

Chapter Fifteen

Carl followed the WPC as she purposefully headed away from The Ferry. They passed a small church, its steeple looming up into the dark above them. Carl had to pick up his pace to catch his pink clad companion, after he'd glanced around. She was making for a small alley between the bizarre juxtaposition of an old Tudor house, whose upper floors leaned out over the path, and modern red brick apartment buildings. The cobbled road stopped shortly after giving entry to a parking lot for the residents, but the path continued as steps descending into the shell of a medieval gate house. It smelt of litter and worse. At the base of the stairs there was an entry through the flint walls and the WPC halted. She discreetly peered out onto the road and surveyed the scene beyond.

"There's a sort of boat sculpture thing with a gang of blokes hanging out by it," she quietly directed at Carl. Her stern demeanour suggested it was time for Carl to re-engage his thoughts. The beer and the WPC's control had slipped him into following in sheep mode. "You stay here and phone 999 again if anything happens. No heroics." With that she had slipped round the corner.

Carl moved up to peer out of the opening, wondering, with distaste, what the puddle he'd have to stand in might be. The WPC had slowed her pace and was tentatively moving towards the group she had described. The boat sculpture consisted of a wooden dinghy apparently half embedded in the pavement. A plastic bag fluttered on the mast end. Around the base were four men in jeans and all sporting tattooed arms. One of them was actually pretty huge Carl realized. Not guys you would meet eyes with. Carl suddenly felt a wave of protectiveness come over him for his companion – did Louise really know what she was doing? She stopped a little away from the gang and twisted on her toes, a little suggestive, inviting permission to proceed. Is the phone on Carl suddenly wondered, guilty for eyeing her bottom? He glanced down at the glowing display.

Close up the WPC thought the group looked most like pit-bulls. Rather than fear though, she was suppressing the desire to start raging at the louts. Play the lost junkie girl, not the policewoman she reminded herself. One of them, the shortest of course, had been the one to engage eyes (the others had glowered). He just looked her over. She was going to have to begin this,

"Uh," she made herself swallow as if terrified, "erm there was this guy Andreas, Andreas Born. He was supplying me with smack." The guy was giving nothing away. He had a gaunt face and short, bristly hair which made him look like a shaved cat she thought. "Up in Winchester," she added. Still no response just blue eyes boring into her. "Well, he's dead, I don't know what, police all over his place... and I knew he came down here, and I need some," she finished in a rush. He glanced over her shoulder and up the street. She prayed Carl was well back. Finally he spoke, controlled and relaxed,

"Dead is he? Well, tough bollocks!" He didn't seem to care either way and the WPC bought that. "You're a lying bitch though," he continued, irritated. Not so good thought the WPC. "He wasn't supplying you, he was barely supplying himself. So you can take

your crap stories off my fucking patch before we find a better use for you.” Ouch! Well, she’d learnt Andreas wasn’t a serious player in the drug market which was probably all she’d wanted to know. He might just be trying to scare her. She could say she’d just tried the cocaine with Andreas and wanted more but what else would she learn? She decided to turn her growing pause into shocked fear,

“OK, OK I’m going,” and she started backing off fast like she was about to cry. He gave her a more suspicious look, perhaps turning tail like this made it look like she’d never been that interested in buying. It was done now though, so she turned and headed off at speed back towards where she’d left Carl.

The gateway in which Carl was hiding was deeply shadowed she noted gratefully. The moment’s panic when she’d thought the guy might get violent was subsiding and, as she turned back onto the stairs, she was commending herself on a job slickly done.

“Not a nice bunch,” she reported calmly to Carl, “but anyway they laughed off the idea Andreas was dealing drugs for anyone. Let’s call this lead dead – I’ll file a report on these clowns with the city squad.”

Carl had been watching her retreat thinking the shortness of the encounter didn’t bode well. Louise seemed to think all was fine but he was watching the four guys talking and then with a laugh the biggest guy started to trot in their direction.

“Louise one of them’s coming after you,” he stuttered starting to feel queasy in his bowels. She glanced back fast and her eyes widened in shock.

“Shit, move!” she ordered in a whisper. They started legging it up the uneven steps of the gate house. The open shell of the old tower offered no hiding places so they found themselves in the alley above. Carl started rushing for the main street but was yanked from behind by the WPC into the parking quadrangle of the apartment complex.

“I can’t go as fast as you or him,” she whispered as she brought them to the ground behind a parked BMW, across from the entry to the alley. They crouched on their haunches waiting to see if their pursuer would go past. Carl could hear the breath hissing through his teeth and put his hand up as a block, certain he would give them away. Hiding like this was nerve wracking; if the thug decided to look amongst the cars they’d had it. The WPC had her arm across his shoulder and was gripping him as if she was going to knock him flat and give herself up if the worst came. The air he was gasping in was surreally tinged with her perfume. Could he really hide while she got beaten, or worse, he wondered?

Suddenly their nemesis was in the entry way, pausing his run to consider which way to go. They held their breath in dread. He was huge, well over six foot tall and built like a front row forward. Something glittered by his hand, was that a knife? Of course he would have a weapon wouldn’t he? But then the brute turned away from the parking area and

ran on towards the main street beyond. Carl collapsed against his companion and let out relieved thanks.

“We’re not out of this yet,” the WPC hissed, “when he gets to the road and sees no sign of us he’ll come back.” A new surge of terror permeated Carl’s veins. They were sitting ducks. The brute was between them and escape now.

“Come on there’s a pedestrian passage way out on the other side,” the WPC was still on the ball even if Carl wasn’t, “I think,” she added, trying to make out the building’s layout. The passageway was there though, between two brown wheelie bins and they could escape onto a main thorough fare. There were a few groups of people walking here and suddenly they felt safer. A pub fifty yards away offered well lit windows and the sound of a juke box.

“I need a drink,” said Carl urging the WPC towards the pub.

“Hang on, let me dump this pink jacket, it sticks out a mile.” She twisted out of the jacket and tossed it behind the wheelie bins. She would look very different now with just the white shirt. “Let’s act couply; he’s expecting a lone woman,” she added, nestling into Carl and putting her arm round his waist. They walked towards the pub, the Hampshire Arms, as quickly as they could reconcile with their new act as lovers. The main door to the pub was three steps above street level in an alcove. Carl was just about to place his foot on the first step when the WPC pulled him across her and up against the side wall.

“He’s just come out of the passage,” she hurriedly whispered. “Excuse me,” with that she grabbed Carl and buried her face in his neck. Carl tried to process the double stimuli of a lithe woman pressed against him and the horror of impending doom coming from behind. Her hair smelt of peaches and under the perfume he could detect her faint musk. He imagined the knife sliding into his back and emerging through his stomach.

“Oh crap he’s going to walk right past us,” she whispered in his ear, before turning her face to his and kissing him squarely on the mouth. She still tasted of fruit from the drinks earlier in the evening. They were kissing for real, tongues entwined. Carl had acted instinctively, never having stage kissed before, and now wondered if he should stop. She didn’t. She had her eyes closed offering no guidance. Perhaps she was praying. Footsteps came by, then receded. She broke off and peaked round his face. He felt her relax against him seeming suddenly small and fragile. She turned back to him and placed her nose against his. “Phew,” she breathed, then grinned and nodded towards the pub.

Waiting to be served at the bar, Carl processed the evening’s events. He was, perhaps not surprisingly, feeling rather close to WPC Louise. Women seemed to be literally falling into his arms at the moment, after which events were hard to control. She was married though, with a child. His love life was a big enough mess already. They weren’t going to discuss events outside again then, he surmised. Somehow he wanted to just talk to her honestly about it, to hear her say she felt something too. Was that his ego just wanting to clock her up as conquered? Probably. He ordered the drinks from the barman and carried

them back to the table Louise had picked. She had tied her hair back and looked considerably more severe suddenly. No conversation here then, he confirmed.

“Have I got this right?” she asked serious faced, “the electron, muon and tau particles are all identical except that they have different masses?” That moment of intimacy had definitely gone; he almost laughed.

“That’s right.” He was rebooting his physics knowledge.

“And they get their mass from the Higgs particle?”

“Yes”

“So why do they have different masses? If they’re the same shouldn’t the Higgs treat them all the same?”

“You’d think so but it doesn’t. That’s an open question – we’ve no sure idea, not even any really compelling speculation.” He thought she looked pleased to have brought him to such an admission.

Suddenly the bulk of a large man loomed over the table. They had assumed themselves safe here in public and hadn’t paid attention to his entrance. It was the man who had been chasing them.

“I think you dropped this,” he spoke with a deep but not uncultured voice. He held out the WPC’s pink leather jacket. It looked rather small in his huge hand. Neither Carl nor the WPC dared say a word. He smiled at their petrified faces as if amused by the effect he was having. The tension lessened. “Sorry if I scared you.” The WPC reached out and took her jacket with a mouthing, ‘thank you!’

“Look if you really know Andreas, I want to talk.” He seemed wary of them suddenly. Perhaps he was wondering if they were the police.

“Go on,” encouraged the WPC.

“Well, he said he had this old manuscript – a laboratory log of Newton’s.” He looked for some confirmation and Carl nodded. “He wanted to know if it could be sold, on the black market. I found a buyer. If you have it or can find it you’ll get a five figure sum. Have you got it?”

“There’s some old stuff of his – we could look,” bluffed the WPC.

“You know where to find me alright. If you own up about it, it’ll just end up in a museum, worthless to you.” He paused as if he wanted them to start searching there and then. He couldn’t think of anything else to say, though so turned and walked from the pub.

Carl and the WPC looked at each other before both starting to giggle. All that game of hide and seek had just been to avoid that?

“I guess Andreas was hoping to unload his counterfeits on as many people as he could,” suggested the WPC.

“Yeah, maybe.” Carl still wondered if there was an original manuscript somewhere.