

Chapter 1

Darnell Sidwell had just crossed the Severn Bridge on the M4, heading west. He read the highway sign: “Sound Sculpture Ahead. Move to outer left lane, maintain speed of 70 kph”. He pulled the little GM rental hybrid into the left lane carefully, and thought about setting the cruise control, but was unsure where to find it on the unfamiliar right-hand drive vehicle. At least the damned thing was an automatic, meaning he was spared having to learn to shift gears with his left hand. He chuckled at this thought, appreciating the irony of a space shuttle pilot intimidated by having to learn to drive on the wrong side of the road.

But he had wanted to come visit Claire, his sister. And before he headed into the north where she had her little community, he wanted to check out this ‘sound sculpture’, see a bit of Wales. The sculpture had been designed by an old friend from back in Missouri, an artist who used to run a gallery in Columbia but who had a penchant for large conceptual works of art.

The GM crossed the first warning rumble strips. Darnell turned his attention to the sound of the tires crossing the strips, and a few moments later was treated to a long, drawn-out rumble over a series of carefully spaced and specially shaped strips, which distinctly said: “WWWWW-ELL-CCCCOOOOO-MMME-TOOOOO-WWWWWAAAALLESSES”.

“Heh. Helluva idea.” He smiled, thought that he should try and contact his friend while he was here. Maybe after visiting Claire. It’d be good to see a sane American again. So few of them were that way, anymore.

Sidwell pulled right, into the fast lane. Other than being on the wrong side of the road, this was a highway not unlike the interstates he had grown up driving on, complete with overpasses and a center median. And no guards, no checkpoints. It was a nice change from Israel.

The M4 took him to the northern edge of Cardiff, and the feeder highway that led straight to the heart of the city wasn’t too crowded at midday on this early fall afternoon. The directions his uniPod barked out at him were simple enough to follow, and before he knew it, he was driving across from the Castle Wall and watching for street signs. Seeing his street just as the uni told him he was coming up to it, he made a right, heading away from the sea, and in a few blocks was at the B&B he had booked for that night.

Typical small European city: pleasant, clean, lots of greenery now tinged with autumn gold, sidewalks and small yards in front of the row of grand Edwardian homes, most of which were now converted to professional offices and B&Bs. He’d passed a nice city park after leaving the highway, just this side of the Castle grounds. The openness, the relaxed air, was a pleasant change from the tension and hustle of Tel Aviv. A very nice break, indeed, though it was seldom enough that he even got into that city, since he was usually flying or preparing to fly another load of equipment, supplies, or settlers to the Moon. His contract with the Israelis kept him pretty busy.

Well, it had.

He parked the car around the corner from the B&B. Unplugging his uni, he dropped it into his satchel, slung the satchel over his shoulder, grabbed his leather hat from the passenger seat and put it on as he got out of the car. Stretching for a moment, he looked around, taking in the warmth of the afternoon sun, the almost sweet aroma of overripe plums under a nearby tree, and the chatter of children from a yard across the street. He walked around the corner, down the sidewalk to the third house. It was a brick three-story, the small front yard a combination of concrete, flagstone, and flower beds. Someone had just been watering the plants, it seemed, since the walkway beside them was still wet in places. The ornate wooden door was up three steps to a landing, had a brass knocker about chest level, with narrow leaded glass windows as tall as the door on either side and a stained glass transom above which had the number of the house incorporated into an arts & crafts design. He stepped up, rapped on the door with his knuckles.

"Be right there." Shadows in motion behind the glass just before someone threw a latch and the door opened. Darnell looked at a man about his own age, say mid 50's. Unlike Darnell, the man was bald on top. He was also a little heavy but not obese. He was wearing a dull brown cardigan over what was once a light green Oxford shirt and slacks of a darker brown, brown loafers without socks. He smiled. Darnell took off his hat, but left his sunglasses on. "Darnell Sidwell. I've booked a room for tonight?"

"Oh yes, yes," said the man. "Do please come in."

The man stepped back, making room for Darnell to enter. Darnell set his hat back on his head, stepped inside, looked around. Entry hall, long and narrow, with high ceiling. Some kind of dark red velvety cloth on the walls up to a chair rail, then a dull off-white paint above. Two closed doorways, one open French door, and at the end of the hallway a stairwell climbed up on the right hand side, with a passageway into another room to the left. Pictures, lots of pictures, in frames of various styles, all in need of a little cleaning and attention. The pictures were mostly lithographs from the early 20th century, scenes of a busy seaport Darnell assumed was Cardiff, with a few portraits of important-looking people thrown in for good measure.

There was a small desk just inside the doorway, which contained a guest book, a small lamp, and a wooden box which was open, and in which Darnell could see brass keys mixed with key fobs. The man stepped around Darnell, went to the desk and opened the book. "Very good. Sidwell, you say? Yes, yes, I have you here in my book. Just the one night, then?"

"Correct."

"Pity. You should stay and explore Cardiff some. Just in for business, then?" He looked up from the book and smiled.

"No, on my way north, but wanted to see a bit of Wales on the way rather than going up the M6."

"Very good. You'll just love it." He noted something in his book. "Well, if you do change your mind tomorrow, let me know. We've had a cancellation, so have an extra room

if you want it. Right. That's 135 for the night, then. How would you like to pay?"

Darnell was already reaching for his wallet, inside his leather vest. "Cash."

"Good, good," said the man, taking the euro notes. "Here's your key. You're one up, first door on the right. Key also works for the front door. Through the French doors there is where we have breakfast, anytime between 7 and 9. We're full-up tonight, so you may have company at your table in the morning, depending."

"That'll be fine."

"And of course, feel free to use the room as a lounge any other time, if you wish. We've also a nice patio out back. And that's likely where you'll find me - oh, I'm Jarred, by the way - or my partner Rick, if you should need us for anything this afternoon or evening. It's just so pleasant out there this time of year."

Darnell smiled. "Thanks, I'll be fine."

"Oh, yes, you have a car?"

"Around the corner."

"Might as well bring it around back, then, into our park. Unless you need it?"

"Wasn't planning on it. Thought I might walk over to the Castle, then downtown, find someplace for dinner."

"Oh, there's plenty to choose from, just south of the Castle in The Hayes. Everything's open, this time of year, so you won't have any problem finding something to suit your fancy. Just pull around, then. I'll open the gate." Without waiting, Jarred went down the hall and disappeared through the passageway to the left of the stairs.

Darnell turned back to the front door, threw the latch and stepped outside. Glancing up and down the street, he made his way to the sidewalk then back up around the corner to where he left the car. It chirped as he got near, driver's door unlocking, and he got in. He started the car, rolled down to the alleyway, then turned left. Jarred was standing beside the open gate, waved him in. Darnell pulled in, parked the car under the shade of a large elm, and got out, slinging his satchel over his shoulder as he did so.

"Need help with your bags?" asked Jarred, who had come up after closing the gate.

"I've just the one, thanks," said Darnell, popping open the trunk and getting out a large midnight-blue duffel.

Jarred looked at the bag, then at Darnell. "Military?"

"Heh. No, well, not any longer. Just a habit from my Air Force days; I travel fairly light." Darnell smiled.

"Oh, sure. Well, this way." Jarred led him past the windows of the kitchen, through the patio filled with large potted plants, to a sliding door. Opening the door, Jarred stepped aside to allow Darnell to enter. "Here we go."

Darnell stepped inside, saw that he was just off the hallway to his left, under the stairway. "Right, thanks."

"Certainly. Let me know if I can be of any further assistance."

Darnell smiled, nodded, and closed the door behind him. Through the narrow hall then turn and up the stairway. At the landing where the stairs turned and went up another

flight, he went through the door in front of him. The door to his room was just inside, on the right.

Nice, recently renovated. Large wardrobe with a television on top. What looked like a 19th century woman's writing desk, just battered enough to be either authentic or a good fake. Small tables on either side of the queen-sized bed, each with a simple brass lamp and a clock radio. On the side opposite the desk, facing the door, was a wingback chair. Bathroom off to the right past the bed, all white tile and stiff lace curtains. He tossed his hat on the desk, dumped both his duffel and his satchel on the bed. Opening the duffel, he removed a couple of items and hung them in the wardrobe. He also removed his little toiletries kit, set it on the bed. Then he set the duffel on top of the wardrobe, out of the way.

Taking the little black toiletries kit into the bathroom, he hung it up next to the sink, checking to make sure that he had adequate towels for the morning. Whenever he was earthside, he liked to shower at least once a day. Made up for those five-day round trips shuttling to the Moon and back when personal hygiene meant babywipes. He hated the smell of babywipes.

He debated whether to enjoy a shower then, decided against it. He wanted to see the castle before it closed for the day. But a quick splash of water over his face would feel good. Turning on the faucet, he took off his sunglasses and set them aside. Cupping the cold water in his hand, he bent over and dowsed his face, let the water drip down into the basin. Toweling off, he straightened up and looked at himself in the mirror. Slight redness to his left eye, some puffiness.

"Not too noticeable. But still..." he thought, putting the glasses back on. He turned and went back into the main room. Grabbing the satchel, he opened it. Inside was his uniPod, a mostly-full bottle of water, some energy bars, his minimag flashlight, a small pair of electronic binoculars, a mylar emergency poncho, and some odds and ends. Good. He slung the satchel over his shoulder. Then he patted down his vest. Cash wallet. Twin passports. Hidden money reserves. Baby Eagle in the front low-imprint holster inside his vest on the left, two extra magazines on the right for balance. He was set.

Grabbing his leather hat (which matched his vest in color and somewhat rustic style), and putting it on, he left the room, satchel slung comfortably over his shoulder. Checking to make sure the door locked behind him, he went through the nearby door onto the landing in the stairway, then headed down. No one else was in sight as he crossed the few steps from the stairs to the front door of the B&B and went outside.

Though it was still early afternoon, the sun was already noticeably lower in the sky. He headed towards downtown, walking along the tree-lined street past all the other old Edwardian homes, noting now the signs out front which announced other B&B's, professional offices, the occasional charitable organization. All the front yards were that delightful English mixture of haphazard greenery and quaint garden sculpture.

He got down to the main street, turned left and continued. On his side of the street were some small office buildings, then the large city park he'd noticed on the drive in. Then he came to the long, tall wall. Pausing for a moment, he pulled the uniPod out of his satchel,

removed the wireless earpiece and pushed it into his left ear. Then he fiddled with the uni, tapping a series of commands on the screen, until the machine found the local hotspot and downloaded the audio tour.

“The park wall, just in front of you, was part of the effort of the 3rd Marquess of Bute, John Patrick Crichton-Stuart, to rehabilitate the old castle grounds in the late 19th century. As you move along the wall, you will see it is adorned with totems of various animals in a realistic depiction, climbing over the wall as though to escape. This was The Lord Bute’s response to being denied the creation of a zoo in this park by the city fathers at the time. As you move along the wall you’ll soon see the looming Clock Tower, a favorite of the Lord Bute. Working with his architect, the renown yet whimsical William Burges, the two men sought to bring to life a bit of what they thought the middle ages should have been.

“This is the casual tour guide. More detailed descriptions and an in-depth discussion of any and all topics related to this site are available. Just select the level of information you require.”

The busy street that ran alongside of the castle wall was full of noisy traffic, and enough of a distraction that he was happy with the casual tour. Since the full data had been downloaded, if he wanted more information later, he could pull it up from his uni. He went on.

As the guide promised, soon he saw the Clock Tower, with its ornate Victorian styling. Impressive. And then the much higher and more substantial curtain wall of the castle proper.

“Built upon the foundations of a Roman bastion, the Clock Tower occupies the South West corner of the 16th century castle wall. Construction of the Clock Tower was begun in 1869, and its seven stories contain several different apartments and accommodations. The bell in the tower is a half-sized replica of the one in the Victoria Tower at Westminster.

“Proceed along the castle wall to the entryway, located midway, between the Black Tower and the Barbican.”

Darnell saw where the entryway must be, just a few dozen paces further on. Looking across the street, he could see various tourist shops, and narrow roads leading downtown into the shopping district. Foot traffic was busier on the other side of the street, though there were a fair few on his side, mostly tourists including what looked like a Japanese middle school class. Turning back to the castle, he walked along the wall, hearing chatter from others around him in several languages he was able to identify, and a few he could guess at. As he approached the tower in the middle of the wall, the guide spoke again.

“The Black Tower is a 13th century structure which has remained largely intact through the years, though there have been several renovations and slight modifications. It was built by Gilbert de Clare, who had other holdings in the area, notably Caerphilly Castle and the original Castell Coch. Today it houses the museum of the Welch Regiment.”

This was the sort of thing that Darnell wanted to see. Not the Welch Regiment, though the history of the Royal Regiment of Wales was famous enough that even he had heard of them. No, the medieval castles. He was looking forward to seeing the great

Edwardian castles in the north of Wales, and this was one of the reasons he'd decided on this route to his sister's. The structure before him was just the sort. Classic squat, boxy shape, no-nonsense crenelation and arrow slits.

"The Barbican Tower forms the second part of the South Gate. The current entryway into the castle grounds is of modern contrivance, though is on the approximate site of the original Roman gate to the bastion sited here. You can note the remains of the Roman wall to either side of the entryway, down at the base of the reconstruction work."

Darnell wasn't much interested in the Roman history of Wales. He'd seen plenty of Roman structures in much better shape in the Middle East.

"Admission to the grounds is 8 euros, 6-50 for seniors and 5 for students with a valid student ID. A guided tour is available for slightly more, though since you have this guide, why would you bother?"

Darnell chuckled. He walked through the passageway, and emerged into the central courtyard of the great castle. He didn't even need to pull up a map of the castle grounds, because right there in front of him was the main reason for his visit: the old Norman keep, high on the medieval motte, complete with a water-filled ditch at the base of the mound.

Impressive.

He stepped up to the ticket window at the little red hut and handed over his money.

"Need a guide?" asked the nice old man who took his money, holding up a printed guide.

"Thanks, I'm set," said Darnell. Stepping to the side of the hut he looked around, taking in the perfectly manicured lawn of the courtyard.

"This is the inner courtyard of the castle. Straight ahead is the north gate, and the road you are standing on marks the start of the Roman road between this fortress and the amphitheater at Caerphilly. Slightly to the left you'll find the remnant of an internal defensive wall which linked the Black Tower to the classic motte and bailey Norman Keep built in the early 12th Century. Further to the left you will see the apartments initially constructed in the 15th Century, which were transformed by the Lord Bute in the 19th Century into the neo-gothic medieval castle which can be seen today. Do please note that the banqueting hall, library and other rooms of the castle are available for private hire. Restrooms are located in this area.

"To the right of the Roman road is a large open lawn, but notice how the ground rises quickly to almost the height of the wall on the east side."

Taking the path which veered off to the left, Darnell went past raised flower beds (the remains of a medieval wall) towards the Norman keep. He came to the little bridge which crossed the moat.

"This is the Norman Keep..." started the guide. Darnell shut it off. He'd heard enough for the time being. Now he just wanted to experience the moment. Crossing the bridge, he started up the stone steps, which quickly climbed the steep incline of the motte to the entrance of the old keep. Stepping inside the shell, he looked around. Perfect green lawn, wrought-iron benches here and there against the interior walls. There were places where the

stone was rough, crumbling, but it was easy to see where there had been fireplaces at several levels, marking the location of different floors inside the structure. He took it all in for a long moment, then turned and started up the tightly spiraling staircase within the wall, mostly in darkness, his feet stepping lightly on stone worn smooth. Up, to the top of the main tower, to the little observation platform at the very top.

As he emerged from the darkness of the stairwell, a strong wind brought the scent of the sea. He stood there, looking out through the openings in the crenelated wall, at the city of Cardiff. He was as high as all but a few of the buildings, and of course the stanchions which supported the roof of the Millennium Stadium. It was easy to look past all that, to allow it to fade away, to imagine himself standing there on top of the fortress when it was first built, when such a structure meant real security. He always enjoyed being so high off the ground, like when he was piloting a launch, all that power under him, awaiting his command.

But no more. Those days were now behind him. He could consult. He could advise. He could supervise. But he wasn't going to be flying any more. Not at the controls, anyway.

With a sigh, Darnell looked down into the interior of the keep, saw two young boys running on the grass, chasing one another. A man nearby looked after them. Perhaps that was the only true security - the only real way to leave a lasting impression on the world. If so, then this too was something Darnell would miss. He had no children. He had taken the standard precaution of most astronauts, and made arrangements with a sperm bank to store his seed when he was young and as yet unaffected by radiation. But that of course was moot now, the TheoCon government in the US having outlawed IVF in their sweeping eradication of all forms of fertility medicine, genetic research, cloning, and even basic reproductive science. The clinic which had his sperm stored in liquid nitrogen had been shut down, all specimens destroyed.

He looked up from the interior of the keep, out at the city once again. But this time, he turned to face the north. Dark green hills in the distance. Beyond that, he could not see. But he knew there were mountains, and castles, and places where a man could lose himself. He'd head that way tomorrow.

But for now, a different kind of hunger beckoned. He stepped lightly back into the welcoming darkness of the stairwell, and descended. Emerging at the bottom, he didn't pause, but made his way down the motte, across the courtyard, to the entrance and out onto the busy city street.

He waited for the light, then crossed. Here there were the usual sorts of tourist shops one found across from a major attraction, including pubs and restaurants which undoubtedly had been there for hundreds of years, but which he knew would somehow lack the sort of reality he wanted. Going down High street, then across to the left, he headed into the main shopping district, to the area Jarred called "The Hayes".

It was a large pedestrian plaza, surrounded by all variety of shops and stores, restaurants and pubs. Some of the buildings had clearly been there forever, others seemed just slightly out of place in their newness. He wandered a while, taking in the feel of the place,

forcing himself to relax a little in the hustle and bustle, pausing to enjoy the group of old men playing cards at a table in front of the Hayes Island Snack Bar with a group of kids nearby playing guitars and singing. It was a happy, relaxed place, moreso than any city he could remember. Eventually, after checking out some of the bookstores and galleries, he found himself in front of what looked to be the sort of pub that real people frequented. It was open all along the front, with tables and chairs making the transition from walkway to interior hard to delineate. He went in.

Some paces back was a small table on the side, unoccupied in the otherwise busy pub. He went over to it and settled in, back to the wall, satchel slung over the back of his chair. He casually watched the activity in the bar while keeping an eye on the entry.

"What's yours, then?" asked a young man, white bar towel flipped over his shoulder, as he slid by pausing just long enough to look at Darnell.

"Good local beer?"

"Ah, yeah, that'd be Brains. Made here in Caerdydd. You like a lager or a bitter?"

"I'll have a bitter. Maybe some food, too?"

"I'll bring a menu with your pint, then," smiled the young man. "American, is it?"

Darnell tried a smile. "Ex pat."

"Best kind," said the youth, turning and heading to the bar. A few moments later he returned, set the beer down on a coaster in front of Darnell, handed him a thin menu. "Here ya go. Nothin' fancy."

"Suits," said Darnell. "Thanks."

"I'll be back in a bit to see what you're wantin'."

Darnell glanced around the bar again. Mostly the after-work crowd typical of British pubs, a mix of young and middle-aged, professional and retail. Mostly speaking English, though he heard snippets of a language he couldn't place, which was likely Welsh. He knew that even here in the most "English" part of the country, there were more and more Welsh speakers.

Then, the unmistakable boasting of an American voice carried over the chatter from about halfway down the bar. A man was sitting there, talking loudly to his neighbor, pointing at the TV behind the bar. "... and I tell ya, Jeb's gonna win this election, and keep the country strong!"

Darnell looked at the TV, saw the characteristic format of CNN International with the banner of text running across the bottom. He couldn't tell whether the set was muted, or if it was just turned down too low for him to hear. But he could read the banner, and the picture of the two men was clear enough. It was a campaign rally somewhere, with W standing there holding his brother's arm high in triumph. Both men were wearing the severe black business suits now popular in the US with the mandatory Old Glory tie. Darnell looked away with a slight shudder, took a long pull on his pint, and turned his attention to the menu in front of him.

"So, who's gonna win?" asked the young barman, nodding his head back at the TV, which still had election coverage from the states on.

"No idea," said Darnell, shaking his head slightly. "Sorry, I don't much follow politics back home anymore. Don't see the point in it."

The young man nodded. "Right, then. What'll ya have?"

Darnell handed over the menu. "The ham & cheese. With the Stilton. Chips."

"Brown or white?"

"Um . . . you mean wheat bread or white? Wheat, please."

"Right you are. Want that grilled?"

"That'd be great, thanks."

The youth disappeared, and Darnell took another long draw of his beer. Ostensibly looking at the TV, but taking in the whole bar's ebb and flow, he got a feeling for the place. And he noticed that the other American down the way was observing him, but being unobtrusive about it. Interesting.

"Here ya go," said the barman a couple of minutes later, setting down a plate with his sandwich and fries. With his other hand he dropped off a small pile of little plastic tubes about as thick as a pencil but only a few inches long. "Be needin' anything else?"

Darnell glanced at the pile of tubes, saw what he needed. "Nope, all set."

"OK, then."

Darnell picked up one tube marked "brown mustard", tore off the end and squirted out the contents on the inside of one half of his sandwich. Then he took two more tubes containing malt vinegar, popped them open and doused his fries. The Brits certainly didn't invent 'chips', as they called them, and didn't make the best in the world. But their matching of malt vinegar with deep-fried potato more than made up for it.

Darnell worked his way through the pile of chips, and was well into the second half of his sandwich, by the time the barman stopped by again. "How's it?"

"Great. Ham's got enough flavor to stand up to the Stilton."

"Yeah. They're both local, you know. From Wales. So's the bread."

Darnell looked at him, said with mock outrage, "You mean the potatoes aren't? I'm appalled!"

The young man smiled. "Sorry, I think they're from the south somewhere. On the Continent, I mean. But the sea salt comes from here, just down the coast a little ways, in fact."

Darnell grinned. "Well, it's all good, thanks."

"Anything else I can get ya, then? Another pint?"

"No, thanks. But say, what can you tell me about that American fellow down the bar? He a regular?"

"Nope, never seen 'im before yesterday, when he first came in. And I'd remember; we don't get too many Yanks in here these days."

"Probably just as well," said Darnell.

"I'd agree," nodded the man. "No offense, you understand."

"None taken. I don't live there any more. Can't really even recognize the place I used to love." Darnell paused, looked past the barman at the TV, which had images of fighting in

Iran. He suppressed a slight shudder. "Well, thanks, I was just curious."

"Righto. Here's your check, then," he said, setting it down on the table across from Darnell.

Darnell nodded. "Thanks."

The young man disappeared back behind the bar, and Darnell turned most of his attention back to his food. He did notice, however, when the American got up from his place at the bar, and made his way forward. And he noticed, without watching directly, how the man studiously avoided ever looking his way.

Interesting, indeed.

Darnell finished his meal slowly, then left sufficient money on the table to cover the check, grabbed his satchel and left. As he made his way to the exit, he diverted across the bar, heading for the bathroom. Without appearing to do so, he scanned the bar, saw a thin man sitting at a table on the opposite side from where he had been sitting, evidently engrossed in his work on a laptop before him. But there was one small incongruity: the small webcam mounted on the top edge of the laptop's screen wasn't pointed at the man. It was pointed out at the crowd.

Darnell entered the bathroom, then stepped into one of the two stalls. Taking the squat, ugly Baby Eagle from his holster inside his vest, he slipped it into an unobtrusive side pocket on the satchel. Then slinging the satchel over his left shoulder, he rested his left arm on top, hand grasping the strap just inches from the hidden pistol. There were advantages to being ambidextrous. Anyone who thought he had the pistol inside his vest would expect him to reach for it with his right hand. And unless he was mistaken, the man with the laptop had probably been scanning him for weapons, probably using a millimeter wave system which would have shown where his gun had been.

Leaving the bathroom, Darnell noticed that the man with the laptop had disappeared. He paused then, and slowly surveyed what he could see of the entire bar. No sign of the thin man. No one else seemed to pay him any attention, but Darnell couldn't be sure the American and the guy with the laptop were the only ones. He crossed the bar again, and exited on the side he had come in.

Stepping out into the cool night air, he caught another whiff of the sea on the wind. There were only a couple of people at the outside tables, and there was no sight of either the two men Darnell was watching for. Calmly, trying to be relaxed, Darnell headed off down the pedestrian concourse, meandering back towards his B&B. He kept his eyes open, and stayed with the flow of other people walking as best he could, until he left the Hayes and was back on High Street heading towards the castle. He doubted that anyone would try anything while he was in a public area. It was more likely that they would wait to ambush him along the way back to his room, if that was their intent. But it was possible he was still under surveillance, and he didn't want anyone to know he was on his guard.

Rather than taking the route he had come downtown by, he decided to risk entering the grounds of Bute Park, just to the west of the castle. He'd remembered there was a path which cut through, that would take him to the street where he had initially parked his car,

just one block over from his B&B.

He turned off Castle Street, through the park wall, and took the footpath that lead north. It was well lit, though there were trees and bushes which could hide an assailant easily enough. He just walked casually, seemingly relaxed and unconcerned, but kept his attention up and his left hand resting on top of the satchel, inches away from the pistol.

The path led across a small stream, and Darnell paused, leaning on the railing of the bridge, giving himself time to look around and see if there was anyone following him. No, the park was mostly empty, just a young woman jogging with her dog. He waited, and she turned off the path as she came up to the bridge, continuing north. After she passed, he took another look around, then started walking again. He choose to go further north than necessary before leaving the park, so that he would come at his B&B from the opposite direction from what one would have expected.

Passing a sports complex, then a couple of small restaurants, he emerged from the park back into the surrounding neighborhood. Two blocks over, he was to his street and then it was just a short block south. As he came up the walkway he paused to enjoy the aroma of overripe plums again, then took the final steps up to the door. Key in hand, he unlocked the door, and entered. He could hear music coming from down the hallway, and the laughter of a man in that general direction. But he climbed the stairs to the first landing, went through the door there and unlocked his door, entered the dark room.

From the corner where he remembered the wingback chair was someone spoke. "Hello, Darnell. Do come in, and please, close the door behind you."