

Shell Shocked Charlie Cochrane

Dedicated to two blokes who always make me smile

The lights, the recording equipment, the lairy looking rozzer.

I've never experienced anything like this before, never been in trouble with the police.

Honest Billy, that's me, always kept my nose clean; I even declare every one of my tips on my tax form. So, what's Mrs. Zanderson's best boy doing being formally interviewed under caution?

Doing his best to explain just how he'd got into this mess in the first place, only I can't tell them the whole truth, for reasons that will become apparent.

"How and when did you meet Jonny Telfer?"

"A couple of months ago, in a bar. The Happy Return."

"Had you gone there to pick up a fare?"

"No. It was pleasure, not business." And what a pleasure it had turned out to be, at least at first...

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"Billy Zanderson! Where the hell have you been?" Max the barman's sonic boom of a greeting hit me half way across the floor.

"It's only been a year or two. You make it sound as if this is the Harmonia Gardens and the band are about to strike up *Hello Dolly*." I shouldn't have said that. He started on the whole, "Hello Billy, well Hello Billy," thing and I had to punch him to get him to stop.

"Well, if you can bear the corniness, I'd have to say it's nice to have you back where you belong." Max picked up a bottle of beer. "The usual? Or are you working?"

"Not tonight." I paid for the beer and took a long, very welcome, draught. "How's business?"

"Pretty good. Got a new chef so now we get people in here for the food, as well as the happy hour and the dancing. You?"

"Not bad either. Got a couple of contracts that keep me pretty busy." I gave the place the once over as I swigged my beer, clocking someone sitting in the corner. He was hunched over some sort of device laptop, face as long as a kite, like he was perched in a funeral parlour, not in a bar. "Who's he?"

"Who's who?"

"The bloke with the laptop? And who brings a one of those to a club?"

"That's Jonny. Jonny Telfer. He's pretty well a permanent fixture now." Max buffed up the bar surface a bit. "And he has the laptop cos he helps Mr. Yorath with the business, finances and the like."

"Ah, right." Yorath must still own the place, then. "Accountant?"

"I don't think so. Not sure what Jonny is, really."

"Money launderer?"

"No way." Max appeared genuinely shocked. "It's all strictly legit here. Mike Yorath makes the average nun look like a lap dancer. You know that."

Yeah, I knew. “Maybe he handles his investments.” I wished he handled mine. A real looker—dark haired, olive skin, just as I like them.

“He’s a bit of an anorak, though. Watches the trains go by but doesn’t seem to make an effort to get aboard one, if you follow me.”

“I follow.” I fetched out my wallet again. “Give me a bottle of whatever he likes and we’ll see what makes him tick.”

I sashayed over, just in case Mr. Laptop had noticed me, then slapped the beer on his table. He jumped, like Miss Muffet with the spider. I must have parked the bottle too close to his precious laptop, or something. Maybe, given what Max had said, he took the thing to bed. Got his kicks that way.

No, that wasn’t fair. What right did I have to make any sort of assumptions about him?

“Is that for me?” He asked, pointing at the bottle.

“Ain’t nobody else at the table. If you’d rather not, I’ll fob it off on someone else.”

“Shut up and sit down.” He grinned—a real “come to bed and don’t dilly-dally on the way” sort of smile—then knocked back some beer. “Thanks. Just what I needed.”

“Glad to hear it. Problems with that?” I pointed at the laptop.

“Not directly. Isn’t it bloody typical for some sodding American server to go down when you really need some up to date figures? I’ve been going around the houses, trying to get the information other ways.”

“And I’m guessing you’ve had no luck?”

“Bugger all. Everyone must have been experiencing the same problem as none of my usual sites or contacts are any the wiser.” He peered at his beer bottle as if it might have the current price of Exxon-Mobil shares written on the label. “I think I’ll give up for the day.”

“Good idea.”

Then I noticed the chair. Jonny’s wheelchair, folded up and tucked in beside the table. Maybe that explained Max’s anorak remark, although with a smile like Jonny’s, nothing should have got in the way of pulling. And guys on wheels hit the dance floor nowadays, just the way they hit the basketball court. Still, it brought me up with a round turn, as my old grandad used to say, because I now felt even guiltier thinking that stuff about how he got his kicks.

“Not seen you here before.” Jonny said, cutting into my muddled thoughts.

“Not been here for a while. I go back to the days when Sindy Sue did the cabaret and Harry May was on the door.” Those were the days. The food may not have been as good but the atmosphere was crackling

“Harry May’s a legend here. Shame what happened to him.” Jonny closed his laptop then packed it away in its bag with as much care as a mum might show a new-born baby she was swaddling. Quite touching, really. “Is it true he had tattoos all down his todger?”

“Supposed to be. I never actually saw it.” The legendary black-work on the equally legendary todger; I’d forgotten all about that. “When you say it’s a shame about him, do you mean his wife found out what the tattoos meant?”

“Worse than that. She saw him coming out of a drag place, tottering about on six inch heels and wearing a Dolly Parton wig.”

“You’re winding me up.”

“I’m not, honest. Unless somebody was winding *me* up when they told me.”

They might have been, although I could remember people warning Harry he was sailing close to the wind. I took another swig of beer, the only remedy for such a sad story. “Did she sling him out?”

“Nah. Dad-in-law came down, though —there was skin and hair flying everywhere, apparently. Harry’s shacking up with Kevin now, down Cardiff way. Kevin being *Sindy Sue*, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“I remember. *Sindy* always had a soft spot for Harry. They’ll be going to see the Blues together—*Sindy* won’t wear drag for that—and getting maudlin over six pints and a *vindaloo* afterwards.” Wonderfully domestic. “Harry’ll be in his element. Ten years’ time they’ll be like an old married couple.”

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“So it was just a casual meeting? Not planned in advance?” The sergeant asks. I’ve decided that, despite the smiles and the soft voice, she’s actually the bad cop, because there’s something about her that riles me. The Inspector’s gruff, but I suspect she’s soft under the surface. You get to weigh people up pretty quickly and pretty accurately in my game.

“Couldn’t have been planned because I’d never ever heard of him before, let alone met him.” I wouldn’t have forgotten those eyes if I’d seen them before.

“And you picked him up? Not like you’d pick up a fare. You ‘pulled’ him?”

“You have such a romantic way of putting it.” I can’t resist a dig. “We found each other attractive. That’s not been illegal in a long while.”

“We’re not suggesting it is illegal,” the sergeant bristles. “What *is* illegal is stealing from financial institutions.”

“Do I look like the sort of man who’d get involved in that sort of stuff?”

I know for a fact that I don’t. Trouble is, neither did Jonny.

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Somewhere around the third beer Jonny got a bit blurry eyed and more than a bit flamboyant. Like Dad on New Year’s Eve when he waxes on about the old Zanderson home in the *glen* which is probably no more than a crofter’s shed, if it exists at all.

“Are you interested in getting rich quick?” He asked, slightly stumbling over the “s” in interested, and pushing his beer bottle away as a result.

“Who isn’t? So long as it’s legal,” I added hastily. Like I said, I’m a good boy. “What does it involve?”

“Too much working capital for me to lay down, for a start.”

“Then you’d better count me out, too.” I was intrigued, though. “What sort of scheme is it?”

“Buying and selling shares, basically. Invest when the market’s down and sell as soon as they boom. Even if it’s a few hours later.” He jerked his thumb in the direction of his laptop. “It’s all about timing.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Can’t bankroll you, though.”

He grinned. “I’ll just have to keep looking for a sugar daddy, then.” He jerked his thumb again, this time in the direction of the dance floor. “Fancy a spin? Literally in my case.”

“Yeah. Why not?” I’d never danced with a bloke in a wheelchair before, but then I’d never met any bloke quite like Jonny, for all sorts of reasons, although that’s getting ahead of myself. I offered him a hand getting into his chair, which he refused albeit not in an angry way. I think he appreciated the offer for what it was—an act of kindness—although I hadn’t asked why he needed the thing to get around. If I needed to know, he’d tell me. We deposited

the laptop case with Max, because you can't trust anybody these days, then hit the dance floor.

Jonny's chair was nifty, lightweight, the sort of thing you see athletes using, and he could manoeuvre it around the dance floor like a pro. I'm no psychologist, but I'd have said the act of dancing, the letting go of physical reservations, seemed to be working some sort of liberating effect on Jonny's brain, dissolving his detachment in beer and perspiration. That sounds a bit pretentious written down, but you get the drift.

There was a lull between tracks; Jonny grabbed my arm and tipped his head towards the service door that led to the back of the club. "It's getting busy. Fancy a nightcap? I rent the bottom floor flat in the annex."

I couldn't refuse such a good offer, even if Jonny's definition of busy—there must have been all of a dozen people in the place—didn't match mine. "Suits me. Got any decent coffee, though? I've had my fill of beer."

A look of panic crossed his face. "I've only got instant but it tastes okay, I promise."

It was going to take a lot more than dodgy coffee to put me off. "I'm sure it'll be fine.

Anything to stop me getting a sore head in the morning."

We collected the laptop and headed for the back door. I remembered the annex being built, one of Mr. Yorath's ideas about ensuring a steady income in a world where the ban on cigarette smoking indoors was forcing a lot of places to the wall. Like many of his ideas, it made sense. Jonny unlocked the outer door and we were barely through it before he grabbed my hand and almost dragged me along the little corridor. He still had his bunch of keys which he slipped round his neck on a lanyard, but he didn't show any signs of using one of them on his flat door. Instead, the saucy bugger reached up, at which I bent down so he could put his arm around my neck, pulling me closer until our foreheads met.

I felt his hot, sweet breath on my face, and the pulse in his temple was drumming as fiercely as the Pet Shop Boys' beat had been over in the club. That hand on the back of my neck started stroking me, which was nice if a bit disconcerting. For some stupid reason, I'd got it into my head that Jonny wasn't going to make any sort of pass—not immediately anyway—so I'd not been expecting such quick work.

I was thinking, "I guess he's going to kiss me," but when I realised he already was. It was gentle at first, then fierce; if I was a romantic novelist I'd have said it was like the tender touch of a bird's wing then the rough assault of a lion's tongue. But I'm just a taxi driver, so I'll leave the flowery prose for the moment. Jonny was one of the best kissers I'd had the pleasure to be tonsil-tennised by; I needed to learn not to make assumptions.

At last I found the breath to speak. "Now that's something I'm willing to invest time and effort in."

Jonny didn't reply; he'd got wiry arms, and they proved surprisingly strong. I'm neither small nor weak, but he soon had me pinned against the wall, smothering my face with more of his really juicy kisses. The angle was a bit awkward, chair and all, but I just let the assault carry on, until he broke off as sharp as he'd begun and, with a big stupid grin, started to fumble his key into his lock. I was getting my thoughts together again, and they all concerned beds or settees and people—me and him—getting their ends away.

He'd just got the flat open when we heard the creak of the outside door and Max's voice, overly loud and distinctly embarrassed, boomed along the corridor.

"Mr. Yorath here to see you, Mr. Telfer."

“Bugger.” Jonny stuffed the keys back in his pocket. He grimaced, gave me a quick pinch on the backside and nudged me towards the door. “Sorry. I’ll make it up to you.”

“That’s okay. There’ll be other times.” I’d make sure of that. “I’ll give you my number. Private one, not the taxi company.”

“Can you get me a coffee, too? I need to sober up.” He already sounded more lucid, which made me wonder—although not at the time—whether the drunkenness had been put on a bit. Max had returned to the bar where he was talking to Yorath; they were pointing in our direction and sharing some private joke, possibly at our expense, in which case they were going the right way about making themselves an enemy. I got Max to fix Jonny a coffee, took it over to where he was getting his laptop set up again, pecked his cheek and left. Shame Yorath couldn’t have arrived an hour later.

Or fifteen minutes. It’s not the time that counts, it’s what you do with it.

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“So you just left?” The sergeant asks.

“Yes. I wasn’t interested in listening in on any of their business stuff.” I fold my arms, try staring her out. It doesn’t work.

“Perhaps you should have been,” she says, with a voice sharp and penetrating as a drill.

“Might have stopped you getting into trouble.”

“Well, seeing as I never got into any trouble, it makes no difference whether I listened or not.”

“But you arranged to see Telfer again?” The inspector cuts in.

“Yeah. He’d given me his number so I texted him. It’s not illegal or two blokes to meet up for a drink, is it?”

“Not if it’s just a drink,” she says with a sneer.

“And not if it’s a date, either. This isn’t the 1950’s.” The intimation that they might be being homophobic is worth a shot.

“You can do what you like in your own beds,” she responds, articulating clearly for the recording, “but you can’t go around nicking a hundred grand.”

As much as that? “I never nicked anything. You’re trying to drag me into something I was not involved with.”

“You may not have taken the money, but can you deny you drove the vehicle to and from the scene of the crime?”

I can’t deny that, although I keep on the front foot. “Am I responsible for everything my customers do when they’re not in my cab? I drive hundreds of people every week. I bet more than one of them gets up to dodgy stuff, but if it’s not happening on my back seat how can I be to blame?”

She doesn’t seem to have an answer to that, for which I’m grateful because when it was half way out of my gob I’d started to panic that she’d try and pin a string of misdemeanours committed by my customers onto me.

“When did you next see Telfer?” the sergeant asks.

“The following week.”

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I'd had a string of airport runs booked so when Jonny texted I had to defer, for a couple of days, cashing in the docket for the delights those kisses had promised. We arranged a date away from The Happy Return and the possibility of Yorath interrupting us; I'd pick him up and we'd go to the new tapas bar the other side of town. I'm used to having less mobile customers so the chair wasn't an issue; nothing was an issue so far as Jonny and his come-to-bed kisses were concerned. I know the conversation about the get rich quick scheme should have rung alarm bells, but I'd assumed he was above board. I never did understand stocks and shares and he'd never mentioned it again.

Of course, the biggest shock I had coming was nothing to do with money, but I'm getting ahead of myself. We had a great meal, lots of tasty little things to pick at, by which I don't mean any parts of Jonny's anatomy, although I had those in mind by way of dessert. We drove back to his, because my place isn't really great for accessibility, and you can guess the rest.

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"You entered into a relationship?"

"Yes." *Although it's none of your business.* I don't say that, of course, because I'm not an idiot, but I stare her out.

"Yet you're still maintaining you knew nothing about Telfer's activities? His criminal ones," the sergeant adds with a leer. "We've a witness who says he asked you to go into business with him."

I resist asking what witness they're talking about because I'm pretty sure said person doesn't exist. I've watched enough cop shows to know the tricks they pull. I stick with telling as much of the truth as I can. "One time he asked me if I'd be interested in investing in stocks and shares. Seeing as I've no capital to hand, I 'passed' on the offer."

"But you agreed to drive him around?"

"Yes. I'm a bleeding taxi driver, it's what I do." I'm also resisting the urge to punch one of them. Is this what they do, to improve their arrest rates? Taunt people into taking a pop at one of them?

The sergeant leans closer across the table, suddenly all kindness. "You're an intelligent man. You've never been in trouble. Model citizen."

"Thank you," I reply, but I don't think she's clocked the sarcastic edge to my voice.

"Given that, are you expecting us to believe you didn't have any inkling that Telfer wasn't the man you may have taken him for?"

I hesitate, because I've been trying hard to speak only what's true, even if it's a touch redacted. Thing is, Jonny wasn't at all the man I took him for, and I don't mean the bank job.

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I woke with a start.

Some bloody idiot was making a hell of a din in the hallway at—I looked at my clock and swore—three in the morning. Fuck that. I put my pillow over my head and tried to get back to sleep but the racket continued for what seemed hours, until I realised it was someone banging on the bedroom door. Panic stricken, I turned over to nudge Jonny, but the other side of the bed was empty.

I got up, assuming there'd been an emergency, the adrenaline and the worry flowing freely. Had Jonny been taken ill and had to crawl to the bathroom to heave up all the squid rings he'd put away the previous evening? I opened the door with more trepidation than anger, to find Jonny; dishevelled, stark naked and gorgeous. The stark naked and gorgeous bit probably saved his life because I'm not at my most forgiving at silly o'clock.

"There'd better be a fucking good reason for this," I growled, before I stopped, gobsmacked. He was on his feet. "You're walking. What the hell..."

"I'll explain, I promise, only I might not have time to—ow! Shit!" He started to writhe and I started to think I must still be asleep and dreaming. He seemed to be changing before my eyes, elegant hands turning scaly like he had some vile disease spreading at a hideous rate across the skin I'd so recently been caressing. The stuff of nightmares.

"What's going on? What can I do?" I felt like the heroine in a Hammer horror movie, standing there half-dressed and helpless.

"Nothing." His voice was becoming less distinct. "Full moon. Shift shape. Sorry. Should have..."

The rest got lost in animal-like squeals and grunts. Which is no surprise as he'd almost completely turned into an animal by then. I later discovered what sort of animal he was; not a wolf or anything clichéd like that—no, Jonny had to be unique. A glyptodont. Not a full size one, thank God, but with all the works. Carapace, armoured skin, bloody great thing like a mace on the end of his tail. He couldn't talk because the voice box isn't set up the right way, even if he could think the way he was able to when human.

I didn't know all that at the time, just that I was almost wetting myself with fright.

By the time I'd decided he wasn't going to tear me limb from limb and eat my bone marrow, he'd trundled off towards the lounge. When Yorath had these flats built, he'd made a big thing about the ground floor ones being wheelchair friendly, including plenty of manoeuvring space. I bet he'd have had kittens if he'd known what an advantage that extra space was to a small, living, armoured vehicle. I grabbed the duvet off the bed to wrap around myself and followed him; it was bloody chilly and Jonny had all that scaly stuff to insulate him so he could fend for himself.

He'd plonked himself in the middle of the lounge floor, with a hangdog—hang armadillo?—expression on his face. Dear God, it must have been awful for him. I mean, wolves are fast and handsome and loyal to the pack. What did *these* things do for kicks?

"What now?" I asked, but reply there came none, so I tried, "How long does this last? Tap with your front paw. Once for yes, twice for no."

He tapped once.

"Hours?"

Once, again.

"Okay, can you tap once for each hour?"

Four taps.

"You want me to stay up with you?"

One tap, and what appeared to be a tear. Looked like I was in for a long night.

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"They didn't use your vehicle in the raid."

“Eh?” The inspector’s suddenly swerved into a different lane and I’m struggling to keep track.

“The entrance to the premises was smashed in by a vehicle. Not yours; we checked.”

“I understand from the news that you have no idea what vehicle it was.” That wipes the smarmy look off her face for a minute. The local news has been all over the case, really bigging up the “police are baffled” element. No clue as to the colour or make of the car—no paint chips or other forensics—and the whizzy CCTV had been disabled by somebody with a real knack with computers. You can put a name in the frame as well as they can.

“We do know you took Telfer home in your taxi, though. That’s caught on camera,” the sergeant chips in. “Where did you pick him up?”

“By Costa. The one on the corner of Minehead Avenue. Put his chair in the back, ran him home, didn’t stay. Where’s the problem?”

“The problem’s in the hundred grand he had stashed in the chair.” The sergeant’s looking smarmy now. “Or are you telling me you didn’t notice that?”

“Plenty of people who use chairs have stuff stashed away in them. Things they need every day. I don’t ask questions.” Although in this case, I really should have.

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The morning after armadillo-gate I woke with a stiff neck where I’d been lying on the floor. Sometime during the night Jonny had changed back; I had a vague recollection of slipping down next to him, shoving a cushion under his head and covering us both over with the quilt. After the initial embarrassment—and an initial something else prompted by his state of undress—I fetched him some clothes and his chair then got to work on making tea and toast. I had a gazillion questions to ask, and no idea of where to start, but he pre-empted me.

“I think I owe you an explanation,” he said, appearing at the kitchen door looking tired but terrific.

“Assuming it all wasn’t a dream then yes; I think you do.”

“I’m a shape shifter. It’s all linked to these, somehow.” He patted his legs. “Genetic. Progressive loss of use of the lower limbs.”

Not all his lower parts though, I noted with a grin.

“It stopped getting worse when I was eighteen,” he continued. “Doctors completely baffled all round. And around then *this* happened for the first time.”

“What do the doctors say about that?”

“Never told them. I’d end up in a loony bin. Bad enough if I’d been a werewolf. Most people haven’t even heard of glyptodonts.”

I had to admit that I hadn’t until then, so we googled the things while the tea brewed.

“What happens if you’re in the chair when you ‘shift’?” The word felt odd to use, but no odder than what it was meant to describe.

“I get out quick. My legs change first, as you must have seen last night, and I get the use of them back. It means I can get myself to where I want to be.” He grinned, sheepishly. “I have to plan full moon nights. I guessed you might be here but I wanted to take the risk. I don’t mind you knowing.”

“Thanks.” I took that as the compliment it was clearly intended to be. “Grub’s up.”

We settled down to smear the bread with jam—him—or butter and marmite—me—and stock up our resources. This was going to be hungry work.

“I try not to be out of the flat when I shift. I’d probably be hauled off to the zoo. But sometimes I just have to ride it out.”

“It’s got to be a challenge.” That sounded the worst sort of banal understatement but I was struggling to get my head around the logistics, let alone anything else.

“Yeah. I don’t think you noticed my ‘change back dash for the loo’ this morning. Got to do it while I still have working legs.”

And before the lounge ended up a mass of glyptodont crap, I guessed.

“Shame I can’t just have the working legs without the shell. Still, when you’ve got used to this and all the challenges of life getting about in one,” he slapped the side of his chair, “then you’re used to having to cope.”

I reached over, giving his hand a squeeze. There was so much I wanted to say but I guessed most of it would sound either mawkish or patronising. In the end, I mumbled, “Glad I can be part of the adventure,” and took another swig of tea.

“You’re alright, you are.” He patted my hand. “You take it all in your stride. You’d be a great wingman.”

“Er...thanks. What mission did you have in mind?”

“Nothing, at the moment. Nothing much, anyway.” There was a glint in his eye, though. If only I’d been brave enough then to ask what was on his mind, but I was too intrigued by the other business.

“When you showed me those glypto-wotsits on google, it said they generally grew a lot larger than you were last night.” I looked around the room. “Just as well you don’t turn into a full sized one. You’d end up stuck.”

“Ah. There’s a funny thing.” As if the whole of the story wasn’t funny—funny peculiar and funny ha-ha.

Jonny went into some detailed account of how the size of animal he turned into depended on his surroundings. If he was outside when the change came he ended up larger than if indoors. I followed that alright, but when he got into the “why” stuff, how it was like animals on islands generally evolving into smaller versions and why goldfish grew in proportion to the size of their pond, it got a bit impenetrable so I switched off. When he’d done with the science speak I asked what was the biggest size animal he’d ever turned into.

“The size of a Sherman tank, just about. That was the early days, when I didn’t quite get my dates right and had a ‘hide on the common and hope there wasn’t somebody out running in the middle of the night’ experience.” He seemed to find the memory more amusing than traumatic. “Mind you I could have bulldozed my way into the woods if I’d wanted. For some reason, I seem to develop superhuman—superglypodont—strength with the supersizing.”

“Now *that* sounds useful.”

“It might be. One day.” He knocked back his tea. “Any more of that in the pot?”

“Might be stewed. If it is, I’ll make fresh.”

And that was it for the time being. How British could you get, reacting to such a revelation by worrying about the quality of the tea?

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“Have you been seeing each other regularly?” The sergeant’s still leading the charge.

“Yes. That’s what people in a relationship do.” I’m getting a bit bored at this point, because most of the things they’re asking I can give an honest answer to, although I can’t let my

guard drop. I'm not sure how good my poker face is when the stakes get really high. I'm also not sure how or when this is going to end because I'm certain they're looking for sufficient grounds to detain me. Maybe they want me to be Jonny-bait, because he seems to have gone to ground.

"When did you last see him?"

"Two evenings ago, when I picked him up. As you are no doubt aware." I sound sarcastic; I feel sarcastic. "I dropped him home then went back to mine to get some shut eye. I had a Gatwick run, as you'll also no doubt be aware of." A couple of girls heading off for a hen do, including some sort of full moon party which they never stopped going on about.

"And where is he now?"

"How do I know? I'm not his keeper."

"You're his lover. As you said, keeping tabs is what people in a relationship do."

"I didn't actually—" the sound of a commotion outside cuts me off. Shouting, confusion, a sound like a wrecking ball hitting the station. I try to work out where whatever this is fits into the greater scheme of "what the fuckery" that seems to make up my life at present.

"Stay there." The sergeant leaps up, making a grab for the door handle, but she's too late.

There's no longer a door where she's reaching as there's no longer a frame for it to sit in, and that's because there's no longer a wall.

"Shit!" The inspector's out of her chair and legging it, and the sergeant's not far behind. The sight of that carapace is enough to give anyone the willies.

A delighted armadillo type squeal announces the arrival of my lift.