

Play God

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Chapter 1

Patrick Adams sat in his huge, technology filled office with his Board Of Directors. The mood in general was one of apprehension due to the boss' mood. Every single person in that room was well aware that Adams wouldn't think twice about relieving them of their jobs within minutes, no exceptions.

"I can see I'm going to have to start the ball rolling." Adams' soft voice never changed much, regardless of his frame of mind, and that only added to the general unease felt by his staff. He was a short, middle-aged man who was always impeccably groomed, always. Patrick Adams had an army of wardrobe staff, dressers, hair stylists and image advisers and it showed.

"The gradually declining ratings didn't just hit an all time dip last night, they plunged into the bowels of hell, ladies and gentlemen." He turned his pale, cold, grey eyes on his Board, not blinking or looking away until the object of his focus did so first.

"Of the total viewers who first tuned in to the show, six months ago, only thirty two percent did so yesterday. A further eleven percent of those few tuned out during the commercial break." Another nerve racking look was cast around the staff.

"Six months, ladies and gentlemen, that's all. I'm sure you all understand my concern." Adams pressed his fingertips together. "Explanations, please."

The Board Of Directors exchanged glances. Patrick Adams wasn't noted for his reasonability when it came to his career and reputation. The bottom line was that the public had had a gut-full of Real Life TV. Adams' company alone had covered Island Life, Home Life, Workplace Life, School Life and their latest gem Prison Life. Prison Life had meant to be a certain success, due to its subject matter. People were innately intrigued by criminals.

"Sir, I don't think the declining figures are through any fault of ours, and certainly not yours." Brian Charlton said graciously. "The prisoners and the staff at F1 have taken it upon themselves to become actors."

"You don't say?" Rowan Hall rolled her eyes. "Governor Stevens with his plastic hair and U-Glo dentures. Yes Sir, Brian's right. They know the cameras are there and they stage it. That fight couldn't have been more false if they'd had scripts in their hands."

"So we move to another prison?" Jacob Price asked.

"Change in subject matter?" Brian suggested.

"It would have to a monumental change." Rowan shrugged.

"Your lack of confidence is very disheartening, Miss Hall." Patrick Adams looked evenly at Rowan and she felt her innards knot.

"I meant, we'd have to find an area we haven't covered already, Mr Adams." Rowan answered quickly.

"Go on." Adams said slowly and Rowan swallowed hard. She had nothing to 'go on' with.

"I think that would be quite difficult and very risky. Our shows have been progressive. They've progressed and developed to adapt to public demands. As an extreme example, can you imagine the viewers being hooked on Family Life now? Observing the home life of a family was all the rage three years ago, but the public outgrew that. We progressed to Island Life, and so on." Rowan was rather pleased with her swift improvisation.

"And you don't see a viable progression from Prison Life?" Adams pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"I can't think of a more advanced environment, plotwise, than the prisons, sir, but obviously that's not to say that there isn't one." Rowan looked round her colleagues for backup. They all looked in every direction possible but not at Rowan. "Cheers." She muttered.

"The public get bored very easily." Adams mused.

"Yes, Sir, they do." Rowan said quietly. "And we've been very successful in keeping up with them."

"Up to now." Adams looked straight at Rowan, making her squirm on the spot. "So you see our form of entertainment as an addiction, Miss Hall. Very interesting." He nodded slowly. "They get a fill of one aspect of the drug then we provide a stronger aspect of the same drug, Real Life TV."

"That sounds absolutely correct Mr Adams." Brian agreed heartily and Rowan gave him a withering glance. "What was the next step up from arcade video games?" Brian spread his hands in front of himself in a very theatrical manner. "Home interactive computers! Interaction, Sir, it's the next step."

"But wouldn't interaction between the public and the subjects defeat the purpose?" Rowan pointed out. "Real Life TV is the observation of Real Life situations for entertainment, obviously. To demand responses and replies from the subjects would make it a Chat Show, Brian, not Real Life."

"And criticism without a constructive alternative is just snide pessimism." Brian snapped at Rowan.

"I wasn't criticizing!" Rowan objected. "I was pointing out a fact. Influencing a situation by interaction alters that situation completely because the subject has to participate, that's why it's called interaction." Brian Charlton really was a simpering rat. That was something that the whole Board was guilty of, Rowan included, but Brian took it to a entirely new level.

"I think you'll find my idea a sound basis at the very least, Mr Adams." Brian blanked Rowan. "A positive contribution, no matter how small, is always better than none at all." He used one of Adams' own 'power quotes' and Rowan sat and seethed.

"Instead of changing the environment, we change the environment." Adams got as close to a smile as he ever got and no one had the spine to tell him that his latest sentence in 'git-speak' made absolutely no sense at all. "You see, the Prison environment *is* alluring to the public. All Institutions that are 'behind closed doors' are. We established that at the conception of Prison Life. That coupled with the enduring fascination the people have with criminals *is* a winning combination. The overall ratings for this type of Show is very high, in general. Reality TV has the monopoly on viewers, and Shows involving an institute of some sort are the most popular, by far." Adams frowned and the whole Board held their breath and didn't dare take their eyes off him. No matter how arrogant and fearsome Patrick Adams' reputation was, his expertise and 'sixth sense' in the world of mass entertainment was quite legendary. "We need an edge, ladies and gentlemen. We need a break from

the now commonplace mainstream, while still preserving the concepts that are responsible for their success." Slight nods and a few murmurs of agreement rippled around the office. "Interaction." Adams mused and Rowan hoped her annoyed grunt wasn't too audible.

"Massive." Brian commented smugly.

"Two way interaction is out of the question, as Miss Hall illustrated."

"Massive." Rowan muttered childishly and she swore she saw Brian's lip tremble.

"One way interaction, however, would not have an effect on the subjects. Involvement by the public to determine what *they* want to see." Adams sat forward.

"Wouldn't that involve pre-set options to cater for whatever type of situation they voted for?" Rowan asked.

"You misunderstand me, Miss Hall." Adams narrowed his eyes at Rowan. "The public decides what happens within the live situation."

"Sir." Rowan had to go over the boss' statement a few times to digest it. "I think the risks of repercussions should be taken into consideration. The Human Rights groups made noises for mere observation."

"Have you ever watched the news, Miss Hall, and heard an absurdly light sentence being passed on a loathsome criminal? I'm sure you have. I'm also sure you'll have entertained alternative scenarios for such people."

"Sir we aren't the judicial system!" Rowan said in shock. Her colleagues were all looking at their hands, knees, the table. Surely they saw the drawbacks of this idea? "Of course I've despaired at ridiculous sentences but a heat of the moment, vicious outcry can't be termed as justice. Good grief there's be no one left alive in F1 alone!"

"Oh Miss Hall, really!" Adams sighed heavily. "I wasn't thinking of a phone- in-execution poll. It's the people in our prison system that drain our resources. Your resources, Miss Hall. They're housed, fed, and clothed by you and by the public out there." He pointed towards to window. "Those people who work and pay for means to enjoy their leisure time, deserve to have something in return. The opportunity to observe human behaviour in circumstances that they choose could almost be classed as a right. The right to learn." Adams lectured. "It'll be huge."

"Sir that would involve the co-operation and collaboration of so many other bodies." Rowan objected. "The prison staff for a start. They'd have to bring about the public's wishes. Are they legally allowed to? Would we need legal advice and maybe legal representation? Who would liaise between the public, the producers, and the prisoners? Sir you can't run a Game Show using human pawns, no matter how they've behaved in the past."

"Are you finished?" Patrick Adams' jaw was set tight and his temples were flushed red. Rowan nodded and accepted the fact that she'd be out of a job quite soon. "Now we're past the hysterics," He glared at Rowan. "We'll back-step until *before* the meeting went awry and veered from a concept, an *idea*, to speculative assumptions." He paused for effect, that effect being ever other member of the Board Of Directors glaring reproachfully at Rowan. "The idea of public participation is a popular one, it's been proven in many other areas of mass entertainment. We at Real TV need to devise a way to incorporate the elements that are popular, in a non-intrusive, non-damaging way."

Finding a balance and addressing any potential unrest with such groups as the Human Rights, obviously needs a tactful and level headed approach. I cannot afford panic-fuelled sparks in my staff." Dismissal for Rowan Hall.

Rowan wasn't asked to any more Board Meetings. She had no doubt that meetings were being held, she'd seen the rest of the Board in the building. She concluded that it probably served her right for being so opinionated. Rowan's current duties were flogging the rapidly dying horse that was the current Prison Life.

"Governor Stevens, is there any part of your prison at all that is unaware of Prison Life? Does everyone know we film there?" Rowan asked the Governor of F1 Secure Facility. "We need to observe, sir. We need to observe your inmates without them knowing that we're doing so."

"It's quite big news, Miss Hall." Stevens retorted defensively. "It isn't every day one gets a chance to appear on national TV."

Governor Stevens missed the point by so far that it vanished into the distance. The best of it was, it wasn't actually the prisoners as much as the staff that were to blame. They all spent more time beaming into the cameras than they did going about their jobs, watching the inmates! Short of rendering the staff unconscious before hand, and thus preventing them from alerting the prisoners to the cameras, Rowan was running out of ideas.

Rowan was almost in tears as she sat in her office and watched a re-run of the most recent episode of Prison Life. The officers may as well have formed a chorus line in the exercise yard and the prisoners executed a near perfect production of West Side Story. No wonder viewers were tuning out. It was getting embarrassing to watch. There was no other thing for it, they were going to have to leave F1 behind. That meant a huge upheaval to 'prepare' another institute, an upheaval that was going to be resented by the Board.

Rowan left her office in utter dejection to relay her terminal prognosis on Prison Life in F1.

"Rowan!" Brian Charlton came striding through the double glass doors that linked the second floor hallway with the offices. "Assignment from Mr Adams." He held up his briefcase. "Shall we?" Brian walked into Rowan's office without waiting for an answer.

"What sort of assignment?" As though it mattered. It was better than Rowan's pending wait in the unemployment queues.

"It's a branch off from Prison Life." Brian explained, taking folders of notes from his case. "It's to be filmed away from F1 and thus free from the buffoonery that's developed there. Basically, it's the filming of a prisoner in transit."

Rowan looked doubtfully at the papers. Would that be interesting enough?

"Transit from where?"

"From the public sector, probably courts or police cell, to F1's remand wing." Brian showed Rowan one sheet after another.

"We aren't allowed to film remand prisoners." Rowan pointed out.

"A point I brought up too. It seems that technically, they aren't remand *prisoners* until they're in the prison system. Their confinement while they await trial doesn't start until they're booked in at F1." Brian shrugged. Rowan wondered if she'd have time to look into that herself. It wasn't that she didn't believe Brian, but Rowan was a very big believer of reading, and interpreting, things first

hand. That way there could be no 'I was told' or 'he said she said' backlash. "And this idea has been endorsed by the Board?" Rowan asked doubtfully. "Watching some bloke get a lift to prison in a cop-van?"

"According to the police we consulted, it's very entertaining indeed. Do you think they just sit there and smile about it?" Brian said.

"Well no, but a whole Show's worth? Even if they kicked off from start to finish, it still would end before the running time did. Or have we resorted to clips a-la-candid camera mode?" Rowan shook her head.

"This is exactly why I spoke out against you being asked to the Board meeting." Brian said starchy. "An outright negative comment like that would have set the lot on a downer, and you out on the streets. Are you even going to read that? I suggest you do."

"Do I need to? I don't really have a lot of choice but to take it, do I?" Rowan said irritably. "The cast from Grease, there, is a dead loss." She wafted her hand at the DVD screen.

"Well obviously we aren't going to waste recording time on a ten minute jaunt from the police station to F1, Rowan. Get a grip. F1 is a major secure facility. It has a very large catchment area for remand prisoners due to it's proximity to the High Courts. We're observing the transportation of one of them from the next jurisdiction." Brian pointed to a printed map. "See?"

"All worked out, eh?" Rowan said sarcastically.

"More or less, yes." Brian answered flatly. "You get to sit up front with the cop-van driver."

"Deep joy." Rowan muttered. "Van rigged with cameras, I presume?"

"Yes. One of the officers in the van is a real officer, obviously, the other one is a camera technician." Brian informed her. "You're to get yourself up to the station on the 7am train, oversee the whole thing by just sitting in the van and doing nothing at all, then getting all the credit for it. I don't think I've ever seen such a skive in my life, Rowan, and there you are with a face as long as a fiddle." He preached.

"Maybe I don't want to skive, Brian. I remember this job when it was actually interesting and rewarding." Rowan said shortly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be snapping at you. I'm just a bit fed up with trying to do something with the amateur dramatics society on there." She nodded at the DVD player again. "Has governor Stevens always looked like Leslie Neilson?"

"The man's a ham." Brian sniffed. "This branch off show could work, you know Rowan. With it being a 'mobile' show, then no one but the camera crews can know for certain if it's being broadcast. That'll remove the staging behaviour of the subjects. If this pilot works, then we'll be spearheading a whole new area."

"And if it doesn't then no 'big names' have been lost." Rowan added and Brian just shrugged. "Is that my incentive to give it my all?" Another shrug. "Standard concealed cams, right?" Rowan sighed and reached for her laptop on which she'd watch the whole back-of-the-van show.

Chapter 2

Rowan timed the train journey. The cop-van journey back would take considerably less time and she still had serious doubts that it would actually fill the time slot. Rowan honestly did think that this was a duck egg of the grandest type. It had 'flop' written all over it in big capital letters. Yes she was getting paid for this, but that didn't mean she had no professional pride. The train journey took ninety minutes. the duck egg was upped to emu egg and the capital letters set to bold too. Maybe the public, and more importantly, other TV executives wouldn't notice her name attached to this. There were hundreds of Halls, after all. R. Hall was fairly obscure, wasn't it?

Rowan was whizzed off into a private office at the police station, out of sight and was informed that 'the lads' already had the van rigged up. She accepted a plastic cup containing an evil looking beverage from a suitably impressive looking policeman called Derek.

"Jason Jenkinson is your star." Officer Derek informed Rowan, showing her Jason's records. "Chosen especially because he thinks he's been badly done by." Derek rolled his eyes.

"I bet most of them do." Rowan said absently.

"You should get quite an interesting set of comments from him, actually. He's quite intelligent for a thug." Derek commented. Rowan nodded. The man's psychological profile and his criminal history wasn't really of interest to her. His charisma and entertainment value were.

"Is that him?" Rowan unearthed a mugshot, obviously of the thug in question. Maybe his looks alone could hook a few viewers. Big, blonde and hero-looking.

"Don't let the 'marine' look fool you. He wasn't arrested for nothing, you know. GBH." Derek nodded seriously. Rowan shrugged her shoulders. That mattered little either.

"Terry Hook." The undercover camera technician introduced himself from the doorway. He was dressed in a smart police uniform that would have fit Rowan. The entertainment value would certainly increase if Jason Jenkinson decided to riot. Terry Hook was only around ten stones wet through. Luckily, the real policeman who was travelling with them looked like the King Kong and was roughly the same size. He was introduced as Alan Bell. The last member of their road trip was the van driver, also a police officer, by the name of Stewart Ward.

Rowan hooked up her laptop in the front of the police van while Stewart Ward looked on.

"Wife watches all this stuff." He nodded. "Can't be doing with it myself. I hope you don't mind me saying, but that Prison Life is a load of tripe. I swear I saw one of them waving at the bloody camera!"

"Well that's when we have to move on." Rowan smiled. She thought she'd seen that wave too, just before a display of male attitude that had more front than Blackpool. "If this pilot takes off, then the broadcasts will be moved to evening peak viewing time." Rowan adjusted the focus on her equipment.

"You think it will?" Stewart asked.

"I hope so." Rowan nodded. It would probably take divine intervention. "You never know, he could try and escape. Viewing figures would shoot through the roof."

The noise of the van doors opening, then closing, told Rowan that their show was under way. The big, moody looking figure of Jason Jenkinson sat on a side seat, opposite officer Kong and Terry Hook. He had a scowl from hell and Rowan smiled in satisfaction at her laptop image.

"You still haven't told me how long I'll be stuck in that crap hole." Jason even made the opening line.

"Your solicitor told you, Jenkinson." Alan Bell's booming voice suited his appearance.

"So 'Until your trial' is a good answer, is it?" Jenkinson snorted.

"Any time in remand is taken of your sentence if you get banged up." Alan heaved.

"Which is naff all good if I get acquitted eh?" Jenkinson snapped. "Bloody stinks."

"It's the way it works for everyone, Jenkinson. Don't take it to heart." Terry Hook decided to make his debut.

"Who rattled your cage?" Jason snapped. "Who are you anyway? Do you just drag them in from the streets or what?" He asked Alan.

"Less of that, Jenkinson. Getting shirty with us isn't going to make one scrap of difference." Alan yawned. Jason Jenkinson let loose with a string of abuse that made Rowan wince. All good for publicity. He then launched into a tirade, criticizing the entire legal system and everyone in it. Derek had been right, he was quite well educated and it contrasted well against his stinking attitude.

The back of the van lapsed into silence and the van itself slowed in speed. Rowan looked up from her laptop. The road had been cordoned off and four traffic police stood abreast it. She looked at Stewart who just shrugged and stopped the van.

"Road's blocked." One of the four informed Stewart.

"I can tell you're a policeman." Stewart said sarcastically. "Why?"

"Gas pipes. Take the right road over there and follow that. You'll hit the main road eventually."

"How very helpful. When is 'eventually'? We're expected at F1 Secure Facility in two hours." Stewart tutted in annoyance.

"Oh I'd add another hour and a half at least onto that." The traffic policeman nodded.

"Bloody marvellous." Stewart heaved. "OK. I'll radio the station." He set off towards the right hand side road. In actual fact, the road wasn't much more than a dirt track and the van bounced along it in a very alarming manner.

"Where the pissing hell we going?" Jason shouted. "Up the North face of the frigging Eiger? If I've

cut my head on that bracket I'll slap so many claims in it'll fuse your computers."

"Oh shut your roaring Jenkinson!" Alan said in annoyance. "Gas pipes or something. We're taking a detour."

"Over the Himalayas. Yes I noticed. Does this detour time come off the sentence that I might not get?"

"Are you going to whine all the way there?"

"You bet your flabby great arse I am."

"I'm warning you, Jenkinson." Alan almost stumbled off the seat as the van hit a mound, which didn't improve his mood at all. "Christ Stewart! You aiming for bloody pot-holes or what?"

"This'll bugger your suspension up." Jason observed.

"Who are you? Bloody Kwik Fit?" Alan snapped.

"Keep your hair on." Jason sniffed, grabbing hold of the seat for support.

"Now what?" Stewart looked in surprise at yet another string of yellow cordon tape. "We didn't miss any turnings did we?" He asked Rowan

"I didn't see any, but I was looking more at the laptop than out of the window." Rowan answered. Stewart rolled down the window when someone who looked more military than police, approached the van. "Yes we're police, yes we feel very foolish, yes we're frigging lost." He said testily.

"And yes you'll be getting out of the van." The soldier type was armed and Rowan almost fainted. This was going out live! This was going out with her name on it!

"Do what?" Stewart said in astonishment. "What the hell is this? Starsky and pissing Hutch? Look I can't leave the van. I'm headed for F1 Secure Facility with a prisoner. They're expecting me, yes? Do yourself a favour and don't make this any worse than you're trying to."

"I said out." The other man repeated. "You too, lady."

"Jesus wept." Stewart muttered. "Do as he says, Miss Hall. I'll have your arse for this, pal." He pointed at the man as he climbed out of the van.

"Open!" The soldier hammered on the back doors with his fist. "Tell them to open it."

"Alan! Open up. Emergency." Stewart shouted. Rowan wondered if Terry Hook was equipped with a body cam. She sincerely hoped so.

"What in black buggery is going on?!" Alan bellowed. "What the shit is that?" He blinked in shock at the soldier's firearm. "Look, buster, we're on a schedule here. If we don't show at the other end, there'll be police forces from two districts out looking for us. Understand?"

"In." The soldier ordered Stewart. "You'll be safe, I promise you. You too girl. In the van." Rowan scrambled into the van first, glancing swiftly at Terry.

"This is a bad move, pal." Stewart growled, stepping up into the van. The soldier cast a swift look

round the interior before slamming the doors shut.

"What the shit's all this?" Jason glared at everyone. "Who was that? Bloody Fidel Castro?"

"Yes, who was that?" Alan turned round to glower at Rowan. He clearly thought this was something to do with her.

"I don't know." Rowan shook her head. The van jolted into motion and the thrill of the story suddenly wore off. That man was armed. They were in danger. "Maybe you should ask him." She nodded towards Jason.

"Huh?" Jason frowned at Rowan.

"Vans get hijacked for their cargo."

"Are you stoned?" Jason yelled. "I'm on bloody remand! I'm hardly Ronnie Biggs! Who are you anyway?" He looked at Rowan, dressed in casual black trousers and a white shirt.

"She's a social worker." Terry butted in.

"Another one?" Jason rolled his eyes, but accepted it. "So where we going?"

"Hasn't it got through your thick head, Jenkinson?" Alan said irritably. "We don't know. In case you missed any of that, we've just been help up and kidnapped at gunpoint."

"What the shit for?" Jason blinked a few times. "I don't want kidnapping for Christ sake! Jesus I'll never get to bloody court!"

"You want to go to court?" Rowan asked.

"Yes, I want to go to court." Jason sneered. "I want this farce sorted out, you see. Everyone in the world can't be bloody blind. Why do you think I went for a Crown court hearing? Do you really think a panel of three, crusty, anally retentive magistrates are in touch with the world? Are they shite!"

"Must you yell and swear all the pissing time, Jenkinson?" Stewart yelled and swore. "Did she have a go at you? No she bloody didn't. Watch your trap."

"You will be quiet!" The driver of the van yanked open the partition window. Rowan, and the others, were very alarmed to see it was a different man. "Just shut the hell up!"

"Where we going?" Jason wasn't the type to shut up on demand.

"Somewhere you should feel at home." The man laughed and closed the window.

"Huh? Clay Street?" Stewart said in confusion, naming Jason's home address.

"Hardly." Jason said sarcastically. "Who in their right mind would hijack a van with three bloody coppers, a shrink, and a thug in it?"

"So this isn't some sort of escape plan?" Rowan asked nervously. The novelty of this was wearing off at a rapid rate. "Trust me, your timing couldn't possibly be worse."

"Do I look like I've escaped?" Jason yelled. "I don't want to bloody well escape! I Just told you that!"

"Roar once more, Jenkinson and I'll sodding well floor you!" Stewart snapped. "Stop frigging bellowing, yes?"

"What time is it?" Alan asked suddenly.

"Yes you've missed your tea break." Jason muttered.

"I wasn't talking to you, pissant. Are your gadgets on a time limit? Do they run out?" Alan glared holes through Rowan.

"Yes and they have, about fifteen minutes ago." Rowan mumbled. The cameras were set to record in two hour blocks but they had to be manually continued.

"So someone will know something isn't quite right. Yes?" Alan persisted.

"I sincerely hope so." Rowan nodded.

"What?" Jason asked suspiciously. "Gadgets? What gadgets?"

"Pocket recorders." Terry came to the rescue again. "They all use them, Jenkinson. As it happens, this one could come in very useful if it's recorded all that."

"Too right." Jason nodded. "Especially the bit with me saying I wanted to go to court. You make sure they hear that bit." He nodded at Rowan who nodded back. She wanted viewer ratings and this cliff hanger would have them tuning in in droves. Would it be worth it if she ended up raped and shot?

"OK, listen up." Stewart sat forward. "They can't drive forever. Right? Both me and Alan are fully trained officers."

"They're armed." Rowan reminded him. "Maybe it was just the van they wanted? They did say we wouldn't be hurt."

"Why would they want the van? If they wanted just that, they'd have hoofed us out." Jason said.

"Well hardly." Rowan argued. "They'd get further without these policemen calling for backup, wouldn't they? Let's face it, if the are trying to flee to somewhere what better vehicle than a cop van? It's hardly going to get pulled over, is it?"

"So when they get to wherever they're going, me and Stewart will take them on." Alan said confidently.

"Don't if they're just going to let us go." Rowan said shakily. "They will let us go, yes?"

"Don't worry." Terry said, rather uselessly.

"Give me that baton thing." Jason nodded to Alan's belt.

"Do what? Not on your Napoleon, matey." Alan snorted.

"To take that lot on!" Jason objected. "I'm a thug, remember? GBH? Come on, you have that tazer thing."

"Not a chance, Jenkinson." Stewart said flatly. "For one thing, we aren't allowed to, end of story."

"It's time you shoved that rulebook where the sun don't shine." Jason sighed in irritation. "You'd better hope this one here has a baton the size of a fencepost. I doubt he could fight his way through his lunch." He nodded towards Terry, who scowled in indignation.

"Look, Jenkinson, we cannot hand over a weapon to you." Stewart said patiently. "Apart from anything else, we're the ones responsible for you. OK? We're responsible for Miss Hall here too. Do you think it's a good idea to ask her to tackle two armed men?"

"No of course not, she could be killed!" Jason said. "Point taken. OK I'll use my fist. I did last time."

"I think we're on a road." Terry said suddenly. He was right. No one had noticed the tires were now running over a far smoother terrain. "What time is it anyway? It's bloody dark in here."

"The roof lights should come on if and when they switch the headlamps on." Alan said. "How far do you think we've gone?"

"And in what bloody direction?" Stewart added. "We could be anywhere. I don't hear any other traffic either." They all listened for a while to the sound of their own vehicle and nothing more.

"Bugger this." Alan tried the back doors but they were locked tight. "Oi!" He hammered on the front partition between the back and the drivers' seats. "How long do you think we can stay cooped up in here?" The sliding panel opened and the gun came through first. "I'm trying to be sensible here. The place will be crawling with coppers by now and you've kidnapped a van full of official people!"

"Do you hear these crawling coppers?" Their kidnapper laughed. "Nor do I. I'm warning you, keep calm and keep quiet." The gun vanished and the panel was slammed shut.

"Leave it Alan." Stewart said. "Last thing we need is him getting trigger happy." Rowan looked at the policeman in panic. "It'll be fine Miss Hall. They can't keep driving forever. Even kidnappers have bladders. Yes?" He smiled.

"Could we make a run for it?" Jason suggested. "What's that look for?" He snapped at Alan's look of disbelief. "I'll be running in the same bloody direction you are, pal, believe me."

"You can't outrun a bullet." Rowan's voice warbled. In all her life, Rowan could never remember being as scared as this. She wasn't easily frightened at all and she definitely wasn't prone to a raging imagination. This was real and they were in danger.

"We're slowing down." Terry said quietly. Indeed they were and the van crawled to a halt.

"Right. No heroics. OK?" Stewart stated. "I mean it, no heroics. This isn't a bloody Rambo film. That goes for you too, Alan. We're still responsible for these people in here." Alan just had time to nod before the doors were pulled open. Two guns were pointed appropriately, and from a safe distance.

"Bathroom break." The van driver shouted. "You, you and you." He pointed with his gun to Terry,

Alan and Stewart.

"I'll stay here." Stewart nodded. "Go on, Jenkinson."

"I said, you, you and you." The gun wielder repeated. "You sit down." He pointed his gun at Jason.

"He's a prisoner." Stewart objected. "An officer has to stay with him." He said patiently.

"Your officer's title means very little just now." The gunman said. "Out!" Stewart didn't have a lot of choice in the matter. The doors were slammed shut and Rowan was shaking from head to foot.

"I hope they don't try anything stupid." She chewed on her thumbnail. "What the hell's happening?"

"Bugged if I know." Jason shook his head in bewilderment. "Try not to be too scared. I know, that's a crappy thing to say. I know I'll fight if I really need to and I think the coppers will too. We won't let those arseholes hurt you."

"I'm hoping they won't hurt anyone." Rowan said weakly. "Who do you think they are? Terrorists? Some sort of political extremists?"

"That would be my guess yes." Jason nodded. "Just going by their gear and the guns. They're not your average street thugs, are they?"

"I wonder where we ..." The van started up again and Rowan was jolted off her seat. "What's happening?"

"Hey!" Jason hammered on the sliding panel. "Oi! What about the others? Shit." He stumbled to the rear of the van and tried the doors. Locked. "What have you done to them?" He roared. "What have you done?" He hammered his fist into the panel and dented it. Rowan yelped and cowered against the wall. This was all she needed! The prisoner was going to go into psychotic mode!

"Jason! Jason calm down!" She sobbed. "Don't go ballistic! Please? They're still armed, remember?" Jason clenched his fists a few times and the muscles bunched in his jaw. "We don't know that they've done anything to the others. I didn't hear a gunshot, did you?" Jason shook his head and tried to settle down.

"I'll be banged up forever at this rate." He mumbled. "I do *not* need this crap."

"We have that in common, Jason." Rowan said. Suddenly the lights on the ceiling flickered on, meaning the van headlamps were on too. They'd travelled all day and now it was dusk. How come no one had found them? Two police forces and a whole television network!

"We're slowing down." Jason scrambled to the rear of the van.

"Be careful. No heroics, remember?" Rowan said hysterically. "Maybe a bathroom break." The van glided to a standstill. "Jason? You aren't going to tackle them are you? There's no way I can. Jason! Are you listening to me?"

"Yes and you're grating on my nerves! No I'm not going to tackle them. OK? I'm not bloody stupid."

"No but you have a temper from hell." Rowan said sharply. "Just engage your brain first."

"Bloody shrinks." Jason snorted. "What are they doing out there? That bathroom break would come in handy right now."

"You're going to run for it?" Rowan blurted.

"Eh? No! I need a slash, woman! Jesus!" Jason snapped. "It's OK for you, women have bigger bladders."

"That puts me at an enormous advantage right now, I'm sure." Rowan muttered. "Are they going to let us out?"

"Oh hang on, I'll text them and ask." Jason said sarcastically. "How do I know?!"

"Knock on the panel here." Rowan pointed to the dented partition and Jason dented it more with his fist. "They've gone?" Rowan said in surprise and confusion. Jason hammered on the rear doors too and the noise made an echo. "We're indoors!"

"Well they won't just have abandoned us and the van." Jason frowned.

"Maybe they're bringing the others." Rowan suggested, hopefully. Jason tried the rear doors. Still locked.

"I can boot these open." He nodded.

"What if they're out there with the guns?" Rowan said in alarm.

"Why? Rowan if they were going to shoot us, they'd have opened the doors and done it. We can't go far, lets face it." Jason shrugged. Rowan just shook her head. The shock was setting in. "Look, we have to find out where we are." He said, more calmly. "We can't just sit in here forever, can we? I'll get clobbered for jumping bail or something." Jason smiled for the first time since their journey started. "Tell you what. I'll hoof the doors off then duck. How's that?"

"Thin in the extreme." Rowan sighed. "OK wait until I get under this seat, then go for it."

Jason stayed on the van floor, and Rowan under her seat, for a good two minutes after Jason sent the doors flying outwards with his big booted foot. Rowan was still cowering with her head under her arms when Jason prodded her.

"No one out there." He said. "This is insane, Rowan. I can't believe where I think we are." Rowan uncurled and Jason helped drag her from under the seat. She could see out of the doors and they appeared to be in some sort of huge warehouse.

"You know where we are?" Rowan peeped out of the doors. "Shit!" She could see a big steel door and a few desks but obviously the place had been in disuse for many years. Along two of the walls of this massive room were rows of bars where one would expect to see windows. "What the shit's this?"

"Looks like a jail." Jason jumped out of the van. "We came in through that metal door. See the tracks?" That was where he headed. "Pity the poor sod who tried to escape from here. It has more locks and bolts than Fort Knox and none of them are on the inside."

"Why have they brought us here?" Rowan blinked around the office area. "Some sort of Head

Quarters, maybe?"

"Could be. We aren't getting out that way, anyway." Jason gave the steel door a kick just for good measure. "Stay here."

"What?" Rowan squealed. "No chance. Where are you going? I'm coming with you."

"Bigger bladder, remember?" Jason rolled his eyes. "I'm just round that corner. Go sit in the van." Rowan nodded and just stood there. "I'll pee fast." Jason vanished into a room that could possibly have been a proper toilet at one time. This was like a nightmare. Rowan felt numb and surreal and doubted she could even suggest a reason for all this even if she'd been calm and collected. She was cold, hungry, and terrified. She had no idea where she was and her only ally was a remand prisoner up for GBH.

"Ugh! Bloody dump." Jason was back. "We'll get out Rowan." He nodded when he saw the look of terror on Rowan's face. "Even old prisons didn't lock their staff in completely."

"Do you think the others are here too?" Rowan asked.

"I've no idea. If they are, they'll be looking for a way out too." Jason nodded. "Come on, we can look about a bit before it gets completely dark."

"Let's see if there's a torch or something in the front of the van." Rowan suggested. Jason went to look and came back with a torch and Rowan's laptop. "I doubt that'll be any good. There won't be any wireless signals here."

"So we'll try whatever other shit you have stashed away, Miss Real TV Hall." Jason threw the laptop on a dirty table. It had her name and the TV company embossed all over it. "You aren't getting a response from me so forget it, but I would like to know how you could be so damned sick! In the van." Jason stormed off towards the van and Rowan could hear him ripping it apart looking for hidden cameras. "I said, in here!" He glared at her from the rear doors. Rowan nodded dumbly and joined him. "You warped bitch. So where are the coppers?"

"I don't know." Rowan said quietly. "The smaller one wasn't a copper, he was a camera technician. All the rig-ups were set to film you in transit, that's all. The lot switched itself off after two hours because I wasn't at the computer to continue it."

"Bull! So you set all this up for a TV show? You set me up? I'm a remand prisoner! I'm not a hardened criminal and I don't bloody deserve this shit! I have a family out there, did you ever think of that? Do you want my mother and sisters to see me in here crapping myself because I thought I'd been kidnapped? Is it funny to frighten a bloody bloke half retarded just for TV amusement? You are in deep shit, lady. You might be able to film convicts, but I haven't been convicted. Here's something else for you to think about, there's quite a good chance that I won't be convicted either. Do you really think, as a free person with *no* criminal record at all, that I'll just leave this? I'm a decent citizen, Miss Hall, with quite a good track record, all in all. I will nail you for this." Jason was only inches from Rowan's face.

"There's nothing out there." Rowan sat on the seat in the van. "Terry the technician rigged up the cameras that you've just ripped out. If he had a body cam then I didn't know, but even if he had, he's not here." Jason darted at her and began going through her pockets. "You bloody big ape! You're hurting me!" Jason pushed her back onto the seat and flung himself on the other. "You weren't even supposed to see me. I was to stay up front with the driver and the computer. Terry covered for me quickly and said I was a social worker when all this happened and I was forced in here with

Stewart. You saw them, Jason. Did they look like they were acting? Would an act extend to leaving a remand prisoner alone in the back of a van with me? Would I have sent you straight to the bloody laptop to blow my cover? They had guns, Jason! Fair enough they could have been fake, I don't know, but it sure as hell convinced two fully trained policemen. As for your family, I deserve to be dragged to pieces. I've no excuses. I never gave them a thought and didn't even consider what it would be like to see you on your way to court to stand trial." Rowan exhaled loudly. "I don't even know where we are, or who those gunmen were, or why they took us. All I can think of is that this is a rendezvous point and they're now on their way to wherever they were going in a different vehicle. I don't blame you for not believing me, you don't have to. We aren't going to be escorted off set because this isn't a set. No producers or cameramen are going to turn up so I can go home, no one is coming for us. We'll be sitting in here forever, Jason."

"You're right. I don't believe you." Jason snapped. "But I don't trust this van either. Out." He nodded towards the door and Rowan climbed out. "You were a bit too vocal in there for my liking, Rowan. Nice commentary. You aren't getting a show out of me, I told you that." He said quietly. "And there is no way in hell I'll jeopardise my trial by carrying on like a nutcase with you. All your precious audience will see is us strolling around the place as though we were taking a walk in the park. How bloody boring is that? They'll tune out in their thousands. This way. I have the torch, remember." Jason stormed off in the direction of an open, barred gate. Rowan had no choice but to follow him.

Chapter 3

Stewart, Alan and Terry were lead towards a drab looking stationary caravan in the middle of a clump of trees.

"I don't like the look of this." Alan whispered to Stewart. "Bathroom break my arse. I've passed a hundred trees I could have taken a leak behind. Stewart we're going to have to tackle them before we get to that hut."

"We need to keep him out of the way." Stewart whispered back, nodding towards Terry. "Crash tackle him when you see me jump. OK?" Alan nodded. "OK. One, two ... shit!" Six men came out of the caravan and looked as un-terrorist as Stewart did. In fact, two of them *were* as un-terrorist as Stewart was. "Chief Superintendent McManus?" Stewart blinked at his superior officer in utter shock. The two gunmen ambled into the caravan and just left them standing there. "What the shit is going on?"

"Brian?" Terry squinted at one of the other men. "Brian, what are you doing here? What is all this?" Brian Charlton had a smile like a denture advert.

"This way please!" He chirped and sprang back into the caravan. The interior was a maze of circuits and monitors. Two technicians were overseeing it all and they pushed back their chairs when the other men crowded out the caravan.

"Jenkinson!" Alan shouted when he saw the familiar figure on one of the screens. "Where the hell is he? He's escaped, Stewart, look at the van."

"He's just booted the doors off their hinges!" Brian Charlton laughed. "Oh this is priceless! Priceless!"

"This is a set up?" Stewart said in utter disbelief. "Those gun-wielding arseholes ..."

"Sergeants Bruce and Telford." The Chief Superintendent nodded. "Oh the guns are fake."

"Sir ... sir ... sir I don't care!" Stewart erupted. "They were real enough to me! And to Alan, and that techie over there." Terry had fainted and was now slumped on a chair. "The girl! Sir, where's the girl?"

"Rowan Hall? Still in the van." The Super nodded towards the screen. "She has no idea of all this, the same as Jenkinson."

"So you set it up for her to be stranded with him?" Alan exploded. "I know he's not a criminal type criminal, but for God's sake! Where the hell are they?"

"I didn't set it up." The Super laughed. "Obviously I needed to be informed but the credit goes to Mr. Charlton."

"Credit?" Stewart gaped. "Sir those two young people were, and probably still are, terrified! Sir you

have to stop this. This cannot go out to the public, it's inhumane!"

"It's been looked into quite thoroughly." Brian chipped in. "They're both perfectly safe and it won't affect Jenkinson's trial at all. It's all been taken care of."

"I wasn't asking you." Stewart snarled.

"Perhaps you'd like to verify it with the Chairman? Although you'll have to wait, he's due on air quite soon. Another crowd puller! Patrick Adams himself making an appearance to host one of his own shows. This will be huge! I'd like to thank all of you for making all this work." Brian smiled happily.

"Where are they? For the millionth time!" Alan bellowed.

"Slateskill." Brian nodded, and adjusted a few dials.

"Did he say Slateskill?" Alan blinked at Stewart. "The old maximum security prison?" Brian nodded. "It's been condemned for ten years! Sir, Stewart's right, you have to stop this. The place isn't safe!"

"As I said, it's been taken care of." Brian said evenly. "There are only certain areas they can go. OK? The rest has been secured off. We've had engineers, technicians, and builders in there for over two months."

"I don't believe this." Stewart shook his head in shock. "I don't believe I helped in it either. Sir didn't it occur to you that my wife will be almost hysterical by now?"

"Oh no worries. I had the front desk call her. She thinks you're working a double shift. You *are*, come to think of it." The Super laughed and Stewart was livid.

"I'm going home." He growled. "With respect, sir, you had no right phoning my house and lying to my wife. I need a car and I'll drive myself, Alan, and the young technician home, away from this lunacy."

"Problem there." The Super mused. "The cars won't be returning for us for a while. We had to send them back in case they were spotted from the road."

"So we're all stuck here with this ... shit?" Stewart pointed to the screen.

"Actually, we are the shit for a while." Brian smiled and nodded to a tiny lens above a window frame. "Does your wife tune in?"

"Mention my wife again and I'll ..."

"Oh not on camera, surely!" Brian giggled like a girl. Stewart stormed from the caravan, slamming the door behind him. Alan just looked at everyone in complete and utter disbelief. He helped Terry from the chair and opened the door for him, then left without saying a word.

"Figures?" Patrick Adams asked from his make-up chair where he was being tanned for the cameras.

"Set a new record, sir." Phyllis Delaney answered, clutching the clipboard that everyone assumed was a biological appendage of hers. "The increase in viewers during the afternoon broadcast increased by two hundred percent as the show was running. That figure has quadrupled."

"Splendid." Adams nodded. "Phone lines adequate?"

"We've trebled the staff on the lines, sir, and we've also doubled the computer contact staff."

"Studio audience?"

"Full, sir. There isn't a vacant seat in there." Phyllis smiled.

"OK. Let her roll." Adams shoo'd his make-up artist away and headed for the glaring lights of the studio. He was met by thunderous applause and a standing ovation as he stepped in front of the massive plasma screen. The video had been playing non-stop in order for the audience to follow the plot and 'get hooked'. They'd watched the afternoon's proceedings, right up to the abduction, and then had to wait on that cliffhanger. It worked. Viewers had tuned in in droves. The footage had resumed at the point where the two officers and the undercover technician had been taken out of the plot and the 'revelation' to them had also been filmed. Adams had actually heard the gasps and cheers when young Jenkinson had booted the van doors off. He was absolutely perfect! He glanced at the plasma screen and saw the prisoner and his rather irritating and dispensable employee ambling down a nasty looking corridor that was damp and dingy. He silently cursed at the clash of atmospheres there. Was Rowan Hall doing that on purpose? Such an air of total nonchalance was not interesting!

"Ah and there are our stars." He laughed warmly. "Completely, and I do mean completely, unaware that they're the centre of the entire nation's attention. It's probably just as well, ladies and gentlemen. I'm sure if they knew that each and every one of you is aware that Jason Jenkinson is a violent criminal and Rowan Hall is an anarchistic supporter of such ideals, they'd be a bit wary." Another jovial laugh and the studio audience 'oo'd and ah'd' appropriately. "Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have a direct influence on how people behave? Wouldn't this world be a better place if you had such an influence? I'm firmly of the opinion that it would. I'm not talking about orders. Any fool can bark out orders. I'm talking about subtle influences to produce a desired effect." Adams nodded slowly and you could have heard a pin drop in the studio. He had them eating out of his hand. "Would you like to see the happy couple holding hands?" The studio audience cheered their affirmations. "Make it so!" Adams turned towards the screen. "Nightsights!" He announced dramatically.

The dirty prison corridor was plunged into total darkness. Rowan yelped and grabbed for Jason.

"What the shit?" Jason spun round and stumbled into a wall. "How can the bloody lights go out when there were none on?" He groped for Rowan's hand.

"There must have been background natural light simulators still working somewhere. Old prisons used to use them to artificially structure the prisoners' days to suit the staff." Rowan stumbled into Jason as he switched on the flickering flashlight.

"And you just happened to know that, yes?"

"No the governor at F1 told me. They still have the equipment there even though they don't use it." Rowan answered as patiently as she could. "It was just a guess."

"So someone's here to turn it off right?"

"Or it's just conked out on it's own. I don't know." Rowan shrugged. "Maybe you'll have a rethink about me being part of a TV set up now? It's pitch black. No one can film in this."

"Maybe I think you're trying a little too hard to convince me." Jason sneered. "I'm not wandering about in the dark. Come on, we'll go back to where the van is." Jason lead Rowan by the hand back along the corridor and pretty soon they came to a locked gate. "We've gone the wrong bloody way. Great."

"We can't have. It's a straight corridor. Shine that in there." Rowan nodded to the flashlight. They could see the outline of a few desks but no van.

"See? Wrong way. That's another office." Jason stated.

"But there are the metal doors, Jason." Rowan wasn't convinced.

"There are *some* metal doors. It's a prison! It's full of metal doors." Jason blew on his fingers that were getting numbed with the cold. "We'll have to keep going the way we were."

"Jason, this is seriously freaking me out." Rowan half sobbed as she crept past the rows of rusted doors that had once kept the criminally deranged at bay inside ten foot square cells. "Shouldn't we stay in one place so people can find us?"

"Stay in one place for your cameras?" Jason gave her a dirty look.

"Will you back the hell off with that!" Rowan yelled hysterically. "Look at me! Bloody look at the state of me!" She sobbed. "I'm terrified, Jason! Are you bloody blind as well as stupid? I want to go home." She finished pathetically. Jason grit his teeth and looked at her.

"In here. We need to rest up a bit I think. Maybe it would be a daft idea to wander about in the dark." He dragged a metal barred door across the floor and walked into one of the cells. "It's rotten filthy with grime but nothing too foul in here." He called to Rowan.

"Is it just me, or has it got warmer in here too? I was freezing before." Rowan snivelled.

"Probably because we're in a cell." Jason nodded. "Look at it, Rowan. See? Four ordinary solid walls, one door hanging off it's hinges. I'm here right opposite you. OK? I'll have to switch off the flashlight to save the batteries." Rowan nodded, even though she felt the terror knot her stomach. She let out a sob when the cell blinked to blackness. "I'm still here. I'll come over there with you."

"So you don't think I set this up?" Rowan cried in sheer fear. "I didn't."

"No." Jason sighed. "Not to this extent. No one's that masochistic or fanatical about their job. Also, no one's that good of an actor. You're close to losing it Rowan. No one could fake that." Rowan let the flood dams down and big, terrified sobs racked her body. "I know. I'm pretty scared too." Jason held onto Rowan's hand.

Patrick Adams smiled warmly over his studio audience. The phone lines were humming, the computers were buzzing and his live audience here was enthralled and amazed. They *had* held hands, just like Patrick Adams said they would! He'd even displayed his compassion and appreciation of such positive behaviour by increasing the temperature slightly in that area of the old

prison. After all, holding hands was far more acceptable in any walk of society than dissent and violent criminal behaviour. He'd *helped* these people with that one, small, action. Turning out the backlights. So simple.

"We're dependant on our sense of sight for more than just sight, as that demonstrates. We don't realise just how much it eclipses our other senses and our other emotions. Deprive a person of sight, and true emotions surface."

"Bollocks!" Someone in the audience shouted and Patrick fought to keep his composure. "She's crying because she's petrified! She'd grab hold of Satan himself if he was the only one in there! Get off with it!" Mutters of agreement rippled around the studio.

"Not so." Adams said calmly. "You're missing my point, sir. If extreme fear had taken over, she'd have ran. So would he, come to think of it. This illustrates natural human bonding, ladies and gentlemen. Humans are innately, social creatures and they will strive to avoid any form of isolation. That includes automatically forming bonds to others that they simply would not form through society's choice. Jason Jenkinson is a gutter rat. He's a criminal from the dregs of society. Rowan Hall is a highly educated, qualified professional woman, five years his senior. They'd pass on the street and simply never notice each other's existence and yet there they are, depending on each other. That dependency was sparked by a reflex for closeness." Adams said in his hypnotic voice. "And that closeness needed verified very strongly once the visual evidence of it was removed. That is to say, once the lights went out and we switched to nightsights."

"So you're saying that society suppresses human reflexes?" A woman from the front row asked.

"Very much so." Adams nodded. "Some it merely dulls, others it suppresses completely."

"You said they were dependant on each other. It seems to me like it's her dependant on him. Is that another reflex?" The original objector spoke again.

"I'm pleased you brought that up." Adams said warmly. "At the risk of getting lynched by our modern ladies here tonight, yes it is. In primitive times it was the males that were the protectors, with the exception of protecting offspring. It's still evident in the animal kingdom. It is quite remarkable actually, even to me, to see how strong this trait actually is. I have had reason to be acquainted with Rowan Hall in the past and she is no recessive wallflower. On the contrary, she has a very high aggression factor."

"So she needs a man eh?" Someone jeered and the audience laughed en-masse, Adams included.

"I don't know if 'need' is the right word." Adams smiled. "I wonder if we can get some idea as to the extent of that? Would she fight if she needed to, or would she be dependant on him to do that? Any ideas?" Adams sauntered along the studio, in front of the cameras. "It's your show, ladies and gentlemen, your influence."

"Well how do we know if she'll fight if there's no one to fight with?" A man asked. "It does say on this form here that we can't ask for other people to be sent in."

"It does, yes." Adams said casually and carried on sauntering.

"Couldn't we make them think someone was there?" A large woman in a hat suggested.

"Nah." the man sniffed. "No point in that is there? All she's going to do is tell him she heard

something then they're both going to go look. Even I can predict that and I'm as thick as a plank."

"No, listen." The woman persisted. "We want to know if she's going to have the guts to act off her own initiative if the going gets rough, right? So if she thinks someone's in there with them, is she going to alert him to it? Or will she tackle it herself? It's a study in reactions, not a bar brawl."

"Why, is he deaf or something?" The man heaved. "Lady, if she hears it, so will he."

"You don't know your own gender very well do you? Can you think of anything short of an earthquake that keeps you awake when you're tired? He's asleep! Or at least if he isn't, he's dozing a lot more than she is." The large lady pointed at the screen. Jason had one arm round Rowan, who was sitting bolt upright and as rigid as a board, and he had his head back, resting on the wall. Definitely dozing, at least. "Plus she's as tight as a drum. I'm surprised she isn't hearing things anyway." The woman affirmed her reasoning a bit more. Adams turned to the plasma screen and spread out his arms.

"Make it so!" He announced loudly. "Audio Effects One."

Rowan caught her breath and felt every nerve in her body spark at once. The wave of sheer terror that pulsed through her almost made her pass out. She heard something. Footsteps? They had been very, very faint and it only lasted a split second. She turned her unblinking eyes towards Jason without moving her head at all. So this was the literal manifestation of 'being petrified'. Jason twitched his nostrils and let out a soft snore. He'd think she was a hysterical twit if she shrieked at him now, the noise had gone after all. Rowan gently removed Jason's arm from her shoulder and carefully unlooped the flashlight strap from his wrist. She shielded the end of it so only a thin sliver of light poked through her fingers as she crept out into the corridor. The office at the end of it *was* the one they'd first been in, no matter what Jason said. If the van had gone, then someone had removed it which meant that those metal doors opened. Someone had come back then, and they had now. Rowan had heard them. She got to the barred gate and her whole nervous system was on overdrive. Rowan's blood froze in her veins when she heard a noise behind her, a definite shuffling noise and it was a hell of a lot closer than the footsteps had been. She spun round and her eyes darted round to weigh up her chances of reaching Jason at a sprint. The shuffling noise again, greatly reduced the odds. Rowan howled like a mad dog and swung out in the direction of the noise with her flashlight. It connected with a crunch and Rowan went into a frenzy. She screeched like a thousand banshees and lashed out with the torch, her fists, feet, teeth and anything else her body had armed her with.

"Shit! Rowan! Rowan it's me!" Jason shielded his face from the onslaught. "Rowan! It's me, Jason!" Rowan was past being able to hear him. Jason groped about blindly and managed to catch one of Rowan's fists in his hand, the other one he caught on the bridge on his nose and it made his eyes water. Hell could this girl fight! He spun her round and pushed the arm he had hold of, up her back and still she kicked and struggled and Jason felt, and heard, Rowan's teeth snapping together savagely. "Rowan no." Jason said as gently as he could over Rowan's roars. "Listen. Listen Rowan. Listen to me. It's Jason. It's OK Rowan, I won't hurt you. Can you hear me?" Rowan stopped struggling due to sheer exhaustion. "It's OK, calm down. Are you hurt?" Rowan shook her head and felt like she was losing her mind. Jason let go of her and she just stood there. He retrieved the torch and steered her back to the cell. "OK so why you beat me up?" Jason tried a different approach and it worked. Rowan snapped out of her shock induced trance.

"Why were you loitering about out there?" She bellowed. "You ... weirdo! Why the shit were you creeping about behind me? You big horse's arse!"

"Why were *you* creeping about out there to begin with?" Jason said defensively. "OK, I'm sorry! I

realised you'd gone. What else do you think I'd do? just sit here thinking you'd gone to stretch your legs? You daft tart! I got halfway up the corridor before it dawned on my rather dimwitted senses that you may have needed a toilet, or at least a private space for it. Yes? So I tried to come back and you jumped me! You bloody nutter!"

"Well of course I did! You were lurking about!" Rowan argued.

"And I just explained why." Jason rubbed his swelling temple where the flashlight had almost knocked him out. "This isn't really a time for modesty, Rowan. If you need a riddle you'll have to tell me you're going. OK? I know, that's gross but we can't wander off from each other."

"Jason I heard a noise." Rowan nodded. "That's why I went out there to see what it was."

"Old building like this is full of noises, Rowan. Maybe it was just that." Jason said and Rowan nodded. That was actually very possible. Rowan's strained nerves simply hadn't allowed for rational possibilities. "Where the hell did you learn to fight?" Jason sat down on the bench next to Rowan again, leaving the flashlight on.

"Same place as you, probably." Rowan smiled. "I was brought up round here but I lived in the grotty bit. Redpit."

"Really?" Jason said in surprise. "You're right, it is grotty. I live on Clay street so it's quite posh I suppose. My family live in Brightwell. So how did a rough lot from Redpit end up as a TV executive?"

"A lot of hard work and good breaks." Rowan nodded. "I've had incredibly good luck as far as my career goes. It seems like I've always been in the right place at the right time. I suppose this is payback for relying on luck, eh?" She smiled. "So what do you do? Apart from get arrested?"

"I'm an electrician, believe it or not. I was hoping the boss would hold my job open until after my trial. If I ever get to the bloody trial, that is." Jason sighed. "There can't be many toerags around who actually *want* to go to Court eh?"

"Well you told me you weren't a toerag." Rowan shrugged. "You don't seem like a toerag either."

"I'm not. Well not really. I did clobber that bloke, I've never denied it. I'd clobber him again too if I had to. He's still limping about like a war casualty six months later. Bloody loser. Anyone can limp eh?" Jason sighed again. "He needed his leg screwed and plated." Rowan flinched at the brutality. "Sorry. I'm not trying to shock you or put the wind up you. I'm not a bad bloke, I swear."

"So what did he do to get your attention in that way?" Rowan asked. "It's fine if you'd rather not tell me."

"No, I want to tell you. I want to tell everyone. That's why I want to go to court. He mugged my mother for the five quid she had in her purse. She's sixty seven. He left her behind a row of bins and it was six hours before the police found her. It left her blind in one eye and with no movement in her left leg due to a bad hip fracture that won't heal, not at her age. She's in a wheelchair now. She's also terrified to leave the house or to be by herself. My sister had to move back home with her. I didn't even plan on going after him." Jason laughed sadly. "It never even entered my head but I suppose it's a bit much to expect them to believe that. I was far too busy panicking about my mother and moving my sister in with her to bother about that little shit. I presumed he'd been lifted anyway. One evening the old girl started screaming like crazy down the phone and I could hear my sister in

the background trying to calm her down. The scum actually had a job cleaning bloody windows! Poor old sod's sitting watching Coronation Street and his ugly mug appears at her window a month after he's beat her senseless! He made a run for it when she saw him but unluckily for him he came haring round the corner the same time as I did. And the rest, as they say, is history." Jason shrugged. "They can make of that what they like. I did beat him up and I do know it's illegal to beat people up. I'm not saying it was right and I'm certainly not going to bullshit round it. It wouldn't do any good anyway. My mother's still disabled and half blind."

"That's horrible!" Rowan said in shock. "Your poor mum! She must have been absolutely terrified, apart from in pain. I'm no judge and I'm no shrink but that happening to your mum would put the mildest temper to the test."

"And mine's not mild in the slightest." Jason reminded her. "I have a very good solicitor and he's been with me right from the start so he knows everything. I really do hope I don't get jailed for it but if I do, it's not for the want of people trying for me."

"I think you're handling it all very sensibly. It's that sort of outlook that gets respected, in my opinion. You aren't sitting here yelling and raving about how you did nothing wrong because he asked for it. You aren't even outraged at the possibility of a jail sentence. You trust the legal system that much?" Rowan asked.

"No but I have no choice." Jason shrugged. "As long as I get banged up at F1 and not here!" Rowan laughed quietly. "Ah we'll get out soon Rowan. There's a shit load of people who are bound to know we're missing by now. Two coppers missing too remember? The police will be all over the place."

Chapter 4

"I can't stand this." Stewart stood up for the millionth time. They'd more or less been ordered back into the caravan by Chief Superintendent McManus for 'security reasons'. Stewart had made Brian turn up the volume so he could hear Jenkinson speaking after Rowan had just beat him up in the corridor. He'd read all Jason's statements before, obviously, but hearing him recounting it to Rowan, in what he assumed was privacy, and with so much sadness in his voice, drilled it in even further that this was all *wrong!* "Those two people are terrified beyond comprehension in there! How can you justify doing that to someone?" He demanded of Brian, who was setting the remote audio effects to standby. "I'm talking to you, you asshole!"

"Sit down, Stewart." The Super glared horribly at him. "I know you have a soft spot for Jenkinson but I really don't know why you're in such a panic. This is going out to millions! His little monologue there could very well work to his advantage."

"That isn't a court room!" Alan exclaimed, before Stewart could. "What's all that bull about observing natural reflexes? There's sod all natural in terrorising a response from a couple of trapped victims!"

"I'd be careful of your use of that word." Brian helped himself to coffee from a flask. "Wouldn't you agree, Superintendent?"

"You're seriously pissing me off, pal." Alan snarled at Brian.

"OK enough!" The Super raised his voice. "Whether you like it or not, that is all above board. It's been researched, checked, and checked again."

"It's kidnapping and imprisonment!" Stewart said in utter disbelief.

"Not technically true." The Super said calmly. "The entire chain of events has, and still is, being witnessed by millions of people including relevant authorities."

"And do these millions of people realise the gravity of the circumstances behind it all? Do they appreciate the terror of having some shit point a gun in their face? Do they actually realise that those two people aren't acting? They aren't on a television set and that is real!" Stewart pointed at the screen. "It's all very well for that hair-gelled ponce to stand there in his 700 quid suit and *tell* the world the score but how much serious weight does that carry coming from a man recognised worldwide for *entertainment*? What would you do if you went through all that, then found out later that it was all for TV Show?"

"Ridiculous comparison. I'm the Chief of Police." The Super laughed. "You don't think they'd actually use anyone important do you?" Brian laughed too and Alan had to physically restrain Stewart.

"Please don't distress yourselves!" Brian said patronisingly. "Rowan Hall is a noted hard case, for a start. She'll do just fine, don't concern yourself with that. She's also a loner and has no family so that

was taken into consideration too. No outraged spouses or anything growling about law suits. Jenkinson's ... well he's Jenkinson." Brian shrugged. "Patrick is thrilled! He's a very intelligent man and to be able to display that to a live audience shows a talent not often seen by the public."

"He's a jackass." Alan said sharply. "The only reason he appears intelligent is because the collective IQ of that audience is only in double figures. Selected that way, I've been lead to believe."

"You were lead falsely." Brian snapped, verifying Alan's statement totally.

"So when does it end?" Stewart asked. "How does it end?"

"It's Real TV." Brian nodded. "There are no plots or scenarios. Mr. Adams and the board have a sense to these things. When the public interest wanes, then we wind down too."

"You've just said they're tuning in by the thousand." Stewart said. "Suppose this contrived public interest goes on for months?"

"You should really leave the production details to us. You're a policeman, not a company executive." Brian said arrogantly. "The 'natural death' method is only one way of bringing about the closure of this show. They could escape." He shrugged. "That would be preferable, actually. That way we get to film the responses and the retrospective thoughts of the subjects."

"You're off your stack pal." Alan barked. "You wouldn't want to see my responses, I can promise you that, and I'm a law officer. She has the brains to have a go at you lot professionally and he'll just rip your spleen out."

"There will be no adverse repercussions, I can assure you! Why won't you believe me? I told you it had been looked into thoroughly and it has." Brian sighed.

"You think you're untouchable, you mean? You really think Mr Plastic on there has enough padding for that?"

"With the public support he has because of this, he won't even have to unpack his own padding." Brian sniffed.

"Well I suggest you grab a few bags-full of it because if the shit hits the fan he's going to write your name all over it in three foot letters." Stewart stated. "It was only two months ago that Rowan Hall was a household name because of Prison Life, alongside the God-like presence of Sir Patrick Adams. He dropped it like a bag of shite once it started losing out. You're right, I'm only a policeman, but I'll bet my bollocks he lumbered the lot of it with her then decided to cut the dead wood. That crap on there is the result." He said in disgust, pointing at the screen again. "She was where you are now and you still can't see that you aren't indispensable. As for Jenkinson, well no bugger uses him for a mug. The Super was right, this might ... no it definitely *will* work to his advantage. Open your eyes, mate, or even ask the Super here, your Mr. Adams has a very serious contender in the charisma stakes and Jenkinson has his youth, his looks, and his realness in is favour. Public support? My arse! You have no idea how the real public thinks."

"I have years of experience that would argue that point for me." Brian twittered.

"And I have a real family who watch this tripe and gossip about it afterwards." Stewart wasn't backing down one bit. "I can just picture the missus sitting watching this, I can almost guarantee what she's saying. Young superhero type stranded alone with a five foot one girly girl hanging off

his arm. You created those heroes and I hope they come back and make you eat every single recording that's ever come out of Real TV."

Jason's eyes gradually realised that a cold, grey light was seeping into the run-down prison. Daylight. Rowan was curled up on the broken-down bunk next to him with her head on his lap.

"Rowan? Rowan it's morning. We have to move and find a way out of here."

"I was hoping I'd wake up in my own bed." Rowan sat up and rubbed her aching back.

"With your head in my groin?" Jason smirked and Rowan gave him a dirty look. The first thing they did was backtrack to the office area. The barred gate was still securely locked and there was no sign of the van, nor had they passed any other turn offs.

"So who the bloody hell's locked us in here?" Jason shouted, booting the gate savagely. "Hell I'm hungry."

"How can you think of your stomach at a time like this?" Rowan rolled her eyes and set off back down the corridor. They passed their cell and made a point of looking in the other cells too in case any offered a turn off or a way out. The place was like a maze! Occasionally they'd come across a dusty or rusted sign with the Block and Corridor number on it, but that helped little.

"We're not lost." Jason scowled, looking up and down yet another row of derelict cells.

"Just a bit misplaced." Rowan picked up a handful of rubble and rubbish off the floor and piled it against the door of one of the cells, keeping it on place by a rusted metal bar.

"We'll do that every twenty cells or so." Jason nodded. "But I don't think we've been here before. That cell's door's closed." He walked over and tugged on the bars. "This one's been made into a sort of office." A rotten desk and a collapsed filing cabinet on it's side were inside. There was also a glassless window frame in the opposite wall.

"If that's a staff area then it won't be as secure as this bit of it." Rowan suggested. Jason agreed and began shaking the barred door. Dust and rubble began falling from the wall above it. "Careful. The lot'll fall in on you. The hinge side, Jason. Pull the hinge side." Jason strained with all his strength at the gate and Rowan went to pick up the metal bar she'd used to weight her marker down with. "J ... Jason?" Rowan looked into the cell in front of her. Two plastic boxes were on the bunk in there alongside two cartons of orange juice.

"What the hell?" Jason was standing behind her. "OK this is so fucking unfunny!" He bellowed. "Where are you? You arseholes! What the hell do you want?" His roars echoed around the deserted corridors. "Stay here." Jason ordered and set off running in the only visible direction open, the one they'd come from.

"Jason! Crap." Rowan watched him charging up the corridor. "Smooth move, dickhead." She growled and picked up her metal bar to prise at the hinges with. An eight inch gap was all Rowan needed to squeeze into the converted cell, but the time it took her to lever out this gap was long enough for Jason to have ran back to the locked main office and back ten times over. "You bloody moron." Rowan said out loud. Common sense told her to stay put. All the rows and blocks of cells they'd passed to get here had been identical so at least this area was recognisable. Rowan squeezed back out and retrieved the two packed lunches just in case they vanished into thin air while her back was turned.

"You wanted a split to test their individual resourcefulness and now you have it." Patrick Adams had undergone a complete clothes change and makeover during the 'quiet time' his stars were sleeping. "I must congratulate the audience on it's observation skills! You quite rightly picked up on Jenkinson's fiery temperament and his predictable reaction to fight above thought. Thought, ladies and gentlemen. Our historical thinkers are predominately male, but how many of those males could have applied their mental ponderings under those conditions?" He pointed at the giant screen. "Could it be that our *real* thinkers should have been women? Are women logical thinkers, though? Or is a female brain as beautifully romantic as typified by Jane Austen, Emily Bronte and their literary sisters? Imagination is a wonderful thing, but could it also be a curse when left to run riot?"

Rowan piled as much junk and rubble in visible places as she could find. She kicked the rotten desk apart and poked the legs out of the window frame as a marker, as well as transferring the packed sandwiches into one box so she could stand the other outside the cell gate. Where was he? He had to be lost, there was no other explanation. How dense was he? Charging off like the bloody cavalry! Rowan snorted and idly began glancing over a few dirty, tattered papers that had spilled from the filing cabinet. Slatesskill! Rowan blinked a few times at the headed notepaper in her hand. She thought the place had been demolished years ago! They'd been kidnapped and brought to Slatesskill?! Why?! Her shock slowly started to fade and horror started to replace it as she read what files she could decipher. Not only had Slatesskill housed the worst of the worst but it had also taken measures to punish these monsters with terrifying barbarity. Electro-Convulsion seemed to have been a routine procedure for everyone, and Rowan seriously doubted it was for medical reasons, seeing as no anaesthetics at all were mentioned. Cold water jets for hours and hours on end were also used, as was extreme heat and humidity. Solitary confinement lasted for a minimum of a month and there didn't seem to be a maximum. The longest one Rowan found was seven years. Solitary really was solitary too, in complete darkness in a six foot cube. A shocking 30% of long term solitary inmates suffered total blindness as a result of it and that seemed like a 'job accomplished' seal for Slatesskill. Sickening negative reinforcement therapy was also used as routine. Months and months of electric shocks and beatings until the 'correct' behaviour was instilled. The mentally deranged were 'cured' by flooding, even to the extent of inducing epileptic fits continuously in people with epilepsy. Violent schizophrenics were hammered into psychosis so the 'violent streak' could be accessed and 'treated'. Rowan couldn't remember the eventual closure of Slatesskill, but Governor Stevens at F1 had pointed out a few 'long timers' that had been transferred to F1 from Slatesskill, all incurable insane. She also recalled the actual number of prisoners needing rehoused being only a very small fraction of what must have been a huge number. Slatesskill was a fortress. Rowan went to look up and down the corridor outside. Her fear and apprehension was mounting by the second. There wasn't a soul in sight. She went back into the office and thought about what to do next. Going in search of Jason wouldn't be wise at all. Rowan jumped a foot in the air and let out a hysterical sob when a mechanical hum started up suddenly. Lights could be seen flickering through the window frame in the back wall.

"Jason?" She whispered in terror. "Jason, you in there?" Rowan picked up her metal bar and crept towards the window frame. "Shit!" The adjoining room was a derelict and abandoned laboratory of some sort, or maybe a therapy room. The hum seemed to be coming from all around the flickering-lit room and Rowan could see two couches, both fitted with buckled securing straps and an aged computer filled the entire wall to the left. She wriggled through the window and stood in front of the couches. From there, she could see a manual electro-generator that was so old and barbaric that it had a cranking handle on it to produce the current. It was an out and out torture device and couldn't possibly have been used for medical reasons. A sharp grating noise rasped through the hum and Rowan scrambled up against the wall. "No. No, no, no!" The cranking handle was turning slowly, causing the squeal of metal on metal to hurt her eardrums. "Jason!" She screamed and cowered against the wall as the handle turned faster. Three red circles appeared on the wall opposite the couches and Rowan sobbed and stared at them. They'd been projected there by some sort of ancient light projector among the vintage computer array and still the screeching metal overlaid the

ominous humming.

"How many lights?" A tinny, monotone voice crackled from the computer and Rowan just looked at it in sheer shock. "Respond. How many lights?"

"What the shit is that?" Rowan squeaked in panic.

"Negative." The cranking handle began spinning furiously and the hum increased in volume.

"Oh my god." Rowan sobbed, staring at the couches. That generator would have been hooked to immobile prisoners at one time. No response had been given in time, so the power had been cranked up ... how? It was a manual generator and the old computer would absolutely not have the capacity to run it automatically.

"How many lights?" The monotone asked again.

"Three!" Rowan yelled in an effort to stop the screeching grind of the crank and the booming hum of the computer. It had the reverse effect.

"Negative." The din increased. "There are four lights. How many lights?"

"Eh? Three! One two three! Stop it!"

"Negative. You see four lights."

"Three!" Rowan screamed. "Three! Three! Three!"

"Negative."

"Say four for pity's sake." Another voice sobbed and Rowan looked around the empty surgery. "Please! I can't take another wave." The voice hissed.

"Who are you?" Rowan roared. "What do you want from me? What have you done with Jason?" She screamed.

"How many lights?"

"Please friend, say four."

"Three! Fucking three! Leave me alone!"

"Negative."

"May god forgive you friend."

Jason stamped back down the corridor. He'd saw no one and wasn't stupid enough to wander far in that maze. He yanked at one of the barred doors and almost dislocated his arm. Locked? He'd just ran through it! Jason tugged and shook at the bars but they wouldn't budge.

"Oh way to go, you tool!" He booted the bars. "Lost! You bloody moron!" He stormed back along the corridor yelling Rowan's name. He spun round quickly when he heard a crackle. "Who's there? Come on asshole! Bring it!"

"Keep to the left." A static filled voice rattled from a dusty speaker set into the wall above a dormant, broken, fire alarm button.

"What the shit?" Jason barged over to the speaker and dragged it clean out of its casing in a flurry of sparks. "*You* keep to the bloody left." He threw it against the wall where it shattered.

"I think we can deduce which one is the more open to suggestion." Adams smiled and the audience rippled with laughter. "Having said that though, Rowan Hall did not say that there were four lights. I mentioned before that she's a very hard woman, abnormally so. Maybe if she were actually wired up to our generator ... just my little joke!" He boomed a laugh which was reciprocated by his puppets. "Do we want a good old fashioned heroic rescue?!" He whooped loudly and the audience burst into applause. "I can't hear you!" The crowd cheered. "Don't you love a hero? Before we witness the silver-screen behaviour that's present in us all, and that touches our very hearts, I have a question. You've become quite familiar with the personalities of our stars and the unknowing conformity to gender roles. Predictions to the outcome of our rescue? By your seats, you will find a control pad, ladies and gentlemen. Will we get a Faye Ray reaction from Rowan Hall? Will she collapse into the arms of her Cary Grant? Maybe her stubborn independence will play a part. Will she launch a tirade from hell at Jenkinson for his hot-headedness? Make your predictions, people, and we'll reveal our rescue after the commercial break!" Adams smiled and left the stage to thunderous applause.

"Mr Adams, sir!" Phyllis Delany came fluttering towards him. "Sir the switchboards are reporting a fraction of outraged calls. Mostly are a bit disturbed as to Rowan Hall's experiences, but a few are pro-Jenkinson. Sir we've had sixty-odd predictions that Jason Jenkinson will beat the system, and not be at all happy about it."

"Oh boo bloody hoo." Adams said childishly. "Sixty? Phyllis our viewing figures are by the million, woman! Block the few that are trying to cause trouble and under no circumstances allow them to be put through on-stage."

Jason stopped stamping and tilted his head. What was that? Electrics? He could hear a droning hum and recognised the sound of an electrical generator when he heard one. He turned round slowly and tried to determine where the droning was coming from. Rowan helped him by screaming his name, sending him into an utter panic. Jason set off at a sprint in the direction of the scream and skidded to a halt when he saw the locked gate he'd just tried, by the shattered loud speaker. He stood and looked round for another way through and heard another scream. Four? Did she yell four?

"What the hell's she doing?" He shouted and darted at the gate more by reflex than common sense. It swung open as soon as he touched it. Jason didn't have time to question this and he started running again. He rounded a corner and saw flickering grey light spilling out into the dirty corridor. The hum of machinery was almost deafening and the screech of metal on metal made Jason clutch his ears. The door was a proper door, not a barred one, and the top half was made of reinforced glass, shatter-proof glass, that was cracked but not broken. It was also locked. Jason took a few steps back then booted it, followed by a shoulder barge. It wasn't as solid as the bars so he took another kick at it, and another.

Rowan stumbled to her feet, clutching her head and tried to block out that awful sound. They were here! Someone was breaking the door down! Rowan kicked with all her strength at the base of one of the couches, sending it crashing against the door. The door gave way and Jason stumbled in, falling head-first over the couch. Rowan jammed one of the metal restraining buckles into the generator and was jolted back by a searing electrical current. Screeching metal and the droning hum throbbed through Rowan's head and were added to by the roars of her captor as wave after wave of current surged through the couch and through his body.

"Shit! Shut it off! Shut it off!" Brian Charlton shrieked at his technicians.

"Jesus Christ." Stewart just gaped at Alan, then his Superintendent in shock. Jason eventually slumped to the floor and the humming had stopped. "Fuck me! Is he dead? Charlton! Is he fucking dead?" Stewart screamed.

The studio audience fell into a stunned silence as they stared at the picture on the plasma screen in front of them. Jason Jenkinson lay on the floor with blood pouring from his nose, as well as from a host of cuts and scratches from the shattered safety glass. He was a sickly grey colour and rapidly evaporating sweat could be seen on his veined temples. Rowan Hall was curled up against the wall with her arms over her head, an ugly scorch mark ran from her wrist to the crook of her arm.

"Everything is under control." Patrick Adams said calmly, even though the yelling and chaos down his earpiece suggested differently. "I can assure you that no live currents could have been emitted from that generator." He lied.

"How about live cuts and burns from your shitty props!" Someone in the audience shouted.

"All within accepted standards." Adams resorted to a stock answer. "However, the area is being reconfigured as we speak. That area will be locked off remotely as soon as they leave it. It's under control, like I said."

"You bringing them out?" Someone shouted. "I paid a bloody fortune for this ticket!"

"Of course he's bringing them out!" Someone else replied. "He looks dead. Is he dead, Adams?" The audience began murmuring and the camera angle switched to other parts of the abandoned jail. "He is! They've turned the camera off!"

"No one is dead, sir." Adams held up his hands. "We'll assess the situation during the commercial break. Thank you for your support and patience." He walked off the stage as quickly as his dignity would allow.

Backstage was chaotic and the switchboards were jammed.

"Get me Charlton and get him NOW!" Adams barked. Phyllis came running towards him with a mobile phone.

"Stupid bitch!" Brian sobbed hysterically.

"So is your mother for ever giving birth to you!" Adams roared. "How the hell did that happen? How?"

"We still have the secondary cameras on them, sir." Brian babbled. "I'll monitor Jenkinson for movement."

"You'd better hope he obliges, Charlton, otherwise I'll have your balls for paperweights!"

"He'll have to stand in line!" Stewart bellowed and lunged for Brian Charlton. He was intercepted by three technicians, and Superintendent McManus. "He needs a bloody doctor!" Stewart yelled. "They both do!"

"You heard Mr Adams. No live currents." Brian swallowed hard.

"Bollocks! B. O. Locks! She has a very nasty burn and he's been electrocuted! You simpering little shit! Trust me, I'll see the lot of you in F1 for this!" Stewart ranted.

"Come on, outside." The Superintendent hauled Stewart out of the caravan. "OK cool it."

"What?!" Stewart exploded. "Cool it? With all respect sir, kiss my bloody arse!"

"I'll let that slide under the circumstances. This has gone too far. Are you hearing me? I'm agreeing with you." McManus said calmly. "The assurances I've had that all was above board and safe are phenomenal and from quite phenomenal sources."

"Well it obviously isn't safe, is it? That was electrocution, I don't give a shit what that arsehole and his boss says." Stewart snapped. "Where's the bloody cars? You managed to get me and Alan here just fine. Sort it."

"You aren't listening. I'm agreeing with you." McManus said patiently.

"Oh I'm listening. I heard you." Stewart said angrily. "Agree now it's gone wrong. Too little, too late, sir. It never should have ever been endorsed in the first place."

Chapter 5

Rowan gradually realised that the only sound she could hear was her own sobs. She had no idea how long she'd been cowering against the wall. Seconds? Minutes? Hours? Jason. She had to find Jason. Rowan crawled along the wall and got to a crouching position behind a desk. She just stared in horror at the black, Doctor Martin boots that she could see from the floor.

"Shit!" Rowan knocked the desk over completely as she jumped to her feet. "Shit no! Jason!" He was a complete mess. He was battered and bruised and was bleeding from his nose and a myriad of cuts. He was also a horrible dull colour, but he was breathing. Rowan rolled him over and wedged her knees under his head. He was clammy and cold. "Jesus Joseph and Mary, I'm sorry Jason. Jason? Jason can you hear me? Shit." She lay him back on his side and ransacked the crumbling cupboards for something to use as a blanket. There was nothing. Rowan scrambled through the window and tossed the pack lunches through, and a few metal bars. She upended the couch and pushed it against the wall so it blocked three quarters of the window, then she dragged the desk in front of that too. "Jason? Shit man wake up." Rowan got on the floor again. The flickering lights had even stopped now and there were no external windows at all. "Come on, Jason, you're the electrician! You don't want me to have at that generator again do you?" She tugged Jason's leather jacket around him and zipped it up. "There's someone in here with us. I heard him crying about the lights." She glanced at the dormant generator, then shuddered. "Someone left our lunch and someone's wandering about locking doors. Jason they must be terrorists. That's why the policemen didn't send anyone here for us. They've probably shot them. Can you hear me? Please wake up, Jason." Jason's breathing was shallow but steady and Rowan took that to be a good sign. "Someone will find us. We're in Slateskill, did you know that? It's in the middle of nowhere but that's good. It narrows down the places to search, doesn't it?" Rowan wiped some of the blood from Jason's nose. "I'm taking a bloody holiday when we get out of here, I need it. I'll be able to go to your trial and cheer like hell when you get acquitted. Hey if your mum and sister want to go too and support you, I can give them a lift. Yes? I have one of those six seater MPVs and it has a side door especially for wheelchairs. I needed a new car so I bought that one because at the time, a colleague of mine had a lot going on because his niece had been injured in a bad fall. Poor little mite was in a double full plater cast from her waist to both sets of toes." Rowan smiled. "The car was great for taking her out and about in, she was only seven. I used to loan Brian it at weekends." Rowan chattered on, for the sake of her own nerves more than anything else. "Short memory he has, you know. Anally retentive ponce. So are you going to wake up or what? You can't stay in here idling about. OK I'll go visit your mum and sister without you." Jason coughed and frightened the life out of Rowan. He rolled over onto his side and vomited fiercely. "Ack! These jeans cost fifty quid!" Rowan laughed and helped Jason roll the other way out of the puddle of puke.

"I'll make sure the electric meter is full if you're going visiting on your own." Jason gasped and tried to sit up. "Who are you? Bloody Magneto?"

"Who? He didn't do electricity." Rowan sniffed. "Anyway you came charging in like bloody Rambo! I was terrified!"

"Rambo my arse! Rambo wouldn't have fell over the sodding couch." Jason rubbed his temples. "I feel like shit." He muttered groggily.

"I thought you were dead." Rowan mumbled. "I thought I'd killed you."

"Pfft." Jason looked up and smiled weakly, trying to focus his blurry eyesight. "Like I said, Rambo's arse. I'm more your Chuck Norris type of bloke."

"Someone's keeping us here." Rowan ripped the hem off her t-shirt and Jason held out his cut covered arm. "Terrorists and they must have shot Terry and the policemen." Rowan ignored Jason's arm and began dressing the burn on her own arm. "We're in Slateskill! I found some old notepaper with it on. They're bound to look here eventually, Jason. It's the only building for miles."

"Slateskill. I did wonder that when I first saw the place." Jason wafted Rowan out of the way and vomited again. "Bollocks." He rested his pounding head against the wall. "Well they're keeping us here by getting us lost in the place so that means there isn't a lot of them. If there was, then we'd be guarded. Come on."

"Get a grip, Jason. You can hardly stand up and I'm not big enough to cart you about. We'll have to stay here, at least until you feel better." Rowan sat down, away from the vomit.

"Can't argue with that." Jason squinted at Rowan. "So what happened in here?" Rowan explained as best she could without making herself out to be a hysterical nut-case. "Shit. Criminals or not, that's just pure torture." Jason nodded. "So how many lights were there?"

"Wh ... what?" Rowan felt a wave of panic wash over her. "F ... four." She looked around the room in terror. "Four! There were four!"

"Hey, hey. It's OK." Jason staggered over and managed to settle Rowan down a bit. "It doesn't matter. OK? Shit how effective is that eh?"

"Jason I heard someone else. I did! Another voice was crying and begging me to say four to spare him any more pain." Rowan nodded. "Not in my head, not in my imagination, I heard it. It was a man's voice and he was dying. He asked God to forgive me." Rowan hung her head.

"OK it's gone, Rowan. Whatever it was it was done purposely. OK? I don't know what sort of sick arseholes are holding us here but they're sick enough to make you hear that crap. No one's dying here, Rowan, you can see that. No one was getting that current, it wasn't hurting anyone at all, except that bloody awful noise it was making. Ugh!" Jason rubbed his eyes. "Let their God forgive them, because I won't."

"Jason, at the end, just before you came in, I really did think I could see four lights." Rowan said quietly.

"Gone. Done with. Four, five, six, twenty six. Probably the crappy computer over there anyway. It's older than the one in my house and that's saying something."

"What are heroes for?" Patrick Adams smiled widely and gesticulated at the plasma screen. Rowan and Jason were now chatting about computers and Jason looked a healthier shade than his previous zombie hew. The audience were somewhat placated by this overall picture. "Although they did spoil our poll." Adams raised a touch of the titters among his audience.

"Why they think it's terrorists?" The large lady in the hat was back. "Just because of those hairy men that jumped the van?"

"Sadly, that's all a prejudiced person like Rowan Hall needs." Adams said with a sigh. "To judge a person solely by his appearance is a woeful outlook to have.

"Well she didn't judge Jenkinson." A be-specticalled man spoke up and his very appearance irritated Adams. "She was under the impression he was a toerag but she still didn't judge him for it."

"I hardly think that's her impartial personality coming into play." Adams smiled enigmatically.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." The man persisted.

"I don't expect you to. Nor did I until I heard the backstage chatter." Adams wandered into the audience, a microphone following him. He stopped in front of a young woman of around twenty years old who had the vacant expression of a stunned sheep. "Tell me miss, can you see any factors up there on that screen that may affect Rowan Hall's opinions of Jason Jenkinson?"

"Yah!" The girl brayed a laugh that made the entire population over the treble figure IQ mark, cringe horribly. "He's hot!"

"That about sums it up." Adams laughed. "How could we put that to the test?" He sauntered back to centre stage. "If Rowan Hall *is* unprejudiced and looks at Jenkinson with an impartial eye, that would explain her tolerance, and even her occasional dependency on him. If she thinks he's ... 'hot' ... then that would also explain it." He mused, casting an eye over his studio audience.

"We need to test one or the other." The hat lady said firmly.

"Viable suggestion." Adams nodded slowly. "Testing the former would be difficult. Testing the latter, however ..." He left the sentence hanging.

"Make her jealous!" The stunned sheep bleated. "I'll volunteer!" The rest of the ovine audience laughed on cue.

"And a grand job you'd make of it too, I'm sure." Adams laughed jovially. "I think a snapshot of our Superstud with a lovely lady should do it." A full sized picture filled the giant screen of Jason holding hands with a stunning blonde and sitting on a park bench, both looking enormously happy with each other. In the bottom corner was stamped, Police Department: Jenkinson, J. Personal Item #4. Obviously it had been on Jason's person when he was arrested.

McManus wandered over to Stewart and Alan. All three had tried to radio the station but the reception was non-existent. None of the officers carried personal phones on duty and the only other contact to anywhere was via Brian Charlton and his techies, all of who were under orders from Patrick Adams not to 'clutter up the lines'.

"What are you doing?" McManus asked conversationally.

"Oh taking in the scenery, relaxing, you know?" Alan said sarcastically.

"He's adding that Personal and confidential item on there to the list of screwups." Stewart answered bluntly. "Before you say anything, I don't really care which officer actually handed it over. It's your station."

"It's only a photograph." McManus heaved.

"A photograph that's covered by the Data Protection laws as long as it's in police care. Christ they even plastered the station name and the item category number on the bloody screen! There'll be legal eagles out there rubbing their bloody hands together over that." Stewart stated.

"And while we're on the subject of screwups, me, Stewart and that technician have all expressed objections to being here, on camera. We're here against our will, sir. We were brought here against our will."

"You know, I really did expect more support from my officers when the going got rough." McManus snapped. "This was not what I was lead to expect. I've said that over and over. It was out of my hands as soon as you were brought here."

"Fair enough." Stewart shrugged. "So that leaves that photograph, handed over before we were brought here, hijacking a police vehicle, before we got here, threatening two officers, two civilians and a remand prisoner, before we got here, unlawful imprisonment of myself, Alan and the techie outside, as soon as we got here. Oh and there's deliberately lying to my family, also before we ..."

"You can't press this." McManus said. "Patrick Adams will rip you apart and the whole force with you."

"No, he'll rip you apart. We've all expressed the wish not to be involved, remember? You contrived this, you sir. You're in it up to your neck just as much as that prick over there and that egomaniac on that screen." Stewart said flatly. "You shit in your own nest, you can sleep in it."

Jason drifted in and out of sleep with varying degrees of nausea, dizziness, blurred vision and downright pain from everywhere. Rowan did her best to make herself, and Jason as comfortable as anyone could get in a derelict torture chamber. She picked at a sandwich while Jason seemed to be resting, then stood up to massaged her aching muscles. They'd agreed not to wander off from each other if they could possibly avoid it, not even for toilet breaks. Rowan looked at Jason, then peered through the shattered glass door. There was a big double doored cupboard right outside with both doors hanging open, half off their hinges. Going ten feet behind a cupboard couldn't possibly be classed as wandering off, especially given the condition of Jason. Rowan crept out of the torture room and sidled behind the cupboard door. Her blood ran cold, thirty seconds later, when she emerged and saw someone tip-toeing up the corridor, away from her. The figure was dressed in dark clothing and was wearing a peaked cap but Rowan could tell by the size that it was either a woman or a young teenager. Jason's crash-in tactics last time had been disastrous, so Rowan flattened herself against the shadowy wall and crept along it. She actually managed to overtake the figure, just before a turn off in the corridor. It was definitely a woman, dark haired and dark eyed. Rowan couldn't go much further than the turn off for fear of getting lost.

The audience in the studio were beginning to make restless noises. They hadn't paid an obscene amount of money to watch roving shots of Slateskill. Patrick Adams had explained that the photograph for his test would have to be located in a strategic place and the camera had switched to 'scenic mode'. The audience had had enough of scenic for now. Adams consciously adopted his denture-ad smile before strolling on stage to the applause of his fans.

"I've been told our catalyst is in place." He said brightly. "Our stars won't backtrack, they'll move onwards. Shall we see if they're observant enough to spot our little testcard among the debris?" He swung round and the screen changed to show Jason tossing and turning uncomfortably on the floor. The camera swivelled round the room and confirmed that there was no Rowan. "This should be good!" Adams laughed and the camera switched to outside the room. There she was. Creeping along the corridor after his technician! His earpiece erupted with chaotic panic as everyone backstage started with hysterics all at once. Adams kept his smile painted on and snarled into his mini-mike.

"Get the camera back on Jenkinson, you imbeciles." The screen blinked it's change accordingly and the audience exploded into boos and jeers.

"Come on! Let's see a bit of action!" Someone bellowed. "Put the bloody camera back!"

"Yes put it back! Our show, remember?" Someone else shouted.

"Bah! It's a load of old crap! It's all put-on!"

"Switchboards are jammed, sir." Someone told Adams down his earpiece. "The public are sensing a staged act."

"Shit. We'll lose rep over this." Adams growled. "What's that bitch doing now?" He looked up when he realised the studio was in silence. His communicator was on wide audio! The backstage technicians all fought to rectify it in order to save their jobs.

"Fixed, Mr Adams, sir." Someone grovelled. "Sir Rowan Hall is still stalking the technician."

"Switch back to camera two." Adams hissed.

"What? Switch to Rowan?"

"Yes! Are you bloody stupid as well as deaf? If we lose one single viewer, I'll make sure you and your entire worthless family are on the streets." The camera switch was made and the audience approved. "Oh Jesus." The crowd went wild as Rowan Hall speared the startled technician in the chest with her shoulder.

"You bitch!" Rowan snarled, booting the woman savagely in the ribs. "Where are the rest of your shitbags?" Another boot.

"Christ you've broke my ribs." The other woman wheezed. Rowan hauled her to her feet by her ears and delivered a sickening head-butt that produced an audible crunch. The woman dropped to the floor in a heap, and stayed there.

"Damn it!" Rowan yelled. "You bitch! Wake up, you lowlife scumbag!" Rowan slapped the woman so hard over the face that blood and saliva sprayed on the wall. "Cow! OK If we're here then so are you." Rowan started to drag the unconscious woman along the corridor but it became obvious that she wasn't going to manage it. She threw the woman's limp arms aside and stormed off in the direction of the torture room.

"Go!" Adams growled down his mini-mike. "Get her the fuck out of there. She's gone for Jenkinson and that technician is fired!"

Brian Charlton's hands were shaking as he remotely locked the gate behind the unconscious technician and two security men.

"Close shave there, dickless." Alan observed.

"Alan, please." McManus glared at Alan, who was past bothering. "An outsider has been hurt, Charlton. Surely that's grounds for Adams to pull the plug? That's a hospital job."

"And the crowds love it." Brian muttered, sitting down heavily in his chair. "*This* is Real TV."

Jason stood next to Rowan, supporting himself against the wall of the deserted corridor.

"They've taken her!" Rowan yelled. "Someone's been for her! I knocked her out. See?" Rowan lifted her hair to reveal a red patch on her forehead. "She was right there!" She ran round the corner, straight into a locked, barred gate. "Ouch! Shite!"

"Rowan I know she was here." Jason said from back round the corner. "There's blood and snot up the wall. You bloody hooligan."

"So who come for her?" Rowan demanded of totally the wrong person. "OK, OK I'm calm! Damn, we could have held her hostage."

"Very 'Die Hard'." Jason heaved a sigh. "You did good Rowan, well done."

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you."

"Well yes it does, but I was being serious. You tried the stealth approach and you didn't go charging off in a frenzy like I did." Jason nodded. "Well we aren't getting through that way." He indicated the locked gate. "We know someone's prowling about in here so we'll go grab those metal bars from that other room. Oh and you drank my orange."

"Maybe I shouldn't have. I might not have pee'd so much." Rowan trudged down the corridor. Jason found himself an iron bar that was more like a girder.

"Eat this." He muttered, swinging it through the air.

"Jason, is this you?" Rowan was standing at the door with a photograph in her hand.

"Where the hell did that come from?" Jason said in astonishment.

"Out there on the floor among the old forms and papers. I only noticed it because it's colour." Rowan handed Jason the snapshot. "How did it get here?"

"I have no bloody clue." Jason shook his head. "Look, see? I had it in my wallet when they lifted me." He pointed at his name and the item number on the bottom of the picture. "Why did that woman have my wallet? How?"

"Oh no." Rowan closed her eyes. "Jason, those policemen must have gave her it. I don't know why she was prowling about down here, maybe the same reason I was, but she's dropped this. The police must have given those terrorist people your things."

"What the hell is going on?" Jason flung up his hands. "The police working with terrorists with me in the middle of it all? Rowan I know I'm an arrogant shit at times, but I can't claim to be *that* important! You might be though." He raised his eyebrows at Rowan.

"I can't see how." Rowan shrugged. "I certainly don't have any political affiliations so I doubt any political terrorist groups would be interested in me."

"You've got a bit of money though." Jason nodded.

"Yes, I don't do too badly. The only person who can get it is me. I have no family and no trust funds and the like. I'm not that important either."

"That's not important anyway. Us getting out of here is. Come on." Jason left the torture room, and Rowan followed him.

Common sense told them that it would be fruitless to try the gate that Rowan had ran into, but nothing in Slateskill was making any sense at all. It wasn't really a big surprise to find the gate unlocked.

"So this must be a way out. It has to be." Jason said.

"It is, yes. Look." Rowan pointed beyond yet another barred and locked door and into the original office where the van had been removed from.

"Balls! Damn blast and bugger it to hell! All that and we've gone round in a bloody circle!" Jason ranted.

"A single floor maze with shifting dead ends." Rowan heaved a sigh. "I'm so bloody tired."

"Single floor?" Jason frowned at her. "You're right." He began scanning the ceiling. "Cavities, there has to be. Ventilation shafts, insulation cavities, wiring cavities."

"So we're going to strand ourselves on the roof? I thought only bad actors with lame scripts did things like that." Rowan said.

"You got a better idea?" Jason asked. "Even if anyone did decide to look here, they'd be as lost as we are in minutes and your theory about the police being a pack of shits is starting to hold water."

"Looks like she's lost faith in you." Brian smiled at Alan and Stewart.

"Goading my officers isn't a wise thing to do." McManus said.

"Good advice. Take it." Stewart snapped.

"Just think, all it took was the brief appearance of two dark skinned men to set up this terrorist idea." Brian twittered on.

"Have a thought of your own, Charlton." Alan rolled his eyes. "Your boss has already been there. Total shit. I think it's more likely to be the kidnapping at gunpoint, regardless of skin colour. Moron."

"Nevertheless..." Brian sat up straight when his phone rang. Only Patrick Adams had his number.

"Are you even watching this?" Adams roared.

"Of course I am." Brian turned a few dials on his control panel. "Don't worry, sir, the gates are all functioning and I doubt even Jenkison's brute force could kick down the ceiling."

"You ass!" Adams bellowed. "Do we want them studying the ceiling? Do we?"

"Shit, the cameras."

"Give him a banana!" Adams said sarcastically. "Use the gates by the boiler hatches."

"Well the boiler rooms weren't checked thoroughly, sir. We ran out of time, remember?" Brian said warily.

"Checked? Checked? He's been electrocuted, she's been burned and electrocuted, and that stupid bloody girl is in a hospital bed shouting 'insurance claim!' Checked? The cameras were installed, right?" Adams said menacingly.

"Yes but ..."

"So get them in that bloody cellar and away from the roof panels!" Adams hung up and Brian got busy.

"Sir!" Phyllis came puffing up the corridor. "Thursby and Nailor Legal Firm. The girl on Jenkinson's photo, sir, her family aren't happy at all."

"So pay them off!" Adams yelled and headed for the stage.

Jason wandered along slowly, looking at the ceiling. It was all but impossible to see any panelling that might have been there. The light was simply too dim. Rowan wasn't having much luck either as she jabbed a five foot long metal pole into the ceiling at regular intervals.

"So who's the girl in the picture?" Rowan asked. "She's very pretty."

"Stacy Michaels and yes she was." Jason leant against the wall and rubbed his stiff neck. "She died in a car crash four years ago."

"I'm sorry." Rowan grimaced. "If you wanted to tell me, you would have. Big mouth."

"No it's fine. Long time ago." Jason smiled. "That photo was actually taken two years before that. I was only nineteen on it. We'd split up long before the crash but my sister still had that picture in her house. She gave me it the day I beat that asshole up. I was just going to stash it somewhere."

"That makes those shitheads having it even more disgusting, in my opinion." Rowan said angrily. "That's your private life and shouldn't be mauled over by complete strangers. Have we been this way? I don't remember seeing that gate in the middle of the floor."

The studio audience went very quiet, then ripples of sympathy waved among the crowd. Patrick Adams cursed, cursed, and better cursed to himself. He's plastered a dead girl's picture all over National TV!

"Poor kid!" A woman shouted. "You're an asshole, Adams. First off you film him on about his mum, then you show everybugger his dead girlfriend! What next? You film her funeral to show us all?"

"All designed to show how such tragedies can affect a man." Adams said calmly. "All Jason Jenkinson has seen is violence and the death of that beautiful girl on that picture must have hit him quite hard. Is it understandable that he hits back at the world when it's treated him so cruelly?" He said theatrically.

"So it's a good job he's got Rowan then eh?" A man shouted and agreements were expressed through the audience.

"Just to clarify, he hasn't 'got' Rowan." Adams raised his hands. "Before this episode, they'd never met. I'd like to make that very clear."

"Oh sit down!" Someone jeered. "We want to see what happens. OK?"

"Yes! Just you keep your nose out of it Adams! We want to see what they do!"

"I think they'll get it on!"

"Nah! Too different to each other."

"She'll help him with his trial."

"They'll start up their own TV show!"

"Yeah! Think they'll get married and all?"

"Maybe. He's a bit younger than her though."

Brian frantically pushed the buttons on his mobile phone.

"What's up Bri?" Stewart drawled. "Hero worship changed direction?"

"You don't realise the impact this could have." Brian muttered.

"Oh? They're all pro Jenkinson so the natural thing for you and your goons would be to pull the plug before you all lose anymore face. Yes? You wouldn't bloody dare, pal. That lot out there would bloody lynch you. Childish to say 'I told you so' but I did."

Chapter 6

Jason not only opened the hatch in the floor, he hauled it off its rusting hinges and hurtled it down the corridor.

"Re-lock that, asshole. Come on Rowan." He lowered himself into the hole and kicked around for some sort of ladder. "I'll have to drop, then help you. The ladder's rotted away."

"If this is below ground, what are the chances of an exit?" Rowan asked, scrambling down the hole after Jason.

"God knows. There has to be some sort of ventilation down here though. All we need is a rusty old shaft to kick a hole through. Ouch! Shit what the hell have you got on your feet? Combat boots?" Jason flinched out of the way of Rowan's 'POD Casuals, for girls on the go!'

"You'd better not drop me." Rowan dangled in mid air, then let go, resulting in Jason acquiring a new abrasion down his cheek from Rowan's belt.

"Do you realise, every injury I have has been inflicted by you?" He grumbled and Rowan sniggered. "Look at the state of me! I have a three inch bruise on the side of my head where you clouted me with the torch, a swollen eyelid where you headbutted me during the same incident, no skin on my face because of your belt, heelmarks all over my head and churned innards where you plugged me into the mains!"

"Ah it's OK. I won't tell anyone." Rowan looked around the cellar. It wasn't an overly big room, which suggested that the cellar as a whole was made up of several rooms. This one housed an ancient boiler that was riddled with rust holes. "Hell it stinks down here." The stale odour of rancid air, mould, and general squalor hung in the air.

"If we get nowhere poking about down here we'll go back up. They can't lock a hole, can they?" Jason nodded to the hatch. "You could be right. It doesn't seem like the type of cellar with an external exit." He walked carefully towards a wooden doorway whose door had long since succumbed to insects.

"OK I hate this." Rowan shuddered. "No exits, I agree. Lets go back up and carry on searching the ceilings."

"Ugh. Look here." Jason was standing next to a wall that ran along three rooms and was squared off into ten inch cubicles. He rubbed at a dulled plate on the front of one of the cubical boxes.

"Howard, Albert. Prisoner #99214. Age At Death: 45."

"What are they? Files?" Rowan pulled out one of the boxes and it disintegrated in her hand. She let out a shriek and began jumping around on the spot as a cascade of dust and small bones swirled around her. "Ashes! oh God oh God oh God! Human remains? why were they never claimed or moved when the place was closed? Er ... I don't suppose you could repackage Dawson, Gregory here could you? We can't leave him strewn all over the floor."

"I don't think he'll mind." Jason rolled his eyes and picked up a few small fragments of bone, returning them to their shelf. "Ankle bones."

"Huh? How do you know? Don't be morbid." Rowan shuddered again.

"No, really. They're so hard that they don't cremate." Jason nodded, looking at the name plates.

"Bit of a closet ghoul, I see. Shit Jason there's hundreds of them. All these can't have died naturally while in prison, it's impossible." Rowan's mind jumped back to the notes she'd read, and the torture chamber. "Jason we'll go back up. There's nothing down here to help us. Please?"

"Yeah, no worries." Jason nodded. "Think of the irony, Rowan. You're more scared of the dead ashes down here than you are of the live terrorist up there." He smiled and just didn't make Rowan feel any better at all.

The camera switched from the caskets of remains and onto the faces of Jason and Rowan.

"Hey! Tell them to put that back!" Someone shouted. "Did that say Robeson, Noah? Did it?" The man turned to ask someone behind him. "Put the bloody thing back on the boxes! It's important!" Patrick Adams glanced uncertainly towards the side stage. "Right! I'm leaving for Slateskill. Noah Robeson was my granddad! He was only lifted for bloody shoplifting! Poor old bugger was senile."

"A march on Slateskill would be very foolish indeed. It's in the middle of nowhere." Adams said loudly.

"So put the bugger back up there so I can check, eh?" The irate man shouted. Adams nodded slightly and the screen was filled with caskets again.

"Shennan. Is that the same Shennans over on LightRidge? I bet it is. None of them are any good." One lady folded her arms.

"Hey my son married a Shennan, you fat hag." Another woman shouted. "Did it say Shennan? I missed it."

"Porter, Gerald. That's him that was done for bothering kids."

"Yes I remember my mother telling me that. His lot tried to say he'd gone away to work. Pfft! Well we know now!"

Stewart, Alan and McManus looked at the screen in the caravan.

"Christ there's going to be bloody riots." Stewart muttered. "Charlton! You'll have to let the Chief contact the station. There's going to be hell on out there." McManus nodded in agreement.

"Not until it's been cleared by Mr Adams." Brian shrugged. "Riots? Do you think? I think they'll all be glued to their screens right now."

"Shit you're a twat." Alan said in disbelief.

"I can't do anything!" Brian objected. "The only man who has any say here is standing on that stage! If I cut the cameras they'll tear that studio to shreds."

"So let us go and secure the damned place!" Alan shouted. "The Station can't act until the Chief tells them to. They'll presume he has this all in hand! Right, you frigging prick!" He stood up. "Phone. Hand it over or I'll break your bloody arm and take it off you." Brian ducked back behind his technicians. "You think I can't take on a gang of geeks?"

"You interfere with that broadcast and you endanger the lives of the staff there. Tell him, McManus." Brian nodded.

"He doesn't need to tell me, I'm not stupid! We need a car here. We need the Chief where he's supposed to damn well be instead of sitting here with you useless arseholes! Any car will do!"

Rowan and Jason turned away from the pitiful and disturbing sight of the rows of caskets. Neither had any desire to stumble across anything else that might be those vaults.

"Can you hear that?" Jason turned to Rowan when a low, quiet groan echoed through the dingy cellar. He peered through the doorway that lead into the room housing the boiler. "Shit!" Rowan peeped round his shoulder and saw cracks in the ceiling radiating from the damaged hatch. They both watched in horror as the cracks spidered across the ceiling, then split suddenly into rifts. "Shit! Rowan! Down!" Jason grabbed Rowan and threw her into the wall before diving over and flinging himself on top of her. Rowan screamed and sobbed as plaster, rubble and wood crashed down around them. Deafening clangs and smashes could be heard from everywhere as mouldy furniture and iron gates came avalanching down from the floor above them. "Fuck! We're going to be buried!" Jason screamed. "Keep down Rowan!" He screwed his eyes shut reflexively and squeezed himself round Rowan's body.

Brian, Stewart, Alan, the Chief, Terry and the technicians stared at the blank, static filled screens in stunned silence, as did the entire nation.

"Oh my God." Brian whispered.

"Natural death conclusion taking on a whole new meaning, eh?" Stewart was shaking from head to foot. "This can't be happening. Shit."

"I need to ..." Brian's phone rang as he was reaching for it and his hands were shaking uncontrollably as he answered it. The silence betrayed the shock that had dropped onto the studio like a lead blanket and all that Brian could hear was Patrick Adams' unsteady breathing. "No visual here sir." He half sobbed, eventually.

"Try the first floor ceiling cameras." Adams said quietly. "If the floor's caved in it might reveal that cellar level."

"What?!" Stewart bellowed. "Yes I heard that. Give me that phone or so help me I'll fucking throttle you." He knocked Brian clean off his feet with his elbow. "Enough! You fucking warped son of a whore! Get someone out there and do it bloody quickly!" Tears of sheer rage and grief sprang up in Stewart's eyes. "You've caused the deaths of two kids, you bastard! Don't make it any worse by filming their bodies."

"I need the cameras on them." Adams snarled. "I don't know who the hell you are but do not tell me how to handle this. I need the cameras on them because I need to know a safe rout to where they are. Do you honestly think I'd film the demise of two of my stars?"

"Your ... your ... what?!" Stewart screamed. "You are one sick shit-sucking arsehole! Your pathetic

Show means nothing now. It's not your place to find a safe route, I think your part in this is over, bastard!"

"They're alive!" Brian shouted in relief. "The picture isn't brilliant but the ceiling cameras are picking them up."

"Thank Christ for that." Alan looked at the screen and saw movement.

The ear-splitting avalanche subsided into a crumbling spattering of debris. Jason's jacket was shredded to ribbons and had it not been leather, his back would have been mincemeat. Blood streamed from a gash in the back of his head, staining his blonde hair crimson. He groaned and tried to move and felt bricks, rubble and splinters shift from his body. An ominous numbness in his right hand suggested that it was broken, somehow, and he winced as a sharp pain shot from his twisted knee. He struggled and pushed outwards with his elbows and lacerated back to loosen enough rubble to be able to move more freely. The last, thick layer of plaster dust and grime stung his eyes and burned his lungs, but at least he was alive. He grabbed Rowan by her underarms and dragged her free of the debris. She was cut and bruised and filthy but she was alive too. Jason looked at one of the solid iron gates that had crashed to the floor. The only reason it hadn't fallen directly onto them is because it had dropped at an angle. It was now propped up against the wall under the weight of two, heavy solid ceiling beams and chunks of masonry that would have crushed Jason and Rowan like bugs.

"You're bleeding." Rowan croaked.

"Rowan! Bleeding? What, again?" He smiled through his terror. "Quite a chunk of the ceiling's collapsed. Look you can see the upper floor." Jason nodded to the splintered edges of a gaping chasm that used to be the ceiling. "You OK? Knob question, I know. Broken bones and the like? I think I've shattered my hand and twisted my knee."

"My shoulder, but I think it's just twisted. You're a heavy bloke." Rowan staggered to her feet. "Oh shit." She stared at their miraculous gate shield. "I bet that's heavier than you."

"Just a tad." Jason nodded. "We need out of here incase that gate gives way." He lead Rowan towards the smashed shelves and caskets, their contents were now part of the collapse debris.

"Jason?" Rowan was looking at a dented and battered name plate. Robeson, Noah. "Look, I'm not religious at all but this is awful. These were people."

"I know." Jason nodded sadly. "No one deserves this, no matter what they did. All we can really do is tell the authorities when we get out. They'll come for them, Rowan. They won't just leave them here."

"You're right. You won't can go much further, Jason. You're limping pretty badly there and you're bleeding all over the place."

"So are you." Jason nodded. "Come on. I'm sure we can find somewhere a bit better than here to rest." They gave the nameplate one last look, before edging further along the cellar.

"That was a close one." Patrick Adams said sombrely to his stunned audience. "Or was it?" He turned to the screen and a distorted, flickering picture flashed onto it. "As you can see, they're alive. Of course they are! I'm not in the habit of ending peoples' lives!" He smiled brightly but his audience wasn't convinced. "I'll let you into a little inside secret. Note the iron gate." He pointed to the screen. "It would simply not be possible for that to fall like that, ladies and gentlemen. It's a

prop." The audience deflated en-masse in relief. "Don't misunderstand me, our guests there don't know that. That was not staged." At least that wasn't a lie! "However, you can see for yourselves that the accepted levels of expected injuries, no matter how minor, are becoming quite random and unexpected. This is Real TV after all. You have to admit, our stars have given us one hell of a show, but their safety is of the utmost importance to us."

"You'll keep that running, mate, I'm warning you." Noah Robeson's grandson was in tears. "Props my arse! Safety my arse! You didn't control that, you prick! Look at the state of that place!"

"Yes! You leave that where it is Adams! Real TV remember? We have a right to see your stuffups too!" Another man shouted.

"They don't need you handling their safety, you jackass!" A woman yelled. "They done just bloody fine up to now."

"Get Security to this studio." Adams whispered down his communicator, without dropping his smile.

"Sir, Mr Charlton says a car is on it's way for the Police Chief. He also asked me to stress that his phone was forced from him and that he'd never presume to take that action himself." Phyllis Delaney said calmly.

"He'll presume and take exactly what I pay him to presume and take. So the Police are away from the remote site? Tell Charton to keep running. If he doesn't, this lot will kill me."

A surprising amount of grey, miserable light filtered through to the abysmal cellars but the limited view from down there made it impossible to tell where it was coming from. The cellars were in a worse state than the rest of the prison and obviously hadn't been used or maintained much even when the place was open. Rowan and Jason kept to the middle of the corridors as much as they could to make full use of the light through the collapsed ceilings.

"I think that's the original office." Rowan said, looking up. "Can you see the doors? You're a bit taller than I am."

"Me and everyone else, Frodo." Jason smirked. "No I can't see any walls at all but that smashed up desk could be the same one." The shattered piece of furniture was strewn across the corridor. "So the cellars should come to an end not far along there, unless they extend further than the building itself." Jason edged carefully along into the shadows with his arms outstretched in front of himself. Rowan could hear him tossing bits of rubble, presumably to confirm where the wall was. "Yep. Dead end. I'm coming back."

"So we need to go back up." Rowan stated the obvious.

"I can't, Rowan." Jason appeared, limping quite badly. He lowered himself painfully to the floor against a pile of plasterboard. "I need to rest the weight off this knee for a while."

"I doubt you could use that hand either." Rowan examined Jason's bleeding hand. "I think your thumb's broken, but it's also badly cut too, so is your head. You need stitches."

"Don't suppose you have any?" Jason winced and smiled at the same time. Rowan shook her head and sat down next to him, moving her shoulder awkwardly. "You still think the police are in on all this? The woman you beat up had to get my picture from someone."

"I don't know what to think." Rowan said wearily. "They were confident enough to hijack a cop van so stealing the picture from the Station wouldn't be a complete impossibility. I don't know."

I don't understand why no one's missed you." Jason said. "My lot think I'm in police custody. I know you said you had no family, but surely someone's noticed you aren't there. How much of the van journey do you think was filmed?"

"Not much. None after I was put in the back. I needed to be at the computer to continue it. Someone's bound to have got someone out looking. We vanished into thin air on camera. Maybe your mum and sister will realise that it wasn't part of the police plan?" Rowan said hopefully.

"I hope so." Jason sighed. "To be honest, if I was sitting at home watching all that, I'd take it all with a pinch of salt. Things like this just don't happen, Rowan."

"Well I'm bloody sure the TV company will know. They wrote my bloody schedule. I can just imagine Brian Charlton now, simpering and bitching because I didn't get the Show done. He'll be straight up Patrick Adams' arse and he was looking for an excuse to fire me anyway." Rowan shrugged. "Ah sod them. I fancy a career change anyway. I'll come and work with you." She smiled.

"You know, I might hold you to that. There's only four of us work there, including the gaffer. He was hoping to expand and take on a couple of apprentices but it was the official paperwork side that was putting him off. We need an office and you fit the bill perfectly." Jason nodded. "Besides, if you swan off back to Real TV I'll probably never see you again." He shrugged. "Let's face it, we live completely different lives out there. Normally, we'd never had reason to even see each other."

"True." Rowan nodded. "Real TV eh." She sighed heavily. "I think I lost touch with real people long ago because of it. You know how long it is since I went down the pub? Just a night out with a pint and a game of darts type thing? Four years. Four years and that was only by accident. I got stranded for a day after a meeting."

"Well that's the first entry in the calendar then! Piss up in the Collier's Arms." Jason laughed. "Would you go if I'd asked you normally?"

"Would you have noticed me to ask me normally?"

"Touche. See? There's a positive side to everything, even this shite!" Jason stated. "I still want my date in the Collier's, even if I get banged up."

"Oh I don't mind waiting." Rowan smiled. "I have a lot of apologising to do to your family for a start."

"No you don't. You're an employee, Rowan. You don't pull the strings."

Adams watched the broadcast from on stage. He didn't dare leave it for his routine makeover in case the audience stampeded.

"Go on, you worthless riff-raff." He snarled quietly. He needed an audience lifter and he needed one urgently. "You'll never see her again, you stupid moron. Get on with it." He turned to check the mood of the crowd. The switchboard and computers were still jam-packed but he could only attend to one thing at a time and the live audience was the most immediate. The cheers and aww's the erupted from the studio almost made Adams collapse in sheer relief. He turned back to the screen to

see Jenkinson and Rowan and the kiss of the century. "Thank shit for that." He stood up. "Now *that's* a finale that's even amazed me." Adams addressed the audience. "It puts us to shame, actually. Every one of us has despaired and got depressed about our lives in today's fast paced society. Our complicated and hectic lifestyles often mean we forget the beautiful things that belong to us. This is Real TV and that is real." He pointed to the screen. "If it's there, which it is in all of us, it *will* happen."

"Hell are you still at it?" A woman heaved. "Shut your face will you? Jesus!"

"Finale he says." One man turned round and laughed with the man sitting next to him. "Not on your life, pal. We want to see them down the Collier's. We want to see them help run that electrician's business." The studio filled with murmurs of agreement. "We want to see them out of there by themselves and sitting having a cuppa with his mum and sister. You know why? Because that's real, mate, and real means they do it themselves and not because you 'let' them." The man actually got a standing ovation for that! "Er ... well I know it's real and all, but come on!" Adams turned back to the screen to see things getting rather steamy in the cellar and it wasn't the boiler.

"You slut, Hall." Adams grumbled. "OK switch to roving shots Brian, for frig's sake. You bloody pervert."

"Sir I can't get Brian." Phyllis told him. "Either the signal's dropped or that horrible man still has his phone."

"For shit's sake! We're Real TV not the bloody porno channel!" Adams snapped.

"Whoa! Go on my son!" Someone roared crudely and the audience agreed wholeheartedly. Adams glanced at the screen as was relieved to see a reasonable amount of decency on it, that was to say, plenty of clothing and half the ceiling. It was still as clear as day what was going on though.

Brian ran back into the caravan, fastening his zip and promising himself no more coffee for a few days. A round of applause, cheers and whistles greeted him from the equipment as he resumed his seat.

"Oh christ!" He squeaked. "Shit, shit, shit! Oh my God." He covered his eyes with his hand and peeped through his fingers as Jason moved sideways and propped himself up on his elbow. Rowan appeared next and sat cross-legged against the plasterboards. Even though Brian had missed *it*, it was glaringly obvious what *it* had been!

"You OK?" Jason wiped a grimy patch on Rowan's cheek and made it worse. Rowan smiled and nodded. "Um ... well that was good eh?" He grinned and Rowan started to laugh. "Pair of bloody weirdos we are! It's hardly romantic here is it?" He rolled his eyes.

"Well it wasn't at first. It's not too bad now." Rowan moved her legs so Jason could rest his head on them. "We could pile some of this rubble up as a step once we've recovered a bit."

"Recover from that? Never." Jason sniggered. "Yes. Just let me ease this bloody knee up a bit. It's aching like hell. Do you think they're still up there?"

"They haven't been to check if we're alive or not." Rowan answered. "So they either think we're not, or the damage up there is stopping them."

"Hopefully an outer wall's collapsed. At least we won't have some arse locking and opening doors all over the bloody place." Jason rubbed his knee. "Swollen like a balloon." He grimaced.

"Try and rest. We'll only end up hurting ourselves if we start dragging rocks about when we're injured and tired." Rowan shuffled down to lay on the rubble strewn floor.

Maurine Jenkinson and her daughter, Linda, held hands and stared at the TV. Tears had come, dried, returned and dried again. Robin Hutchinson, Jason's solicitor, and now the family solicitor too, was sitting next to them in Maurine's tiny, cluttered, sitting room and had long since stopped making notes.

"Our Jason will be the talk of the Post Office." Maurine said in a daze. "Having it off in front of the whole world. Good lad." She added, winking at her daughter.

"Well he can have it off wherever he likes once he's out of there." Robin commented. "There isn't a Court in the land would sentence him to jail after all that."

"What about all that lot who set him up? Set her up too. Poor woman." Linda said shortly. "That creep on there needs locked up in Slateskill for the rest of his life." She referred to Patrick Adams.

"I think Mr. Adams is going to have his hands very full indeed, him and a few others."

Conrad Michaels had his arm round his wife as he bellowed to Naylor and Thursby's representative down the phone.

"I do not care!" The ex-forces man roared. "I know what a Police stamped item looks like! I do not care who handed what to whom. Do you understand me? That picture was the responsibility of that police station and I want the Chief Superintendent's arse hammered to the wall for it! That young man never stopped respecting my daughter, and continued respecting her memory after her death. You even look in his direction for answers to any part of this and I'll nail your arse to the wall too. Do I make myself clear?"

Thomas Robeson senior fought back the tears as he spoke to Lilan Hornseby, his solicitor.

"Shoplifting." He wiped his eyes. "Poor old bugger was seventy three and as barmy as a coot. He should never have been sent there, Miss Hornseby. Back then, there wasn't all this appeals stuff and different places for different people. You got done, you went to Slateskill. They told me his heart gave out. I still have the letter upstairs, all dated and everything. They told me he was to be cremated and that we could hold a memorial service for him. Me, my late missus and my three lads all went there, Miss Hornseby! Those bastards let us sit there grieving over a pile of bloody stones and a few weeds that they called a memorial garden. All the time, my dad was in a bloody box in the cellar. I was told his Death Certificate was accidentally destroyed in a fire, not long before the place closed. I should have been the first one to pray for him, not two kids who found him by accident. Mistakes is mistakes, Miss Hornseby and the system makes them too but my dad, and those other poor bastards shouldn't have been left there like that and I shouldn't have to have found out about it like that."

"You're damned right you shouldn't." Lilian nodded. "The Board of Prison Services is in a lot of trouble here, as is that imbecile on that TV for incompetent negligence."

The entire police shift was sitting in the area behind the front desk watching an old portable TV.

"Hey! Look here!" Officer Terrorist Telford laughed. "Come on lads, let's here it for our own celebrities!" The police officers all whistled and cheered as Stewart, Alan, the Chief, and Terry

walked into the station. Derek stood up smiling.

"Well you had me." He laughed. "I knew you were filming Jenkinson in transit but that is amazing!" He pointed at the TV. "Come on, Chief, that has to be staged. How does Jenkinson really know Rowan Hall?"

"He doesn't." Alan snapped. "Why are you here?" He growled at Telford.

"Because I was invited! Hey don't get pissy with me, mate. I joined in when I was asked, that's all." He nodded towards the Chief who grimaced.

"So come on! How does a rat-arse like Jenkinson know Rowan Hall?"

"He doesn't! Are you deaf?" Stewart shouted. "Get that shit turned off and ..."

"He doesn't? You could have fooled me, Stewart." Derek laughed. "They've just finished getting it on in front of the whole nation."

"What?" Stewart elbowed his way to the TV. Rowan was curled up against Jenkinson's chest, both in a very fitful and uneasy sleep. "Are you going to do something?" He said through clenched teeth to the Super.

"Oh get out of it Stewart." Derek laughed. "Made our night, that did."

"What did? Perving over two young people who think they're completely alone in there?" Alan snapped again. "Jenkinson's the same age as your son isn't he? That sort of thing float your boat does it?"

"Back off Alan." Derek pointed at his colleague. "It's TV! That was uncalled for."

"Enough!" The Super barked. "Stewart, Alan, Derek, you're with me. You too Terry, we may need you out at Slateskill. McKie, take Morrison and Heron and call in Squad Blue. It's an emergency so none of the usual 'I'll swap shifts' shite off them. Get down to that studio. Telford, contact the next district and tell them to get their arses round to those TV offices. Fowler, take two female officers and get round to Jenkinson's house and you do the same for the Michaels family, Part. Well need shift two out on overtime, so sort it Carter. Move!"

Chapter 7

It was a slow and painful process to pile as much broken furniture and rubble as was possible into the middle of the corridor, under the hole in the ceiling. Rowan was the least injured so she scampered up to the next floor alone to find more stable furniture to lower to Jason. Obviously he was much heavier and much impaired with his twisted knee and broken thumb. She skirted round the collapsed floor and ran into a side room that she remembered Jason using as a toilet when they were first brought here. It was a narrow tiled room with broken and mould-covered pipes hanging out of the wall but there was also three plastic chairs against the far wall. Maybe just one of them would be enough for Jason to reach the second floor comfortably. Rowan lifted one of the chairs and was blasted forcefully against the side wall by a jet of freezing cold water that forced her breathing to stop completely. She crawled out of the jet's path and lay coughing and wheezing on the filthy floor. Her chair had been knocked upwards and had landed more or less in its original place, which was on the far side of the ice-cold water. Rowan wriggled forward on her belly and stretched her arm under the blast. A second full forced jet almost ruptured her stomach as it exploded directly beneath her, sending her hurtling upwards for around six feet before she tumbled sideways and landed heavily on the floor. She curled up on her side, clutching her agonised abdomen and yet another jet sent her crashing backwards into the far wall.

"Oi! Hey Adams! Stop that shit!" One in the audience shouted. "We've done all that crap, it's old. Leave her alone!"

"Yes you sadist! She's only tiny for shit's sake! You're going to break bones, you idiot!"

"What the hell is going on?" Patrick Adams growled into his communicator.

"Genuine burst pipes, sir." Phyllis informed him. "Absolutely and definitely not by our design."

"Christ." Adams seethed. "And that was supposed to be checked out months ago? I'll deal with that later." He stood up and adopted his false smile. "Water, just water, and it's not as forceful as it looks, I promise you." He glanced at the screen to see Rowan crawling towards the door. "Standard effects used in the film industry. It's mostly vapour."

"Cobblers! It knocked her flying!" A middle aged man was on his feet. "You proved your point, OK? She's a tough lady. Turn that ... shit!"

Adams spun round and wished he hadn't. The weight of the water, and the sudden pressure activity caused the floor to drop visibly, and suddenly. Rowan only had time to scream the first half of Jason's name before she dropped out on sight completely.

Jason heard the hiss of water, and the rumbling of old pipes and he tried frantically to scramble up the mound of rubble.

"Rowan! Rowan get back here! Something else is going to collapse! Rowan!" He yelled. "Row ... ouch!" His knee gave way sending him cascading painfully downwards to the floor. "Balls!" He clutched his knee with his damaged hand which caused him to swear and shout even more. He

staggered to his feet and tried again only to be thrown off his feet completely by what felt like a mini earthquake. "Rowan! Shit. Rowan!" He roared. Jason heard a rattling noise and spun round as fast as he could. More pipes. The place was collapsing rapidly. He frowned and listened a bit closer. It wasn't a rattle he could hear, but a soft tapping coming from the side wall. "Rowan?" He limped over to the cold grey wall. "Rowan! Is that you?" The tapping had stopped. "Rowan tap again Princess, just once more." Jason shouted and a feebly, tinny, rap sounded from behind the wall. "Hang in there, Princess." He stumbled his way to the pile of debris and dug through it with his unhurt hand until he found a metal support bar of the type used over door frames. He jabbed with all his strength at the flaky wall, hoping to hit a cavity just to confirm that it wasn't solid stone. "Rowan! Rowan, tap again Sweetheart. Can you hear me banging like a noisy bugger? Tap again Rowan." One single tap. Jason hacked and hacked at the wall and the surface began to crumble away. "Come on you bitch." He snarled, cleaving away a sizeable chunk. He heard a soft sob and threw down his bar. He'd made a two inch hole in the wall and Rowan was on the other side of it. "Rowan! Rowan are you hurt?"

"I can't breath, Jason." Rowan gasped. "I'm trapped by my legs in a bubble of rocks. there's a water pipe in here. If it's bursts, I'll drown!"

"Calm down. Shh, calm down." Jason leant against the wall and felt close to collapsing. "You can breath, Princess. See? Look towards my voice and you'll see a hole. See it?" Jason slid down the wall in relief as three of Rowan's fingers poked through the hole. He held them in his hand and heard Rowan's terrified sobs again. "I'm going to dig a bit more soon Rowan. I'll have you out of there soon."

"Don't leave me." Rowan cried.

"No chance." Jason smiled at the wall as though it wasn't there at all, still holding Rowan's fingers.

"No one's coming for us Jason. No one knows where we are and the place is collapsing and now I can't move. I'm going to die here."

"Hey don't you talk like that." Jason let tears of sheer terror, stress and exhaustion stream down his face. Rowan had just voiced exactly what he was thinking. "I'm right here with you, Rowan. I'm not going anywhere."

"You'll miss you trial." Rowan said irrationally and Jason smiled.

"I know. I'd have taken my chances with the crusty magistrates if I'd known all this eh?"

"You selfish man! I could have ended up here with anyone of you'd done that!" Rowan said weakly. "I'm tired, so bloody tired and cold."

"No falling asleep on me woman." Jason was more alarmed that he let on to Rowan. "Are you listening to me? I'll lose face. Rowan? Rowan! Listen Rowan, listen to me. My mum! Yes. What about my mum and Linda? You want to meet them, right?"

"Yes, more than anything." Rowan answered.

"Good stuff! Hey we'll wheel Maurine down the Collier's in her batmobile and get her snotted eh? She knows The Wild Rover all the way through." Jason clutched Rowan's fingers and fought with more tears when he heard Rowan's laboured breathing that was meant to be laughter. "Oo! I know. We'll get Linda to invite her ex. I am telling you, there is no bigger stiff in the whole universe! He's

ideal fodder for taking the piss out of. Linda reckoned all he ever smelled of was hair gel and fabric conditioner."

"I have no friends to introduce you to." Rowan whispered.

"What about him with the niece who had the accident?"

"Brian? Yes I suppose he was at one time. I don't know who changed, or how. Him? Me? Probably both. I think the office had ideas planned for me and Brian, you know. I can't even remember if I ever saw him like that. If I did, it was long since swallowed up by professionalism. Yes, I'll introduce you to Brian. Underneath all the fawning that everyone does, Brian's a good man."

"Rowan I need to go take a leak." Jason lied. He could hear a scraping noise from the floor above and he fully intended to beat the cause of it to a pulp with his metal lintel. "Rowan? You hear?"

"Yes." Rowan whispered. "Don't leave me."

"I won't, Princess, I won't. OK I'll let go of your fingers for a few minutes. I've only got one hand remember and I need it to hold..."

"Yes OK Jason. I get the picture." Rowan muttered, let going of Jason's hand. Jason crept along the wall under the overhang of the ceiling hole, clutching the rusted metal rod. First he saw flashlight beams, then he saw big black boots. Official type boots. Boots he'd last seen like that on an arsehole poking a gun in his face. Jason tried to control his rage as the boots, and the legs, began slowly descending into the cellar floor a mere ten feet from him. As soon as sole hit rubble, Jason swung the bar up and over his tormentor's head, stifling an agonised yell as he caught the other end with his damaged hand.

"Right you fucker!" He snarled softly, walking back into the shadows with the struggling man. "What's behind that wall and how can I get there?" The man grabbed at the bar and kicked his feet uselessly. "Trust me pal, I'll cave your frigging head in and not think twice about it. My girl is suffocating behind there. Can I get to it from the other side?" The man nodded furiously, then delved into his pocket. Jason went to knee him in the back and his injured leg gave way, sending them both sprawling to the ground. Injury or not, Jason still got to his feet quicker than the half throttled man.

"Jenkinson." He wheezed. "It's Terry. Jesus. Terry! I was in the van with you." Terry coughed and spluttered and tugged at his shirt collar.

"The techie? The techie! Thank shit for that! Rowan's dying, Terry. She's behind that wall trapped in rubble. We have ..."

"It's OK, mate. I know where Rowan is, so do the coppers." Terry propped himself up against the wall and Jason lunged back to Rowan's wall.

"Rowan! Rowan the police are here! They've come for us. Rowan? Rowan can you hear me?" He listened and could hear distant voices and falling bricks. They were digging through the rubble but not fast enough. "Rowan! Rowan wake up, please!" Jason yelled hysterically. "Help me up through there." He spun round to face Terry. "What's that?" Terry has some sort of wires in his hand and Jason saw a tiny, marble sized lens at the end of one of them. "You have got to be shitting me?" He blinked in disbelief. "You're filming me? I'll fucking kill you!"

"No!" Terry flinched. "This isn't mine, Jason, for shite's sake! It's a bevelled embedding cam."

"I couldn't give a shit what it is. Why is it in your hand?" Jason snarled.

"Because I've just taken it out of that ceiling." Terry flinched again, just in case. "Please, Jason, it had absolutely nothing to do with me, Rowan, or those coppers, I swear on my life. I'll explain the whole warped shit up thing from start to finish, I promise you. I've been dismantling these as I've come across them here and I dare say I'll be as unemployed as Rowan is by now."

"No worries, the electrics company needs a techie too. Come on."

Stewart, Alan, Derek, two more officers called Cauley and Andrews, and even the Chief were in shirtsleeves, levering stone and rubble from the top of the mountain that used to be the wash room floor. Reinforcement emergency services were wailing into the area and manpower from the volunteer specials was also on it's way.

"Jesus wept." Stewart cursed. "No one could survive this. There's too much of it."

"Stewart! Help me prise this beam out of the way." Alan shouted. "The rubble's falling under it, Stewart, there's a gap." The two officers strained at the beam with metal girders and it began to shift. The Super scrambled over and knelt down by the girder.

"No chance, sir. You're bigger than I am." Cauley nodded. "And I'll not fit through there either."

"I will." Jason came limping over with Terry. "Yes I'm fine, yes I'm pissed off with absolutely everyone and yes I know the score. Piss off out of my face." He elbowed the Chief Superintendent out of the way as Stewart and Alan strained to keep the girder raised.

"Don't be a tool, Jenkinson." Stewart puffed. "You're bigger than everybugger, you knobhead. OK Alan lower it."

"Lower it? She's suffocating you dick!" Jason snapped. "Don't block the bloody hole! Here, I'll see if I can lift it with you."

"Not with those injuries." Terry dropped to his backside and wriggled quite easily into the gap.

"Anyone calls him a geeky nerd ever again and I'll batter them." Jason said seriously.

"Well actually that was you, Jenkinson." Alan panted.

"Don't think so." Jason said stubbornly.

"She's breathing." Terry shouted through the gap. "She's unconscious and her legs are trapped under loose stones. I'm clearing them off her now!"

"Good job Tez!" Jason shouted back. "Quick as you can, mate. Shit hurry up." He added rubbing his eyes.

"Ambulances are on their way, Jenkinson." The Super told Jason.

"If I wasn't so worried about her, I'd make sure you needed it more than me." Jason said flatly.

"Don't say a thing. Just ... just don't. OK? Piss off."

"I'm such a frigging wreckling!" Terry wailed from within the pile of rubble. "She's free, but I can't lift ... shit! No! Ouch! No! It's ..."

"You shit!" Rowan screeched and Jason started to laugh in overwhelming relief. "You slimy asshole! I'll tear your frigging innards out!"

"Jenkinson! Do something!" Alan strained under the weight of the girder.

"Oi! Frodo! Get off him, you bloody thug." Jason shouted.

"Huh?"

"It's me! You're mental!"

"Who's me?"

"I'll tell you if you put that sodding brick down!"

"Terry! Terry!" Rowan sobbed. "Jason's through there Terry, he's injured."

"So who's this out here calling you Frodo? Get out here woman." Jason shouted. Rowan stood all over poor Terry as she scrambled through the gap.

Slateskill Wing Four was soon dazzled by multicoloured flashing lights. Rowan and Jason sat on the floor against a wall in complete exhaustion. They'd both now heard exactly what had happened to them and Rowan was too stunned to be angry, or even to react at all. She stared at the box of embedded cams on the floor at Terry's feet and just blinked.

"Arseholes." Terry sighed. "Unbelievable. It must have taken months to rig this place up."

"The months I was kept out of the way flogging Prison Life, yes." Rowan nodded and looked at Jason. "Jason those ceiling cameras will have been running constantly. All the time. Even down there in the cellar."

"I know." Jason exhaled loudly. "Terry told me. Apparently it was all quite discrete, artistic, even." He nodded. "So the entire country knows I have a mole on my arse?"

"Well actually they didn't. The ceiling was in the way." Terry knelt down in front of the couple. "However, if you look just to the left of the fourth ceiling panel on the fourth row from the door, you'll discover that they do now. It has to be the last cam Rowan and it's still active."

"Oh it is, is it?" Jason growled. "Does that mean what I think it means?" He asked Rowan.

"Adams is still broadcasting." Rowan said in complete disbelief.

"Come on kids, into the ambulance." Stewart wandered over.

"You coming too, Stewart?" Jason asked, accepting help to get to his feet. "I think you should, you know. I wouldn't want any earwiggling, scum-sucking, dickless, middle aged egomaniacs anywhere to exploit a technicality such as I'm still on remand and still in transit. Would you?" He looked at Stewart.

"You're taking the piss! This is going out? Still?" Stewart blurted. Jason grabbed Rowan's hand and

turned round smiling.

"Was it worth it Adams? It was for me. Come on Rowan."

----- End.