

Smokescreen

It is a man's own mind, not his enemy or foe, that lures him to evil ways
Buddha

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Chapter One

Late spring, Rory Calderwood was seated on one of the benches overlooking the river, sipping from his bottle of water. On the opposite bank, he could see the cricket ground, famous for its iconic backdrop of the cathedral. It was a warm day but with a threat of rain, of which there had been plenty in recent weeks.

Everywhere looked green, the riverside trees dipping branches into the water as if testing the temperature; the fields, speckled with the yellow of dandelions and buttercups. He watched an angler land a three-inch Dace and put it in the keep-net, half-submerged in the high-running, fast-flowing Severn. Another twelve of those and he could have sardines on toast, Rory thought, smiling to himself.

He hadn't had much to smile about in the past eight months since he left the rig. Delta Bravo, the North Sea Oil and Gas platform, had been his life for the best part of twelve years. He allowed himself the occasional retrospection, not that he had much choice; his thoughts would visit him like an unwelcome guest. This time last year, he had a well-paid job, a nice house in a desirable suburb of Aberdeen, a wife and two children; the statistical aspirational norm for those who would count their life as a success.

But now, so different. The incident that, in the end, had cost him his job and almost his life, still haunted him. It had destroyed his relationship with Kim, who had tried to nurse him back to health when his demons were at their height. He'd been living with her after leaving the hospital. She'd provided the emotional support he needed until, unable to cope with his mood swings and moroseness, she returned to London. He couldn't blame her; he had difficulty living with himself and couldn't expect anyone else to share his burden.

By that time, his marriage to Janie was already over. He regretted that; she and their two boys had been his life. The strains of fortnightly separation had been too much for her and she'd set up home with her tennis instructor, Geoff. Rory's sons, Matt and Jason, appeared to have settled in too well to their new domestic environment. He might just as well be dead as far as they were concerned, he thought in his darkest moments.

The incident on the rig had rekindled memories of his time as an SAS officer. He still could not shake the flashbacks from his army days that awoke him almost every night, haunting him, suffocating him,

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taunting him. His way of dealing with it was to push himself physically - running, gym, exercise; as if punishing himself for his own failings.

His saviour had come from an unexpected source. It was the regular discussions he'd had with the welfare officer at Petronix, his former employers. Alice Spencer, a motherly figure with the patience of a saint, was a trained psychiatrist, and somehow, she connected with him. The therapy gave him the mental strength that allowed him to come to terms with life and move on. The decision to leave the company was easy; he could never return to his old job as senior engineer stuck in the middle of the North Sea. To ease any financial pain, he received a substantial payoff which included his industrial injury claim.

After Kim had left, he moved into a small flat in Aberdeen but there were too many memories there. So, he made another decision and substituted the wild crags of The Highlands for the gentler hills of Worcestershire.

This was his home territory, having been born and raised the other side of the Malvern Hills in nearby Herefordshire. His only living relative, his sister Anna, had lived in Worcester since leaving university. Unable to think of a better alternative, he called her out of the blue, asking if he could stay with her while he sorted himself out. He'd had little contact with her for some time; Christmas and birthday cards when he, or more likely Janie, had remembered. Although it had been an upheaval, Anna had welcomed him like a prodigal son. "For as long as you need," she said, but without too much conviction.

Janie had taken most of the furnishings from the house, so it was just his clothes, record collection and some odd bits and pieces that made the journey in a borrowed van from his Aberdeen apartment to his sister's garage.

Rory didn't get on too well with Anna's partner, Sonia, who tolerated his presence with barely veiled hostility; he had disrupted their routine. This had gone on for two months before the inevitable, "how long do you plan on staying," conversation took place. Rory had taken the hint and found himself a small two-bedroomed cottage close to the river; no suggestion of permanency, but it would do for now.

That was over four months ago, but he felt at home in his new abode; there was a familiarity about it, born from his childhood recollections. It was a place of peace and solace which is what he needed right

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now. His bedroom window looked out across the small unmade road, more a cinder track really, which ran parallel to the Severn. It was a joy to open the curtains each morning and see the river making its way majestically downstream to the sea, almost a hundred miles away, and the rolling fields on the far bank with the Malvern Hills in the distance. Tranquillity it certainly was, and this time of year, at its best.

On moving in, he'd replaced some of the furniture; a new bed, cooker, washing machine and TV; although he was not one to sit still for any length of time. He converted the second bedroom into an office, which he would need to pursue his idea of setting up as a freelance security consultant. Apart from engineering, it was what he knew best. After leaving the Regiment, he had spent three years working for an agency in London before joining Petronix. As a result, he had an extensive knowledge of the shady world of security, particularly close protection, or body-guarding as it used to be called. He'd even run training courses on surveillance techniques and internal fraud. His years in the Regiment had given him a wide knowledge of the more extreme forms of subterfuge.

It was the last week in May 2007, he was beginning to think more positively about the future. He needed to be doing something; his money wouldn't last forever even though he had his army pension to cushion him. He had monthly maintenance payments for his boys to cover; dipping into his savings to pay the bills was a road to disaster. An income would be required.

His priority was to find some clients. He'd started to ring around some of his old contacts. After twelve years, most had moved on, but he would persevere; something would turn up. Rory knew Worcester was not an ideal base for a security consultant. It was not renowned as a hotbed of serious crime; 'quaint' would be an apt description, but he was happy to travel to wherever the work took him. So, with a website for 'SCI Consultants', his new business name, set up by a friend of Anna's, he was now at least in the marketplace.

He took a final sip from his bottle and dropped it in a litter-bin, then set off back to his cottage, about two miles downstream. There were a few folks about, walking dogs or cycling along the riverside path. There were also fellow joggers. He was approaching Diglis Dock where he would need to take a detour and cross over the Birmingham - Worcester Canal.

A piercing shriek rang out.

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“Help...! Help...!”

Rory ran towards the caller, a young woman frantically waving on the river bank.

“Help me, please...!” she pleaded desperately. “My little boy... he’s fallen in the water,” and she pointed to a small object gently bobbing up and down, being carried out to the middle of the river. “I can’t swim.”

Rory slid down the bank and into the river feet first. His training taught him never to shallow dive into unknown water; all kinds of hidden objects awaited the unwary. His running Nikes squelched on the muddy bottom making it difficult to move but within a couple of paces, the water was up to his chest. He pushed off swimming hard towards the boy. The cold hit him like a stone, causing him to inhale instinctively. He ignored it and quickened his pace. It was about thirty feet to the centre of the river and the current increased dramatically. Rory was being carried downstream faster and faster, but he was closing in on the lad. It was a race; the canal joining on the left created strange currents. Then there was the weir, two-hundred yards downstream. He needed to catch the boy before he reached that, or the chances of survival would be minimal.

A final effort and he managed to grab the boy’s anorak and hold on. The air in his clothing had kept him afloat but it was only a matter of time before the water would be absorbed and the additional weight would drag the lad under.

Rory pulled the boy to him and held his head.

“Hold on son, I’ve got you.”

There was no sound; the boy was either unconscious or paralysed with fear.

Now came the difficult part. There would be no boats on the river this close to the weir. There was no alternative but to head back against the current and hope he reached the bank before his strength gave out. This is where his training and fitness would pay off. Slowly but surely, he made progress against the strong current. There was a boat moored about fifty yards away, one of many parked along the bank further upstream; some had become permanent homes for the owners.

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Someone was on deck and, as Rory got closer, he saw a lifeline being thrown. It landed short and the line was reeled in for a second attempt. This time the line reached Rory. The circular lifebelt landed in the water two feet away. Rory made a grab and took the strain as the boatman pulled. It took less than a minute to get Rory alongside the boat. It was as though time had stood still for the boy's mother who was sobbing hysterically on the riverbank as she watched the drama unfold. A small crowd had now gathered, alerted by the commotion. They watched as Rory passed the boy to the man on the back of the boat, and then made his way to the bank. He felt the clinging mud under his feet once again and managed to haul himself up the steep bank. He stood momentarily at the top, hands on knees, to regain his breath.

"I've called an ambulance," said one bystander.

Rory was becoming the centre of attention. "Are you ok?" asked an elderly gentleman with a cross-bred poodle. "Well done, sir," said another, dressed in the uniform of the local rowing club; blazer, cap and short trousers.

Rory stood up straight, water dripping from his clothes and hair, brown silt discolouring the bottom of his jogging bottoms.

"Where's the boy?" he said to nobody in particular.

"On the boat... his mother's with him," was the reply.

Rory made his way over the short gangplank to the open area at the stern where the owner was giving CPR. The boy's mother was standing next to him sobbing. "Save him, please save him, don't let him die," she cried.

"Here, let me have a go," said Rory, turning the lad on his stomach with his head to one side and pressing hard on his back. It was cramped; the small floor area was surrounded by seats and with three people there was not much room to work. Rory continued pushing on the boy's back. There was a cough and a splutter as water was expelled from the lad's lungs.

"What's his name?" asked Rory.

"Kyle," said the frantic woman.

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“Hello, Kyle, you’re safe. My name’s Rory, you’re ok... your Mum’s here.”

The boy slowly opened his eyes. “Mummy?”

He heard an ambulance, then paramedics rushing to the boat and across the short wooden gangway. Rory was still reviving the boy; his mother frantic with worry. The first paramedic took over and placed an oxygen mask over the boy’s face. The boatman and Rory moved back into the boat to give the paramedic room. The mother was on her knees cradling her son’s head.

“Just breathe normally for me... How old is he?” asked one of the paramedics.

“Nearly three,” replied the boy’s mother.

Having stabilised him, they lifted young Kyle onto a stretcher and the small party walked back onto the river bank towards the waiting ambulance.

“That was a great job you did there,” said the boatman.

“Thanks for the line, I couldn’t have held on much longer, the current’s really strong,” replied Rory.

A spontaneous round of applause broke out as Rory reached the ambulance where the small group of onlookers had congregated, keen to absorb every ounce of drama. Several had their phone cameras out recording the scene. The other paramedic approached Rory with what looked like a giant Bacofoil blanket and wrapped it around him.

“Hi, I’m Stacey, you need to be checked out.”

“It’s ok, I’m fine,” said Rory. “Just need to get out of these wet things. I only live over there,” he added, pointing to a group of buildings on the other side of the dock.

“If you’re sure,” replied Stacey.

She looked into his eyes for any adverse signs. She saw none. “Ok, look, if you feel nauseous or drowsy in the next few hours, call an ambulance. You could be in shock.”

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“Thank you,” said the mother to Rory as the paramedic closed the ambulance door and it sped away, sirens blaring.

“Can I get you a drink?” said the boatman from behind Rory. “I can let you have a change of clothes as well.”

Rory didn’t want any fuss but to avoid the continued attention of the bystanders, he accepted the invitation.

“Yeah, ok, thanks,” replied Rory and the boatman led him back onto the deck and down a couple of steps into the boat. The audience started to disperse, chatting animatedly, comparing notes, swapping stories, recounting events. “Did you see...?” “I couldn’t have done that...”

It was a cabin cruiser, slightly bigger than many along the river bank with a seating area at the back where Kyle’s recovery had been executed. Folding doors separated the living quarters from the small observation area. Rory was not very familiar with leisure-boats but could see it was well looked after and comfortable for the keen enthusiast.

“Nice boat,” said Rory.

“Thanks,” said the owner. “Here, dry yourself off.”

He handed Rory a bath towel.

“Name’s Alistair... Alistair Bailey.”

“Thanks... Rory... Rory Calderwood.” They shook hands.

The boatman opened a cupboard and rummaged around. “Ah yes, here we are,” he said as he pulled out a tracksuit.

“Here put this on. I’ll leave you in peace,” and he went back on deck, pulling shut the doors, providing Rory with some privacy.

After a few minutes, Rory appeared. “Thanks for the loan. I can drop it back to you in the morning.”

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“No rush,” said Alistair. “Here, I’ve poured you a beer. Bet you could do with one after what you’ve been through,” and he handed Rory a long glass of lager.

“Cheers,” said Rory taking a sip, standing in his borrowed tracksuit and carrying his now ruined trainers in one hand and his soaking jogging apparel over his arm. “Lucky I left my iPod at home. Can’t get on with it when I’m jogging.”

“So, you live around here?” said Alistair. A statement framed as a question.

“Yes, just across the dock... five minutes,” replied Rory.

“Lucky you were about, that lad would’ve drowned. I was below deck and heard the commotion. Came up to see what the noise was all about. That’s when I saw you.”

“Pleased you did, that current is really strong,” replied Rory.

“Yeah, that’s the weir, very dangerous, and the river’s running on the high side with all this rain we’ve been having. I tell you this, it’s not easy for boats steering down the channel around it, let alone anyone swimming. I don’t think I’d have tried it.”

“Just instinct,” said Rory and he took another sip of his beer. “So, do you live on here?”

“Well, it’s a permanent berth. I use it as a base during the summer; weekends mainly, the occasional bank holiday and days like today, when I just need to escape the office for a while. You were lucky; I wouldn’t normally be here on a Thursday.”

“Thank goodness you were,” said Rory.

“Yeah, that’s for sure... No, boating’s just a hobby. I live in Birmingham... well, on the outskirts, actually... I’ve got a small manufacturing business, castings and that sort of stuff.”

“Doing ok?”

“Yeah, can’t complain. Got a full order book which is more than can be said for some of our competitors,” replied Alistair.

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Rory was starting to relax, and he viewed his host. He looked the part in his blue and white striped top, navy blue shorts and deck shoes. He was probably in his mid to late fifties with greying hair, long at the back, thinning at the front; fit-looking with a slight tan, evidencing time in the sun. Rory could detect a West Midlands' twang which gave credence to his origins.

“What do you do?” asked Alistair. “When you're not saving people.”.

“I'm in security,” replied Rory.

“Security?”

“Yes,” replied Rory without elaborating

“What sort of security, specifically?” asked Alistair

“Close protection, internal fraud prevention, investigation, that kind of thing,” replied Rory.

“What, on a consultancy basis?”

“Yes,” said Rory.

“Now that's very interesting,” said Alistair, looking at Rory with a serious expression. There was a pause. “Look, I may have some work for you if you're interested. But now's not the time to talk. Here...” He handed Rory a business card. “Ring me on my mobile tomorrow and we can have a longer chat. You'll be wanting to get back and shower.”

Rory was trying to sum up the man. There was an earnestness about him, Rory detected; clearly successful, probably self-made, someone in control.

“Thanks, yeah, I will, and thanks for the drink, and the clothes; I'll get them back to you.”

“There's no rush,” said the boatman.

Rory put the card in the tracksuit pocket, headed back down the gangway and walked on towards his cottage. The audience had gone; life had returned to normal.

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Rory crossed the bridge over the canal dock and along the towpath, a couple of hundred yards to his front door. It was a large converted dwelling, dating back to the turn of the last century, tastefully modernised into three separate cottages; his was at the end. He took his key from his tracksuit pocket and opened the door into a small lounge. He walked through into the kitchen and put his jogging bottoms and T-shirt into the washing machine; his trainers went into the sink to soak. He looked at the clock; it was five o'clock; normally he would be thinking about cooking around this time, but he didn't feel hungry. He went to the fridge and took out a bottle of milk and poured a small quantity into the bottom of a mug along with a teabag. He switched on the electric kettle and waited for it to boil.

He could feel it; the adrenaline rush, then the withdrawal, like coming down from a fix. He knew the signs. It had been like this on every mission; Northern Ireland, Iraq, it was just the same. Personality profiles of SAS soldiers put them in the same category as psychopaths; except these are the good guys. He walked back to the lounge and lay on the sofa.

Within minutes, he was asleep. His mind returned to the firing line; he and his best buddy, Lennie 'The Loon' Arthur. It was so vivid, like watching a movie. The action replayed before his eyes, the barren landscape of the Iraqi desert, the jeep heading back after another successful mission. The rest of the platoon had been air-evacuated back to base; it was just the two of them, dressed in local garb. He was sitting next to Lennie, it was his turn to drive, they were twenty miles from the Saudi border and safety.

Lennie, as his nickname suggested was 'total bonkers' according to all his buddies, but great to be around; always the joker, anything for a laugh. Even driving he would take almighty risks, like cornering fast to see if he could get the jeep on two wheels without it tipping over. Occasionally, Lennie would go too far but everybody excused him. "That's just Lennie," they would say.

Rory didn't know whether he or Lennie heard it first; he couldn't remember. At the later inquest, he was unable to recall the exact sequence of events. There was just sort of a hissing sound and then everything was upside down. He must have blacked out for a few moments. He had no recollection of what had happened, nothing. He just remembered picking himself up off the desert track and seeing the jeep turned on its top, the wheels still revolving as if crazily seeking some traction to drive it forward. He got

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up and tried to run towards it, but his right leg refused to obey. He dragged himself closer and then there was an explosion as the petrol tank blew, igniting the box of ammunition on the back seat.

Rory shielded himself from the blast as bits of metal hurled through the air; a three-inch shard embedded itself in his arm. He never felt it. He moved closer to the wreck; there was little left. Lennie had been driving and could not have escaped. A roadside bomb, he thought at the time. Rory had been blown clear. Such is the luck of war, totally random. He looked at the charred remains of his buddy at the side of the road and he threw up. He was conditioned to put any emotion out of his mind, but this. He needed to get back to base. "Focus," he ordered himself. He started walking south.

The rest of the squad had landed several hours earlier. They reported Rory and Lennie as overdue which prompted a search and rescue helicopter. It was over three hours before Rory was eventually spotted and picked up, dehydrated and with a broken right ankle, the shard of metal was still embedded in his arm. The pain unimaginable, but he'd managed to block it out as he had been trained to do. He spent a week in a field-hospital recovering, but the hardest part was writing the letter to Lennie's wife, Helen. It wasn't until the inquest that he discovered it had been friendly-fire from an American F16.

Rory woke with a start, jolted by the memory, temporarily disorientated. Then he was back, compulsus, still on his sofa. These were the demons that returned most nights since the incident on the rig.

The borrowed tracksuit was damp with sweat. He got up slowly and went back into the kitchen and re-boiled the kettle to complete his tea-making. Sitting at the small table, where he would have his breakfast, he reflected on the events of the afternoon as he sipped his beverage. There was something he needed to do. Luckily, he hadn't taken his mobile phone with him on his jog and he retrieved it from one of the kitchen drawers. He looked up a number, then dialled.

"Hi, Worcester Royal...? I want to check on a patient brought in this afternoon. Kyle somebody...he fell in the river. Thank you."

Eventually, someone confirmed that the boy was recovering well; he was out of any danger. Rory felt good about that.

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The following morning, he was up at six and back on the towpath for another run, this time down river; he didn't want to face the scene of yesterday's drama. He'd not slept well; his adrenaline levels were still high from the exertion of saving the boy. It was just like returning from an op all those years ago. His trainers had dried overnight but still bore the stain from the river mud. He'd washed the tracksuit borrowed from Alistair, the boatman and, on returning from his run, picked up the business card from the kitchen worktop. He rang the mobile number.

"Hi, is that Alistair? It's Rory, from yesterday... Yes, fine thanks. I can drop the tracksuit back if you're about this morning... Yeah, sure thing, about nine-thirty...? Ok, see you then."

After managing to eat some breakfast, Rory felt better. Just before nine-thirty, he made his way over the bridge that traversed the canal, and along the riverside for his appointment with the boatman. Alistair had seen him coming and was on the stern-deck awaiting his arrival. He beckoned Rory on board.

"Rory, great to see you," he greeted him warmly. "Come on through," and they went down the steps into the cramped living quarters. Rory stopped momentarily as he could see they were not alone.

"Rory, this is Natalie, my personal assistant. Natalie, this is Rory, the man I was telling you about who saved the little boy yesterday."

She held out her hand to Rory. "Pleased to meet you, a hero I think," she said in an accent, clearly not local.

"Pleased to meet you too, but I'm no hero," he replied.

He looked at the woman, late-twenties to early thirties, black hair, high cheekbones, slim with striking blue eyes. Not English; probably Eastern European, from the Ukraine, the Baltic States or possibly Poland, he thought. She was smartly dressed, wearing a white blouse and a dark blue skirt which looked like it was part of a business suit, minus the jacket on this warm morning.

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“Natalie’s been helping tidy up some detail on a recent contract we’re in the process of negotiating, but we’ve just about finished.” Alistair turned to his assistant. “Thanks for coming over, let me know if you’ve got any questions?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, “I’ll see you back at the office...”

She picked up her briefcase from the top of the fold-down table and took her car keys from her handbag. As she was walking down the gangplank, Alistair called after her. “Just got one or two things to catch up on here... I’ll be in around lunchtime.”

She turned and acknowledged him. “Ok, see you then.”

Rory watched as she got into a white Audi TT, parked just off the bridleway where he was jogging the previous day. She started it up and roared away.

“Sorry about that,” said Alistair. “Needed a quick catch-up with Natalie. I often have meetings here. It’s good to get away from the office sometimes, helps me to think. Unfortunately, I do need to go in this afternoon... Friday’s always hectic... Here, have a seat,” he said, and ushered Rory opposite him onto the wooden bench which went around the stern of the boat; they were separated by a small table.

“Coffee?” asked Alistair.

“Yeah, cheers,” replied Rory, and Alistair moved along the boat to a small galley area and boiled a kettle.

“So how are you feeling today? No ill effects I hope,” came a shout from his host.

“Fine, no problem, thanks,” called back Rory

Rory looked around; money had been invested in the craft; it appeared to have everything one would need, a real home from home. Alistair returned with two mugs of coffee and placed them on the table then returned with a plastic carton of milk and a sugar bowl.

“Help yourself.”

Rory poured a measure of milk into the coffee.

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Alistair left again and went to the front of the boat where there were various switches and dials and a large steering wheel. He opened a cupboard to the right of the control panel and returned with a laptop.

Rory was intrigued as he watched the man open his laptop and navigate the keys. He took a sip of coffee.

“Have you worked internationally at all?” asked the boatman.

Rory considered his answer. “Depends what you mean... not security work, not directly.”

“No, I couldn’t see anything on your profile,” replied Alistair.

Rory looked at him somewhat perplexed. “What do you mean... profile?”

“Ok, cards on the table,” said the boatman. He looked up from his laptop and opened a piece of paper lying next to it, then engaged Rory with eye contact. “I’ve done a few checks...” He read from the note. “Twelve years Petronix, on one of the rigs I believe... Before that, worked for Guardian Securities in London; seven years’ army service, awarded Military Medal 1991, little information on army career which makes me think probably SAS, Special Forces. Degree in Engineering.”

Rory looked at him in disbelief, and some concern. “Hmm, you are well informed. Where did you get all that from?”

“Oh, I have my sources... It was necessary; as I said yesterday, I’m looking for someone special and I must say your bravery with that young lad yesterday put you in that category. Then, when you said you worked in security, I thought straight away you could be the guy I am looking for, which is why I did the checks.”

Rory wasn’t sure about the intrusion, but let it pass.

Alistair turned his laptop so Rory could see. It was opened at a website, ‘AB Engineering Ltd’, nothing flashy, unpretentious even, just an information store really. ‘Contact us’, ‘products’, that sort of thing.

“This is my business.”

Rory turned his gaze from the man and looked at the screen.

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“I set it up around twenty years ago. I was an engineer with GMI, but they lost a big Government contract to the French. All a bit political at the time; so, I set up on my own. The paradox is, they’re one of my major customers.”

Rory was familiar with Global Metal Industries, the Worcestershire based company specialising, among other things in rocketry and guided missile systems. They used to supply some of the kit he used in his army days.

“What sort of things do you make?” asked Rory.

“Specialist orders, bespoke, mostly Government contracts, which is why I need someone to look after security. The firm I currently use is always swapping people about. I don’t know who I’m getting from one job to the next, which is a bit of a worry. I also need someone I know I can trust. As I’m sure you know, the M.O.D. are pretty exacting in their terms and conditions when it comes to security.”

Rory was still looking at the website but had heard the reply.

“Ok, I’m interested,” said Rory. “How do you want to do this?”

“Come over to the house on Sunday. You can meet some of the team, see what we do. That’ll give me a couple of days to set things up.”

“Yeah, ok,” said Rory. “Where’s the house?”

“Near Blackwell, here’s the address and directions; I’ve written it down for you. It’s pretty easy to find,” said Alistair and he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Rory.

“Have you got a Sat-Nav?”

“No,” said Rory, “but it’s ok I’ll find it.”

“Just a minute,” he said and went back inside the boat and returned a moment later carrying an A-Z Road Map. He opened the relevant page and detailed the journey.

“Yeah, I’ll find it,” Rory repeated. “But why international?”

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“International?” said Alistair for a moment losing his thread.

“You asked if I’d worked internationally.”

“Oh... yes... I did. I’ll tell you more on Sunday,” he added.