

... They spent the rest of the day just sitting and gazing out over the valley from the small conservatory at the back of the cottage. The mist never quite lifted the whole day. It fluctuated from dark grey to white, they caught brief glimpses of the green countryside through the murk, but for the most part they remained cocooned in this soothing grey white blanket. Alex felt shielded from the world here. Nobody could call him. They had really escaped. He began to feel more relaxed, the anxiety started to dissipate. He felt he could stay here forever.

In the evening they opened a bottle of wine, then another; the warming glow of the alcohol improving his mood still further. Before they went to bed that night Sharon took some pills from a kitchen cabinet and offered him two. It would help him to sleep, she said. He wasn't sure how long he slept after that. He may have spent several days fading slowly in and out of full consciousness. Afterwards he had vague memories of spending time gazing out over that Welsh valley. The mist never seemed to lift. The valley was either in total darkness or enveloped in that eerie grey white purple light. He remembered Sharon bending over him, injecting something into his arm. Her voice was low, whispering and echoing, his hearing was distorted and he had difficulty speaking. He didn't care. He was happy to drift, happy to allow Sharon to take care of him. Anything to avoid the constant stress and doubt that had begun to pervade his every thought back in London.

He woke abruptly on one occasion at the sound of loud knocking at the door. Sharon was there but didn't react, she just lifted her head from the book she was reading and smiled at him. The knocking at the door continued, growing louder still; he could see the door shaking violently and thought it might be wrenched from its hinges. He still did not feel any concern. He smiled back at Sharon and lifted himself out of the chair. It was quite an effort, he seemed heavy and his arms and legs felt weak and shaky. He slowly struggled to the door and lifted the latch, interested to see who could be making such a noise and who might be so desperate to see him. The urgent, persistent knocking continued right up to the point when he managed to pull the heavy door open. But there was no one there. He walked out into the cool, misty air and looked around but nobody was there at all. Going back into the cottage, he noticed that Sharon's smile had grown wider.

‘Did you hear something, Alex?’

‘There was someone knocking at the door. I was sure of it but there was nobody there at all,’ he slurred.

‘Nothing is really as it seems, Alex. If you hear knocking at the door it doesn’t always mean that someone is there. You may have been taught that by a lifetime of personal experiences, but it really doesn’t necessarily have to follow.’

‘I’m glad nobody else is here. I don’t want to see them ever again. I feel good here. I could stay here alone with you for ever.’

‘No. You can’t hide for ever Alex. You will eventually have to surface back into your real world. But first you have to hide. You have to hide from the others and, at least for a while, you have to hide from yourself.’

Sharon would cook each day. She would prepare chicken and serve him lamb. She threw him an apple one day but when he started to eat it he realised it was an orange. He found it amusing. He had worried about the odd events that were happening in France and London. They had even terrified him but here, in this small cottage with Sharon, it all seemed fine. Sharon was looking after him, this was all part of her healing process. He gave himself over to her completely and felt calm and safe.

He continued to drift in and out, lucid one moment, drowsy and dreaming the next. He thought he saw the angular features of Dan the caretaker at the window once; on several occasions he was sure Jack was shouting for him outside. On each occasion the illusions were replaced by the reassuring presence of Sharon, who would place herself between him and the danger, sometimes calmly, sometimes laughing manically, her red hair blowing wildly around her face despite the air in the cottage being warm and still. At one stage she started calling him Hérbert, in a French accent and when he asked why she simply stated that he reminded her of someone she once knew.

One morning, he wasn’t sure when, he awoke, finally feeling refreshed. He felt renewed; better than he had in a long, long time. His mind was clear, uncluttered by worry. His thoughts and

vision were crisp, the fog and dizziness seemed to have gone. He went downstairs and Sharon was there, sitting in a room that seemed bigger than before and she was still smiling at him reassuringly. He went outside and saw that everything was very different. There was no strange fog, no disconcerting purple hue to the light. The day was bright and sunny and he could now see the distant hills clearly. Way below at the bottom of the valley he could see a river. Not a small Welsh mountain stream but a huge, wide, gaping river. The car parked in the driveway wasn't his sleek, shiny Tesla any more but a large, old and battered four wheel drive vehicle in dull, faded military green. Sharon came out, stood beside him and held his hand.

'I've brought you to a different place, Alex. I think it's time to stop hiding from yourself now. You have to trust me more than ever. Do you feel up to it Alex? Do you feel better now? '

'My head feels clear. It's incredible. I didn't know it was possible to feel this good. This aware, this alive. Where are we?'

'You're home, Alex. This is where you've been all along.'

'Where?'

'Come with me. Now you are here we probably don't have much time.'

They climbed into the beaten up old car and drove off, descending into the valley. The river Volga opened up before them as they reached the bottom and they started to follow it westwards and entered a large town. The streets were empty.

'Where is everyone?'

'It doesn't matter, they are only concerned about you right now. We just have to keep moving. We have to keep pushing forwards towards the city centre. If we hesitate they will have time to regroup.'

'Who are "they"?'

'You'll see soon enough. Keep focussed on the route ahead, don't try to think about anything else. Keep trusting in me and it will all be clear soon.'

They saw nobody. Old Soviet style, concrete apartment blocks lined the road on either side. As they approached the centre they went through a more modern neighbourhood dominated by an old Soyuz rocket, towering up into the clear, blue sky and then suddenly, appearing out of nowhere, there was a police road block in front of them. Two policemen stood next to an ancient, green Lada with a small blue light on the top. Sharon pulled the car over and began speaking to the two policemen in fluent Russian. She opened the glove compartment and took out an envelope which, Alex saw, had bank notes stuffed inside. The policemen took the package, gave a dismissive wave and they were allowed to continue on their way.

‘Where are we?’

‘We’re in Russia, Alex. Try to keep your mind clear and calm. Don’t start questioning too much.’

There was another police road block ahead, exactly the same as the first, the same two policemen standing next to the same small green Lada. This time Sharon didn’t stop and just drove straight past the furiously waving policemen. When he turned around to see if they were following, they had disappeared. Had they been there at all?

‘What’s going on?’ He still felt calm, despite the obvious danger they were now in.

‘Think of it as a dream, Alex. You can’t come to any harm, I promise. Trust me.’

Another police road block, this time manned by four policemen and two green Ladas. The second set of two policemen and their Lada exactly mirror imaged the first, and they moved in perfect unison, blocking the road completely this time. Sharon again refused to stop and smashed through the road block, just managing to keep control of the vehicle. There was an horrendous metal on metal scraping on both sides of their old car as they pushed through the two police cars. They were right in the heart of the town now; new, shiny office buildings rising high above them. But there were still no people. The streets seemed completely devoid of life. Sharon pushed on along the main street. Up ahead a tram was slowly pulling across their path. There was nobody on board, there didn’t even seem to be a driver. It stopped, blocking the way ahead. Sharon turned

right, down towards the river, then left to regain the direction of the city centre. A trickle of water started to fill the riverside road in front of them. There was no rain, and the river seemed low, at least ten metres lower than them on the right. There was no sign of the river being in flood. Nevertheless the trickle of water gradually became a steady stream, becoming deeper and deeper until she was forced to veer off to the left again, away from the river to gain higher ground. Just before reaching the main road a car appeared out of another side street to their left and a collision seemed inevitable. Sharon floored the accelerator and gained just enough ground to receive no more than a glancing blow to the rear of their car. It swerved, but Sharon corrected the steering and they managed somehow to keep ploughing forwards at speed. There was now a smell of burning rubber, and the car was slowing and skewing off towards the side of the road. One of the rear tyres must be catching on the bodywork, Alex thought. The car started to stutter and then ground to a halt.

‘Come on Alex, we need to hurry now.’

They jumped out and started to run along the still empty streets. Another tram was approaching from behind and stopped next to them, its door opening invitingly. Sharon jumped on and pulled Alex after her. There was nobody else on the carriage, there was nobody driving it. It pulled away and continued along the road for a mile or so, then stopped. There was a sign indicating the name of the stop which he hadn’t noticed before: *Terminus*. They alighted the tram and began to run along the road, Sharon scanning left and right, searching for something. A car passed by, then another one. The street ahead in the distance was now beginning to fill with traffic. Then a couple approached on the pavement, looking at them quizzically.

‘Keep focussed on me, Alex. Just think about following me and stop questioning. Keep your mind blank. Don’t worry about where we are or what we are doing. Look at me and follow me. Don’t start to doubt, just believe in me.’

More cars and more people began to appear. The streets began to resemble a normal city rather than the eerie ghost town they had entered. Sharon desperately tried to stop him from looking at the cars and pedestrians.

‘Alex! Focus on me!’

‘What are we looking for?’

She was starting to panic...