

THE
BADVENT
CALENDAR

LES COWAN

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A DAVID HIDALGO SHORT STORY

“Go on then – open it,” David Hidalgo urged, leaning back and looking relaxed, happy and maybe a little bit smug.

Dr Gillian Lockhart held a large, brightly wrapped square package on her lap and looked unsure.

“Well, thank you very much, whatever it is, but I always thought you were obsessive about not opening anything before Christmas.”

David took a sip of a smooth Ribera Sacra *tinto* and settled even further back in his chair.

“Normally you’d be entirely right,” he agreed, “but technically it isn’t actually a Christmas present, though it is quite *Christmassy*. And secondly if you leave it till Christmas Day it will actually cease to be of any use anyway. So go ahead. Open it.”

Gillian gave a knowing smile.

“Ah,” she said. “That gives me a clue. I think I’ve got you sussed, Señor Hidalgo.” And with that she proceeded to rip off the paper. “Just as I thought. And it’s the John Lewis one too. Very nice. Thank you very much. Do I get to open the first window today?” She laid the advent calendar – for so it was – on the table, popped open the first of December window, pulled out a mini tube of hand cream and examined it.

“Lovely,” she pronounced squeezing half an inch onto the back of her hand and rubbing it in.

Sunday afternoon always put David Hidalgo in a good mood: the morning preaching over, Sunday lunch safely stowed away and a glass or two of something nice consumed. Perfect. Although they were engaged and a wedding date had been set, they weren’t yet sharing a property. Nevertheless, he had taken to spending more and more time at Gillian’s stylish Marchmont flat, certainly for Sunday lunch and often to work during the day as well. The previous day – not his favourite day of the week with a service to plan and a

sermon to finalize – he'd been trying to work in her little office room with a splitting headache, no paracetamol in any of the cupboards, and Gillian out at a chamber group Christmas carols practice. So he'd found himself queuing in Boots on Princes Street, and it was then that he spotted a new concept – for him at least. The grown-up advent calendar. A different cream or cosmetic for the lady in your life for the twenty-four days leading up to Christmas. And for guys, twenty-four different beard-grooming products. What? How is that possible? Do twenty-four different beard-grooming products even exist? This question notwithstanding, the germ of an idea had formed. And knowing Gillian's favourite shop in all the world, he had scoffed a couple of tablets and headed to John Lewis at the top of Leith Walk. About ten minutes later – he didn't believe in drawing out the agony – he had emerged back into the early December Edinburgh drizzle with a large, beautifully wrapped box about eighteen inches square and an inch thick in a waterproof plastic bag. Gillian hadn't been home by the time he got back, so he had managed to stash it under a bed without the risk of detection, ready to produce with a flourish after lunch the following day.

“Lovely,” Gillian repeated. “Now, great minds and all that...” and she whipped a box of almost the exact same proportions from behind the sofa.

“Ha!” David let out a groan. “I was hoping just for once to be a step ahead. Some chance. Well, thank you very much in return. Not to seem ungrateful, but I hope it's not twenty-four male grooming products.”

“I think I know you well enough to know that would be a waste of money. So open it!”

He did so, but it took a few seconds to click what it was.

“Hmm, interesting. I've never actually had anything like this before.”

“I know. That's why I chose it. Every day you get another mini tool, and on the last day a metal box to put them all in. It'll stop you tightening pot lids with a kitchen knife. Open the first day!”

He did so, and found that it was a mini Philips screwdriver.

“Cute,” he said. “I think I’ll maybe go and tighten a pot lid or two. And I think a pre-Christmas thank you kiss is in order.”

There weren’t any kids around to worry about, his finances were okay, and the love he’d lost in such traumatic circumstances during his 40s he had found again in his 50s. Things were good – very good indeed. No cause for complaint at all. But still, Christmas was a stressful time for David Hidalgo. The nearer the day got the more he worried that all the i’s in Christmas might not yet be properly dotted, nor all the t’s thoroughly crossed. This was of course entirely natural for a working bread-and-butter pastor with a small but growing congregation on the southside of Edinburgh. But it had also been *todo normal* while he was leading Warehouse 66 in Madrid some years earlier. So he should have had long enough to get used to it, but that didn’t seem to make it much easier. Every year he was expected to come up with some new insight or angle on the best-known story in the world, and entertain both kids and adults with an appropriate mix of profundity and humour. Sometimes he stood up there feeling like he was expected to be a cross between *Thought for the Day* and Basil Brush. “While shepherds washed their socks by night” – Ha Ha Ha Ha! Boom, Boom!

There was nothing for it but to buckle down and get on with the job. That’s why he found himself back at the desk the following morning, laptop in front of him, a clean A4 pad to one side, pens and pencils at the ready, and not a single idea in his head. Gillian had popped in, given him a peck on the cheek, and headed off to lecture in Scots Language at the University, counting the days till the end of term and becoming increasingly demob-happy with each passing day. David, on the other hand, wanted the remaining weeks to stretch out as long and pass as slowly as possible in the hope that by brain cell evolution some semblance of a good idea might arise from the primeval sludge. *Some hope.*

He got up, walked through to the kitchen and put the kettle on. A cup of Earl Grey and the time it took to brew properly would

delay the evil moment by about ten minutes in a way he could more or less justify.

“Alexa. Play ‘Autumn Leaves’ by Cannonball Adderley,” he commanded, making use of his birthday present from a few months earlier. *Ah, that was better.* The bass, piano, sax, and muted cornet eased in flawlessly and coaxed his blood pressure down a notch or two. He poured the tea, added a splash of semi-skimmed, and headed back through, the volume still high enough for the sound to follow him down the hall.

Now, what else to waste bit of time? He fired up his web browser and clicked the link to BBC News. More Brexit grief and Trump shenanigans, but also a good news story about a girl born deaf who’d had her hearing restored by the latest technology. There was a video of her mother sobbing in delight and disbelief. *Lovey.* Maybe that could give him an idea about the restoration of something you’d never had but somehow felt the lack of. Wasn’t the Christian story essentially that our entire race were made for relationship with the divine but had had the mat pulled from under us before we even knew it? he mused. As if we were born deaf to divine whispers of love, but despite never having heard them were still aware of something missing. Something that should be there but wasn’t. So we went searching for something else to make up the deficit. Material things, sexual relationships, promotions, property – even drugs, sex, and, rock ’n’ roll. All fine in their place, perhaps – well maybe not the drugs – but not when they were filling in for something else. Like a diet of all Snickers bars and no broccoli. Sounds great, but probably not entirely satisfying. Maybe this idea could lead to something that would make sense to all ages. And then he could show the video as a heart-warming culmination. *Promising. Definitely promising.*

Still not quite ready to put pen to paper, David thought one further time-waster would be okay and clicked on his email, not expecting much more than advertising at this time of year. He wasn’t disappointed. *El Tenedor*, a restaurant offers site he’d signed up to in Spain and never quite got round to dumping was offering dinner for

two at a Thai restaurant near the *Puerta del Sol*, Madrid, for only €25. *Not bad if you weren't a thousand miles away.* Amazon's latest crime thrillers £1.99 on Kindle. The Billy Graham Centre for Missions offering Evangelical Missions Quarterly online at a twenty percent reduction for sign-ups in December. *Maybe once upon a time, but not this year.*

Then something he was about to zap without looking at, as it wasn't from anyone he knew, caught his eye. "David Hidalgo," the subject line read. "Warehouse66. Badvent Calendar." *Yuck. What a tasteless pun, and why take Advent and try to turn it into something bad?* He clicked merely out of curiosity, immediately wishing he hadn't.

David Hidalgo. Warehouse66 is one of your passwords, right? You don't know me and no one is paying me for sending this. Let's get to the point. I have infected your computer with a virus that records keystrokes. I know everywhere you been and what you been looking at, including your regular visit to the XXBabeshomeXX website. I like your good taste! My virus also let me to turn on your camera and record what you do when you are online. Know what I mean? I can show images of what is on your screen and then you together, side by side.

So the point is this. What you do on your computer is your business, but some friends and family might be disappointed to see. Unless you transfer now £350 in bitcoin, following details in the attachment, all screenshots of you (yes, you!) will go to everyone in your contact list. You have until Christmas to make my transfer. When I receive payment the virus is deleted, going with it all the data I hold about you. Make the right decision now and avoid all this embarrassments and shame!

Dan Truelove

P.S. Please forgive if my English is not perfect. I am from Ukraine.

That certainly got his attention. David immediately felt his pulse increase, his palms begin to sweat, and his breath come quicker. Despite frequent nagging from Spade, his friendly neighbourhood hacker, he had never bothered with anti-virus software. *Weren't Macs supposed to be safer?* He was instantly regretting it. While `XXBabeshomeXX` had never crossed his mind or his screen, rendering his conscience clear, who knew what advertising pop-up might have appeared without him even noticing. Maybe he'd left his laptop lying open and unattended at church or in a café for a moment, and either some delinquent member of the Southside Fellowship youth group or else a total stranger might have logged in without his knowledge. In the space of thirty seconds his laptop had gone from being a useful taken-for-granted tool that would help him get his Christmas programme done to a ticking time bomb. *Gulp.* He heard a ping and glanced down again. It was another Badvent message. Against his better judgement he tapped to open it.

And in case you don't want comply, this is Badvent Calendar. Every day you fail to responding as instructions, something worse is happening. And I have special surprise planned for Christmas Day. Enjoy.

Dan

As if the first hadn't been bad enough! What would this person do tomorrow? Or the next day? There were twenty-three days of horror ahead. And `warehouse66` was indeed one of his passwords. That proved he had access to his data, didn't it? As far as David could see, he was entirely at the mercy of some criminal in the Ukraine who had a hold over him that he could do nothing about. The unknown man was about to wreck his private world with who knew what horrors. If having your most private information and search history sent everywhere wasn't bad enough for any person, what would it do to a pastor? Unbidden, he began to imagine tense leadership

team meetings, hostile glances in the aisles, shaking heads, and perpetual tutting. Church members would be gobsmacked by what had just popped up in their inboxes. Maybe there would even be something illegal cobbled together to make him look like a viewer of child images. He sat back, closed his eyes, and tried to breathe out and let the tension go. Unsuccessfully. Like the prospect of a hanging on the morrow, a threatening email seemed to concentrate the mind wonderfully. He could think of nothing else.

Just then the doorbell rang. *Not now*, he thought. *NOT NOW*. But part of the job of being a pastor was to be available when others got themselves in too deep. It could be any one of the poor souls he was trying to work with right now. He shook his head and slid the chair back.

“Morning Dave,” a voice announced brightly as he opened the door. “Care for a Tunnock’s Caramel Wafer? I’m not allowed them at home any more!”

David could almost have kissed the short, round figure standing in front of him in a Warcraft hoodie.

“What’s wrong with you?” Spade asked. “Looks like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Worse than that,” David muttered. “You’re the very man. Come in!”

Spade and David had originally met thanks to a stray bullet in a shop doorway. It had been meant for the one and hit the other. After all the dust had settled, David had got a name from the police, and he and Gillian had gone round to a tatty flat in a tatty street in the Gorgie district of Edinburgh to apologize. It turned out the occupant of the flat almost never used his real name but called himself Spade, in keeping with a line in hacking that seemed to be more like an obsession than a job. An obsession that was only matched by his fondness for Tunnock’s Caramel Wafers. But since getting in tow with the lovely Tina, the caramel wafer supply had gradually been drying up, and conversely Spade’s waistband had gradually been getting a bit less stretched. But no mere girlfriend could unsettle

Spade's primary obsession, so when David and Gillian had needed someone with IT expertise the police seemed to lack to uncover a people-trafficking sex slave racket, Spade had proved more than capable of the task, and they'd kept in touch ever since.

So, over a plate of very sweet Scottish biscuits and strong tea, David explained what had just happened. Spade seemed entirely untroubled, munching and slurping unconcernedly through the whole explanation about the emails, which as far as David was concerned might mean the end of his ministry, his reputation, and possibly even his freedom.

"That it, then?" Spade asked, licking his fingers once David had ground to a halt.

David nodded bleakly.

"Isn't that enough?" he groaned, sitting back and staring at the ceiling.

"Can I have a look at your laptop?" Spade asked.

David went through to the office and brought it through.

"Cheers."

David knew from past experience Spade was not a man to be hurried when it came to rooting around on the internet, so he went to make more tea. As he did so, Spade fished a USB stick out of his jeans pocket and stuck it into one of the laptop ports. David could just hear his friend starting to hum *500 Miles* as he left the room. He boiled the kettle, came back with more tea, picked up the post, read the relevant stuff and binned the rest, checked his phone several times, went back to the kitchen and washed some cups, and then with nothing else to do flopped down on the sofa opposite his visitor with all the poise of a Tesco bag-for-life filled with mixed veg. Spade kept humming and tapping, the soul of calm as David felt he was slowly climbing the walls with anxiety and impatience. He couldn't prevent future doomsday scenarios forming in his imagination – each one worse than the last. Finally, just as he was being admitted to prison and his personal belongings were being taken from him and bagged up, Spade gave one final tap and sat back.

“So? What’s the story?” David demanded. “How bad is it?”

“Well,” Spade replied slowly. “It’s not good.”

David felt the concrete block in his stomach gain an extra few kilos and settle that little bit further down.

“How bad exactly?” he asked, like Napoleon after Waterloo.

“So,” Spade went on, “despite my frequent reminders you still don’t have any virus protection at all. Your hard drive is in serious need of defragging, there’s a whole sack load of cookies you don’t need lying about, and your desktop is a total mess. But besides that...”

“Yes...”

“Everything’s more or less okay.”

“What do you mean? I just got an email with a real password in it. Somebody knows my real passwords!”

Spade sighed heavily and closed the laptop lid.

“You stopped using the password they quoted about eighteen months ago, though you have a bunch of variants that aren’t very different, which you should change immediately. You do not have any keystroke trackers on your computer. Your camera has not been accessed by any outside agency and your bank account is fine. Forgive me for having had a look.”

David sat back and ran his fingers through his hair. He let out a long sign of relief.

“That’s incredible,” he said. “You mean the whole thing’s a scam?”

“Precisely. Not a very good one, but quite interesting – to the connoisseur, that is. I had heard about Badvent on Reddit but hadn’t actually seen it before, so that’s good. Customers expect me to be up to date with the stuff they get.”

“So some nerd in Ukraine somehow got hold of an old password of mine and is just trying it on, then?”

“Well, actually some nerd in Spain, as it happens – so almost on your home territory, you might say. You can buy millions of email addresses and passwords from dark websites. It’s not hard. Quora’s just lost a hundred million of them in a data breach. Then you make up a convincing sounding email, send it out and wait for the money

to come in. The returns aren't very high, though. For lots of users it just goes straight into their junk and gets deleted without them even seeing it. Slightly more savvy users who get it and notice go online and look it up to see what other people are saying. There's a thread on the Norton antivirus page and a discussion on a Network Rail IT managers' forum if you're interested. No? Oh well, not your cup of tea, I suppose. Then other people like you who get spooked have no idea how to pay in bitcoin, so although they want to cough up to protect their privacy they actually have no idea how. So they spend a few days sweating about it and then notice that the deadline has passed and nothing has happened, which means they aren't in the income stream either. So the culprit actually needs users who are not sufficiently aware to check it out but who do know how to make a transfer. There probably aren't too many. The guy's English isn't too bad, though. He'd be better off with a legitimate business offering online English chat for a fee."

David stared up at the ceiling again.

"I can't believe I've been had," he said. "I thought it was really serious."

"Nah. Just some nutter with too much time on his hands trying to have a bit of fun. But just to be safe I think you should change all your passwords, make sure there aren't any duplicates, and install some decent protection. If you want to give me the laptop overnight I can do all of that for you."

"That would be highly appreciated," David said with gusto. "You've really saved the day. You were just the man I needed when I needed him! But I never asked what brought you round here anyway. Not just looking for a Carmel Wafer sanctuary, I imagine."

Spade gave the ghost of a laugh.

"It's not come to that yet," he remarked dryly, "though we're not far off it. Tina has declared war on sugary cakes and biscuits. And puddings. And snacks. I'm fading away!"

"So why were you knocking on my door? Were you just in the vicinity?"

“Actually no. There’s something you can do for me. Or for us, really.”

David smiled.

“Can I guess?” he asked.

“Well, you’ll probably be right. Tina and I have decided to tie the knot and she’d like you to do the honours. Early in the New Year, we think. Might as well get on with it!”

“Congratulations. I’d be delighted!”

“Okay – cheers – so I’d better get back to the Bridge... other IT problems are calling. Oh, by the way, I can wipe everything connected with that scammer and block future emails if you like.”

“Yes – that would be a relief,” David said with feeling, then stopped with a thoughtful look. “Actually, no,” he reconsidered. “Maybe not. I might have an idea...”

Gillian had to sit down and was almost through her second G and T by the time David had finished telling her about the day’s adventures. The good news was that he wasn’t in peril of his life, and between the restoration of hearing and release from the supposed penalty of internet sin he had a full set of Christmas talks worked out, along with matching readings and carols. Ka boom!

“And one other thing,” he said. “I’m nipping out to Madrid for a few days. The Christmas programme’s in hand, you’re going to be out at work dos almost every night this week and next, and I’ve got some annual leave left.”

Gillian raised an eyebrow, not for the first time that evening.

“You are full of surprises today,” she said. “What’s the rush?”

“Well, before Spade left he offered to clean my laptop and block the Badvent sender, but I asked him how much he could tell me about the individual that sent them before he did. He told me that both emails came from ISPs registered to a small *locutorio* in Villa de Vallecas, Madrid. So I decided I’d like to try and meet my antagonist. You know, find out why someone would do such a thing.”

“And try to set them on the straight and narrow, knowing you!”

David shrugged. “Well, who knows. I think it’ll be more to give them a piece of my mind. Maybe I won’t be able to track them down. Maybe they’ll refuse to talk to me. Maybe I’ll decide it’s too dangerous. Anyway, I just don’t think people should be able to do that and get away with it. I’ll play it by ear.”

“Where will you stay? With someone from Warehouse 66 again?”

“Not this time. I’ve been in touch with Alfonso. He’s happy for me to stop by for a few days.”

“Alfonso?”

“Yes – you remember. He’s an old pal from my Santa Eugenia days. We lost touch for about twenty years, then he popped up doing a blog I stumbled across.”

“Yes, I do remember. Is he not Alfonso the Atheist or something?”

“Exactly. I’m sure we’ll get on famously.”

Gillian finally got up from where she’d been sitting as David told his tale, took her work jacket off, and picked up a warmer anorak.

“Speaking of old friends, you have remembered we’re having fish and chips with Charlie tonight, haven’t you?”

David banged his forehead with the heel of his palm.

“No! Thanks for reminding me. I’ve worked up an appetite though. Fish and chips here I come!”

During David Hidalgo’s childhood in Edinburgh before university, followed by a sharp exit to a career in Spain, Brattisani’s had been an Edinburgh institution. So many Saturdays had consisted of a swim at the Commonwealth Pool on Dalkeith Road in the imposing shadow of Arthur’s Seat, then a sit-in chippie at the Newington Bratti’s. Fish, chicken, black pudding, smoked sausage, or the new and exotic 505 Pizza Pie, folded over and deep-fried – the choice was extensive and teenage appetites were fully up for what was on offer. Sadly, Brattisani’s was now history. But the Edinburgh City Café, while not sounding nearly as appealing, was in fact a good substitute. Every

Monday evening for the past few months David, and sometimes Gillian, had shown up there for a chippie tea with Charlie.

Charlie McIntyre had first come to their attention several months earlier by hanging around outside the front door of Southside Fellowship's South Clerk Street premises on Sunday mornings with a hard luck story and a paw thrust out for "any spare change". While this was annoying for the congregation – though some contributed more or less cheerfully – David was disinclined simply to see Charlie as a pest to be got rid of. He was certainly filthy and unkempt, smelt of cheap booze, and would no doubt spend any takings on more, but he was also polite, never threatening, and seemed grateful for any contributions. David took to coming to church early, stopping to chat on the way in and give him a bag of sandwiches from Greggs instead of spare change. Charlie did not take that as an offence and seemed grateful. Soon they were on first name terms and it wasn't long before he came in, sat quietly at the back during the service, stood up and sat down at the appropriate times, and began to get to know some other members of the congregation as well.

Mrs MacInnes, Morningside's matron, stalwart church secretary, treasurer, and general factotum, treated him with proper respect and always got him the first cup of tea after the formal bit was over. However, she did whisper in David's ear, "We have to get that man a bath.". So they did. A bath, a change of clothes, and shoes that weren't worn through. But he was resistant to any other interference. "Ah'm fine," he used to say when asked where he was going to spend the night. "Ah've goat a wee place. It's just dandy. Nae boather." So they didn't push it. However, he was painfully thin, so Gillian suggested they take him for a decent meal at least once a week. So that was how it had started, with a fish supper at the City Café on a regular basis. Depending on David's schedule in might be lunchtime, tea or later, or even sometimes the full Scottish breakfast at half past nine if the day was looking particularly full. But Charlie was always on time, though he didn't seem to possess a watch. He always polite, yet initially completely private about his history.

It took months of “confidence-building measures” as Gillian called them before the story finally came out. He’d been working on various building sites – he had no qualifications but plenty of experience and was a good worker. He’d had no partner but a decent council flat and no trouble. Then his brother had asked – innocently enough, it had seemed – if he could help out with a wee business thing he was setting up. It was a vehicle repair and body shop, but there was just one problem. Younger brother Des was banned from holding directorships after a bit of difficulty about a debt collection business the previous year. Charlie surely wouldn’t mind helping his own flesh and blood, he had suggested. So the deal was that Charley would sign his name on the dotted line as director just till things got sorted out. No responsibility, no hassle. Just sign here. Charlie had never had anything to do with the law except for the odd night in the cells to calm down after a couple over the eight, so he had no way of knowing that directors bear business responsibilities jointly and severally, for both debts and illegalities.

The day came when that responsibility came home to roost. The prosecuting lawyer explained the scam to the court. Des McIntyre and others unknown had created a series of false identities, bought up nearly new expensive vehicles, smashed them up, claimed the insurance and then repaired them to a minimum standard in Des’s own garage and sold them on before starting again with more names and vehicles. The average take was more than £5,000 per smash, and they had managed about thirty-five cars before being rumbled by the insurance companies. Des had made a beeline for the south of Spain where, as far as Charlie knew, he was now running a bar under an assumed identity. Charlie had gone to court but had been unable to prove that he knew nothing about it. He had been sentenced to five years. When he came out he could no longer get work, he had lost his home, and he now had a drug habit to feed. Thanks Des. Besides sympathizing, there wasn’t much David and Gillian could offer. But they could listen, show respect, and provide hot fish and chips, which they did. And Charlie seemed grateful.

“Haw, Davie man. How’s it goan?” Charlie greeted them outside the City Café in his usual ebullient way. They shook hands and Gillian gave him a peck on the cheek, but David could immediately see something was the matter – the bonhomie was more act than genuine this evening. Charlie was a bit unsteady on his feet going in and stumbled on their way to the table. *Not a good sign*. He ordered his usual fish supper, bread and butter, and a cup of tea, but then sat there looking glum.

“Something the matter, Charlie?” Gillian asked, reaching out to place her hand on his.

“Aw, well. Ups and downs, ye ken.”

“Looks like more than just the usual ups and downs, Charlie,” David put in. “Everything okay?”

Charlie hesitated for a second, then seemed to collapse.

“That no good brother o’ mine,” he groaned. “Here ah am sleepin’ rough or in some stinkin’ hostel, and oan and aff the booze, and he’s livin’ it up in the sun. Waste o’ space that he is!”

“What’s happened, Charlie?” Gillian asked. “Have you heard from him?”

“Aye. The sod thinks it’s funny to send me a postcard. It went tae ma sister in Leven. She sometimes comes into town shoppin’ an’ tha’, and takes me oot. Wisnae signed nor nothin’, but it wis him aw right. Malaga. Would you believe? The photy wiz o’ the ootside o’ a pub cawd The Waverley. Meant tae appeal tae the expat Scots, ah suppose. There he is huvin’ a great time an’ here ah am. Aw because o’ him!”

Charlie had his elbows on the table and his hands clasped in front of his face covering his eyes, but they could both see behind the mask. He was crying. Just then the waitress arrived with their orders, which gave him a chance to pull himself together. The fish supper ritual of appointing the plates with plenty of salt, vinegar and brown sauce, the stirring of the tea, and the arranging of the plates on quite a small table give them all time to recover.

“Well, eat up Charlie,” Gillian encouraged as a way of taking the heat off him. “A plate of fish and chips makes everything a bit better.”

Charlie wiped his nose with his sleeve and gave a hearty sniff.

“Cheers guys,” he said. “Magic.”

They ate in silence until Charlie seemed to cheer up a bit in response to the hot food inside him and the sympathetic company he trusted. Eventually, after a bit of small talk, some of Charlie’s routine joking resurfacing, and David judged that the time might be right to try to probe a bit deeper.

“So you reckon you’ve heard from Des, then?” he began. “How come he can get in touch with you and the police don’t seem interested in him?”

“Huh!” Charlie snorted with disgust. “Story o’ ma life. Des wiz aye the clever one. Goat me tae be the director so his name wiznae oan nuthin’. An’ whit dae ah ken about directin’ onythin’. Onywaes, when the polis starts takin’ an interest he clears aff tae Malaga and leaves yours truly hoddin’ the wean. Ah suppose they thought they goat some mug fur it so they wirrnae much bothered aboot the wan that goat away. Ken whit am sayin’?”

“Have you never tried to lodge an appeal against your conviction?” Gillian asked.

Charlie gave an bigger snort with even more disgust behind it.

“Well, ah might be wrang, but ah’ve heard that appeals need lawyers an’ lawyers need money. An’ if ah’ve goat enough left auer fur a couple o’ cans, ah’m dain’ aw right. Ken whit ah’m sayin’, hen?”

Gillian nodded, feeling chastised and a bit stupid. However, to give him his due, Charlie noticed and tried to backtrack.

“Look, ah’m sorry. Ah ken ur jus’ tryin’ tae help an’ tha’. But it’s a waste o’ time, right? Ah just need to no’ let it get tae me, that’s aw. Onywaes, huv yiz heard this wan – whit’s the difference between Donald Trump and Donald Duck? Wan’s a crazy cartoon character an’ the ither’s a duck. Geddit?”

Charlie went off into a roaring laugh at his own joke while David and Gillian smiled and sneaked a brief moment of eye contact.

* * *

“There must be something we can do for Charlie beyond filling him with fish suppers,” Gillian wondered aloud as they walked back toward Marchmont having topped Charlie up with as much as he could eat and seen him off a bit happier and more sober than he’d been when they’d met.

“Well, he’s right about one thing. Appeals do need lawyers and lawyers do need money,” David said with an air of resignation.

“Well, I don’t think that’s good enough, Señor Hidalgo,” Gillian announced as if she’d just come to a decision. “I’ve been invited to the Old College Christmas knees up. I’m going to speak to Professor Wheeler – he’s the Law Faculty appeals expert. If we can’t do something between us with the connections we’ve got, then it can’t be done. And I don’t believe that it can’t be done.”

A few days later – having caught the first flight he could get (and having received five more Badvent emails) – David rang the doorbell of Flat 3A, number 54 Calle de Puentelarra in Santa Eugenia, Madrid. He only had to wait a matter of seconds before the door was thrown open. Alfonso the Atheist was a lot less intimidating in person than his blog handle might have suggested. He was a big bear of a man in his fifties with a wide grin and a full head of jet black hair swept back into a James Dean quiff with plenty of hair gel. He sported a black shirt with three buttons open to fit the look, along with a heavy gold neck chain and a goaty beard. He looked like a body builder who had gradually lost it and accumulated a pudgier outer layer – like some sort of Spanish beef wellington.

“David! Hombre! *¿Qué tal?* Welcome to my humble abode. It’s been so long. Great to see you. Marga! It’s David. I’ve told you all about him! Come in, come in. We’ve been expecting you.”

David was ushered into a tiny but very stylish lounge with black and white decor featuring large monochrome photos of fifties and sixties idols: Ali standing menacingly over Sonny Liston, Marilyn in that skintight dress she had to be sewn into, and the original

Rebel without a Cause leaning against the bonnet of an open-top Corvette with a cigarette hanging from his lips and a suitable sneer at the camera.

“David, I’ve heard so much about you,” Marga said. “It’s a pleasure to meet at last.” She came forward and offered the two traditional Spanish kisses while Alfonso took David’s cabin bag and disappeared with it.

“So you two were university friends?” Marga asked.

“No, business associates. I studied in Edinburgh before coming to Spain and my first flat was here in Santa Eugenia – just on the other side of the courtyard down there. I got a job selling gourmet foods across the south. Alfonso was working at a jamon wholesaler. Then we found out we were neighbours, so we became drinking buddies as well. And the rest is history – well, a history I probably shouldn’t tell!”

Marga gave a knowing smile.

“Some I know and some I can imagine,” she said. “Anyway, coffee? English tea? A beer? What would you like? Or we can go out if you’re not exhausted.”

“Out!” shouted Alfonso, coming back minus the bag. “*Madre mia* – we’re Spanish!”

A round of coffees soon arrived at the bar on the corner downstairs, along with a plate of still-hot churros and a bowl of nuts.

“Ah – this is so nice,” David said, settling back into his chair and taking a sip. “I know I’m really Scottish and I’m perfectly happy there, but when I get back to Madrid I realize I’ve been missing something. Besides decent coffee.”

“Well, we’re very glad to see you after all these years,” Alfonso announced. “We need to get some serious drinking in while you’re here. I know a bar where they do their own excellent house vermouth. A few of those and you forget your problems. Anyway, I didn’t entirely get what you’ve over for – besides the coffee. Can you run it by me again?”

“Sure,” David agreed and proceeded to explain about the email, which he had subsequently discovered was a “sextortion” scam that had even featured on the BBC News website.

Alfonso let out a low whistle.

“Well, if a man like you ends up panicking, imagine what it would do to someone who really did have something to hide! Impressive. And here in Vallecas. Isn’t that a bit of a coincidence?”

David smiled.

“You might think that,” he conceded, “but I have a friend who says there’s no such thing.”

Alfonso snorted.

“Now don’t get all religious on me,” he demanded. “Life is random. Incredibly unlikely things happen all the time. The fact that you used to live here and you get a few emails from someone else who lives near here – it’s just one of those things.”

“I won’t fight the case with you,” David smiled. “It’s just interesting, that’s all.”

“Well I think it’s horrible,” Marga announced flatly. “Why can’t people just leave other people alone? Every step forward we take just seems to allow new ways for people to torment others. I’ve just come off Facebook, and I don’t tweet or blog or anything. I tell Alfonso he should pack it in too, but I might as well be talking to the wall.”

Alfonso shrugged but did look a little shamefaced.

“I think I’ve been around long enough not to get taken in. And the blog is really just for discussion among like-minded people – anyone who wants to talk about religion or its opposite. And it got us back in contact with this young gentleman.” He gestured in David’s direction with a half-eaten *churro*.

“So you’re actually planning to try and meet this criminal?” Marga asked. “Isn’t that a bit risky?”

David took another bite of the delicious pastry and took his time before answering.

“Maybe,” he eventually agreed. “Could be. It’s just that the email itself was horrible, and it was frightening when I saw they’d

got hold of a real password. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought there had to be a real human being somewhere behind it, probably with no real thought of the upset it causes. It's a bit like bomber pilots in wartime, you know – though I'm not comparing them morally, of course. You get a target, drop your bombs, then head for home, probably with no thought for what happens on the ground. Or maybe they deliberately think about it as little as possible. So this hacker sends out a million emails and gets a hundred bitcoin transfers. As far as he's concerned that's probably been a good day's work. I had a bit of leave in hand from the church and I'd been promising myself a trip out to reconnect with Alfonso here, plus I was a bit ahead in preparing for Christmas, so I thought why not? I'd like to look the guy in the eye and ask him if he has any idea of the distress he's causing – I'm assuming it's a guy – and find out why he would think that's an okay way to make money."

"And shop him to the police, I hope!" Marga added.

David inclined his head.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe not. It all depends what I find. If I find anything, of course. We've tracked down that the emails are being sent from a small *locutorio* in Vallecas, which seemed too much of a coincidence when I was thinking of visiting you anyway. It's only ten minutes down the road. So I just thought, why not? Win, lose, or draw I get something out of it. And a coffee fix."

"Don't forget the vermouth!" Alfonso reminded him.

After a couple of hours of nourishing chat and catching up, David went to bed late and got up late the following morning. Alfonso's blog was strictly a spare time thing, and as he was still working in the food sector he had left early. Marga was teaching but didn't start until eleven, so they had a leisurely breakfast. Marga was curious to know exactly what a Scottish pastor was compared with a Spanish priest, and was surprised and intrigued by all the cultural differences. Like marrying, having kids, having a normal home life, and, in the case of David's church, not baptizing infants but letting

people decide for themselves in due course if they wanted to follow any particular faith or none.

They spun it out as long as possible before Marga had to head off and David knew he had to bite the bullet. He sent Gillian a quick text, then wrapped up warm for the low temperatures of the Madrid winter and headed out into the street. The ten-minute walk from the prosperous, professional commuter belt Santa Eugenia down into low-rent Villa de Vallecas was engrained in his memory. As a newer seventies-built district, Santa Eugenia didn't have its own metro stop, so Vallecas was the nearest. The walk down to the metro had been part of his daily routine for more than five years – now more than thirty years earlier – but not much had changed. As he came into the square where the metro connected with the outside world, he couldn't help remembering his spiritual mentor Paco and their visit to *Urgencias* so long ago when Paco's car had smashed into his one night in the mountains north of Madrid. And Paco's revelation that he knew David's father as they sat waiting to be seen. And the conversation they had then had in that exact bar over there, where Paco had revealed his own spiritual journey and challenged David over his presuppositions and prejudices about faith. *What a lot of water had passed under the bridge since then.* Sadly, Paco was no more or he'd have been staying with him rather than Alfonso the Atheist.

David put these thoughts out of his mind in favour of the business at hand. He turned left along Paseo Federico García Lorca, named after the famous Spanish poet murdered during the civil war simply for being different. If anything here was different, it was the fact that the Villa had smartened itself up quite a lot since these old days, despite the Spanish economic crisis that was still hanging on like an unwelcome guest that never takes the hint. The shops were cheap but cheerful, and there seemed to be plenty shoppers about. Middle-aged women with their trolleys out for groceries. Old men sitting chewing the fat on a park bench in a bit of winter sun. Young people who should have been working but couldn't find

jobs, laughing, joking, and just hanging out. Ordinary people doing decent, law-abiding, ordinary things. He was on a quest to find someone who was doing quite the opposite.

He spotted the *locutorio* from a hundred yards away, having checked it out on Google Street View. Along with dozens of its kind, it had sprung up to bring together cheap internet, coffee, and poor immigrants who still had family in Honduras, Colombia, or Rumania and needed to keep in touch but couldn't afford the mobile charges or a computer at home. Exactly the same as in Edinburgh, except there they were called internet cafés. He stepped inside and waited at the reception point while the guy on duty finished setting someone up on one of the PCs.

"*Buenos días*. What can we do for you? PCs are €5 per half-hour. Coffee free. No USB drives or CDs of your own."

"*Buenos días*. I'm not actually looking for a PC. I'm looking for a person."

The receptionist raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"First of all, I'm not police. I'm a pastor."

Still nothing.

"And I'm also the victim of a scam that came from a computer in this shop."

"How do you know that? Our PCs are all cleaned every day and users aren't allowed to install their own software."

"How he managed it I can't tell you, but here's the evidence."

David pulled out a couple of stapled pages that Spade had left him with and handed them over.

"It lists IP addresses for PC's registered to this business," he said.

"How did you get this information?" the receptionist demanded. "That's private data."

"Never mind how I got it. It is accurate?"

The guy was beginning to look a bit more worried. He sat down and started scanning through the pages. Finally, he let out a sigh and handed it back.

“Looks like your sources are right,” he admitted reluctantly. “Thanks for letting us know. Do you want a coffee?”

They sat on a bench at the back of the shop behind the rows of booths, each with an identical PC and fairly similar-looking users – mostly a somewhat darker shade than most Spaniards and even more down-at-heel than most indigenous residents of the Villa – all chattering away in regional accents from South or Central America.

“I’m Ricardo, by the way. It’s my business. *Encantado*,” the owner said, holding out a hand.

“David Hidalgo. From Scotland, but I used to live in Santa Eugenia just up the road.”

“Hidalgo,” Ricardo repeated thoughtfully. “I think I know that name. When did you leave Spain?”

“A few years ago now. I used to have a church out in Torrejón.”

“Warehouse 66? I do know you. I used to hear you on the radio. Then it all just stopped and I wondered what had happened.”

David took a sip of his coffee and glanced around the shop again.

“Long story,” he said. “Anyway, I got an email from one of your customers that I wasn’t overjoyed to read. It threatened to send compromising images to all my contacts unless I paid up. Luckily, I’ve got a friend who knows about that sort of stuff and was able to tell me there wasn’t any actual risk and that I shouldn’t pay up. But apparently other people are so freaked out they do pay. I’d been thinking about a trip back to Madrid before Christmas, and I was curious as to who might be doing something like that and why. So here I am.”

Ricardo had been listening with increasing concern.

“This sort of stuff is really bad for business,” he said. “We run a clean shop. There are family filters on all the machines, so nobody comes in here to look at porn. The dark web is blocked and everything is scanned daily. If the police thought we were a haven for scammers we’d probably get closed down overnight. You are going to go to the police, I take it?”

David scratched his chin thoughtfully.

“Not sure,” he finally said. “It all depends on finding the guy, being able to prove it, and what sort of story he has to tell. We’ll see.”

“Well if you don’t, I will,” Ricardo announced without hesitation, and with a colourful vernacular reinforcement that made David smile. It was a long time since he’d heard that particular phrase, and despite its crudity it made him feel at home.

“So what now?” Ricardo asked. “We get dozens of users in here every day, and probably hundreds of different people in a month. How do we track down a single individual?”

“Well, we know the IP addresses of the computers he’s used,” David offered. “Assuming you haven’t been resetting addresses we can tell which machines he’s been using, and on which days. Did I tell you he calls the whole thing the Badvent Calendar in English? It’s a combination of Advent and Bad. The idea is you get emails of increasing severity every day up to Christmas until you crack and send over the money. My hacker pal put something on my laptop that shows the IP address of every email I get. So if you have records of who used which computers on what days we should be able to get a match.”

“Hmm. Clever,” Ricardo smiled. “I get the point. How long are you here for?”

“Three more days, so we can’t really hang about too much.”

“Okay, leave it with me. We always take photocopies of ID cards and addresses and mobile numbers, so if we get the guy we should have all we need to report him. I’ll work on it this evening. Can you come back early tomorrow before we open so we can go through whatever I’ve found?”

Ricardo seemed to have been getting angrier and angrier as he spoke.

“We may not need to bother with the police,” he added grimly. “I’ve got some friends who’ll know what to do with him!”

Despite another late night with Alfonso, which involved sampling a number of different vermouths, David appeared outside Ricardo’s

locutorio at eight thirty sharp the following morning with a mixture of emotions – excited but also nervous. There was no way of knowing what, if anything, they were about to uncover. It might be a well-organized criminal enterprise with appropriate protection or some pale skinny kid just having a go to see what he could rake in when he wasn't spending the rest of his time playing *Fortnite*. Ricardo was already at his station on the reception desk with two coffees, a couple of magdalena buns and a fat ring binder in front of him. After some small talk and taking the coffee Ricardo offered him, David sat down and waited for the update.

“Good news and bad news,” Ricardo began. “The good news is that I've been able to match the dates and IP addresses for most of the emails.”

“And the bad?” David asked.

“The bad news is that some of the days you got emails I was away, and my sidekick Felix isn't the most careful with the paperwork, which means we've a couple of missing sessions. So instead of being able to say exactly who meets all the criteria I've only been able to narrow it down to one of three.”

“Okay,” David nodded. “Can I ask who they are?”

Ricardo flicked open his ring binder and flipped over a few pages.

“So,” he began. “We've got Maria from Venezuela – I know her quite well. She cleans at the Honduras Education Centre across the road. She's got kids in Caracas and uses the computers here to send money home. Then, second...” he turned over a page, “Agustin. Don't know him much – he doesn't really believe in chit-chat. He's about thirty-five, I'd say. Big bloke. Unemployed. Plays a lot of online games. I think he's smart enough, and he could probably get a job if he didn't waste so much time in here. I know it's my business, but sometimes I really feel like kicking them out and saying go and do something more productive, you useless waste of space! Anyway, that's another story. Agustin could be your man, I think. He's smart enough online. He was here every day, and he

was using the right machine. Then finally there's Daniel. He's a bit younger. Again, doesn't speak much. He's only started coming in quite recently. Seems the nervous type. I doubt if he'd have the balls to do what you're talking about. My money would be on Agustin."

Just then the shop doorbell gave a loud clang. Ricardo looked at his watch.

"Nine o'clock," he said. "Opening time." A middle-aged lady with jet black hair drawn tightly back and streaked with the first signs of grey stepped in.

"Ah, morning Maria," Ricardo said warmly. "Just talking about you!"

"All good I trust, *caballero*," Maria shot back with a broad grin and an incomplete set of lower teeth.

"Of course. Actually, this gentleman was asking me if I knew any international cyber criminals, and your name immediately came to mind!"

Maria giggled again.

"Ooh, you are a tease! If you were ten years younger I'd give you a good spanking!"

"Ha! Promises, Señorita."

Maria dropped €10 onto the desk and shuffled down the aisle toward her usual machine. She sat a huge shopping bag at her feet and put the headphones on.

"That'll be her for the next hour now," Ricardo smiled. "Chatting happily with her sister at home and comparing the price of shoes in Vallecás and downtown Caracas. I'd be amazed if she knew anything about your emails. She knows how to open Skype and that's about it."

David nodded. "I'm inclined to agree," he said. "So what now? Just wait for our other two suspects who might or might not show up?"

"I guess so." Ricardo shrugged his shoulders. "I do have IDs and addresses, but I really don't think we want to go knocking on doors, do we?"

So that was it. David grabbed a coffee, then went and sat in a corner with his own laptop, filling in the blanks for his Christmas programme. The shop gradually grew busier as the morning went on, and Ricardo was kept on his toes handing out access tokens, turning PCs on and off, and sorting various problems for users who had gone slightly beyond the limits of what they knew how to fix. But there was no sign of Agustin or Daniel.

Maria finished her session, and after a bit more flirting with Ricardo bustled happily off in search of cheap shoes that didn't leave her feet feeling like they'd spent the morning in an industrial press. Ricardo brought David more coffee and they agreed there seemed to be little point in accusing her of anything other than working while receiving unemployment benefits, which was almost universal in the Villa.

The rest of the morning came and went without incident till Ricardo came over and announced he had to pop out for a minute to get his lottery tickets before they were sold out. In fact, it was almost half an hour before he got back, throughout which time David couldn't help but scrutinize each and every customer. *This one looks pretty weedy and nerdy. Maybe he was Daniel. That one had the build of an aging middleweight. Could that be Agustin?* Ricardo finally returned, clearly having run some distance and still puffing.

"Sorry," he called over in David's direction. "What a queue!"

He nipped behind the counter and had a quick look at a PC screen that monitored machine use, then looked up just as a middle-aged man dropped €5 on the desk and headed out the door. Ricardo looked after him, then again in David's direction.

"Agustin!" he mouthed, and David was up like a shot.

Together they emerged out onto the street just in time to see a burly figure in a checked shirt turn the corner up a lane. As they gave chase the thought struck David that he actually had no idea what he was going to say when they finally stood face to face. Agustin had stopped just round the corner to light a cigarette and seemed to be in no particular hurry. Ricardo approached him first.

“*Perdón, Señor,*” Ricardo began.

Agustin looked up.

“*Si,*” he replied perfectly calmly. “*Dime.*”

“You were just in the *locutorio,*” Ricardo continued.

“Sure – what of it?” Agustin replied, suddenly defensive. “I left the money. What’s the problem?”

“This gentleman would like to ask you a couple of questions.”

David swallowed as Agustin squared his shoulders and looked at him.

“What?” he demanded, now fully on guard.

“*Hola,*” David said in as casual and friendly a manner as he could muster. “I’m just wondering if you can help me. I’m actually following up on some emails that were sent from the *locutorio.* I’m trying to track down the person who might have sent them.”

“What sort of emails?” Agustin appeared suspicious.

“Scam emails. Emails that try to get money out of people and threaten a consequence if they don’t pay up.”

“And you think I might have sent them? Are you crazy? I don’t even have an email address. I just use Facebook, and even then my wife had to sign me up with her email. Anyway, why me? Why not everyone else in there?” Agustin was slowly moving from defence to offence. He took a step toward David.

“Nobody’s accusing you, sir,” Ricardo intervened before a punch was thrown. “I’ve seen the emails and we know they came from my shop. We know the dates and times, and which machine they came from. We’ve narrowed it down to all the people using these computers, and there are only so many people it could be. We don’t mean to accuse you of anything; we’re just trying to rule out the people it couldn’t be.”

“And when was this supposed to have happened?” Agustin demanded.

“Mainly last week,” David replied. “At least, that’s when I started getting them.”

“Ha!” Agustin looked triumphant. “Well, you can keep looking,

then. Last week I was visiting my sister in Granada. I can show you the bus tickets if you don't believe me."

Ricardo looked confused.

"But we have you down on the schedule for using a computer every day last week," he said.

"Wrong!" Agustin declared flatly. "I gave my cousin my discount card and he signed in as me. You can charge me the extra if you want, but it wasn't me. Now, if you don't mind I've got things to do. Go and accuse somebody else."

David and Ricardo walked back to the shop feeling as though they'd just assaulted an innocent passerby. Ricardo rang Felix, who had watched the shop when he was away. Felix confirmed that Agustin hadn't been in all week.

"So why did you sign him in if it wasn't him?" Ricardo demanded. "Oh, never mind!"

"That's the last time Felix will be looking after things," he stated, dropping his mobile onto the reception desk in disgust. "What a moron!"

After that they resumed their places until two in the afternoon, when everything closes in Spain, without identifying any further suspects.

"How much time did you say you have?" Ricardo asked.

"Two more days. I've got a tight schedule for stuff at home."

Ricardo raised an eyebrow.

"Well, let's hope we get a visit from Daniel," he remarked. "I'm sympathetic to the problem and it gives my shop a bad name, but I'm not about to go accusing people in your absence. This is your problem."

David wandered back up toward the flat in Santa Eugenia feeling totally lifeless. Christmas decorations were beginning to go up. A fat Santa with a ladder was trying to break into a first floor window and a sleigh complete with reindeer was careering over the wall of the preschool nursery.

Alfonso had taken the rest of the day off and Marga wasn't at work, so Alfonso insisted they go to *El Jardín de Baco* just up the road and sample their excellent and enormous seafood platter. David had little appetite. However, he understood the conventions, so he put on his best positive smile and agreed. He checked his laptop before they went out. The Badvent emails were still faithfully showing up in his inbox, each nastier than the one before, presumably following some ghastly preset schedule. The newest threat was being reported to the police because of the images he'd been viewing. It made David feel sick, but he put on a brave face and out they went.

"What I can't understand," Marga began as the waiter popped a bottle of Ribera del Duero and poured, "is how you two are such great buddies when you're a pastor, David, and my beloved husband is Alfonso the Atheist. It makes him sound like an anti-religious superhero."

Alfonso did a superman flying pose with a straight face – almost knocking the bottle over.

"Easy!" David replied. "We both care."

"About what?" Marga pressed him.

"About the truth," Alfonso replied, having filled his glass and taken a glug. "He thinks there's a God and I don't, but we agree that it's an important question. Most people in Spain are lapsed Catholics and are just glad to be rid of it all, never having to think about it again."

"And there are lots in Britain too," David added. "Lapsed something or other, or more likely they never were since we've not been as religious a country as Spain. Religion is usually seen as entirely irrelevant and something that just stops you doing things. Apathy is our most popular belief system nowadays. Maybe there should be a census question that lets you put down 'apethist?'"

"Exactly," Alfonso agreed. "And we're not apathetic, are we, amigo? I passionately believe that religion has done untold damage to individuals and nations. He thinks – well, what do you think? How would you defend it?"

David laughed, “I’m not going to attempt a defence when there’s food and wine to concentrate on. I’ll give you two points, though. One, there’s a huge interest in mental health in the UK right now, particularly men’s mental health. You know, depression, anxiety, social phobias, and an epidemic of loneliness, as well as the more common things we think of as mental illnesses.”

“Like supporting Raya Vallecano!” Alfonso put in, referring to the third Madrid football team, local to the Villa but never classed in the same bracket as Athletic or Real.

“Well – things like that, maybe. We’re being told to get out there and make friends, join a choir, play team sports, go to a craft group or whatever, all to make friends. Whatever we think about the actual content, the church is tailor made for that. At least, modern churches in the UK are. It’s no longer about going to get your card stamped; being part of a community is just as important. And the evidence is clear that people who have a faith and go to church are less likely to be in prison, on drugs, divorced, bankrupt or lonely than the rest of the population. And they are more likely to be non-smokers, physically healthy, and have more sense of meaning and purpose because they’ve got something to believe in and a community to be part of.”

“And the second point?” Marga prompted him.

“Well, just that lots of the Edinburgh churches are stuffed with young people nowadays. Gen Xers and Millennials are finding they want something more to believe in and commit to than materialism and scientific explanations – and they seem to be finding meaning. So, far from going out of fashion, faith seems to be cool again for some at least.”

“Well, all you’ve shown is that you can create a busy, religious social club and that people sometimes like to be deceived,” Alfonso said. “Neither of which is news or convincing. Speaking personally, it was trying to believe ten impossible things before breakfast that did my head in. But anyway, I do agree with you that it’s important. And we get people of all sorts of beliefs and

none on the website. But at least they all want to talk about it because religion is still important in our world – maybe more so with immigration and different belief systems threatening the status quo. Anyway, that’s enough of that.” He raised his glass. “Here’s to your quest. Death to scammers and confusion to the enemy – whoever that might be!”

They drank and settled down to talk about other things, including war stories from David and Alfonso’s past, Marga’s teaching job, how the economy was doing, and the antics of the US president. The seafood platters were one between two, but Alfonso insisted on ordering two and then proceeded to chomp his way through one of them almost on his own. Finally, when all was safely gathered in, *pastr*e ordered and consumed, and coffee taken, David looked at his watch and gulped.

“I need to get back to Ricardo’s,” he announced without any preliminaries. “I don’t want to miss out on the action.”

“Ah, what a shame,” Alfonso intoned. “A meal like that deserves a little chat, a large cognac, and then a proper siesta. Too bad.”

“I promise I’ll be back as soon as we apprehend the criminal and have him saying Hail Marys for life.”

“Well, get him to say one for me – I’m a bit overdue,” Alfonso offered, then clapped David on the back and sent him off.

He might as well have not bothered. Daniel – if Daniel was his name – failed to appear that afternoon or evening. Or the following day. Or the day after that. David was beginning to get sick of the endless refills of Ricardo’s coffee and the buns from the bakery next door.

“Well, I guess that’s it,” Ricardo announced gloomily just as he was about to shut the shop for lunch on the third day. No show this afternoon and we’re done.”

David was even getting fed up with the excellent Spanish lunches he’d been having with company or on his own, so he decided to head for the Chinese restaurant on the edge of Santa Eugenia. It was next to the main road on the other side of which was Ensanche

de Vallecas – the Vallecas extension. The last time he'd been there it was like a ghost town dotted with the skeletons of half-finished tower blocks interrupted by the economic crisis, which had brought construction in Spain to a grinding halt. It was encouraging in one sense to see the cranes working again and the buildings getting a skin over their bare bones. He could even see cars parked in the street, and one or two people were wandering about.

He sat in and ordered the cheap set menu, a glass of diet coke, and a pair of chopsticks. There was nobody else in the restaurant except for a young man who was also sitting alone. They wished each other *buen provecho* in the Spanish style, where, unlike in Britain, it was perfectly normal to wish a total stranger a 'good meal' – in fact there wasn't even a natural translation of the phrase into English.

"Excuse me, but are you English?" the young man asked shyly after they had exchanged pleasantries.

"Scottish, actually," David replied genially. "How did you guess?"

"Maybe your accent is a little different – or the cut of your clothes. I don't know. It's just that I'm trying to improve my English and I try to take every chance I can to chat to native speakers."

"No problem," David smiled. He was happy to be doing something other than looking for cyber criminals for an hour or two. "I was brought up in Scotland but worked most of my life in Spain. I'm back living in Scotland now, but just popped over to clear a few things up."

"Do you mind if we switch to English, then – if I'm not bothering you, of course."

"Not at all. Happy to help," David replied in English.

"What are you being here for, if I can ask?"

"Oh, it's complicated. I'm looking for someone who's been sending me nasty emails. It's just a boring personal thing. I'm mostly here out of curiosity. What do you do?"

The young man looked down and shuffled his napkin.

"Not much now with the economy the way it is," he admitted.

“I was at university but I had to drop out to help the family budget. Everybody’s unemployed in my family and they just couldn’t afford to support me any more. In fact, it’s looking like the house will be taken away unless we can find €10,000. I’m doing everything I can to raise some money but it’s not easy. Problem is I love Chinese food, so I come here once a week as a treat. It’s about the only treat there is nowadays!”

The food arrived for both of them, curtailing the conversation until coffee time, when David’s fellow diner started it up again. They chatted happily for another half-hour until David looked at his watch.

“Sorry,” he said. “Got to go.”

“Me too,” his new friend agreed. “Where are you heading?”

“Down into Vallecas.”

“Me too. Do you mind if I walk with you? I need all the English practice I can get!”

The bills were paid and off they went, first walking alongside the main dual carriageway past the big new police station, then down Calle Real de Arganda to the metro station, then left into the Villa.

“Where are you going?” David asked.

“Just as far as the *locutorio*. I have to send some emails and we can’t even afford a computer or broadband these days.”

“That’s a coincidence,” David remarked. “That’s where I’m going. I’m David, by the way.”

“Daniel. Pleased to meet you.”

When they arrived at the *locutorio*, David ushered Daniel in first and watched for Ricardo’s reaction. From behind the reception desk, Ricardo took a long, cool look at Daniel, then checked something on a sheet in his ring binder. Then he looked at David and gave the merest hint of a nod.

“Hi Daniel,” he said. “What are we up to today, then?”

“Oh, just the usual,” Daniel replied in as casual a tone as he could manage. “Some more emails to send. Is my usual PC free?”

Ricardo glanced over and nodded. “Sure. What sort of emails?”
Maybe it was just his imagination, but David thought Daniel was starting to look shifty.

“Oh, just some stuff. I guess you could say it’s a kind of a marketing campaign.”

“Okay, cool,” Ricardo replied. “Just the hour?”

“Yeah. Here’s the ten.”

“Okay – off you go.”

Daniel went straight to a PC located right at the back of the shop. He took something out of his pocket and laid it on the table out of sight, then he sat down.

“Him?” David asked in a whisper.

“Him. And if I’m not mistaken that’s a USB stick he’s just taken out of his pocket. Another no-no. What do you want to do?”

“I’ll let him get comfortable, then I think we’ll have a chat.”

“Coffee?”

“Of course.”

Ricardo poured two cups and handed one to David. Then he sat down behind the desk again with an expression of apparent calm, but behind it was an air of alertness and concentration – like a technician about to set off a fireworks display. David stood next to the desk and took his time with the coffee, occasionally glancing in Daniel’s direction. If their suspect had seemed nervous before, he now appeared relaxed and focused, staring intently at the screen, constantly moving and clicking the mouse and from time to time jotting something down in a notebook.

“Okay,” David said after a bit. “I think it’s time.”

“Okay,” Ricardo agreed. “In for the kill! Good luck.”

David placed his cup down in case things got boisterous and strolled over to Daniel’s desk. Daniel didn’t notice him until he was almost alongside his chair. Then he glanced up, startled, and immediately hit a key combination that flipped the screen to *World of Warcraft*.

“I thought you were sending some emails,” David said

innocently. “A bit of marketing, wasn’t it? You’ll never sell anything playing that,” he added with a disarming smile.

“Yeah, well. All work and no play,” Daniel stuttered. “I’ll get back to it in a minute.”

“In a minute when nobody’s watching?” David suggested. “Maybe it’s all very confidential. That would be entirely normal, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, confidential,” Daniel repeated stupidly. “Yeah, that’s it. It’s all very confidential.”

“Hmm,” David replied. “Would it maybe be confidential because it’s not entirely legal?”

Startled, Daniel looked up like a rabbit in the headlights.

“Legal? No, not at all. I mean yes – it’s legal. Totally legal. What do you mean?”

“I mean,” David said slowly, lowering his voice so other PC users didn’t overhear, “that you are sending out extortion emails accusing people of using porn websites, threatening to expose them by sending screenshots of their online activity and video captured from their webcams to all the names in their contacts list – unless they send you, is it \$1,000 in bitcoin, or has the price gone up now? And it *is* a market campaign in a way, isn’t it? I mean, it’s not just a one-off mail shot – this is a campaign. The Badvent campaign, if I remember correctly. By the way, can I compliment you on your use of English. It’s quite an advanced skill to take an existing English word, change one letter and twist the entire meaning. Like ‘mathlete’ for example. Someone who is like an athlete, except in maths. That’s the one I always use in English classes for Spanish speakers. Well done. Anyway, that’s a bit off the point, isn’t it? You’re sending out a series of emails leading up to Christmas quoting a real password used by the individual, which I suppose you bought on a dark web trading site – each one more threatening than the last – until the recipients totally freak out at the thought of being exposed to all of their friends and colleagues and send you some cash. For your poor struggling family, I suppose. No matter if they happen to have poor struggling families of their own.”

Daniel had mutated from a normal, healthy, tanned Spanish complexion to pure white within the first few seconds of David's calm, careful delineation of the entire scheme. His mouth was moving but no sound came out. One hand hovered over the keyboard and the other was frozen, gripping the mouse.

"How... how... how do you know?" he finally managed.

"Because I was one of your lucky – sorry, unlucky – recipients," David said with a smile. "David Hidalgo: david@southside.org, password 'warehouse66'. Look it up. Actually, I'm probably one of your early adopters. I've been in since the start. I think I've had more than six emails from you, each one nastier and more threatening than the last. Which is strange because you don't seem like a very threatening person *in person*, if you know what I mean. In fact, you're not very impressive at all, are you, Daniel? Just a guy behind a computer threatening the world. Until somebody gets upset about it and shows up to confront you. Then everything changes, I imagine. No?"

In less than a minute Daniel had gone from startled to terrified. He was already completely devoid of colour and David could now see beads of perspiration on his brow. The hand on the mouse was now shaking. He lifted both hands and rubbed them along the thighs of his jeans.

"What are you going to do?" he finally managed to stutter. "Are you going to tell the police?"

"Hmm. That's the question, isn't it?" David said thoughtfully. "I suppose I should really, shouldn't I? I mean it is totally illegal. You're breaking laws in every country you've contacted, which could be dozens, I suppose. I should think there must be twenty or thirty different jurisdictions that would be very happy to get their hands on you. It would be like a feeding frenzy. Then the question would be where you'd go to prison first. Would you serve prison sentences in each country in turn, or would they just kind of trade the penalties and add them up so you could stay with your buddies – or maybe not buddies – in one location for the entire time. I'm really not sure."

“They don’t know yet then – the police, I mean...”

“No, they do not. Not yet. At least not through me. Though Ricardo is very keen that we inform them. I mean, he needs to protect the reputation of his shop and so forth.”

“Please don’t,” Daniel pleaded. “Don’t tell the police. I was just trying to make a bit of money. In the crisis, you know. I haven’t made much. Almost nobody has paid up. I can pay it all back. Please don’t tell. I’ll do anything. I will.”

David continued standing over Daniel, who was now hunched over his keyboard, head in his hands. David hadn’t actually enjoyed turning the screw so tightly, but a bit of the panic he’d felt on receiving that first email seemed to have resurfaced and he’d started to feel more and more aggrieved and outraged as he went on. *Enough*, he thought. *Calm down. Keep it cool.*

“Anything?” he asked after a pause.

Daniel looked up hopefully. In the midst of the awful realization that the game was entirely up, the one thing he could see clearly was that now was not the time to start bargaining.

“Sure,” he said with a glimmer of hope. “Anything.”

“Okay,” David said thoughtfully. “We’ll talk about that. Close your programmes, take that USB stick out of the slot, and let’s go for a drink.”

Daniel got up in a daze and followed David out of the shop. Ricardo relieved him of his USB stick as they walked past reception and threw it in the bin – then thought better of it and fished it out again. Daniel didn’t seem to have any will to protest left. David led him across the tree-lined avenue to a bar on the other side of the street that still had tables out despite the time of year. They sat and David ordered a glass of Rioja. Daniel was still too shell-shocked to be able to understand the process, so David simply asked for another glass.

“Right,” he began. “My name is David Hidalgo. I suppose I am on the illegal database you bought. And you call yourself Dan Truelove. What’s your real name?”

“Daniel Fernandez Garcia,” Daniel replied, as meek as a lamb.

“Okay, that’s progress. Now, whether I report you to the police currently hangs in the balance. I’m sure you’re aware of the lovely modern police station we passed at the roundabout on Real de Arganda. As a matter of fact I used to be quite friendly with Miguel, one of the sergeants. In any case, Ricardo has your ID details and your address, so one way or another it would be an easy matter for you to be interviewed and charged. Do you understand?”

Daniel nodded dumbly. The drinks arrived and David took sip of his, but Daniel simply stared as if he didn’t know what it was.

“However,” David went on, “we’re not quite at that stage. I came to Madrid to find out who was scamming me and why. So, over to you. Convince me why we shouldn’t go straight to the police. What’s your story?”

“I’m unemployed and I needed the money,” Daniel whispered, examining the table in front of him. “And I’ve got some debts.”

“What debts? Why?”

“My family aren’t very well off, but my mum wanted me to go to university so she took some loans to pay the fees, and for books and things. I said I’d pay her back as soon as I got a job, but they couldn’t afford for me to continue so I dropped out. Now I don’t have a degree, I’m no better off for finding work, and I owe more than €40,000. I saw a thread about a scam on Reddit and I thought I could do it. So I bought the emails and passwords, then I copied one of the other scam emails and started sending them out.

“Did you spare any thought about how alarming and upsetting your threats might be to the people who received the emails?”

Daniel said nothing and just shook his head.

“I needed the money,” he finally muttered.

“And how much did you make?”

“Less than €2,000.”

“Where is it now?”

“Still in the Bitcoin account.”

“So you can pay that back without any problem.”

“I guess.”

“Okay. That’s the first condition for not turning this over to the police.”

David took another sip of his wine and pushed Daniel’s glass toward him till he noticed it and picked it up. He raised it to his lips then put it back on the table as if he were a robot rather than a human being.

“So you were studying and couldn’t afford to continue. What and where?”

“Complutense University in Madrid. Law. I did two years and I had a couple of placements in criminal law firms. I passed all my exams. I actually got a class prize in the first year for an assignment about wrongful convictions. I was enjoying it, but I guess I was spending too much money as well. I wanted to be like everyone else. You know, go out, party a bit. But a lot of the other law students came from really well-off families. Their fathers and mothers were lawyers or worked in the financial sector. It costs a fortune just living, even before paying for the books and other stuff. I’d love to finish. I’d go anywhere and do anything to make it happen, but I know it’s impossible. It was a dream and now it’s over.” He shook his head. “I’m totally screwed.”

David said nothing for a bit, just looking at the man in front of him. Finally, he got up.

“Hang on here, Daniel. I’ve a couple of phone calls to make.” He took out his mobile and walked out of earshot, keeping his eyes on Daniel as he dialled and spoke. He eventually came back to the table.

“Okay, Daniel, here’s the deal. You are going to pay the money back, of course. I think we’re agreed on that. Secondly, you will send an email to everybody who received a threatening message explaining what was going on, apologizing, and reassuring them that it was a scam. You don’t have to give your identity in this. Okay so far?”

Daniel nodded again, as if he had Mike Tyson opposite him and was agreeing to shine his shoes as an alternative to going fifteen rounds.

“And finally,” David concluded, “you will meet me here at ten tomorrow morning with your passport and a case packed as if you were going on holiday.”

Daniel finally looked up.

“Why?” he asked. “What for?”

“Because you’re going on holiday. But not to jail. I’ve had a better idea.”

Gillian met them at Edinburgh airport. David introduced her to Daniel, who still hadn’t managed to pull himself together. From appearances, he might as well have just landed on Mars. They drove into town and parked round the corner from Southside Fellowship’s Newington location. They went into a Costa across the road and sat down at a table. Irene MacInnes was waiting for them.

“Well, young man, I’m very pleased to meet you,” she began brightly, shaking his hand. “I’m not sure how David does it, you know, but you are an answer to prayer; just exactly what we’re looking for. And in exchange for what you’re going to do for us, my friend Mrs Buchanan will be delighted to put you up in her spare room.”

Daniel looked at Mrs MacInnes, then at Gillian, and finally at David.

“I don’t understand,” he said in his best English. “I can’t pay for accommodation and meals.”

Mrs MacInnes was scandalized.

“Who said anything about paying?” she demanded. “I’ve explained the situation to Mrs Buchanan and she told me she’d love to have someone to cook for and look after again. Things just haven’t been the same since her Henry passed away five years ago. So there’ll be no talk of paying, that’s settled. David here knows where she lives. You can pop along there any time this afternoon and get acquainted.”

Daniel shook his head again as if trying to shake a bunch of puzzle pieces into place so they'd form some kind of coherent picture.

"Okay, I guess," he finally managed, at which point Mrs MacInnes, her job done, picked up her handbag, beamed a smile at all concerned, and headed for the street.

"So what now?" Daniel stuttered. "I'm in Edinburgh. I'm getting free accommodation and food. I'm not in jail. I don't understand."

"Well, you told me in Vallecas you'd do anything rather than be reported," David said slowly. "Correct?"

Daniel nodded again.

"And you'd do anything and go anywhere to finish your studies in law. Also correct?"

Another nod.

"Well, I had an idea and a conversation with Gillian here. Gillian, do you want to pick this up?"

Just at that point a waitress appeared at their table. David ordered three coffees, one cup of strong tea, and a plate of bread and butter if they could manage it. Daniel looked utterly confused but hadn't the heart to ask what was going on now. An order for four but there were only three of them there. Nothing had made any sense for the last twenty-four hours. If anything, he was getting used to living in an inexplicable whirl of conversations and events that seemed to bear no relation to one another. It was as if he had somehow fallen through the looking glass into a mad world of non sequiturs, actions with no consequences, and consequences with no cause.

"Well, Daniel," Gillian said, taking up the story. "You studied law but didn't finish, but you did well academically, you say. The problem was financial, yes? Okay. Well, you're here now to get something and to give something. I work at the university. I had a word yesterday with one of my colleagues at the law faculty. They offer an international programme for European Union citizens who are unable to study due to financial hardship. Obviously, it hasn't been decided yet, but he is willing to interview you if you wish to continue – or even finish – your law degree in Edinburgh. Would you like that?"

Daniel looked completely dazed and unable to respond, more like a man who had seen a terrifying ghost than a rabbit in the headlights.

“Would you like that?” Gillian repeated. “You can easily go back to Madrid if not.”

“Ye... ye... yes,” Daniel finally managed. “But why are you doing this?”

“Because,” Gillian continued, “you can do something for us. Some legal work, in fact, while you’re studying – if you get in. I know you won’t be qualified to present anything in court, but you can do some very valuable research and a qualified Scots lawyer or advocate can take it from there. Okay?”

This time Daniel managed a yes and a nod, which seemed like progress.

“Fine. So the assignment you got a class prize in was about wrongful conviction, wasn’t it? Great. Well, we believe someone we care very much about has been the victim of a wrongful conviction.”

By this time the light was beginning to dawn ever so slightly in Daniel’s mind, and for the first time he looked as if he understood something and was paying attention.

“Who?” he asked simply. At that moment the door opened and a tall, skinny man wearing a leather jacket with holes in the elbows came in. He immediately spotted the threesome and broke into a grin.

“Hullo there, Davie!” he beamed. “Hoo’s it goan, man? Izis the lawyer bloke? Magic. Ah canna wait tae git started an’ that. We’ll get on jist magic.” He stuck a paw out in Daniel’s direction. “Pleezed tae meet ye’ an’ that. Am really grateful yiv offered to help us... This is gonna be ma best Christmas fur years!”

Seeing a mystified look across the table, he stopped abruptly in mid flow. “Aw, sorry pal. Wiv nivir akchully met yet, huv wi? Plized tae meet ye. Hooz it goan, Danny? Ma name’s Charlie!”

David and Gillian walked arm in arm up Marchmont Road. It was a cold evening and the first flakes of snow were beginning to fall.

“And you say women are manipulative,” Gillian remarked.

“That was some performance. I’d have to say a bit on the pushy side at the very least.”

“Well, he did agree to do anything, anywhere,” David countered. “And he needed a push – a big push.”

“You certainly gave him that. I almost felt sorry for him, sitting there as if his great granny had just risen from the dead and was giving him a good talking to. He was half confused and half terrified, poor soul.”

“Ha!” David barked. “Not that poor. Remember I was the poor soul when I opened up his first email. Sorry, but I don’t have much sympathy. He deserved a wake-up call. Anyway, if your colleagues in the law department play ball he has a course of study, accommodation, and food. We can maybe even manage to give him some sort of allowance for books and pocket money. And we’ll find out if Charlie’s case is really appealable or not. What I’d like to see is the conviction revoked and compensation for all these wasted years. Then maybe he’d get back some of his self-respect and be able to live a proper life.”

The snow was becoming heavier as they walked on and their footprints were beginning to show on the pavement.

“Maybe two lives can be turned around,” Gillian reflected. “That would be a great theme for one of your Christmas talks: renewal, renovation, a new start. It’s what the incarnation is all about, isn’t it?”

David looked thoughtful as they walked on.

“Maybe,” he accepted, “but that’s for another year. I wouldn’t embarrass them this year. In any case, we have no idea how it’s all going to pan out. It might come to nothing yet.”

“You’re such a pessimist, David Hidalgo,” Gillian said, with feeling. “I have no idea why I agreed to marry you, I really don’t!”

“For my wit, wisdom, and charm?”

“It must be. After all, you’re totally useless at rehabilitating internet criminals, rescuing homeless down-and-outs, and putting them together for mutual benefit.”

“You’re right,” he agreed gloomily. “I’ll have to take up with a wonderful woman who can show me the error of my ways.”

“I know just the woman to do it,” Gillian said.

She hugged his arm and turned to plant a kiss on his cheek. He looked round just in time and got it on the kisser.

“Love you, my best girl,” he said.

“I love you, best boy. And happy Christmas when it comes.”

Large flakes of snow were falling on them like a blessing.

“Happy Christmas, my love.”