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THE SIXTH RICHARD STILMAN

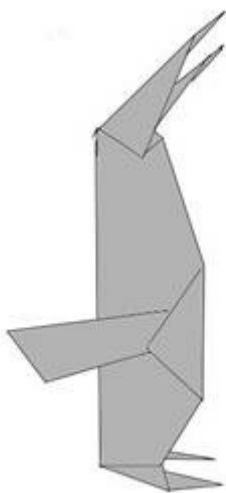
A LEO SELF MYSTERY



The Sixth
Richard Stilman

a Leo Self mystery

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The Sixth

Richard Stilman

The advert was a bit vague really. 'Personal Assistant required. Good interpersonal skills essential. Enquire Leo Self, 4 Station Road, Flyemouth.' It didn't say how much it paid but I needed the job

and this was the only thing in my line and in my area, so I decided I had nothing to lose. There was no phone number, no closing date, so I had no choice but to go to the address and see what happened.

4 Station Road turned out to be a small cottage near the railway bridge. It didn't look promising for employment but it wouldn't hurt to check it out so I smoothed down my skirt, took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

It was opened almost immediately by a youngish man with a mess of curly hair and an intense expression. He frowned at me. 'Can I help you?' There was a hint of irritation in his voice.

'I've come about the job,' I said as brightly as I could. 'Personal assistant?'

He looked confused for a

moment and then suddenly appeared to remember. 'Oh, yes! That. Come in, come in.' He opened the door fully to let me enter the cottage.

The door led directly into the living room, which was very neat, if a little old fashioned, apart from a few open newspapers lying on the floor. I had to stand on them to walk across the room. One corner was given over to an elaborate model railway. He had managed to set it up so that the track climbed the wall and went all the way around the room before descending again to join the main railway in the corner. A train was running on it now. It was really quite impressive.

A bookcase on one wall contained a few books but mostly DVDs. A lot of them were box sets

of TV shows I'd never even heard of. I couldn't see a TV anywhere but there was a laptop on the coffee table. On top of the bookcase, lined up in neat rows, were lots of origami models. Mostly animals but some flowers, boats and even a miniature swing park.

'These are amazing,' I said, picking up a panda and a horse to look at them more closely. They really were very clever but out of the corner of my eye I could see him stiffen slightly and his eyes widen in anxiety. He obviously didn't like people touching them – well, they were only made of paper – so I put them back on the shelf. Immediately he came over and swapped them around.

I looked around the rest of the room. Another corner was filled

with three metal filing cabinets, and next to them was a doorway that led to a small kitchenette. I could see the sink, which, in contrast to the tidy living room, was piled high with dirty dishes. The train passed above the doorway, distracting my attention.

‘Sit down,’ said, presumably, Leo Self. ‘Can I get you something to drink?’

I tried not to look in the direction of the kitchen as I sat on the sofa. ‘No, thanks. I’m fine.’ There didn’t seem to be any other doors. Where did he sleep?

‘I’m Leo Self.’ He was rather casually dressed for a job interview.

‘Karen. Karen Aspen.’

‘Can you start straight away or do you need to hand in your notice

somewhere first?’ he asked.

I was taken aback. ‘Do you mean I’ve got the job?’

‘Yes. When can you start?’

‘But don’t you want to ask me any questions?’

‘I just asked you two.’

‘But you don’t know anything about me.’

‘Is there some reason why I shouldn’t give you the job?’

Was this a test, I wondered.

‘Well, no, but...’

‘Good. Can you start immediately?’

‘I don’t even know what the job is!’

‘Personal assistant. It did say in the advert.’

I tried to keep my cool. ‘Yes, I know that, but what does it actually involve?’

He looked confused. ‘Assisting

me.'

I hoped my face didn't give away my irritation. 'What exactly do you do, Mr Self?'

'I'm a private detective. And please call me Leo. I feel old when people call me mister.'

'Alright, Leo. A private detective? So are you essentially looking for someone to answer the phone, meet clients etc?'

'Good grief no! You'll be working on cases with me.'

Was he serious? 'I'm not a detective.'

'No, I am. You're my personal assistant. I thought we'd covered that.'

If I hadn't needed the job I might have walked out there and then, he was so exasperating. 'Could you maybe tell me what you need an assistant *for*?'

‘I’m quite a good detective. I’m very intelligent, good at deduction, finding clues, lateral and logical thinking. I crack a lot of cases that the police can’t. But I’m not very good at people.’

The advert had asked for good interpersonal skills.

‘I can’t always read them very well, often miss things. I recently had a case I couldn’t crack until someone told me that two of the suspects were having an affair. They’d worked it out from body language, things they said and so on. I’d never have spotted it.’

I began to think that it wouldn’t matter if my expression gave me away or not. He probably wouldn’t pick up on it.

‘I need someone to do all that for me. Plus it’s been pointed out to me that I’m sometimes a bit

abrupt. Even rude. I don't mean to be but I don't always realise it. So in that sense, yes I do need you to talk to clients, and other people, to make sure I don't get it wrong. Or to apologise for me when I do. You're my human credential.'

This was beginning to sound interesting. And Leo's candour about his social inadequacies sort of mitigated how exasperating he was. In a strange way, it was endearing. I asked about money, hours etc. It didn't pay that much but it was better than having no job at all and while the hours would be irregular and often antisocial, it could be fascinating. Not just the job but Leo himself.

He picked up one of the newspapers and handed it to me. 'Read that.'

It was open at the obituaries

page and one of them had been circled. 'Richard Stilman, Flyemouth, beloved husband of Joanne, died unexpectedly abroad on April 8.' I looked up at Leo. 'So who was Richard Stilman?'

He smiled enigmatically. 'That's a very good question.'

He handed me another paper. Again, it was open at the obituaries. 'Richard Stilman – ' I looked at Leo again. 'Richard Stilman. It's the same man.'

'Keep reading.'

'Richard Stilman died, aged 43, leaving his devoted wife Heather. Richard was a victim of the Australian air crash of March 29. A memorial service will be held in Edinburgh High Kirk on April 15.' I shrugged. 'So they had the same name.'

'And died within a few days of

each other.’

‘A bit of a coincidence, I’ll grant you, but – ’

He passed me another paper. There was another obituary for another Richard Stilman. This one was 39, from Doncaster and left a wife called Marie. The next one was from Oxford, aged 40, married to Gail and had died at sea. Then there was a 42 year-old Richard from Congleton with a wife called Charlotte and one from Abersoch aged 38 whose wife was called Natalie.

‘Six men with the same name, all dying within a week of each other?’ I said incredulously. ‘And it’s not exactly a common name, is it?’

‘All similar ages too. Is that the Flyemouth Gazette?’ Leo asked, indicating the paper under my

arm. I had taken the job advert with me to make sure I found the address. 'Page 35.'

Page 35 contained a more detailed obituary for the first Richard. He had worked for the Diplomatic Service and had been killed in a terrorist bombing in the Middle East. The funeral service was today, in about half an hour.

A thought struck me. 'How did you notice all these? Do you spend all your time reading the obituaries?'

'Not all my time,' he said seriously. He began folding up the papers, very neatly.

'Is this a case?' I asked, wondering if there was some serial killer going around murdering people with the same name.

'It's certainly suspicious, don't

you think?’ He opened one of the filing cabinet drawers, rifled through some drop files and placed the newspapers in one.

‘Suspicious of what?’

He gave that enigmatic smile again. ‘Let’s go and find out,’ he said, grabbing his jacket.

‘So it is a case,’ I said as he walked over to the train set.

‘Time will tell.’ His hand hovered over the controls as he watched the train making its journey around the room.

‘Well aren’t you going to switch it off?’ I asked impatiently. ‘What are we waiting for?’

‘The train has to get back to the station first.’

‘Seriously?’

The train finally reached the miniature platform and he flicked the switch. ‘Come on.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘To the funeral, of course.’ He opened the door and suddenly stopped dead. ‘The train doesn’t go anywhere near the church,’ he said as if this was a disaster.

‘That’s alright, we can take my car.’

‘I suppose so,’ he said reluctantly and left the cottage.

As we walked towards the car, he suddenly stopped again and turned to look up at the railway bridge.

‘Now what?’ I asked.

He held up a finger to silence me. For a minute or two he just watched and then I heard the sound of an approaching train. As it passed overhead I thought that it must be unbearably noisy living right underneath the bridge. Once the train had passed out of sight

he turned and followed me to the car as if nothing had happened.

As I turned the engine on, Leo said, 'You're not wearing your seatbelt.'

'Alright,' I said tetchily, 'give me a chance.'

I did a u-turn and headed for the junction.

'Turn left here,' said Leo.

'It's alright, I know the way.'

But as we got to the next turn he said, 'Turn right here.'

'I said I know the way.'

He did it again at the roundabout.

'Will you stop giving me directions! I know where I'm going.'

After that he did let up on the directions but once we got on to a long stretch of road and I put my foot down, he said, 'You're doing

thirty-two in a built-up area.’

‘It’s fine,’ I said as calmly as I could.

‘You’re doing thirty-two in a built-up area,’ he said again. There was a slight tension in his voice this time.

I was starting to lose my cool.
‘Do you want to drive?’

‘I can’t.’

Somehow I wasn’t surprised.
‘Then stop telling me how to.’ But I slowed down to thirty, just to shut him up.



Leo frowned his way through the entire service. We sat at the back,

out of the way, as the vicar spoke eloquently about a man he had clearly never met and the grieving widow didn't cry as much as I'd expected. Leo seemed familiar with all the hymns and I wondered if he went to a lot of funerals. As the last hymn began, I leaned across and asked him what was wrong.

'I didn't expect there to be a funeral,' he said.

'Yes you did. You said we were going to the funeral.'

'But I didn't expect there to really be one.'

'Why not?'

'I was expecting them to be fake. The Richard Stilmans. The obituaries. I thought it was some sort of code for people to communicate in secret. But he was a real person. That changes

everything.’

‘Still a case?’

‘A very strange one if there really were six men with the same name who died in such a short space of time.’

When everyone filed out of the church, Leo made a beeline for the widow. ‘My sincere condolences,’ he said as he shook her hand a bit too vigorously for the occasion.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Did you know Richard well?’

‘Hardly at all,’ answered Leo truthfully. ‘But when we read about it in the paper we just had to come.’

‘It’s a terrible tragedy,’ I added.

She nodded sadly. ‘He was away so much and often in dangerous places but you never think it’s going to happen to you, do you?’

‘It didn’t really happen to you,

though,' said Leo, 'it happened to him.'

Ah. This was what he'd hired me for.

'Sorry, Leo's just a bit upset, aren't you?'

'Am I? Oh, right. Yes. You talk to her.' He wandered off to speak to the vicar, which would hopefully be less damaging. Or if not, at least the vicar might be better equipped to deal with him.

'You said Richard was away a lot. That must've been hard for you.'

She didn't look at me as she replied. 'It's not easy only seeing your husband for a few weeks of the year. After five years that takes its toll. But I'd never have wished *this*.' And then I saw the first sign of any real emotion from her as she shuddered and her lip trembled.

I found Leo debating theology with the harassed-looking vicar.

‘There’s no actual scientific evidence for the soul, though, is there?’

‘I suppose not but does science really give us all the answers?’

‘Yes. That’s what science is.’

The vicar smiled. Only just. ‘But science doesn’t really tell us anything about the spiritual realm, does it?’

‘Because there’s nothing to tell. There’s no scientific evidence for the spiritual realm.’

‘Perhaps science is inadequate for understanding the spiritual.’

‘No, science is just a way of describing how everything works. If science can’t describe it then it isn’t real.’

‘Oh, but surely there are lots of things that science is currently

unable to explain,' said the vicar.

'There are things we can't explain yet but we know they exist.

There's still no evidence for the soul. Now you take – '

I decided it was time to rescue the vicar. 'Sorry, vicar, he's just a bit upset.' I grabbed Leo firmly by the arm and steered him towards the car.

'Hey, I was having an interesting conversation!' he protested.

'Inappropriate at a funeral,' I said quietly.

'Really? Why?'

'Because people are upset. They don't want to have existential debates when they're laying their loved ones to rest.'

'But it was the vicar. It wasn't *his* loved one.'

'Still not appropriate. Trust me. That's what you're paying me for,

remember?’

He seemed to accept this. ‘Did she tell you anything?’ he asked.

‘Well it wasn’t much of a marriage,’ I told him, feeling proud of my first piece of detective work. ‘They’d been together five years and she only saw him for a few weeks out of every year. And I don’t mean a few weeks at a time. In the last year he was only home three times, each time for a fortnight or so before he went off on the next diplomatic mission. Couple of months in total. That means they’d spent less than a year together in their entire married life. Don’t you think that’s sad? They’d drifted apart. She hardly knew him really.’

‘You got her to tell you that?’

‘She didn’t have to. A woman can tell. You get anything interesting

from the vicar? I mean before you started haranguing him about his faith.'

'Yes. He told me it was a closed casket.'

'I suppose a terrorist bomb wouldn't have left very much of him,' I said sadly.

'Nothing at all. There was no body.'



‘We need to find out more about the other Richards, don’t we?’

‘We do.’

‘We’re not going round all their funerals, are we? One of them’s in Wales!’

‘That would be impractical. We’ll have to see what we can find on the web.’ Leo adjusted some of his origami models by a few millimetres. I couldn’t see anything wrong with them.

‘I could phone some of them pretending I’m a reporter.’ I was really getting into this detective thing. Leo looked doubtful but waved me towards the phone while he powered up his laptop. It didn’t take him long to track down phone numbers for such an unusual name and meanwhile I started by calling the papers to see what information they would give

up. I then moved on to the widows, beginning with the Edinburgh one as the air crash seemed the most promising pretext for a reporter to phone. Leo grimaced at my fake accent but I ignored him. The information I gleaned fired me up for the rest and I tried the Oxford Richard next as a shipwreck seemed like another good excuse. But it was when I phoned the Abersoch local paper about the Welsh Richard that things got really interesting. Leo finished whatever he was doing quite quickly and picked up a large square of shiny paper and started to fold it while he waited for me. After about an hour I sat down beside Leo feeling quite pleased with myself. On the table stood an elaborate origami dragon.

‘What accent was that supposed to be?’ asked Richard.

‘Well, the first one was Scottish because I was phoning Edinburgh. Then I did posh for Oxford cos that’s what Inspector Morse sounds like.’

‘They both sounded the same.’

‘No they didn’t, you just weren’t paying attention. Then I just used my own voice because I can’t do Welsh.’

‘You can’t do Scottish or Oxford either.’

I took a deep breath. ‘Leo,’ I said as nicely as I could, ‘you know how you said sometimes you need me to tell me when you’re being rude to people? This is one of those times.’

I couldn’t read his expression. ‘What did I do wrong?’

‘You were mean about my

accents?’

‘But they were terrible.’

‘In your opinion! But you don’t have to be mean about it.’

‘I wasn’t being mean, I was – ’

‘Remember you said you don’t always realise you’re doing it?’

He thought about it. ‘Alright. I’m sorry. I’ll try not to do it again.’

Was that how it worked? I just had to tell him what he’d done wrong and he’d accept it?

‘Did your accents help you get any useful information?’ asked Leo.

‘Too right they did.’ I looked at my notes. ‘Edinburgh Richard. Died in the Australian plane crash? He was only the pilot.’

‘Was he now?’ said Leo enigmatically.

‘His wife, lovely woman, said he’d been flying for ten years

without an incident. But get this.’
I prepared for my shock
revelation. ‘Welsh Richard? Same
plane crash.’

I grinned smugly when Leo
stared at me dumbfounded. But
my grin faded when he said, ‘No
he wasn’t.’

‘He bloody was. His wife told
me.’

‘I’m sure she did. But he wasn’t
on the plane.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I’ve seen the list of the
dead – and there were no
survivors. Or Richard Stilmans.’

It took a few seconds for that to
sink in. ‘What, not even the pilot?’

‘Not even the pilot.’

‘But – ’ Now it was my turn to be
dumbfounded. ‘But – ’

‘What else did you get?’

I had to make myself think about

the others. ‘Er, Oxford Richard. Died at sea. He worked on that ferry that went down in the Channel. And Doncaster Richard – well he didn’t. But he was on it. Only you’re gonna tell me that he wasn’t, aren’t you?’

‘I’ll check the casualty list. What about the sixth one?’

‘I couldn’t get much on him. No answer at his house. The paper told me it was a man who brought in the obituary, his brother they reckoned. But they did remember one thing. It’s not in the paper but the man mentioned the date he died. They remembered because it was the same date as someone in the office’s birthday. You’ll never guess.’

‘March twenty-ninth?’

I was gutted. ‘How’d you know?’

‘It’s the date of the plane crash.

It was going to be either that or the ferry.'

By now he'd found the casualty list for the ferry disaster and, sure enough, there were no Richard Stilmans. He picked up the phone and made a call of his own, all the time watching the train go round and round the room. I looked at the kitchen and couldn't stand it any more. I had to tackle the pile of dishes.

When I came back through, Leo put the phone down with a triumphant grin. 'The Diplomatic Service say they've never heard of a Richard Stilman.'

'Why would they say that?' Then a thought struck me. 'Do you think he was a spy?'

Leo gave me a withering look. 'He lied about being a diplomat.'

'Or,' I persisted, 'he was a spy.'

‘He wasn’t a spy.’

‘How do you know?’

‘There was no body because he isn’t really dead.’ He picked up a smaller square of paper and began folding it.

‘But his wife had a letter from the Foreign Office. She told me.’

‘Easy enough to forge. Think about what else she told you.’ He didn’t seem to be paying attention to whatever he was folding. He just did it automatically.

‘What else did she tell me?’

‘Two months of the year. She only saw him for two months of the year.’

‘Because he was away spying.’

‘Because he was away being one of the other Richard Stilmans.’ He stood up and put the origami pelican on the bookshelf next to the others.

‘What?’

Leo went into the kitchen and switched the kettle on. He’d bloody waited until I’d done his dishes for him.

‘Six Richards, two months of the year each. He lived six different lives. One was a pilot, one was in the merchant navy. I’ll bet the others all had jobs that took them away from home too. And we know that three supposedly died in a plane crash and two died at sea.’

‘So their bodies might not have been recovered either!’ I was beginning to see what Leo was getting at.

‘Except, of course, those were all lies. I’m sure that if we phone the airline and the ferry company, they’ll never have heard of him either.’ He came back through

with two coffees and a packet of dark chocolate digestives. ‘I think Richard Stilman was a bigamist.’

‘Don’t you mean –’ I realised that I didn’t actually know the word, ‘a multi-bigamist?’ I tried.

‘Polygamist.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘But why would he only spend a couple of weeks at a time with each wife?’

‘Because he has to see all of them.’ Leo’s tone suggested he thought this should be obvious.

‘But that’s not really living six lives,’ I explained. ‘That’s just running around all the time never living any of them. Anyone else would spend the full two months with each wife before moving on.’

‘Would they?’ Leo genuinely didn’t seem to understand this.

‘Isn’t it much more plausible to be home three or four times a year than just once?’

‘I suppose so but you wouldn’t really get the benefits of having all those wives and houses and lives, would you? If he didn’t want to spend much time with them then why bother at all?’

Richard stared at me as if I’d made some great revelation. ‘Why indeed?’

‘What? You’ve thought of something, haven’t you?’

‘If you’re right then he had some other reason for marrying them all.’

‘Well he didn’t marry them for their money,’ I said. ‘He was the breadwinner in the Flyemouth house. Diplomat’s a well paid job.’

‘So he was well off?’ asked Leo interestedly.

‘I just said, didn’t I?’

‘You said diplomats are well paid.’

‘Yeah.’ Was he being deliberately awkward?

‘He wasn’t a diplomat!’

‘Oh yeah. Hey, but he was still earning diplomat’s wages!’

‘Salary. But yes. So if he didn’t marry them for money, what was it?’

‘And why did he fake his death? Deaths.’

Leo seemed not to have considered that. ‘Yes. He killed them all at the same time so he probably had to do it in a hurry. Something happened that made him want to cover his tracks.’

‘He was found out,’ I suggested.

‘Perhaps...’ I could see his brain ticking over.

‘By a rival spy?’

‘He’s not a spy!’

‘Might be.’

‘Why couldn’t you get hold of the sixth one’s widow?’

‘I tried,’ I said defensively.

‘I know that. But she was the only one you couldn’t get. And the obituary was brought to the newspaper office by a man. And it was the last one to be published.’ He didn’t even have to look at the papers to confirm the dates.

‘You think that was Richard!’ I gasped. ‘He did all the rest and then did that one himself.’

‘Try phoning again.’

I obediently rang the Congleton number. ‘Still no answer.’

‘Maybe there isn’t really a widow,’ mused Leo.

‘Maybe she’s just out,’ I said reasonably.

Leo was on the internet again

and soon pulled up a news story. It took me a moment to see which one he meant because it was buried in a page of stories dominated by the search for air crash survivors being called off. The other big ones were ones about a prosecution over the ferry disaster, Justin Ledbetter frothing at the mouth in the Commons like he always does about the Sheffield bank robbers being released early, and another victim of the Brighton Butcher, this time a stripper. I eventually saw it sandwiched between a disturbing piece on a weirdo undertaker doing nasty things with the dearly departed and something about the Loch Ness Monster possibly being unwell because no-one had sighted it recently. Or ever. The story Leo had found was just one

short paragraph in amongst these and others.

*Mystery Blaze in Congleton
Firefighters were called to a house in Beech Road, Congleton, on Friday night. It took two crews three hours to control the blaze. A single body was found inside. Arson has not been ruled out.*

‘Is that the street where Richard lived?’ I asked, a horrible idea forming in my mind.

Leo’s fingers danced across the keyboard. ‘Same street. Same house. It’s the sixth Richard Stilman’s house.’

‘Do you think it was his wife? Do you think he set the fire to get rid of her? Maybe he’s going round killing them all, one by one.’

Richard gave me a withering

look. 'You have far too much imagination.'

'Well maybe we should find out.'

'If he's killing all the widows?'

'Who the body was. Maybe if you had some sort of police contact...'

'I have.'

'Then maybe they could help us out?'

'I'm sure they could.'

God, couldn't he take a hint?

'Then are we going to see them?'

'I'm waiting for the train to get into the station.'

We also had to do the thing where he waited for the train to cross the bridge on our way out to the car. At least this time he didn't tell me how to drive.



‘New assistant, eh? Business must be booming.’ There was a slight mocking edge to the statement that reminded me to make a mental note to ask Leo if anyone was actually paying us to investigate this case.

Detective Inspector Lesley Hudson was far too sarcastic and pretty and I hated her instantly. ‘So what case do you need me to solve for you this week?’

‘House fire in Congleton.’

‘Congleton?’ she repeated in disbelief. It was hardly her patch. That’s the word, isn’t it?

‘I need you to get in touch with Cheshire Police and find out if they’ve identified the body.’

‘What’s your interest?’ she asked, although I noticed she was already reaching for the phone. Leo hesitated. ‘Come on, Leo, share and share alike. I can’t give you police info unless you give me something in return.’

Leo gave in and told her about the obituaries and everything we’d worked out so far. I held back my spy theory. Just so we’d still have one over her.

‘Sounds a bit far-fetched but yours usually do. Alright, I’ll bite.’ She made the call. ‘They haven’t ID’d the body,’ she said, putting the phone down, ‘but it was an

adult male.’

‘So not Charlotte,’ I said, and immediately felt guilty for being a bit disappointed.’

‘Who’s Charlotte?’ asked Hudson.

‘The widow.’

‘There was no widow. None the Cheshire force could find any evidence of, anyway. All the neighbours said he lived alone and there’s no marriage record.’

‘But it said in the paper – ’ I began.

‘It said a lot in the paper,’ said Leo, sounding annoyed that he had to keep reminding me.

‘They did find something to bear out your theory about Stilman having faked his own death,’ continued Hudson. ‘His bank account was emptied the day *after* he died.’

‘Well *that* couldn’t have been Charlotte,’ I said. ‘She didn’t exist. What about the brother? And then Richard burned him in the house. Or the brother burned Richard.’

‘What brother?’ asked Hudson.

‘There *was* no brother!’ said Leo irritably. ‘Richard took the obituary in himself.’

‘Then who’s the body?’

Leo’s face took on the expression I’d already seen several times today.

‘Oh, he’s getting one of his theories,’ said Hudson in that mocking tone I didn’t like.

‘How much?’ asked Leo.

‘How much what?’ asked Hudson.

‘How much money?’

‘The bank account? Er, they didn’t say the exact amount but – ’

‘But it was a lot, wasn’t it? What

did he do?’

‘Businessman of some sort.’

‘Another well-paid job that took him away from home. Not that this one had a wife to lie to but he probably needed something to tell the neighbours. So they all had well paid jobs – ’

‘Not all,’ I interrupted.

‘Doncaster Richard was a lorry driver and Welsh Richard was a travelling salesman. Still jobs that took them away from home but not the same kind of money.’

‘But I’ll bet they still *had* the same kind of money,’ said Leo, who obviously thought he was on to something. ‘And I’ll bet they all with-drew it after they died. Or if they didn’t, they will soon.’

Hudson picked up the phone again. It took her longer this time because there were no suspicious

circumstances for the other Richards so there had been no need to check bank accounts. Leo peeled off one of her Post-It notes and started folding. After a few seconds he placed an origami penguin on the desk and took another Post-It. Eventually Hudson put the phone down. By now there were twelve pieces of origami on the desk, including a family of polar bears that had necessitated Leo rummaging in the desk drawer for a glue stick in order to assemble them.

‘Couldn’t get much from Wales,’ said Hudson, who didn’t seem at all fazed by the paper menagerie or Leo’s over-familiarity with her desk. ‘No cause. But a stroke of luck at Doncaster. The house there was set on fire a few days ago. The widow was inside but

they got her out. She's still in hospital, hasn't regained consciousness yet. The bank account was cleared out same day. And they reckoned it was a pretty impressive sum for a lorry driver.'

'So Richard *is* still alive,' I said.

'No he isn't,' said Leo urgently.

'And the widows *are* all in danger. Lesley, get someone to phone all the police forces and get protection for the widows right now. And we have to get to the local one before it's too late.'

'Why?'

Leo was already halfway out the door. 'I'll tell you on the way. Come on! We'll have to take a car – the train doesn't stop near there.'



Before we got there we already knew it was too late. A report came over Hudson's police radio of a house fire at Joanne Stilman's address. That distracted us from asking Leo what was going on. My heart was in my mouth all the way there and as we pulled into the street and saw the flames filling the skyline and the fire crews desperately trying to subdue them, it sank as a stretcher was loaded on to an ambulance with a blanket pulled up over the victim's face.

'We've got to catch whoever did this,' I said, fighting back the tears. I hadn't really known her but I'd met Joanne Stilman and seen something of the sadness of her life. She didn't deserve this.

'They'll be long gone,' said Leo. 'But one of the other forces'll catch them. It'll be easy now we

know who they are and where they're going.'

'Spill, Leo,' ordered Hudson.

'Who's killing the widows if it isn't Richard?' I asked.

'Oh, it definitely isn't Richard,' said Leo. 'He died in the fire in Congleton.'

'Then who?' I asked again.

'His old gang mates.'

'What gang?'

'Why did Richard – or whatever his real name was, we'll only know for sure when the others tell us – need six different lives? Scattered around the country to keep them separate. But he never spent long in any of them, so he didn't want to *live* the lives or spend time with his wives. They were just a front for something else, something he needed to keep checking on now and again while he lived his real

life alone in Congleton.’

‘A front for what?’ asked Hudson.

‘The money. He had six bank accounts, all of them with large sums of money. He wasn’t actually doing any of the jobs that would earn him so much and some of them weren’t well enough paid anyway. So the money must have come from somewhere else. But it was too risky to keep it all in one place so he kept it in six instead.’

‘You’re saying that he created six lives – married five women – just to hide his money?’ I asked in disbelief.

‘Yes.’

‘Hide it from who?’

‘The other gang members,’ said Hudson uncertainly.

‘Exactly.’

‘What gang?’ I asked again. And then I remembered the other news stories I’d seen when we read about the Congleton fire. ‘The bank robbers who were released the other week!’

‘You got there in the end,’ said Leo patronisingly. ‘They all went to prison but Richard got away with the money. When they got out he knew they’d come looking for him so he decided to kill off all six Richards and start somewhere else. He’d have planned to withdraw the money himself – it was probably him that withdrew the Congleton money – but they caught up with him. He must have refused to give them the details of the other accounts so they killed him and then went looking for his widows to get the information out of them. They were successful in

Doncaster and we know they killed the widow here. We'll find out soon enough whether they got the bank details from her first. They've got three more to go. They'll probably go to Edinburgh next, then Oxford. For some reason they didn't go to Abersoch straight after Congleton so I'd guess that they've got a boat waiting there to get them out of the country.'

Leo was right on every point. The gang were caught in Edinburgh the next day, having emptied Joanne Stilman's account first, and they did have a boat in Abersoch. Richard – whose real name was Norman – had double-crossed them and run off with the money, leaving the others to get caught but they'd deliberately kept quiet about him so they could go

after him and get the money back when they got out of prison.

And we did get paid! The bank had offered a reward for information that led to the recovery of the money and Leo claimed it.

‘Did you know we’d be getting paid by the bank?’ I asked as we sat in his cottage drinking coffee from the last of his clean mugs.

‘How could I?’ he answered, holding up a newly-made origami dolphin to inspect it. ‘I didn’t connect the case to the bank robbery until we were in Lesley’s office.’

‘Then you just took the case on the off-chance?’

‘I didn’t have any other cases and this looked interesting. It helped pass the time.’

‘Do you work that way all the

time?’ I asked, trying not to sound as concerned as I felt.

Leo stood up and walked to the bookcase. ‘Only if I’ve got nothing else on.’ He smiled. ‘People do hire me for cases. I do make a living out of this. Don’t worry, Karen. You will get paid every month.’

I looked around the tiny cottage and wondered how a man who lived here could afford to employ anyone.

‘That’s a relief,’ I said unconvincingly.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ he said without any trace of irony as he put the dolphin beside the others.

He really did need me.

