

# THE HEALTH OF STRANGERS

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**SANDSTONEPRESS**  
HIGHLAND | SCOTLAND

MONDAY

SHALLOW BREATHING

‘He’s dead all right.’

Mona stepped back, and ran her eye over the corpse. She’d seen worse than this, much worse in fact, but not in the last few months. Funny how quickly you forgot the sights and smells of death. Maybe you had to forget, maybe the amnesia was some kind of defensive mechanism; if you remembered what it was like you’d spend every night downing a bottle of wine while surfing jobs websites for less traumatising employment. She glanced over her shoulder to where her partner, Bernard, was standing, and quickly stifled a laugh at the expression on his face. From past experience she recognised the signs that he was channelling all his energy into keeping his breakfast safely lodged in its rightful place. He ran his hands over his short hair a couple of times, tugged at the collar of his polo shirt, and, despite his distress, managed to choke out a few words.

‘The Virus?’

‘Hard to say, with him being so decomposed.’ She took a further step away from the armchair. ‘I mean, when the skin’s turned black like this, and the teeth and hair have started to fall out there’s not much to go on. And look at this – there’s some kind of larvae on his cheek here.’ She waved him closer. ‘Come and see.’

He bolted out the door, and Mona gave in to a grin.

You either had the nerve for these kinds of things, or you didn't. That being said, the smell of the room wasn't doing her stomach any good either. She gave a quick look over to the door to check Bernard wasn't about to reappear, then negotiated her way between the heavy wooden furniture toward the window, stopping only to pull a handkerchief out of her pocket and clamp it over her nose.

The curtains were a seventies relic, a lurid orange-and-brown mess of swirls and curlicues. She pulled at them one-handed, and after a couple of tugs they opened, filling the room with weak April sunshine. Yellowed netting covered the length of the pane; she reached behind it and found the catch. She fiddled with it for a minute, succeeding only in cutting herself on the rusting paintwork. She cursed and pulled her hand back. The rust had dyed her fingertips brown, and a small cut was sending a river of red down her index finger. Wiping her hand on her jeans, she made a mental note to dig out the Savlon when she got back to the office. There were enough ways to die at the moment, without succumbing to good old-fashioned tetanus. She gave the catch another try, and to her relief, it opened. She hauled the window up a couple of inches and crouched on the floor next to the fresh air.

Mona pulled her notes out of her bag and gave herself a quick refresher on the facts. Their visit had been triggered by the non-appearance of one Reginald Dwyer at his monthly Virus Prevention Health Check. According to her notes Reginald was in his seventies, Caucasian, 5'6" tall, with grey hair and blue eyes. She poked her head and handkerchief back round the curtain and eyed up the corpse. The nylon trousers and woolly cardigan

combination suggested a senior citizen's wardrobe, but the other facts were lost to the indignities of decomposition.

Now it was a judgement call – phone the Health Enforcement Team first or the Police? Alerting the Police to a potentially suspicious death made it their problem. Phoning it in to the office as a Health Check Violation Due to Fatality left it resting firmly in her in tray, with a tonne of attached paperwork. She walked back into the middle of the room, and looked round in search of anything that could justify her phoning her former colleagues in Police Scotland.

A little wooden side table next to the corpse had a newspaper resting on it, open at the TV listings. She picked it up, trying her hardest not to disturb the deceased. The last thing she wanted was a shower of teeth, hair, or worse, falling off the late Mr Dwyer. The date on the paper was the 21st February, just over a month ago. Probably the length of time he'd been lying here, which fitted in well with her gut feeling about how long he'd been dead.

'Bernard?' She removed the hanky from her face.

'Yes?' Her partner's voiced echoed feebly down the hall.

'Can you check with the neighbours when they last saw him? Or when they first noticed the smell?' She put her makeshift face mask back on.

'I tried. No-one's in, apart from a woman in the ground floor flat who doesn't speak English.'

No surprise there. Getting the average Edinburgh tenement dweller to answer their doors to a stranger had always been a struggle, but these days a warm welcome would have been some kind of miracle. She didn't blame people for their caution. After you'd spent a fortune germ-proofing your home, why take the risk of opening

up to find someone coughing and spluttering on your doorstep?

Bernard's face appeared in the doorway, wan as a waxing moon. 'I peered through the letterbox of the flat across the hall and I don't think it's occupied.' He paused and grimaced. 'Can we get out of here now?'

'Just a sec.'

There were two doors leading off the living room. She threw open the nearest one, which revealed a bedroom, the divan resplendent with an orange candlewick cover. She took a couple of strides and pushed open what she assumed was the door to the kitchen.

'Bernard – look at this.'

He appeared at her side, and gaped, as she had done, at the tinned goods that were stacked from floor to ceiling all across the room.

'He didn't pay much attention to our advice about not hoarding food, did he?' Bernard took a step back. 'Ironic really, given how he ended up.'

Mona smiled. 'Poor sod.'

'Can we go?'

She took a last look around the room, and sighed. 'Yup. Just let me phone it in.' She dug out her mobile and selected the North Edinburgh HET office from her contacts list as she walked toward the stairwell. 'Maitland, it's me, Mona.' She pulled the door of Reginald Dwyer (deceased) firmly closed. 'We've got a stiff.'

'So – did you puke?'

Bernard ignored the question and walked purposefully in the direction of his desk. Undeterred, Maitland rolled his chair across the office and ground to a halt an inch from his side, trapping Bernard's little toe under a

castor. Bernard pulled his trainer loose, booted Maitland back toward his desk, and was gratified to hear a tiny squeak of pain from him as he collided with a sharp edge. Unfortunately, the injury was not enough to silence him.

‘But did you?’ Maitland was beaming from ear to ear, every inch of his six foot three frame bouncing up and down with pleasure at Bernard’s discomfort. He sat back, knitted his fingers together, and rested them on his dark hair. ‘C’mon, Bern, did you spew when you found the body?’

‘No, Maitland, I did not spew, as you put it.’ Bernard reached the safety of his own workspace, and lowered himself into his seat. OK, so he had left Mona to deal with it and stood outside trying to overcome his nausea. But he wasn’t going to give his colleague the satisfaction of admitting it. ‘I’ve seen dead bodies before, as you are well aware.’

‘Aye,’ Maitland grinned and dived toward Bernard’s desk, ‘but those were in a medical setting, where everything is nice and clean and neat.’ He rested his elbows on the back of Bernard’s chair, and lowered his voice. ‘This time, we’re not talking hospital corners and disinfectant. We’re talking weeks-old corpse, maggots, bluebottles burying their eggs in the decaying flesh . . .’

Bernard’s stomach heaved, and he leaned on his desk with his hand over his mouth. After a moment, he pushed Maitland’s arm off the back of his chair, and his tormentor turned away, laughing.

‘Mona, so did he puke or what?’

She dismissed Maitland’s question with a wave of her hand. Her hair hid her face and Bernard wondered if she too was mocking him under the blonde bob. It was impossible to tell. He thought about going over to see if

she *was* actually laughing, but worried he would seem overanxious. Mona had made it plain over the past few months that she did not like needy men.

Maitland wandered back to his side of the office, still chuckling.

Bernard sighed, and started looking for the piece of paper that would let him know just how bad the rest of his day was going to be.

It wasn't in his tray, or on top of the neat pile of previous cases he'd left sitting prominently in the centre of the desk, in the hope that someone would file them. It wasn't caught up in his personal papers, and, when he picked up his copy of the *Guardian* and shook it, it didn't fall out from within its pages.

Bernard leaned back in his chair, sighing again. There was definitely no Defaulter List on his desk. 'Mona – have you got our DL?'

Across the room his partner was still engrossed in paperwork. She looked up, shook her head, and shrugged.

In the four months he'd been working for the Health Enforcement Team this had never happened before. As surely as night followed day, by 9am every morning a memo appeared on each of their desks outlining who had defaulted on their Health Checks that week. The idea was that this notification arrived the day after someone had defaulted. The demise of Reg Dwyer was testament to how well this system worked. Bernard looked round the office for someone else to ask. Maitland's desk was now empty, although his coat was thrown over the back of his chair.

He looked over at Carole Brooks's desk. In amongst the pictures of her kids, and a range of handmade and, probably, fair trade clutter, Carole was on her mobile. Bernard overheard snippets of her conversation.

‘So, how much is his temperature up by?’

Bernard winced, and feeling suddenly breathless, sat down at his desk. This was what grief felt like, the poleaxing power of a stray comment, or a TV show, or, like this, an overheard conversation to knock him sideways. Six months now since his son had died, too young and weak to fight off the Virus. And when the memory hit him, it wasn't just of the boy's death; it was of the paralysis, the helplessness, the overwhelming impotency he had felt in the face of the illness. He'd not told his colleagues about his loss; how to describe it to these people he barely knew?

Carole ended the conversation but sat staring at her desk. She pulled out the band that was holding her hair up, and let it fall loose. She ran her hands through it, then after a second she gathered up the strands and tucked them away.

He decided not to bother her and reluctantly looked in the direction of his boss's office. Once upon a time, the building that the HET occupied had been a grand Georgian house on the Southside of Edinburgh. It had remained intact until the owner had racked up gambling debts so astronomical that the only method of staving off creditors was the sale of the family home to the newly formed South Eastern Regional Hospital Board. Lothian Health Board had taken the premises over in 1972, and had knocked through rooms, boarded up chimneys, and bricked up doors with a cheerful disregard for the intricacy of the cornicing, or the delicate tiling on the Adam fireplaces. In a final mortification, when the HET moved in, a corner of the room had been partitioned off with MDF to create an internal office for the head of the team. Bernard knew that deep within this temporary structure

sat Team Leader Paterson, drinking tea, regretting the day he left the Police, and thinking of new ways to make Bernard's life miserable.

Bernard caught Paterson's eye through the office's window, and within seconds his boss threw open the door. He stood in the doorway, his greying crew cut scraping the top of the door frame. Paterson was a very big man, in a very small office.

He pointed a large finger at Mona, then Bernard. 'You two – in here now.'

They exchanged glances and got to their feet.

'You were right, Guv, the No Show was dead. Looked like he'd been lying there for weeks. Seems that he'd ...'

Mona broke off as she walked into Paterson's office. Bernard peered round her side and saw there was someone else in the room. This was interesting; Paterson was not in the habit of entertaining visitors. A stranger in the boss's office, hot on the heels of the missing Defaulter List, meant that today was veering off the fairly repetitive course that Bernard had experienced since his arrival at the HET.

The man was tall, with neat blonde hair and square, brown-rimmed glasses. A raincoat was folded across his knees, and at his side was a brown leather briefcase. He radiated an air of controlled competency not often found nestling in the chaos of the HET office. The new arrival had been given the only comfortable seat in the office and was sitting behind Paterson's desk.

The Team Leader leaned his considerable bulk against his desk, and gestured a thumb in the stranger's direction. 'This is Doctor Toller.'

The three of them shook hands, which involved a fair bit of manoeuvring, given the limited dimensions of the office. Mona sat on the plastic chair that Paterson had

swiped from the canteen some months ago. Bernard looked round for somewhere to sit, and in the absence of options, stayed standing.

‘Toller here works for the German Government and is investigating a Missing Person. Heidi Weber, eighteen years old, exchange student at Edinburgh University. Showing up on our Defaulter List for the first time today.’ He passed a case file across the desk which Mona grabbed and started reading. ‘I want you to give Doctor Toller every assistance in locating this young lady.’ Paterson pointed his finger at each of them to emphasise the point. ‘Every assistance.’

Mona spoke without looking up from the file. ‘Can I ask why she is of interest to you, Sir?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘She is not, of herself, of particular interest.’ His English was good, but tinged with a German accent. ‘We are concerned about the Health Status of all our nationals who are living abroad. As you know our infected population is much lower than yours, which is twenty-eight per cent, I believe?’

‘Twenty-eight per cent average, lower for older people and children, higher for young adults.’

Paterson coughed. Bernard ignored the hint and carried on.

‘But the infection rate is falling year-on-year. We’re anticipating an eight per cent infection rate next year.’

A thin blonde eyebrow was raised by the German. ‘Yet you still have mortality of 2.5 per cent?’

‘2.4 per cent, to be precise.’

‘Bernard ...’ Paterson had a familiar tone of warning in his voice. He wasn’t a big fan of Bernard’s ability to remember facts and figures relating to the Virus. Bernard was torn between avoiding his boss’s wrath and defending

his country's public health record. Patriotism won.

'And twenty per cent of the population is already immune.' He finished the sentence as quickly as he could.

'In Germany we have mortality of less than two per cent.' The Doctor smiled and folded his arms. 'You can see why we are concerned about any health risk that our citizens may be encountering.'

Before Bernard could open his mouth to pursue the point, Mona spoke up. 'She hasn't been reported missing by her parents.' She waved the case file in the air. 'Although they have expressed concern that they hadn't heard from her?'

Paterson jumped to his feet. 'Doctor, I think my colleagues have enough to go on. I need to brief them about a couple of things, then the three of you can make a start on locating young Heidi.' He yanked open the door, causing the walls of the office to vibrate.

The Doctor stayed seated for a moment staring at Paterson, then slowly stood up. 'I wish to use the lavatory before we leave. I will meet you in the main entrance.' He stopped and turned to address Mona and Bernard. 'I am not overly concerned about this young woman. We made a check of her room, and all her documents were there, including her passport.'

Paterson smiled expansively at his guest and extended an arm in the direction of the exit. He waited until the door shut behind the German. 'Dickhead,' he said, making only a slight attempt to lower his voice.

Bernard wondered about the sound insulation properties of MDF, but Doctor Toller didn't look back.

'So, what was all that about, Guv?' Mona had joined the HET from Edinburgh CID, and had brought both Police jargon and respect for hierarchy with her. 'Something

about this isn't right. Her parents are concerned about her but haven't reported her missing? She's not been seen for the best part of a week. The Police should be dealing with this as a Missing Person.'

There was strict protocol on this point: the Police dealt, or chose not to deal, with people who had been reported missing. The HET dealt only with people who had not turned up for their Health Check, but were not listed as missing persons. In Mona's experience, there was usually a reason that nobody had missed a Health Defaulter.

Paterson cut through her protests. 'Ignore all the bollocks about health concerns. Heidi's the daughter of a member of the – crap, what did he call it? The Brundiesdag?'

'Bundestag?' suggested Bernard.

'What?' Paterson squeezed past Bernard to get to the kettle, managing to hit him on the head with his mug on the way past.

Bernard rubbed his temple. 'The German Parliament?'

'Yeah, that's the thing. He's like an MP, only German. So his lassie, well, she's probably shackled up with some boyfriend or other, but it's a major embarrassment for Herr Weber if his daughter's found to have skipped a Health Status test, especially after the German Chancellor made a big deal about the UK having such high infection rates.'

'And she *has* missed a Health Check?' asked Mona.

'Yup.' Paterson smiled. 'Missed her Health Check on Friday, and a week later it lands on our desk. And if you are about to ask me why it took a week to get here, don't, because I don't know the answer.'

'Can we talk to Herr Weber?' asked Bernard.

‘Yes. Herr Weber and his wife are staying at The George Hotel and Toller’s waiting to take you there. They’ve already passed Heidi’s laptop on to us, so check with IT what they’ve found on it.’

‘Anything else, Guv?’ Mona was already on her feet.

‘Yeah – pull your fingers out and get this lassie found. One morning of Doctor Tossler has been more than enough for me.’

He followed Mona back to their desks. She was reading the files as she walked.

‘Do you suppose Doctor Toller’s driving, or do you think he’s expecting us to provide transport?’ His colleague shrugged on her waterproof and reached for her bag. ‘Should we sign out a pool car?’

‘Hmm.’ Lending half an ear to her, Bernard logged into his computer.

‘Bernard! Are you listening?’

‘Yep. Pool car. Good idea. Just give me two minutes.’ Ignoring the look of impatience on Mona’s face, Bernard called up a search engine. He typed ‘German Chancellor’ into Google. The computer failed to react.

‘Hurry up, Bernard!’

‘Hold on,’ he jabbed the Enter key several times, ‘it’s not my fault we’re still on Windows 7. Would it have killed them to splash out on an upgrade?’

He hit Enter a couple more times, and, finally, he was reading the German Chancellor’s much-publicised attack on the Scottish response to the Virus.

‘Mona – listen to this. “The lax response by the Scottish Government to the Virus has put the whole of the European Union at risk. The reliance on a monthly health check-up, compared to weekly or fortnightly across most of Europe, has led to high levels of infection. Inadequate

policing of Health Defaulters means a hardcore of resisters with no known Health Status which endangers the wider population . . .”

Mona snorted. ‘Bullshit. We’d never get away with the kind of regime they’ve got on the Continent. Remember all the outcry when the idea of Health Checks was first suggested?’

‘Yup.’ Bernard had watched the demos on TV, fascinated by the mixture of protest banners – Amnesty and Socialist Worker, of course, but all the new groups as well. Teenagers Against Health Checks had been all over the news, partly because of the photogenic nature of the girls involved. ‘But you can see why Toller’s worried. I mean, what’s his boss going to say when they find out his daughter’s a “hardcore resister”?’

Mona grinned. ‘Let’s find the Doctor and ask him.’

As she turned to leave, she almost crashed into Carole Brooks, and dropped her car keys.

‘Sorry.’

Their colleague didn’t move.

‘Are you OK?’ Bernard thought back to the conversation he’d overheard earlier.

‘They’re sending my son home from school. His temperature’s up.’

‘What to?’

‘38 degrees.’ She stared at Bernard.

‘Kids get temperatures all the time. It’s probably nothing.’

‘He’s coughing a lot.’

‘Could just be a cold. Kids still get colds, even in this day and age.’

‘Mm.’ She didn’t sound convinced. ‘Can you make sure Maitland lets Mr Paterson know I’ve gone?’

Bernard patted Carole's arm. 'Yeah, don't worry about that. We'll see he gets the message.'

They watched her disappear through the office door.

'I take it her boy isn't immune then?' Mona asked. 'I just assumed her whole family would all have had it.'

'Nah, I heard she got the Virus on a hen week with her sister. Ended up quarantined in Ayia Napa.'

'Oh dear. How old is her lad?'

'Fifteen or sixteen.' Bernard thought for a moment. 'I'm not sure exactly.'

Mona stooped to pick up her keys. 'Still, at least you reassured her.'

Something in her tone betrayed a certain insincerity.

'Well, I tried.' His tone was defensive, but he could guess what Mona was thinking. He'd done his best, but Carole was an ex-nurse, and Bernard knew he hadn't had any reassurance to give.

Mona elbowed him and pointed in the direction of the door. 'C'mon. We've got somewhere to be.'

The three of them had been in the car for fourteen minutes, according to Bernard's watch, and no-one had yet spoken.

He stared through the windscreen, willing the traffic on the Mound to move faster. The number 23 bus in front of them indicated that it was pulling into the bus stop opposite the National Galleries. A couple of schoolgirls wearing brightly coloured mouth masks dived across the road in front of them, bumping the bonnet in a doomed attempt to catch the bus. Mona cursed under her breath, and the car ground to a halt. Bernard couldn't stand it any longer and turned round to Doctor Toller with the intention of making small talk. This wasn't made any

easier by the soundproofed Perspex window separating them. Bernard's finger hovered over the intercom, but, as on the previous two or three times he had considered speaking, the Doctor was staring out of the window in a manner that suggested he was not open to pleasantries. Bernard resigned himself to the atmosphere.

The bus moved and the car inched forward again, only to stop when the traffic lights turned red. His mind wandered. He wondered what his wife was doing; she'd still been in bed when he left the house that morning. Not, he suspected, actually asleep, but hermetically sealed within her duvet and ignoring all conversational attempts. People, it seemed to Bernard, went to great lengths to avoid speaking to him. There was a hammering on the Perspex, causing him to jump. He turned to see Toller pointing out of the window. He reached forward and pressed the communication button. 'Your public health information is out of date,' said the German.

'Sorry – what?'

Toller extended a long, elegant finger in the direction of a laminated sign attached to a lamp post. 'Remember to cover your mouth when you cough. Throw away your tissues immediately. Wash your hands frequently ...'

'Oh, that.' Bernard laughed. 'Those were all supposed to have been removed ages ago. A legacy of our Duck-and-Cover days.'

The German stared at him, puzzled. 'Duck-and-Cover?'

'You know – once upon a time we thought we could deal with a nuclear attack by hiding under the table.' Bernard did a little mime, sheltering under his hands. He pointed at the poster. 'This was about as effective in stopping the Virus spreading.'

Toller's thin lips pulled into a smile. 'I see. Very droll.'  
Bernard smiled. He started to turn back in his seat when the doctor spoke again.

'You are not very popular, I think.'

'Me?' Bernard's tone betrayed his slight feeling of panic. What had Toller heard? Had Paterson said something about him?

The German gave his narrow smile again. 'You misunderstand me. I mean the HET is not very popular.'

'I'm not sure I would say that ...'

Mona snorted, and Bernard gave up attempting to defend his organisation's reputation.

'I have noticed that many of your public health billboards have been defaced,' Toller stared at him, 'likening your Health Enforcement Team to, of all things ...'

Bernard closed his eyes, aware what was coming.

'Nazis.'

The lights changed, and Bernard swivelled gratefully back toward the front. Mona drove up Hanover Street, turned right round the statue of George IV, and into the street that bore his name. She bumped the car up on the pavement outside The George Hotel, ignoring the double yellow lines.

Bernard looked at her in horror. 'You're not going to leave it parked here?'

'Why not?' She slid the gears into neutral and opened her door. She tapped the HET sticker on her windscreen. 'It's not like they are going to fine us. We are the Police after all.'

'Except we're not. We're the Health Enforcement Team,' said Bernard, to Mona's back.

'Whatever.' She rapped on the internal window. 'Can you show us to the Webers' room, Doctor Toller?'

‘Yes, of course.’ He slid out of the car and walked briskly in the direction of the hotel, leaving Bernard to worry about the parking arrangements.

Herr Weber was in his fifties, thin, and wearing what Bernard thought looked like a very expensive suit. He shook each of their hands in turn.

‘It is very good of you to come and see us.’ Unlike Toller, his English bore almost no trace of a German accent, but had a slight American twang. ‘Please, sit.’

The Webers were staying in one of The George’s finer suites, with a separate lounge and bedroom. The room was tastefully decorated with muted shades of green, its gleaming oak furniture a testament to intensive levels of housekeeping. It was quite unlike any of the hotel rooms Bernard had ever stayed in, most of which had been located near motorway intersections. In one corner of the living area there was a meeting space already set up for them. They settled themselves at the table, while Toller lolled in one of the armchairs, hiding himself behind the room’s complimentary copy of *The Telegraph*. Bernard read the headlines. *Industry Chiefs Call for an End to Virus Restrictions*. It was a familiar theme. Almost as soon as the Virus infection rates had started to fall, business leaders had begun agitating for relaxations on Green Cards, group meeting restrictions and Health Checks. It wasn’t an easy time to be running a business, unless you were an online provider of home entertainment. He leaned forward a little to read Professor Bircham-Fowler’s case for the defence. *The evidence indicates that regular Health Checks reduce the infectivity potential of Virus-infected individuals by half ...* Perhaps the HET was useful, after all.

‘Can I get you a coffee, or perhaps a cup of tea?’ Herr Weber hovered anxiously by the kettle. With polite murmurs they declined the offer.

‘Shall we make a start, Sir?’ asked Mona.

‘One moment, please.’ Herr Weber walked to the bedroom door and knocked gently on it. ‘My wife will be joining us.’ He lowered his voice. ‘She is extremely upset.’

‘Understandably, Sir,’ said Mona.

Frau Weber was around the same age as her husband, but considerably larger. She had obviously made recent efforts to put on make-up, which, unfortunately, was not responding well to her distress. Mascara was cascading down her cheeks, like two black railway sleepers.

Herr Weber took her by the hand. ‘My wife does not speak much English, I’m afraid, but she was very keen to meet with you.’

Bernard and Mona smiled at her. She gave them a little wave, then returned to dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

Bernard opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything Frau Weber began to talk.

‘She says that her daughter has never done this before.’ The Doctor put down his newspaper, and translated from his armchair. ‘She says Heidi always rings her on a Sunday evening, every week without fail. She says she tried to call her but the phone went straight to voicemail.’

Mona smiled sympathetically in Frau Weber’s direction, then asked Toller, ‘Have we found her mobile?’

‘No,’ Herr Weber responded to Mona’s question. ‘We searched her room and found her passport and her diary, but no phone. I assume you will want to look for yourself?’

‘Yes. So, to clarify, she didn’t phone on Sunday, and

then missed her Health Check on Monday. Does her diary give any idea of her movements?’

‘Yes and no,’ Herr Weber replied. ‘We’re having it translated for you at the moment. She seemed to frequent a couple of pubs in Edinburgh – Morley’s and the Railway Tavern. Her last entry mentions plans to meet friends at Morley’s. Are you familiar with these establishments?’

Mona nodded. ‘I’m certainly familiar with Morley’s. Useful leads, Sir.’ She turned to Doctor Toller. ‘Could you please tell Frau Weber that it is very unlikely that anything has happened to her daughter, and that she will probably turn up unharmed?’

Herr Weber answered. ‘I hope for all our sakes that you are right.’

‘Mona.’

Paterson appeared out of his office the second they walked into the room, red-faced and purposeful, like an overheated shark. He strode toward them, and Mona noticed Bernard take a half-step behind her.

‘You’re a woman.’

‘Very nearly,’ piped up Maitland, cheerfully.

They all turned and glared at him. He smirked and ducked down behind his computer.

‘Shut up, Maitland.’ Paterson returned to his theme. ‘You are a woman, and good at all that touchy-feely crap.’

Mona stared at her boss, and wondered if in the past six months he had learned anything about her at all. ‘I wouldn’t really say those were my particular strengths, Guv. Perhaps Bernard would be a better choice for whatever you’ve got in mind?’

‘He *is* practically a woman.’ Maitland’s voice came from behind his PC.

‘Shut up, Maitland,’ said Bernard, and blushed.

Paterson ignored the interruptions. ‘Carole Brooks phoned to say she’s at the hospital with her kid.’

‘Poor Carole.’

‘Is her son all right?’ asked Bernard.

‘We don’t know.’ Paterson turned to Mona. ‘I need you to get up there and check she’s OK.’

She looked at her boss in surprise. ‘That’s very thoughtful of you.’

‘Yeah, and while you’re there find out how long she’s going to be off. If it’s going to be more than a couple of days we’re in trouble.’ He turned on his heel. ‘But be tactful. I don’t want another of those harassment-bullying tribunal thingies.’

Mona decided not to wonder about the Guv’s past HR record. She picked up her bag. ‘OK, Guv. What’s the rush to get Carole back, though? We can cover for a few days at least.’

He handed her a sheet of paper. ‘Here’s why. Our glorious leader has woken up to the fact that people have either not heard of the HET, or if they have heard of us they consider us a bunch of health fascists ...’

‘Which isn’t exactly fair, Guv,’ said Maitland. ‘There is an epidemic going on.’

‘You don’t have to convince me. Everyone’s 100 per cent in favour of us enforcing the Health Checks, right up until the minute they forget to tell us they are going on holiday, and come back to a full-scale HET investigation. Then it’s all articles in the *Daily Mail* about our heavy-handed response, blah, blah, blah.’

‘Basically, people want us to enforce Health Checks for everyone except them,’ said Mona.

‘Exactly! Anyway, in an attempt to win hearts and

minds, the Powers That Be now want us to . . .’ he gestured at the memo Mona was holding.

She looked down. ‘Tour local high schools promoting the work of the HET? You’ve got to be kidding.’

‘Yes, it appears that the million pounds Health Communications has spent on adverts in the middle of *Coronation Street* still hasn’t raised our profile sufficiently for people to see us as the fluffy bunnies we really are, so now someone has to go and speak to school assemblies across Edinburgh.’

Maitland’s head appeared above his computer. ‘Carole is definitely your man on that one, Guv.’

The car park at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary was full. Mona circled round half a dozen times before spying a woman walking toward a Ford Focus. She tailed her at a discreet distance, then sat drumming her fingers on the steering wheel while the woman hunted for her keys, got in, and slowly reversed out. Mona gave a polite wave to the disappearing tail lights, and swung sharply into the vacated space, narrowly missing the wing mirror of the neighbouring car.

The ERI loomed in the distance, a low modern building with rounded turrets at each end. Its white squatness always reminded Mona of the bottom tier of a wedding cake. She reached into her pocket for her Green Card as she approached the security gate between the car park and the hospital grounds. A man coming in the other direction held the gate open and winked at her as she passed through. She smiled politely and wondered exactly how many plaques outlining the dangers of letting people through the barriers the NHS would have to pin up before people actually took notice.

She walked at a smart pace into the foyer, ignored the queue of non-immune visitors waiting to plead their case with the Admissions Officer, and pressed her Green Card against the security turnstile. The light turned from Stop to Go, and she entered, nearly bumping into a woman who stepped forward and thrust a leaflet at her. She glared at her assailant, then noticed the Hospital Volunteer badge on her lapel and quickly morphed her features into a polite smile. The helper nodded at her, and let her pass. She looked down at the leaflet, and saw it was a Health Communications publication about Virus precautions.

*The influenza virus is spread by close personal contact . . .*

She scanned down to a box at the bottom. The author had gone overboard on the use of exclamation marks.

***Remember:** A single sneeze can spread the Virus up to 6 feet away!*

***Remember:** A person has the Virus for up to four days before showing symptoms – just because someone looks healthy doesn't mean they are Virus-free!*

***Remember:** You are infectious from the day before your symptoms show until up to seven days after you become ill – if you don't feel well STAY AT HOME!*

***Remember:** punctuation overuse can kill!*

She shoved the leaflet in her pocket, walking past the café and bookshops until she found a board listing the different wards. There were an apparently endless number of possibilities. Would Carole and her son be in Virus Immediate Quarantine, Children's Virus Ward,

or Young People's Virus Ward? At what age did a child become a young person? They'd discussed her family when she'd joined the HET, in the usual getting to know your colleagues way. Carole had obviously sussed that children weren't her thing though, as Mona couldn't remember ever discussing her kid again – or was it kids? And Christ – what was his name?

She pulled out her mobile. 'Carole, hi, it's Mona.'

'Mona, how are you?' Her colleague's voice was quiet.

'I'm in the foyer of the ERI but I don't know what ward you're on.'

'You're here?' She sounded surprised. 'Did Mr Paterson send you to check up on me?'

'He's concerned about you. In his own way.'

There was a brief pause. 'Ward Four. It's marked Young People.'

Carole and her son were in a small side room, with a sign marked 'Caution: Virus Assessment' on its door. It had taken a bit of manoeuvring on Mona's part to get this far; the double whammy of child protection and Virus control concerns meant that a letter from God himself was required to get on to a ward. Mona had the next best thing – an HET ID card. The nurse on duty had looked a bit doubtful, but a few veiled threats about the power of the Health Enforcement Team had given her enough leverage to get shown to the correct place.

Mona hovered in the doorway. Carole was sitting by the bed, holding her son's hand. Her eyes were closed and her head bent slightly forward, as if she was praying. Was she a Christian? Mona didn't know. Maybe everyone in this position appealed to a higher power. When her father had had his heart attack she remembered a long night of

bargaining with a deity she wasn't sure she believed in. Much good it had done.

A bank of monitoring equipment stood in position at the top end of the room, its light flashing rhythmically red then green. The covers of the bed had been thrown back, and the long limbs of the teenager were shifting restlessly. The pinkness of the boy's cheeks stood out against the sea of hospital white. He looked like a textbook example of a Virus case. He could have appeared on a Virus protection ad with the PHeDA logo underneath: *Phone Help. Don't Approach.*

Indecision gripped her. Was it really worth bothering her colleague right now? It was pretty obvious Carole wasn't going to be rushing back to work anytime soon, despite the Guv's school assembly emergency. She was just coming down on the side of lying to her boss, when Carole opened her eyes and caught sight of her.

'Hello, Mona.' She attempted a not very convincing smile.

To Mona's relief, the boy's details were written in pen on a white board above his head. Michael Brooks. He was only fifteen.

'How is Michael?'

'Not so good. The doctor ...'

The machine that was monitoring Michael's heart rate gave out a loud buzzing sound. The flashing light changed to a persistent red.

Carole leapt in alarm, dropped the magazine, and pushed past her to the door. Mona followed her into the corridor, scanning up and down the whitewashed walls for a sign of assistance. Carole stood in the middle of the hallway, and spun round in an anxious pirouette.

'Where are they?'

‘I’m sure they’ll be ...’ She stopped when the blue-clad form of a Virus nurse appeared at the end of the hall and ran in their direction. They followed her back into the room.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said, pressing a button. ‘This machine does that from time to time.’

The buzzing ceased. Relieved, the pair of them exchanged a look.

‘Are you OK?’ asked Mona, then realised how stupid the question was. ‘I mean, of course you are not OK, but are you ...’

‘Coping?’ Carole walked round the bed and collapsed back into her seat. ‘I’ve been living on my nerves ever since the school phoned this morning.’

Mona spied a chair in the corridor and nabbed it. She edged past the nurse, who was now taking Michael’s pulse, and settled down next to Michael’s feet.

‘Did they send him home?’

‘No, I went to the school to get him. I took one look at him when I got there and jumped straight into a taxi. He started coughing up blood on the way. The driver was immune – thank God – and helped me carry him in.’

‘It’s Carole Brooks, isn’t it?’

Surprised, they both turned in the direction of the nurse. Mona looked at her properly for the first time. She put her at about thirty, with brown hair pulled back in a bun. She was round-faced, with slightly buck teeth, which, combined with her air of eagerness, made her resemble an enthusiastic hamster. Carole looked as if she vaguely recognised her, but couldn’t put a name to her. The nurse helped her out.

‘Amy Wilson, Phillips as was. I was a student nurse on your ward about ten years ago?’

‘Sorry,’ said Carole, reprising the barely-there smile that Mona had seen earlier. ‘Long time ago.’

‘Yeah, you left to set up your ...’ her face screwed up as she thought, ‘shop, was it?’

‘A herbalist shop, yeah.’

The herbalist shop was a source of much amusement in the HET office. Maitland had visited it and reported back on the range of crystals, herbs, and other ‘wacko shit’ that it purveyed. Even Bernard had been heard to comment on the dangers of homeopathic remedies in the current climate. Amy Wilson didn’t seem to find it funny, her hamster cheeks working overtime as she nodded.

‘Yes, of course it was. Is that still going strong?’

‘Business has never been better, actually.’ Carole gave a bitter little laugh. ‘Everyone’s desperate for a cure.’

They all looked at Michael.

‘I just wish I had one.’

Amy Wilson, Phillips as was, smiled and smoothed the sheets back over Michael’s legs. ‘How’s Jimmy? Will he be in?’

‘No. He’s not immune, nor is my other son, so sadly it’s just me.’

‘That’s a shame. So, you’ve left him minding the shop?’

‘Actually he’s been running the business since I started working for the Health Enforcement Team.’

Amy’s eyes widened. ‘You’re with the HET now? How did you end up there?’

Carole turned her face away, and shrugged. ‘Oh, you know,’ she looked at Michael, ‘there were all those adverts for nurses who’d left the profession ...’

Mona could see her colleague’s attention was drifting back to her son’s bed.

‘... and, what was I saying? Sorry, my head’s not in the best place right now.’

Michael shifted uneasily on the bed.

‘It’s all right, sweetheart.’ She stroked his hand. ‘Mum’s here.’

Amy moved toward the door, and as she did so a man in blue scrubs appeared in the doorway.

‘Just press the red buzzer if you need anything.’ She smiled at them both. ‘Good to see you again.’

Carole muttered something, but Mona could see that all of her attention was now focused on the doctor.

The doctor was young, with blonde hair in a perfect Marcel Wave. He looked like a 1920s Hollywood starlet, albeit a star who had just worked a twelve-hour shift saving the lives of fever-stricken minors.

‘Which one of you ladies is Michael’s mum?’

Carole let go of her son’s hand. ‘I am.’

‘I’m Doctor McMenamie.’ He stuck out a hand to shake hers.

Mona stood up to leave, ‘I’ll head off now.’

The medic picked up Michael’s notes from the end of the bed.

‘Could you stay, Mona, just until the doctor’s gone?’

There was a tone in Carole’s voice that Mona hadn’t heard before, and the hint of a plea was playing around her eyes. She reluctantly sat back down. ‘Sure.’

The doctor looked at them both.

‘As you know, the blood tests confirmed that Michael is suffering from H1N1-variant influenza, or as we usually call it, the Virus.’

Carole nodded.

‘So, I just wanted to run through with you what we will be doing with Michael’s treatment.’

Mona stood up and motioned to the doctor to sit down in her place.

‘Thanks.’ He took a deep breath. ‘The Virus, as you may be aware, is particularly dangerous for young people.’

Mona waited for Carole to admit to being a nurse, but she didn’t enlighten him. Mona wondered why; Carole had been out of nursing for around ten years – perhaps she was unsure of the latest responses to the Virus? Maybe she just wanted to hear it all again as a refresher? Mona looked over at Carole and got her answer – Carole was trying so hard not to cry she couldn’t speak.

‘This is due to a phenomenon called a cytokine storm, which basically means that your body’s immune system completely overreacts to the Virus.’

Carole dug a hanky out of her pocket and wiped her eyes. ‘I’ve heard the term.’

The doctor smiled. ‘It’s amazing the terminology everyone has become familiar with over the past couple of years. So, this overreaction is bad in adults, but in young people like your son, it’s particularly powerful as they have the strongest immune system.’

‘Oh God.’

‘But you got him to us really quickly.’ He held up a reassuring hand. ‘He stands a very good chance of recovery. Our main concern is making sure that this doesn’t develop into bacterial pneumonia, and to that end we’ll be monitoring him throughout the day.’ He stood up. ‘Any questions, just ask.’

Carole covered her face with her hands.

Mona reached over and patted her shoulder. ‘Thanks, Doctor.’

He gave a nod of acknowledgement and disappeared out of the door.

Carole laid her head face down on the bed, next to Michael's hand. 'Sorry, Mona,' she said, her voice muffled by the bed sheet.

'Don't apologise, it's totally understandable.' What did it feel like to have your son go through this? The idea of having a child was quite difficult enough for Mona to imagine, without factoring in life-threatening illnesses. 'I could stay for a while.'

'No.' Carole sat back upright, wiping her eyes. 'No, get back to work. Try and save some other poor bugger from going through this.'

Mona backed slowly out of the room. 'Take care, Carole.'

As soon as she was out of sight she started to run, and didn't stop until she was back at her car.