I enquired cautiously, my super-Security senses informing me that she wasn’t happy about something. I’m not tremendously culinarily competent, but if she said anything along the lines of ‘My gravy won’t rise’ or ‘My Yorkshires

won't thicken', then I did have several very helpful Top Tips she would enjoy hearing.

She stared at us, which was disconcerting. If disconcerting is another word for downright scary, of course.

'Um,' said Max. 'Can we help?'

'Actually – yes. Perhaps. I think. I don't know.'

Well, that certainly covered every eventuality.

She drummed her fingers on the table. 'I might need some assistance.'

'Well, obviously,' I said, 'we would be delighted.' I glared at Max. 'Wouldn't we?'

I could see Max weighing up future kitchen benefits against future kitchen grief. Greed prevailed. She nodded.

Mrs Mack appeared to come to some sort of decision. 'Come with me.'

I waited for the '... if you want to live', although as Max said afterwards, the implication had been clear.

Back in her office, Mrs Mack closed the door and said, 'Well, Pie A was the most popular by a long way, but it was the least authentic. Pie E ...'

'The dog shampoo,' I said without thinking.

She gave me a hard look. 'The most authentic but tastes like crap.'

'Ah.' Enlightenment dawned. 'You are attempting to recreate an authentic mince pie.'

She nodded.

I frowned. 'But if the authentic one tastes so awful, then why? Why not just stick with Pie A? Which was very nice. Or even Pie G, which was also very nice.'

'I've been challenged,' she said darkly, the light of battle in her eye.

Dear God – who would have the nerve? I had a sudden vision of the Battersea Barricades being recreated on the South

Lawn – Leviathan and all – and everyone would expect me to do something about it.

I needed to put this quite tactfully. ‘Can it be that our fraternal brethren at Thirsk are getting above themselves again?’

‘Not them this time. Far worse.’

‘Oh dear God – not ... ?’ I hardly dared put it into words, whispering, ‘Not the ... not the Time Police?’

‘Even worse,’ she said.

Max shifted the heavily slumbering Vortigern off his chair and sat down on his warm spot. ‘Then who?’

She took a deep breath. ‘The WI.’

Oh shit – the Raffia Mafia. We were doomed.

Everyone’s heard of the Women’s Institute. Jam and Jerusalem. Lots of good work for good causes. They once famously and publicly heckled some patronising prime minister – which raised their prestige from high to stellar. They take their clothes off for their famous calendar. Although unkind rumour says Mrs Huntley-Palmer and her crew from the Rushford branch are heavily bribed to keep theirs on. Anyway, the WI is a force to be reckoned with. It’s thanks to them we still have a local post office. And that the mobile library still calls every three weeks. And that we have a new village hall. Even Dr Bairstow treads carefully around Mrs H-P. Especially every time St Mary’s has a teeny-tiny ... yes, *incident* is a good word. A teeny-tiny incident. Such as setting fire to Huntsman’s Spinney, or inadvertently causing our listed barn to collapse – which was a complete accident, by the way – or, and she does keep coming back to this one – World Naked Gardening Day. Which, from an organisation that has its own naked calendar every year, demonstrates a very inconsistent attitude, I think everyone will agree.

Anyway, back to whatever this was all about.

‘The Rushford Show,’ Mrs Mack added, as if that explained everything.

OK – the Rushford Show. Once a year everyone turns up to show off their pretty sheep, flower arrangements, pet rabbits, cakes and pastry, glossy cows, gleaming tractors – if there’s even the remotest connection to rural life, then it’s at the Rushford Show. Except us, of course. We turned up once – by invitation, before anyone gets the wrong idea – to perform a re-enactment of Rushford’s only real moment in History, a civil-war skirmish so minor it’s not even in the History books – and there was a bit of an issue with the cannon. And the ensuing stampede. And the now ex-tea tent. And apparently people used the subsequent chaos to settle a lot of old grievances, none of which were anything at all to do with St Mary’s but guess who got the blame. So, ever since then, we at St Mary’s are only permitted to attend the Rushford Show in a non-professional capacity.

Except for Mrs Mack, of course. Pastry chef supremo and outright winner of all things flaky and short. Flaky and short definitely sounds like Peterson and Max if you ask me. I made a mental note to suggest it to them as call signs. They’re always grateful for my input. Anyway, it transpired that this year – shock, horror – Mrs Mack had come second to ... dum, dum, dum ... no, I’m not going to start doing that again – second to Mrs Huntley-Palmer. I wasn’t sure which particular pastry delights had won or lost – something to do with pies, I think. The tale became confused with past issues being dredged up willy-nilly, but the salient point was – Mrs Mack had lost to Mrs H-P.

‘I feel your pain,’ I said, because I did. Mrs H-P has been a thorn in St Mary’s side for many, many years. And looked like she would continue to be so. Mrs Mack was our flagship – culinarily speaking – and she’d been humbled. I narrowed my eyes to show I was bending my powerful intellect to the issue and she asked me if I was feeling all right.

With my usual pinpoint focus, I went straight to the heart of the problem. ‘Did she cheat?’

‘Well, far be it from me to cast aspersions, of course ...’

‘But ... ?’ I said probingly. Markham – the human laser.

‘It might be a coincidence, but there are reports of a Fortnum & Mason hamper being delivered to Mrs H-P’s house under cover of darkness. In an unmarked van.’

I was shocked.

‘I’m shocked,’ I said.

‘Really?’ she said tartly. Did you see what I did there? Tartly? Good, eh?

I could just picture the scene. The stuffy tent ... the carefully presented baked goods ... the proud prize-winners. And the coveted red certificate propped against Mrs H-P’s ...

‘What was her offering?’

‘A pork pie.’

... propped up against Mrs H-P’s golden, succulent pork pie. Mrs H-P standing smug and complacent. Mrs Mack gnashing her teeth in the background ... Well, no, she wouldn’t have done that. She would have smiled, congratulated her rival on her well-deserved success and retired to Plot Her Revenge. Very understandable.

The thing is – Mrs H-P hates us. Has done since World Naked Gardening Day when her car was stolen by someone not unadjacent to St Mary’s. Well, two someones, actually. It had eventually been found in her own garage where the two miscreants had thoughtfully parked it when they’d finished with it – but not before the police had been called. Obviously the first thing they did was fling up her garage door – helpfully obliterating any fingerprints the two thieves might have inadvertently left behind them, although they hadn’t because one of the thieves isn’t an idiot – and there was Mrs H-P’s car. Large as life. Sitting in its own garage. There had been some hard looks, apparently. This public humiliation, coupled with having had to deal with that arsehole Commander Treadwell, and the confrontation with our naked gardening team and their novel approach to eradicating greenfly – and all on the same day, too – had obviously constituted a perfect storm for Mrs H-P and she’d been using the time to plot her revenge. She

had, however, made a very grave error. She'd tangled with Theresa Mack. Heads would roll.

'You're absolutely right,' I said warmly. 'I don't think we should let this stain on our honour go unpunished.'

'We're not,' she said tartly. Did you see, I did it again! 'It's the Christmas Fayre at the beginning of December and I intend to extract full and public revenge.'

'That's the spirit,' said Max, getting up to go because she obviously didn't need either of us for that.

Wrong. It would appear that she did. Pinning Max back in her seat with a Look, Mrs Mack continued. 'This year's rules require all entrants to recreate an authentic Christmas pie.'

Max blinked. 'What's an *unauthentic* Christmas pie?'

Mrs Mack sighed. 'Christmas pies are the original mince pies. The recipe called for meat – lots of it – all minced up. That's why they're called mince pies. Didn't either of you know that?'

Well, I did, actually, but some parts of my life aren't for public consumption so I shook my head and assumed my default expression of quiet intelligence.

'And don't sit there looking like a constipated duck,' she snapped, quite unkindly, I thought. 'I want you to do something for me.'

'Of course,' I said, thinking, as anyone would, of time spent in the warm kitchen working my way through plates of traditional deliciousness based on Christmas past, followed by thoughtful discussions, all the while ticking boxes and making intelligent suggestions.

Well – none of that happened.

There followed twenty minutes of discussion – well, Mrs Mack spoke and we listened – and then she sent Max off to see Dr Bairstow. Max didn't see why Mrs Mack couldn't have gone herself and said so. Theresa Mack was one of the first people Dr Bairstow recruited to St Mary's and I was pretty sure she could have anything she wanted, but she said no, she

preferred to stay out of things lest charges of unfair advantage be brought. I couldn't quite see the logic of that, but she said Vortigern wanted his chair back and why were we still here so we left, with Max rehearsing her arguments as we went.

1. We'd been working hard putting St Mary's back together again after various recent excitements. Tick.
2. Authenticity was key and that could only be achieved by just a teeny-tiny jump to sometime appropriate. Say, oh, just off the top of our heads ... Restoration London. Tick.
3. Which would also provide a chance for Max to test her sea legs after her enforced grounding. Tick.
4. The honour of St Mary's and the downfall of Mrs H-P, etc., etc. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Yes – all that should work quite nicely.

Dr Bairstow was sitting behind his desk surrounded by files and data stacks and not looking particularly happy with either.

I nudged Max. 'Let me do the talking.' She indicated her willingness to do so.

I gave Dr Bairstow my best smile. 'Good afternoon, sir.'

He peered at us over a massive file pile.

'Mr Markham. Dr Maxwell.'

An excellent beginning, I think everyone will agree.

I decided to cut straight to the heart of the matter.

'The honour of St Mary's is at stake, sir.'

'Again?'

'Indeed, sir. And from an unexpected and insidious source.'

'I really don't think you should go around calling the WI insidious,' he said mildly. 'Should any reports find their way

back to Mrs Huntley-Palmer then I fear even I might be unable to save you.'

Nothing gets past Dr Bairstow.

I went for it. 'On the contrary, sir, the Security Section, with minor assistance from the History Department, has already devised a cunning and well-planned initiative designed to restore the honour of the kitchen department and raise the prestige of St Mary's itself to even greater heights, where it will remain, forever unassailed.'

He looked very unimpressed. 'Have you indeed? Perhaps you could favour us all with a brief – a very brief – outline, if you please, of this cunning plan.'

I went for it some more. 'Prompt action, sir, backed by well-researched intelligence, leading to a favourable outcome and confusion to the enemy.'

I braced myself for some intensive probing as to the nature of the prompt action that would lead to this acquisition of well-researched intelligence. I'm very good at picking up unspoken clues, you know, and something was telling me he was experiencing minor pangs of doubt.

'Do I understand this initiative will involve you inflicting yourselves on some unlucky century already overburdened with a surplus of unfortunate events?'

'You do, sir.' I laid out our arguments. Hard work. Restoration London. Honour of St Mary's. Max's sea legs. The whole shebang. I was as eloquent and persuasive as only I can be. Max, in particular, closed her eyes, all the better to focus on my compelling arguments after a large lunch.

When I'd finished, there was a short silence.

'For how long do you plan to be absent?'

'Two hours, sir. No longer. We will acquire the ... the material needed for the in-depth research that will enable Mrs Mack to recreate the perfect Christmas pie, and return to St Mary's. You won't even notice we've gone.'

‘I always notice when you and Dr Maxwell are gone, Mr Markham.’

He was probably referring to the inevitable drop-off in efficiency, intelligence, good behaviour and so forth that occurred every time I left the building. Not so sure about Max.

Mrs Partridge tapped on the door and entered. ‘The chief constable for you, Dr Bairstow. There has been another complaint.’

He sighed. ‘Concerning ... ?’

‘It was not clear. Shall I put him through?’

‘If you please, Mrs Partridge.’ He looked at us across his desk. ‘Very well. Permission granted.’

I was gobsmacked. I think even Max was caught on the hop. Certainly too much on the hop to make a timely getaway. Our biggest mistake. If we’d had our wits about us, we’d have galloped out of the room and been halfway round the gallery by the time the thought occurred to him.

‘And take Miss Sykes with you.’

I saw Max open her mouth to argue, and hastily said, ‘Of course, sir,’ pushing her out of the door before he could add Bashford into the mix, together with instructions for us to sort out all their little differences and restore the accustomed peace and harmony to the History Department. I should say now that the words History Department, peace and harmony should never be used in the same sentence.

‘Shit,’ said Max. But only once we were safely out of earshot.

‘Yes,’ I said, staring at a door. Because we were just outside Peterson’s office.

We looked at each other. We at St Mary’s have a policy of spreading the shit as far and wide as possible. There are industrial-strength muck-spreaders out there that can only envy our performance.

‘It will be good for him,’ I said. ‘A rare opportunity for him to exercise his field skills.’

Max beamed. ‘That is so thoughtful of you.’

I indicated that I was a very thoughtful person. That I lived to serve my fellow man.

‘He can utilise his people skills, as well,’ I continued. ‘He’s always banging on about how great they are. Now is the chance for us lesser mortals to sit at the feet of the master.’

We grinned at each other and barrelled into Peterson’s office, where he was staring out of the window and pretending to be busy.

‘What do you two want?’

‘Just a courtesy call,’ I said. ‘Max and I are off tomorrow to sort out the Great Christmas Pie Controversy.’

‘Eh?’ he said.

‘Not an official assignment. More a kind of informal Great St Mary’s Day Out.’

It might have been my imagination, but Peterson seemed to turn a bit of a funny colour, recovering enough to say sarcastically, ‘Because the last one went so well, I suppose.’

Ah. He hadn’t forgotten. How come he can’t remember he owes me a tenner from last week, but can remember a somewhat shambolic jump during which we’d nearly killed William Shakespeare? The good part – often passed over when the History Department is playing the blame game – was that it had triggered my hitherto unsuspected acting talent. I don’t mean that time I played the backside of Evans’ Christmas reindeer – I still can’t look at an egg sandwich – but proper acting. The sort where you strike an attitude and declaim and are awarded a knighthood, even though your best work was as the famous wizard in the famous adaptation of an even more famous book.

‘All right,’ I said, adjusting my ideas somewhat. ‘Don’t think of it as a day out. Think of it more as an illegal Christmas jump. Haven’t had one of those for a while.’

‘It’s September.’

‘Not where we’re going.’

There was a long silence. A sure sign of a senior manager thinking deeply. That and the slight smell of burning, of course.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Restoration London.’

Max remained silent, staring angelically at the ceiling.

‘Who’s going?’

‘Me and Max. And you, of course, if you want to come.’

‘Hm,’ he said, steepling his fingers in the gesture he practises in front of the mirror. ‘All right.’

‘And Sykes, of course,’ said Max, keeping the best till last.

‘What? Why?’

‘Get her out of the building,’ I said.

‘Why would we need to get her out of the building?’

‘Give her some space to contemplate her future.’

‘She’s Head of Training. Her future is training people.’

I sometimes think senior managers have a very narrow focus. ‘Yes, you’re right. But what about the other aspects of her life?’

‘She has a choice between a literal headbanger and his chicken, or a bearded bloke who’s mysterious and Welsh. Faced with that sort of choice, I’d ... oh yes, I see your point.’

I nodded. ‘A little distance will aid perspective. Help her come to terms with the catastrophe that is her life. And get her out of the building for a bit.’

‘Not a bad idea, I suppose.’

‘And,’ I said, gilding the lily, ‘we won’t have to steal Leon’s pod again – seriously, I am sick of the sight of that thing. We can take Number Eight and travel in style for a change. What do you say? Just like old times. We’ll see Mrs Enderby about costumes this afternoon, set off first thing tomorrow morning, acquire various samples of Christmas pie, and stand well back as Mrs Mack creates something authentic and delicious and

carries off all the honours at the Christmas Fayre. Just think how grateful she'll be. She won't be able to do enough for us. Poor Janet will be wearing her arms out with my Spotted Dick.'

Janet is my Designated Spotted Dick Handler. As Max once said, 'For that, she worked her way through catering school,' but she, Janet, rightly deems it an honour. Some people have work wives. I have a Spotted Dick wife.

As a courtesy, we also went to see David Sands, because as Head of the History Department, technically he was Sykes' overlord and should therefore be consulted.

'Knock, knock,' I said, a phrase guaranteed to unleash a torrent of dreadful dad jokes and put him in a good mood.

Not this time, however. He was looking a trifle harassed. More harassed than is normal for the poor sod in charge of the History Department, anyway.

Max informed him we were taking Sykes off his hands for a day.

'Good,' he said, whirling his data stack to near terminal velocity. 'I've been racking my brains for a way to split them up for a while. I'd have sent Bashford away on a course somewhere except he's only just come back from one.'

'It'll let them calm down and, with luck, sort themselves out,' I said.

'I'm hoping the situation will resolve itself,' he said with entirely misplaced optimism. 'Remember the problems we had with Sykes and North when they couldn't work together.'

'Yes, but fate sorted that out for us – or rather, the Time Police did when North went off to work for them. Problem solved.'

He sighed. 'Wish all my problems were solved that easily.'

Once again I engaged my laser-like deductive abilities. 'Something wrong?'

'My publishers have demanded a short story off me.'

‘Isn’t that a Good Thing?’

‘For a Christmas anthology.’

‘Again ... Good Thing?’

‘Something bright and cheery and uplifting.’

‘What are you giving them?’

‘The body-fat story.’

I blinked. ‘Excuse me?’

He sighed. ‘In the story, they’ve invented a wonderful new drug for guaranteed weight loss. Taking the drug triggers a gene that eats body fat. People can lose weight without even trying.’

‘Well,’ said Max, who has her own attitude to BMI, ‘that sounds very cheery and uplifting to me.’

‘They discover, too late, that they can’t turn the gene off. People literally eat themselves alive.’

I blinked. ‘This is a *Christmas* story?’

‘The body consumes its own fat and then, when that’s gone, it starts on flesh, then muscles, organs, bones, until there’s literally nothing left.’

I genuinely think it’s time St Mary’s imposed some sort of psychiatric testing on its historians. *Regular* psychiatric testing. ‘How is that anything to do with Christmas?’

‘The drug is the world’s most popular Christmas gift, but each of the twelve days of Christmas suffers its own fresh horror as civilisation slowly breaks down, and by Twelfth Night, everyone’s horribly dead.’

‘Well, I think it’s brilliant,’ said Max. ‘Your publishers don’t know how lucky they are. You could close the final scene with a deserted shopping centre. Outside, the snow is falling gently, and inside, there’s a recording of “Silent Night” playing on an endless loop, while overhead a bright star burns, shining its cold, dead light on a peopleless world.’

We stared at her.

‘What?’ she said.

I shook my head. ‘There is something so wrong with you.’

Obviously there was the traditional briefing from Max before we set out.

‘Right,’ she said as we assembled in her office. ‘This assignment isn’t exactly on the books, but it isn’t exactly off them, either. Our purpose is to locate and secure examples of the forerunner of the modern mince pie – known at the time as Christmas pie. We’re acting on behalf of Mrs Mack – who has refused to come with us because – as she told me when I was foolish enough to ask – she’s not that stupid. You, however’ – her glance encompassed all three of us – ‘have been selected precisely because you *are* that stupid.’

We beamed. There’s nothing like complimenting the troops to get them motivated.

‘There’s no particular historical aspect to this assignment. We’ll be aiming for mid-December 1661, and we hope to be on site for only a few daylight hours. It’s a lively time – the country is celebrating the return of the king, Charles II. It’s a world of taverns, theatres and coffee houses, brothels and bawdy women, and the possibility of bumping into Charles himself as he exits one of his many mistress’s abodes. It can be a little exciting after dark but we’ll be long gone by then. Before all the drinking and licentious behaviour really gets going.’

‘Aw,’ said Sykes.

‘Mr Markham will handle any Security issues. Because we’re all senior staff – mature and responsible – a full Security presence will not be required. The team will consist of Dr Peterson, Mr Markham, Miss Sykes and me. We’ll be using Number Eight, which Leon informs me is in full working order and he expects to have it returned to him in the same condition.

‘I’m sure I don’t need to remind everyone that discretion is the better part of this assignment. Quick and quiet will be our

watchwords. Report to Wardrobe this afternoon for your costumes and Hawking at 0830 tomorrow morning. Any questions? Thank you, everyone.'

All our preparations went perfectly. Except for one teeny-tiny detail. And I'm pretty sure Peterson was behind that. People think he's so sweet and charming with his lovely manners and his haystack hair, but take it from me, he has a nasty streak a mile wide and if you call him out on it, he just rubs his bad arm and looks pathetic and everyone hates you.

I stared at my costume. 'Pink,' I said crustily. Did you see? I did it again. Another good one.

'Rose,' said everyone else.

Yes – I'd been saddled with the pink monstrosity again. The one from the steam-pump jump. Yeah – that one. You can call it rose as often as you like but it's a pink coat, pink breeches, pink waistcoat and pink hat. And I swear the feather was even bigger this time round. I accepted the costume because otherwise they'd have me going as a night-soil man or something equally unpleasant, but believe me, somewhere out there is an ostrich looking for its arse feathers.

We assembled outside Number Eight in Hawking Hangar. Me, Max, Peterson and the considerably-more-cheerful-now-she-was-getting-away-from-men-and-their-chickens-for-a-while Miss Sykes.

I've been told an explanation is necessary at this point because some people might not have a clue who we are and what we do. And certainly not why we do it.

We're the Institute of Historical Research at St Mary's Priory and we investigate major historical events in contemporary time. Draw closer because I'm going to whisper. It might be time travel. On the other hand, it might not. Depends if Dr Bairstow's listening. Anyway, we shoot up and down the timeline investigating some of History's more dubious events, recording and documenting as we go. And not dying,

obviously. Which most of us have managed pretty well so far, although it wouldn't be St Mary's if we hadn't experienced a number of close shaves along the way. Because if there's a catastrophe occurring somewhere, we do like to get up close and personal.

We do what we do because, as Max says, it's important to have a record of events as they actually occurred. Not the version everyone wishes had happened. Or the version that makes certain people look good. Or the version that supports current religious, social or political thinking. Or the sanitised version. Actual events as they actually happened. Just the often inconvenient truth. Because, as everyone knows – there are lies, damned lies, and History.

The three of us – Peterson, Max and I – have a longstanding Christmas tradition. We steal a pod – well, actually, we borrow it, and ask permission retrospectively, so it's not technically stealing – as I have to point out to Dr Bairstow every single time – and then we and the dubiously acquired pod shoot off and have a kind of festive adventurette. Until the last few years, that is, when Max and I had other things on our minds.

Now, however, we were back at St Mary's and normality had been restored and respectability acquired. No longer did we have to steal a pod while no one was looking. As heads of departments and with Dr Bairstow's permission – no matter how reluctantly given – we could go anywhere we chose and here we were, in Hawking Hangar, standing outside Number Eight and all ready to go.

'This is fun,' said Max, automatically running an eye over the rest of us – checking for inadvertently acquired tattoos, wristwatches, jewellery and the like. 'Not only have the three of us not been on a Christmas jump for a long time, but we have Miss Sykes with us today.'

It was September but everyone agrees that time is fluid. And it would be mid-December when we arrived, which is close enough for St Mary's work.

'Stand still and let me have a look at you.'

She herself was wearing a dark blue woollen dress, cut high at the neck with a white collar. The fashion was for a small waist and wide skirts, but obviously we needed to be able to move freely, so hers were less wide than most. That and the close-fitting cap under her wide-brimmed hat gave her the look of a mature and respectable woman. Although obviously no one dared say so. Sykes was very similar but in brown. They both had thick, dark, woollen cloaks because there was a bit of a mini ice age in the 17th century, and each carried a small basket in which, with luck, we would be stashing our pies for onward transmission to Mrs Mack.

There had actually been some discussion over this. Pod safety protocols dictate an object can only be transported out of its own time if it's marked for imminent destruction, when it has no further part to play in History. Yes, a pie is biodegradable, but would that qualify?

‘It will if we eat it,’ said Sykes cheerfully. ‘Problem solved.’

‘Well, no,’ said Peterson. ‘If we eat all of it, then there’s nothing to bring back.’

‘We buy two,’ said Sykes, ever resourceful. ‘And eat one. We say loudly that we’ll eat the other one later – thus marking it out for imminent destruction, which will allow us to bring it back to this time.’

Yes – that’s historian reasoning for you. The sort of stuff they come out with all the time. You’d never believe they were educated, would you? It was also very possible, given the hygiene standards of the time, that consuming a 17th-century meat pie would mark the consumer out for imminent destruction as well. God knows what went into them in those days – although we hoped to find out. Plus, anyone who consumes anything from another time automatically qualifies for extra time in Sick Bay on their return, and trust me, life under Dr Salt is hard. She runs a tight ship. I’d managed to steer clear so far, but, according to Bashford – who practically has his own wing in Sick Bay, never mind his own bed – she has a very thorough approach to all things medical.

Anyway, we'd decided we'd cross the *bringing things back to this time* bridge when we came to it.

To continue. Peterson was looking very smart in a long, dark red coat with turned-back cuffs and a snazzily embroidered waistcoat. Which just left me. Cutting my usual elegant and fashionable figure. In rose. With a bloody feather. St Mary's just does not appreciate me.

'All aboard,' said Max.

We entered the pod and made ourselves comfortable. I sat back with a sigh. The sweet smell of cabbage. It's always the little things you miss most.

'Computer, initiate jump.'

'Jump initiated.'

And the world went white.

London. Mid-December 1661.

I fluffed up my feather – as you do – all the time watching Max. She really has no idea how close she came to the point of no return. Too many jumps to too many destinations in too short a time. This wasn't her first jump after her enforced grounding, and all the others had gone well, but we keep an eye on her just the same.

We landed in the shadow of Old St Paul's Cathedral.

'Brings back memories,' said Max quietly, staring at the image on the screen.

I nodded. It did. The assignment that Schiller didn't survive. She died in the Great Fire – although not *of* the Great Fire. Another death to lay at Clive Ronan's door. There was a silence, and then because her death shouldn't be allowed to cast a dark light on this particular assignment, I said, 'That was another time, another place. This is here and now.'

'You would have shot me,' Max said, again displaying typical historian flexible-memory syndrome. She forgets to send me the assignment schedule I asked her for yesterday –

and last week – and the week before that – but she does remember us fighting our way through the burning streets, desperate to get back to the pod before I was forced to shoot her dead. Which I would have done, because I wouldn't have had a choice. And I would've had to live with myself afterwards.

I grinned. 'Happy memories.'

'True – there's no time like the past,' she said cheerfully. 'Right – readings show it's brass monkeys out there, so the sooner we get started, the sooner we're back in the warm.'

There was a brief flurry of cloaks, gloves and baskets. We always try to carry something. Baskets not only lend a realistic touch and give us something to do with our hands, but they're also useful repositories for standard historian equipment – stun guns, pepper spray, tag readers, compasses, water-purification tablets and the like.

Peterson was busy draping his black cloak over his shoulders. 'For that look of quiet elegance,' he said. Wild horses wouldn't have me wearing mine because – yes, you've guessed it – it was pink.

Peterson stared thoughtfully at my hat. 'If the wind gets up, you could find yourself becoming airborne.'

'Remind me again why you're here,' I said coldly.

'Bringing my usual rapier-like intelligence to whatever crisis is about to engulf us. And to keep you buggers in line, of course. When you're ready, Max.'

Yes, technically he outranks her, but this was her assignment.

'Two parties,' she replied. 'You and me – Sykes and Markham. Markham's team goes first. If they're still alive after two or three minutes, then you and I will join them. Obviously if we stumble over their bleeding corpses, then we'll be nipping back to St Mary's for a rethink.'

That's the way things work at St Mary's. Where leading from the back is considered a good thing. Especially if you're one of the ones at the back.

Sykes and I stepped cautiously outside. We were in a narrow space between two frosty brick walls and there were only a handful of people around, which meant no shouting, no riots and no one dying. In fact, no one appeared to be taking a blind bit of notice of us. After a minute or two, Max and Peterson appeared, carefully closing the door behind them.

Bloody hell, it was cold. There was no snow but a heavy frost glittered over everything and I could see patches of ice trapped between the uneven cobbles. We'd need to watch our step. One of the worst things that can happen on assignment is someone twisting or breaking an ankle and being unable to walk.

We exited the narrow space and out into the street. People complain about traffic noise in London today – you should try it in 1661. There was the deafening clatter of wheels on cobbles competing with the bellows of stallholders bawling their wares. What seemed like scores of wheelbarrows, handcarts and wagons were clattering past. For some reason, there were very few coaches. Lots of sedan chairs, though, with puffing, red-faced, perspiring chairmen staggering past on their way to deliver or pick up customers. Perhaps we were in the wrong part of town for high-class coaches. Or the streets were too narrow for a coach to pass.

I looked up and there it was, rearing up, dark against the steel-grey sky. Old St Paul's Cathedral.

I don't normally have a problem with old London. The Great Fire – still five years in the future – obliterated most of the landmarks I'd once known. I don't know why I had a problem with Old St Paul's ... Seeing the spire again ...

I knew Max would be watching me. Next to Hunter and Major Guthrie, she knows me better than anyone. I deliberately turned my back and made myself concentrate on the job.

Old St Paul's was the beating heart of London. The place was packed with people both inside and out. Inside, the nave itself was generally known as St Paul's Walk and was definitely the fashionable place to be seen. Courtiers came to

plot and scheme. Businessmen to cut deals. Prossies to ply their trade. If, of course, any of them could find their way around all the vast piles of books, pamphlets and paper stored there. It was these same books, pamphlets and paper that would massively combust during the Great Fire and bring down the old cathedral in a spectacular explosion of crashing masonry, flaming timbers and flying sparks.

Anyway, prossies and pamphlets aside, St Paul's was a thriving commercial area. I saw a fishmonger, his apron glittering with fish scales, and a butcher hanging two hares over a giant hook. A row of what might have been dogs but equally possibly could have been large rats watched his every move. A flock of geese waddled past. People got out of their way very quickly. There was a milkmaid with her cow and three-legged stool, dispensing milk. It was worth noting the taverns had more customers than the milkmaid. I could see Max nodding. She thinks milk should be a banned substance. Chickens pecked between the cobbles, occasionally squawking and shedding feathers as they fluttered away from trundling wagon wheels.

There were beggars everywhere in these crowded streets, many of them children. We'd brought a supply of ha'pennies, pennies and groats with which to purchase our pies. I saw Max quietly slip a penny to a little boy, blue with cold, barefoot and naked, apart from a few tatty rags.

The smell was robust. After a while in our job, you become accustomed to the smell of people who don't wash from one end of the year to the next – especially in summer – together with horses, woodsmoke, cooking and so forth, but this was the 17th century and so we had the tang of spices and the rich smell of coffee as well. Charles II's reign saw the introduction of coffee houses. Open to all classes of men – women weren't encouraged – where politics and sedition could be openly discussed, inflammable pamphlets distributed and read, tobacco smoked ... and coffee drunk, of course. And not just coffee – you could purchase a dish of tea – the China drink; or chocolate – the West Indian drink. If things went well and we had some money left, then Peterson and I could nip in and treat Sykes and Max to a hot chocolate, which would be very

welcome today. I could see my breath puffing in front of me. Actually, I could see everyone's breath puffing in front of them.

And, at last, over there, around the corner from the coffee house, standing with his back against a wet brick wall splashed all over with something disturbing – a pie man. His tray was stacked high with golden goodies.

The plan was that Peterson and I would buy the pies – we were the ones with the money – and Sykes and Max would carry our purchases – they were the ones with the baskets. This is the sort of plan that sounds like a great idea and when you get down to it, really isn't.

'All right,' said Peterson. 'Our first pie. Who wants to do the honours?'

'Me,' I said. 'Come along, Miss Sykes. We'll show them how it's done, shall we?'

Max made a very unprofessional noise.

'What do you think?' I said to Sykes as we approached the vendor.

'He looks clean enough,' she said. 'No doubt if it was summer, he and his tray would be acting as landing pads for every disease-carrying bluebottle in London, but fortunately for us they've all died of eating contaminated meat pies. In fact, their corpses probably constitute a major part of current meat pie fillings. Recycling at its best, don't you think?'

I stared at her, saying, 'I can't believe they actually put you in charge of impressionable young people.'

She smirked, saying, 'Impressionable young people think I'm wonderful,' just as we arrived at the purveyor of quality meat pies and pasties and before I could think of a suitable response.

He was a morose-looking chap with a large dewdrop swinging from one nostril. I nudged Sykes, who couldn't take her eyes off it. He regarded us with a distinct lack of enthusiasm and snorted. The dewdrop disappeared. God knows where it went.

Christmas pies look nothing like modern mince pies. These were quite large and round with a flat top. Rather like pork pies, now I came to think of it. One had already been cut in half, so obviously you could buy them in smaller portions.

I pointed. ‘Christmas pie?’

He grunted, leaving neither me nor Sykes any the wiser. Was it or wasn’t it? The silence went on. I think we were waiting for him to hand us one. Although now I looked at his hands ... Perhaps he was waiting for the money first ...

‘Seventeenth-century self-service,’ muttered Sykes, selecting the smaller half, tucking it away in her basket and indicating that I would pay.

We had no idea of the price. There was no sign displaying such helpful information, most probably because he couldn’t write and his customers couldn’t read. Presumably everyone already knew the price of a pie. Except us, of course. I stared at the pie man. The pie man stared back. I felt like Simple Simon. I decided to start small, handing him a ha’penny. But only because I didn’t have a farthing. He took it and stared a little bit more. A ha’penny’s not a bad price for a pie and judging by the number still on his tray, these weren’t good pies. Another Markham Top Tip – always buy from the man with a queue. Eventually, I handed him another ha’penny. He gave me the other half of the pie.

‘No,’ said Sykes. ‘That’s not what ...’

I hustled her away before we became even more confused by 17th-century commerce. Besides, no one can start a riot like Sykes – don’t ever mention the words pollock and Caernarfon to Max – and we rejoined the others.

‘Why did you buy two?’ demanded Max.

‘Different flavours,’ said Sykes swiftly.

‘Us next,’ said Peterson. ‘Come on, Max.’

At the end of the street not only was there a pie stall, but it had a queue. We hung around trying to see how much people were paying.

‘A penny, I think,’ muttered Max.

We joined the queue, stamping our feet on the cold cobbles. These pies were loaf-shaped and the seller was cutting off thick slices for his customers. Peterson swapped cash for something that smelled delicious and Max tucked that one away in her basket.

‘Time to split up,’ she said. ‘Otherwise we could be here all day and I want to be gone well before dark and we freeze to death. We’ll all buy as many pies as possible from as many different vendors as possible and meet back here in an hour.’ She pointed. ‘Street corner outside the sign of the Red Lyon. Then it’s straight back home to present the fruits of our endeavours to Mrs Mack. The team with the least number of pies has to get the drinks in.’

‘You’re on,’ I said, knowing Sykes and I were already a pie ahead. ‘This should be a piece of cake.’ See what I did there? Sometimes I amaze even me.

We split up. Peterson and Max went right and we went left.

‘Right,’ said Sykes, striding out. ‘We’re going to win this.’

Historians are very competitive.

‘Too right we are,’ I said.

So is Security.

‘So,’ I said, matching my pace to Sykes. For a little person, she really covers the ground. Max is the same, although in her case she has to maintain forward momentum because otherwise she falls over. Like a bicycle, she once explained. I’m sure she was right. I myself tend to stay away from bikes. They can be tricky. As I discovered after an early, unwise and painful attempt at bicycle jousting. Although I did open my eyes to find Hunter bending over me. The most romantic moment of my life.

Which reminded me ... ‘You and Bashford,’ I said, watching my breath puff in the weak sunshine.

Sykes didn’t say anything, but on the other hand she didn’t actually attack me, so I ploughed on. Obviously it was a tricky

subject so I'd need to work up to things slowly and with subtlety.

'What's going on with you two?'

'He's an idiot,' she said, kicking a loose cobble across the street.

'Well, yes, but you've been together for years – you must have known that. I mean, the man keeps a chicken on his wardrobe.' I paused, because I really wanted to know. 'Does he ... ? When you ... ? You know ... ?'

She stared at me. 'What?'

I bottled it. Work back to that later, Markham. 'Is Angus the problem?'

'Oh no,' she said. 'Angus is a sweetie. In fact, I prefer her to either of them.'

I stopped. 'Is it *make your mind up* time?'

Her eyes flashed. 'I've been given an ultimatum, would you believe?'

'Are you sure? That doesn't sound like Bashford. Were his eyes open?'

'Not Bashford.'

'Roberts?'

She kicked another stone.

I was baffled. 'Then why were you yelling at Bashford?'

'I ... He ...' She made a frustrated gesture.

'Oh God, he didn't tell you the decision was yours, did he? What an idiot.'

She said nothing.

I probed more deeply. 'So are you angry at the one demanding you make the choice or the one who seemingly doesn't care enough to demand you make the choice?'

'Honestly? I'm thinking of going with Angus.'

I said carefully, ‘If one of them were removed – suppose Bashford left St Mary’s – how would you feel then?’

‘Upset.’

‘And Roberts?’

‘Same.’

‘Hm,’ I said, adopting the Peterson appearance of giving an issue serious thought while not having a bloody clue.

We turned into a small square. We’d done a fair bit of walking by this point, but such was the maze of streets we were still in the shadow of St Paul’s.

I wasn’t quite sure what to do. Technically, their small personal spat wasn’t anything to do with me. We do live on top of each other a bit – Max and Leon weren’t stupid when they moved out of St Mary’s – but these sorts of things usually blow over after a couple of days sulking, together with a bit of alcohol chucked into the mix to lend wisdom and perspective. On the other hand, if this was going to affect us operationally, then it definitely was something to do with me. And then there was that sultry Welshman – the Dread Historian Roberts. Where was he in all this?

‘It’s just that ...’ I began.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake.’

She peeled off.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Tavern.’ She pointed through an arch into a tavern’s back yard. ‘Midden.’

I knew better than to ask why. Middens were public toilets. You sidled up, selected your spot, dropped your drawers – if you were wearing any – and added to the pile.

‘Already? Why didn’t you go before we left the pod?’

‘Can’t help it. It’s the cold.’ She glowered. ‘And the company.’

Well, after that, you won't be surprised to hear that I left her to it. Technically, as Security Supremo, I should always be either within earshot or eyeshot, but something told me that giving her a little space might be a good thing.

She stamped off into the yard and I hung around outside, looking for pie shops, stalls, vendors – anything even remotely pie-related. We were in luck. This was a good area pie-wise. There was the tavern itself, a coffee house over there looking steamy, warm and inviting on a day like this, and a pie stall that was basically a barrow on wheels.

I gave her two minutes. And then, to be on the safe side, another one, and then called her up.

‘Sykes?’

‘Just coming,’ she said crossly. ‘I had to wait. There was a —’

She cut off abruptly. I heard a man's voice. Then another's. Then something unidentifiable. And then silence.

I didn't wait. I raced into the yard. Which was packed with thirsty customers. No horses, but a ton of people criss-crossing into and out of the back door. And quite a few women in dark cloaks which didn't make things any easier. I circled the midden, closely scrutinising all the young women squatting there – and garnering not a few nasty looks in the process – so in the end I abandoned finesse, climbed on the chopping block and shouted, ‘Sykes.’

I'm not sure what happened next but somehow I fell off the block. I don't remember hitting the ground.

When I opened my eyes, there was a small crowd of people bending over me. Most of them seemed quite disappointed I wasn't dead. That's actually been a major theme in my life.

I was lying alongside the wooden block on top of a small pile of chippings and sawdust. The good news was that I'd lost my stupid hat with the stupid feather. Someone helped me up. I suspected they all thought I'd taken more ale than was good for me. There was a bit of laughter.

The bad news was that there was no sign of Sykes anywhere.

The worst news was that someone handed me back my hat.

I thanked everyone, took my hat and staggered back into the street. Finding a quiet corner, I opened my com.

‘Max. I’m outside a tavern. The sign of the ...’ I squinted up at the sign. ‘The something girl. Can’t make it out. Might be the Queen’s Head. You know – Good Queen Bess. Anyway – I’ve lost Sykes.’

‘How?’

‘It was very sudden. I’m not sure what happened but I think someone may have her.’

‘Stay there. On our way.’

I leaned against the wall. My head hurt but I’d just take a moment and everything would be fine.

I threw up just as Max and Peterson panted around the corner. Most of it missed them so that was all right.

‘Shit,’ said Max, stepping around the unpleasantness on the cobbles to take a closer look at me. ‘What happened?’

I straightened up. ‘Better now.’

‘Far be it from me to argue,’ said Peterson from behind me, ‘but the back of your head’s covered in blood.’

Shit.

I clapped my hat on my head. It might as well do something useful. ‘There. Out of sight, out of mind. All better now. We need to get after Sykes.’

‘You were attacked?’

‘No, not really. Sykes ... disappeared. Obviously I was searching for her when ...’

‘You were attacked?’

‘I fell off the chopping block.’

They stared at me.

‘I think I might have lost consciousness,’ I said, in a blatant and wholly unsuccessful bid for sympathy.

Peterson sighed. ‘Why is nothing ever simple for us?’

Max rummaged in her basket and handed me the tag reader. ‘Can you see properly?’

I squinted. ‘Well enough to read this.’

‘Do you want me to do it?’

‘No, it’s OK.’

There was a reading. Quite strong, too. I extended my arm in a dynamic and commanding gesture designed to show them how completely on top of things I was. Or, if you believe Max’s version, I waved vaguely in the direction of a brick wall. ‘This way.’

We set off in a purposeful and well-coordinated straggle.

And ran smack into the Time Police.

Two of them, standing with their backs to the low, bright sun casting long shadows over everything. To me they were just big black shapes silhouetted against the glare. We had to squint to see them properly. I’ll say this for Ellis, tactically he’s not an idiot.

Everyone stared at everyone else.

‘Well,’ said Ellis. ‘We should have guessed, I suppose. If something’s gone wrong, you can bet St Mary’s is never far away.’

‘Actually,’ said Max, bristling, ‘I think you’ll find that the common denominator in all Time Police catastrophes is the Time Police themselves. However, delightful though it is to watch you struggle to achieve basic standards of human intelligence, we’re actually working.’

She made to push past them.

Ellis looked at Miss North – formerly of St Mary’s – sorry, I know she’s in the Time Police now but I think she’ll always be Miss North to us – and said, ‘Can’t be a coincidence, can it?’

I pulled my coat around me as if I was cold. Which I was, but it was mainly to hide the tag reader. On the rare occasions when something goes wrong, we at St Mary's are always very discreet about it.

My movement attracted North's attention. 'Dear God, you've not still got that thing, have you?'

I'm assuming she meant my outfit. Otherwise that was quite rude.

I stamped my feet, and at the same time, Peterson said, 'Well, this has been delightful but it will be getting dark soon so we should crack on.' He began to edge past.

Another few seconds and we might have got away with it but, with true St Mary's luck, the tag reader beeped.

Typical.

Tag readers are bloody useless. Always have been. In fact, they're famed for it. We're all tagged, obviously, because St Mary's tends to shed people faster than a white cat moulting on a black sofa. You wouldn't think it would be so difficult to invent something that can identify and track said tags – but apparently it is. We have a piece of kit to wave around – at vast expense, as Dr Bairstow continually reminds us – and yes, if the person for whom you're looking stands four feet in front of you, and jumps up and down while waving their arms and shrieking, 'I'm here,' then there's a vague chance the tag reader will pick them up.

Or, of course, should you ever find yourself in a tricky situation *vis-à-vis* the Time Police, you can guarantee the bloody thing will go off like a sonic bomb. As it just had.

At times like this, the true hero steps forth.

I smiled at Ellis. 'I think something's triggered a piece of your kit. We'll let you get on, shall we?'

'Hold on a moment,' said North.

I sighed. With very few exceptions, the Time Police are as thick as two short planks and, typically, two of those few exceptions were standing in front of us right now. In fact, you

could say both Ellis and North were very smart cookies. Hey – did you see what I did there? Smart cookies? *Cookies?*

North looked at Ellis, saying in an undertone, ‘They’re definitely not here, sir. No sign of them.’

‘You were late,’ said Ellis. ‘They’d have been nervous. Perhaps they wouldn’t wait.’

North looked at me and scowled. ‘Or ...’

‘Or what?’ I said brightly, because even with a thumping headache, pennies were dropping all around me.

She ran her eye over us. ‘Are you perhaps ... missing someone?’

‘No,’ said Max and Peterson together.

‘Yes,’ I said. Because we were.

‘Someone female?’

‘Of that gender, yes,’ I said.

‘There’s only one person stupid enough ...’ She sighed. ‘Let me guess – Sykes.’

‘That is a possibility.’

She turned to Ellis. ‘They must have mistaken Sykes for me, sir. It’s the only explanation. And now – willingly or unwillingly – she’s gone off with them.’

Ellis blinked. ‘Why on earth would she do that?’

North didn’t actually grind her teeth, but there was just the very tiniest impression of exasperation. ‘Because it’s Sykes.’

‘Hang on,’ said Max. ‘Are you saying that you’re involved in some kind of sting and the people you’re stinging have walked off with one of ours instead of one of yours?’

‘Yes,’ said Ellis grimly. ‘We are.’

‘Bloody hell,’ she said. ‘For God’s sake, don’t tell Sykes she’s been mistaken for a TPO or she’ll bring the house down on top of you.’

‘Never mind that,’ I said. ‘Just make sure she never finds out someone mistook her for North or we’re all dead.’

Max smiled brightly and patted Ellis on the forearm. ‘Well, we’d better go and get her back. You two wait here where you can’t make things any worse.’

Somewhere a blaster began to whine. ‘I think not,’ said Ellis. ‘The *waiting here so as not to make things any worse* will be carried out by the St Mary’s part of this contingent. With me, North.’

‘Oh, really,’ I said. ‘Got Sykes’ frequency for your tag reader, have you?’

Max folded her arms.

Peterson turned back to Ellis. ‘Who do you think has her?’

He sighed. ‘You’ve met them before. ENLA. The English National Liberation Army. You know – England for the English.’

Peterson blinked. ‘Aren’t they illegal?’

‘Yes.’

‘What are they doing here?’

‘*That* is what North has spent some time trying to ascertain. She was on the brink of success when certain irresponsible members of a certain irresponsible organisation drifted across our path and ballsed things up big time.’

Frowning at Max and Peterson to stay quiet, I said to Ellis, ‘If they think Sykes is North, then who exactly do they think North is?’

‘The money.’

‘The what?’

‘The financier. Or their financier’s minion.’

I caught a glimpse of North’s face and couldn’t resist. ‘North is a *minion*?’

There was a slight but somehow very significant pause before a quick-thinking Ellis could recover. ‘North is the

facilitator.’

‘Better,’ said North.

‘Exactly what is she facilitating?’

‘At this stage we don’t have sufficient ...’

‘You don’t know?’

‘Officer Varma has, so far, been unable to ascertain exactly what ...’

‘So you were going into this blind?’

‘Not completely. The Time Police ...’

‘And Sykes won’t have a clue about any of it.’

You could see the words *nothing new there* struggling not to be spoken by North. North and Sykes were chalk and cheese. Even as trainees they’d both struggled to be civil to each other. There’d been a moment – on the steam-pump jump – when I’d had to have a stern word with the pair of them. Don’t get me wrong – both of them were excellent historians in their own way, just as long as you kept them well apart from each other. Together ... well, let’s just say they struggled to establish a working relationship and leave it at that, shall we?

North regrouped. ‘This is an official investigation into an illegal organisation, to ascertain their intentions. Or would be, if St Mary’s hadn’t interfered.’

Ellis intervened before someone got thumped. ‘Did you try contacting her?’

‘Once,’ I said. ‘And knowing what we know now, we won’t be trying again.’

Max shifted impatiently. ‘We need to stop wasting time and get after her.’

‘Them,’ I said. ‘We go after *them*.’

‘We’re not involving ...’ began Ellis.

I waved my tag reader.

He waved his blaster.

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ said Max. ‘In the interests of saving time – there’s three of us and two of you, so you’re outvoted. It’s called democracy. The greatest curse to mankind since religion but, like religion, useful for controlling the masses and getting your own way. Lead the way, please, Mr Markham.’

Things really did hang in the balance for a moment and I could see us all doing time – courtesy of the Time Police – and then Ellis and North exchanged a glance, stepped aside and gestured for us to go first.

None of us made the mistake of thinking we’d won.

I pulled out my tag reader and Ellis fell into step beside me. North followed on, with Max and Peterson bringing up the rear. I switched the tag reader to silent – an obvious precaution – and off we went.

For those not quite up to speed, ENLA were – and still are, for all I know – one of those fringe groups comprising looneys, inadequates, and those with some of the more colourful personality disorders. We’d encountered them before at Bannockburn, when they’d sent a couple of snipers to take out Robert the Bruce. I’d like to say we foiled their dastardly plot, but the best I can do is tell you that we were there while their dastardly plot was actually foiled by others. The political aims of ENLA are self-explanatory – they’re not the brightest stars in the firmament, which, presumably, is why they’ve had to put the clue in the name – and now they were here looking to further their agenda by doing ... what? I really didn’t fancy engaging with another of their sniper teams. We hadn’t exactly covered ourselves in glory last time.

I looked around. The streets were packed with people. If there was a sniper up on a roof somewhere, and if someone suddenly dropped to the ground, how would people react? If ENLA used a silencer, it might be a while before anyone worked out what had happened, and the team would be long gone by then.

I looked up. Other than St Paul’s, the buildings here were mainly two and three storeys. I supposed they could have someone on a roof, but who could possibly be their target?

The streets were full of Londoners, all going about their normal, everyday business. There wasn't anyone politically or socially important about. Perhaps not an assassination, then. So why were they here?

I looked back down at the tag reader.

'Stop a minute,' I said, because a somewhat muddled reading was showing Sykes had been here at some point in the past. Or possibly, given the reliability of tag readers, sometime in the future. We all crowded into a very convenient narrow alleyway. Something crunched under my foot. I didn't dare look down to check what it was.

'Where exactly are we?' said Ellis. 'Perhaps the location can give us a clue.'

'We've passed through St Paul's churchyard,' I said, 'and have just turned into Candlewick Street. Or Candelwichstrete, as it was formerly known. Or Cannon Street, as it will be known in the future.'

'What's there?'

I opened my mouth but North shouldered me aside. Associating with the Time Police had done her social skills absolutely no good at all. She and Ellis conferred in undertones by one wall so St Mary's conferred in undertones by the other.

'I can't believe Sykes hasn't tried to contact us,' said Max. 'Even a double tap.'

The double tap is used when, for any reason, the tapper can't talk. *Contemporaries too close. Or no time to talk now. Or the shit has just hit the fan.* That last one is a favourite. Or the not quite so popular – *I think I'm dying.*

'Too dangerous perhaps,' said Peterson. 'But she must know we'll track her.'

'Or ...' I said. Because I'd had a sudden thought. And the reader said she'd been here ...

They watched me as I poked around with the toe of my boot. There had been that crunch. Could just be a broken pot,

of course. No cause for alarm. ‘Anyone got a torch?’

North did, obviously. I don’t know why I bothered asking.

I flashed it around our feet. You would not believe what we were standing in. ‘There.’

We all looked down as I stirred the crushed remains of a com device. Sykes’ earpiece was probably here somewhere as well. Too small to look for in this dim light.

‘That’s not good,’ said Max.

‘Not necessarily,’ I said, because there was no point in panicking yet. Plenty of time for that later. ‘She might have ditched them herself. If it is these ENLA people, then surely they’d search her at some point. Which they couldn’t do in the street so this alleyway might have been their first opportunity.’

North nodded. ‘Good thought. I’m not wearing an earpiece for precisely that reason.’

Looking at her now, I could see how easily Sykes could have been taken for North. North was taller but they were both wearing the same dark cloak and dress. They had the same slight air of not quite fitting in, which all of us – Time Police or St Mary’s – have, because we’re not in the right time and it shows. ENLA had turned up for a rendezvous, identified someone they thought was North – because to them, all women probably looked the same – always supposing they actually knew what a woman was (some don’t, you know) – anyway, they’d seen someone of the right gender, someone who didn’t look quite right and ... what?

Suspected she was a TPO and killed her? No – no body.

Had they simply assumed she was their contact and whipped her away for some reason? Likely. They probably wouldn’t even have needed to threaten her. Sykes – single-minded, stubborn, curious, furious, resourceful, reckless and proud disaster magnet – would have gone with them. Like a shot, probably. Because she’d know we wouldn’t be far behind.

Sadly, we were. Far behind, I mean.

Candlewick Street was a major east-west thoroughfare and rammed with traffic. There were carriages here, and since no one had yet decided driving on the left was the way to go, the whole thing was one massive traffic jam in both directions. Sykes could be tied up in a carriage or sedan chair, or been bundled away down an alleyway – anywhere.

I stared up and down the street. Max joined me while Peterson smiled amiably and kept an eye on our unwilling colleagues.

‘Sixteen sixty-one,’ Max said thoughtfully. ‘Not a lot happening. The return of the king last year. Massive joy and celebrations. End of the commonwealth. No plague. No fire. No real trouble.’ She turned to North. ‘Miss North, had you met any of these people before?’

‘No. It was all done through intermediaries.’

‘Who suggested this area as a rendezvous?’

‘They did.’

‘Did they nominate a specific location?’

‘No. I was to make myself visible and they’d find me.’

‘And they would make every effort to do that because ...’

‘Because I have the money. Well, something that looks like money. These people aren’t bright.’

‘How did you become aware of all this?’

She looked at Ellis, who nodded. ‘We’re working our way up the organisation. A lowly minion fell into our clutches. He gave up his mates ... we took them down. One or two of them grassed up others. Realising we might be on to something big, Varma arranged for an appropriate cellmate. He was supposed to find out who, why, where and when. He got the where and when but not the who or the why. So here I am. The major here is my minder and Varma and her team aren’t that far away.’

‘What happens when they discover Sykes doesn’t have the money?’

We looked down at the crushed com. Perhaps they already had.

I stared down the street again. Narrow-fronted houses. Timber frames. Gables. Crooked rooflines. Shops. Traffic. People. Church tower. One of many. Everything crammed in tight. Too noisy to be peaceful but certainly trouble-free. At the moment, anyway.

I dragged out the tag reader.

‘She’s here somewhere. Or been here very recently.’ Out of curiosity, I took a step forward and the reading strengthened.

‘This way.’ I went first, never taking my eyes off the reader, with Ellis and Peterson masking me on either side. Max and North followed on behind. It was impossible to walk in a straight line as we dodged around water pumps, people, parked chairs, vendors, dogs, water troughs, stalls ... until ...

It was Max who got it first but I was less than a second behind.

‘Over there,’ she said, grabbing my arm. I don’t think she realises how much that hurts.

Oh, yes. Of course.

There was no notice board outside the church because most people couldn’t read, but I knew where we were. And looking at Max, I could see my own thoughts reflected in her eyes.

‘I wonder,’ she said.

I drew Ellis and North to one side and we stepped down into the church’s cavernous entrance porch.

‘What?’ said Ellis quietly.

Max motioned for me to speak. ‘St Swithin’s church,’ I said.

‘St Swithin? Isn’t he the bloke with the rain?’

‘Yes, but it’s not the church that’s important.’

‘Well, what is?’

I nodded across to the other side of the road. Almost directly opposite the church.

‘Oh,’ said Peterson slowly, as enlightenment dawned. ‘Shit. The London Stone.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said North, reverting – temporarily – to the traditional St Mary’s reaction to any problem.

OK, time for a whole shower of Markham’s Fun Facts – you lucky people.

Let me begin by telling you what it’s not.

The London Stone is not prehistoric. Well, the rock is, obviously, because all rocks are prehistoric, but it probably wasn’t brought to London until Roman times. So quite modern, then.

To my almost certain knowledge, no one’s ever been sacrificed on it. Or even to it. Strive to contain your disappointment.

Medieval kings did not use the stone to take control of London. And while we’re on the subject, that traitorous tosser Jack Cade did not strike the stone and proclaim himself king of England. Blame my mate Bill the Bard for that little legend.

The stone has been moved several times in its life, so saying if it’s ever moved or destroyed then London will fall is probably tosh. Although I wouldn’t want to take a sledgehammer to it – just in case. It’s a bit like the ravens at the Tower, isn’t it?

There hasn’t been a long line of mysterious guardians. If there is a current guardian, then it’s a popular high-street chain outside whose premise it currently resides and who don’t realise their own mythic significance.

It probably wasn’t brought to this country by Brutus, the first king of Britain.

It probably isn’t a piece of Troy, salvaged by Aeneas as he fled the burning city. He would have been too busy carrying his ancient dad. Nor had it been passed down the ages to his descendants. Trust me on that one.

There’s nothing magic or supernatural about it. It’s just a lump of stone that has – like all stone – been around for a long

time, surviving civil wars, fires, and world wars. It was a rallying point during the Civil Uprisings, and when they were over, a blue plaque to that effect was fixed to the wall alongside the Stone. You still occasionally see a bunch of flowers resting at its base.

The London Stone itself is harmless but that doesn't mean it's not dangerous. Especially in the wrong hands. The wrong hands being a bunch of not very bright fanatics with a very dodgy manifesto. Although manifesto is probably too strong a word. Vaguely imagined wish list would probably be more appropriate.

Anyway, the London Stone has graced London since Roman times, and people are fond of it in an absent-minded sort of way but, typically, having taken no notice of it for most of their lives, would become extremely upset if a bunch of heavily brow-ridged missing links tried to damage or steal it.

I could see why possession would appeal to ENLA. Stones are important. Stonehenge. The Omphalos Stone of Delphi. The Stone of Destiny. The Sword in the Stone. The Blarney Stone. The Rosetta Stone. They all wander through History trailing more than their fair share of myths and legends. They all mean something to someone. But why jump back to now? Presumably the stone still existed in ENLA's time.

Or did it?

Dum ... dum ... dum ...

No – stop that now.

Ellis peered out of our doorway, interrupting my train of thought. 'What is so special about this old rock?'

The Time Police have no sensitivity. History has just passed them by.

'It's the London Stone,' said Peterson patiently. 'It's been in London for thousands of years.' He paused and then said in quite a different tone of voice, 'Please tell me you still have the London Stone in the future.'

'No,' said Ellis slowly. 'I've never heard of it.'

We all stared at him. ‘What happened to it?’

‘I don’t know. North?’

‘Just a minute.’ She pulled out her scratchpad from some hidden pocket. ‘London Stone ... London Stone ... disappeared. Date unknown.’

‘Oh God,’ said Max in horror. ‘You didn’t shoot it, did you?’

‘Thought to have been lost or damaged during the Time Wars,’ she continued.

‘Well,’ said Peterson. ‘Now we know. Your ENLA people have come for the London Stone. Because he who controls the London Stone controls England.’

‘No, he doesn’t,’ I said, quite irritably, because my head was hurting. ‘That’s just some stupid myth.’

‘But do they know that?’ said Max. ‘It strikes me the London Stone would be right up ENLA’s street.’

‘Which just goes to show what idiots they are,’ said Ellis. ‘One rock looks very much like another. Why couldn’t they just grab the nearest bit of rock and announce, “Behold, I have the London Stone”?’

‘Well,’ said Peterson, ‘I should imagine they’re after a’ – he threw out his chest and deepened his voice to declaim portentously – ‘*whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil is rightwise king born of all England* moment.’ He coughed and resumed his normal voice. ‘People do tend to forget the anvil bit. I blame Calvin Cutter. Anyway, ENLA are fanatics and truly believe in things like mythic stones and destiny and magic swords.’

I was very careful not to look at Max, and we both even more carefully refrained from looking at Peterson. This was definitely not the moment to mention that Caliburn – or Excalibur if you prefer the modern version – was currently residing in a small cave just outside Ross-on-Wye.

Ellis wasn’t giving up. ‘But it’s only a stone – no special markings or anything?’

That's the Time Police – no respect for ... well, anything, really.

'Is it possible the money's to fund the theft of the London Stone?' enquired Peterson.

'Well ...' said Ellis thoughtfully.

'We should definitely check it out,' said Max. 'Two parties. TPOs to check out the area in general and Sykes in specific, and we'll take a look at the Stone.'

'Why?' said Ellis, instantly suspicious.

'To check how easy it is to move, of course,' she said crossly. 'It's not actually enclosed at this point in time, but I'm pretty sure it will be sunk quite deeply into the ground. Plus, at some point in its life, it has a bit of an accident, so this London Stone is considerably bigger than the London Stone of our time.'

'So that's the plan, then,' I said, keen to move things on. My head was killing me. 'Easy as pie.'

'Piece of cake,' said Peterson, getting into the spirit of the thing.

'That takes the biscuit,' said Max, completing the hat-trick.

We left separately. Ellis and North paused for a moment while the three of us wandered down the street in an authentically straggly group. Conscious there might be eyes on us, we paused at the glover's stall, inspecting but not touching his wares, and then moved on to the bootmaker. From there we strolled casually across the street. The London Stone was a landmark. People living here actually gave their address as 'at London Stone'. It was perfectly natural for people to pause for a quick look.

Ellis and North swept past us without a glance, turned left into St Swithin's Lane and were lost in the crowd.

'They really do stand out like a bull's bollocks, don't they?' said Peterson thoughtfully, watching them go.

'But not quite as bright,' said Max.

‘Or as good-looking,’ I said.

‘Or as useful,’ said Peterson, taking a quick look around to make sure they weren’t still in earshot.

The London Stone in 1661 was not the London Stone we see today. I mean, it was still the same stone, it’s just there’s less of it for some reason. No one knows how, but it was damaged at some point in its life, and today it’s much smaller than it was in 1661. And completely gone in Ellis’s time, apparently.

This Stone, however, currently stood about waist-high to Max – which admittedly isn’t all that high – but I was willing to bet there was a lot more buried below ground. No one was ever going to pick it up and run off with it.

At some point there had been a number of iron bars holding it in place, though these were now so rusty and corroded I couldn’t see them putting up much of a fight.

‘It would take hours to dig this out,’ said Peterson, frowning. ‘Longer than a night, certainly. You’d have to prise up the cobbles around it and then dig down, and you’d need some substantial levers, and there would be cursing and God knows what. People would notice. There would be a row.’

‘Not necessarily,’ said Max thoughtfully, and I could see where she was going with this. ‘A tight-beam blaster could laser off the piece above ground. That’s what I’d do. Then grab it and run.’

‘You’d still need a wagon to trundle it away,’ argued Peterson, looking up and down the street. ‘How easy would that be? And is there a curfew? What about the watch? The chances of discovery would be very high.’

‘You could just wheel it down to the river on a handcart, perhaps,’ said Max. ‘Load it on to a boat and row away. ENLA’s pod could be parked downstream. Perhaps that’s what the money’s for. To buy the gear and manpower involved. Hiring a horse and cart. Hiring a boat. Greasing people’s palms and so forth.’

Time to break up this academic discussion on how best to steal a national monument. ‘Ellis and North can handle the dastardly plot foiling,’ I said. ‘We have a Sykes to liberate.’

We moved away. That was enough attention to give a landmark on a cold day. And as if that wasn’t enough, there was a mist rising from the river and feeling its way across the cobbles.

‘I wonder where she is,’ said Max, pulling her cloak around herself and shivering. Have I mentioned how cold it was? ‘I hope to God she’s all right.’

I consulted the tag reader. ‘Well, I don’t think she’s dead. She’s not moving but ...’ I was getting the sort of readings you get when you’re literally on top of your target. I stared at St Swithin’s. ‘I wonder ...’

Max followed my gaze. ‘Crypt,’ she said cryptically. ‘And all sorts of other religious nooks and crannies. Secret places. Very possible.’

‘The church won’t be locked during the day,’ said Peterson, ‘but if we go in to investigate now and they lock the doors at dusk, we could be trapped in there.’

‘Better get a move on, then,’ I said.

‘What about ... ?’ Max gestured in the direction of our departed Time Police colleagues.

‘I always feel it’s better to seek forgiveness than ask permission,’ I said. ‘Let’s go.’

The porch was stone-built and deep. Two wooden benches ran along each side with a battered but still hefty-looking wooden door at the end. Which was unlocked.

We let ourselves inside very quietly. The inside of the church was no warmer than the outside. Opening the door and letting in swirls of soft white river fog didn’t help much, either. The weak sun was setting, everyone would be ramping up their hearth fires – which would turn the fog yellow – and we’d all be coughing our lungs out any moment now.

The only light inside was from a lantern standing on a table near the door and another hanging from the wall. The altar candles were lit, throwing out little flickering pools of light which only served to highlight the deep shadows in the corners. There was a strong smell of damp stone and candle wax.

But at least it was empty. We closed the door as quietly as possible behind us because it had quite a powerful creak on it and stood for a while, waiting for our eyes to grow accustomed to the gloom. The thick walls and sturdy doors insulated us from the noise of the street. Here was only an echoing silence.

Peterson picked up the lantern and cast it around. The church wasn't large. There were three doors: the one we'd come in by, another on the left-hand wall – which led to the tower, I suspected – and another smaller door in the back right-hand corner which probably went down to the crypt.

Peterson led the way, with me bringing up the rear trying not to think about throwing up in a church.

Something scuttled somewhere. I wondered if rats and mice could eat candle wax.

Max took hold of the metal door ring while I watched our rear. The ring turned and the door opened silently. Unlike the street door, there were no creaks, groans, scraping wood or squealing metal. I saw Peterson sniff and he whispered, 'It's been oiled. Can you smell it?'

A set of very narrow stone steps lay before us, leading left in a tight spiral.

With some regret, Peterson laid down the lantern. The glow would give us away. We'd turn the last corner and anyone down there would be waiting for us.

I chucked my hat on the stone floor because it did tend to get in the way, and down we went. Slowly and very carefully. And silently. Or as silently as we could manage.

It wasn't a long staircase. One and a half turns to the left and we were there. The stair wall was lit with a faint glow. I

was reminded of the House of Lords' infamous undercroft, and I cast an anxious glance at Max. She doesn't get them any longer – or she says she doesn't – but she's prone to flashbacks. If she keeled over now, then she'd fall, taking Peterson with her, and I had no idea what I could do about that.

She showed no signs of running amok, however, so I concentrated on getting myself down without mishap. Two steps behind them both just in case anything kicked off and I needed the room.

We took the last half-dozen stairs very cautiously. There were lights. And voices. And one of them was quite familiar.

'I'm not telling you where the money is until you give me more details,' said Sykes firmly. 'How stupid do you think I am?'

'I know how dead you'll be if you don't tell us what we want to know.'

'What a coincidence. I was just thinking exactly the same thing.'

I gently eased Max to one side and squeezed past her to peer around Peterson.

A couple of lightsticks lying on the ground illuminated the worst possible scenario – Sykes had her back to us with three men facing her. Which meant they'd see us as soon as we moved and Sykes would have no idea we were here. Bugger.

In books and holos it's always the other way around, enabling the heroes to sneak up on the villains while the plucky heroine keeps them talking.

I signalled to Peterson and Max to move back up the stairs. As soon as they were out of sight, I took a deep breath and tripped lightly down the last few steps.

'Hello there – sorry I'm late. Have you started without me?'

This was actually quite a clever thing to say. If either Sykes or her captors were awaiting reinforcements, I could pretend to be them.

Three guns immediately pointed in my direction so it seemed safe to assume they weren't eagerly awaiting my arrival.

'Where the hell have you been?' demanded Sykes and I honestly couldn't tell whether she was in character or genuinely wanted to know.

'Well, you know ...' I said feebly.

'You're an idiot. I wish I'd never entrusted you with the money.'

'Well,' I said, looking at her all trussed up on an old stool and trying to calculate how long it would take to free her. 'It's just as well you did.'

I turned to the ENLAs. 'This is what happens when you let women do anything requiring brainpower.'

I was dead. My body just didn't know it yet. The ENLAs might kill me. I might die of concussion or blood loss. The Time Police might shoot me. Max and Peterson could accidentally finish me off at any moment. Any of that was possible – but the most likely cause of death on my death certificate was going to be Death by Sykes. I suddenly realised Bashford deserved far more credit than we'd ever imagined.

'What did you say?' she demanded, outraged. She turned to her kidnappers. 'Cut me free at once.'

'Don't you dare,' I said, moving away from her in alarm and, coincidentally, a little closer to the ENLAs.

She gave a squawk of rage, setting off a symphony of echoes inside my head.

'Look, don't start with me,' I said to Sykes. 'My head is killing me. Look.'

I showed her the back of my head.

She blinked. 'You fell over?'

'I fell off the chopping block,' I admitted, shamefaced.

'What the hell were you doing on a chopping block?'

‘Looking for you, of course.’

Sykes uttered an exasperated utterance in which only the words *idiot*, *moron* and *God help me* were clearly discernible.

I appealed to those of the same gender as me. ‘I came a right cropper. Can you take a look? I think I might need stitches.’

As I spoke, I turned towards them, tilting my head so they were able to appreciate the full force of my gaping wound.

Someone retched. Not particularly comforting when you think about it.

‘Where’s the money?’ said one. These fringe groups can be very single-minded.

I turned back to face them, taking the opportunity to move a little further to my left. They moved automatically to keep their distance. Which turned them away from the stairs. Sykes, sadly, remained well and truly trussed.

‘The money’s quite safe,’ I said.

I had no idea what, if anything, I was supposed to receive for this money. And was I supposed to just hand it over? And if so, now? In full? Or should I haggle over the price of whatever it was I was supposed to be getting? On the other hand, having hung around with Maxwell for years, I’ve become accustomed to not having a clue what was going on.

And, by now, I’d had a better look at the opposition. There were three of them and I reckoned we could take them easily. If I could just get them angled a little further from the stairs, then Max and Peterson with their stun guns shouldn’t have any problems at all.

Two of them wore the vaguely olde worlde clothing the film and holo industry consider suitable for every age from late Roman to the end of the 19th century. Who the hell wears those stupid boots with the turned-over tops? Very nearly impossible to walk in, as I’d discovered during the Great St Mary’s Pirate Day. And stupid cloaks with fur. And no hats, obviously. I mean – amateurs.

The one on the left, however, actually looked as if he might have something about him. Tall, quite well built, he looked fit and active, with shoulder-length, light-coloured hair and an air of quiet confidence. He might be a problem. The other two were older, thinner, shorter, and denser. They'd be less of a problem. Even Sykes could take them and she was tied to a stool.

'Hand it over,' said Blondie.

'As soon as all the conditions are fulfilled,' I said, crossing every finger I had.

There was some shuffling. I didn't know whether to be alarmed or reassured.

'Firstly,' I said, still trying to buy Max and Peterson time to think of something useful, 'you will release my colleague here or no one sees a penny and – worst of all – I leave her here with you.'

'I don't think so,' said the one on the right. He had no idea of the danger he was in.

'OK. Nice meeting you today.' I made to move back towards the stairs.

'We'll shoot her,' someone shouted.

'Good idea,' I said. 'Bye.'

'I mean it.'

'So do I.'

And now I'd reached the bottom of the stairs with no idea what to do next.

Fortunately, I didn't have to do anything, because an out-of-sight voice said, 'And if you come this way, mistress, you will be able to see for yourself the ...'

There was a moment of wavering light on the wall and then Peterson and Max appeared. He was holding the lantern and helping her down the steps. She had her basket over her arm and was rummaging through its contents. I have to say, in the dim light, they looked very authentic. Not that these idiots

would know any different. Ironically, people like them usually have very little historical knowledge.

I moved closer to Sykes.

Peterson looked up. ‘Oh. My goodness. So sorry. No idea ...’ He apparently caught sight of Sykes. ‘What ...?’

I was already moving. Max was already pulling out her stun gun. Sykes was already throwing herself sideways out of the way. Peterson already had his pepper spray. Twenty-five seconds’ frantic activity and once again St Mary’s had saved the day. All entirely thanks to a rigorous Security-designed training schedule imposed upon complaining historians whether they liked it or not.

‘Well,’ said Max, straightening her hat. ‘That was refreshing.’

Peterson was cutting Sykes free and helping her to her feet.

‘What ho,’ she said cheerily, brushing dust and grit off her dress. ‘You took your time.’

No one does gratitude these days.

Max was repacking her basket. ‘Report, please, Miss Sykes.’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I was awaiting my turn at the midden, picking my spot, all the usual stuff, and some bugger took my arm and said, “Come with me” – and before I knew what was happening, I’d gone with him and he wanted money and he was speaking modern English and wearing something stupid and I thought, oh, this could be quite interesting, and he kept asking me for the money and I said I rather thought he’d got things the wrong way round and he should be giving *me* money, and then his mates were waiting in an alleyway and they were talking about searching me, and I realised this might be serious so I discreetly ditched my com and earpiece and stood on them while they searched me, and when they couldn’t find this money they were banging on about, they brought me here, and I wanted to see what would happen next so I let them.’

Yes – typical historian report, I’m afraid. Interesting insight into their thought processes, though, don’t you think?

At my feet, one of the ENLA stirred and tried to sit up.

‘Now what?’ said Peterson, putting his foot on his chest and pushing him back down again.

‘Well,’ said Max, ‘I rather incline towards handing these three over to the Time Police, while at the same time making a few cutting remarks to the effect that St Mary’s has had to bail them out again, then waving goodbye and continuing with our mission. Pies for the buying of. Although I’ve no idea what time it is or even whether there will be any left by now.’

We hauled the ENLAs to their feet and propped them against the wall. One had streaming eyes and nose from the pepper. I advised him not to rub his eyes but he ignored me and now he had it on his hands as well. There was snot everywhere. We all moved away from him. Of the other two, the blond one was recovering more quickly than the other, who was still at the unfocused and dribbling stage.

‘Let’s get them back upstairs,’ I said. ‘We don’t want to be locked in here. Max, you and Sykes go first with the lantern. Secure the top of the stairs. Call when ready. Peterson will go next, then our friends here, then me.’ I addressed our prisoners. ‘If you do anything at all to make us suspicious, there will be mass zapping and full-frontal pepper spray. But not by me, because the female of the species is far deadlier than the male. Just a friendly warning. Go, Max.’

Have you ever had a moment when everything goes exactly right? When the universe stretches out a benevolent paw and everything just slots neatly into place? No mess. No fuss. No effort. Just everything behaving exactly as it should.

Well, good for you. What are you doing hanging round St Mary’s?

To begin with, things went a little bit wrong. Then quite a lot wrong. Then very badly wrong. A wonderful example of St Mary’s moving from order to chaos, showcasing the wonderful world of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics. If

my head hadn't hurt so much, I'd have banged it against the wall. Or followed Max's example and banged someone else's head against the wall. I try to be fairly philosophical about this sort of thing because you have to take the good and the bad. And the History usually turns up by itself.

Anyway, back to the prisoners. Everything was OK until the first bend. I was at the back and couldn't see that well but I heard the sounds of a scuffle, a cry of alarm – or warning – and the next moment a great tangle of bodies came rolling around the bend and knocked me off my feet and now we were all on the floor.

Which set my head off again and I wasn't quite as quick to get back on my feet as I might have been. With the result that when I eventually achieved verticality, the tables had been turned and now the ENLAs had guns and we didn't. This is what happens if you have nothing with which to secure your prisoners and obviously I didn't have anything with me. Handcuffs, apparently, are only acceptable in certain social situations – as Hunter has made very clear – and so I didn't actually have any on me at the time. And this was the result. I resolved never, in future, to be without handcuffs. I may have informed our little group thusly but I can't really remember. Head. Hurting. You get the gist.

'Right,' said Big Blond ENLA. 'Everyone against the wall. You ...' He pointed at me. 'Hand over the money. Don't bother with the amusing distractions. Money on the floor. Now. Or kiss goodbye to your right kneecap.'

Well, he was certainly a cut above his colleagues. A few more like him and ENLA might actually become something to worry about.

I sighed and said, 'Tell him.'

Sykes looked at me. 'You sure?'

'Yeah.'

'OK.' She turned to Blondie. 'We don't have the money. We never had the money. We don't have the first idea where the

money is. We don't know why you want the money. You kidnapped the wrong woman, you muppets.'

'She's right,' I said. 'The woman you really want is tall and snooty and has major problems relating to the human race. This one, as you can see, is short and delightful.'

Max nodded. 'He's right. You grabbed the wrong woman and we came looking for her.'

Blondie tossed back his hair. It was like being in a shampoo advert. 'So who are you?'

Sykes beamed at him. 'Historians.'

Blondie literally stepped backwards. 'Oh shit ... not St Mary's?'

Quite rude, I think we can all agree.

'I'm not an historian,' I said. And then realised telling them I was Security might not be the way to go.

'So who are you?'

'Admin,' I said quickly, because the most dangerous people I know are administrators.

I know all this light-hearted badinage might seem irrelevant, but I was really hoping Max and Peterson were using the time to sort themselves out and do something useful. A quick look around was enough to tell me they weren't. Of course they weren't. Why would they ever take advantage of Sykes and I being as distracting as we knew how in order to effect our escape? Sometimes I think I know just how Sisyphus felt.

Max was over against the wall. Uninjured as far as I could tell. Peterson was sitting on the bottom step, rubbing his knee and cursing. The other two ENLAs were looking much happier now they'd regained control of the situation. Right up until the moment ...

Somewhere above us a door banged. There was a very faint jangle of keys. And then, worst of all ... slow footsteps on the stairs. And someone humming a happy tune. My first thoughts had been North and/or Ellis but the Time Police are not noted for humming happy tunes.

There was another brief moment of lamplight and then a small elderly round black-clad figure, wearing a wide-brimmed, shallow-crowned hat, rounded the last bend and stopped dead.

Shit – a contemporary. First time I’ve ever been disappointed it wasn’t the Time Police.

He stared at us. Whatever the 17th-century equivalent of gobsmacked was, he was staring at us with it.

‘I ...’ He stopped and tried again. ‘Who ...’

His lamp began to wobble all over the place. He was seconds from turning and trying to get back up the stairs again. He’d never make it.

‘For heaven’s sake,’ I said to Blondie. ‘You’re just making things worse and worse. Admit you’ve got this one wrong, put your gun away and cut your losses. Somewhere out there is the woman you’re looking for. If whatever you’re up to is that important, she’ll be looking for you. Go and put yourselves in a position where she can find you.’

All of which was perfectly sound advice. I felt quite proud.

The old bloke’s lamp was still wobbling all over the place so Max took it from him with a polite murmur and carefully set it down on the floor. A wise move. In addition to whatever the vicar and his gang were storing down here, there was all sorts of builders’ stuff as well. It looked as though they’d either had, or were about to begin, some major renovations. Stacks of wood, lots of tarpaulins – all tar-treated to make them waterproof – boxes, candles, crates, jars – for storing oil for the lamps, perhaps ... Yes, we definitely didn’t want a dodderly old gentleman dropping his lamp and burning St Swithin’s to the ground before the Great Fire got the chance to do the job properly in five years’ time.

‘My colleague is correct,’ said Max, possibly for the first time in her life. ‘Let’s all leave quietly, exit the church and go our separate ways. We ourselves are on a top-secret, vitally important mission – as, I’m sure, are you – and we should all of us be cracking on, don’t you think?’

I could see the ENLAs were bang alongside the cracking-on bit – it was the *all of us* part that was making them hesitate. The quickest and easiest thing for them now was to mow us all down – dodderly verger included – and depart.

‘You go first,’ I said, trying to hurry things along a little. ‘We’ll count to one hundred and then follow you up. You’ll be long gone by the time we get into the street and this gentleman ...’ I indicated the probable verger, ‘can continue with his own plans for the evening.’

The ENLAs eyed each other. Blondie was nodding and he definitely seemed to have some authority. We’d got this. We were going to get away with it, and surely Ellis and North must be somewhere in the vicinity. I hoped. And hadn’t someone mentioned Officer Varma was out there somewhere too?

Blondie gestured with his gun. ‘Everyone back against the far wall.’

We shuffled backwards against the far wall.

Blondie motioned to his – for want of a better word – colleagues. ‘Go.’

‘Hang on a minute,’ said one.

Shit. One of them had a brain cell.

‘They’ve seen our faces,’ he continued. ‘They could identify us to the Time Police.’

‘But not if they’re dead,’ added his mate, very brave now he’d got his gun back.

Bugger, ENLA were clearly recruiting from the higher-functioning range of single-celled organisms.

‘I don’t think ...’ said Blondie.

‘I do,’ said the first one, raising his gun and taking aim at the lamp.

The lightsticks had long since expired. When the lantern went, we’d be in the dark. Although there would be the nice bright flames, of course – between us and the only way out. I

really wasn't enjoying today. And I could definitely do with a bit of a sit-down.

And then ...

Familiar cut-glass accents cut through the gloom.

'Time Police. Lay down your weapons. On your knees. Hands on your heads. Do it now.'

Thank God. The Time Police were here.

I might have to pause for one moment to savour those unfamiliar words. But never mind, it was all good. The cavalry was here. We were saved.

No, we bloody weren't.

I personally would not have believed things could get any worse, but, unbelievably, I was wrong.

Ellis came down first, somehow projecting full-on Time Police-officer mode, even in contemporary costume. Followed by North – ditto with the full-on, etc. And very impressive the pair of them were. Right until the very last step. Max hadn't got our trembling verger's lamp off him quickly enough. He'd spilled a little oil somewhere.

Ellis's foot slid out from underneath him and he went down with a full-on Time Police-officer crash. Only a step behind him, North did the same. The two of them rolled into the crypt and collided with Blondie, who'd been closest to the stairs, knocking his legs from under him. He went down like the last pin in a bowling alley.

I made a grab for his gun but it was too late. The two remaining ENLAs – who possibly weren't as dim as I'd thought, given they were the only two people who looked like getting out of this alive – turned their weapons on us. I looked over at Max. She was too far away although I knew she'd try. And Peterson. And Sykes. And not one of us would make it. We were going to die in this crypt.

'A neat and tidy solution,' said Peterson, obviously following my thoughts. 'They won't even need to bury us. Just lock the door and walk away.'

‘I never thought I’d actually be buried on consecrated ground,’ said Max thoughtfully. She turned to Peterson. ‘Did you?’

He shook his head. ‘No. I never thought you’d be buried on consecrated ground, either.’

North was picking herself up off the floor. She’d landed on Ellis. Who wasn’t moving. I really hoped he was faking it. Her weapon was on the ground. Wisely, she ignored it.

‘No one thought you’d be buried on consecrated ground,’ she said, shaking out her skirts and ignoring the threatening ENLA gun gestures.

‘Oh shit,’ said Sykes, in disgust. ‘It’s Princess Perfect.’

‘Oh,’ said North, in the tones of one who has just discovered half a slug in her lettuce – and the wrong half at that – ‘You.’

Two simple words conveying the aristocrat North’s centuries-old contempt for the peasant Sykes.

‘Yes,’ said Sykes, in the tones of one holding the other half of the slug and not afraid to use it. ‘Me.’

I wondered if they’d actually come to blows, in which case there might very well be a chance of something creative on our part, an opportunity to exploit. I like to hope for the best. (Although at St Mary’s, it’s usually wiser to plan for the worst.) And these ENLA people were clearly complete amateurs. Professionals would have shot us half an hour ago.

An idea which was obviously occurring to them now. One looked at the other. ‘Let’s get out of here. Back against the wall, all of you. Now.’

‘Ah,’ said North. ‘A firing squad.’

‘And him.’

She peered down at Ellis. ‘I think he’s dead.’

‘Tough. Shift him.’

North bent and tugged feebly. ‘He’s very heavy. I can’t ...’

‘Try harder.’

She grunted. Not very realistically. You can’t really imagine North grunting, can you?

‘Just a minute,’ said Blondie, attempting to climb to his feet. ‘Let me help.’

‘You just stay out of it,’ said his colleague. ‘I’m having some doubts about you.’

‘But ...’

Without any warning at all, Ellis uncurled and went for the one on the left. North went for Blondie. I went for the one on the right. Well, I would have, but Max and Peterson had the same idea, with the result that all three of us went for each other instead.

‘Get out of my way,’ I yelled.

‘You’re wounded,’ shouted Max. ‘Stay back. We’ll handle this.’

‘I’m the Head of Security.’

‘I’m Deputy Director.’

‘And I’m CHOPS and this is my mission.’

So – a quick recap. Ellis and an ENLA were struggling in the gloom. North and Blondie were rolling about on the floor getting dirty – which she wouldn’t be very happy about. The third ENLA was about to shoot us all, and St Mary’s was engaged in its own private conflict. I’m not sure what the probable verger was doing at this point, but there was a lot of noise and clatter and echoes and jumping shadows, and who knows how it would have ended, but just at that moment ...

‘Well, hello there.’

Two figures emerged into the crypt. Their appearance had a remarkable effect.

The fighting stopped instantly.

I swear Ellis groaned and covered his eyes.

Sykes waved with enthusiasm.

Max turned her head. ‘Oh, hello.’

One ENLA fled for the stairs, but stopped dead in his tracks as Pennyroyal stepped into the wavering light, his shadow looming black on the wall behind him. Not a reassuring sight for those not on the side of the angels. Or, actually, given it was Pennyroyal – not a reassuring sight for anyone.

‘Everyone just stand very still.’

The ENLA on the floor made a grab for his gun. Without even looking at him, Smallhope stamped on his hand. There was a rather unpleasant crunch. He yelped and curled up in a ball.

I leaned against the wall. Would this day never end?

For anyone still interested – the answer is no. The best – and worst – was yet to come.

Disobeying instructions, Blondie climbed to his feet, a huge grin splitting his face. He flung out his arms.

‘Amelia.’

Her face lit up. ‘Kester, you old bugger – how are you?’

‘Oh, very well, thank you. You?’

‘Absolutely tickety-boo, thank you.’

Please don’t be fooled by the Bertie Woosterisms – many have been, and only a few have lived long enough to regret it.

‘Well,’ said this Kester bloke. ‘Can’t stand here chatting all day. I have to get my prisoners back.’

Smallhope raised her eyebrows. ‘*Your* prisoners?’

‘Indeed. A nice little haul of ENLAs. Plus a couple of Time Police officers and’ – he peered at the probable verger – ‘a contemporary and’ – he peered at us – ‘some others.’

‘Oh goodness me,’ said Smallhope. ‘Where are my manners? Kester, may I present Doctors Maxwell and Peterson from St Mary’s, together with Mr Markham and, pardon me, Miss Sykes, I believe. People, this is a professional acquaintance, Kester di Maggio.’

Peterson drew himself up. 'At your service, sir.'

I think the 17th century was beginning to weigh on him a little.

Kester di Maggio ducked his head briefly. 'To what do we owe the pleasure of St Mary's?'

Sykes beamed. 'We're buying pies.'

He appeared somewhat puzzled. I really couldn't blame him. 'Why don't you just go to Greggs like everyone else?'

Not the sharpest sandwich in the block, I decided. No wonder he'd fitted in so well at ENLA.

Seen in a better light, this Kester di Maggio bloke continued the tall, blond and handsome theme, but enhanced the image with a certain glint in his eye that always appeals to the ladies. And quite a few young men as well, I suspected. I disliked him on sight. As, I could see, did Peterson. And don't get me started on Pennyroyal, who was standing around with the expressionless face that never bodes well for anyone within striking range. Especially pretty blond boys.

'I'm confused,' said Max. She wasn't the only one. The crypt walls were beginning to behave in a very odd manner. 'Who's arrested who?'

'Whom,' I said, steadfast in my struggle to maintain standards despite sometimes overwhelming odds.

'What?'

'Never mind.'

'I've a bloody good mind to arrest you all,' said Ellis. 'Put you out of my misery.'

'You can't do that,' said Smallhope. 'The ENLA people are mine. We've been on this for weeks.'

'Months,' said Pennyroyal.

'I think you'll find they're mine,' said Kester. 'I had them first.'

'They were about to shoot you, Kester.'

‘I had the situation under complete control.’

‘Sod it,’ said Max, who had been investigating her basket. ‘I’ve crushed my pies.’

‘I’ve lost mine completely,’ said Sykes. ‘Thanks to these morons.’ She glared at an ENLA. ‘You people are such idiots.’

North put her hands on her hips. ‘You’re certainly well placed to comment on that.’

You can’t faze Sykes. ‘Oh, I think the entire universe yields to the Time Police when it comes to idiocy. You are rather the supreme champions, aren’t you?’

North raised her eyebrows, looking down her nose at Sykes.

Sykes shifted her weight slightly. ‘I can see right up your nostrils.’

I glanced at Max, who unobtrusively moved between them.

‘To recap,’ said Ellis. ‘Of the ...’ he counted, ‘twelve of us currently here in this crypt, nine are professional time travellers ... Yes, I know,’ he said, flinging up a hand as Max, Peterson, Sykes and I opened our mouths to correct this erroneous statement. ‘The point I am trying to make is that, of all of us in this by now very crowded crypt, one is a contemporary and only two are actual time criminals, which strikes me as complete ...’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Kester. ‘It’s no worse than Sir Walter Raleigh, is it?’

Complete bafflement greeted this statement. Eventually Max said, ‘What?’

‘No, don’t tell them,’ said Ellis, but it was too late.

‘Bloke who flung down his cloak for Good Queen Bess to step through the mud.’

Max prepared to battle to the death. Not her death, obviously. ‘No – that’s a myth.’

‘No, it’s not. It actually happened. Only everyone there that day was a time traveller of some kind. Just like this.’

‘What?’

‘Even Sir Walter himself. The real one was off shagging someone at the time.’

Even the verger was staring at him in amazed confusion. No, I’ve got that wrong. My head was splitting.

Kester sighed and continued. ‘But because it’s a shame to let a good myth go to waste, someone stood in for him and the myth became reality.’

He beamed at us all.

‘That’s terrible,’ said Sykes.

‘Even worse, they later discovered that that Elizabeth wasn’t the real Virgin Queen, either.’ He grinned. ‘Which was just as well given what occurred a couple of hours later.’ He smirked. ‘There were a lot of confused people there that day.’

There were quite a few confused people here and now, as well.

‘Bloody amateurs,’ said North, encompassing the entire room with one of her more scathing looks as she began to attend to the prisoners.

Kester remained unscathed. ‘Not so.’

No one was in any doubt he’d been there that day. In fact, I’d bet good money he’d been ‘Sir Walter’.

‘No,’ he continued. ‘If it hadn’t been for the amateurs that day, the world would have been denied the sort of entertaining myth that lends colour and interest to the vibrant pageant of history that is England.’

There was complete silence. Never have the words *utter twat* been so unspoken.

As if to demonstrate the difference between the Time Police and lesser mortals, North had been efficiently zip-tying the ENLAs. I leaned gently against the wall as Sykes and Peterson retrieved their stun guns and shoved them in Max’s basket, and there we were – situation under control and all set to go home. We’d all file quietly up the stairs, out of the church and into

the street. The Time Police and Smallhope and Pennyroyal would argue over who had custody of whom and bounties would be arranged. There would be signatures on dockets and everyone would go home for a lovely cup of tea, although I suspected Kester di Maggio was going to have a pretty tough time convincing everyone he'd only been infiltrating ENLA. I also suspected he wouldn't get any assistance from Pennyroyal, who was wearing one of his least helpful expressions.

We climbed the stairs – quite wearily in some cases – and nipped back through the church – someone very unhelpfully remembered my hat – and out through the porch back into Candlewick Street. The sun had gone, the day was ending and the streets were empty. The fog had thickened drastically and the world was now full of white silence. I'd lost all interest in pies and just wanted to go home. We could come back another day. This one was a write-off.

I didn't know the half of it. Trust me, the shit was still to hit the fan. Because we'd all of us made a fundamental error. There was something that had been tickling away at the back of my mind for the last twenty minutes or so, but given everything that had happened to it today, my brain wasn't feeling particularly cooperative, and who could blame it?

This wasn't the first time we'd tangled with ENLA, and we'd made exactly the same mistake as before.

ENLA teams come in pairs.

There was another team.

And they were waiting for us.

We stepped out of the porch, and suddenly there was torchlight and shouting and blaster fire.

Everyone acted instinctively. Pennyroyal went left and vanished into the fog.

Smallhope went right. Ditto with the fog.

Ellis dropped to the ground.

North took cover in the porch.

The verger stood frozen with shock.

Max went to grab one of the ENLAs.

Peterson did the same for the other.

Kester di Maggio was already on the ground, with Sykes enthusiastically on top of him.

All up to me as usual.

I got the verger out of the way – yes, I know, Hunter gave me a right ear-bashing about that afterwards. Apparently you're not supposed to hurl men of God roughly to the ground. I promised I'd do it more gently next time, which didn't calm her down in the slightest. I rolled him across the floor, very nearly knocking North off her feet. She swore at me, would you believe? She's really gone downhill since leaving St Mary's.

'Someone give me a weapon,' I said in my Man of Steel voice.

North passed something over and I rolled away again.

Red and gold blaster fire was criss-crossing the night. What with the distorting effect of the white fog, the whole impression was rather pretty, but some of it was gouging great lumps out of the porch and it was only a matter of time before it started gouging great lumps out of us.

I had no idea how many of them were out there, but two of them were in here with us, which wasn't ideal, and no sooner had that thought occurred when I heard sounds of a struggle quite close by. I heard Peterson shout, 'Grab him,' and his voice sounded quite muffled, but before I could investigate further, someone fell on me and I lost the gun. I heard it hit the ground. No time to think about that. I closed with whoever it was.

It wasn't Max. Or Sykes. Or North. Wrong configuration to be female. It wasn't Pennyroyal because I was still alive. It wasn't Peterson – not tall enough. I'm pretty sure it wasn't that Kester bloke – which only left one of the ENLA mob. We wrestled away. He was full of naughty little tricks like headbutting, testicle-grabbing, elbowing, and putting the boot

in, and it was such a shame for him that I'm Guthrie-trained and have a whole repertoire of even dirtier tricks, so the two of us were quite busy for a while.

I was vaguely aware of things happening around me. Someone was scuffling with someone else – the other ENLA, I hoped, but we are St Mary's, so it was very possible we were all fighting among ourselves – and the other miscreant – as Smallhope loves to refer to them – was long gone.

No, he was still here. Someone yelped with pain and just for once it wasn't me. My outflung arm brushed my dropped gun. I groped blindly, missed it, found it and grabbed it.

My adversary did exactly the same thing – we both struggled for possession – and the blaster went off. A ruler-straight red plasma line stabbed through the fog. It hit something. I heard a crack and a crumbling noise. I grabbed his arm and tried to direct the beam downwards. The laser beam swayed to and fro. Someone shouted – I've no idea who. There were people everywhere and Chummy and I were in danger of chopping them all in half but I couldn't let go or he'd finish those of us still in the porch. And I couldn't hold on much longer. I was beginning to feel rather strange. The red beams curdled. The floor tilted beneath me and all the sounds suddenly went very far away. And then came back again. And then went away again. And this time they stayed away.

I managed to croak, 'Some help here,' and felt someone lay hands on my dancing partner and drag him off me. I rolled under the stone bench, out of the way, intending to catch my breath and just generally ... not throw up. Or die.

There was a lot of shouting coming from further down the street. Varma and her team, perhaps, turning up to save the day. And about time. We really had to wrap this up quickly before the authorities arrived to investigate.

All around, exciting things were still happening. I was sprawling, dazed and confused, in the traditional St Mary's manner, and only slowly became aware of a new, but strangely familiar, sound. The sound of wood on bone. And yelps of

pain. Real pain. Someone, somewhere, seemingly, was on the end of a right good seeing to.

Max appeared with a torch. The light hurt my eyes. She switched it off. ‘What are you doing down there?’

I managed to say, ‘Not feeling so good.’

‘Shit. Tim – a hand here.’

They dragged me out. Which was painful. I had grazes in all sorts of places afterwards, and I didn’t feel any better for being lifted up and dumped on one of the stone seats. The torch came back on again – not pointed at me, fortunately, so at least I had a better view of unfolding events.

Have I mentioned the alms plate? I don’t think I have.

As we’d entered the church, I’d noticed a wooden alms plate, resting on a shelf just above the right-hand bench – placed there should anyone feel like donating any out-of-hours alms, presumably. Part of the probable verger’s duties would be to empty it every evening when he came to do his rounds and lock up. At this moment, however, it was being put to a very non-spiritual use.

One ENLA was on the floor – although *cowering in a heap* might be a more accurate description. North, standing over him, her gigantic shadow dramatically silhouetted against the stone wall, had seized the alms dish and was laying about her with enthusiasm, and some of her blows were painfully on point.

Her victim was rolling and curling and yelling for someone to get her off him, and generally registering discomfort.

He wasn’t likely to get any help from his mate because Sykes had abandoned Kester and was now giving him her full attention instead. I remembered they’d tied her up. She was obviously remembering the same thing, because she’d climbed up his back, twisted his hair with one hand and was clawing at his eyeballs with the other. Actually, I think I taught her that move.

I said feebly, ‘There’s something on your back,’ but I don’t think he heard me.

Even as I watched, North shouted, ‘Sykes, behind you,’ in best pantomime tradition.

Sykes flung herself to the ground as North hurled the alms plate, discus-style, at the ENLA looming from the gloom behind her. He cleverly fielded it with the bridge of his nose and toppled backwards out of sight. A knife tinkled down on to the stone floor.

I’m not sure what happened after that. Shadows were jerking everywhere. Sykes rolled over, seized the alms plate and tossed it back to North, who pivoted and smacked someone upside his head with a blow that sent him crashing into the stone wall. He slithered bonelessly to the ground.

I couldn’t help thinking perhaps it was just as well North and Sykes had split up. If we’d ever been able to persuade them to work together, they would have been unstoppable.

There were people everywhere. In the porch. In the street. TPOs, ENLAs – I saw Varma several times. Or possibly the same Varma but I was benefitting from double vision. The battle raged on. I leaned my head back against the wall. Everything was absolutely fine. They didn’t need any help from me. No one needed any help from me.

I was joined by Max, who took my hand and felt for my pulse.

Then Peterson, who sat back with the air of one who had minions for this sort of thing and was only here in a supervisory category.

Then Ellis, who sat down with a sigh. ‘I’m feeling somewhat superfluous,’ he said.

‘You can talk,’ said Max. ‘This is supposed to be our story and it’s been completely taken over by everyone else.’

‘Where’s the probable verger?’ said Peterson suddenly.

The poor chap was crouched in the doorway, half hidden behind the open door, almost certainly wondering what the flying duck was going on.

‘What on earth are we going to do about him?’

I'm sure everyone had really good ideas about what to do with the probable verger. I rather lost interest. The walls receded far into the distance. People were talking. Using words and all sorts of things and everything was just going away. I decided I'd do the same.

For some reason, everyone had gone – which was just typical, wasn't it? I stared around. Yep, still in the porch on the bench looking out at the fog, so things hadn't got any better. Worryingly, I wasn't feeling any pain – but then, you don't in dreams, do you? White river mist swirled past the entrance. The whole effect was rather pretty. Swirly. I leaned back, all the better to enjoy it. And because I really was feeling a bit odd.

A tall, robed shape appeared silently in the entrance, giving me a very nasty shock, I can tell you. The Angel of Death had turned up to collect me in person. I wasn't sure whether this was a Good or a Bad Thing.

'My brother, are you hurt?'

'I'm absolutely fine,' I said bravely, because that's what we always say, even when facing death itself.

He seemed puzzled by my response. Great – a puzzled Angel of Death. I pulled myself together and became less modern.

'I have hurt my head,' I said, by way of an explanation.

'May I see?'

The next moment he was sitting beside me. Ah – not the Angel of Death. Not this time, anyway. A Benedictine monk. Very gently, he parted my hair, saying, 'Yes, I see.'

Opening the scrip hanging from his belt, he pulled out a cloth, folded it carefully into a pad and very gently applied it to the back of my head. 'This will ease your pain, my brother.'

I didn't see how but I thanked him anyway. It was only later I realised it wasn't the pain in my head he'd been talking about.

I leaned back against the cold stone wall. 'Thank you.'

We sat for a while. I couldn't see his face – it was hidden in the dark shadow under his hood.

'You are happy?'

I was quite surprised by the question, but this was a dream, after all. Any moment now I'd discover I was naked and had forgotten an important meeting with Dr Bairstow, the location of which I couldn't quite remember. However, standards must be maintained, even in dreams.

'Yes, I am,' I said. 'Apart from this, of course.' I touched my head.

'Yes,' he said. 'To be happy was always in your nature.'

I wasn't quite sure how to respond to that so I said nothing. Because it was my dream and I didn't have to talk if I didn't want to. Besides, someone would be along in a moment to give me a hand and then I could go home.

'I feared we had lost you to the river,' he said, which didn't make a lot of sense because the river was all the way over there but, you know, long day ... head not working properly ... dream ...

'No,' I said. 'Even I couldn't fall into the Thames from here. Although I suspect Max will give it a jolly good try.'

I thought he'd get up and go – job well done and all that – but he stayed where he was, sitting next to me, his hands resting on his knees. They were work-worn – as a monk's would be – and ink-stained. It was dark, but for some reason I could see his hands quite clearly.

I closed my eyes.

'Do not fall asleep,' he said, quite sharply for a monk. Although some of them can be buggers, you know. I opened my eyes again.

'Although I did fall in once,' I said, solely for the sake of conversation. 'When I was a boy.'

'Yes,' he said again. 'We feared we had lost you.'

It took a while. The words ran around inside my head while I tried to make sense of them.

‘Did you?’ I said. Eventually. Not exactly a sparkling response, but the best I could come up with at the time.

He turned his head slightly and now I could see the shadowy outline of his face. I don’t know how. It was dark, it was foggy and there were no torches lit anywhere near here. And because it was a filthy night, no one was about – no pedestrians with their own torches, no link boys or chairmen.

‘When they told me you were lost ...’ he said, and tailed away.

Both my head and my heart began to pound.

‘No,’ I said slowly. ‘I was rescued.’

‘I never knew that. I grieved for you. All my life.’

Outside the porch, the fog swirled some more. We were sitting in a tiny pocket of something insubstantial. Delicate. Fragile. A wrong word or a wrong move at the wrong time and all of this would fade away and I’d never have it again. This was a single, solitary, tiny glowing moment. For both of us.

‘Open your eyes,’ he said. ‘Stay awake.’

I jerked upright. ‘I’m awake.’

I could almost hear him smiling. ‘That is what you always say. In the mornings. When it takes three men to rouse you from your slumbers.’

Forgotten memories jolted into life. A warm, snug bed ... a good fire ... the sun shining on the frost outside ... the smell of my favourite honey drink.

I turned my head. ‘Who are you?’

‘I told you,’ he said simply. ‘Have you forgot me?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Never. I think of you every day.’

My eyes closed themselves.

‘If you sleep now, you will never wake.’

I was struggling. The desire to let go was overwhelming. To sink beneath the cold water. Down into the dark, perpetual silence.

‘Wake up,’ he said sharply.

My eyes flew open again and I was back in London on a bitter night and my head hurt.

‘I thought you were dead,’ I whispered. ‘There was never any news. Not even a rumour. They tried to kill me. Did they kill you as well?’

He smiled sadly. ‘It was a rescue attempt. They did their best but you woke too early. You were frightened. The boat tipped. You fell into the water and were swept away.’

‘I was saved,’ I said. ‘I lived. You died.’

‘No. They searched for as long as they could, but the tide was turning. I awoke on a ship at sea.’ He lowered his head. ‘Without you.’

He pushed his hood back a little way, and by the magic of dreams, I saw his face. Long. Thin. Features like mine only my face is squarer. Blunter. He was always the better looking.

Tucking his hands into his sleeves, he tilted his head to one side and smiled at me. Just as he used to. ‘Do you know me now, my brother?’

I’ve only cried once or twice in my life, but I cried then. To know that he had lived.

‘We both lived,’ he said gently, ‘and my heart is joyful.’

‘But how? Where?’

‘I was taken to Rome, a long way away from Henry Tudor’s grasp, and placed with the Benedictines there. The life suited me. I would not, I fear, have been a strong king.’

‘You would have had me to fight your battles for you,’ I said and he smiled.

‘I took my vows, and because God knows what is in all our hearts, He showed me how to serve Him best: in the

scriptorium. I illuminated manuscripts. Wrongly, perhaps, I was a little proud of my skill.'

'Only a very small sin,' I said. 'So you were never in Burgundy?'

'For a while. There was a secret room. No one knew I was there. God kept me safe. And continued to do so. For which I thank Him.' He bowed his head.

'For how long? I mean ...' I stopped, unable to tell him we were over a hundred and seventy years away from those events.

'Not as long as I could have wished, but my ending was merciful. I coughed for a while – you remember my cough?'

I nodded.

'And then one day, I closed my eyes and gave myself up to God's grace and it was granted me. And now my heart is filled with joy to find my brother at last and know that he lived.'

'I did,' I said and tears ran down both our cheeks. 'I did. But now ...'

I looked around. The fog had grown thicker. The porch was dark and full of darker shadows reaching out for me.

'You must stay awake,' he said urgently.

'I can't,' I said. 'My eyes are so heavy.'

'If you close them now, it will be the end. And you have much to live for.'

He took my hand. His was cool and firm. I seized it with both of mine and he placed his over the top. He gripped hard. We both did. This moment would not be torn from us.

'My brother, you were always a fighter. Fight now. Open your eyes. You must open—'

'—your eyes,' said Pennyroyal. 'You have to stay awake, mate. Stay with me. Nearly there.'

The porch was gone. We were in the street. The cobbles were slippery with frost and ice. There was a lighted pod

ahead. Smallhope was waiting in the doorway to help me inside.

‘Wrong pod,’ I said feebly.

‘Ours was closest,’ said Pennyroyal.

‘Pies,’ I said, stopping dead.

‘What?’

‘Christmas pies ... We lost them ... The recipe. For Mrs Mack ...’

I can’t remember his response.

And then we were through the door.

I woke up to find Hunter sitting by my bed, and I could tell just by looking at her that this had been a bad one.

As soon as she saw my eyes were open, she slapped on her professional face and moved to sit on the bed, very gently smoothing my hair out of my eyes and helping me to drink something. ‘Hey.’

‘Hey,’ I said, words deserting me for a moment because I was convinced I could still feel the tears on my cheeks.

‘Don’t talk,’ she said. ‘You came a bit of a cropper on this one but you’re fine now. Drink your drink.’

Obediently, I sipped and felt better.

‘We’ve had Max and Peterson in and out of here at ten-minute intervals for the last two days,’ she continued. ‘They’re due again in ...’ She looked at her watch. ‘About three minutes. Actually, we think they’ve pitched a tent in one of the treatment rooms and never left.’

I wiped my cheeks but they were quite dry. ‘I have to tell you something,’ I said, because I tell her everything. ‘While it’s just the two of us, before anyone else turns up. And I need to tell you as Di. If I tell Nurse Hunter, she’ll have me taken away to the funny farm.’

She smiled. ‘I think even Nurse Hunter’s given up on that one. What did you want to say to me?’

I told her about the church porch. Everything that I could remember. As if saying it out loud would somehow fix it in my memory forever.

When I’d finished, she stared at me for a long time, probably rehearsing her arguments for having me put away. Then slowly she opened the top drawer in the bedside cabinet and took out a small pad of coarse linen.

‘This was being held in place by your ridiculous hat.’

‘Hey,’ I said, with all the indignation I could muster. ‘I won’t hear a word against that hat. I’m going to ask Mrs Enderby if I can keep it. We can hang it on the wall in our bedroom.’

‘Or not,’ she said, leaving me in no doubt as to how that particular conversation would end.

We both looked at the pad of linen. There were dark stains that might have been ink, as if someone had used it to keep their inky fingers clean, mixed with a few brown streaks that might have been dried blood.

‘You can wash that out,’ she said.

‘No,’ I said slowly. ‘No. This was ... Edward.’

Not the most cohesive sentence I’d ever uttered, and I waited for her to say I’d been helped by a complete stranger and projected some sort of Edward fantasy on to him, but she didn’t.

‘No, of course not,’ she said. ‘It was Edward’s. You must put it somewhere very safe.’

‘With my hat.’

‘Perhaps,’ she said, and smiled at me.

I decided to *carpe* a bit of *diem*.

‘I’ve been thinking.’

‘Oh dear – have you?’

‘I’ve been wondering ... if ... because I don’t think it’s a problem any longer, is it? Not since ...’

‘What have you wondered?’

‘Well, I ... um ... have you thought ... um ... I mean ... we ... um ...’

‘You mean have I thought about us having another child, and if it’s a boy, we could call him Edward?’ she said, demonstrating yet again why she’s much too good for me.

I grinned at her. ‘You are so worthy of me.’ And it’s probably very fortunate for me that Flaky and Short came in at that exact moment.

A slightly disbelieving Dr Bairstow turned up at Sick Bay that evening.

‘I’ve read the reports,’ he said, sitting heavily, disposing of his stick and shaking his head. He was wearing his *more in sorrow than in anger* face.

I frowned. ‘Have I written one? I don’t remember doing that.’

‘Not yet,’ he said, effortlessly conveying his intended threat.

‘I’ll do it as soon as you leave.’ I nodded, thus effortlessly conveying my powerful understanding of his intended threat.

‘Before you begin the near-impossible task of justifying your actions in the monumental calamity that was your last assignment ...’ he said, and paused.

I’ll admit to being slightly baffled at his use of the word calamity. All right – no pies – but that was hardly the end of the world, was it? We could always go back another day.

‘... I believe I must both congratulate and reprimand you, Mr Markham.’

Congratulations from Dr Bairstow shouldn’t always be taken at face value. ‘Really, sir? What for?’

‘On being the person to solve the mystery of how the London Stone came to be damaged.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘And reprimand you for being the person causing the London Stone to be damaged.’

Oh God – yes, now he came to mention it – my struggle with the ENLA – the blaster beam lancing through the night must have hit the London Stone.

I looked him firmly in the eye and told him I had no memory of such an event.

‘Very wise,’ he said, so I gathered I wouldn’t be doing time over this one.

I indicated that actually I thought the last assignment had been something of a triumph, and he stared at me.

‘You damaged the London Stone. You damaged yourself. You lost Miss Sykes – who then damaged herself falling down a flight of icy steps on the way back to her pod and badly sprained her ankle. You damaged our always precarious working relationship with the Time Police. You exposed yourselves to a contemporary. And remind me exactly how many pies you were able to bring back to Mrs Mack.’

Well, obviously, if he was going to put it like that ...

‘We foiled a dastardly plot, sir.’

‘The Time Police foiled a dastardly plot. With the assistance of two professional acquaintances of ours. St Mary’s fell over its own feet and very nearly destroyed the London Stone.’

He wasn’t wrong.

I pulled up the covers, hoping thus to convey my invalidness.

He sighed. ‘However, all that is a discussion for later.’

Well, that was certainly going to speed my recovery, wasn’t it?

‘In a not-unrelated matter ... I’m certain this will turn out to be one of the many things I’m better off not knowing – but perhaps you are able to inform me why I appear to have received a copy of *The English Huswife* by one Gervase

Markham? I cannot help feeling there's someone out there – or possibly *two* someones out there – with a very peculiar sense of humour. It arrived in this morning's post.'

He handed it to me. 'First edition, printed in 1617. One cannot but help wonder how it's made it down the centuries in such perfect condition. Quite valuable, I should imagine. It appears to contain, among many other things, the definitive recipe for Christmas pie.'

I remembered the way he had phrased the question – about this being one of the many things he was better off not knowing. Which, in this case, would be the means by which a couple of bounty-hunting friends of ours could have acquired such a treasure. 'I have no idea, sir.'

He took the book back. 'I shall immediately convey this to Mrs Mack. I am certain she can make use of the contents in her quest for public retribution and restoring the tattered remnants of the honour of St Mary's. All in the spirit of seasonal goodwill, of course.' He paused to consider. 'Revenge baking – an interesting concept for a new TV show, I feel. Thank you, Mr Markham.'

I know I've rambled on a bit and there are many people who think this story's all about them, but, in all the confusion, there was still one final issue to resolve.

While Smallhope and Pennyroyal had got me back to their pod – because it was closer than Number Eight – Max and Peterson had conveyed Sykes back to St Mary's. She hadn't escaped her little adventure completely unscathed – incurring scrapes, cuts, bruises, a minor blaster burn, two broken fingers and a sprained ankle. She'd had her wounds seen to, survived her mandatory visit from Dr Bairstow, and was recovering next door in the women's ward.

As soon as Hunter let me out of bed, I wandered in to see her. Because, of course, for those still able to cast their minds back to the beginning of this rambling epic, her own personal issues still remained unresolved.

I found Di, Peterson, Max and Sykes all standing at the central table, surveying a small, smart suitcase on which reposed a cellophane-wrapped bouquet of flowers embellished with pretty ribbons.

Alongside these items – and looking rather surprised to be in the same universe as such elegance – slumped a dilapidated sports bag that smelled strongly of chicken, together with a handful of hastily plucked blooms from Mr Strong's cherished rose borders, all wrapped in a couple of yellow disciplinary forms.

We in Security are required to be fully conversant with everything going on at St Mary's. Besides, I'm nosey. 'What's all this?'

'Well,' said Sykes. 'You know in all the best fairy stories, the princess sets a series of tasks for her suitors? Kill the dragon, free her from imprisonment in a remote tower, don't turn into a frog when she kisses him and so on.'

I didn't think she'd got that last one quite right but it was Sykes and I was still a bit wonky so I wasn't going to argue.

'Anyway, it occurred to me I should do the same.'

The Anvil of Enlightenment fell upon me. 'You mean you set tasks for Bashford and Roberts?'

'Yes.'

'Oh my God – you're going to make them kill a dragon?'

It's possible the Anvil of Enlightenment had slightly missed its target.

'Well, obviously that was my first choice, but there aren't many dragons around here – they probably couldn't find a virgin anywhere – so I had to work with what I had.'

'Which was?'

'I told them I was going to be here for a couple more days and asked them each to pack me a bag.'

I couldn't see this ending well at all. I'll be frank: men aren't good at packing. Not even for themselves, let alone for a

loved one. And given Bashford's tenuous grasp on reality ... I sighed. Poor chap. Well, he'd had a good run.

'So,' I said, with misgivings. 'What have you got?'

'Let's see, shall we?'

She unzipped the chicken-smelling sports bag and upended the contents on to the table. The smell of chicken grew even stronger.

'One, two, four, seven ... eleven pairs of knickers.' She rummaged. 'No bras, obviously. My only posh frock – an evening gown in midnight blue ...'

'I fear Mr Bashford might be slightly overestimating both the quality and the quantity of night life in Sick Bay,' said Hunter.

Oh God. Bashford was an idiot.

Sykes continued. 'My treasured silver Jimmy Choos with the four-inch heels.'

Hunter shook her head. 'They should be kept behind lock and key and only taken out to be worshipped at midnight on the second full moon of the year.'

'Two sets of blues. A pair of gloves. One sock. A completely different sock. A make-up mirror.' She rummaged again. 'No make-up. Conditioner – no shampoo. A packet of Angus's favourite biscuits. And a personally signed picture of Angus herself.'

'Ah,' said Peterson, nodding sagely. He does this when he doesn't have a clue what's going on. He assumes the expression of a constipated stoat, nods sagely at the end of every sentence, and, when he's completely out of his depth, fingers his chin thoughtfully.

'On my right-hand side ...' Sykes unzipped the smart overnight case.

'Two bras. Five pairs of knickers. Toiletries. Hairbrush. PJs. Dressing gown. Trackie top and bottom. Three magazines. And my Kindle. Fully charged.'

She regarded both piles and shook her head in sorrow.

Max sighed. 'No competition really, is it?'

'Not really, no. A clear winner.'

The door opened behind me.

She looked up. Her face softened and she smiled. 'And here he comes now ...'

And before I forget – because I'm certain everyone else will have – Mrs Mack swept the board at the Christmas Fayre. Top of the class in every category she entered and Best in Show for her Christmas pies.

Happy endings all round, I think.

And little Edward is on his way.

Merry Christmas to everyone from your friends at St Mary's.

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