

shirley holmes creative

Colour Blind **by Leigh Young (writing as Lelleigh)**

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Disclaimer: I do not own any of the characters belonging to Shirley Holmes. I promise to return them, hopefully, in one piece and still breathing.

Colour Blind

Not everything is black and white. Seeing can be as sightless as being blind. Yet, when you're blind you are attuned to the world around you, while sight numbs your senses. To get over this dullness you have to open your heart as well as your mind. It is those who are intellectually clever that fail so bad to see, that life isn't one big problem with a dozens solutions. It is a dozen solutions with no problems. Those, who may not be so sharp, are more able to accept that not everything is right or wrong, it is what we make it. For a true loner does not want to be lonely, it is those that wrongfully push themselves to be alone, that make loners lonely. The message I hereby give you is; intellect is nothing without the emotion and vice versa, though when the two are put together, there is nothing that they can't achieve. I look past my life and remember time and time again when this rang true and nothing reminds me better than the lives of two of my best friends. It was after they divided and went their separate ways. They both could see and I was blind, one was the intellect, one was the emotion. Their sight numbed their senses and that was what stopped them from understanding the loss. Both struggled with their only power, for what good is intellect to someone who wants to be loved but cannot love? And what good is emotion to someone who needs intellect to survive? In this changing world, we all need that one special person to keep us from slipping towards the edge. It could be you lover, your soul mate, your mother, your father, your sister, your brother, your aunt, your cousin, your colleague, your next-door neighbour, who is yours? I was never overly bright yet I wasn't stupid - although on occasion my friends certainly let me know when my lack of judgement got the better of me! But I knew from the minute I met her that she was dull. Of course we had good laughs and always had time for fun, it was just the laughter never quite made it to her eyes. She was one of these people who were too smart for her boots. Infuriatingly smart sometimes. I couldn't even have a toothache without her figuring it out immediately. Though, at that time, Shirley was just smart. Dull but smart. We had met at University and it was her passion for mysteries that had drawn me to her. For I, myself was quite intrigued with the intriguing. There is nothing better than sitting down and figuring your way through a list of suspects, each with a motive and means. We hit it off like a house on fire and by the end of four years the police had a leaving party for us. The numbers of guys we brought to justice was mystifying and made us close to the officers in charge. At that time, we weren't too worried about keeping a low profile. As long as the bad guys didn't know about us then all was fine. It was always joked at the station that we were doing the detectives out of a job! I recall that Shirley used to get totally wrapped up in each case, almost as if she was trying to relive something that she loved. If it weren't for that day when she asked me

to go through her old stuff for fingerprints, I would never have found out about him. The box was brilliant, well I suppose anything having belonged to Sherlock Holmes would be utterly enthralling. The casing itself was a rich mahogany and woven with intricate flora patterns. Shirley told me that the box would tell me how to open it but of what I could see, there was nothing there except a number on a brass plate. With a little Shirley advice, eliminate the possibilities until one (no matter how impossible) is left, the number meant something. Within five minutes I had worked out it was a date. 1455 - 1485, the only thing I could think of was the War of the Roses. I knew then and ran my fingers over the rose in the pattern and a small compartment revealed it's key. Inside was a mixture of what had to be the man his self's possessions and Shirley's. Of hers, I found a dusting kit, a folder, newspaper clippings, a book, an ink set and an album. Without thinking I flipped open the book and immediately felt guilty. It was her diary. I was about to slam it shut when I noticed the name at the top. Dear Bo, who was Bo? I sat back into a more comfortable position, straightening out my legs in front of me. A small piece of paper fell out.

To the holder of this letter, my commendations. Solving the puzzle of the chest required more than considerable deductive powers. My work has consumed my life and I have produced no heir to follow in my path. But I picture you - a young man of good imagination. Any mystery devised by mortal minds can be solved therewith. Yours faithfully, Sherlock Holmes.

Then there was a new script underneath,

To the holder of this letter, my commendations. You have solved the mystery of the chest and made proud my Great Great Uncle and indeed myself. For deducting the War of the Roses, I must allow you to observe my work through this journal. The first one has already made it out into the world and I believe has been taken care of. Hopefully by reading this, you will understand the importance of the image. Be wise my friend and learn by my mistakes. If I am alive at this time of your reading, I must ask you in return to grant my wish of ignorance. As what is contained, I do not desire to relive. Prove us proud and always remember to keep an open mind. Yours faithfully, Shirley Holmes.

Curious was not the word to describe how I felt reading that letter. And as began my journey through her past I couldn't help but long to see that first journal. Even more so, I was desperate to find out whom the Bo was, that the journal constantly addressed. Case upon case was depicted out and explained and my respect to my best friend heightened to that of reverent awe. The way her mind so easily explained everything out, now I could say I understood her in a way. That book was she. Then it stopped. So suddenly. The page was blank. The journal stopped on the closure of a store robbery. It was like her life just stopped. BAM! Everything halted and disappeared - it was eerie. Why did she stop so suddenly? Who WAS this Bo? Why did she stop writing in this journal? Did she stop detecting? Flicking over the page to check that there was no writing on the other side I was met with a pure white blank page and an envelope. Gently pulling out the tab I emptied the contents of it onto the floor in between my legs. They were newspaper clippings each heading the same sort of line, "Ukrainian Kids killed in Explosion", "Tragedy strikes Ukrainian School; Guttled parents weep for their lost". I sifted through them, each told the similar story of a gas explosion within a Secondary School, which completely destroyed the place and took 98% of the lives inside it. The wrenching statements of the parents brought tears to my eyes and my heart constricted so tight I could hardly breathe at the picture of the devastated school. But what did this have to do with Shirley? My answer came in the form of an address book at the back of the journal. I skimmed the names briefly, Alicia Gianelli. Bart James. Stink Patterson. Molly Hardy. Matt. Bo Sawchuk.

Wait, Bo Sawchuk????? Is that the girl who Shirley was writing too? Sawchuk, hmm. that second name is rather odd, kinda unusual, sounds foreign. But she has scored the name out, including the number. This is getting interesting. What is Shirley trying to hide? Wait a second, she has Alicia's email address here, and maybe I could. 'Nah I better not. Shirley would kill me if

she found out'. But, the other part of me argued back, 'you're a detective; you HAVE to find out! Anyway, Shirley doesn't have to know.' That decided it; I clicked away the screensaver on my laptop and open up my Email box. I quickly typed a letter and send it to the email address on the page. I just hoped that the girl hadn't changed it in the last, what, seven years? I turned to the other stuff in the box and having found the finger print album, I turned to my attention to the newspaper articles. I got so engrossed reading them that I jumped ten foot in the air when my computer beeped new email. Eagerly I crawled back to my laptop and opened up the mail.

Dear Anna, Thank you for your email. I haven't seen Shirley for years so it's great to hear that she is doing well. I lost her number and couldn't get in contact with her again. As for your request I'm afraid I can't tell you all that much. Bo and Shirley met when they were thirteen in Detention; from then on, they were the best of friends. Jeez, you couldn't break them up. Wherever Shirley went, Bo was sure to follow like a sheep. To tell the truth I thought they would get together in the end, we all even had bets on it. Anyway, both of them went around like Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson, constantly sticking their noses in where it didn't belong. Unfortunately, Bo's parents sent him to the Ukraine when we were seventeen and Shirley was left heartbroken without her partner. After that, I don't know what happened to Bo; Shirley never spoke about him. In fact at the end of Sussex Academy she was a whole different person - I wouldn't say it was a change for the better either. At least she acquired a slightly better dress sense though. I hope I have been a little helpful in your quest, say hi to Shirley from me,

Yours faithfully, Alicia.

I finally understood and felt an overwhelming sympathy for my best friend. She had lost her best friend, her emotion. I picked up a newspaper clipping. His second name was unusual because it was Ukrainian. He wasn't a girl but a boy. He and Shirley had divided because he was sent to the Ukraine. I presumed she kept in touch with him while he was there until. I stared at the picture of devastated school. until he died in a disaster. That's why, I flipped open the journal; she stopped writing. It was then I noticed some jagged bits of paper between the pages; a sheet had been torn out. Looking carefully at what would be the corresponding page, I noticed there was a slight indent. I hurried over to my desk, switched on my lamp and holding the book under the intense light I read the worst writing ever, indented on that page. In scraggly writing, as though the author's hand was shaking I read, Dear Bo, I'm so, so, so sorry, forgive me.

The tell tale splash marks of her tears made me drop the book in anguish. Shirley would never be whole again; her life was a misery, a struggle. It was all here. Here is the wretched journal. I understood then, I was blinded and I saw everything for what it was. Shirley loved this guy Bo. He was her constant, her grasp in life. The one person whom she had depended upon, the one person she trusted with her life. They were a whole and they didn't know it. You know what the worst bit was; there was nothing that could have been done. He couldn't be avenged, the culprit couldn't be brought to justice and no revenge was available for his death. Shirley had had to accept it as it was. No wonder she wanted to forget that that period in her life had existed, I knew Shirley was strong, but something like this was eventually going to get the better of her. But, what to do? What to do? Who am I kidding; there was nothing I could do. Nothing at all. Picking up the newspaper articles I sat back and read them again. As I read, the hairs on the nape of my neck rose, something nagged at the back of my mind but for the life of me I couldn't figure out what it was. After an hour I threw the papers to the floor, something did not add up right and it was bothering me something chronic. Finding the picture was the last straw. The back of it told me it was Alicia holding the prize for best amateur video with Bart and Bo standing behind Shirley with his arms around her shoulders. They were all grinning as though they were on top of the world. I knew then I had to follow my gut feelings. I was about to embark on an investigation taking me through one the biggest cover-ups in History and I was going to do without Shirley. I had to, Shirley could not know about this at all. I was alone. totally alone.

Chapter #2

The rain pelted at the window, streaming away the collective dust like a sponge squeezed out upon the skin. Chewing my pencil thoughtfully, I studied the photocopy of the page in Shirley's diary. It had dawned on me when the gasman came round what it was that was eluding me. Carefully I circled the section, not sure, whether it was significant or not. It was dated a week and a half before the disaster.

Dear Bo,

I'm glad everything worked out with Yuri, see, its not called being noseey but concern for a friend! I wish you had believed me before... You mentioned talking to a Mr Martov at your school, at least yours is friendly; our gasman, Mr Peters, still has a grudge against every pupil. I've been doing some background checks on him and ...

Why did a school, that had recently been examined by a seemingly good gasman, blow up? Surely, if there were a problem, the expert would have found it? Sure, everybody can make a mistake, but a mistake that great? It's not really feasible; at least not to an educated mind. I suppose something like this isn't resolved in the mind unless the eyes themselves saw. It was plain from the start that I would eventually have to wander out there. It's just getting the motivation from some substantial evidence that's the hard job. Blessed, that I have the money to travel that far and hopefully the means as well. All that left was to convince Shirley that I was doing nothing out the ordinary – funny thing was, I was yet to do something normal.

Ding dong, I shivered, it was chilly in Kiev this time of year. I pulled my long coat even more firmly around me in attempt to keep out the biting cold. It wasn't difficult to find out the address of one of the survivors, there had only been three. I hopped impatiently from one foot to another as I waited for the door to be opened.

"Pryvit?" I looked down to see a dumpy but cheery looking woman standing in then doorway.

"Er..." I stammered, I couldn't say I spoke Ukrainian very well, "Pryvit, traven ya rozmovlyaty na Ruslan?"

"You speak English?"

I nodded, thankful that I wasn't going to have to whip out the dictionary in order to try and get this woman to understand me.

"Yes I do and I'm sorry I know almost no Ukrainian".

"So I gathered," the woman grinned at me toothily, "I think you better repeat your question in English".

We both laughed conversationally,

"Would it be possible to speak to Ruslan, that is if he wouldn't mind? I don't wish to bring it back to him but one of my friends died in the explosion a few years ago, I wondered maybe he would speak to me?"

"Ruslan was very upset by the tragedy but I am sure he will speak to you," she started to turn

but as an afterthought she spun round and said, "I suggest you speak in English to him".

I nodded and stepped inside where I was lead to a very English style living room.

"Make yourself at home, I shall go and fetch him for you".

I thanked her and took a seat on the very soft and comfortable sofa. My backside sighed in relief; it was still numb from the hard as rock seats on the train. Instinctively my eyes studied the room and noted that it was a close family, as there were pictures all over the mantelpiece and desks. Obviously, they were the children and grandchildren of the woman who had opened the door. She was proud of her children, as there was quite a sprinkling of awards on the shelves. The room itself was of soft colours, brown, red and cream but it had a sense of being lived in. Although tidy, it was littered with little artefacts all of an interesting nature. Overall, it had a homely feel to it and I felt quite comfortable.

I stood up as the door opened. A bright young man entered and shut the door firmly. From what I could see, he was a couple of inches taller than me and had a reasonably athletic built. To match, he had a mop of brown hair that seemed to sit in every direction other than straight, slightly square shoulders, a healthy tan and deep blue eyes, which held a quizzical look. In all honestly the guy was quite good looking. He walked over to me and held out his hand,

"I am Ruslan, good to meet you and you are?"

"Anna, Anna Grange" I smiled and shook his hand with a firm grasp.

"You have travelled far?" He gestured to the sofa and we sat down,

"Yes, I live in Canada".

He whistled,

"Then this must be very important to you. Now let me see, how can I help you, I am certain that we have never met before. My mother said you wanted to talk about Saint Frances."

He was intelligent too; I liked this guy immediately,

"I was hoping that I could pick your brain about your old school. That is, "I rushed, "If it isn't too painful for you".

For a moment, he wouldn't meet my eyes and I averted mine to give him a little regard, I knew that he must have lost many valued friends.

"I do not mind but may I ask first why you are so interested?"

He held my gaze, his blue orbs searching in mine curiously; I decided to tell him the truth.

"Okay, this may sound a little far fetched but go with me on it. My friend, back in Redington-"

"That is Canada?" He interrupted, I nodded and continued, "she lost her best friend in the disaster. However, for some reason, probably shock, chose to forget that she ever knew her friend and only found out about him by accident".

I paused to allow him to follow and he guessed,

“She does not know that you know. You haven’t told her you know”.

I shook my head,

“Shirley would probably kill me if I bought it up. It would devastate her if she had to relive it and I don’t want that. However, when I was looking through some of her old stuff, journal, letters etc... I found there to be something a little odd about the whole thing”.

I paused again, wanting to see how he would react. He wrinkled his forehead and penetrated me with an intense stare,

“Are you suggesting that there was foul play in that explosion?”

I pursed my lips and pressed my hands together,

“That is what I’ve come to Kiev for. If there was any foul play, no matter how little, I will find out about it”.

I waited, half expecting him to start shouting and chuck me out onto the street. He merely sighed, placed his head in his hands and rubbed his face wearily. He chuckled sarcastically,

“I’m not stupid, I am smart enough to understand where you’re coming from and I know that I shouldn’t jump to conclusions but... No, I have to be smart about this” he sighed and turned to look up at me. “You must be pretty certain that there is more to this case than meets the eye to come trailing all the way out here. So I guess I’ll have to help you as much as I can. But I have two questions. One; what do you need from me? And two; why are you so sure that you’ll find out the truth?”

I sank back into the cushions, relishing the comfort,

“Well for your first question, what I need from you is a few answers to some questions, some basic information and maybe a little guided tour?” He bowed his head in concurrence, “For your second question I’ll have you know that I’ve been trained as a freelance detective by Sherlock Holmes Great Grandniece”.

His eyes widened in shock,

“Well in that case anything that I can help you with is my pleasure, what would you like to do first?”

“I’ll start by picking your brain”.

For an hour, I got him to tell me about the school and what happened that day. As he spoke, I recorded notes and learned that he had been in the grounds picking up rubbish as a punishment when the school exploded. The force of the explosion sent him flying into the janitors shed and the next thing he knew was being dragged out a pile of rubble. He had ensured a few painful months with a broken arm, several deep wounds and some burns. He showed me some of the scars on his arms and legs. Even now, some years later, they still very noticeable. Just another reminder of that dreadful day.

He told me about his friends, their plans and secrets, at this, his voice cracked and he choked back tears. I learned about the teachers, what he had done that day up until his punishment. Eventually we stopped after the police investigation and Ruslan’s mother brought in a cup of tea for us.

After tea, we headed out into the cold and walked through many roads talking amiably. I was just explaining about the simplicity of homemade finger printing kits when we drew to a stop. In front of us was a three foot red bricked wall which enclosed a huge empty yard. It was so spotless that I could have sworn it had been scraped clean. The fine sprinkling of dust and the odd stone was the only hint that told there was once a building here.

“My god” I breathed, my breath coming out in a fine mist.

“I know” the guy mumbled beside me, “There’s nothing left at all. Saint Frances was a fantastic building, three storeys of...”

“Red brick” I finished, Ruslan gave me a lopsided look,

“How’d you?”

“The red brick wall” I stated.

“Oh...” there was a short silence and then he spoke softly, almost reverently, “I loved this place, Anna. I loved the people here. I just can’t...” he choked, eyes glistening, “If someone caused that disaster” His eyes grew hard, “then I will personally make sure they pay”.

I grabbed one of his gloves hands and spoke kindly,

“I promise Ruslan, if there is foul play, I will hunt them down and make them pay for the lives they destroyed”.

He squeezed my hand and we stared into the abyss.

A few minutes later, I asked absently,

“Will we get in trouble if we’re caught in there?”

He chuckled,

“No but yes if we’re caught in the train yard”.

I turned to him inquisitively,

“There’s a train yard?”

For once Shirley found herself alone, what with Anna gone off to visit some relatives and most of the police force either off sick or patrolling the beat. It was lunchtime and she was in the middle of Redington with nowhere to go. It just so happened that she was walking past the Quasar Café, which she hadn’t been in for years and she decided ‘Why not, now that I’ve got a chance’. With that, Shirley pushed through the door.

It hadn’t changed much since the last time she had sat in here, what several years ago now. The tills, she noticed, had been revamped, the pictures had been changed, and the green vase had moved to the other side of the café. Shirley let out a breath that she hadn’t known she had been

holding, for some reason she was glad it hadn't changed.

It was then that she got a surprise,

"Shirley?" there was only one person that voice could belong to.

"Alicia!"

"Shirley, darling" they embraced and Alicia kissed both Shirley's cheeks in an overly posh way.

"What are you doing here?" Shirley asked as they sat down,

"Still the detective then," it was no question and Alicia left no space to answer, "I'm visiting my parents and decided I'd have a wander through my old home. What better place to visit than my old work! So Shirley, how are you, actually I was thinking about you only the other day. Now why did you spring to mind... oh yes, I spoke to one of your friends".

Shirley's eyes narrowed in surprise,

"Who?"

"I think her name was Anne Granger or something like that".

"Anna Grange"

"That's it, quite a nice person".

"How'd you bump into her?"

"Oh no, she emailed me".

"Huh" Shirley was becoming very suspicious, which she didn't like to become when one her friends were concerned, "When did she email?"

"A few nights ago".

Shirley thought fast that was a time just before she suddenly went to see her relatives. Immediately she felt guilty, Anna was her friend; she should give her the benefit of the doubt. It was unlikely that her BEST friend was working behind her back. But Shirley couldn't shake off the unease curling her gut,

"Why did she email?"

"Oh, she just wanted to chat about Sussex life, she asked about Bo".

Shirley felt the blood drain from her face, she couldn't bare that name anymore, in fact she forgotten about him at least she had told herself that she had. That life was well back in her past where she had buried it. Where had Anna found out about... of course! The journal! Shirley groaned, making Alicia slightly alarmed,

"Are you okay?"

Shirley got up,

"Yes I'm fine. Look, I'm sorry but I have to go, I'll call you later, okay?"

Alicia stared after her perplexed,

“I’ll never understand that girl... where did she get those boots?”

Shirley rushed over to Anna’s bungalow and let herself in with the key Anna had gotten cut for her. She headed straight for the attic where Anna had stored some of Shirley’s things for her. The chest was lying open and the journal was resting on a ‘Computer’ box. At least Shirley knew that Anna had read it, that part didn’t matter. Nothing else seemed out of place and she turned to go down to the bedrooms. Once there she rummaged through the mail on the beside table, Anna, although she tried, wasn’t the neatest of people. Although feeling immensely guilty about invading her best friends privacy Shirley hurried through the envelopes with an urgent manner. One envelope caught her eye as she put it to the back of the pile; quickly she took it back and chucked the wad of papers onto the bed. Pulling out the letter rather carelessly, she took out the bill and gasped. She sank to the floor in disbelief.

The yard was full of vans and trucks, although none was momentarily moving. There was a constant clanking of a hammer, the churn of a machine and men were walking back and forwards carrying various items. Ruslan and I skirted in and out the trucks. I had no idea what I was looking for but just had a feeling there was something very important here. From where I was standing, I looked back towards the school ground and tried to envision the building. Ruslan had sort of described what it looked like and I analysed that from the front of the school, this yard would be totally hidden. I pulled my camera out of my bag and snapped a few pictures as Ruslan looked around edgily. Then we made our way through towards a storage house, we paused behind some tar wagons. I snapped a few more pictures; I turned to my companion,

“Let’s get a closer look”, he nodded in agreement.

We had hardly taken more than five steps when a loud gruff voice shouted,

“Oi! What are you kids doing here” at least that’s what I thought it was, I can’t speak Ukrainian.

Ruslan looked at me,

“Run!”

And we ran; the man dropped what he was carrying, yelled to some other men and chased us. We sprinted through trucks and wagons; the men were hot on our trail. Turning around another set of trucks, we found our path was blocked so we ran the opposite way. There were several sidings full of long wagon trains ahead, both of us were gasping for breath. We slipped through the couplings and under the wheels, skipping on the stones. Abruptly I was alone. I looked around for Ruslan. I could hear the men getting closer and I was near panicking stage, where WAS Ruslan? Suddenly I found myself being jerked upwards and pulled across some splintered wood beams. I was about to scream when a hand went over my mouth. A hand closed the wagon door to and I heard men run past outside. Minutes went past then I heard one of the men shout,

“Bob, tell them they’ve gone. No use trying to find them. They’re probably well on their way home. Stupid kids”.

I felt a little indignant; I was in my twenties! Just because I’m small, jeez. I felt the hand covering my mouth fall away and I spun around to face my captor. To my relief Ruslan was grinning back

at me.

“You do this stuff for a living?” he gasped, short of breath.

“Yep” I replied with a cheesy grin.

“You’re mad,” he laughed back.

I got up and explored our little haven as Ruslan did the same, I heard him exclaim,

“Hey! Come and look at this”.

I hurried over and saw the writing carved into the wagon wall.

“Help us, help us. A.S.L.P.”

“Do you think that’s meant to be A.S.A.P?” Ruslan asked running his finger thoughtfully over the carving.

“It’s possible,” I said, the wheels turning in my head, I snapped a picture of it. “Well they speak English”.

I must have sounded surprised because Ruslan turned around,

“English is sort of an International language, it can link two different countries. If these people were going to a different country then they have more hope with English than Ukrainian – that’s if a Ukrainian carved this. Do you think it’s a clue?”

“I like how you think” I complimented, happy to see him smile appreciatively. I shifted a box and a little piece of paper appeared. Picking it up I moved towards the door to get better light. Ruslan glanced over my shoulder,

“My god” he gasped, “That’s a Saint Frances letter! It’s dated the same day as the explosion and addressed to Maxim Ketrov. Maxim Ketrov was a friend of mine and died in that disaster. What would that letter be doing in this wagon? Maxim would never even spit outside the school gates”.

The plot grew thicker.

“Let’s get out of here,” I murmured and we left.

Shirley wiped away the tears that flooded her face, she had decided then. Anna was supposedly her friend; surely, she would not go against Shirley’s wishes as stated in that journal. She reasoned that it must be important for her friend to go behind her back. Angrily she threw the plane ticket bill on the bed and reached for the phone. She was going to clear up a few things and confront her friend!

Chapter #3

Shirley absently drew a pattern in the condensation as the invariable countryside rolled past. Trails of water slowly distorted her artwork and she conceded the inevitable by wiping her hand across the window to clear the remaining mist. Outside the wind blew the bare trees towards breaking point and Shirley shivered acknowledging the coldness outside the warm carriage. The impending dusk, made the lights inside reflect virtual images on the window, distorting her view of outside and she saw a pale version of herself staring back.

Shirley knew she had changed, that girl, who had been at the height of her detective career during her years at Sussex, had withered away. Sure, her skills in that line of work had been honed past superior but her passion for her job had died down to barely flickering flame and why...

Shirley sat up angrily, this was pathetic, and tonight she was going to end this pitiable front and face up to who she was. That previous Shirley Holmes, who was always so sharp and professional, would be avenged.

Anna sighed as the warmth of room heated up her frozen bones. Pulling away her scarf and coat, she reflected on the day's happenings. After they had hurried as far away from the yard as possible Ruslan spent the afternoon showing her around the city, pointing out some crucial buildings – including the library. Following hours of reviewing newspapers articles there and learning about the yard, Anna found out the address of Bo's Aunt and Uncle's house, tomorrow she would pay them a visit.

She sighed happily as she sunk gently into the warm sofa with a hot cup of tea. It was seven when they had emerged from the library and they'd been hungry so Ruslan had taken them to one of his favourite restaurants. They'd started off talking about the case and discussing what the abbreviation, ASLA, could stand for. Presently they'd moved onto themselves and their personal lives. Ruslan was really interesting. He worked as an apprentice for an attorney firm, which in his eyes was literally making coffee and sorting out mountains of paper work. However, he was currently enjoying six weeks off as the building was getting renovated, this time off didn't bother him at all! When he was at school, he had worked at a local Hotel as a lifeguard, as Anna had at the local pool in Redington, fitting in shifts around their schoolwork. Ruslan had many amusing tales of that Hotel and Anna found herself laughing hysterically with him as he recounted the tales of Marcel's Mishaps. The poor guy would never go near a public toilet again. It was nice to have a night out, back in Redington her line of work meant that she never really got a chance to go out with people who weren't her 'so called colleagues'. Shirley, as well, didn't think much about the need for a social life, especially when it came to guys.

Ruslan, himself, was a really nice guy and had a delightful sense of humour and Anna felt herself really enjoying his company. The atmosphere was so relaxed and since he was quite smart, she found that she could relate to him well. She told him she was grateful for him not throwing her head first out the door when she had arrived. And that she was equally grateful for him helping her out so much. Ruslan replied that he would never chuck a beautiful woman head first out the door especially an intelligent one – to which she had blushed. He was also still hurting from the disaster and if there were someone to blame then he would avenge his friends by hunting them down.

Later, Ruslan had walked her to the hotel she was staying in and bid her goodnight, promising to meet her tomorrow morning so they could go to Bo's Aunts house. She thanked him and hurried inside out of the freezing cold.

Now she sat sipping tea, her feet curled up on the sofa beneath her and a notebook balanced on the armrest. It was barely past nine but she was tired after all the trekking round Ruslan and she had done. Tomorrow was going to be another busy day so she'd need some rest. As she blew the steam away, she took another sip, and turned her thoughts back to her notebook. There was definitely something suspicious about the train yard and that van they had hid in. Though before she jumped to any conclusions she had to do some legwork, there was no point in delving into danger before you know what the danger is. The first thing they had to find out was what ASLA stood for and her intuition told her that tomorrow would bring some answers. But most of all

Anna now believed that the explosion wasn't an accident –

KNOCK KNOCK.

Anna jumped, who on Earth could that be? Maybe it was Ruslan and with that thought, she leapt off the sofa and hastened to the door. Pulling back the catch, Anna swung the door open and drew a sharp intake of breath. Her heart plummeted to the ground and she suddenly felt sick. Shirley stood in the doorway with a very angry set of eyes glaring her way.

Shirley spoke first, or rather seethed,

“Anna”.

“Shirley... what are you doing here. How did you find me?”

That comment seemed to unbottle the anger and Shirley started her tyrant,

“I'm a flaming DETECTIVE Anna! It's my job to find people! As for what I'm doing here, it should be me demanding that explanation from you!”

Shirley had stormed into the middle of the room and stood there irately staring at her, almost shaking with fury and that seemed to spark something in Anna too. She slammed the door closed and met Shirley's look,

“Why I'm here is none of your business! I can do whatever I like”.

“Uh huh, and I suppose you're here to look into the Saint Frances disaster”.

“And if I am?” Anna replied defensively.

“You're meant to be my friend Anna, my BEST friend. Best friends don't go behind each other's backs and certainly do NOT go against the other's wishes” Shirley spat back.

A mix of anger and guilt made Anna flare up,

“Oh get over yourself Shirley! Firstly, I think that is a bit ironic coming from you. How many times have you gone behind my back to dredge something up from MY past in your obsession to know everything. How many times have you stuck your nose into my business, specifically against what I wanted, and forced me to face facts? So don't you start pointing fingers at people when you're no better yourself. Secondly, you brought this on yourself. When YOU asked me to find that kit you wanted surely you'd known that I would find the journal. If you hadn't wanted me to find it, why the hell did you not get the kit yourself!?”

“I forgot it was there, otherwise I would have, but still you knew I didn't want it's contents dredged up again, and I thought YOU of all people would have respected that” Shirley yelled indignantly, she was upset at her friend's lack of remorse.

“You forgot! After reading that journal, I am amazed that you'd forget something like that. In fact, I would say that you've changed completely since the time that journal was written. And Shirley you didn't have to know about this. It was your own nosiness that you found out. I'm hurt that you didn't trust me enough to leave me alone and wait for me to come to you and explain. You call me your best friend; well Shirley, news flash, trust goes both ways you know,” Anna shook her head, almost in disbelief. “I thought you knew me better Shirley, because if you did, you'd know that I would never go behind your back without a substantial reason”.

“What! Are you going to tell me that Bo is still alive” Shirley scorned, folding her arms across her chest.

“Well that’s a possibility” Anna replied without thinking, then clasped her hand over her mouth in shock.

Shirley’s eyes bulged and she stared at Anna in astonishment, SLAP, Anna’s cheek stung from the blow Shirley had placed on it. As the visitor made her way to the door, Anna’s mind spun. Since when had she ever thought that Bo might still be alive? No time to think about that a voice said in her ear, better confront Shirley, and she found her courage.

“What’s the matter?” she asked out loud, watching the figure stop and turn to face her, “Did I hit a nerve? Admit it Shirley, you’ve changed and we both know the reason why. But I’ll tell you this, until you wake up to reality and face the past; you’ll never get over losing Bo. I’m not just talking about his death either. Bo was everything to you wasn’t he?” Anna didn’t dare look at her friend’s face. “He was your first close friend, he was your partner in crime, he was there through everything, he was your best friend. He was your CONSTANT. And when he left for the Ukraine, you had nothing. Before Bo you wouldn’t let anybody close, would you, but Bo, brave guy, forced his way into your heart and in the end you couldn’t live without him, right! So Bo leaves, you’re by yourself, you feel hurt that he’s gone. He was still there though, and you hung desperately to the fact he was only one phone call away. Then he died and you felt even more hurt. Almost betrayed. It was then you vowed not to ever let anybody into your heart again, am I right? There was so much that you felt you should have told him, maybe you felt guilty that you’d never told him how much he had meant to you. Most of all Shirley, you missed Bo so much, you ached for him and no matter how much you tried you couldn’t stop it. The only way you could think to stop the pain and to get on with your life was to forget he had ever existed. Which I may say, Shirley is an insult to his life”.

Anna looked up from the floor to her friend’s face and saw the war going on inside her. She was crying silently, her body shaking with the pain and immediately Anna felt guilty.

“Lies” Shirley whispered but there was no meaning behind the word. Anna felt herself grow calmer and she spoke softly,

“No it’s not Shirley. You know that and I know that. Take a look at yourself this very moment. Think back to when you and Bo were working together, did you ever cry? Did you ever allow your emotions to get the better of you? Did you ever come to being anywhere near a state as you’re in right now? I think we both know the answer to that and I’m sure that you could always keep a passive face. Shirley, I’ve always known this side of you but I know that I want to see the old side of you and I promise that I will help you get that side back” Anna stepped forward and gave her a hug. “I’ll give you a hug now because once you’re back to your old self I’m sure you’d kill me for doing so”. She let her go and watched her friend dry her face, “Shirley, I think once you’ve got to the bottom of this case then you’ll feel better and maybe you can really forget the past”.

Shirley nodded and Anna returned to the sofa, Shirley gave her a look,

“What case? The school exploded from a gas leak, end of story”.

“Think about it Shirley and imagine that it’s Bo saying that. What would you say to him?”

Shirley paused and gave Anna a weird look,

"I would tell him not to jump to conclusions. I would tell him that there is always more to a story and if it was a gas leak, how was it caused? There are hundreds of possibilities and that although it may look like an accident there is a good possibility that it was engineered. The best way to know is to look further and investigate".

Anna just smiled at Shirley,

"And when it happened did you do all those things?"

Shirley was taken-aback, this was standard practice, and how on Earth did she accept something like that at face value?

Anna saw the look and decided to step in before Shirley's thought got too in depth and she lost her again,

"Shirley, when emotions get in the way, things take a whole new shape. Emotions are not bad though, you have to understand that but you do have to be able to control them. You're lousy when it comes to feelings because you're so intelligent. Bo was good for that because he was good with feelings although he wasn't the most academic person. Do you understand?" Shirley nodded sharply, "I wouldn't worry too much about that" Anna continued, "I'd suggest you start concentrating on this case and if you come over here I'll discuss what has happened so far. Are you willing to try?"

"Yes, now tell me everything you know and then we'll mark up a chart".

"That sounds a little different than the Shirley Holmes I know" Anna grinned and budged up the couch to allow Shirley to sit down.

Morning came all too soon. Anna woke up to a knock on the door; in her groggy state, she heard Shirley go to answer it and decided that she ought to make an appearance as well. Not bothering to put a dressing gown on in the warm hotel room she ventured out into the main living room yawning and rubbing the sleep out her eyes.

"Good morning sleepy head" Anna jumped, not because someone spoke but because of whom the voice belonged to.

"Ruslan! Good morning, you're here early... what is the time anyway?" Anna turned to look behind her as the man stood up from the sofa and met her face to face. He was grinning mischievously.

"After eleven" Shirley supplied not bothering to look up from making breakfast.

"What?" Anna gasped in surprise, grabbing Ruslan's wrist to check his watch. "Jeez, I must have been tired!"

Shirley looked up from the hob and cracked a grin,

"Nah, you've always been lazy in the morning. You're as bad as Bo was".

Anna shook her head to clear the surprise and looked back up at Ruslan, he grinned evilly back and teased,

“Nice pyjamas”.

The girl in front of him blushed and muttered,

“Thanks”.

“Now that you’re up and once you’ve had breakfast we’ll head off for Bo’s Aunts house,” he suggested.

Anna looked across at Shirley who nodded her consent.

“Fine, my car’s in for repairs, so I’ll go and order us a taxi to pick us up in forty five minutes. Okay?”

It was agreed and he left to go downstairs.

Shirley dished up breakfast and they sat down at the table. While she ate, Shirley studied her best friend, suddenly realising for the first time how different she was.

Anna felt the stare and gave her friend a quizzical look.

“You’re not like me,” Shirley stated.

“No...” Anna replied slowly.

“I’m sorry Anna. I’ve always treated you like you were a part of me. You’re a different person; you have different tastes. I’ve never given you a chance to be yourself. In fact because of me you’ve never had much of a life, have you?”

Anna put down her fork and studied Shirley; her friends blue eyes didn’t give anything away – which was a change.

“What’s brought this on, Shirl?”

Keeping a passive face, she replied,

“Nothing, it’s just then, when I saw you with Ruslan, I thought it was strange to see you next to a guy. It was then I realised that you’ve never had a chance. Look, in the future, I’m not overly aware of relationships and what not, if you need anything, like a break, please tell me, okay?”

“Okay” Anna repeated, trying not to smile.

They ate in silence for a few minutes then Shirley replied teasingly,

“You two look good together”.

Anna gasped,

“Shirley!” and threw a balled up napkin at her as Shirley just laughed.

Anna was glad that Ruslan could speak Ukrainian as well as English otherwise she was sure that Shirley and her would never have found Bo’s Aunt’s house. Kiev was a beautiful city, full of

fantastic buildings and green parks. The river with its amazing Kharkivsky Bridge stood magnificently in the frosty background and they navigated down fairy tale roads.

Shirley was a little surprised when they finally pulled up in front of a white washed house, although not overly posh, it didn't look like a slum either. To be honest, compared to the fish shop his parents had owned in Redington this house was the Ritz. It surprised her a little. The three of them exited the car and bundled against the chilly wind; made their way up the path.

The woman who opened the door was distinctly familiar and Shirley rationalised that she was the sister of Bo's father.

Ruslan spoke first, asking if she spoke English, for the benefit of the girls,

"Yes I do, though it not so good but I can try. Now, how may I help you?"

Shirley stepped forward,

"Mrs Sawchuk, I know this may be a little upsetting for you but... we were friends of Bo's from Canada. We were wondering if we may see some of Bo's things. It's just that he had something of ours that we really need".

The short, dark haired woman sized them up; the memory of her nephew still hurt her.

"What are your names?"

"This is Anna, Ruslan and I am Shirley Holmes. We..."

The woman cut her off with a broad smile,

"You are Shirley Holmes? Bo talked much about you, please, come inside, you must be frozen".

"Thank you".

Gratefully all three of them stepped inside the cosy house.

Shirley quickly conjured up an explanation that they were looking for a journey she herself had given Bo before he left. When asked why, she explained that there might be some information in there that would help her search for her grandmother. Anna needn't have crossed her fingers, Olusia Sawchuk was more than happy to help.

After escorting them to the room, which used to belong to Bo, she left them to start making lunch; her off spring, Flavia and Bohdan were due back in an hour. Her last note to them was said sadly,

"We haven't had the heart to clear his room, yet. His parents didn't have time to clear it out when they came for the funeral and at the moment, they have no money to fly out. Everything should be exactly as he left it. Good luck with your search and if you need anything, I shall be downstairs in the kitchen".

Thanking her the three of them turned to look around the room.

"Where should we start?" Ruslan asked, eyeing the piles of paper on the old desk.

Shirley took a moment to answer; she was too busy looking around at the pale blue walled room. The single bed, unmade of course, was positioned under the two paned windows. There was a desk; the one Ruslan was looking at, on the other wall, beside the end of the bed. A large oak cupboard occupied the furthest left hand corner of the room and the deep blue carpet was littered with belongings... and clothes. Bo never was the most tidiest of people, neither was she in a way. However, they had both agreed that they weren't messy but just liked organised chaos.

"I think we should divide the room up. Ruslan, you take the drawers under his bed and that chest over there. Anna, if you could sort through his desk and the bookshelf and I'll tackle the cupboard and the floor. Just look for anything out of the ordinary, anything belonging to him that might suggest or hold information that could induce a reason for foul play at the school. In fact, if you find anything to do with the school, put it in a pile on his bed. Oh, and although the journal was just an excuse, if you find it, tell me".

They nodded and set to work.

"Any luck, dears?" Olusia asked as she brought in a tray of drinks.

"Not yet, but there can't be many more places where the journal can be".

Mrs Sawchuk nodded and placed the tray on the floor, straightening up she said,

"I would like it very much if you stayed for lunch. Bo talked so much about you Shirley, that I am intrigued to learn more about my nephew, from the person whom he cared so much for. I'll give you a call when it's ready".

Shirley thanked her and took a glass of lemonade. She looked across at her best friend and noticed her squinting at an A4 sheet of paper.

"What is it, Anna".

"I'm not sure" came the reply, "It's a half written essay of Bo's, and must have been a school project. Yet... it just seems a little odd".

"Let me see" Shirley walked over and took it from her as Ruslan came over as well.

A Study of Legal Attorneys

Although trailing in the wake of the giant, America, the Ukraine is fast upping the track with its Legal Attorney rivalry. Not yet as competitive as the USA, the Ukraine however is more than equal to that of Russia. It is a step forward in losing the final ARISTOCRATIC advantages that Russia beseeched at the turn of the twentieth century. The Sovereignty of the wealthy has long since gone but when you look at the rivalling prices for legal attorneys it is evident that the Ukraine is still, almost a century on, economising for a more democratic ruling. Many LibeRation groups have been set up in protest that all services should be open for the people, and at the moment, it looks like the people are winning. The leading legal Association has also stated that it is looking to cut down prices to a no win/no charge operation. P235 of the Code of

Practice states that the attorneys are obligated to take on a case regardless to the class.....

Ruslan scrunched up his forehead,

“I have had a lot of experience in the legal world but I’m sorry, I have not got a clue to what he’s talking about”.

Anna nodded in agreement but Shirley smiled triumphantly,

“It’s not supposed to make sense because it is a code”.

“What?” The other two asked.

Shirley took the paper of to the desk and rummaged in her rucksack for her magnifying glass.

“Those mistakes aren’t typos as one would immediately expect, they’re markers, meaning that it is a code to something else. See, the word ‘RussiA’, the two capital letters highlight it, making it stand out. Obviously, this has something to do with Russia. The capitals at Aristocratic, Sovereignty, Liberation and Association show that they are important...”

“Hey!” Anna exclaimed, “ASLA – Aristo Sovereignty, Liberation Association, that’s it! What else does it say?”

Shirley searched through the paper, as did Anna, who then moved towards the bookshelf,

“He suggests that it has something to do with the turn of the century,” Shirley thought for a moment.

Ruslan stepped in,

“It that has anything to do with Russia then I would suggest this has something to do with the Russian Civil War”.

“That makes sense, he talks a lot about ‘the people’, and different groups... political groups! There’s a reference here, my, this is ingenious, I never thought Bo had it in him” Shirley remarked in admiration.

“Well, he had some advice” Anna called; lifting the cover of the book she was reading. It was a detective book called, ‘The Practice of Codes and Messages’. “And here’s that reference Shirley”. Anna held open the book; on the page was the secret to making your writing invisible using an orange. To read the writing you have to burn it slightly. Shirley slowly bent to her knees and searched in her rucksack again, finally producing a lighter.

“Okay, let’s see what Bo has to say”.

With that, she hovered the bottom blank section of the page over the naked flame and slowly the writing began to appear,

Dear Shirley...

Chapter #4

It took you long enough to find this letter but since you have found it; it means something bad has happened. I know, at this moment, things that I shouldn't and I believe that my life and possibly many others life's are in danger. As you're reading this, I might be dead or I might not, but don't take what you see at face value. I don't know what's going to happen but don't except the story because it won't be true, what will really happen will probably seem too far-fetched in the mind. At any length though, I will be right beside you but not in the Ukraine. Please hurry and solve this case, this trouble has gone on long enough.

I trust in you,

Bo Sawchuk

The scrawled writing was very familiar; this proved to Shirley that it was Bo who had wrote it. Funnily enough, what he said reassured her but remembering what Anna had said, pushed all her thoughts to the back of her mind. Once this case was over, she could investigate them. All she said out loud was,

"We've got everything we came here for, let's go down to lunch then head back into the city". Anna and Ruslan agreed and followed her out of the room. Suddenly Shirley remembered,

"Go ahead, I'll be back in a second".

They gave her a puzzled look but carried on, without question, down the stairs.

When Shirley came back down the stairs only a few minutes later than Anna and Ruslan, Olusia lead them to a large family table. Sitting there were a girl, about thirteen and a guy about twenty, Shirley guessed that they were the kids, Flavia and Bohdan, and smiled at them.

All through lunch, Mrs Sawchuk, who they learned had kept the family name because her brother had moved out of the Ukraine, bombarded Shirley with questions. Shirley recounted many of the times that she'd spent with Bo, his Aunt listening raptly.

Afterwards they helped wash up, thanked her and said goodbye. She told them they were welcome to come back whenever they wanted.

The taxi was waiting outside for them when they finally left the cosy house and hurrying to get out the cold, they jumped into the passenger seats and slammed the doors.

Anna turned to Shirley,

"Okay, what's next?"

Shirley pondered for a second,

"Ruslan, do mind helping us out a bit more?"
Ruslan smiled warmly,

"Not at all, I will help as much as I can".

"Well I propose we spilt up, Anna; if you could find out more about that yard you visited and the

line network, any information will be helpful. Ruslan, if you could look up as much information about the ASLA? I would suggest that you take it as being called the Aristo Sovereignty Liberation Association and work your way from there. I'll investigate more about the relationship of the Ukraine and Russia during the Russian Civil War. Once you've finished just go back to the hotel and we'll compare notes".

It was an agreement. They paid the taxi in Khreshchatyk Street and went their separate ways.

Ruslan decided the first place to start looking was in the Legal Attorneys office library where he worked. The only problem was; where were they being stored during the renovations? Decidedly, he walked along to the line of phone booths and searching in his pocket for some change, dialled the number for his colleague, Arkhad Toras. The line rang three times before the receiver was picked up. After exchanging a few pleasantries, Ruslan enquired to where the books were being kept and his colleague told him they were in the printing office, across the street. Thanking him, Ruslan hung up and made his way through the icy streets towards the printing office owned by his firm, which was positioned directly across the street from the main office. By the time he got to the printing office the snow had started and was already an inch thick. He shivered as he delved into a pocket, searching for the keys. Triumphantly he pulled them out and teeth chattering let himself into the building. First thing he did was go to the staff room and put on the kettle, next he ridded his body of the snow caked overcoat and boots. Noticing there was no heating on in the office, he pulled out an electric fire and turned it up to maximum. Once the kettle had boiled, he made up a strong cup of coffee and retreated to one of the back stores where the books were held.

Half an hour later, he was scrunched up in a comfy chair with a mountain of books, all of which were professionally bound in leather. Jotting down notes as he read, Ruslan found it hard going, sure, he liked Legal stuff, but some of this was so formal it made you drowsy!

At half four, he snapped the book shut and flopped back into the chair, he was exhausted and reading anymore would give him a headache. Anyway, he had plenty of information, which to him in context was quite startling. Grabbing his notes, he placed them in a carrier bag courtesy of the printing office, switched off the heater and after awkwardly getting into his sodden jacket and shoes; he left the building for the hotel.

Meanwhile, Anna had walked along some of the streets that were situated on the opposite side of the yard. The start of the snow began as she was walking through on of the many parks in the beautiful city. By the time she had exited onto a main shopping street the snow was billowing quite violently making it hard to see. As the pages of her Ukrainian dictionary began to moisten, she decided that she'd better take a little cover until the snow levelled off. It was then that she stumbled across a museum and it was no ordinary museum, her dictionary translated it as being a transport museum. What a stroke of luck!

Without hesitation, she entered the shop, revelling in the heat that immediately succumbed her. It was a fairly large museum, with several floors, some café's and a maze of interesting artefacts. To make things even better there was a cloakroom where she gladly left her heavy and rather wet coat.

It took her a while and many look ups in the dictionary later for Anna to find the Railway section. It held several large commotives, one of which was built in the Scottish Highlands. This interested Anna slightly as some of her family did and still does live in Scotland. Moving on past

the building and theory of the engines she came to reference section. Not many museums, she knew, had these but obviously this one did, which was another stroke of luck. A reference section was like a little library where you could look at books but you weren't allowed to take them out the museum. The problem was; they were written in Ukrainian...

"You look like you're in a little dilemma," a friendly voice said.

A thirtish old woman with short dark hair and wire rimmed spectacles walked over. Seeing the questioning look in Anna's eyes she offhandedly explained,

"I speak eight languages and let me guess," she stared pointedly at the dictionary in Anna's hand, "You desperately want to read these books but you don't speak Ukrainian. Though maybe I could be of some assistance?"

Anna pondered for a moment; perhaps this woman would think her strange. Oh jeez, I'm a detective, I should be used to people thinking I'm bonkers!

"I need to know as much information about the train yard here in Kiev".

The woman looked thoughtful,

"You mean the one behind Saint Frances... or what's left of it, god bless".

"Yes" Anna replied, making sure she gave away nothing in her appearance.

"Well you're in luck," the woman, whose badge told her to be Cathy Major, said, indicating with a finger for Anna to follow her. She lead her to another room full of books, "I recently ordered some books in different languages, half of the people who visit this museum are foreign and have a hard job understanding the words. I've kept well under my budget each year so they allowed me to splash out on some multilingual literature. Here, take a seat and I'll go and fetch some of the books".

"Thanks" Anna replied and took a seat at one of the wooden desks. Looking around she saw that there was many bookshelves, each full of puzzling information, which made no sense to her. The smell of them was musty and old, making her feel totally at home, all this knowledge thrilled her as a detective. The room itself was rather dark and had to rely on the strip lighting to make the words readable. Everything was made out of wood, which made it seem even darker and cosier and yet very much like a real library. Cathy returned with several books, all of which varied in length.

"Happy reading" was all she said before disappearing in the way that strict librarians do. They also seem to appear out of nowhere, Anna thought, as she remembered back to her schooldays when she got caught many times by their stringent school librarian. Mrs Pewter did not like pupils being in her library when it was shut, as Anna had found out time and time again.

Forty minutes later, she had found nothing. The book was only telling her about the building of the trucks, wagons and the history of the steam engines that had chugged their way through. Although absorbing the information, she felt her self become more and more frustrated. Nothing here sparked any light on the case. Maybe the train yard had nothing to do with the accident; maybe the boy had been playing in the trucks during break and had left it there by mistake. It was plausible, certainly, but something was trying to convince her that it was not but the link just wasn't here. Discouraged, she flicked the page over and paused. Slowly her eyebrows rose in contemplation. Maybe this book did contain the link after all.

Anna looked over to where the woman was stocking books.

“Ms Major, is there any possibility of an enlarged photocopy?”

Ruslan arrived back at the hotel by five o'clock. Immediately he went into the small kitchenette and put the kettle on. Before the water had finished boiling, Anna appeared.

“Hey you're back too. Did you find anything interesting about the ASLA?” Anna asked as she slipped out her sodden coat with a grimace. Placing a chair near the radiator, she hung the wet item on the back to dry as Ruslan poured out some tea.

“Actually, I did find some interesting stuff but nothing that is complete. Though I think some of the information Shirley might find will make it fit like a jigsaw”. Anna nodded thanks as he handed her a steaming mug, “Mmm, how about you, did you dig up much about the yard?”

Blowing the steam away, Anna took a sip before speaking,

“I've found some interesting stuff,” she indicated to the rather full carrier bag by the door. “In fact, finding the transport museum was a real stroke of luck. I feel as though we've taken a giant step forward in the case”. Ruslan chuckled as he sat down on the sofa,

“It one small step for man...”

“One giant leap for mankind” they both chorused and laughed. Taking a seat next to Ruslan, Anna looked thoughtful,

“I guess we'd better wait for Shirley to get back before swapping information”.

“Mmmhmm, so what do you want to do?” Ruslan asked, sighing blissfully as he sank back into the cushions. Anna was quiet for a moment then grinned wickedly.

“Wanna play Cluedo?”

Shirley sighed in vexation, had she have attended the school in Scotland, where Alexanna Kingsley had gone then this would be easier to understand. Alexanna had sat her Higher History, which included the Russian Revolution. In all honesty, this research was no fun. Perhaps she could email her friend, oh but she was in the middle of a murder case. Alexanna had been a fellow detective in Scotland and after her schooling decided that, her future lay with the police. She was smart and had already become an assistant to the detective in charge in her local police station. What with this vigorous murder case, Shirley decided it would be better not to call on her friend.

Getting up stiffly, she took the book back and placed it on the shelf. Luckily, some of the books were in English, but before he had left Bo had taught her the basics of the Ukrainian language, so she could get by all right. As she scanned the shelves, a section caught her eye, “Local History”. Bingo! Glancing over the titles, one caught her eye, ‘The Ukraine from 1900-1917’. It was thick, some 800 pages and the cover was a well-used red. Without hesitation, Shirley

carried it over to her table and spent the next hour or so making vivid notes. This case seemed to be getting clearer.

Anna explained that the Hotel held a games room, which contained many board games. After sneaking Cluedo up to Anna's room, they settled on the floor and played. When Shirley walked through the door, she found her best friend and Ruslan laughing like idiots and throwing crisps at each other.

"Why are you throwing crisps at each other?"

Both stopped mid throw like children caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

"He started it" Anna whined, Ruslan pouted and threw a crisp at her.

"Well she said I cheated", he dodged another flying crisp.

Shirley just shook her head and went to the table. The other two followed, letting the crumbs fall to the floor.

"Okay, let's see what we've got".

They all stacked their papers on the table and took a seat. Shirley arched her eyebrows at the paperwork and said,

"It would be logical if I went first, since I believe this whole fix started a long time ago".

"Proceed" Anna replied and Ruslan got the sense that this was the brisk business side of the two girls.

"Right, now I paid a visit to the city library and started looking up information about the Russian Civil War. This I took from Bo's essay. I am certain this era is what the whole incident was about".

Several eyebrows were raised but Shirley ignored them and continued, "During the 1st World War, the Germans occupied many parts of the Ukraine. Now, in Russia the Whites were fighting the Reds for power, the Reds were mostly Bolsheviks and they ruled over the middle of Russia – including Moscow. This meant that the Whites were divided causing them land weakness. Unfortunately, unlike the Reds who fought a common cause, the Whites were further divided in beliefs and also fought among each other. The Ukraine, during this time, was fighting a battle for its independence. To cut a long story, at the end of the war Kornilov's Aristocracy Front gave back the Kiev peasants, the Prisoners of War, freely. The Ukrainians, however, were in trouble. The Germans, who had invaded and collaborated with most of the Ukraine and who hated the Russians had killed the Russian Prisoners of War. Unfortunately, the Russians did not get back their lost ex-members of the aristocracy. Although not the Ukrainians fault, Kornilov's supporters blamed them. The Germans kept out the fight as they had enough trouble at home with the 'Treaty of Versailles'. However, the Aristocracy in Russia was also in no position, under the rule of the Bolsheviks, to do anything about the massacre, so nothing, in their eyes, was avenged. By now the whole ordeal should have been forgotten and just another page in the History of War".

Shirley stopped and looked at Ruslan, the story was becoming bitterly clear to Anna, "Ruslan, I think you should go on next".

Ruslan nodded and gathered his papers, "What Shirley has said has made things a lot clearer to me. All I needed was a motive. The ASLA does stand for the Aristo Sovereignty Liberation Association and they were founded ten years ago. They are positioned in Russia, though I'm not sure where. As the name suggests they want to give power to the Aristocracy, however in size they are a very small group. Probably no more than 50 members in total – although that's not to say there may only be a small number of supporters. Their messages are very strong and from their protests and demonstrations, they could be capable of anything. In fact, allegedly, although it was not prove, they had a hand in the assassination of Communist Conrad Askov".

"But why choose Saint Frances?" Shirley murmured, deep in throat.

Anna cleared her throat,

I believe I can answer that. We agree that this is all about revenge from something that happened in the past? Well, my trip to the Transport museum proved very interesting. The first thing that caught my attention was this. She placed a fairly large roll of paper on the table and laid it out flat. Shirley and Ruslan helped put cups on the corners to stop it from rolling up

"This was in a book and I managed to get it enlarged" It was a map of the train network through the Ukraine and Russia. "Now, here's the yard behind the school, it is also the main interchange for all over the country. See how this line here, the one running into Russia, it has three lines crossed over it. Well that means there are three tracks. One of which is a goods line. Now, how does this tie in with the case? My suspicions were confirmed when I got this". She pulled some timetables out of her bag. "The woman at the museum got me them. See, that day there was a goods train due to Russia. Supposedly, it was holding some sort of crop but you can see it was due at the Interchange just minutes before the blast. Ruslan, do you know what some of the trucks were? Remember the truck we hid in, I took a note of it's and some of the other's codes and here," she pointed to a chart, "you can see that those trucks we hid in were the same trucks that were on that goods train".

"The note!" Ruslan remembered.

Shirley looked quizzically at her best friend,

"Anna... are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

"I know it sounds a little far fetched but remember that Bo said it might. What I am suggesting is that this explosion may have been a cover up and what was a mass disaster was actually a mass kidnapping. I believe that the whole school was put on that goods train – probably at gunpoint and taken to Russia. I believe they are being held captive somewhere in Russia, probably as slaves. I also believe Shirley... that Bo is probably still... alive..."

Silence

Chapter #5

Bo, still alive? Alive and breathing? Working as a slave? Held at gunpoint? Alive? Shirley's head spun with wild thoughts. In a daze she peeked torpidly over at her best friend,

"What makes you sound so sure?"

Anna chose her words carefully,

"Shirley, you know when you just get this feeling, it nags at you and, although it sounds stupid,

you KNOW that you're right? Well I've got that feeling right now".

"Now that you've gave us your theory, although unbelievable, it does make sense in a way" put in Ruslan. "I mean, there were no remains found after the explosion, so there is a good chance that they never died. As for slave labour, in say, a factory, if anyone enquired, I'm sure this elite group would have the resources to make up false papers. If they were in a place, where there is a lot of industry then no one would really be suspicious. Hire a few employees, who are loyal supporters, to show that people do go in and out of the building and there you have a perfectly normal looking factory".

Anna nodded her head enthusiastically,

"Russia has a lot of Industrial ground, for when Stalin came into power he introduced the massive Industry growth. Even today, much of it is left and things have advanced considerably, meaning they'd be plenty of places where that sort of set up could be positioned successfully.

Shirley chewed her lip in thought and suddenly stood up. Anna and Ruslan silently watched her cross the room and disappear into her sleeping quarters. She returned with Bo's essay in her hands, the orange writing still clear at the bottom. Laying it on the table, she sat down and poured over it. Her eyes lit up in understanding,

"How could I have been so stupid?" she muttered, "He gave me a blunt clue!" Ruslan and Anna shared a questioning look; eventually Anna spoke up,

"What is it?"

Shirley held out the page, "Look" she said pointing to Bo's writing, "He says 'I might be dead or I might not but don't take what you see at face-value'. Don't you see? He was expecting to be taken. He meant that the ASLA would cover their tracks by making people believe that the kids were dead but they're not".

Anna hesitated, her green eyes sparkling in the light,

"Um... Shirley, you're using a lot of assumption here. It might be true but-"

Shirley cut her off,

"You didn't let me finish. Next he says 'what will really happen will probably seem too far-fetched in the mind. At any length though, I will be right beside you but not in the Ukraine'. Look, he's practically agreeing with you! 'I will be RIGHT beside you but not in the UKRAINE'. He means he may be alive but not actually in this country. What lies to the right of the Ukraine is..."

"Russia" Ruslan finished.

There was a pause; all three stared at each other, straight faced, not betraying their thoughts,

"So I'm right then?"

Shirley merely glanced at Anna, folded up the essay and then gave her two friends a stern look,

"There's only one way to find out, we need to go to Russia".

"Whoa!" Ruslan exclaimed, gesturing a calming motion with his hands, "Slow down. What is the point of going into Russia when we don't even know where in Russia they are? Russia ain't a

small place!”

“True” Shirley replied.

“Actually we should do in this case”.

Shirley felt her heart give a funny lurch, were they really going to find Bo? Frances... the thought of that name was painful and the memory of finding it out made her eyes burn. She shook her head to get rid of the sensitivity.

Anna rummaged through the paper and picked out the timetable,

“Look, it has a destination on it as well”.

They all peered forward eagerly and saw the name VOLGOGRAD printed in small type.

He may in Volgograd. Russia. He may be alive. It just wouldn't sink in; Bo was actually alive. The Bo that had saved her from a burning building; the Bo who had waded in sewage to save an endangered species. The Bo who had to tell her that it was a trick and her mother was still missing. The Bo that had kept her out of the loop, while trying to save a friend from the police. The Bo who had posed as a Maths genius to break up a masterminded plot – the SAME Bo who rescued her from the WIZARD... the last case they had solved together. The guy that she cared so deeply for and he may still be alive.

Anna knew what she was thinking and broke in softly,

“Shirley, don't. We don't know for certain that he's alive”.

“I know” Shirley sighed, staring toward the faraway wall. “Look, here's an idea. From this map, it shows that the train must have gone from the yard to Moscow and from Moscow to Volgograd. So, we take a train to Volgograd and we search there. If that doesn't turn up anything then we'll work our way back along the line. Hence, Nikolayeusk, Penza, Tambov, Belgorod and Tula. In all honesty, I don't think that they'll be in Moscow. It's too big and there would be a lot of questions. What do you think?”

“I think it's a logical idea. We don't want to arouse any suspicions, so I agree” Anna answered.

“The only qualm I have is the long journey on the train. I hate travelling at the best of times, trains especially, make me queasy”.

Shirley gave her friend a sympathetic look,

“I'm sorry, but it's the best way. I would cost a lot in petrol or taxis fees or bus fees and I don't want to go by aeroplane. How did you manage to get here?”

Anna grimaced,

“Two things counted. My aspiration to investigate and the pain of my numb butt that overpowered everything else, made the journey less queasy”.

Shirley and Ruslan chuckled. Anna turned her gaze to Ruslan,

“Ruslan, you've helped us so much so far. Now, there's no question about both Shirley and me going, but will you? We quite understand that there ARE money issues and we do offer, as a company, to pay for expenses but the decision to come is up to you. Though I will say on behalf

of the company, we want you with us. No pressure”.

Ruslan didn't hesitate for a moment,

“I'm going. As for money, don't worry, I can look after myself fine. My only question is. What are we going to do with the ASLA once we find them?”

“Good question” Anna relied and gave Shirley a pointed look.

“Well, the main thing is to locate the hostages. Once we've found them and seen what kind of position we're in, then we decide how to handle it”.

“Okay” Ruslan agreed ultimately.

“Right then,” Shirley clasped her hands together, “I shall go and book some tickets for us”.

The train was due to leave early the next morning so they decided that it would be best if Ruslan spent the night in the hotel room. Shirley was determined to visit Bo's Aunt again; she deserved to know more about her nephew. When Shirley phoned to ask permission, Olusia was more than happy to comply, so Shirley was to spend dinner at their house.

It was getting on; Anna rode in a taxi with Ruslan to notify his mother of his pending journey and to pack up some belongings. After dumping a suitcase in the hotel room, which Anna had advised the hotel about, they wondered what to do next?

“Do you fancy going to the theatre? Although it's in Ukrainian I think you'll like it”.

“Of course” Anna replied enthusiastically.

They stopped to have dinner in the Lybid Hotel, which was fun as they had live entertainment. After that, Ruslan took her to the Ivan Franko Ukrainian Drama Theatre. Both really enjoyed themselves. Though, since it was based on a mystery, after Ruslan had translated it for her, Anna had solved the murder before the first interval.

Afterwards they walked back to the hotel via the parks. It was cold but not ice cold, as there was a light falling of snow. Arm in arm they talked and joked around, laughing their heads off and generally having a relaxed fun time. Anna remarked to Ruslan,

“I wish I could have these types of breaks in cases more often. It's nice”.

He stopped and turned to her, slightly concerned,

“Do you work all the time”.

Anna looked at the ground and sighed resignedly,

“Yeah, I do.” She shrugged, “Don't get me wrong, I love my work more than anything virtually, but... I wish I could also have a life as well”.

Ruslan looked over her tired face, memorising every detail. High cheekbones, dainty nose, green eyes, long beautiful lashes, cheeks rosy from the wintry chill. Gently he caressed her cheek with his thumb,

"It's not healthy, you know that," he whispered.

"I know" her whisper blew out as a mist in the cold air. Strands of coppery hair flew around her face as though attracted by an invisible magnet upwards.

He searched her eyes,

"Anna, tell me the truth. Is this mission going to be dangerous?"

Her emerald eyes hesitated and clouded his clear view of her soul,

"Ruslan... my job is dangerous. I accepted that fact years ago. Yes... it may be risky. One of us could easily be killed. Now, if this makes you change your mind about going, then that's fine. I'm not going to lie to you".

He didn't answer but instead stared intently at her face. Burning the image of her inescapably into his mind, Ruslan leaned forward and kissed her softly. Pulling back, he shrugged, eyes twinkling,

"Just wanted you to have some social life before we die".

Anna chuckled and arm in arm they headed through the wind of melting candy.

The slight rustling in the kitchenette and the soft bubble of the kettle brought Ruslan out of the drowsy black velvet and back into the dark room. At first, every thing looked comfortably unfamiliar until he remembered where he was. Rubbing away the last of the dream world he had indifferently departed, he pushed away the floppy quilt and draped his legs over the side of the couch.

The moonlight partially made the worktops glow but he had to squint to see whom it was leaning on the counter. The soft creak of the wood as he stood up alerted the shadow from their thought,

"Sorry, I didn't wake you did I?"

"No" came the sleepy reply as she watched him walk over.

"Do you want a cuppa?" She whispered, not wanting to wake her either friend from her much needed sleep. Goodness knows she needed it!

"Please," came Ruslan's answer.

Ruslan took a few seconds to study her chestnut brown hair and concerned eyes as she pulled out another cup for him.

"Couldn't sleep," he asked softly, watching as her soft blue eyes met his.

"Fitfully, my mind's overactive tonight".

"Mmm".

There was a drowsy silence as the water boiled and she filled the cups up.

“Ruslan, did you know Bo Sawchuk?”

He saw the worried creases round her eyes and suddenly it dawned on him,

“You loved Bo, didn’t you?” He was amused to see her eyes bug out and a flush colour her cheeks.

“No... well, I don’t know. He was my best friend, I didn’t want to lose that”.

They were quiet a moment as they sipped their tea.

“I don’t remember a Bo Sawchuk but I did know a Fran Sawchuk,” he finally answered.

Shirley’s eyes lit up; did she dare believe?

“His name was Frances?”

“Yeah but everyone called him Fran. I think his middle name was Boris”.

“That’s him!” Shirley whispered excitedly, though wondering why Bo would call himself by his real name when he hated it so much.

“Fran? Oh he talked all the time about a girl called Miranda”.

A stone sank to the pit of her stomach as her face fell, who was Miranda? Maybe she was a girlfriend or... a light switched on. It was her! And worried fleetingly how she could have been so stupid, anyone would think she was jealous.

“He was talking about me”.

Ruslan looked at her questioningly, Shirley smiled softly,

“My middle name’s Miranda, I often used it as an alias on a case”.

Ruslan just nodded and sipped his tea but Shirley was curious,

“Bo, Fran, he talked about me a lot?”

“Yes quite a lot”.

A stupid grin split her face as her mind scolded her for being so flaky. So, he did miss her and much as she missed him. Well that was a start!

Moving over to the armchairs they sat in silence, lost in thought. Glancing over, Shirley studied her companion, like Bo, he had dirty blond hair and, she considered, wasn’t bad looking either. He suited Anna well.

“How do you feel about Anna then?”

He reacted like a deer blinded by headlights,

“What? Er... I... what do you... how do you...” He looked utterly bewildered.

Shirley smiled coyly,

“Oh come on. I’ve seen the way you look at her. Bart was the same with Alicia”.

“Bart? Who’s he?”

Grimacing slightly on remembering she replied carefully,

“Both Bart and Alicia were our, Bo’s and my friends in school. They went out together and they ‘did’ love each other but Bart cheated on Alicia. Even to this day, they love each other and given the chance they would get back together again. Just a matter of pride. Anyway, stop changing the subject”.

Taking a gulp of tea and looking directly at his sock clad feet reluctantly,

“Yes, I like Anna. She’s fun, she’s smart, she’s beautiful and god I’m going to miss her when she returns to Canada”.

He meant it, he really meant it and his heart ached at the thought of Anna’s absence.

Shirley studied him a moment then stated more than asked,

“You like detective work. Would you ever consider putting your skills to work?”

“Are you suggesting that I drop everything here and come and work with you?” Ruslan kept his voice steady and face impartial.

“Well, we’re always looking for options to enlarge and your legal skills would prove crucial to our work”.

Shirley waited patiently, and then Ruslan spoke,

“Before I give you any answer, tell me this. Once we save Bo, that’s if and only if he is still alive, then what are you going to do? Are you going to say ‘hi’ and remain friends, are you going to say ‘bye’ and return to Redington without him, are you going to tell him the truth? What are you going to do?”

Shirley knew why he was asking this and felt a little guilty about her past attitude to Anna. But, what was she going to do?”

“It depends on what Bo wants. I would truly love for him to come back to Redington, though if he wanted to stay here, then that would be fine. I would miss him, yes, but now we also have the opportunity to visit more frequently” a sad smile illuminated her face, “That’s IF he is alive. Alive and... to be honest, “her voice grew to almost an inaudible murmur, “I am not convinced in the slightest that he is”.

Anna shifted uncomfortably; it had been hours since they’d left Kiev. It had also been hours since they’d left Moscow and although the queasiness had passed, she was getting numb. However, the train was swaying around slightly, managing to jolt every time she stood up so she resigned to stay put in her seat. Out side, the sun was low and weak, the icy wind finally freezing the light into darkness. Every now and then, there was a farmhouse dotted in the far

distance but other than these man-erected buildings, life seemed bleak.

Surely, oh surely, it couldn't be far to Volgograd?

"Another hour" commented a voice, Ruslan slid into the seat next to her and handed her a steaming cup of... something. He looked a little distressed as he wiggled on the seat,

"Man, I hope I don't get cramp in anything else. You need more than two feet to go to the bathroom and the moment!"

Anna giggled and placed down her book,

"Have you seen Shirley?"

"Yeah, she's in the next carriage talking to some waiter, I think. So... how are you feeling? You've at least got some colour in your face now".

Anna grimaced,

"Yeah, I'm okay. I think I'm over the worst. It's usually the first hour or so, that's when the queasiness reaches a peak, then I either throw up or it slowly goes away".

"Lovely" he replied brightly.

They were silent a moment, then Anna noticed a magazine in Ruslan's hand,

"What's that" she nodded towards the mag.

"Oh this? It's just a magazine I bought. Mum reads it all the time and I feel a little guilty about not being home. Hey," he opened it and skimmed to a page, "try this out, test your knowledge on Harry Potter".

"Harry Potter" Anna replied faintly, not sure how to reply. Ruslan smiled teasingly at her,

"I'm bored out of my mind. I need something to do. Anyway, it'll be fun. Come on".

"Okay, who am I to turn down a challenge".

Clearing his throat, Ruslan settled back against the seat,

"Right, number one. What is the name of Hermione's Cat?"

"Crookshanks".

"Correct, number two, which Quidditch team does Ron support?"

"Geez, not that easy are they? Chudley Cannons".

"Correct" his eyebrow arched at her and she just shrugged and grinned,

"Number three..."

Shirley sighed and sunk back into her seat. Speaking to that waiter had proven fruitless. He could barely understand her let alone tell her much about Volgograd. Gazing out the window she saw in frustration that they were slowing down, all she wanted was to get off this train and investigate. But with the impending darkness, she knew that it would be near impossible. This didn't help her mood. The train now was moving at a crawl and she saw they were being pulled through a yard of some sorts. Beside them loomed a tall old factory, which had seen better days. It lay so close to the line that if she stuck her arm out of the window she's be able to touch the polluted bricks. Flopping back, she looked up at the ceiling. The train drew to a halt, turning back to the window she gasped. There was a window directly opposite her window and there was a pair of haunted eyes staring at her. A pair of familiar blue eyes... she screamed... then they were gone.

Chapter #6

When Shirley found them, looking slightly shaken, and told of what she had seen, Ruslan and Anna awarded her with dubious, if not pitying looks. Sharing uneasy glances and trying to let her down gently, they both replied that it was highly unlikely. It was clear that they both thought she'd been seeing things and their concerned eyes began to make her feel rather frustrated. She had seen them; the person had looked back at her. She knew they had. Finally Shirley snapped,

"I'm a Holmes. I do not imagine things' and huffed back to the carriage she'd been previously occupied in.

Anna bit her lip as she watched her friend leave, concern was evidently written on her face,

"This case is getting to her. I should never have let her find out what I was doing... this is all my fault'.

Ruslan gently pulled her chin round till she was reluctantly staring him in the face.

"Anna' he murmured quietly, "Shirley is a very headstrong woman. She would have found out another way, if not the way she did. Shirley is hurt by Bo's leaving; she is devastated over his apparent death and has only just accepted that he is gone. Now, suddenly, she had reason to question whether he did die or not. She's confused and resultantly emotionally tired. Also, if he is alive after all this time, then she's going to feel extremely guilty about not finding out sooner. As a detective she will feel as though she has failed, not just a client but one of the most important people in her life', he brushed her cheek tenderly. "But Shirley needs to see this case through, out of guilt and out of love and Anna... nothing you can do will stop her. In no way is this your fault, in fact you may have saved her life'.

Anna looked surprised at his last remark and searched his face questioningly. His face remained impassive as though the true meaning of his words were too hard even for him to contemplate.

As it was drizzling with rain when they arrived at their destination, it was Anna's suggestion that instead of wandering the streets in the impending darkness, they should book into a hotel and get an early night. The only productive outcomes that would come from wandering around would be getting lost, drenched and catching one heck of a cold. Tomorrow they would map the city.

Wearily they trudged into the nearest hotel, which wasn't much more than a stone throwaway from the station. Shirley stripped a few layers before diving under the covers and promptly falling asleep.

Anna wasn't so lucky, what with her stiff limbs, she now had cramp in both legs and was wriggling uncomfortably, throwing the covers off and then pulling them up again as Goosebumps raced up her body. Needless to say, it was a while before exhaustion took over.

Promptly at eight thirty, Shirley got out of bed and made her way into the shared living room/kitchenette. Anna looked up from the stove and laughed at Shirley's elegantly raised eyebrow. Shirley couldn't believe her eyes,

"Quick, give me a piece of paper, I need to write this down. Anna... is actually up before nine? What are you up to?"

Taking the bait, Anna replied,

"Oh, you've caught me red handed, I was about to go rob a bank. Since I know how to protect myself from forensic detection and that you'd know I would never get up this early, I'd have such a strong alibi and no evidence that I'd walk free".

Shirley's eyes twinkled in amusement as she poured an orange juice for them.

"Ruslan up yet?"

Anna shook her head,

"Hadn't the heart to wake him".

Smiling knowingly, Shirley slipped comfortably into the accumulated silence between them and set about laying the table. After a while, Shirley lifted her head up and observed her friend, watching her mouth twitch as though she wanted to say something.

"Spit it out, I can tell you want to say something".

"Fine", Anna cleared her throat, ready to spit.

"Yeugh! Don't. That's disgusting – oh you're as bad as Bo was" With that she flicked Anna with the tea towel. Anna laughed heartily before bestowing a serious look on her face.

"Shirley, why didn't you ever tell me about Bo?"

Sighing, Shirley pulled out a seat and sank down.

"Now that's complicated. First off, I couldn't... I wouldn't believe that he was gone. It was hard enough trying to accept that mum was gone let alone Bo. I suppose with mum I always had that small hope that she was still alive, but Bo was dead. End of story. I was angry. Angry at the world for taking Bo away, angry at his parents for sending him to the Ukraine, even angry at Bo for leaving so willingly. Most of all, I was angry at my self for falling apart".

Quietly Anna placed a plate of toast on Shirley's mat. Taking a seat opposite she stared to eat without a word. It was Shirley who broke the silence,

"Anna... have I ever told you how alike you are to Bo?" It was a rhetorical question in more ways than one. "I think that's why I get on with you so much. Both so loyal".

Anna smiled kindly,

“Then he must have been heart broken when he left you behind”.

Shirley had no reply.

The window was almost invisible in the darkness, with pen light in her mouth Shirley slowly prised the window away from the sill as Anna carefully broke the moss seal with her penknife. The three paused briefly as the window creaked up into it's maximum opening. Nobody stirred. To say they were surprised there were no alarms was an understatement but they weren't complaining. Like thieves, they hopped through the open window, landing softly on the wooden boards inside. Everything was pitch black, not a light blinked. Stealthily the three creep across the room, walking through what seemed to be a well-used board meeting room. The faint smell of over brewed coffee and the few cups on the table told them it had been in use that day.

Quiet as mice they slipped through the door making sure they left it open, in case something should go wrong. The clearer path they had the better. The room opened out onto a hallway in which they blindly made their way Eastwards. They came to a stairwell in which they stepped down three steps and walked through a set of heavy double doors. Eventually they came to a T-junction in which they took a left. The double doors were wooden, well used and locked. Pulling out her penknife, again Anna made light work of the door and it sprang open with an invisible force.

Although they had gotten their night vision, they hadn't been prepared for the sudden pure blackness of the room. It wasn't just a room either. With penlight, Shirley could just make out that the hall carried on as far as the eye could see. They had found the machinery of the factory.

In sync the three of them stepped more into the room, allowing the darkness to swallow them. Suddenly the door behind them swung shut with a huge force, closing with a slam. All three jumped and looked back, seeing nothing before looking forward again and being blinded by a powerful torch.

Shirley managed to squint through the blinding light to make out some figures standing behind it. It wasn't the number of people behind it, it wasn't the fact that she had been caught, it wasn't the intensity of the light but it was the person holding the light that her blood freeze and her mind blank.

Also, it wasn't her but Anna, who asked the question,

“Bo?”

Chapter #7

Two months, that's how long it had taken them. Two months to get in here and finally face the inevitable. Eight weeks of spying, bluffing, disguising, running, hiding, worrying, break downs, brick walls and frustrating dead ends to finally crack the case in half with the force of a sledge hammer. Two months was nothing to Shirley, it was the years of painful endurance as the glowing splint within her withered and blew coldly, missing the spark of life. Her oxygen, her main reason of living had seeped away but now it stood in front of her, begging her to take a long deep breath. The warmth of disbelief, happiness and relief overwhelmed her and Shirley felt an unusual awkwardness. How was she meant to feel? Happy that her friend was back? Worried if he didn't remember her? Scared that he blamed her for not looking for him sooner?

Angry that all this mistreatment had been forced upon him and these innocent people? Relieved that she had found them? Anxious about the future and whether Bo would want to know her?

She couldn't think straight. So typically great, she was standing here, gawking at these people, and looking like a complete idiot. Some professionalism she was using! Two months of searching high and low; only to go round in circles to find that the answer was staring her in the face. From day one, it was there, right in her face, so large that it was incomprehensible.

The next day, after they had finished breakfast, the three of them had gone to the local library. In the reference section they had managed to acquire a large map of the city. Industry was a major point here and the number of industrial estates was quite substantial, in that, unless they found out a link, they'd have to search every warehouse out. Ruslan raised an eyebrow at this; in that there was no way that a school of over 700 pupils could be housed in a warehouse. But considering the fact that all the kids could fit into St Frances, it was pretty much accepted that they could easily be in one of the warehouses round here. The mass of production in Volgograd was large; the sites were enormous and very spacious. The typical trade was that of the manufacture of machinery and 14% in total was of chemical production and plants. So there was no limit in things to do.

After they'd made a list of suspect places to scout out the three of them returned to the hotel room to sort up the plans.

"I think I'll go for a wonder around the Josikov Industrial Estate after lunch. I'd like to start on the outskirts and work my way back into the city" said Anna.

"Good idea. I'll tackle from the west in that case" Shirley called, dumping the bakery bags on the table.

"Well I'll head along the Volga River, size that up, make any notes etc..."

"Great" Shirley replied from setting up the table.

Anna picked up some of the books she'd managed to acquire and carried them towards her room. The flashing screen caught her eye,

"Shirley, you have a message on your mobile".

"Oh right, text or voice?"

"Voice".

Shirley quickly finished putting everything out on plates then hurried to her phone. Moving back to the table she sat down, where Anna soon joined them.

"You have one new message. Received on: Thursday at 10.34am. Press 7... First new message... Hello, Shirley? This is Olusia Sawchuk speaking. I just thought I'd let you know that I found a book today, stuffed behind the sofa, belonging to Bo. I was just wondering if you would like it. If you give me an address I will send it to you. Let me know soon. Bye... end of message... press 1 to..."

"A book belonging to Bo?" Shirley mused out loud.

“What?” Anna asked looking up.

“Nothing, don’t worry. It was just Mrs Sawchuk ringing to let me know that she found a book of Bo’s. Wanted to know if I would like it. Funny, I have no idea what it could be”.

“Do you think it could be a clue he’s trying to give us?”

Shirley looked at Ruslan hard,

“I don’t know. Olusia wasn’t specific on the details. All she said was that it was a book”.

“Ring her up and ask” Anna replied.

“Yeah I will, but first I want to check with the hotel, make sure she can deliver here”.

“Okay”.

After lunch, Shirley made her inquiries and left a message for Olusia to send it to the hotel

Have you ever had that feeling where everything is eerily quiet... too eerily quiet? You know like on Westerns when the cowboy comes into town, the place is deserted and deathly quiet. Then when he gets too bold all lets loose. That’s the feeling his place was giving Anna. It was creepy. Everywhere she looked laid a port cabin, though, they weren’t in great shape, and most of the doors had fallen off them. There was just something though... maybe it was the fact that she’d got in here so easily or maybe it was the fact that there was no one around. Never the less, she persevered on towards her target; the main warehouse. Had she’d known the reason why she had that feeling she would have ran for her life but the security cameras made no noise as they followed her pursuit.

Crouching behind a large wheel, Anna used her vantage point to survey the building. With her well trained eyes she could tell that it was not as big as she first thought and there was a distinct lack of carbon coating. If the building had been more than ten years old then a thin gathering of black carbon would have started to appear from industrial pollution. In other words, this building was relatively new and if Anna went on gut feeling alone, she would probably say this was not the building she was looking for. But she knew better than that. Rule number 4 - never make an assumption before checking out all the evidence. This evidence evidently required her to investigate the interior of the warehouse... oh the thrill of being at the forefront of adventure! Hopefully this time she wouldn’t have to spend the night in a cell, especially since she didn’t know what the Russian police were like. Anna shuddered at the memory of a previous investigation. At least she could say she had looked at ALL the evidence before coming to the conclusion that cells had no privacy...

But how to get inside? Her sharp eyesight fell upon a ladder that led up to the roof. Must be the service stair for the entrance to the air ducts. Perfect.

Darting her head round like a furtive fox, making sure the coast was clear; Anna slinked across the open yard and dived behind the wall. Quickly checking behind to make sure no one had seen her, she edged against the wall till she reached the steps. Jumping slightly she caught the handle and slid the steps down to the floor. They made a soft snick as the catch slipped in place but it was so quiet Anna wasn’t worried. Swiftly she lifted her right foot up onto the first step, which, although on its lowest setting, a good foot and a half above the ground. Hefting herself up slightly, Anna looked behind her once more before hiking up the ladder with an impressive speed.

The top opened out onto a relatively flat piece of roofing, this was covered in tarmac – or something to that effect. She guessed that it covered the offices; a lot of buildings tended to have this style of roofing over their offices. She should know - having climbed up too many to count in her years at work and arduous adolescence. Having this prior knowledge allowed her to exert caution as to her footing. It would not do to have her feet fall through any weak roofing – one; there would be a lot of explaining to do and two; Shirley would never let her live it down. The latter was still oblivious to how the station aerial got tipped out of place and this lack of knowing was going to stay that way. It was bad enough that Constable Sinew knew and delighted at pulling monstrous faces when nobody was looking. Anna was miffed, if at two o'clock in the morning you suddenly get snagged by a mysterious shape when you're in the middle of a stalker investigation, you JUST wouldn't hesitate to put up a fight. However, punching metal does not receive any more awards than a few bloodied knuckles – so Anna found out. Sometimes you just have to learn the hard way!

Edging carefully around the perimeter of the roof, she moved over the short ladder that led up to the next level. Leaping up she scanned the area and set her sights on a hatch. Surprisingly no rust had yet formed on the lock so it was only a matter of a spurt of oil to lever it open without a squeak.

It opened to present another set of metal stairs, painted a fetching peach, leading down to the bulk of the factory. A comforting hum of machinery and a pump lilted the air. Every now and then the sound of metal hitting metal rang out, indicating that someone was inside. Carefully Anna slid inside and crouched on the top step, peering around a tank. All sorts of machinery lay about, seemingly hard at work but what work it was eluded the young detective. From what she could tell, everything here was practically machine ran, so within reasoning, a large work force would not be needed. She had seen enough to make her judgement but for the sake of the investigation she shrugged off her bag. Raking inside, she finally pulled out her camera and snapped a few pictures of the various machines and zoomed as far across the vast hall as possible, snapping near perfectly focused images of the factory layout.

Carefully hiding her camera at the bottom of her bag, she collected herself together and quietly made her way back up through the hatch.

It was as she was closing it firmly into position that she heard the voices. They translated, unknowingly to Anna, as

“Are you certain she went up here?”

“Yes sir, I could see her on the camera but why would she go up here?”

“I have no idea but I soon will, what was she wearing?”

“Plain clothes, bag which said Yosemite.”

Yosemite! That was the only clue Anna need to know that they were after her. She looked around for an escape route but there wasn't anywhere except that ladder. Unfortunately that's where her fans were coming. She thought fast. Diving into her bag she pulled out several items. Swiftly she pulled off her cap and put her hair in bunches. The men's voices were getting louder and glancing over her shoulder she saw that they were climbing off the ladder and onto the roof. It was a matter of seconds before they spotted her. Grabbing the book off the ground and the binoculars she scooted over until her legs hung over the edge of the roof – she daren't look down. It was just in time as one man gave a shout and four men charged over to her. Acting completely surprised she began to get to her feet but the man who got to her first lifted her

roughly to her feet and shook her,

“What are you doing here? What’s your name? It’s illegal to be up here, speak!”

Anna had no clue as to what he was asking but instead cowered under him, forcing herself to shake with fear.

“Je... Je... Je cherche l'épervier. La momie a dit qu'ils étaient communs autour d'elle. Je juste désiré voir si je puisse en trouver un. Vous arrivez une bonne vue d'en haut ici”.

The man just gave her a puzzled look, obviously he didn’t speak French. Anna held up her book,

“Voyez, voyez,” she pointed to the picture of the bird in the book she had. The man just stared at her,

“Vous connaissez l'oiseau?” Anna flapped her arms like a bird (feeling a little silly mind you), “Les chercher”, she held her hands to her eyes, imitating she was looking through binoculars. The man seemed to get the picture slowly. As the other men approached he turned to face them, spending Anna in his grip at least a foot above the roof. Not exactly fun.

The men spoke at length, the leader obviously annoyed. He was a hard looking man with oil stained overalls on and a chiselled face. The man holding Anna took the book out her hands and showed the man. They spoke some more making Anna feel irritated as she didn’t have a clue in what was being said. For all she knew, they were going to throw her off the roof. Suddenly she was thrown to the floor and pushed towards the steps. Two men headed down the ladder, the man behind her pushed her forward; Anna got the message and started her descent. At the bottom both her arms were gripped and she was dragged towards the main gate. When they arrived, one man let go to fish in his pocket as the other one tightened his grip on her jacket. The other man pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the padlock, the gates opened and she was roughly pushed through. She landed with a thud on the gravel stained road, momentarily disorientated. A soft plop indicated her book’s arrival beside her. Turning around she watched the guys put the padlock back on, secure its grip and stride away, without looking back at her.

For some reason she stuck her tongue out at their backs before pulling out her bunches. She hissed when the skin on the arm nicked her jacket, there was a nasty graze there from where she fell and it didn’t take long for her to discover several more nasty abrasions, some on her legs, hands and arms. Gingerly placing her binoculars, bobbles and book back into her bag she stiffly got to her feet. As she hobbled back towards the main street to get a bus she couldn’t help but think, even over twenty I can still fool guys with my little girl act!

The cleaner whistled quietly as he slowly mopped the floor. The conservatively decorated hallways were a give away to how successful this company was. If as much expense had been put into production as in creating the perfect office space then the quality of goods produced must be excellent. Everything was perfect and tidy, exuding money. The surfaces, doors and furnishings were modern and the theme of blue throughout was very regal. It was slightly unnerving to the inexperienced.

As the door opened and the poker faced men in starched suits filed out, the cleaner looked up and nodded to each man as they walked past. The last out pulled the door to but not fully, leaving enough of a gap for sound to escape. As the cleaner rinsed out his mop in the ‘bucket on wheels’, he heard snippets of the odd conversation. The men inside spoke English.

"It's getting too risky Wilson. We need to pull out. I need to pull out – my wife, my kids; I can't do it to them again".

"Relax Kev, by next week the exchange will be over with and we can go back to our lives, no one will be any the wiser".

"But what if it goes wrong. What if there is a leak in information?"

"Nothing will go wrong; as long as we both stick to our jobs everything will be fine".

"It's alright for you, you're rolling in it but some of us have to work!"

"Now look here. At the moment everything is going as planned. The only thing that's going to make us fail is if one of us loses our bottle. So pucker up, for if you are the one that loses me this deal so help me – your life won't be worth living. Got it?"

"Hakunnah Matata".

There was a roar of laughter and the sound of someone patting someone else's back heartily.

"Glad we see eye to eye".

The men headed to the door and the cleaner immediately returned his attention back to the floor.

"I'll see you at the meeting, sharp at nine, Monday morning".

A tall, thinly built man with mousy hair, and a mousy moustache to match, nodded curtly before striding off down the corridor. His footfalls clicking meekly against the floor as though they too wanted to get out of this uneasy place.

The other man, a portly guy with greying hair around a perfect oval of baldness and an expensive black suit, locked the conference door behind him. Turning around to hold out his wrist to the light in the hall, the man gave the cleaner a clear view of his face. The soft clicks coming from the cleaner's hand were inaudible in the hall, probably due to the expensive carpet soaking it up. After checking the time the man smartly pulled down his sleeve, bent to pick up his leather briefcase and headed along the same path that the previous men did. He briefly nodded his head at the diligent cleaner as she passed.

Once the man had disappeared around a corner the cleaner dug into his pocket and pulled out a recorder. With a triumphant grin he pressed the stop button and rewound it back a few seconds. Pressing play, the recorder made a short whine before repeating the voices of the men in the room. The cleaner's smile widened and he pressed stop, carefully placing the recorder back in his pocket. Dipping his mop back into his bucket he headed back to the cupboard where he deposited them and grabbed two bulging rubbish bags.

Calmly he carried them along the corridor that he had arrived via and through the reception to the door. The man behind the desk glanced at him in suspicion but seeing the rubbish bag and the uniform immediately went back to watching the cameras. Just then the phone rang and within seconds he had forgotten the cleaner even existed. That was why he never found it odd when the cleaner never returned.

Outside the man through the rubbish in the bucket and headed round to the staff car park. Stopping behind a wall he quickly ridded his body of the uniform, rolled them up and shoved them in a hole.

Then he just walked out the gates whistling. Three steps out of the property Ruslan turned around, looked at the building and shook his head in amusement. Too easy!

Dusk was beginning to set in as Shirley approached the fence. Of what she had investigated that day, nothing had showed anything worth while. In a way though, that was good, it meant that there choices were narrowed... slightly. Of all the places she had looked at so far this one seemed more promising. It looked huge from the gates, one big junk yard, of sorts, but from her position Shirley could make out some warehouses in the distance. This required further investigation so she walked around some of the perimeter scrutinising the fence. It was built fast; there was no way that she could get over it without getting torn to shreds by the barbed wire.

Or was there?

Behind several bushes a part of the barbed wire was missing, if she could only get up there then things would be grand. But how was she going up there? She looked sharply around and spotted a load of junk by a barren stream, Shirley walked over to take a look. Most of it WAS junk, bits of pram, newspapers, tin cans, some wheels, a barrel, a coil of rope, various rods and plenty of unidentifiable objects that had rusted away to nothing. Inspiration was the key and it was with her today.

Checking the area around her first for any on lookers, she dragged the barrel over to the fence. Slightly out of breath she returned to the stream and grabbed the rope. Sitting on the barrel she carefully looped the rope like her friend Matt had shown her how so many years ago. Matt had been a hand on a ranch when Shirley and a few of her classmates had won a trip to the Lazy H Ranch. It's safe to say that mysteries seem to follow Shirley wherever she goes and that trip was no exception. A little horse trouble earned Shirley her first crush, with a little extra ranch skills on the side.

Well here goes nothing, with that she flung the rope out and it fell flatly over the points on top of the fence. She pulled it snug. Quickly she stood up on the drum and grasped the rope, ensuring its tightness. It was secure.

By the time she had got to the top, after slipping and sliding against the metal, Shirley was out of breath and sweating. The fence wobbled perilously under her and feeling her balance lessen she moved her foot and jumped to the ground.

Before doing anything else Shirley ran over and grabbed a large crate, placing it by the rope – this was plan B if anything went wrong. Sitting down on the crate, catching her breath, she shrugged her loyal bag off her shoulder and rummaged around for her new binoculars. They were her last birthday present from her parents. Scouting the estate she espied three security cameras. Luckily, there was still a clear path for her to travel to avoid being detected by them.

Hitching her bag back onto her back, Shirley ran forward, moving between large crates, wood and a load of junk. Stealthily she made her way up as close to the building and hid behind an old lorry to keep out the way of the camera. Studying the building she spotted two more cameras and reasoned that the whole building was covered. Clearly she was not going to sneak in here. Though she did wonder why such high security was needed, it was very intriguing indeed. However, Shirley had enough experience to know that if she wanted to get inside she'd have to talk her way in and because she didn't speak any Russian, it wasn't a good idea. A full proof plan would have to be formulated with Anna and Ruslan, they could do that tomorrow. For now

she'd have to make do with pictures. Pulling out the camera she took twenty pictures of the building and the land around it, also noting the position of the security cameras. Turning around and heading back toward the fence, Shirley examined the ground. As she moved past an old wagon her eyes caught something. Checking no one was around first Shirley darted across the path and knelt down. Quickly pulling her bag back off her shoulder she rummaged around and produced an evidence bag. Using tweezers as not to disturb the evidence she placed the item in the polythene bag and placed it in her rucksack.

Behind her, some metres off came the sound of barking, Shirley's face paled and she quickly lifted the binoculars to her eyes. Her heart sank at the sight. Several Dobermans were padding around where she had stood to take the photos and they clearly smelled something they shouldn't.

Shirley took one gulp and sprinted for the fence, accidentally kicking a piece of metal in her flight. The dogs heard it and advanced. Shirley was fast but there was no way she could out run these dogs. Every second they gained on her, she looked back and saw that they were only 50 metres away. As she reached the barrel she shrugged off her bag and flung it over the fence where it landed softly in a bush. Next she hurled herself at the rope and leaped high on the fence. By now the dogs were ten metres away and clearly excited in their chase. As her feet slipped against the smooth metal Shirley began to panic, the dogs were almost on her. In a last ditch attempt she jumped up and managed to grab the top of the fence. Her hands stung in agony but she ignored it and struggled to get her legs over, the dogs leapt at her and the dog grasped her trouser leg as she threw herself over the other side.

RIP!

The bottom of her trousers tore and a large piece of material came away in the dog's mouth. Shirley shook her head out of a daze and quickly scrambled away from the fence, breathing hard. The dogs were still snapping and snarling at her but at least there was now a metal fence in-between her flesh and the dog's teeth.

Rising unsteadily to her feet, she fished her bag from the bush and hurried away from the building, silently wishing her long ex partner was with her now.

Ruslan was concerned about the state Anna arrived at the hotel in and quickly set about cleaning her up. Ignoring her protests that she was okay and that they were only small cuts he ordered her to the table.

"Okay, roll up your sleeves" Ruslan requested as he placed a warm bowl of water in front of her. Anna grimaced as the cotton pulled on the torn skin.

"Okay, this might sting a little" he teased, "so I want you to look away and recite the nursery rhyme 'baa baa black sheep'.

Anna gave him a weird look but all he did was raise his eyebrow at her - in an annoyingly similar fashion to Shirley. So she complied and giggled out the first line. Dipping some cotton wool in the water Ruslan carefully wiped away the dirt from around the cut before gently running it over the actual graze. Anna's recitation of Baa Baa Black Sheet suddenly took a higher note as the abrasion stung sharply. After the initial sting the rest of the clean up was fine and the gentleness that Ruslan produced surprised her. So much so that she stopped the recitation to watch him.

"You've done this before".

“How did you guess” Ruslan replied giving her a lopsided grin. Anna’s heart missed a few beats at that.

“Well it’s pretty evident”.

He grinned at her,

“Well I looked after my neighbours kids a lot. They were quite boisterous and seemed to always need stitching up”.

Anna nodded softly as Ruslan placed a plaster over one of her deeper scratches. He then took turned his attention to another raw looking graze,

“My, my, Miss Grange, you need to look after yourself a bit better than this”.

“I know,” she replied, “I wonder how Shirley’s getting on”.

“We’ll find out soon – hopefully better that you did otherwise I’ll run out of bandages!”

Anna laughed as he pulled a face. Gently he applied some antiseptic cream to her wound and looked up,

“How’s that feel?”

“It feels much better, thank you” She paused, a wicked look in her eyes, “Though; it would feel a lot better if someone would kiss it better”.

Ruslan’s eyes snapped up to hers and she looked directly back, challenging him, he visibly relaxed and quipped,

“If it would please Madam”.

A daft smile etched her face and she held out her arm,

“It certainly would”.

Ruslan bent down and placed a soft kiss just above the graze causing a hundred butterflies to arise in Anna’s stomach. Decidedly he placed another, longer, one next to the previous one and Anna had to bit her lip from sighing in bliss.

Letting her skin go softly he brought his head up to smile at her and their eyes locked. Then Ruslan grimaced,

“Yuck! Antiseptic cream tastes disgusting!”

Anna burst out in laughter and soon Ruslan did too. It was then that Shirley appeared at the door, looking rather ruffled and red in the face. She looked rather comical in fact and it was enough to send Anna into hysterics.

“What?” asked Shirley.

Ruslan just shook his head,

“Never mind”.

“Okay team, let’s round up and see what we’ve got”.

The faces straightened into seriousness again and they settled around the table. Although nothing breaking had been found at least they now had a lead.

The first ice breaker didn’t arrive for three days. Shirley awoke to a knock on the door, outside a man from the hotel handed her a package and a form to sign. Taking the pen and scrawling her name she gave him a tip and shut the door.

“What’s that?” Anna asked sleepily.

“It’s the book from Bo’s Aunts”.

Pulling away the parcel paper she flipped over and saw the writing “Bo’s diary”. Her eyebrows rose in curiosity, next she noticed the padlock and fore with the lack of a key. Turning the book to its back cover she found an inscribed note.

If only you could

magic it open

Now what could that mean?

Chapter #8 : Understandings

“It’s getting too risky Wilson. We need to pull out. I need to pull out – my wife, my kids; I can’t do it to them again”.

“Relax Kev, by next week the exchange will be over with and we can go back to our lives, no one will be any the wiser”.

“But what if it goes wrong? What if there is a leak in information?”

“Nothing will go wrong; as long as we both stick to our jobs everything will be fine”.

“It’s alright for you, you’re rolling in it but some of us have to work!”

“Now look here. At the moment everything is going as planned. The only thing that’s going make us fail is if one of us loses our bottle. So pucker up, for if you are the one that loses me this deal so help me – your life won’t be worth living. Got it?”

“Hakunnah Matata”.

“Ha ha... Glad we see eye to eye”.

Zzzzzzzp.

“Hakunnah Matata”.

“Ha ha... Glad we see eye to eye”.

Shirley clicked the recorder off.

“Well, he’s not lying about having kids” she said, scribbling down a note.

Ruslan looked up at her questioningly,

“How do you know for certain?”

Shirley just smiled and gesturing with her hand replied,

“Hakunnah Matata is from a 1994 Disney film specifically aimed at younger children. I cannot imagine, though there’s a slight possibility I could be wrong, that a top notch business man of thirty would go out of his way to watch a kid’s film. I suspect he either took his children to the cinema or bought the video for them. The latter would probably be more feasible as he came right out with the saying which suggests that he watched the film recently.”

“They could be his nieces and nephews or his neighbours” Ruslan argued.

Shirley hesitated, a slight pained expression crossing her face, Ruslan certainly wasn’t making this easy for her.

“That’s true and hopefully Anna can put some light into this matter. Have you managed to get a clear picture of the name tag yet?”

“Yes, his name is Scott Jessop and... he is a partner in the multi-million pound company ‘Methno Supplies’ based in London. I am just locating some of his personal information...” Anna called from Shirley’s laptop.

“Methno Supplies...” Shirley pondered out loud, and then an idea struck her. Delving into her pocket she pulled out her cell phone. With practiced ease she dialled a number and waited patiently for a reply. The answer machine switched on.

Hello this is Dr Bartholomew James. I’m afraid I’m not in at the moment but please leave your name and number after the tone and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can. Thank you! Beep .

“Hi Bart, this is Shirley. Listen; can you do me a favour? I’m on a case at the moment and I need to know as much information as possible about “Methno Supplies”. That’s M.E.T.H.N.O Supplies; I believe they are based in London, thanks.”

She snapped the phone shut, Ruslan looked across with curiosity,

“Is that the same Bart who went out with Alicia?”

“Yeah, he’s got a PhD in Astro-physics but he also has a lot of links with million dollar companies. If they have more than a million dollars in their bank account then Bart will know something about them.”

“That’s pounds, not dollars Shirley. Methno Supplies is based in England and their currency is the pound sterling,” Anna called from the table.

Shirley just rolled her eyes and picked up the photo's that Ruslan had taken with her camera pen.

"Well, aren't we a naughty boy" Anna muttered. Shirley and Ruslan's immediately snapped the heads up and clambered over to where Anna sat with the laptop.

"You got something, Anna?"

Anna just nodded in reply and swirled around in the seat to face them.

"It seems that our boy Mr Scott Jessop did ten months community service for petty thieving when he was nineteen. Seems he was part of a gang, which hit several stores in one night. He got caught helping an injured store worker... the other members were never caught,"

Shirley had a sudden flashback to a similar sounding case, where Bo had honestly shocked the hell out of her.

<Editor: (reading an e-mail from Molly) Three years ago, Redington was rocked by a series of convenience store robberies. I believe the conspiracy of silence protecting one of the people responsible is reprehensible regardless of how stoked some may be over his recent success in Europe.

Tremaine: One of those store owners took a heart attack and died

Editor: Is this what you're trying to stop? Publication of this column?

Tremaine: We never did catch those punks. This is your lucky day, my young friend, because if you know who was behind those robberies and you refuse to tell me, you get to be an accessory to manslaughter>

An accessory to manslaughter, man, I didn't see that one coming. Or of what I had suspected that one wasn't one of the answers I had in my pocket. I thought I knew my best friend, I guess it's just one of those painful reminders that you should never jump to conclusions. But there was one conclusion that I did know and that is that Bo could never lie to my face. Maybe it's because I could always see right through his façade or maybe it was because he actually trusted me... But that aside; he did follow through and convinced his friend to tell the police who the other gang members were. It was one of Bo's finest hours, that and his little speech and although it seemed customary at the time; I knew that it was Bo cutting the last ties he had to his previous convictions. No longer did he associate himself with the gang and his petty crimes, no, he was Bo Sawchuk now, thinker for himself.

<I've been telling myself all day that I had to stop Molly's column... some kind of loyalty but... it wasn't loyalty man... It was because I was afraid like you're afraid now. It isn't right, kids shouldn't have to live in fear>

He was absolutely right, kids shouldn't live in fear but as long as gang power and sociopaths like

Molly Hardy roam the streets, kids will be forever looking over their shoulders. Worst of all, the adult world is no better.

Shirley returned her attention to Anna, who scrolled down the screen.

“Also, you were right Shirley, Mr Jessop has two children, one 8 and one 12 and a wife by the name of Dana Leonard. Whom; he married in Samerad Parish Church in 1989 and has stayed faithful to for nearly fourteen years. I also have a current address for where he lives with his wife and kids in London.”

“Excellent Anna, well done. What about the other guy?”

The girl sighed in frustration,

“Now he’s another story. I’ve narrowed him down to two possible candidates but it’s difficult to trace either one.”

“Keep trying, he has to be a somebody.”

As Anna swung back round in her chair wearily, there came a knock on the door. Shirley got up to answer it and found a cheerful porter standing there with a package in his arms.

“????? ??? ??????? Holmes”

“?????????? ???”

Shirley took the package, signed the slip and handed him a tip. He tilted his hat at her and left.

Closing the door with her foot she started pulling the brown parcel paper away. Thank you Olusia, she thought as a small dragon was revealed.

It had taken only a few minutes for her to figure out the clue on Bo’s diary,

If only you could magic it open.

Now what could that mean? It stands to reason that the word ‘magic’ is the key point in the phrase, so what sort of things are related to magic? Shirley had then made a list, ranging from witches, to The Blairwitch Project. None of it sparked any ideas though. It was then Ruslan’s magazine had caught her eye, there splashed on the page was an advert for the second Harry Potter film. Wizards. It dawned on her then; the last case they had solved together was based around a game committee called the WIZARD. Why WIZARD? Well it was an anagram of the team’s first initials. Wizards were magical people and in the context of the case; the magic had been for Bo to find the clues and rescue Shirley. The last of the clues had been two keys, one of which broke in the lock and the other one Bo had kept as a souvenir. In fact, he had kept one of the dragons, taken out its dangerous personality and put the key inside.

Having figured out the clue, she then rang Bo’s Aunt and asked her to go look for the dragon. It had to be at her Aunt’s house as Bo would have needed the key to write in the diary. Olusia reported back to have found the dragon and was going to send it across to Shirley.

Now was the moment of truth, she placed the dragon on the table and went into her room to find the diary. Returning she placed it and her pocket toolkit on the table top and sat down. Turning the dragon over Shirley held it under the light, trying to see what type of head the screw had. It was a cross. Taking the cross shaped screwdriver from her kit she proceeded to carefully take out the screw. Removing the bottom plate, Shirley took a long breath before flipping the dragon over and giving it a shake. To her relieve a key clinked onto the table and by the look of it, it would surely fit the padlock on the diary.

It did, the padlock unsnapped and the book sprang open, revealing many pages of scrawled writing.

Shirley just stared at it, her heart thumping at the feeling of holding something belonging to her best friend. This was the book he had touched, read and written in with his painfully familiar scrawl. It told of his thoughts, his feelings and accounts of trivial happenings - which seemed as captivating as though they were momentous occasions. At least, they were fascinating to Shirley and she couldn't understand why.

'Day 1,

Well I'm here and I don't know why. I mean I've only been here for two hours and already I'm homesick. Well... that's not entirely truthful. Don't get me wrong, I miss my parents' loads; I hated seeing my mother so upset at the airport... I hated that so much but... It's her... it's always her... why is she so aggravating! Either she's in your face with her quest to know everything and it's all you can do to get away from her or she's faraway and despite yourself, you can't get her out of your head.

She's everywhere, I see her in all the brunettes, I smell her on her journal and my clothes and everything said to me reminds me of some stupid case we did together. I can't close my eyes without picturing her poured over a microscope. Shirley couldn't stop putting her nose in other people's business especially mine. Why did she have to be so damned annoying? Yet... god, I miss her so much; it hurts... I just want to go home...

Shirley snapped the book shut, swiping the back of her hand across her eyes to stop the tears from falling.

Anna hurried over, concerned,

"Shirley are you okay?"

Shirley nodded sharply and avoided the comforting arm,

"I'm going out to the West again. I'll look at some of the places I missed the other day. I don't want to assume anything with the Methno Supplies."

Anna signed inwardly, Shirley was putting up her guard again, and ignoring whatever it was that troubled her. Something clearly upset her friend but if she wasn't going to talk about it then Anna knew it would be hopeless to try.

"Fine" she replied, heading back to the table, "I'll carry on with identifying this man and I'll look up some of the industries online."

Ruslan stood up and stretched,

“And I think I’ll go along the backstreets by the river. Search out the lowlife lot, crawl a couple of pubs, see what the talk on the street is. Maybe I can get out some info from those who constantly have their ears to the grounds.”

Anna stood up rather quickly,

“Isn’t that a bit dangerous, Ruslan. I mean I know you can speak a little Russian but those types of people talk hard.” She was quite clearly alarmed.

Ruslan smiled reassuringly, picking up his leather jacket,

“I’ve dealt with these sorts of people before; they’re the same wherever you go. Sure, what goes on in dark corners isn’t pretty, I know that. But trust me, for most intellectually deficient punks, just feed them a couple of pints and they’ll spout Shakespeare to the hilt. I’ll be fine, I promise.”

Anna bit her lip, fighting an internal war but eventually nodded reluctantly. Ruslan offered her a half smile and walked over to her slowly, eyes glinting.

“Fear not, oh fair maiden. I will return... but... if I don’t appear before seven, send a search party. Or at least have six cups of strong black coffee at the ready.” He winked, kissed her soundly on the lips and sauntered out the door.

Anna just stood there, speechless.

It wasn’t until eight o’clock that night that Bart got back to Shirley.

“Morning Shirley”.

“Morning?” Shirley scrunched her forehead in puzzlement then laughed, “Oh of course! Redington is probably the best part of ten hours behind Volgograd.”

“Ah... things are beginning to make more sense. I get a call at some god-forsaken hour in the morning for information about some London based company. Although I prefer to know what exactly I’m looking for; I have got some information for you, if you want.”

“Please” Shirley replied tersely

“Well, I’m not sure whether this is going to be any help on whatever case you’re on... Anyway, Methno Supplies is the second ditch attempt at making a company work. Two years ago they went bankrupt after taking a serious gamble; it left them with quite a lot to pay off in repayments. Methno Supplies has taken off quite well but unless they suddenly get a substantially rich offer then its en-route to the same ending as its predecessor. They are going to find it hard to get someone to invest because no one will want it if they find it’s got a shaky history.”

“That all makes sense” Shirley replied slowly as she thought about the conversation on the tape. “Any dodgy dealings going around it.”

“I’m afraid not, although in dire trouble the company never resorted to anything under the hand so

to speak. They're pretty much squeaky clean, or as clean as multi million pound companies can get."

Shirley signed dejectedly,

"Thanks Bart, that information was invaluable to the case."

"You don't sound happy" he teased.

"No, it wasn't the answer I was hoping for. It means the answer must lie somewhere else".

"Oh, well, nobody said anything was easy... uh, is Anna there by any chance?"

"Yeah, hold on I'll get her for you... Anna! Bart's on the phone."

Anna squealed and dived for the phone,

"Hey... have you seen the latest X-Files episode?"

Shirley laughed and shook her head giving Ruslan a sympathetic look,

"So, are you going to ask her out for dinner?"

He gave her a quizzical look,

"What?"

"Look, it's eight o'clock, we haven't got any fresh leads and there's not much we can do in this darkness" she indicated to the window where the street lights blinked invitingly. "Go and treat yourselves, take her out for dinner, go see a movie, do whatever you young things do now-a-days. It'll give me some privacy to read Bo's diary as well."

"Are you sure?"

"You're asking a Holmes?"

Ruslan grinned impishly and jumped up, making a big gesture of brushing himself down,

"Thanks Shirley!"

"Just make sure you have her home before three, young man."

He saluted her and went to collect their coats.

I always come back to the same thought, if Shirley was here what would she do? That's enough to sort out all my problems and quell my dire need to see her... I miss you Shirley wherever you are...

Shirley sniffed, her throat burned and her eyes stung from holding back the tears that ever-increasingly threatened to fall. It was one thing to hear Ruslan say that Bo had actually missed

her but to read it from Bo's hand... A huge wave of relief and anguish fell over her. In all honesty, one of the main reasons that Shirley had been so upset about Bo leaving had been the fear of him forgetting about her. Shirley had never allowed anyone to get close to her like Bo had once become, losing somebody close was a new thing to her and since it was Bo, it hurt very much. The thought of Bo forgetting that she ever existed caused her gut to twist painfully and she closed her eyes in attempt to block the pain.

I was blind to the colour around me; everything was black and white, totally colourless. Then this blob appeared called Bo, he wasn't black and he wasn't white. He was a bright colour and all of a sudden the blackness and the whiteness seemed to fade into the background as my life was illuminated by a dazzling rainbow. He wasn't a special colour; in fact compared to others he was pretty ordinary. The one thing that made him stand out, especially, was the fact that he was the first colour to appear.

If you're out there, I will find you my friend... or if not then I'll take your revenge. After all, even my great, great uncle looked out for his friends...

Quote: 'If you had killed Watson, you would not have got out of this room alive'.

(Spoken by Sherlock Holmes in "The Adventure of the Three Garridebs")

Chapter #9 : On Whose Trail ?

Shirley brushed the last strand of her silky brunette hair up into the bobble before twisting it into an elegant knot. The addition of a stylish pin held it high on her head, making her appearance look professionally wise instead of lost and tacky. The beige suit fitted Shirley well, making her slim figure very trim and showed off her legs somewhat. Shirley couldn't help but wonder what Bo would think if he saw her now. Since school, she'd grown a couple of inches, lost a few pounds and her hair was sleek, allowing her a couple of extended looks from available guys. But Shirley wasn't really interested - if she was honest with herself.

A simple spray of lavender perfume and she was ready. Snatching up her purse Shirley walked steadily to the door, grinning inwardly at her accomplishment. It had taken a few weeks of constant traipsing round the house and nights of aching blisters for her to master the art of heels. Now it was second nature, although she preferred soft shoes as they were less noisy and allowed her to follow people without being heard. Today however, she was going to have to rely on more than soft shoes to keep her real identity silent. Since reading the diary over a week ago, she'd had a boost in hope and was now freshly determined at solving this case.

Today, she was delving further into the field and mingling with its occupants as though she'd been born one of them. Today, she was infiltrating at the top. Today, Shirley was part of the business meeting, attended by the representatives of half the organizations in Volgograd. Today could be a field day in exploring prospect companies.

With Bart's help and other anonymous 'high up' people Shirley had managed to gain a seat in the large meeting set for today. Under the alias of 'The Eastern Timber Corporation', she was to take part in the discussion or an undeveloped piece of land. A site, in which had sparked much controversy and competition between the many companies wishing to expand and buy it. Today was just an introduction by an agent to highlight the advantages and disadvantages and to answer any questions. It was also the day to state the minimal price, which would help reduce the number of contestants' right at the beginning. Shirley's plan was simply to mix in the background, keeping a neutral front and avoid any direct confrontation.

The knock on the door snapped her back into reality as Ruslan called,

“Shirley are you about ready, it’s almost nine thirty”.

“I’ll be right out”.

Ruslan was to accompany her on this little undercover mission, acting as her second in command. The reason it was Ruslan and not Anna was the fact that Shirley had a sneaking suspicion that the number of women at this meeting would be minimal. She felt that if two women represented a company there might be too many questions asked. Not what she wanted if they were to keep a low profile.

Anna, herself was looking pretty smart, she had managed to gain herself access to an exclusive interview with the largest chemical works in her part of Volgograd. Under the pretence of an exchange student, she was to get an interview for her ‘school magazine’ to inspire her classmates into the chemical business.

At an age over twenty, she wasn’t sure whether it was a compliment or not that people mistake her for a fifteen year old, but on a case like this it could come in handy!

Quickly rechecking that she had everything she needed in her rucksack, Anna headed out to the main room, in hope of finding her jacket. Of which, had, unfortunately become misplaced when she and Ruslan had returned to the hotel a little less than sober last night.

Not in the cupboard, on the couch, on the work top, on the floor... where was it?

“Hey! Have either of you seen my jacket?”

“Nope” replied Ruslan heading for the fridge to grab a roll of film.

“Damn, its cold out, where did I have it last?”

“How about the fridge?” Ruslan called, Anna screwed up her face,

“Don’t be daft”.

“Hey, I’m not the daft one who put it in there”.

Anna glared over at him, confused and a little irritated,

“What?”

Ruslan just shrugged, trying not to grin,

“Take a look”.

Sighing she walked over to the fridge, giving Ruslan a deploring look as she passed him. Opening the fridge she gasped in surprise. There was her jacket bunched up on the top shelf. How drunk was she last night?

The cold fabric sent Goosebumps up her arms but Anna gritted her teeth, grabbed her purse and

strode out the door. The grey clods already gathered over her head.

“Someone’s grouchy this morning” Ruslan muttered. Whether he meant for her to hear or not, Ruslan didn’t know, but she spun around, stuck out her tongue and slammed the door behind her.

“Grouchy and... weird, a nice combination”.

Shirley laughed at this as she walked into the spacious main room.

“That’s Anna alright. A typical woman without the stinging bite. Be thankful, those types are rare, Anna is one in a million”.

“I know” he sighed.

Shirley gave him a side long look and cracked a grin,

“You sentimental fool”.

With that they gathered their stuff and headed out to the foyer. While awaiting a free taxi, they stood quietly, huddled up to keep the chilly air out. It was a frosty morning and the exhaust fumes seemed to billow in torrents of white steam in a swamping, ever-growing, mist across the road. Although the traffic was light, the sounds of the engines mixed with the people walking past, the cranes and diggers working on a nearby site and the bustling of porters around the main entrance were quite deafening. Shirley glanced around the street, it was nice she noted; the pavement lined with trees and grass. The absence of litter was refreshing compared to home. Glancing up the road he eyes took in the familiar high brick wall of the factory next to the hotel. It seemed a quiet establishment although being one of the biggest manufacturers in the whole city. The employees seemed to either come or go, never stopping to wait by the gates, even for a friend. The hum of the machines was also distant, loud enough to hear on the street but quiet enough to be blocked by the Hotel’s double glazed windows. Just as well, she remarked, looking back up at the grand hotel with its elegant style bricks, rich furnishings and red carpet. Had the factory not been as quiet as it was, the hotel would probably not have been such a success. Ruslan jerked forward and signalled a passing cab, startling her out her musings. As he opened the door for her, Shirley took one last look as the industrial brown words of “Kartek Tractors’ before clambering into the back seat.

Anna was bored already sitting there; it had taken her a few attempts to introduce herself to the secretary, who unfortunately spoke little English. This was clearly a different person to who she spoke to on the phone. Having difficulty, too, in reading Russian, the magazines had bored her in minutes.

The waiting room was a stark white colour, only broken up by the purple seats dotted against the wall. On the far corner the secretary’s oak desk stood, in a conservative room it would have been at home but with the white background it looked startlingly out of place. The only other pieces in the room were the table on which the magazines lay and the two pictures of watercolour roses on the wall. The sparse décor made the prospect of even singular ‘I spy’ look dim. So she set about rechecking her questions.

Finally, the door next to the secretary opened and a large man, set in his fifties, complete with grey hair, comb over and bulging waistline entered. His sharp brown eyes immediately looked straight at Anna, as though sizing her up.

“Good afternoon, I’m Mr Henstein please come through to my office” his deep voice was heavily accented with Russian but his English was understandable.

Anna stood up and followed him into another sparsely decorated room. The only personal object there was the photo frame of presumably his wife and two cheeky little boys, sitting on the desk.

“Please, have a seat. Now I believe you’re here from school?”

“Yes sir. I’m writing an article for my fellow students about the opportunities they have when leaving school. I was hoping I could ask you some questions about the work you offer?”

“Certainly, fire away”.

“Opening her notebook, Anna cleared her throat before asking,

“What do you look for in an employee”?

“Ah, well, that depends. Generally we want them to fulfil all the training requirements but we also train on the job. We ask our employees to be presentable, work hard and have plenty of motivation. A good sense is needed for health and safety, especially when using our machinery. Someone who shows that they are truly interested in pursuing a career in the company is also high on our mark”.

“What sort of jobs do you offer”?

“Well, we have two main sides; there is the office side and the manufacturing side. On the business side we offer careers in secretarial, account, finance, computing and marketing. On the manufacture side we have jobs ranging from loading to heavy machine production handling”.

“What sort of salary do you tender?”

Anna watched for any uncomfortable signs from the man but he didn’t even bat an eyelash.

“The pay rises from £5 an hour for easy manual labour to £40 000 for high up marketing”.

“Is there any age group that you prefer when looking at applicants”.

Mr Henstein slouched back slightly in the twirly leather seat, making it creak under his weight. There must be something about those twirly chairs as the one she was sitting on kept turning her around, trying to make her face the door. In an unobtrusive way she hook her foot under one of the supports managing to keep the crazy seat in control.

“We are not sexist or racist in anyway but we do have some strict rules when it comes to manual labour. We prefer to have young adults between 18 – 40, who are reasonably fit, this is to do with Health and Safety. There are also some height restrictions on some of the machinery, this cannot be helped. Generally no, we have no preferences to age, race, size or sex”.

“What other benefits do you give your employees?”

“We offer many things, such as 7 weeks paid holidays, opportunities for promotion, bonuses for extra work and we also have an excellent maternity plan”.

Anna smiled,

“Sounds like the perfect place to work”.

The man chuckled, reclining further in his chair,

“We try our best”.

“Okay, almost finished, how big is your workforce?”

Mr Henstein pondered a second,

“I would say about 3000 on the pay roll”.

“Wow that’s a lot!”

Mr Henstein laughed again, his chin wobbling in rhythm,

“We are a BIG business young miss”.

Anna politely cracked a grin as the man sat forward again, the chair squeaking its protest.

“Any other questions?”

“Yes, just one. Do all your employees live in Volgograd?”

“I couldn’t exactly say for all of them but most live in the city. We tend to get many applicants from Kytarack College which is only two miles away. They specialise in business management and technical studies. In fact, if you’re interested, I suggest you pay them a visit, they’ll tell you all about the training and the courses they offer”.

Anna nodded enthusiastically,

“I certainly will sir, anyway, I think that’s all my questions answered”.

MR Henstein nodded and opened the top drawer on the left of his desk.

“I have some leaflets here that might prove useful for your school”.

“Thank you” Anna replied, taking the folder full of brightly coloured leaflets, “And thank you for your time”.

She rose and so did Mr Henstein,

“A pleasure miss. I hope that everything I’ve said has been helpful”.

“It certainly has sir”.

They walked to the door and Henstein opened it for Anna. Shaking his hand and wishing him goodbye, Anna thanked the secretary and made her way out of the building. Her mind was working overtime and it indicated strongly that this business was nothing to do with the case. Which was good in a way because she had liked the cheery manager, but on the other hand it gave her no help in her search for Bo?

Perching on the bus shelter bench she wondered how Shirley and Ruslan were getting on. Amusedly she wondered whether Ruslan was bored out of his skull by now – she certainly

hoped so!

Anna was right. Ruslan was bored out of his skull except he didn't dare let it show. In fact he daren't move as this meeting was so professional.

The hall was quite big and tastefully decorated rows of tables and plush chairs faced a small stage. On the stage was a large screen and a panel consisting of two women and three men. One of the men was giving a deep explanation of the plot of ground. Different slides kept flashing on the screen; so many that Ruslan wondered how the hard drive hadn't crashed!

Even though he was bored, Shirley was paid rapt attention, which was just as well as one of them should at least have a clue about what was going on. The mass of straight faced men and woman dressed in expensive suits and constantly whispering behind their hands to ach other as though it were a conspiracy, did not settle right with him.

I should be used to this. I've seen more than my fair share of top notch business men in court. I just hope that nobody asks my opinion on anything. Hey, I'll just introduce them to Shirley and make her talk to them. I'm evil...

It seemed like hours had gone by when Shirley nudged Ruslan awake,

"Is that it done now? What was the minimum bid?"

"Yes, the presentation is over and they've set the minimum bid a 3 and a half million pounds" Shirley looked around cautiously before carrying on, "Some of the contenders have already dropped out but there are still many in. Right now, some of them are showing their ideas and are giving out information. I suggest that we inconspicuously have a good look at all of them. Go around, mingle, ask a couple of questions" her voice dropped and she leaned forward, pressing a cold object in his hands, "...take a few pictures..." Shirley fiddled with one of the buttons on her suit, "... record a couple of conversations".

"Sounds like a plan" Ruslan replied winking conspiringly at her.

Shirley grinned and winked back before walking off towards a larger group of people.

Anna stepped off the bus, clutching a wad of paper and some books. The tall heavy gates of the factory next to the Hotel loomed impressively in front of her as the familiar red brick wall welcomed her back to the hotel. Anna couldn't help but stop to marvel at the desertedness of the place. The grounds were totally void of people but as she looked up into the office windows she could see clearly the silent silhouettes of people moving about.

Pulling her shirt back down into place Anna continued walking along the street and up the steps into the hotel. The doorman politely nodded to her as she entered through the main door.

Ruslan gathered that this meeting was coming to a close quite soon. Two thirds of the people had already left and those that were left were packing up. To say he was relieved was an understatement and also, his stomach growled, he was hungry.

Putting his notebook and pile of leaflets down on a near by table, he slipped the “pen” into his top pocket.

Where was Shirley?

He scanned the room looking for the familiar brunette hair of his friend. There she was over in the far corner. As he walked over to her someone clipped him on the shoulder, making him sway. Ready to apologise for something that wasn't his entire fault, Ruslan looked behind him but saw the tall figure storming away. He couldn't even see his face.

Wonder what's biting him?

Shrugging his shoulders he continued over to Shirley and gently nudged her elbow,

“I think we should make our exit soon. If we stay any longer we will draw attention”.

Shirley knew it was an excuse, she could see that Ruslan was desperate to get out of here... hell so was she. What he said was true anyway, so she agreed and excused herself. Nobody seemed to care.

“So did you get plenty of pictures?” Shirley enquired.

“Yeah, I took loads and I managed to steal a pile of leaflets. What about you?”

“Well I overheard some interesting conversations but I'll need to go over them again at the hotel. Nothing important really stood out but I could have missed something”.

“Well we'll put everything together when we get back”.

Picking up his small bundle from the table Ruslan followed Shirley out the room and eventually into the chilly afternoon air. He didn't notice that his pile of leaflets had gone up by one envelope.

Anna had just bit into a cheese and salami sandwich when the hotel room door opened and admitted a bright eyed Shirley and a tired looking Ruslan.

Anna looked from one to the other as she asked,

“How did it go?”

“Quite interesting actually” said Shirley as Ruslan groaned out, “I was bored out my skull”.

Anna laughed and gave Ruslan a sympathetic smile,

“You guys hungry? I made some sandwiches, they're in the fridge”.

Ruslan's pout suddenly transformed into a giant grin,

“Food!” He dived at Anna and hugged her tightly, “oh I love you!” Then he bounded to the fridge and pulled out a plate. Smiling luxuriously as he inhaled the sandwichy smell, Ruslan muttered,

“Oh beautiful food, I though I was never going to see you again. I'm so hungry...”

Shirley rolled her eyes.

So alike are Anna and Ruslan, both as weird and wonderful as each other.

Joining them at the table with her own sandwich, Shirley handed Ruslan his pile of leaflets. As she passed them across the table a small white envelope fell out into the sugar bowl.

“What’s that” Shirley asked, removing it and giving it a shake to get rid of the sugar grains. Ruslan shrugged,

“I have no idea, open it”.

Shirley tore open the envelope with her right index finger and pulled out a single folded sheet of paper. Unfolding it the words came out clear. Her eyes widened in surprise then furrowed deeply in concern.

“What is it?” Anna asked around a mouthful of cheese.

Shirley silently flipped it over so that her friends could read it. The sandwich fell from Anna’s hand and Ruslan gaped in shock.

My advice is to stay away. You don’t know what you’re meddling with. Go back to where you came from and forget that you ever heard of St Francis. There’s nothing you can do as this plan is perfect.

“Nothing is perfect” Shirley said slowly.

She had a flashback to when she had said the same sort of thing,

<Bo: Maybe he is... the perfect boyfriend?

Shirley: Nobody’s perfect, a principle used in Japanese art.

That was the first time when either of them had ever suggested that there could have been more between them. Unfortunately, Bo had done the typical male thing and disappeared home. Their next meeting had been awkward but they had managed to have a sort of discussion ending in

Bo: I mean we’re best friends

Shirley: (interrupting briskly) Yeah, we can’t lose that

Bo: Alicia and Bart don’t know what they’re talking about

Shirley: No... it’s just something that they can amuse themselves with. There’s no weight in it.

They grew silent... both staring at the ground. Suddenly Bo looked up and Shirley found herself

pulled forward as he kissed her quickly. Pulling back he squeaked,

Bo: See, didn't feel anything, just best friends. Come on lets go to the Quazer Café, I'm starving.>

Maybe the peck had meant nothing to Bo but it had meant something for Shirley. Even today her lips tingled at the memory, sweet and much needed but far too short. Although a closely guarded secret it was the one thing that kept Shirley going on the inside when it all got too much.

God Bo... I miss you so much... if you're out there... if you can hear me... I'll find you soon, I promise.

Shirley snapped back to the present and her face instantly turned to dismay,

"Unfortunately someone knows what we're doing..."

Chapter #10 : It Narrows

The room was deadly quiet except for the pulse of the clock on the wall. Shirley's last statement vibrated in their heads pounding in time with the ever-increasing volume of the tick. Someone knew.

"It must have been someone from one of the participating companies; otherwise they'd never have got in there. Those meetings are usually highly guarded by security" Anna stated as she sat down at the table.

Shirley picked up a leaflet, although appearing to read it, her mind was elsewhere.

"In which case, you're suggesting that one of the companies present today, is really the ASLA. One of them has the whole of St Francis in enslavement".

"It does sound a little far-fetched doesn't it" Anna replied as she sifted through some notes.

"Unfortunately, the most far-fetched ideas usually come from the truth" Ruslan replied.

Anna glanced over to him with a frown,

"So you really think in this day and age that enslavement is going to happen?"

Ruslan shrugged, his face impassive,

"Yeah. If nobody thinks its plausible then they can practically get away with it. I mean so far, nobody has suspected foul play except us".

"That's true, Ruslan, and I agree with you but there's only one way to find out, and that's to find St Francis. Anna, I know that this sounds really incredible but I have this gut feeling that we're on the right track".

Shirley gave Anna a pleading look, Anna sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Okay Shirl, who am I to argue with a Holmes?"

Ruslan smirked,

“So what now?”

Shirley smiled her all-knowing smile,

“Now,” she said triumphantly, “Now that we have decided that it must be one of the corporations participating in the auction, I want to get a copy of the guest book!”

It was so simple that Ruslan was astounded.

Getting a copy of the guest book was made simple by a phone call to Bart. He who has connections in all high places asked no questions and had it delivered to them (With no explanations) by ten o'clock that night. It was a silent agreement that if he asked no questions about 'why', they would ask no questions about 'how'. This made everything much easier and less awkward.

By eleven o'clock they had a considerably reduced list of suspects after they had eliminated all the drop-outs of the day and all their previous investigations. It surprised them at how many of the names they recognised; it seemed that the piece of land for sale was very much in demand.

Now they were tired; thrilled that they were getting somewhere, but very tired. Ruslan decided that now was a good time to voice the thing that had been troubling him.

“Okay” he said, catching Anna and Shirley’s attention as they looked up from their paperwork, “So maybe it turns out that you’re right Shirley. This insane group has kidnapped a whole school - that’s a lot of people – and they are using them as slaves in a major production unit. That is big. No it’s not; it’s HUGE. This is something that could start a war! Shouldn’t it be someone like the Russian Army or Government who takes over this investigation? I mean we are only three humans who haven’t even gotten into their better twenties. Surely some high power should know about this”.

Shirley sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Having been up since early that morning, her tiredness was beginning to give her a headache.

“You’re right, Ruslan, someone should know but not yet. I mean, first off, what evidence have we got to offer them, all we have is speculation – we’d be laughed out of this country! Secondly, the whole country would be swarming over this, that could lead to panic on the ASLA part and who knows what would happen. Safety of St Francis comes first. And thirdly, they’d have nowhere to begin and it would take time to tell them everything we know. Time IS of the essence here, this is the lives of well over 700 pupils and teachers”.

“Right, okay, I see your point”.

Shirley bowed her head in resign, hating the truth of her words. They made her feel small and heavy the weight of the whole world resting on her.

Anna glanced at her friends faces, noting the wary looks.

“Look you two. We’re all tired. I doubt we’re going to find anything else tonight. We already have what we want so let’s go to bed. Tomorrow is another day and we can go to the library and look up more information on our new list of suspects”.

It was a mutual agreement and they packed up.

By eleven o'clock the next day they were quietly seated amongst a table full of books. They had not uttered a word to each other all morning as they were all too engrossed in their research. The list of prospect suspects had dwindled for many reasons. From purely machinery run to small scale production, the names disappeared by their quantity.

Anna reached across the table, shifted some books and pulled the copy of the guest book out. In trying, she successfully managed to tear the corner. Not even noticing, she leafed through the pages until she found what she was looking for; '??? ????????? ??????????'. With a black biro Anna scored the name out before reaching for another book.

As she read Anna felt her eyes burning, placing the book down she rubbed them and glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was eleven twenty three, quite late as they'd been here since the place had opened at eight. Eyes slightly watery, Anna decided she should take a five minute break and she glanced around for her friends.

Shirley was typing frantically on a pc no more that eight feet away and Ruslan was sitting across from her, scribbling away into a notebook.

Sensing Anna's gaze upon him, Ruslan peered up and offered a smile,

"Tired?" he asked, book marking his page.

"Yeah, I could do with some caffeine".

Placing his book down Ruslan grinned at her,

"Sounds like a plan".

Standing up with discomfort, Anna walked over to Shirley who was copying a whole page worth of Russian text into a translator.

"Hey Shirl, Ruslan and I have decided we need a break, fancy grabbing a coffee or something with us. There's a small cafe just across the street. Ruslan's away to ask if the librarian would keep an eye on our stuff for us".

"Sure" Shirley replied, thankful for this welcome break, "Just let me print this page out".

Minutes later they walked out the beautifully sculpted library and headed across the road.

"You know something" Ruslan remarked as they sat at a window table, waiting for their orders. "This is nothing like the movies".

Several cars whizzed past but they were barely audible through the glass. Shirley arched an eyebrow,

"How do you mean?"

"Well, if something this major happened in the movies then the heroes would spend every waking hour trying to find clues. They wouldn't spend hours at the library, taking coffee breaks or walk round the cities, scouting out different buildings. No, they would have spies infiltrating at the top,

they'd find the culprit straight away and have some big fight. In the least they'd be pretty panicky but you two take it so calmly, like it was an everyday occurrence, you seem to have no sense of urgency. It's just weird..."

Shirley played with the menu in her hands, pondering Ruslan's words before replying,

"Unfortunately, real life isn't like the movies. All movie scripts are based on real life. Life is more complex than chasing bad guys, what they fail to show you, is how much hard investigation you have to go through in order to even find someone. Actually nailing them with cuffs and cement is the simple bit, don't forget, we are not a police force. Neither Anna nor I carry a gun and unlike the movies if we die, we're dead for good. No imaginative script writer is going to bring us alive again. That's why we work so closely to the police. We find the evidence and the criminal, the forces arrest and escort them to court. It's safer for them, for us and any innocent people who've been dragged in during the way".

"Is every case like this?"

Anna laughed causing her pigtails to jump up and down,

"No, sure we spend a few hours in the library but mostly we're out in the field. Usually it's collecting forensic information at a crime scene, or interviewing suspects or going under cover as different people".

"That sounds interesting".

"Remember that time when we posed as circus actors, Shirley?"

Shirley groaned at the painful memory,

"I nearly broke my neck falling off that trapezium".

They all laughed.

Refreshed and energized, the three of them returned to the library in good spirits. Smiling their thanks to the librarian who had kept an eye on their work, they returned to their previous stations.

Reaching the table Shirley stopped dead causing Anna and Ruslan to collide into her. Straitening up with apologies they peered around her and gasped. There, on the table were several charred photographs of the three of them. Evidently they had been burned but what was even more disturbing was the pictures had all been taken at different times and recently. Beside them lay a folded sheet of paper. Shirley rummaged in her bag for a pair of gloves and picked the letter up, unfolding it carefully.

I warned you to keep away. Stop meddling in things that concern you don't. I not warn you again. Next time it won't be pictures that burn.

"Someone obviously doesn't know how to speak English very well" Ruslan remarked.

Placing the letter and the photographs into an evidence bag Shirley put them away in her bag.

“I’ll check for prints later but let’s just finish our investigations here then go back to the hotel”.

They set warily back to work, all the while feeling they were being watched.

Back at the hotel, Shirley carefully brushed each photograph with white dust, nothing had come up so far and she had only succeeding in covering herself and the table with powder. Realistically she didn’t expect to find anything, the pictures had been burnt quite badly, not enough to make the image unclear but enough to take a good portion off the edges. Prints were more likely around the edges. Though, seen as they were burnt, the burner would have more likely worn gloves than risk burning their own skin. Pity!

The last photograph showed nothing as well, although expecting this, Shirley was a little disappointed. All that left was the note. Because the note was written on white paper, using white powder would show up nothing, so she swapped to a black one. Starting at the bottom she worked her way upwards. As she came nearer to the top her heart sank, no prints yet, the writer must have worn gloves again. Then the brush caught something. Shirley’s heart leapt. Carefully Shirley brushed an excess of powder over the top left corner and sure enough, a print started to show through.

“Guys, come and look at this”.

Anna and Ruslan stopped what they were doing and hurried over. Turning the sheet over Shirley brushed the reverse of the corner and sure enough a slightly smaller print showed up.

“Cool” whistled Ruslan, quite impressed, this was better than the movies!

Shirley smiled indulgently at the note,

“It seems that our stalker was not careful enough. When he took this sheet of paper from its source he picked it up by the top left hand corner gloveless. That’s why you can see two prints, the larger is the thumb and the smaller is the index finger. The reason why I think it is the index finger and not the middle is the angle of which the thumb is pressed”.

“Good work Shirley” Anna replied, giving her a hearty thump on the back.

“Thank you and Anna use your computer skills and send this off to Redington station and get them to check up on Russian records. Let’s see if they can get a name on this print”.

Saluting her, Anna snapped on a pair of latex gloves and took the note to the computer.

Standing up Shirley brushed herself down and headed over to the bucket. Glancing out the window as she dropped the blackened gloves into the bucket, her sharp eyes caught something.

“Ruslan, pass me my binoculars, quickly”.

Ruslan snatched them off the counter and brought them over to the window,

“What is it?”

“That car, it’s been here since we arrived and there’s someone in it...”

Twisting them into focus, Shirley jolted in surprise as the figure in the car became clearer along with the binoculars they were using. The binoculars 'he' was using and directing them at her!

"It's him! The stalker! Quick, downstairs".

Like lightning the three of them dashed down the stairs, bumping into a few startled people on the way.

Shoving through the door, Shirley, in the lead, stopped short at the top of the stairs, breathing heavily. Looking left and right she groaned before looking back to where the car had been moments before.

Anna stared up the road through the binoculars and followed it into the distance,

"How... where... that's impossible! That road goes on for a mile before turning! That car can't just disappear into thin air".

Ruslan caught the attention of a porter,

(In translation) "Did you see any cars do a u-turn on this road seconds ago?"

"No, no car has done a u-turn. Only two cars moved off and they went that way"

He pointed down where Anna was scanning with the binoculars.

Anna and Shirley turned to each other, wide-eyed. Hmm, a car that could disappear into thin air – whatever next!

Shirley was adamant that it was not impossible and that there was some plausible explanation. So in order to double check they did some calculations, which involved timing themselves running from their room to the steps outside, this didn't seem to impress anyone.

Shirley tore a piece of paper from her notebook and wrote down

Distance of road = 1.7km

Time in hours to get there = $10 \div 3600 = 0.0028$ hrs

If speed = distance \div time, $1.7 \div 0.0028 = 607.14$ km/h

Shirley sighed, the probability of a car doing 607.14 km/h in this day and age was next to impossible. Maybe that car did just disappear into thin air, or maybe the porter was tipped off!

However, no matter who they asked, nobody saw anything out of the ordinary.

Ruslan heaved a sigh, he was utterly bored again. Luckily the meeting was drawing to a close. Out the corner of his eye, he glanced up to a balcony where he knew Anna was skulking, looking over the whole deal for anything suspicious.

They seemed to do business differently in Russia Ruslan noted, allowing his eyes to wander

over the rows of bidders.

After yesterday's weird episode with the car, the three of them had been paying close attention to their surroundings. If the guy following them was serious then it was sensible to be worried after what had happened to St Frances.

As the new bids were being made, Shirley noted the names of those who were in the top two bands. There were still many contenders but there were also a lot of drop outs. As Shirley made their bid, Ruslan took another peek around the room and caught some movement in the far corner. Unobtrusively he glanced back up to Anna and frowned. He could no longer see her shadow.

Anna had been watching them at the back for a while now; a group of indistinguishable men had been staring in Shirley's direction and began muttering between themselves. It was when one of them looked up at her that she became entirely suspicious. This was her time to act. Watching, she saw a few of them leave quietly through a nearby exit and decided she would follow them. Sprinting down the stairs from her upper level to the lower level she paused in the doorway, checking the coast was clear, before quickly making her way along the side corridor. When she first arrived she scouted the building and knew that this corridor led to the main corridor where that exit opened out onto. The main corridor was empty when she got there but turning left she hurried along it until some loud voices brought her to a complete stop. To the right was another corridor, she could tell that they were near the entrance by the volume of the voice and the fact she could see an arm moving. Quietly she tiptoed into the nearby stairwell and listened; to her surprise they spoke English.

"They know too much, it won't be long until they figure out it's us" one man said, breathing harshly.

"Then we get rid of them, I don't care how but we get rid of them. I will not allow three stupid adolescences to ruin this revenge".

"But..." the other man cut in.

"No buts, the rest of ASLA would have our necks if we did. We must avenge our ancestors; it's what they would have wanted".

"Okay, then what's the plan".

"Come on".

Anna heard the sound of scuffling and the echoes of footfalls as they walked further down the corridor. A swish and thud told her that they'd exited the building. Creeping out of the stairwell she carefully made her way down the corridor the men had just walked down and came to the exit. Trying to look innocent she opened it and walked out into the night air. It was seven o'clock and the car park was dark except for the dim lamps dotted about. They were barely bright enough to see your car keys in.

Cautiously Anna stepped out into the car park and looked around, nothing moved. She walked forward and squeezed through the two parked cars in front of her. Still no movement, all she could hear was the faint sounds of traffic on a nearby busy road. Biting her lip she turned around and started walking along the silent road, looking at each car. As she got nearer the end of the row, she got a prickly sensation causing the hairs to stand up on the back of her neck. Glancing around she saw nobody.

Suddenly she was dazzled by a pair of bright headlights; through the brightness she heard the roar of an engine and the screech of tyres. The headlights came closer and closer, blinding her with their light. The noise of the car deafened her and she barely managed to leap clear before the car smashed into her.

Shaking her head as she stumbled up from the ground she spun around at the screeching sound again. The lights were back on her. Again she lunged to the side, her foot striking the left side of the vehicle. Rolling up on the rough ground, Anna felt her ankle pulse with pain. Struggling to stand up she realised she was smack in the middle of the road, the car was turning again. Anna had to move but the ankle throbbed, in panic, she scrambled up, gritting her teeth to block the pain and tried to move. She couldn't.

The lights overwhelmed her, everything was pure white, and the noise shook her whole body. Anna couldn't move and utterly terrified she screamed as the car came upon her. She was going to die. Just as the bumper almost touched her Anna felt herself flying forward, her skin tore as the gravel skidded under her. The noise of the engine flew past and slowly got fainter, the screeching of tyres indicating its exit round the corner. The car park was silent again.

Shaking uncontrollably, Anna realised that a pair of firm warm arms encircled her and panting she slowly turned around, hissing at the pain of her ankle. Her eyes met a soft pair of blue ones and she fell forward. Throwing her arms around Ruslan she hugged him tight and burst into sobs.

As Ruslan held Anna tightly, soothing her, Shirley scouted the car park. Digging out the flashlight from Anna's satchel she set to work walking across the grounds. Something glinted in the empty space where the car had been parked. Jogging over to it Shirley picked it up and held the flash light against it. It was a bus pass. A bus pass with a picture and name.

Did it belong to the men who had just tried to kill Anna?

Chapter #11 : What Links it all Together ?

The first aider at the hotel confirmed that Anna's ankle wasn't broken but only bruised. Though, even with a support bandage it still hurt immensely and with all the scrapes she'd got from the ground, Anna felt very sore.

"I'm going to be black and blue by the end of this case" she moaned as Ruslan handed her two aspirin and a glass of water. He chuckled as he walked back over to the sink to fill a bowl with warm water in order to clean Anna's grazes. The scratches she'd got from being shoved out of the gates of the factory had healed to red or bruised marks and with today's; she looked like a cheetah gone wrong.

Shirley sat at the counter, innocently browsing through record files that were supposedly un-hackable. It wasn't the problem of hacking that annoyed her; it was the 'sods law' that allowed the information to be unclear and really imprecise – or in other words not exactly what she wanted. The bus pass belonged to one Leonid Mataev, age 29, address; 213a Jasrekom St, Volgograd. His personal details included the fact that he lives with mother and works in a factory.

Not much at all. No criminal records, no involvement with any major groups, not even the name of the factory that he worked in, he was just an ordinary John Doe.

"What have you got Shirl?" Anna called from the sofa, gingerly rolling up her sleeves in preparation for the water onslaught.

“Well I know he works in a factory, but which one... who knows? The data files are pretty useless and incomplete. However, I do have an address, which checks out. He just seems to be an ordinary guy, no criminal record, nothing. The only aspect that ties him to this case and those people in the car is that he works in a factory”.

She sighed and twisted herself around in the seat,

“I hate to say it but I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere with him”.

Anna met Shirley’s eyes and frowned,

“Can’t we just stake out his joint?”

Shirley shook her head,

“Several reasons, one there’s a police station only yards down across the street, two his mother is disabled and will be in the house all the time and would probably spot us. Three he lives in a tenement apartment, the picture on the bus pass isn’t very clear, even if we saw a man go in there, it might be a neighbour. Anyway time is getting too short!”

Ruslan gently pressed a cloth to Anna’s arm and Anna gasped as the water stung her fresh cuts.

“Well... I guess we go back... to the drawing board” she hissed through gritted teeth.

Shirley slumped dejectedly forward in her chair, staring at the computer screen,

“Yeah I guess”.

“Shirley... maybe there is no case. Maybe everything we’ve found is just coincidence. I mean, the whole idea is pretty far-fetched. We have no proof, only speculation and maybe... Maybe we would just be better off letting it go”.

“No!” Shirley said stubbornly, “We’re not giving up, we’re on the right track – I can feel it.” Shirley gave Anna a pleading look, “Look, I can’t give up now, I won’t give up, just... give it more time, please?”

Anna nodded and Ruslan reached for his bag and pulled out the guest book,

“Well, we can at least take off the names of tonight’s dropouts”.

Shirley nodded and reached for her rucksack and removed her notes.

As Ruslan and Shirley crossed off the names one by one, Anna created up a new list on the laptop.

An hour later Anna disappeared down to the hotel lobby to get a print off, leaving Shirley and Ruslan to tidy away their notes. As Shirley stretched across the table for her pen, Ruslan took a moment to study her, absently staring at her chestnut hair as it fell softly across her eyesight.

“I’m intrigued” he said eventually, feeling slightly uneasy about what he was going to ask.

Shirley merely looked up at him and raised her right eyebrow in question,

“Intrigued?”

Ruslan nodded firmly,

“Yes, intrigued. Intrigued at how this one boy affects you. Sure, it’s human nature to be curious and damn right nosy when it comes to mysterious circumstances, but I refuse to believe that you’re driven, this time, by pure thrill of mystery. What did this boy do to make you so hell bent in finding the truth, when so many obstacles make it next to impossible? Who was Bo, and what made him?”

Shirley drew in a long breath to steady her nerves; the memory of Bo was still painful for her. She closed her eyes and willed herself to be calm; Bo was just another victim, someone whose background was in question. He was not the long lost friend whom she pined for; he was just a name in the inquiry.

“Bo, Fran, or his real name Frances Boris Sawchuk, was... is... of Ukrainian background, his parents moved to Canada after escaping trouble there. I met him, believe it or not in detention; this was during the mysterious arson attacks that I had been investigating. Things had been going wrong at Sussex since he had arrived and I was interested in finding out more about him... I suspected he had something to do with the arson but Bo had a tough attitude that was hard to penetrate...”

So she told Ruslan all about her first meeting with Bo and their first case and once that was described she delved right into their second case and third etc. Each time bringing in all the people Bo knew, met and befriended including Alicia, Bart, Stink, Mr Howie, Ms Strattman, Blazing Star, Parker, Catherine Miller, Zack, Matt, Jesse, Heather – his last girlfriend and of course... the sociopath herself; Molly Hardy.

Shirley finished by saying quietly,

“The hardest part is, even if we are on the right track and we do find St Frances, that’s no guarantee that Bo will be alive. After so much work, to find that he’s not waiting for me at the end would be... I don’t know but I doubt I could handle it... handle anything ever... I’ve bounced back once; I might never bounce back again.”

Ruslan felt poignant, placing a hand on her shoulder he replied,

“We will find the truth and if he’s not there, we’ll make whoever is responsible pay dearly. That is a promise”.

Anna, who’d joined them during the third case, nodded sharply and drew a line over her heart, signifying her blood oath.

“Shirley, I’m disappointed in you”.

Shirley spun round and he eyes bugged out as she gasped in shock,

“Bo?”

He nodded curtly, her utter bewilderment affecting her so much that she didn't comprehend the fact that he was exactly the same as when he had left Redington. No height difference, build, or alteration in looks, he was simply seventeen years old. He was even wearing the same clothes.

"Shirley, I thought I knew you better, I thought we were friends?"

Shirley just stared at him speechless; he continued, a slight edge to his voice,

"I guess I was wrong".

"Wha... what do you mean, of course we're friends!"

Shirley felt panicky for some reason she couldn't fathom, the boy in front of her looked scornful,

"So that's why you're giving up? That's why you're already forgetting about me. The answer to the whole case is staring you straight in the face, yet you have not looked for it".

Bo tilted his head to look her directly, fire in his eyes, his face contorted in anger,

"Or maybe you do know the answer but you just don't want to find me – is that it Shirley? You '*appear*' to want to find me but maybe deep down you don't".

"What do you mean?" Shirley was utterly confused at Bo's behaviour.

"You KNOW exactly what I mean!" Bo spat, his face reddening with fury. "The answer to the case. It's staring you in the face, yet YOU refuse to see it. What links it all together? You know! You can see! Shirley, it's simply, what links it all together? It's not hard, so why don't you see it, or maybe you're not the Shirley I know".

They stared at each other, neither blinking, Bo breathing hard after his outburst.

"God, Shirley, think. What links it together? What linked every nasty column that appeared in 'The Banner' at Sussex – Molly Hardy that's what! You can figure it out. What links it all together?"

Shirley sat up straight on her bed, Bo's voice still echoing in her head,

"What links it all together?"

Throwing the duvet away she sprang out of bed and hurried into the main room and over to the table. On the table lay the print out that Anna had made up. Shirley picked it up and studied hard, the jigsaw finally taking shape. What links it all together?

Anna had listed everything under headings. Shirley thought hard, what links it all together... what applies to everything... who applies to everything. It hit her.

Looking at the paper Shirley knew now what linked it all together. Bo had been right, it had been staring her in the face. It had been staring at her in more ways than one and she kicked herself for good measure.

Shirley walked away from the table to wake Anna and Ruslan, they had to know. They had to

know that she knew where St Frances was.

Chapter # 12 : Black & White Reunite

“Anna! Anna – wake up!”

Anna groaned and opened her eyes slightly,

“Huh?”

“Anna, I know where St Frances is, I know!”

Suddenly Anna was wide awake; she bolted from the bed,

“Where?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute; go and wake Ruslan then go to the table and I’ll show you”.

Shirley returned to the table, her heart thumping hard against her chest. They had found St Frances, she might see Bo.

When Ruslan and Anna appeared Shirley laid the print outs together on the table top.

“I just had a... weird dream but it made me think. What links it all together? What solution makes everything seem sensible? The scale of the factory, the men who’ve been following us – the disappearing car! It’s all there; each column is linked by one thing, one corporation. Look!”

As she stared at the print outs it slowly dawned on Anna and she suddenly felt light headed. Softly sitting down, she stared at her best friend,

“God... how could we have been so stupid?”

Poor Ruslan had no idea what the answer was, he stared and stared at the papers but nothing came to him.

Anna started banging her forehead off the table.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid!” she muttered with each hit.

“What?” Ruslan asked, “I don’t see a link, who is it?”

Shirley smiled slightly, a long forgotten satisfaction in seeing something that nobody else had settled in her stomach – Ruslan was playing the part of Bo perfectly.

“Okay, Ruslan. Who is in the list of ‘Places yet to investigate’, ‘contenders in the auction’, also in a position to watch us closely, and who provides the only plausible explanation in that disappearing car?” At Ruslan’s blank look, Shirley added hastily, “I’ll give you a clue; it’s within throwing distance of here”.

Throwing distance? Ruslan scrunched up his forehead in thought. He imagined he was standing on the steps outside, what was in front of him? Houses, shops, a café, a building site, to the left was a small antique shop, to the right was... Kartek Tractors. Realisation was evident on his face and Shirley felt herself grin even wider,

“They are so close that they probably have their ears against the wall. The car didn’t just disappear, it pulled into the factory, and the high wall prevented us from seeing it.”

Ruslan was dumbstruck; it was too simple, too far-fetched to be reality. He pinching himself hard but all that gained him was a throbbing arm.

“You are trying to tell me that a whole school was smuggled out of The Ukraine and is now being used as slave labour in the factory next door to us? Why am I sceptical about that?”

“We need proof” Anna interrupted.

Shirley turned to look out the window as though she was sure someone was looking at them,

“We ‘need’ a plan” she stated, “I think we should phone Bart – this is far too major for us to deal with alone.

“You’re telling me” Ruslan whistled, shaking his head in disbelief, “You need a *?!#ing army!”

“Were you followed?” Shirley asked hurriedly as she pulled Anna through the door. Anna nodded,

“Some guy in a denim jacket but I shook him off at the market. I did, however, get everything I needed”.

“Good” Shirley replied, moving back over to the hotel window, “It is all set for tonight. I wish we could go earlier but we need the cover of darkness”.

Anna shrugged out of her jacket and looked around the room,

“Where’s Ruslan?”

“He’s outside, cutting pieces of flat wood to cover the soles of our shoes”.

“Good idea – I take it he bought local stuff”.

“Yep”.

“Do you think this is going to work?”

Shirley paused and her face settled into a determined look,

“I hope so, Anna. I hope so”.

Much later that night the three detectives donned their dark clothes and Shirley and Anna tied their hair back tightly. Ruslan had scored the, now wooden, soles of their shoes so that they would grip better. Shirley had explained that the wood would cover up traceable footprints and that they could easily rid themselves of the wood when the time came. On top of the shoes they tied cloth to silence their steps. Checking that they had all the equipment necessary for the plan they set off.

Ruslan grabbed the bed sheets that they'd tied together and they left the room. Anna led the way down the hallway to a certain door, of which she'd checked earlier that it was empty. With a couple of twists of her pen knife she had unlocked the door and they entered the dark apartment. Shirley closed the door behind them as Ruslan strode to the bathroom window and slowly opened it – checking everything was clear. The window opened out directly above the wall of the factory and he could see the yard below.

Now tying the bed clothes around the trunk of the sink he threw the length out of the window and watched it fall softly down the other side of the wall. He was nervous about this but he didn't show it in front of the girls.

Anna went first, testing the clothes first and finding them snug. Carefully and yet gracefully she hopped out of the window and down onto the wall. Like a natural she slid down the rope of bedclothes and landed with a soft thud on the ground. From there she looked up and realised how high the window actually was. Anna made a small mental note not to look down when she was going to climb up it later. Next went Shirley, who also landed softly, the equipment in her bag barely moving around.

Ruslan came last and did fairly well, maybe he did not land as gracefully as the girls and maybe he had a few extra burns on his hands...

When he joined them, Shirley fished out a print out Bart had sent her via email. Right, there's a camera over there and one to the left of that shed so we need to follow the path exactly as Bart has drawn. So they did. The path led to the main offices, the bottom right window to be exact. The whole office building was in total darkness and according to Bart's sources; there were no security beams in that area. It was so dark that they had to use penlights to see their way.

The window was almost invisible in the darkness, with pen light in her mouth Shirley slowly prised the window away from the sill as Anna carefully broke the moss seal with her penknife. The three paused briefly as the window creaked up into its maximum opening. Nobody stirred. To say they were surprised there were no alarms was an understatement but they weren't complaining. Like thieves, they hopped through the open window, landing softly on the wooden boards inside. Everything was pitch black, not a light blinked. Stealthily the three crept across the room, walking through what seemed to be a well-used board meeting room. The faint smell of over brewed coffee and the few cups on the table told them it had been in use that day.

Quiet as mice they slipped through the door making sure they left it open, in case something should go wrong. The clearer path they had the better. The room opened out onto a hallway in which they blindly made their way Eastwards. They came to a stairwell in which they stepped down three steps and walked through a set of heavy double doors. Eventually they came to a T-junction in which they took a left. The double doors were wooden, well used and locked. Pulling out her penknife, again Anna made light work of the door and it sprang open with an invisible force.

Although they had gotten their night vision, they hadn't been prepared for the sudden pure blackness of the room. It wasn't just a room either. With penlight, Shirley could just make out that the hall carried on as far as the eye could see. They had found the machinery of the factory.

In sync the three of them stepped more into the room, allowing the darkness to swallow them. Suddenly the door behind them swung shut with a huge force, closing with a slam. All three jumped and looked back, seeing nothing, before looking forward again and being blinded by a powerful torch.

Shirley managed to squint through the blinding light to make out some figures standing behind it. It

wasn't the number of people behind it, it wasn't the fact that she had been caught, it wasn't the intensity of the light but it was the person holding the light that her blood freeze and her mind blank.

Also, it wasn't her but Anna, who asked the question,

"Fran?"

He was taller, definitely taller, but slim and still very much Bo-like in the face. His blond hair was short but his eyes were a vivid blue. Shirley found she couldn't breathe.

"Who are you? You shouldn't be here! Go before they catch you" Bo replied shortly.

"Who?"

"Who? Who do you think? Go, before you get us all into trouble!"

Anna took a step forward, her hand shielding her eyes against the brightness.

"Look, we know everything, we want to help you but you've got to help us. Just listen for a few minutes, please".

The people stared back at her coldly. A young boy of about seventeen stepped forward, his accent was thick,

"Is this a trick? We want no trouble. Leave us be".

Shirley stepped forward,

"Fran, please, tell these people we're not here to hurt them, we want to help".

She gave him a pleading look, he stared back no recognition in his face,

"Why should I tell them anything, when I don't trust you myself?" His eyes narrowed, "Who are you and how do you know my name?"

He didn't recognise her... Shirley felt her eyes fill up in hurt and despair but she blinked the tears away. Something flickered in Fran's eyes. Biting her lip, Shirley walked up closer. Her eyes kept running over his overalls and his face, that face – so familiar. Her blood seemed thick in her veins, butterflies arose in her stomach, and her throat felt like it was choking on a golf ball.

"I found you... I found you Bo" she whispered.

Fran's eyes widened in surprise, his jaw worked up and down like he wanted to say something but all he could do was search Shirley's face frantically.

"Shirl... Shirley?" he finally asked, hoarsely.

Shirley felt herself shaking slightly and at the sound of his voice saying her name, he vision blurred as the tears threatened to fall.

Clang!

The faraway noise brought everyone to their senses,

“They’re back – you must leave!” Bo cried.

Anna stepped forward,

“Listen, this is important, we’re here to help you. We’ve got some stuff we want you to do”.

Shirley slipped off her back pack and pulled out two pens, a tape recorder and a tiny video camcorder.

“We’ll be back but if you want to help yourselves get back to your families then use this equipment to record this place. Get as much incriminating evidence as possible. One of us will be back tomorrow night to pick this up - leave them in the shrubbery next to the wall by the hotel. Please!”

There was a sound of jingling keys from the opposite side of the hall. Ruslan and Anna started backtracking to the doorway, which was now open. Shirley peered around at everyone whom she could see, trying to look pleading. Not sure whether they understood her or not she called,

“Think of your families, if you don’t help yourself now then you may be giving up the chance to ever see them again”.

The keys had now snicked in a lock somewhere. Shirley started to walk backwards until she caught Bo’s gaze. She couldn’t leave him now...

Anna sensing Shirley’s dilemma doubled back and grabbed Shirley’s arm, dragging her to the door. Just in time they guessed as they ran along the corridor, behind them they could hear a large door opening and raised voices.

Without pausing for breath they sprinted their way back to the window, practically diving through it. Out of breath and in stitches they tore across the ground and climbed their way back up (with some difficulty) into the hotel.

They didn’t stop until they and the bed sheets were safely in their own room. All three collapsed, wheezing, into respective chairs, too out of breath to talk.

Shirley’s mind was whirling all over the place; all she could make sense of was the words ‘he’s alive!’”.

On those words she fell softly into a deep sleep.

It was eleven o’clock when she woke up and it took a moment for last night’s happenings to register. Ruslan and Anna were still asleep in their chairs. She casually wondered whether anyone was taking pictures yet but then forced those thoughts out of her head. Shirley needed her wits about her and determinedly expelled all thought about Bo and the plan out of her head. Instead she went and made breakfast.

As the day wore on they were all fidgety. Shirley, who grew exasperated with Anna’s pacing and Ruslan’s drumming of his fingers against the table, shooed them out. So Ruslan called a taxi and they disappeared to the river for the afternoon.

At seven o’clock they reappeared again, flushed and bright eyed, Shirley couldn’t resist teasing

them.

After ordering a pizza via the hotel, the three sat and played Cluedo until the scheduled time of ten o'clock. Shirley then disappeared to go get the equipment that is of course, if it was there.

While they waited, Ruslan and Anna played again, Anna winning. Afterwards they lapsed into an awkward silence. They had fun today, a lot of fun but now they felt strangely shy.

"So... are you looking forward to going home?" Ruslan asked, trying to start a conversation.

"Oh yeah, I miss my family, I miss the station, I miss everything" Anna saw his slightly disappointed look and added hastily, "but that doesn't mean I've not enjoyed myself".

The look Ruslan gave her was sceptical and she laughed,

"Okay so the train rides weren't fun, getting thrown head first out that factory was painful and almost getting run over by a maniac driver was frightening but there have been some good bits".

"Good bits?" Ruslan prompted, trying hard to sound nonchalant.

"Yeah... you're a good bit".

Ruslan feigned a look of surprised,

"Me?"

"Yes you. Truthfully, I'm going to miss you when I go home".

Ruslan's face turned serious,

"I'm going to miss you too. Who else is going to lead me blindly into danger?"

Anna chuckled and Ruslan smiled shyly back.

They lapsed into silence again, Ruslan looking distractedly at the Cluedo board and Anna just sat wringing a dish towel in her hands. The air felt very awkward. Finally Ruslan looked up, his movement making Anna start and glance up at him. For a minute they gazed at one another before Ruslan darted forward. Anna wrapped her arms around his neck as his hands cradled her head and Ruslan was about to kiss her when... the door slammed open!

Ruslan and Anna jumped apart, very red, as Shirley entered. Though it looked like she hadn't noticed what she had walked in on.

"They did it! The stuff was there! I can't believe it!"

Anna stood up quickly and whooped.

Shirley couldn't stop grinning,

"All we've got to do is send it off to the address Bart gave us".

Anna went and fetched a box she had bought earlier and Shirley added the letter she'd painstakingly written that morning to explain everything.

“Wait a minute” Ruslan called as Shirley took the parcel into her room, “Won’t those people at the Headquarters, or wherever you’re sending that to, think it’s a bomb or something?”

“Bart already thought of that and has send word via his contacts that something was coming”.

Ruslan was taken aback,

“You know something; I’d really like to meet this Bart guy”.

In the morning they decided that sending it in the post wasn’t a good idea so Ruslan volunteered to take it by hand. At eight o’clock he took a taxi through the city. He returned triumphantly at three o’clock.

Shirley sat down at the table with a mug of tea,

“All we’ve got to do now is wait for them to contact us”.

“You put in your mobile number?” Anna checked.

“Yep”.

And so they waited for the authorities to call and prayed that the evidence that the people had got was enough to convince the police and whoever else was needed.

Chapter #13 : Who Pays for the Windows ?

At seven o’clock Shirley’s mobile rang. They all jumped. Shirley quickly picked the phone up and pressed the green button,

“Hello? Yes speaking”.

There was a pause, Anna and Ruslan waited with baited breath, trying hard to hear what was being said.

“Alone?” Shirley replied.

“Well, my two colleagues are deeply involved in this investigation, they know as much as I do”.

Anna looked at Ruslan and winked,

“Anna Grange and Ruslan-”

Shirley broke off abruptly then answered startled,

“Yes, Ukrainian... sure... just a sec”.

Shirley took her ear away from the phone and looked around at Ruslan, perplexed. She held the phone out to him,

“They want to speak to you”.

Ruslan stared at her for a moment then gingerly took the mobile,

“Hello?”

Anna moved over to Shirley and whispered,

“What’s this all about?”

Shirley shrugged her shoulders and continued to gauge Ruslan’s reactions to what was being said on the line. To her dismay, Ruslan kept his face impassive for the next ten minutes.

Finally, he finished with,

“Of course, I’ll let you know as soon as possible. Bye”.

“What is it?” Anna asked immediately.

Standing up and stretching, Ruslan turned to the girls, looking uneasy. Lowering his voice and glancing around, he replied,

“You two are to report to Takreav Police Station. You’ll be accompanying the main squad, a Vladimir Daestro will be waiting for you, and he’s in charge. He will explain everything to you – in English” he smiled slightly.

“What about you?” Shirley asked, feeling a little put out by the change in duties.

Ruslan’s smile vanished, he bit his lip and sneaked a look at Anna, he knew she wasn’t going to like this!

“They want me to infiltrate... keep an eye on things... you know... let the forces know if anyone suspects anything’s amiss. I’ve to mingle with the workers and find out as much information as possible. I’ve to stay with St Frances until everything’s safe.”

He could feel Anna’s eyes widen, Shirley spun around to check on her best friend. Shirley knew all too well how familiar this type of scenario was to Anna. It was this type of contribution that had cost a very close person to Anna to lose his life. It had been a hard two months, she had been totally devastated but time was the healer again. Shirley knew that her best friend hated allowing innocent people to walk into hostile situations. She also knew that Anna was going to fight this – and Shirley was right.

“Abosolutely not!” Anna said shortly, folding her arms across her chest.

“What?” Ruslan stared at her.

“You’re not doing that. They can’t expect you to do that, it’s far too dangerous”.

“Look Anna, what choice do I have?”

“Plenty” she hissed, “They can come up with a better plan than that. In fact, I’m shocked that they would even conceive of the notion of allowing anyone, unarmed, to go in there”.

“We already have!”

Anna’s face was a mask of fury and Shirley decided she’d better step in.

“Anna... I’m sure they’ll make sure he’s safe. I know that they would never put Ruslan in danger unless it was necessary. The reason why they chose Ruslan is because he is Ukrainian and will be able to mix with the school. If any questions are asked then Ruslan can honestly say he is part of St Frances. Albeit, he wasn’t taken three years ago... Anna, it’s the best option. I know you don’t like it but if Ruslan wants to do it then you can’t stop him” Shirley softened her voice, “Like you couldn’t stop Danny”

Anna just stared at her, then after a few seconds she turned away. Shirley waited and Anna eventually replied,

“I know it’s Ruslan’s choice, not anybody else’s but I’m not going to stand by and let it happen again. I can’t”.

Shirley took her friend’s shoulder and pulled her back around,

“You can’t stop him. If Ruslan wants to do this then you MUST respect his wishes. I’ve learned that if you try and stop someone doing something they want to; they will try everything in their power to do it without your knowledge. It’s Ruslan’s decision, okay?”

Anna didn’t reply and Shirley took this to be consent, next she looked at Ruslan,

“I know you’re not stupid so I’m not going to tell you how dangerous this is, you already know. There is no law binding you to this, we can phone them back up and tell them to forget it, only you can decide. The question is; do you want to do it?”

Did he? Ruslan wasn’t sure. He wasn’t terrified of getting hurt but he wasn’t exactly thrilled about going into such a dangerous situation. But St Frances... no, he had to help them. If he was prepared at the beginning to avenge them he must now be prepared to save them!

“Yes” he replied firmly.

“No...” Anna whimpered as though Ruslan had just signed his own death sentence.

Now he turned to look at her, Anna’s eyes were full of panic and her jaw worked up and down as though she was desperately trying to say something.

His stomach did a funny jolt and he glanced back at Shirley. Shirley caught it and said quickly,

“I’ll go let them know your decision and get us a ride to the station”.

With that she disappeared knowing fine well that this was Anna and Ruslan’s personal time.

When Shirley left the room Anna found her voice, it sounded calm but distant, a sound that caused him more anguish than anything before.

“You know that this will be dangerous. There is a good chance you will be discovered and hurt?”

“Yes”.

Anna seemed to choke on the finality in his voice.

“Shirley and I try to avoid these situations, we find them difficult and we’re experienced... you’ve not had as much experience”.

“This will be a good chance to learn”, he fought hard to keep the quaver under control.

Anna couldn't believe what she was hearing, he sounded so cold,

“Why you?”

“Because I am Ukrainian. I know... knew these people and I understand the case as intricately as most of those men who are going to help us. I'm the one person who stands a chance of pulling this off. The ASLA are more than likely to mistake me for a captive than anyone else”.

His calmness was making her on edge,

“This is serious Ruslan! They probably have guns. Fuck, they probably have enough power to blow up this whole city! They won't stop to think for moment before killing you if you're discovered”.

“I know that”.

Anna was now breathing hard, her eyes brimming, she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Turning to face the window to get herself under control, she whispered,

“Don't you care?”

There was a long silence. Then she felt Ruslan wrap his arms around her from behind and nuzzle against her ear,

“Of course I care” he whispered, “but I have to help these people. Many of them I personally cared for a great deal, I saw their families suffering grief beyond tears. I felt the pain, I shared it, I preyed to god for them to be safe and I swore I would help them in anyway. Now that I have the chance, I can't let it go. If not for them; at least for their families”.

“I understand” Anna replied quietly, sinking back further into his embrace. There was a pause, and then she added softly,

“Be careful please”.

He smiled into her hair,

“I'll try my best, but you too, promise you'll be careful”.

Anna turned in his arms to face him and caught his eyes with hers,

“I promise”.

The flashback of a similar departure with her brother caused the tears to finally fall. This time however, this man was not going to die, Anna would make sure. Closing her eyes to block the flow, she felt a slight pressure on her right cheek and then her left and she knew she would have to explain to Ruslan some day. But not today.

As he brushed her tears away with his thumb, Ruslan studied the girl in front of him. He had known her for what, only a month, two? Yet, he could hardly remember life without her. In fact he couldn't bear to think about it. Her witty remarks and dry intelligent sarcasm, that red hair that fell past her shoulders, those greens eyes that sparkled with life, laughter and curiosity.

Then he understood, an understanding that made his stomach flutter and a strange nervousness that caused his hands to shake slightly. It was now or never and on that thought he bent down and captured her lips with his own. Anna was taken completely by surprise but opened up to him. As Ruslan pulled her closer, Anna slipped her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss.

She couldn't believe it. I mean she had suspected it would happen but she didn't think he would be so passionate. Ruslan was kissing her. Her!

Then suddenly he pulled away and a wave of disappointment washed over her.

It was just in time because Shirley appeared at the door,

"Let's go!"

Shirley and Anna were shown into a room where several men were gathered at a table, each donned in a different uniform which demanded high respect. Next to the door stood several guards dressed in their army gear complete with guns.

As they entered, a tall but chubby man sauntered up to them, dressed in a smart pin striped suit. His face was beetroot red, lined with drinkers' streaks and a fine sheen of sweat lay across his forehead. He looked harassed. Wiping the sweat away with the back of his hand he proceeded to offer Anna his hand as he introduced himself,

"You must be Shirley and Anna. My name is Gregory Stewart-"

Anna shook his big sweaty hand and smiled politely, before wiping her hand off on her trousers in disgust

"You're English" Shirley stated shaking his hand. The gentleman looked mildly impressed,

"Yes indeed, I'm the British diplomat here. Believe it or not I was actually in Moscow this morning but I was called down to Volgograd for an emergency meeting. Lucky I was so it turns out. They," he indicated behind him, "Want me to assist you; some of them are not good with English".

"Okay" Anna replied, "So what is their plan, do you know?"

The diplomat sighed, looking wearier from his long hours of duty. Indicating at the table he led them over and sank heavily into a plush chair. Shirley and Anna followed suit.

"They are most worried about this" he replied, casting a wary glance over to the men talking in hushed tones. "Intelligence knew that something was amiss for they've noticed a rise in Aristocratic support. The last couple of weeks have sported several demonstrations and er... warnings".

The vagueness in the Diplomats description warned Shirley that there had been some serious threats.

"Which was why I was called down here" Stewart continued. "Some agents believed that there was a powerful group behind these... acts. A small but powerful group. Unfortunately they had no proof. In fact tracking down any such group proved impossible. Whoever they are, they are smart, well equipped and loyal to their cause, perhaps dangerously loyal".

“Do you mean terrorism?” Anna asked quietly.

Stewart's eyes widened slightly and he pursed his lips,

“No” he said eventually, “It's not terrorism. It's... it's like the Bolsheviks before the fall of the Tsar, Nicholas II. Quiet but strong.” he saw Shirley's look and added quickly. “Though, I do not believe for a second that there is going to be a revolution any time soon. We knew they wanted something, that there was a point to this but we weren't sure what. That's where you come in”. He stopped, taking in the reality of what he was going to say next. Obviously he was still shocked as he shook his head and looked at them with wide eyes.

“Who would have thought... I mean, did they really think they could get away with this. It's like something out of the movies”.

Shirley was beginning to feel irritated,

“Unfortunately it is really happening. Perhaps it would be more productive if you told us what they are going to do and what they want from us?”

Stewart stared at her, not sure how to react to the bluntness. At Shirley's probing look he snapped back and replied,

“Right, they've got a plan” he fumbled to push his glasses back up on his nose. “They're bringing in the army for this one, as backup. At the moment we don't know how the group will react. In fact we have no idea if they have weapons or not but we're not taking any chances. As it is, we have no idea how political their plans are or what they wish to gain by this... hostage situation. Now, your friend, Ruslan, is going to be inside the factory in case of any new developments. We need to know where everyone is and what they are doing. If the situation turns hostile we need to know, even if two people leave, we need to know”.

Shirley frowned at the slight falter in the Diplomat's voice as she listened to him, something bothered her, but she kept quiet.

The men in the corner had finished speaking and the seats around the Shirley and Anna had begun to fill. The door where the two girls had been shown through opened and high ranking officers began to appear. The soldiers around the room stood up straight and saluted. Shirley, Anna and the Diplomat stood too, until the men had been seated at the top sides of the table; so that the wide board could clearly be seen by all.

Everyone sat down except one of the new officers, who remained standing and began to speak in Russian.

The two detectives tried hard to follow but it was next to impossible. The diplomat didn't seem to find it necessary to interpret until the speaker had begun a slide show. A map of the factory appeared against the white board and the speaker, a forty-something six footer with tanned skin and a black bushy moustache, began tapping the board in places.

“These are where the troops will be placed when we get there. They will enter the buildings in steps so that nobody escapes. At this moment in time the troops are already moving into position” Gregory whispered.

Both women nodded and watched the speaker continue. After five minutes the map disappeared and the man turned to face the group properly. He lent down on the table and accented his

points with a thud from his index finger. Then suddenly the whole room looked at Shirley and Anna. They squirmed uncomfortably in their seats and looked questioningly at their interpreter.

“You must be kept safe. You may be required to give evidence or be taken to court if you are lying”.

Shirley nodded to the man at the front who clapped his hands together and everyone stood up as the Leaders exited. However the speaker stayed behind and made his way up to them,

“Hullo, my name is Vladimir Daestro, I am in charge of this operation. Forgive my English but you will accompany me to the factory. This is a very delicate operation and we need all the help we can get. Come”.

Gathering up their jackets they followed him out the room and down a corridor. It was bare, no pictures, and smelled faintly of disinfectant. It reminded Shirley of a hospital, the plain grey/green and white walls, not a comforting thought at all.

Daestro continued,

“As Stewart may have informed you, our intelligence has been tracking an aristocratic movement for some time. They have not been entirely successful. When we heard about that explosion in The Ukraine three years ago, we were immediately suspicious but the trail was cold and we found nothing. It does not surprise me that this...” he waved his arms wildly in gesture, “scenario has come to light. Believe it or not, we are quite thankful for this, as it means that the movement consists of a small elite group. A group that we can deal with”.

Shirley shuddered at that thought for some reason. Daestro’s statement had sounded cold and cruel.

“You saw our plan in the room so you should understand what our tactics are. We do not know of their status when it comes to weaponry so we are going to use our army”.

They were approaching, what seemed to be, a control room. As they neared a door, a soldier hurried towards them. He saluted to Vladimir before bursting out.

“We’ve lost contact with the Ukrainian boy”.

Anna gasped and drew back. Shirley’s forehead scrunched in mistrust. Gregory Stewart had been right; there was a leak in this force.

Daestro growled something in Russian that Shirley easily deciphered to be blasphemy. She spoke up now,

“In that case we must hurry, they have pulled off one disappearing stunt before, and they can certainly do it again. We can’t let them escape!”

“Kenin, escort these ladies to the helicopter and wait for me there. I’ll be with you in one minute”.

Kenin saluted and indicated that Shirley and Anna should follow him, the three set off at a run.

As they ran through the garage ignitions were being turned and vans were screeching as they sped out onto the main road.

They only had to wait two minutes before Daestro rejoined them inside the helicopter and it took

off into the skies.

Houses flew past as the radio assaulted their ears with its constant buzzing and orders. Daestro became quite animated as he barked instructions through the intercom. Looking next to her she could see Anna had her eyes closed and her fingers crossed. She seemed to be rocking slightly in her seat. Shirley lifted her right hand and placed it on her best friend's shoulder, Anna's eyes flew open.

"He'll be okay" Shirley stated, Anna nodded and turned to look out the window.

Suddenly the helicopter began to descend until its feet touched down in the yard. As Daestro, two guards and the two detectives jumped out, the vans and tanks screeched through the gates.

Everything seemed to happen at once. Vans and officers poured into the deserted yard and spilled around, filling the air with shouts and clicks from cocking guns. Shirley and Anna became separated in the mass of soldiers.

Daestro had marched to the front and was sporting a megaphone to which he was shouting something in Russian.

Anna scanned the scene for Shirley and jumped when a hand grabbed her shoulder. Spinning around Anna gasped,

"Shirley!"

"They need to get round the back – I know they do! I have a bad feeling. They have to go through the building and get out to the back".

"We need to tell Daestro!" Anna called back over the noise.

"Come on!" Shirley hissed and led her through the throng. But try as they might the two detectives couldn't get through. The soldiers pushed them back. They desperately ran round, trying to find a space, barely hearing what Daestro was yelling. Until Shirley froze, she was no expert in speaking Russian but she knew enough to register that Daestro was counting. Just in time Shirley grabbed Anna as gunfire rained at the building. Windows smashed, plastic and rubble flew everywhere.

"What the hell are they doing?" Anna screamed over the noise.

"Warning shots" Shirley yelled back.

"But they could kill the hostages!"

"This is the Army! They're serious!" Shirley screamed back.

The gunfire stopped and there was silence for a minute, Shirley and Anna got up and surveyed the damage. A whole row of windows of the offices was blown away completely, leaving a long gaping hole.

But now the soldiers were moving, they were advancing into the building, guns aimed in front.

Shirley and Anna shared a look then ran forward, until they felt something hook their legs and they fell painfully to the ground. Dazed and sore they looked up to see two soldiers with rifles pointing straight at them. They got the hint; they were not to move. All they could do was watch men climbing through the windows and doors, themselves powerless to help.

It felt like an eternity before a soldier gave the all clear.

“No!” Anna wailed, falling to her knees, “Ruslan!”

The all clear meant that the building was empty. He was gone, St Frances was gone. The ASLA knew about this, they knew about RUSLAN! He was probably dead! The soldiers guarding them seemed quite concerned about Anna’s behaviour and Shirley took this moment to roll away and sprint for the building.

She heard a shout and the sound of running feet but she sprinted up the steps, through the main doors and down through the corridor. She ran past several soldiers and burst through offices. Shirley had no idea where she was going, only that she had to get to the back. As she shoved through another door, Shirley spied a fire exit and hearing voices behind her, she put in a final effort and crashed into the door, sending it flying open.

She skidded. It was quite dark now, around 9.30pm but from the lights in the building she saw that the back was empty.

Someone thrust her forward and she fell on her knees, staring out at the empty backyard.

How had they done it? How had they escaped?

Strong hands pulled her to her feet and she met the eyes of Vladimir Daestro.

“Where are they?” He asked, his face passive.

“I don’t know” she whispered, thinking hard.

Around them, soldiers were starting to mill around and Shirley felt a surge of defeat wash over her. She had failed. Failed like she had failed three years ago, failed Bo once again. Not only Bo, but Anna too, she had lost Anna her Ruslan.

They were interrupted by a call from one of the soldiers. He had emerged from one of the faraway sheds and was beckoning for help.

Shirley broke free from Daestro’s grip and followed the soldiers over to the shed. Shoving her way to the front she saw the soldier who had yelled, take an axe from someone. Then she saw why, it was a door!

Seconds ticked by as the soldier hacked at the wood until they heard the merciful crunch of wood giving way. The door then swung outwards revealing a set of stone steps leading to yet another door. The next door was pulled open easily and it opened through onto a track..

“The track must run behind the back wall of the yard and the back of hotel – how come I never saw it?” Shirley wondered out loud.

She hurried down the steps with the other soldiers and walked onto the track. Other soldiers were appearing and Shirley began to wander up the track, looking for something important.

“Looking for something?”

Shirley’s head sprung up and was surprised to see Anna.

“Yes, but I don’t know what it is until I find it”.

Anna nodded and joined in.

Two minutes later Shirley found it. A patch of oil.

“It’s fresh and still quite warm” Shirley called, Daestro was beside her in a flash. Shirley looked up at him, a sparkle in her eye,

“Where does this track lead to?”

Minutes later they were back in the helicopter and whizzing over the city. Gregory Stewart had appeared in a van just after they’d found the track and had now taken the place of one of the soldiers in the helicopter. Daestro was back to barking commands across the radio. Other helicopters had joined them now and down below on the roads, cars and vans were hurtling along.

“The train’s been spotted” Daestro called back to the girls. He then instructed the Pilot to veer to the left more.

The response coming back from the radio sounding more and more agitated. Daestro replied curtly. Shirley looked over at Stewart to see his take on things but he was staring at Daestro. Whatever was going on over the radio had him transfixed.

The speaker on the other side of the radio suddenly paused and Daestro went quiet. Stewart’s eyes were as round as saucers as though he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

Then Daestro replied and Stewart gasped. His face was almost purple now; it looked as though he was having a stroke.

“You can’t!” he burst out.

Daestro turned around to face him, Stewart continued feverishly,

“You can’t derail the train! You’ll kill the hostages!”

“We have no choice. They have not obeyed the orders given by my men. They continue to speed the train up. We must derail it”.

Daestro’s face was hard and Shirley felt kind of sorry for him. It must be an awful job to have all these lives in your hands.

“Can’t you put it onto a siding?” Stewart asked in disbelief

“We aim to. But at the speed they are travelling at, the distance for stopping is too small and part of the train will derail”.

Shirley and Anna shrank back into their seats in horror.

Two prayers went simultaneously into the air.

Please keep Ruslan safe

Please keep Bo safe.

Choking black smoke flew into the night air which was glowing with orange haze. As flames licked the remains of the engine and several trucks, the fields around it was alight with screaming people. Soldiers were hurrying this way and that. Fire engines and ambulances flashed and the ground became sodden with the jets of water.

The soldiers worked together, escorting people into trucks, while others were clamping men into secure vans.

Kids were crying, small explosions were rippling the air and the smoke was burning everyone's nostrils.

Shirley felt lost as she stepped down from the helicopter. She could feel Anna grasping her arm. They both stared in utter horror at the burning engine which was now just a mass of burning metal.

As they slowly walked through the field, they were jostled by people running this way and that. Underneath, mud sucked at their shoes and the smoky air made their eyes water.

Around them several paramedics were carrying stretchers with blankets covering the bodies on board. Shirley closed her eyes as they passed.

Blank and unseeing faces walked past them, some staring at them hopelessly, children - barely even teenagers - huddled together, scared.

Shirley felt Anna's hand shaking as it clutched her arm.

"Ruslan!" Anna called faintly into the night air. So quiet was her voice that Shirley barely heard her. Anna was looking around frantically.

"Ruslan!"

Shirley joined her, and they shouted together.

"Ruslan!"

They searched every blank face, feeling more and more frantic. Anna started running across the slippery ground, checking vans and ambulances.

Shirley found it hard to keep up with her. Around them everything was distorted by the black smoke and they both found themselves coughing.

Shirley caught Anna's arm and whirled her around. She could read the panic in her friend's face.

"Anna slow down, we'll find him!"

Two paramedics carried another stretcher past them and Shirley's words fell on deaf ears. Anna pulled her arm away and began running in the opposite direction, screaming Ruslan's name over the thundering noise. Shirley couldn't do anything but follow her. Anna was running blindly, blind from panic.

Ahead, Shirley saw her trip and fall and rushed to her side. Anna was now sobbing as she stood up. Her ankle had twisted and she could barely walk. Shirley saw the defeat wash across her best friend's face.

It was then a voice called,

"Anna! Shirley!"

Both twisted around and Ruslan came hobbling into view from beside a truck. A strangled cry erupted from Anna as she tried to run forward. Shirley felt a wave of relief flood through her and waved to Ruslan before he was swamped by Anna.

A divine notion of satisfaction came to her, as she watched her two friends embrace. The raw emotion on their faces said it all and Shirley smiled.

"Shirley?"

Shirley froze.

"Is it you" the voice croaked again.

Shirley turned around slowly and her eyes met Bo's.

"Bo..." she breathed.

He stood there, wrapped in a grey blanket, shivering slightly from the cold. He looked just seventeen again. And they stood there, simply staring at each other.

Then his face cracked into a grin and hers did too and awkwardly Bo opened his arms and Shirley stepped unsurely into them.

She was too overwhelmed to think. Too overwhelmed to make a big deal out of finding her long lost friend. All she wanted to do was stand here in his arms for eternity.

They had no need to say anything, they knew exactly what each other was thinking.

And with that notion in her head she pulled back and scolded,

"Don't you dare do anything like that again!"

Bo laughed.

"I promise! I also promise to never complain about you butting your nose into my life again".

Shirley returned his grin and they started to walk over to Anna and Ruslan.

"Oh I nearly forgot" Bo said stopping.

He took her chin between his finger and thumb and pulled her close to him, placing a chaste

kiss on her mouth.

“Thank you for rescuing me... again”.

Shirley shook her head and muttered,

“Oh brother” and they walked on; arm in arm

Chapter 14 : Ties Severed No More

The air is thick with utter elation, disbelief and thankful prayers as I stand, here, in the City of Kiev . Today the world was rocked when the Russian Army spectacularly ended, what has proved to be, the most elaborate and shocking demonstration of an active body ever. Today it was revealed, that the unfortunate explosion three years ago of a school in the heart of Kiev, which had supposedly killed around 1000 students and teachers leaving families completely devastated, was nothing more than a cover up. It was a cover up of the biggest mass kidnapping that the Ukraine , and indeed much of the world, has ever seen.

Late last night, branches of the Russian Army, acting on an anonymous tip, broke into the factory where the hostages were being kept. Finding that the captors, ASLA, had high tailed it, the break in only helped them pursue a chase which ended abruptly in a trains' derailment. Several of the captors died when the engine exploded but the Russian Army insists that all the pupils and teachers are safe.

Tonight, the streets of Kiev are lined with the families and friends of those who were captured as they celebrate the return of their lost ones. They await eagerly for the planes which will finally bring St Frances home, which should arrive in the next few hours.

The ASLA or Aristo Sovereignty Liberation Association was a political group formed...

Shirley pressed the stop button on her VCR and sighed happily. She was back home in Redington, now, the return of St Frances happening over a week ago. This was her first chance to watch the news clips that her parents had recorded for her.

She knew that they knew that Anna and Shirley had played a major part in solving this mystery but her parents kept quiet – admiring from afar.

Shirley was glad to be home, it was comforting being back with her own possessions. Suddenly remembering, Shirley pushed the remote across the settee and stood up, making her way to her desk. Today she was spending the night in her small apartment, which she used mainly when she was on a case. Although she loved her own room back at her parents home, when she had started working on real cases and found herself working odd hours, Shirley decided it would be best to get her own place. It was a place in which she spent most of week, mostly spending weekends with her parents. Though, when things were quiet she would often return to her old room, loving the old artefacts that always stayed there.

Searching in the bag she had bought today Shirley pulled out a shiny new book. For a moment she just stared at it, her mind casting back to joyful memories and then she grinned. Moving back over to her table the lights overhead made the words sparkle brightly. DIARY.

It had been years since she had last written in her journal and the familiarity was very comforting.

Picking up a pen, Shirley carefully opened the cover and smoothed over the first page. Then she

wrote, she wrote everything from seeing Bo again to her current position. Everything was going to be okay. Bo's Aunt and Uncle had been ecstatic when the plane had touched down. Mrs Sawchuk barely let go of Bo for the rest of the night, she had howled in pure joy. Shirley remembered the strange floating sensation which had overcome her as families reunited with happy tears. It was when she saw a lonely mother by herself, watching the plane tearfully, that Shirley understood the impact of what Ruslan, Anna and she had done. The woman, clearly a widow, stood for ages watching the plane but no child appeared. The woman had then turned and started walking away as though completely lost when a cry sounded across the hall, louder than anything else. A girl, barely fifteen, came sprinting through the crowd, knocking people over as she shoved through. The widow stopped and turned around and Shirley would never forget the look she saw in the woman's eye. There were no words to describe it as mother and daughter embraced. Shirley understood then, that she had not failed at all and that 'time' was an uncounted extra.

Her next two nights in Kiev proved to be more fun than she had ever had as the city and Bo's Aunt and Uncle celebrated. However, during the celebrations they had come to some serious decisions. One of which was; what happens now?

So they had talked. First of all the four, Anna, Ruslan, Shirley and Bo had discussed their current situations, which opened up more avenues. They had then split up to discuss things more privately. From that it turned out Ruslan had decided he wanted to come to Redington. He had seriously thought about the job Shirley had offered him ages ago and thought it would be a good idea. So it was agreed. Ruslan was moving to Redington to live with Anna. Shirley had pointed out that his knowledge on law would prove to be invaluable. Ruslan was now going through all the correct channels and to speed things along, Shirley had spoken to the chief of police who had contacts in high places.

Anna was happy and Ruslan was happy. They were together and that's all that mattered to them. And although they expressed warnings to Shirley that it might not work out, Shirley knew deep down that they would stay together – they were a perfect match.

Bo. The name made her smile every time. In fact smile did not cover it; grin ecstatically was closer as her body heated with warmth. Well, they had talked, endlessly. At first it was mostly reminiscing the past, trying to keep the happiness going but soon they were awkwardly admitting how much they had missed each other. However, they kept avoiding the subject of what was going to happen now. It was Ruslan who noticed this and pulled Bo aside. Shirley, naturally curious had listened in, half sure that Bo knew she was. What she overheard though made her happier than she'd ever been before. It had included the word 'love' but not in the phrase 'in love' or 'love like a sister'.

What it meant was that Bo was coming home, back to Redington to live with his parents, who were beyond emotion at hearing of his survival. Not seeing their son for three years was killing them and the fact that they couldn't afford to go out to the Ukraine made it worse. So Bo was coming home. He even asked Shirley if there was a job for him and that was when Shirley decided that they were going to branch out into a bigger organisation.

And Shirley was satisfied. Bo was coming home and they had promised each other that they work hard to get their best-friend ship back and running. They had so much to catch up on and Shirley couldn't wait to start.

Tucking the diary under the sofa Shirley reached for the paper where many red circles lay prominent. She had to speak to Anna.

Grabbing her backpack and shoes she hurried out the door. As she reached for the latch she

changed her mind and headed back in towards the table. From there she pulled a rose out of the ornate vase and hurried out the door.

Anna heard the soft tuft of feet and glanced up. She had a look of resolute on her face and it was dry of any tears.

“Hey” she called softly.

“Hi” Shirley replied coming to a stop and gazing down to where Anna sat. Gently she crouched down on her knees and placed the single rose in front of the grave before her. As she made to sit down as well she allowed her fingers to gently brush over the grave.

“You know” Shirley said softly, “he’d be very proud of you”.

Anna nodded but remained quiet and both sat there lost in thought for ten minutes. Then Shirley said,

“I found some promising lets down in the city centre. Want to go check them out”.

Anna’s face brightened and she slowly stood up,

“Okay, I don’t want you getting any old place”.

“Hey, my taste is not that bad” Shirley replied indignantly.

Anna grinned back wickedly,

“If it’s anything like your taste in fashion then I wouldn’t take my words back”.

Shirley couldn’t help but laugh and stood up as well.

“Come on then”.

Anna looked back at the grave stone and brought her fingers up to her mouth. She placed a kiss on them then touched her fingers to the stone.

With that the two best friends walked away through the tidy graveyard.

The slight breeze barely ruffled the grass so that nothing hid the words that glinted in the sunlight.

In loving memory of

Danny Grange

‘Spring will always come again’