

## PALL MALL

RICHARD GREENSTREET, THE SECRETARY of State for Defence, was comfortably ensconced in a leather armchair at his club, enjoying the first drink of the evening. It had been a trying day. Defence questions had not gone well in the House, and the PM was apparently not impressed. There was already talk about a cabinet reshuffle. Well, there always was. But these days, Richard's name was mentioned more often than was comfortable and not in terms of a promotion.

Which was a pity because he really rather loved the defence department, a toys-for-boys sort of job; rides in tanks, test firing whatever new weapon system the military-industrial complex boffins had come up with, meetings with NATO counterparts. The only time it got hot was when some ancient regiment was to be merged with another less glamorous outfit or when some hapless recruit dropped dead on a training exercise. The job was nowhere near as complex as trying to ride the bucking bronco of the economy or piloting an ever more hostile environment at the Home Office. And as for Health, forget it.

At that moment, an urbane figure drew near. 'Richard, how nice to see you. May I join you? Or are you waiting for colleagues?'

'Nick, great to see you. No, no, take a pew. I'm recovering from a torrid defence questions session.'

'Ah, democracy! Such a good idea in principle; so misguided in practice.'

'Nick, I'm afraid you can't expect me to agree to that. Not until I've moved onto pastures new.'

Nick lowered himself into an adjacent leather armchair. 'Which won't be too long from what I've been hearing.'

'Don't believe everything you read in the newspapers. The PM has been very civil to me recently. He said that it was the furthest thing from his mind.'

'Don't believe anything until it's been denied. Or words to that effect.'

'Well, there is that, but I'm highly regarded on the back benches.'

'Enough to trigger a leadership election?'

'That would be telling.'

'Indeed, and another reason why the PM might want you off the team. Anyway, when the tumbrels arrive, you should be okay.'

'I don't know about that. A minister's salary is not a fraction of what the teaboy gets at Goldman. And your ordinary MP is on a pittance, not much more than the minimum wage. And then the divorce cost an absolute packet. And the bimbo is somewhat high maintenance.'

'Ah, well, you only have yourself to blame there. I hope it's worth it under cover of dark.'

'Well, it is rather good, actually. I haven't had such a good seeing-to for ages.'

'Sarah not very obliging latterly?'

'That's one way of putting it.'

'Having it off with someone else, was she?'

'That was my belief. She does, after all, have previous form in that regard. But there was nothing my investigators could dig up. If they had, the divorce might have been rather more straightforward.'

'But you're loaded, aren't you?'

'I don't know what gives you that idea.'

'I seem to remember that we had roughly the same amount of BTC ten years ago. I'm sitting on a million or two. Or did you clear your position?'

'I'm sorry, old boy, I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about.'

'Bitcoin. I set up a digital wallet for you, and you gave me five hundred quid to invest.'

'Oh yes, I do have some dim memory of that.'

'Are you being deliberately vague because you didn't disclose it in the financial settlement with Sarah? Or had you completely forgotten about it?'

'The latter, but if what you're saying is the case, millions, then the former too.'

'Well, I hope you took my advice and kept an offline backup.'

Richard gulped. 'I'm not sure I did. Would that matter?'

'Not if you still have the same computer.'

'Hmm, probably not. Isn't it just a matter of logging in to the Bitcoin website and checking the balance?'

'No, it's not like that at all. Honestly, Rich, I'm blown that you got as far as you did in the world of banking, asking questions like that.'

'In my day, a banker wasn't required to understand how the system worked. All that mattered was your contacts.'

'And look what happened to Barings.'

'True, but that was fraud, wasn't it?'

'Yes. With a little help from the Kobe earthquake.'

'What we have learned to call a black swan.'

'So you're not completely out of touch with modern thinking.'

'I will pass over the implication of that remark and return to the more important point. Are you saying that if I no longer have the same computer, then I have lost my, ah, digital wallet?'

'Not necessarily, but without the private key, you will not be able to access the wallet. I seem to recall you had a Macintosh. Do you have an iCloud account?'

'I think so, but Sarah took care of all that stuff with the home computers. In fact, I hardly ever use a computer. I was mainly on my Blackberry, when that was a thing. And since then, I've used an iPhone. But that was set up by my officials. They're terribly strict at Defence.'

'Thank goodness. And what happened to that Mac, or its successors?'

'Sarah's got it.'

'Well, assuming something more serious didn't happen to the transfer of your data, that's where the digital certificate will be. Will Sarah let you rummage in her hard drive? Or is that a thing of the past too?'

Richard looked glum. 'The latter.'

'Oh dear, so it looks like she's the one with access to the millions.'

Richard stared into the distance. After a few moments, he said, 'Oh, fuck.'

Nick took pity on his former colleague. 'I'm sure I told you to print out the private key and put it in a safe place.'

Clutching at straws, Richard asked, 'I'm sorry to be a bit dim about all this, but what would it look like when it was printed out?'

'I would have suggested you print it out as a QR code.'

'Which is?'

'Oh, Rich, honestly! One of those square barcode things.'

Suddenly a neurone fired in the depths of Richard Greenstreet's brain. 'Got you. I did print it out. And I know exactly where it is.'

'And where is that?'

'It's in one of our photo albums, actually one which contains some particularly saucy pictures of Sarah.'

'A few topless shots for old times' sake?'

'Well, actually a bit more risqué than that.'

'I see. Top shelf material.'

'Yes, that would be a way of putting it, although we actually kept it on the bottom shelf for some reason.'

'To which you have access?'

'Well, that might be a bit tricky. But contrary to how it seems, there is still a bit of thing between Saz and me.'

'Despite the acrimonious divorce.'

'As I was saying, you shouldn't believe everything you read in the papers.'

'I can't believe you two have spent tens of thousands of pounds with divorce lawyers if you are still reasonably good friends.'

'Perhaps we're not friends in that way at the moment. But you know there have been transgressions on either side. Neither one of us is entirely blameless.'

'So you think she'll take pity on you?'

'I wouldn't go that far, but she might think that a fair division of the photo albums was reasonable. Of course, if I just asked for that particular album, she'd smell a rat, and making sure that the album with the QR code is in my allocation might be a bit tricky. I'll have to give it some thought, but it doesn't feel like a completely impossible problem now. Anyway, thank you, Nick; you might have saved my bacon. I owe you one.'

'You certainly do.'

## HOT PR

SARAH GREENSTREET, THE CELEBRITY newsreader, was sitting in the hypermodern offices of her agent Penny Wharton. She slid the folder back across the surface of the Poltrona Frau desk. 'Penny, I'd kill to get this gig.'

'Sarah, love, I'm doing my level best to get you on the shortlist. They love your reel. You look and sound right, but they're worried that you're seen more as a newshound than a serious arts commentator. You haven't been a judge on a big prize. You don't pop up a lot at awards ceremonies.'

'That's because we have an arts and culture editor on the programme. Have you any idea how much work is involved in just keeping up with the news?'

'It's not a criticism, love. I'm just telling you what the perception is. You are perfect for the gig and I'm not saying that just because you're my client. So we need to find another angle. You haven't by any chance got an unpublished novel tucked in your top drawer?'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'You're not a secret but talented watercolourist in your spare time?'

'No. The only thing I've ever done on the creative arts side is write a few poems when I was an undergraduate.'

'Okay,' Penny said doubtfully. 'Poetry's not really what I had in mind. It doesn't really connect with a mass audience. But running with that idea for the moment, have you got enough poems to show a publisher?'

'Not really.'

'Never mind, we could get someone to ghost some using your own efforts as the template.'

'Penny, it's a nice idea, but I wrote those poems when I was twenty. Anyway I don't think poems are the kind of thing that can be ghosted.'

'Oh, nonsense everything can be ghosted.'

'Even if that's true, I doubt if my laments at being chucked by the hunk who was captain of the college rugby team are what the publishers of contemporary poetry are really looking for.'

'That's not the point. All we have to do is assemble enough stuff for a reputable publisher to be prepared to consider it and agree to a pre-publication PR campaign.'

'What reputable house would be prepared to connive in such a thing?'

'Several actually. It wouldn't be the first time I'd worked on the launch of a book that never appeared.'

'I don't know. I wish I hadn't mentioned it.'

'Okay, well let's take a different approach. Got any artist friends or know any novelists? Could we arrange to have you snapped at The Ivy with Damien or Martin?'

'No one in that league.'

'You went to Oxford, didn't you?'

'Yes, but I did PPE.'

'Even so, surely you must have known some writers at the start of their careers.'

'I did know one or two, mainly struggling ones, and none that I've stayed in touch with. Anyway most of them are still struggling.'

Penny laughed. 'I can't see why anyone puts themselves through all that agony.'

'Quite. At least with poetry there isn't so much writing involved.'

'But it's all become so obscure. Who was the last superstar English poet?'

'If we're talking poets from the British Isles, then probably Heaney or Ted Hughes, but the Americans have dominated English language poetry for a century now.'

'You're not giving me much to work with here, Sarah.'

'I've been concentrating on more basic matters. I've had all the regulation nips and tucks. I'm never out of the gym. My teeth conform to the strict canons of the American aesthetic, as do my tits and arse. If I get an in-person interview, I'll be in with a chance.'

'So what we've got to do is get you across to New York and arrange for you to bump into one or two people. Leave it to me, but make sure your passport is valid.'