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Opening Extract from...

Good People

Written by Ewart Hutton

Published by Blue Door

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EWART HUTTON

Good People



blue door

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For Annie, Mercedes and Calum

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I could have gone home by a different route, I could have driven a lot slower, but it was late, the end of a long and tedious day. My inner child was nudging, so I let the self-centred little bastard slip out of his cage. It would be a distraction, and I would only be adding a couple of minor new enemies.

Boy was that going to prove to be one great big painful underestimation.

The squad car was off to the side, parked up on a stakeout for hayseed drunks, just where their radio chatter had placed them. I caught a glimpse of it in my headlights as I crested the hill. Getting on for close to midnight, and I was tramping it.

They pulled out behind me, their full light rig coming on to crank up the drama. I played with them down through a few safe bends, and then pulled over to give them at least the start of their Stormtrooper moment.

'Detective Sergeant Glyn Capaldi.' I grinned up into their torch beam and waved my warrant card.

Now they were truly regretting it. Driver and Shotgun, both of them young. They knew me by reputation. Hawked up and spat out of Cardiff, and put out to graze in the tundra. And here I was with my Jonah vibe ranged out over their rear seat. And I was drinking their coffee supply. I was no longer in a hurry. This had

turned into my Saturday night. The ratshit investigation I was working on had left it too late for me to make it to The Fleece in Dinas before closing time.

The talk was desultory. They didn't quite trust me enough to bitch about the job. We stuck mainly to the safe subjects of high-performance cars we had chased, and gruesome RTA's attended.

Their call sign broke through an undercurrent of static on the radio. Shotgun picked up the handset eagerly.

I leaned forward to rest my arms on the back of his seat. 'I speak Welsh,' I warned him cheerily. It was mainly a lie – my Italian was better, and that wasn't good – but he didn't need to know that.

But he ran with the bluff and took the call in English. A minibus driver had reported being hijacked and abandoned in a lay-by.

'Been nice having your company, Sarge,' Driver said, strapping in, and starting the engine up.

I eased myself over to the door. 'I'll follow you down. It's on my way home.'

They didn't like it, but they didn't argue. Arguing would have kept me in their car.

I pulled out behind them. With their blue strobe turned off, the night had got big again. Gradations of darkness, treetops in serrated silhouette, the loom of the hills against the paler sky, dishcloth shreds of clouds trawling in from the west. Rain before morning – my newly acquired Pig Wales lore.

We found the minibus driver sheltering in a telephone booth outside the hulk of a Baptist chapel. The booth's light was the only illumination in the street of a village that looked like its occupants had packed up and retired underground for the winter.

He crossed the street towards us as we parked, stepping off the pavement without checking. He had obviously been hanging around for long enough to know the likelihood of traffic. He walked with the stride of a man who is advertising grievances.

Driver and Shotgun got out of their car with that air Traffic

guys have of sloughing skin every time that they exit their vehicle. It was their call, so I hung back out of courtesy, just listening in. Catching that the minibus driver had managed to flag down a car that had dropped him here. By his estimation, we were already something like two hours into the event. You could cover a lot of Wales in two hours.

'How many passengers were there, sir?'

'Six. I was taking the bastards to Dinas.' He looked at the three of us entreatingly. 'It's not as if we'd even fucking argued about anything.'

I nodded sympathetically from the sidelines, my interest raised by the mention of Dinas.

'They were totally pissed, all of them, not one of them would have been capable of driving safely,' he protested righteously.

'Do you have the names of the passengers?' Driver asked.

'No, you'll have to get those from the office. I was just told to pick them up at Shrewsbury Station, off the train from London. They'd been at the England–Wales match at Twickenham.'

'Did you see who actually drove the minibus away, sir?'

'It was the middle of the night out there. A poxy lay-by full of puddles and junk.'

'You were outside the vehicle?' I asked, slipping into the conversation. 'Detective Sergeant Glyn Capaldi,' I introduced myself, calculating that it was time to start trying to sharpen this thing to a point. Driver gave me a look, but it was a token, he knew that he was outranked.

'They tricked me,' the minibus driver protested.

'How did they manage that?'

'One of them told me someone was going to be sick. I hate that smell,' he announced vehemently. 'Beer puke on the upholstery, you can't get rid of it. So I found somewhere to pull over quickly. Two of them got out and went round the back as soon as I stopped.'

'Did you hear them being sick?'

'No. A lot of passengers get sick for one reason or another, and I don't listen out for it. I kept the engine running. Next thing one of them is at the door saying that there's something about my rear wheel that I should see. So I get out, and there's the other one crouching, kind of squinting at my nearside back tyre. "Should that be like that?" he asks me, and like a prat, I get down there trying to see what the fuck he's talking about. Next thing I know the bus takes off, and I'm left out there in the dark.'

'No build-up to this?' I asked. 'It came as a complete surprise?'

'Total. I thought they were all as happy as Larry in the back. What with the booze, their fucking rugby songs, and joking around with the girl.'

My face cracked. He looked at me, puzzled by the change. Driver and Shotgun hadn't picked up on it.

'What girl?' I demanded.

He swayed back defensively, shaking his head. 'A hitchhiker. It wasn't my idea. I didn't pick her up. I stopped for diesel at a garage this side of Newtown, and she was already inside when I got back from paying. The passengers said they had offered her a ride to Dinas. I didn't argue.'

'Describe her,' I said, letting him hear the new snap in my voice.

He shook his head again, sickly smile set, wanting to help me now. 'I can't. She was stuck up in the back behind the men. I never saw her properly. I only heard her laughing back there.'

A flash: Regine Broussard.

I sometimes get a foreboding when things are about to go very, very wrong. It predicts awful possibilities from the merest of nuances. It translates as a melting feeling in the region of the kidneys. A little bit like sex. Perhaps it was my Ligurian genes? Warm loam reactions in a damp northern climate. Often it got me into trouble. I should have learned by now to run the other way, but some warped instinct always managed to spin me in the wrong direction.

And the tickle makes me wince.

Shotgun saw it. 'You all right, Sarge?' he asked, eyeing me curiously.

I ignored him. It had to be the woman. The source of the tickle. The presence of the woman added the crown of thorns.

Otherwise it was fairly typical Saturday-night bloke behaviour. Drink and testosterone fuelled. A prank with a potentially lethal edge. Sparked by impulse, opportunity – or the driver was not giving us the complete story of his relationship with his customers. Either way we had six drunks and a minibus, and a lot of different ways that they could wreck it.

How many ways did they have to wreck the woman?

What did I know about these men? According to the driver they were all young. They liked rugby. They supported the national team. They were country people. They had hired a minibus so that they could drink responsibly. All of that, if you discounted their age, stacked up reassuringly. Not quite nuns, but the profile was comfier than skanky-haired baby-fingerers with weighty Temazepam habits. A bunch of nice lads out on the town for the day.

So why the fuck had they turned idiotic?

There was no way to answer that yet. I left Driver and Shotgun to take the minibus driver back and deal with the procedures. Until we had a victim of some variety, or a complaint from someone other than the driver, I was redundant. I volunteered to cover the road between there and Dinas, keeping an eye out for the minibus.

With only a minor detour I let my route take me past the lay-by the driver had described. I used my high beams to light it up. Puddles and wind-blown rubbish. I got out and walked slowly. The hard light did weird things to empty crisp packets, disposable nappies and crushed drink cans. I almost missed it, floating upside-down in a puddle, the peak tipped away, looking like a miniature coracle.

It was a baseball cap. Dark blue, soaked, with an illegible logo.

No telling how long it had been there. I turned it over and round in front of a headlight. No identifying labels. From its size, if could have belonged to a kid. Or a young woman with a small head. I put it in the glove compartment. I had thought about using an evidence bag, but I didn't want to tempt fate.

I saw nothing on the rest of the way home. No skid marks, no smoking wreckage, no Indians circling the wagon train. I stopped in town and called Dispatch, gave my contact number, and asked them to log a message that I wanted to be kept up to date with the story.

Then I had no excuse. The Fleece was closed. The Chinese takeaway was closed. And a cold rain was starting, earlier than I had predicted. It was time for bed. I drove out of town. Heading for home.

The planks on the bridge rumbled under the wheels as I crossed the river into the utter blackness of Hen Felin Caravan Park. At this time of the year I was the only resident. Unit 13. I wasn't superstitious.

The site held the frost, the electricity supply was erratic, and the water that came out of the taps was the colour of weak tea, but there was an upside to the location. It kept the public away. People who might think that it was a local policeman's duty to help them out with squirrels in the attic, or neighbours playing the harmonium too loud. The site was out of town, badly lit, muddy, and in the holiday season it was full of outsiders whose brat-kids taunted the locals for speaking queerly.

Another advantage was that it was a caravan. It was temporary. It kept my impermanence tangible. Some day I would be leaving this awful place. Every time I walked in through the door, and was met by the mingled smells of condensation, plastic curtains and propane gas, I could remind myself that this was not going to last. This was the smell from family camping holidays long ago in Borth. And holidays in Borth had never lasted. Thank Christ.

The message light on the answering machine was blinking. I

hit the play button thinking that the dispatcher might have an update for me. Two messages. The first one was from a cop in Caernarfon who thought he might have some information on a stolen Kawasaki quad bike that I was investigating. I hoped that he was wrong. Caernarfon was way the hell to the north, and the geographical limits of this case were already stretching me.

The second message was even less welcome.

'Capaldi, it's Mackay, we need to talk.'

The voice was Scottish, clipped, and to the point. Mackay was ex-SAS and we went back a long way. Every time he resurfaced in my life trouble happened, albatrosses fell in flocks from the sky. Currently, he was only hopping along the fringe, having become my ex-wife's current lover.

It hadn't really upset me when he had taken up with Gina. In fact, it had had the beneficial effect of keeping both of them off my back. The trouble was that she, at this point in the orbit of our relationship, unjustifiably in my opinion, felt that I was the sack of shit in her life. Now I could start to worry. What poison had she managed to work into Mackay's system concerning me?

I double-checked the lock on the caravan before I went to bed. It was a token gesture, a fruit-juice carton would be more secure. After Mackay's call, I knew that I was going to be crediting every sound that I heard out there tonight with having army training.

I sent a flighted wish out into the night for the woman in the minibus to be safe. I didn't include the guys. They had got themselves into it, and I wanted to retain enough juju in my system to keep Gina and Mackay out of my life.

The telephone woke me too early on Sunday morning. I registered wet windows, grey sky, and the branches of the riverside alders drooped and dripping as I lurched to the dining nook to answer it. On mornings like this I truly missed the city, where you could pretend that weather didn't exist.

'Glyn Capaldi,' I grunted.

'Sergeant, a minibus was hijacked last night over at . . .'

'I know,' I interrupted him, 'I left a message for you to keep me updated.'

He went silent for a moment. 'We've found it,' his tone changing to eager.

Overnight, the isobars had packed together and the wind was coming strong out of the northwest. And cold. The rain that stung my face as I opened the caravan door was thinking about applying for an upgrade to sleet.

I went out of town on the mountain road, climbing up to open hill country. Scrub grass, sedge and heather, with grey, lichen-splotched boulders crumbled in for texture. It was a big, scrappy geography up here.

The minibus was parked on a narrow lane beside a small arched bridge near the junction with the mountain road. There was a marked police car close by. Uniform locals. I recognized the man who was making a point of watching my approach. Sergeant Emrys Hughes. We knew each other. He didn't like me. It wasn't a complicated issue, just a matter of his boss detesting mine. The fact that I didn't like my boss either didn't seem to help.

He shouted something up at me as I parked on the splay. I ignored him. I wanted to take in an overview of the scene before I got involved in other people's perceptions.

The minibus was parked, neatly squared off, on a patch of compacted gravel. It hadn't been abandoned. Thought had gone into where and how it had been left.

Emrys turned away from me. He must have shouted something else, because two more uniforms appeared from behind the minibus, where they had been sheltering from the wind. Emrys issued an instruction, and one of them came over the bridge, and up the slight incline towards me. I smiled to myself, recognizing a troop movement.

He had his head lowered, and kept his face slanted away from me to keep the rain out of his eyes. I gestured for him to go round

to the leeward side and dropped the passenger window. He lowered his face to the opening. Lanky and young, his eager expression overcompensating for his nervousness. 'Sergeant Hughes told me to tell you that we're in control of this.'

I leaned across the seat towards him and grinned. 'Sergeant Hughes told you to tell me to fuck off?'

His face dropped. 'No, Sergeant, not at all.'

'Where are the people from the minibus?' I asked before he could recompose himself. 'Have you managed to get them down off the hill?'

He looked confused, and shot an involuntary glance at Emrys. 'There weren't any people.'

'What were you doing round the back of the minibus?'

'Sheltering.'

'Had you checked for footprints, any other evidence, before you trampled the area?'

His brain mired on that one. I didn't wait for an answer. I got out of the car and fought my way into my coat, the wind whipping rebellious life into the sleeves and tail. It was even colder out here. The young cop caught up with me, trying to get my attention, but not quite daring to come abreast. I ignored him.

'Morning, Sergeant Hughes,' I called out affably.

He glared at me stonily. 'What are you doing here?'

'I got the call.'

He scowled. 'There was no call. Not for you. This isn't a CID matter, Capaldi. We're handling it.' As usual he put a heavy stress on my name. As if he had had a grandfather die on the Anzio beaches and I was somehow to blame. Emrys Hughes was a big man, with black, wavy hair, craggy features, and a mosaic of broken veins in his cheeks. His square bushy moustache and matching set of eyebrows looked like they might have been lifted from an identikit box.

I inclined my head towards the minibus. 'Have you put in a request for a SOCO team?'

'Why would I do that? This isn't a crime scene.'

'The minibus was stolen.'

He shrugged. 'And now it's here.'

'So what's your plan of action?'

'I've put a call in to contact the owner and get him to come up here with a spare set of keys.'

'You intend to move it?' I deliberately pitched my tone to needle him.

He struggled to keep his temper. 'It went missing. Now it's been found. Happy endings.'

'It was stolen, Sergeant.'

'I know the owner. I'm sure he won't want to press charges.'

'Someone was drunk in charge of a stolen minibus last night.'

He pulled a fat face and shrugged.

'Where are they?' I asked.

He leaned his face in towards mine, lowering his voice. 'I know these people, Capaldi.'

'If you haven't been able to make contact with the owner yet, how did you come by the passenger list?'

He flashed me a pitying smile. 'We're a small community. We know who the lucky bastards are who can get hold of tickets to a rugby international like that. And the operative word here is "community". Sometimes you have to take the sensible line. I know them all, I can vouch for them personally: they're good people. Not one of them has a criminal bone in his body.'

'It's still taking and driving away. Driving under the influence. Maybe more, if the driver decides to stay mean.'

'He won't,' Emrys announced confidently. 'And, after the rollicking I'm going to give them, none of them will be doing this again.' He spread his hands, trying me out with a reasonable-man-to-reasonable-man smile. 'Okay, they were wrong. But that would have been the drink, the excitement of having been in London. It would have been meant as a bit of fun, nothing malicious.' He shook his head. 'And they'll stick together. Even I'll never find out

which one of them actually drove it away. You're not in your city now. There's a time and a place for the heavy-handed route and this isn't one of them.'

It was a big speech for Emrys. This was obviously important to him. Credibility issues, perhaps. 'Where are they?'

He tried out a grin. 'In their beds I assume. Getting ready to wake up and realize how lousy they feel.'

I recognized that he was offering me an opportunity here. The chance to play Cottage Cop, ingratiate myself into the community, show them that I didn't always have to be seen as an aloof and hard-ass outsider.

'What about the woman?'

He frowned. 'We don't know for sure that there was one. That could just have been the driver trying to make it worse for them . . .' He raised his hands to stop my protest. 'Okay, I promise you this, if there was a woman on that minibus with them last night, she'll have been treated with absolute courtesy and respect.'

'So where will she be now?'

'Wherever it is, she'll be safe. I can guarantee that. I expect she'll probably have been offered hospitality for the night. It's not like the city, women don't have to fear for their bodies or their lives.' He smiled smugly. 'We don't lose or misplace our womenfolk around here.'

Womenfolk . . . He actually used the word. As if he was describing a separate species that could be displayed in pens for admiration and grading. I used a spluttered cough to cover my astonishment.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

I nodded. 'I'll make you a deal.'

He inclined his head to listen.

'If you can convince me that everyone who was on that minibus last night is safe and sound and where they're meant to be, I'll walk away and leave you to wrap it up your own way.'

He nodded. 'I'll take that deal.'

'And that includes the woman.'

He smirked. 'If she exists.'

I left him to get on the radio, and went over to take a closer look at the minibus. There was a dent in the front offside wing that could have been historic, and a new scratch on the driver's door that cut through the dust patina.

At the rear I had a hunch, and dropped to a crouch to study the exhaust. I moved in close; the uniforms had already corrupted this area, and I couldn't make it worse. Using the long serrated blade of my Swiss Army knife, I probed inside the pipe. When I pulled it out a set of vehicle keys fell on to the gravel.

This fitted in with the careful way that the minibus had been parked. The keys had been left for us to find. Emrys was right. Someone was trying to signal that there was no malicious intent in this.

I dangled the keys at Emrys as I walked round to the side door, but he was occupied with the radio and didn't see me. The two uniforms, who had been circling the minibus with me, keeping it as a shield between us, looked like they thought I was fucking Merlin when they saw the keys.

I always carry a couple of supermarket plastic bags in my coat pocket. Generally, they're for shopping, but occasionally they come in useful in situations like this. I unlocked the minibus door, and, using my handkerchief on the handle, slid it open. I put the plastic bags over my shoes before I climbed in.

Stale cigarette smoke was the main olfactory make-up over the background of synthetic upholstery and diesel. I sniffed selectively. No vomit. No dope. No girls' stuff either, or I just wasn't good enough to pick it up.

I trawled the interior slowly. Some rubbish on the floor, a couple of beer-bottle caps, a crumpled potato-crisps packet. This didn't look like a vehicle a bunch of drunks had stumbled out of.

I found it tucked under the seat in front of the back seat. I felt the tickle again. Bad news arriving. Regine Broussard had also been in possession of a plastic carrier bag.

I pulled it out carefully. This had been well used, creased and bearing the faded imprint of a butcher in Hereford. I looked inside. Paco Rabanne aftershave and Calvin Klein underpants both boxed in their original packaging.

'Capaldi . . .'

Emrys was at the open door.

'I'll take that.' He held his hand out.

I passed him the bag. For a moment I mistook his expression for fury. Then I realized that the torsion in his face went with anxiety.

'None of them are there . . . None of them got home last night . . .'

'Have you any idea what conditions are like up here?' I asked the duty officer at headquarters in Carmarthen over the radio.

'I can't authorize a helicopter search.'

'Yes, you can.'

'I need senior officer clearance.'

'Call DCS Galbraith.'

'It's a Sunday,' a note of panic rising in his voice at that prospect.

'And this is an emergency. I have seven people missing up here in conditions of extreme exposure. One of them is a young woman. You take the fall if any of them die or suffer serious injury.' I let that doom note resonate for a moment before pressing down on the exaggeration pedal. 'You don't know what it's like. I'm talking mountain conditions here, an enormous wind-chill factor, snow, a warren of forestry trails to be covered.' The last bit, at least, was true.

'Is a helicopter any use if it's snowing?' he asked.

'It's passing over,' I said quickly, 'but the wind's getting colder.'

'Okay,' he came to a decision, 'I'll set it up, but it's your responsibility. I am only acting on information received.'

It's only accounting, I told myself, the budget must have an allocation for such emergencies. I raised a thumb of

acknowledgement to Emrys, who was down at his own car, on the radio to his boss, trying to get more people in for the search.

But where to start? I traced the course of the minor road with my eyes until it disappeared into the forest that rolled outwards and onwards for hectare after hectare. New growth, old growth, clearances, logging trails, abandoned trails, and the bastard, shape-shifting magic trails that I always ended up getting lost on. The imminent prospect of moving into that forest held no appeal.

The imminent prospect of a call from Detective Chief Superintendent Galbraith was even less appealing.

I had a lot to blame Jack Galbraith for.

For a start, he had rescued me. After my career in Cardiff had effectively gone down the tubes, he had stepped in and offered to have me in the Carmarthen Division. The Wild and Woolly West, as we used to say in Cardiff. I had thought about it when I had gone in to clean out my desk in that strangely empty squad room. After they had told me that it was safe to surface from my "emotional" leave. Why was he taking in a burned-out and redundant "hero"? Jack Galbraith did not have a reputation as a philanthropist. Had someone in high places called in a big favour? Or was he setting up an even bigger one, to be redeemed at some future date?

'I've been informed that you used to be a good cop, Capaldi,' he had told me on that first day of my official reincarnation in Carmarthen. When I had been born again as one of his men. 'That's why you're here with me instead of wearing a rinky-dink security uniform and patrolling the booze aisle in some shanty-town supermarket. I'm giving you another chance. See if you can get back some of that good judgement that you occasionally used to demonstrate.'

'Thank you, sir,' I had replied humbly.

'Look at this.' He walked across his office to the map of Wales that hung on the wall.

I looked. He tapped the map, a drummer's rhythm. I didn't have a clue what I was supposed to be looking at. He was tapping the bit in the middle, the empty bit, the bit God gave to the sheep.

'Do you know how much it's costing . . . to send men out from here . . .' he rapped the pen on each of the divisional headquarters, then came back into the middle again '. . . to here? Every time a case comes up?'

'I can imagine.' I nodded sympathetically.

'Overtime, petrol, hotel bills if they have to stay over.'

'And you're paying out for unproductive time with all that driving,' I added helpfully. I would have kept my mouth shut if I had known what was coming.

'Exactly. You've hit it right on the head there, son. Unproductive bloody time.' He sat down on the edge of the desk. A power move. Looking down at me, nodding at the question before he had even framed it. 'So what are we going to do about it?'

I didn't even pretend to think that I was being invited to advise on strategy here. 'I don't know the answer to that, sir.'

'I'm going to try an experiment, Capaldi.'

I gave him my best fresh, interested look.

'I'm going to put a man in there. A resident detective, someone who can cover the routine crap, so back-up only gets called in when it's absolutely necessary.'

Something plummeted. I felt like a specimen butterfly watching the mounting pin descend. 'You're surely not thinking of me for this, sir, are you?'

He grinned. It wasn't meant to be friendly. 'I'd have thought you would be grateful for any chance.'

'I'm straight out of the city, sir.'

'And you fucked up good there, didn't you?' He didn't embellish. Didn't remind me that I was responsible for the messy death of a man. He didn't have to; the memory still kept me on familiar terms with the Hour of the Wolf most nights.

'But I wouldn't know how to operate out there,' I protested, not faking my bewilderment.

'Don't fret your head about that, Capaldi, No one fucking does.'

We cordoned off the minibus with incident tape, and set up the command post there. With all that country to cover it was as good a place as any.

We had a mountain-rescue team on its way down from Snowdonia, volunteers from Forestry Services, and police teams with dogs already working their way into the forest. Inspector Morgan, Emrys's boss, had turned up and was now running the uniform end of things. Apart from some filthy stares, he kept away from me, and left me in charge of the communications with the helicopter. Which was ominous. Had me wondering whether perhaps there wasn't an emergency budgetary allocation after all.

My mobile rang. A number I knew only too well.

'Capaldi . . .' the voice boomed.

My stomach clenched. 'Yes, sir.'

'We're on our way.'

The wind had dropped, the rain had thinned to a fine suspension. It wasn't quite the Ice Queen blizzard that I had invoked. 'I don't think there's any need, sir. There's nothing to do but wait, you'll just get cold and wet up here.'

Jack Galbraith chuckled darkly. 'Don't think you can call up a fucking circus, Capaldi, and not invite the chief paymasters. I'm bringing DCI Jones up with me. If my Sunday's fucked I may as well spread the misery.'

'Yes, sir,' I replied snappily. Bryn Jones was one of the few cops in Carmarthen who hadn't treated me like an AIDS carrier when I had limped in damaged from Cardiff.

'Give me the background,' Galbraith instructed.

I laid it out for him. Emrys Hughes couldn't expect low profile now, so I nudged up the spin of the hijacking to six booze-fuelled guys and an unknown but vulnerable woman. Seven people missing

in the hills. I played down the discovery of the neatly presented minibus. That didn't fit in so well with the dark-tale storyboard.

He was silent for a moment, and then I could just make out indistinct conversation at the other end of the line.

'You're wrong.' He came back on the line.

'Sir?'

'We think you're wrong. This group isn't the sort to be involved in anything truly sinister. You've been watching too much redneck massacre shit.'

'It's the woman that I'm concerned about, sir.'

'The men don't fit the gang-rape mould.'

'What do you think I should have done, sir?'

'Waited.'

'I'm sorry, sir, you're breaking-up . . .' I cut the connection.

That was an unofficial rebuke. Was it going to end up turning official? Had I overreacted? I thought hard about it. No. Even Emrys Hughes had been spooked when he realized that none of those good people of his had made it home. But where had they made it to?

The helicopter's call sign squawked over the radio. 'DS Capaldi – we think we might have a sighting for you.'

'Think?'

'You're looking for seven people?'

'Check.'

'We've only got five here.'

'What about stragglers?'

'I've circled. There's only five.'

'Is one of them a woman?'

'Sexometers aren't standard operating equipment.' I could hear the laugh in his voice. 'And from this high up I can't distinguish tits.'

Two of the party apparently missing, and this funster thinks it's a joke. I was tempted to tell him to check his mirror if he wanted to be able to distinguish a real tit.