

The Grey Pilgrim's Gambit

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Chapter 1

September the twenty ninth began like any chilled out, suburban Sunday. The only matter worth noting was Maddy's hangover from her forty first celebration the evening before. But Maddy's Sunday ended before midnight, and it triggered a cataclysm for her sister, Detective Inspector Sam Hawk.

Every second counted. Maddy needed to get to the Little Ouse as fast as possible; wrestling with the fear she may already be too late. The deepening gloom a reality not just in her mood. She switched on the headlights. Her sepia world contracted into the narrowing achromatic tunnel of trees along the black, decaying leaf slim Thetford Road. A remote voice on her mobile confirmed the route to her destination. Surprised and relieved to see the open pole barrier at the junction she needed; the Mondeo swept off the metalled surface onto a shingle-surfaced forest track; she wouldn't have to run the last mile. Trees and bushes pressed in closer. Caution abandoned. Her breath shallow and panting - the sprint to the finish line. The car's engine fluttered and surged as she accelerated harder, breaking late into black hollows and bends. The car crested the rising forest track, its headlights bursting high into the cathedral arch of skeletal, branches before dipping back onto the gravel drive. Without warning, a child's pushchair flashed into view. Confusing impressions burned into Maddy's mind's eye; was there a child? No time to make sense of it. She wrenched the steering wheel over; gripping it tighter, aware of sweat on her hands. A thump. The pushchair vanished from the headlight beam. She screamed; over-breaking; her mind a trauma of consequences. The car danced and skidded on the adverse camber before the track disappeared to the left. The last image before the grinding of metal - the violent impact and shock of deceleration - a blackened ancient, scarred oak; a 300-year-old roadside sentinel.

The misfiring of the dying engine; the idle clicking of a spinning wheel; ruptured radiator coolant escaping; intruded into the deadening silence of the forest. Maddy coughed in a fog of dust and dirt from the deployed air bag. Groaning as much in emotional anguish as physical pain. She couldn't grasp how she could be numb and yet ache all over. Maddy pushed the deflating bag to one side. She tentatively moved, discovering that the crumpled front of the Mondeo had folded in and trapped her feet and lower legs. Maddy sighed with frustration but grateful to have survived, then with an involuntary small cry she remembered the pushchair. She had to get out. But no amount of tugging and wriggling loosened the entombed grip. Her fingers felt around the wreckage of her surroundings. Where had her handbag and mobile gone? The mess puzzling and chaotic. Maddy lay back, exhausted, trying to think past her thumping headache. What were her options? So far from the main road. Would her student, whose dramatic text had been the trigger for her journey, come looking for her? Had she heard the crash? Would anyone be around at this time of the evening? And then... Had she imagined it? A movement and the scrunch of gravel underfoot.

“Hello? Please help.”

A shadowy figure of a man materialised by her door. He was unnaturally motionless - a trick of the evanescent light? But he was no hallucination. She went to speak, puzzled by his behaviour. There were no words of comfort. No enquiry as to her injuries. The man moved. He wrenched the rear door open. Forest scented air rushed in, washing away the stale fumes.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said, surprised by the rasping, guttural sound of her voice. “Is your child safe? The pushchair? I am so sorry.” She couldn't help the garbled, stumbling words, “I must get out. One of my students needs my help. Down by the river. I am so sorry about all this.”

The figure's silence disturbed Maddy. She could not explain why. "I need your help, please. Please, I beg you."

The car bounced as the man clambered behind her into the Mondeo. Her seat cranked back. She could hear laboured breathing with each violent turn of the adjustment wheel. He removed the head rest from its mounting. Two strong gloved hands located her shoulders: assured movements, but they were not attempting to pull her clear. Fingers pressured either side of her head, seeking leverage.

Her skin tingled. Adrenalin primeval response. She realised the man intended her harm.

"No... No. No... Please."

She thrashed wildly, wrestling with the grim spectre's grip. His muscular strength did not yield, pulling her head back, discovering a point of resistance as he twisted her skull. Her muscles shook with exhaustion: her legs trembled as terror gripped her bladder. Tears of anguish splashed from her cheeks.

Maddy's final thoughts of her elder sister Sam left alone in the world. Distraught. "No," she screamed. "Please - my sister - plea..."

The sinewy scrunch of bone cut through the words. A pitiful whimpering mew echoed into the night.

Chapter 2

Detective Chief Inspector Sam Hawk ignored the high pitched whine of the mosquitos and every other hungry blood-sucking bug tormenting the exposed skin of her face and hands. A dry raised patch of marsh sedge in the mud flats hid her location from both the nearby Norfolk Coastal Path and any boats approaching the land from Holkham Bay. The sea-brine wind eddied with the stench of pervasive mud methane from rotting vegetation. It would require several machine washes to rid her camouflage clothing of the odour. Exhausted and irritable, her agitation had spiralled with her mobile phone; the inert screen wouldn't respond to commands. She was perplexed. It wasn't the battery, but another technological gremlin she couldn't deal with in the field. Nothing had gone right with her evening. She frowned, recalling the police mantra for surveillance - *a copper on stakeout always comes a cropper* - long hours and a poor return on intelligence. But Sam had high confidence in the latest tip off. Each one from a reliable source brought her closer to the smuggling gang using the isolated Norfolk coastline. Sam pulled up the cuff of her jacket and examined the self-illuminating military watch, a legacy from her RMP days. It was 01.40, thirty-seven minutes past the high-tide mark. Her suspects should have landed in the River Burn estuary near Gun Hill, Scolt Head, before 01.00. But it was a no show. The rip tide and ebb currents would make the risk of getting marooned on a mud bar too risky.

Despite the disappointment, there had been some positive moments. Sam had arrived early evening to establish her location well away from prying eyes. In the late autumn sun, there had been time to scan the shoreline and incoming tide. She hoped to see a Peregrine Falcon. Memories of her late father's bird watching expeditions flooded back. Not an unexpected hobby with the family name of *Hawk*; maybe obsession would be a more accurate description, especially with the raptor. Her father could barely disguise his pleasure at discovering a keen birdwatcher in one of his daughters.

Equalled in the measure of disappointment his wife expressed, who wanted the traditional mother-daughter relationship with her two girls.

Sam preferred the wild, natural world. But it wasn't till much later that she appreciated her teenage rebellion was in part a reaction to the tensions between her parents; and a mother who wanted more and eventually found it in another man; her unexpected departure, abrupt and devastating. Three years later, her father died in a coach crash while on holiday in the Italian Alps. It drove Sam over the edge. She abruptly signed up with the armed forces. An event that left her younger; her sister Maddy bereft; her need for security and companionship crushed; the suffocating demands were beyond Sam's ability to cope. In contrast, she hungered for anonymity, determined not to be emotionally vulnerable again. All these years later, Sam accepted the hurt and confusion she had inflicted on her sister. But the present was all that mattered. Sam had finally found peace. The past was just that. She couldn't change it, not that she was sure she would if she could. Sam was long past regrets. The mental and physical trauma of her military life had made her resilient and independent.

Sam cast aside the memories and breathed deep. She rolled over and stared up into the opaque and grubby night. The smothering cloud cover a disappointment. There should have been glorious starlight so far from urban light pollution. The mournful cry of a seabird caught her attention. From an early age, she associated the sound with death and a passing soul. In the distance, she heard the faint bark of a dog. The air scythed through the tall grasses and several hundred metres away, the timeless rumble of breaking waves cast a spell. The harmony of the coastal marshes coloured the dark with life. Nearby a screech; an alarm call warning of a predator? A precursor to imminent danger? Experience had taught never to ignore nature. Twisting onto her front, she scanned the horizon once more with her infrared binoculars. Nothing.

She was still loathed to leave just in case the smugglers had mistimed their landing. But resigned to failure, she got to her feet, easing her stiff muscles to regain a sense of balance before the uneven tramp back to her unmarked police car. She scooped up her day pack and set off, waving away an invisible, swarming drone of high-pitched mosquitos that persistently hooded her head. Her mobile LED light was sufficient for her to locate the dry cankers of higher ground between the sucking tendrils of mud. She didn't rush - pause, hop - pause, hop. It took an age of energy sapping stumbling before her cramped legs found relief on the solid ground of the rough stone vehicle-turning circle where the sea had given up its invasive efforts. The parking area had room for three cars; barely sheltered from the elements by tall reeds and scrub willows. Sam staggered to a halt in disbelief. The white myopic light revealed someone had broken into her car. They had pushed the vehicle back into a deep drainage ditch: it resembled a mechanical dinosaur rearing up with its front wheels, uselessly pawing the air, partially blocking the access track.

Sam stopped herself swearing out loud in case the thieves were still nearby. She made a quick, awkward search, grunting with the effort of keeping the elevated driver's door open. They were lucky she hadn't caught them in the act. It was too dark to examine all the damage. The thieves had removed all items of value. She hissed her frustration. The comms., were missing, ripped out of their housing. She could have called for assistance. But now stolen police property would cause her no end of grief back at Region. Resigned to the inevitable bureaucracy and criticism, she let the door slammed shut under its own weight. Sam stepped away, baffled. Why hadn't the car alarm activated? Why not steal the car? But it also had the look of wanton vandalism? She flexed her head and breathed deep to release the tension in her neck muscles. Speculation was pointless. It could wait till daybreak. She now had a long, arduous trek to the nearest public road. Sam removed her night stick before shouldering her bag again and set off. She didn't need her mobile light and switched off her phone to save the battery. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark. The gravel roadway

lighter, ashen grey, bordered by the impenetrable shadowed landscape. Sam moved silently, close to the edge of the vegetation, making herself small and invisible. Her military instincts ingrained. The vandals could still be close by.

Chapter 3

Voracious acrid smoke lit from beneath by a convulsive blood red fire billowed up, ghosting through the Thetford Forest canopy into the night sky. Ominous popping of melting radial steel tyres betrayed the root source. In the distance there were faint echoes, growing stronger - the long wailing cry of fire tender, followed minutes later by a resonating ambulance siren and finally by the lower pitch call of a blue and two, some distance behind the others. Rippling phosphorescent light intermittently broke the distant forest shroud, tracking the emergency vehicles' progress as they descended onto the crash scene. A resounding thump, roar and crackle of firefly sparks answered back.

Sergeant Mike Wilson had 28 years of police experience with the Norfolk constabulary. It brought assured confidence and unflappability, at least on the surface, to the casual observer. There was little he had not dealt with. Wilson knew all too well the reported accident spot he was travelling towards. He had attended over nine RTAs at the notorious bend over the last decade. It had claimed three lives. His shoulders slumped. He was bone tired of the waste. His fatigue wasn't just about the futility of life, or his age or broken sleep. It was the job. Two more years till mandatory retirement from the force didn't sound long, but Wilson's disillusionment led him to calculate he had over half a million minutes to survive. To survive the cutbacks: the work overload and disrespect from the crap of humanity. He shook his head to rid himself of the self-pitying thoughts.

The last junction on the road to the crash site appeared in his headlights. Wilson pulled over and levered himself out of his patrol car. He unloaded the road closed and diversion signs and the warning lamps. Switched on, they intermittently illuminated the proficient movements of a balding officer who appeared overburdened by a bulky hi-vis jacket that hid a stab vest. Wilson inspected his work and nodded to himself, satisfied with his unremarkable achievement. He stood for a

moment, transfixed by the yellow strobing lights, listening to the dark silence. He knew the ambulance and fire brigade had arrived on site. It confirmed they were attending to the driver and any passengers and putting out the car fire. His priorities were to close vehicular and public access and secure the scene. He disliked night-time accidents. It was all too easy to miss evidence for his initial assessment that would inform his report to the Roads Accident team. As he clambered back into his patrol car, he consoled himself with the thought that at least it wasn't raining and if the weather forecast was to be believed, it should stay dry for the next twenty-four hours; enough time to complete his work.

Pulling in behind the ambulance, the situation confronting Sergeant Wilson left him with a sinking feeling. The crew were standing by the front of the vehicle in deep conversation. Its rear doors were closed. Beyond them, the fire engine's powerful lights brightly illuminated the crash site. It's undulating roar a life force for the men clad in heavy retardant clothing lumbering around it. There were no flames but a vast expanse of foam surrounding the blackened vehicle and oak headstone. Wilson drew in a deep breath and gradually exhaled, resigned to the likelihood of another death and its inevitable consequences. An inescapable routine of lengthy enquiries. The victim's immediate circle faced a fraught, emotional journey drawn out by an adjourned inquest process; months would pass before the delivery of that hackneyed phrase - closure for the family and loved ones. Wilson nodded to the ambulance crew, who acknowledged his presence with resigned shrugs. There was nothing to say. The crew commander broke away from the scene and walked to meet him. Pulling off his breathing apparatus (BA), he raised a hand to Wilson to stop where he was. It pleased both men to see each other. They had served roughly the same time and attended together more incidents than either would care to remember.

“Can you stay back for a bit Mike, the wreck's still a toxic mess. Thankfully, they are a rarity.”

“Just the one. The driver, medium build, can’t tell you much else from what we can see.”

“Okay, I’ll wait here. Straight forward, do you think?”

“Ah. Hold that thought we need to get better access to the car. Something is odd.”

Commander Tom Haye replaced his BA as he returned to his men. Mike didn’t like Tom’s uncertainty. Odd, equalled complications. That would mean every detail, including circumstantial issues, would require confirmation or elimination. As he stepped back to return to his patrol car, his foot caught something metal on the roadway. He flicked on his flashlight and looked for the cause. It was the reverse side of a vehicle registration marque (VRM). He crouched down onto the damp road surface, groaning with stiffness, his curiosity roused. It was a strange place to find a VRM. It was an inexplicable anomaly. He used his pen to flip it over. Was he imagining it? Were the black stains in the artificial light blood smears? They looked significant and fresh. He looked back toward the crash scene. Was it connected? It wasn’t possible to tell if it was from the vehicle.

The registration was familiar. It was telling him something. He frowned, searching back through images and situations to trigger the memory. Then it hit him; a sickening gut punch; he fervently hoped he was wrong. Leaning heavily on one hand, he struggled back to his feet and took several steps towards the crash site, desperate to get closer. But he stopped. Tom’s warning was clear.

Wilson waved his flashlight to attract their attention. He needed confirmation that the burned-out vehicle was missing a plate. One firefighter noticed and tapped his commander’s shoulder, pointing back towards Mike. He felt guilty watching as his approaching colleague struggled back out of his BA again, but Wilson had no other option.

“Problem Mike?”

“Hope not, Tom, but I have a bad feeling about this. Can you confirm whether the vehicle is missing a VRM? I have one here.” He flashed the torch on the plate. “I recognise the number and I bloody hope it doesn’t belong to that car.”

“Okay, wait one.” There was no hint of criticism in his tone.

The Commander returned to his team. Mike paced back and forth. It took an age. He watched the gesticulations and sign language. Eventually, the foam was washed free of the rear of the vehicle. For a moment, no one moved. The men began a search around the car. Mike could see the Commander listening to his men. How Tom heard anything over the pulsing grunt of the tender’s engine was beyond Mike. An exhausting backdrop to the unfolding drama. As he observed the performance, it reminded him of the spotlight characters in a surreal, macabre play. Once more, Tom exited the limelight. Mike could see Tom’s sweat plastered silver hair, and the exhaustion etched on his face. Fighting fires was tough enough without all the heavy protective equipment. He felt contrite about the many times he had griped about his safety gear.

“There is no plate. It isn’t there. And that’s not all. The car is a diesel, and the fire doesn’t appear to have originated in the engine. I can’t be certain, but the circumstances of this incident are suspicious.”

“Shit.”

“Not the information you wanted to hear, I guess. Who does the car belong to?”

Mike hesitated, not because he didn't trust his colleague and friend, but because there was no going back once he spoke his thoughts out loud. Not that he had any option.

"It belongs to one of our own Tom."

He sighed... No turning back now; he thought - *the suspicious circumstances of the death of DI Sam Hawk.*

The intermittent buzzing wouldn't leave DCI Mark Hood alone. The noise remained irritatingly out of reach in his dreams, but try as he may, he could not ignore it. Mark leapt from incomprehension to realisation at the abrupt recognition of the source. It triggered an instinctive response born of years in the force. He was sitting on the side of his bed; his mind was playing catch up. Mark searched simultaneously for the lamp switch and phone. He found the first and swept the second onto the carpeted floor. The buzzing stopped.

He shuddered with the shock – he'd never got used to calls in the night. Mark rubbed his beard and ruffled his greying hair, a habitual delaying tactic familiar to colleagues. The pain of waking alone clawed at his mind. He dreaded going to sleep because he would have to wake up. Ten months, one week... how many days he couldn't think what day it was.... seemed like yesterday. It was a lifetime ago. His wife's antineoplastic medication gathered dust on the dressing table. Everything remained as it had been. He felt shame. He hadn't kept the house the way Caroline would have done, but he was alone and adrift. Hood hated coming home: he hated eating alone: he hated himself for being so weak: he hated she had left him. The buzzing started again. He stared at the

pulsing light and drew a deep breath as the adrenalin surged. DCI Mark Hood reached down. He could escape again.

The trip to the accident site brought mixed emotions. Sam's death was devastating. Not least because she reminded him of his daughter Sarah, who had died three years before his wife, but the consequence of her death was the catalyst for what had followed. The consultant had speculated that the shock had impacted his wife's metabolism and probably led to the cancer. The knowledge made him angry, and it didn't resolve any of the guilt he experienced; that Sarah's death hadn't impacted him as badly as Caroline. He had felt shame every time he looked into her eyes or held her in his arms.

Hood pushed aside the deadening thoughts of the phone call and tried to focus on memories of his DI. But the Sam he knew was already slipping away from him; a defiant face he wouldn't see again. He sucked in a lungful of air and shook his head. He owed it to her to stay in the game. *Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never...* quotes were just one of her many traits.

Sam Hawk had left a distinguished career with the Royal Military Police Special Investigation Branch before joining the Norfolk Constabulary. She had been a flier. There was a period of her military service that was a taboo subject, involving her and a colleague being kidnapped in Afghanistan. It was a dark period, which he had been partly privy to as her superior. But he never discussed it. Despite her experiences, she was deceptively strong in mind and body and determined no one would ever take advantage of her again. The experience underpinned her rapid progression through uniform to Detective Chief Inspector. Hood recalled how he had initially under-estimated his DI. The truth, as he came to appreciate, was more complex. Sam created the impression that she was not a threat. He had observed many colleagues and criminals make that misjudgement;

allowing her to get under their guard. And she had an uncanny knack of finding behavioural patterns others overlooked.

Hood's tired, gritty eyes watered at the abrupt flashing headlights of the few oncoming cars. Then the thought hit him. He would have to tell Maddy that her sister was dead. Estranged for most of their adult life. The two women, so unlike each other in manner and looks, had rebuilt their relationship in the last year. There were no other surviving family members Hood knew of.

The desolation of loneliness threatened to overwhelm Hood. Deja vu. He slammed his fists on the steering wheel. The car swerved. He grabbed it back under control. His heart thudded in his chest.

He cursed the injustice. "Damn it... Damn it to hell."

After the long miles between his home and in the early morning darkness, he arrived to confront a situation he really wished was a bad dream. He pulled in behind Sergeant Wilson's car and took a few moments to assess the scene. Silhouettes of the firefighters appeared frozen against the floodlights. Icy breath betrayed life. Hood had been off duty, but as Sam Hawk's superior, they had forwarded the incident report to him. The change in shifts would bring in the Traffic Justice Unit and the forensic team to replace the first responders. But for now, it was Hood and Uniform. As he emerged from his car, the figures came back to life. He stretched his tall languid frame, easing the stiffness due in part to old rugby injuries – common enough for a 'lock' in his day. But that was a long time ago. He had bulked up, a heavily built man with a reputation in the force as a temperate plodder. His investigation style and lack of ambition did nothing to endear him to his Chief Constable or her minions. Despite his traits, or perhaps because of them, his clear up rate was better than average. He did not rush to conclusions or follow the herd instinct. He had built a small

idiosyncratic loyal team who shared his values and operational methods. A team that had now suffered a painful loss.

Sergeant Wilson approached, relieved it was DCI Hood. He didn't treat the uniform branch as gofers. In the half-light at the edge of the illuminated crash site, both men reviewed the scene.

“Any update Mike?”

“Fraid not, sir. I sent the ambulance crew back. Nothing for them to do here. I have secured access to the accident site.”

Hood nodded his understanding. “Who reported it? Do we have a witness? First on the scene?”

Wilson shook his head. “No. Not seen a soul. Odd, but not unusual. Some people don't want to get involved.”

Hood nodded; his attention wandered again. *Why was Sam here; what had happened?*

Wilson waited. An awkward silence developed until he broke the spell. “There is little more I can do here, sir.”

“Okay Mike. Right... Yes... Sorry. I'll report in. I'll get things moving.” He paused for a moment.

“You did a good job... Whatever the outcome from this, my thanks.”

He saw the DI's death was personal to Hood and decided he didn't want the DCI to think he didn't care.

"DI Hawk?"

"Yes?"

"She was in your team?"

"Yes. Direct report to me. Not part of the major crime team or their activities."

"What was she working on? Could it be a reason for this?"

"Far too early to say. She was undercover. We had no hint we had compromised the stakeout." He struggled to keep his frustration and sense of loss under control. She shouldn't have been here. The operation was far away from this location.

A figure broke away from the knot of firefighters around the burnt-out wreck. Heavy boots raked the gravel road. Once more, the Commander removed his BA. He stopped a few meters away from Hood and Mike, aware of the repugnant odour of the car's poisonous plastic, rubber and chemical cocktail of fumes that clung to his uniform. His smoke-stained face broke briefly into an acknowledging smile. "Good to see you, Mark. Sorry circumstances are grim."

"It is what it is. Any hope we have it wrong?"

Mike noted with relief the inclusive question – not that he had got it wrong.

Tom grimaced. “The wrecks still too hot for the forensic team. May need a few more hours before your people can confirm our initial assessment.”

Hood accepted the reality of the circumstances. “No point in rushing. Need to get it right. Want nothing missed. Daylight would be better for them. What about the plate Mike spotted?”

“The Mondeo is wrapped around the tree, but from what we can see, the front one is a partial match for the VRM.”

“And the driver, any chance it could be a joy rider... stolen?” Hood knew he was grasping at straws. Had there been other passengers? One of them could have reported that accident? But as he considered the possibility, he remembered the message from control that Sam’s mobile was going to voicemail, which was unusual.

“The fire was intensive. Significant damage to the flesh, shrinkage is normal, severe contortion but I am certain as I can be at this stage that it’s a woman of medium stature.” Tom’s words were professional, without emotion.

But Hood recoiled; the victim wasn’t an unknown Jane Doe. It took him a few seconds to recover his composure. The tone of his voice resigned to the inevitable situation. “In summary, we have a vehicle make and model, and a victim that matches my DI’s description... We will go with that... The time is....”

Hood searched his pocket for his phone, but Mike saved him the trouble - looking at his watch.

“01.08”

Tom Hays held up a hand. “I don’t want to add to your problems, Mark, but the fire is suspicious. Cars catching fire at an accident are rare. And it didn’t start in the engine compartment. I would suggest someone started it deliberately.”

Hood’s shoulders slumped. That was a twist he wasn’t prepared for. He studied his friend’s sweat-stained face and eventually nodded. “Understood.”

The information complicated the hell out of the incident. He gathered his thoughts. “Okay. Let’s keep everything tight.” He turned to Mike. “Head back to your traffic control point and stop any inquisitive Twitters or Instagram wannabes from getting up here. I don’t want Sam’s last image, to be a burnt corpse on social media.”

Mike and Tom nodded in unison and walked away. Hood returned to his car and collected a heavy coat. He leaned back against the bonnet to feel the remnant heat from the engine as the cold seeped into his feet; unwilling to leave his DI, even though there was nothing he could do. He tried to contact control and discovered there was no mobile coverage. Hood frowned. Where had the original call come from? Another anomaly? He pulled gloves out of the pockets of his coat and hugged them closer around his body. The questions could wait for the answers. There was nowhere else he wanted to be. So much heartache in recent years had burned him out. And the thought of telling Sam’s sister Maddy filled him with dread.

Chapter 4

It was close to 0300 when Sam arrived at the end of the track. It had been an uneventful walk; with no suggestion the car thieves were still in the area. She had one piece of luck as soon as she reached the highway. A vicar or priest drove the first car to pull up. Sam wasn't sure of the denomination, not that it mattered. The clergyman explained he was returning to Norwich after Ministration of the Last Rites to a parishioner and expressed concern at discovering Sam alone on the roadside. Sam vaguely referred to her car breaking down, but when she mentioned she was a police officer, he appeared reassured and left Sam at peace with her thoughts. She was grateful he resisted his profession's empathy and need to fill the silence.

Sam waved off her good Samaritan on Unthank Road before walking the last two hundred metres down Grosvenor Road to her home. She paused outside the Victorian terrace to her second-floor flat. Her car was missing. She looked around before noticing Maddy's vehicle had flat tyres. It appeared her sister was also having problems, but her absence so late was worrying. Sam climbed the three heavily foot worn stone steps to the building, hesitated and looked for any sign of Maddy. Sam shook her head and frowned at the unusual situation, before turning her attention to the illuminated keypad and tapping in the pin code. The security lock clicked open. She checked over her shoulder one more time, then entered the oak panelled, brown and red geometric tiled hall. Motion sensor energy lights flickered on – the initial dull glow never had time to reach full illumination before switching off again. Sam silently made her way up the wide, carpeted stairs.

Sam reached her floor and froze.