

DEFANGING THE RED DRAGON

**A Brookstone-
Castilblanco Holiday
Adventure**



Esther Brookstone and friends become embroiled in geopolitical intrigue as the West tries to thwart a plan China has for stealing its nuclear submarine secrets.

Steven M. Moore

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Summary

Esther Brookstone, ex-MI6 spy and ex-Scotland Yard Inspector in the Art and Antiques Division, and her husband, Bastiann van Coevorden, ex-Interpol agent, along with NYPD homicide detective Rolando Castilblanco and his wife, TV reporter Pam Stuart, become embroiled in geopolitical intrigue as the West tries to thwart a plan China has for stealing its nuclear submarine secrets. Taking place mostly in the US and UK, this suspenseful story has multiple twists and turns and is also the tale of two cities, New York and London, and the bustling life found in both, from the rich and powerful to the most scurrilous criminal elements.

British, Scottish, and Irish Dialects

Note from Steve: Just like the US has Bostonian and Texan dialects, the UK and the Republic of Ireland have regional dialects. I tried to include all those appearing in the novel, but I possibly missed a few...or included a few extras from previous novels? And please don't hold it against this Yank if my definitions aren't one hundred percent correct. (While I might be responsible for some errors, Google and Microsoft Word were willing accomplices!)

A

aggro--aggravation

Auld Reekie—Edinburgh, Scotland

B

barney—verbal skirmish

beck—creek, small river

biro—ballpoint pen (named after the inventor)

blaggard—scoundrel

blather—talk, often without rhyme or reason

bloke—fellow, guy

blues and twos—emergency vehicles, or patrol cars in general (for blue lights and two people)

bollix—bungle

bollocks—general swear word (literally, testicles)

boot--trunk

brae—a steep bank or hillside

C

car park—parking lot (usually seen as two words, but sometimes as one)

ceilidh—gathering with Gaelic folk music, singing, dancing, and/or storytelling

chap—fellow, guy

chappie—fellow, guy

chat up—flirt

chinwag—conversation, discussion

CID—Criminal Investigative Department

chuffed--pleased

copper—policeman or policewoman

crisps—potato chips

D

DS—Detective Sergeant

DC—Detective Constable

DI—Detective Inspector

DCI—Detective Chief Inspector

do an early dart—leave business early

do a runner—flee, disappear

donkey's years—a long time
dosh—money (wad)
droll—boring, irrelevant

E
eejit—fool

F
fag—cigarette
feckin'—not as strong as the American version, yet also used to emphasize
fiver—five-pound note
fuggy—(of a room or atmosphere) warm, stuffy, smoky

G
give stick—beat up, verbally or physically
gobshite—mean or contemptible person
gobsmacked—astonished, astounded (a “gob” was a wad of tobacco)
goolies--testicles
GP—General Physician
grass on—rat on

H
hire-car—rental car

I
Iron Lady—Margaret Thatcher

K
kerb-crawler—prostitute (kerb is curb in the US)
knackered—exhausted

L
do a lie-in—sleep late
loo—bathroom, WC
lorry—truck

M
marra—mate (Cumbrian dialect)
mash—brew of tea, but not tea bags
mobile—cellphone
monkeys—500-pound note
MPs—members of parliament

N
nappies--diapers
nick—steal (verb); arrest (verb); police station (noun)

niggling—trifling, annoying
nipper--child
numpty—stupid or foolish person
nutter—crazy person

O

old chestnut—adage or saying

P

peckish--hungry
pillock—fool
pish-tosh—only a trifle
plonker—a fool
plods—coppers
PM—prime minister
prat—a stupid or foolish person
publican—owner of a pub
punter—bettor (British); customer (Irish)

R

rozzar—copper
rugger—rugby player

S

SCO19—Specialist Crime and Operations group (SWAT group in the US)
scarper--flee
scrote—lowlife
scrum—disorderly crowd
shite—what you expect, but not considered swearing as such
skelping—unusually large or outstanding
SIO—Senior Investigating Officer
SOCO—Scene of Crime Officer (US CSI)
sod—annoying person (noun); deprecate or disparage (verb): Sod it!
stunner—pretty woman

T

takeaway—fast food the buyer picks up
taking the Mickey—taunting, joking, or being otherwise unreasonable
taking the piss—see immediately above
telly--television
tipple—imbibe an alcoholic beverage
tippler—habitual drinker
toff—aristocrat, or member of the privileged classes
trainers—sneakers (US East Coast) or tennis shoes (US West Coast)
trawl—search
tuck in—more eating than going to bed

twaddle—nonsense

twit—foolish or stupid person (applicable to both sexes in Britain)

W

wag—a person given to droll, roguish, or mischievous humor

Wellies--overshoes

wrinklies—elderly people

Y

yob—rude or aggressive person

Cast of Principal Characters

Tucker Biggs = NRL scientist
Jeremy Brand = MI5 counterterrorism expert
Esther Brookstone = ex-MI6 agent and ex-Scotland Yard inspector
Rolando "Rollie" Castilblanco = NYPD homicide detective
Cecilia "Ceci" Castilblanco = NYPD CSI, and Castilblanco and Stuart's adopted daughter
Pedro "Pedrito" Castilblanco = NYPD detective, and Castilblanco and Stuart's adopted son
Dao-Ming Chen = NYPD homicide detective, and Castilblanco's partner
Ben Crosby = Admiral Peterson's aide
Reginald "Reggie" Fox = Esther and Bastiann's neighbor
George Langston = chief of the Art and Antiques Division of Scotland Yard
Liu Chao-Xiang = a Chinese spy-assassin
Frederic "Freddie" March = ex-Home Office VIP and MI5 consultant
Admiral Joseph "Joe" Peterson = conference delegate from Australia
Lou Rogers = FBI special agent
Ricardo Silva = Esther Brookstone's artist friend
Ambreesh Singh = MI5 techie
Pam Stuart = ABC TV news producer, and Castilblanco's wife
David Thackeray = Scotland Yard DCI
Bastiann van Coevorden = ex-Interpol agent and MI5 consultant, and Esther Brookstone's husband
Robert Winston = MI5 agent
Wu Huiz-Hong = science attaché at the Chinese embassy

National Security Agencies: Acronyms and Comparisons

Internal security: British MI5 : US FBI & DHS : French DGSI : Russian FSB

External security: British MI6 : US CIA : French DGSE : Russian SVR

Both: Australian ASIO; Chinese MSS

Notes:

The MI in MI5 and MI6 stands for “Military Intelligence”

FBI = Federal Bureau of Investigation

DHS = Department of Homeland Security

CIA = Central Intelligence Agency

The DGS in DGSI and DGSE signifies “General Department of Security...,” while the I means “Interior,” and the E means “Exterior”

FSB = Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service

SVR = Russia’s Federal Security Service

ASIO = Australian Security Intelligence Organization

MSS = China's Ministry of State Security

Metropolitan Police—also called “the Met” or “the Yard” (for Scotland Yard, which is used for both the Met and the City of London Police), is the general policing organization for England and Wales; it covers general crime throughout the region with its many divisions, including Esther’s old Art and Antiques Division, but it also covers crimes associated with the Official Secrets Act and railroad terminals and some local airports.

Police Scotland—created in 2013 to unify policing in all of Scotland, and nearly the size of the Metropolitan Police with all its divisions and bureaucracy.

Preface

In my role as Dr. Watson to Esther Brookstone's Holmes, I've often mentioned in passing in these chronicles Esther and Bastiann's American friends, detectives Dao-Ming Chen and Rolando Castilblanco. In this tale about international intrigue, these two NYPD homicide detectives play more important roles, so I decided to divide the story into two parts, the first occurring in the US and the second in the UK.

As is customary in these chronicles, I've taken the liberty to fill in scenes that I've only heard about anecdotally from the major players in the drama. Moreover, I've edited out certain details I'm privy to, either because of confidentiality or because including them would slow the pace of the story. Let me assure readers that I have not violated the Official Secrets Act in what follows either way, although they tell me I have come very close to doing so!

George Langston
London

Part One: United States

Chapter One

Cecilia Castilblanco, Ceci to her family and friends, thought the old house in Queens was empty; so did Mike Guzman, her fellow CSI. She had felt no qualms when he suggested she take on the second floor on her own. After all, there were detectives and uniformed cops on the street out front trying to figure out who were the new gunshot victims lying there. Supposedly the two had bolted from the house because its door had been left wide open.

She imagined her appearance would remind people of Neil Armstrong stepping onto the lunar surface that first time. Underneath the forensics PPE, she was a slight woman of medium height, with bright brown eyes and brown hair with a reddish cast, a young woman who had survived a few troubled years as a child until she'd been adopted by loving parents. Her father was a cop; she thought she might be the favorite child, but her brother Pedrito might argue about that. Her mother was still technically a TV news reporter, focusing on crime in the Big Apple, but she now spent more time producing news than reporting it and substituting for anchors who took time off.

She wasn't completely new at the job and worked well with Mike, the CSI downstairs, a polite and quiet man who she had a hard time imagining as once a tough marine. Only his buzz-cut hinted at any of that history. She was well liked by all her colleagues, and she liked them in turn. They were cops too, in a sense, but they were the scientific arm of the force and now so necessary at crime scenes.

Upstairs and down were both like dumpsters in a house that had seen better days. She wondered how many had been living in the old house that should have been condemned long ago. The two victims out in front had seemed young. *Maybe gang members?* she thought. If there had been others, they'd scattered, but they'd probably regroup and attack the shooters' gang in retribution. That was the law of the city's mean streets where social workers were supposed to do more than cops now, a policy her father considered ridiculous.

She'd never understood gang violence. *Is it macho posturing, or do they cling together as a substitute for nonexistent families? Or is it some sort of inborn need of desperate human beings to create a tribe?*

She figured political groups were like that now, tribal entities. A politician not too long ago had used that to divide the country. Her father said things hadn't changed much since then. She had to factor into the equation that he could be really pessimistic at times, as elders often were, but she knew there was a lot of truth in the statement too.

He'd seen a lot, her *papito*, from Afghan terrorists to evil Mexican drug traffickers. She often wondered why he didn't just throw in the towel and retire with *mamacita* to enjoy their golden years, perhaps traveling more in Europe. He could leave the ring after winning many bouts and fight no more, yet he kept at it.

She'd already seen a lot too. Most of the time the work still excited her, but some days it was bad or depressing. Whether good or bad, she had a job to do, and she always hoped the forensic evidence she gathered would help put some of the bad people away for a while so they could no longer hurt the good people, at least for a little while. That took cops and CSIs with integrity, not social workers.

Mike wondered how the gang—if it had been a gang living in the house, not just squatters—could take control of a house in a borough where rent was so high. It wasn't a bad house for that part of Queens, perhaps once a modest family home that had been small and cozy. Somehow it had become a rental, and some gang member and his girlfriend had pretended to be a charming young couple looking for a new home, had put down first- and last-month's rent as well as the security deposit, faked the required references and other papers, and moved in, making the ensuing rent payments with proceeds from prostitution, fencing stolen goods, and selling drugs. The landlord might not even care what they did to the house, especially when that couple never called him or the real estate agency to make repairs. That was the common scenario that was often repeated in the New York City boroughs.

The TV in the living room had been left on with one of the "Fast and Furious" movies, its soundtrack causing the walls to reverberate; he turned it off. When he did that and backed away, a board in front of the set creaked. He lifted the threadbare rug, pried up the loose board, and saw the drug stash. *For sale or personal use?* that was the question. He bagged it all.

Moving on, under the equally threadbare sofa, he saw lots of trash. He ignored that. He only had so many evidence bags. There were also some suspicious stains on that same rug that could be dried blood, but he ignored them too because they looked old. If someone else had been killed or injured in that room, it would have been long ago and probably had nothing to do with the case at hand.

He entered the dining room that had no table or chairs—no surprise. There were seven sleeping bags, though, that looked like health hazards.

The kitchen should have been condemned by the EPA, although stove, fridge, and microwave were still functioning. There was more than a case of beer in the fridge and not much else. Mike was glad he had booties on as he walked over and through the trash spread all over the floor.

How can people live like this?

He headed for the stairs, deciding that he'd had enough of the first floor and wanting to help his colleague upstairs.

Ceci had gone through two of the bedrooms—there were four—without finding anything more than gangland debris: unwashed sheets with sweat stains and a variety of body fluids; bras, panties, and condoms showing the house occupants either were into prostitution or women were part of the gang; beer cans, old newspapers, empty cigarette packs, old napkins, and so forth; all refuse that didn't qualify as evidence. The stale odor of cigarettes and pot was heavy in the air. She was glad she had on her protective gear. It wasn't very complimentary for her youthful figure, but she was never trying to be Miss Universe on the job or off.

The third room was indistinguishable from the first two. It was possible the house occupants just crashed where and when they felt like it. She hadn't taken many samples, but she now bagged a gun and knife found at the back of a drawer in an old dresser. Prints, DNA, whatever, all might be useful, besides the weapons themselves—maybe to connect someone to previous crimes?—so she decided that room might need more attention. She went to the closet first to see what it might contain.

As she reached for the knob, the door opened outwards and slammed into her. She fell backwards and hit her head hard on the old wood flooring. Her mind entered a dark tunnel to nowhere. Just one word, a whimper escaped her lips: "*Papito....*"

The young gang member scurrying down the stairs bowled Mike over and dashed out the front door. Mike got up and gave chase. The wiry thug hurdled a low fence and bolted by some astonished cops.

"Get'im!" Mike called to them. "He might be a witness!"

A detective and uniformed cop took off in pursuit.

Ceci? Mike ran upstairs.

"Ceci!" He saw the blood leaking out from the edge of her hood but resisted the urge to cradle her head. Going to the window, he leaned out. "Officer down! Call an ambulance!"

The crime scene now became a lot more complicated. Mike was too choked up to continue with his work and sadly watched the ambulance take his partner away, siren blaring and lights flashing. Another CSU was called in. He was through for the day, but he would go to the hospital to see how Ceci was doing. It had looked bad. He wasn't thinking too clearly, but he'd always believed that EMTs and CSIs had the safest jobs among first responders. If his partner died, that opinion would be turned on its head.

He was sitting on a rickety step leading up to the house's porch when an older detective approached him.

"You knew her better. Isn't Rollie Castilblanco her relative? You should call him."

"He's her adopted father. They're close. Isn't that your job, though? It's your fucking crime scene!"

"Easy, easy. I'll make a personal visit when I can. Right now, I'm rather busy. I think we have here the start of another gang war."

"Okay, I'll call. Just find the bastard who did that to her."

The detective nodded.

NYPD homicide detective Rolando Castilblanco paced in the hospital waiting room at the NY-Presbyterian Hospital in Queens, his wife Pam Stuart staring at the fish tank as if hypnotized. CSI Mike Guzman had gone to fetch her some tea and him some coffee.

"Mr. and Mrs. Castilblanco?" said the doctor who approached them, still in scrubs.

Castilblanco confronted him. "Will my daughter be okay?"

"Too soon to tell. We stopped the bleeding on the brain. She would have died if not for that PPE gear. You really need a football helmet to take that kind of blow. In any case, we put her in an induced coma. She's young and strong, so I'm hopeful."

"That's all you can give us?" Pam said. No longer mesmerized by the fish in the tank, she'd joined her husband.

The doctor shrugged. Castilblanco supposed he was a good surgeon, but his social-interaction skills were terrible. *I considered Ceci's job choice safer than Pedrito's*, Castilblanco thought. He put his arm around his wife.

"Can we see her?" Pam said.

"She's in the ICU now. She could be there a few days and then into a room."

Pam perked up a bit with that, probably thinking the last meant their adopted daughter wasn't going to die.

"We'll want a private room," Castilblanco said.

"I'll call someone so you can arrange that. I apologize. I have to get back to the OR now. We're busy this morning. Seems like a gang war just flared up."

"Don't make any extraordinary efforts for their wounded on my behalf," Castilblanco said.

They watched the doctor hurry away.

"It won't do me any good to watch you pace," she told him. "Arrange for the private room, and then go find the SOB who did this to Ceci."

He nodded. "Ride with me, Mike," he said to Ceci's fellow CSI. "My partner will need to pick your brain." Castilblanco knew he couldn't be on the case, but Chen could.

As they rode in the taxi toward Castilblanco's precinct, he couldn't begin to imagine how future events would influence their hunt for his daughter's attacker.

Chapter Two

Earlier that morning, Chen had her own problems to contend with as she, her husband, and their kid left Radio City Music Hall where they'd seen the Rockettes as a family.

"Let's cut through this alley to 49th, Eric," Chen said to her husband. "We're more likely to find a taxi there that will take us back to Jersey City."

"I hope so." He adjusted the precious burden he was carrying in his arms, their sleeping child. "For the city that never sleeps, it's deserted here. Isn't an alley a bit risky?"

Chen smiled. "It's just late. And don't worry. I'll protect you two."

They could see and hear cars whizzing by on the street ahead when they were a third of the way through the alley. She stopped, and he almost ran into her.

"Cover the baby's eyes."

"What's wrong?" He then saw the body sprawled on the ground beside a trash bin and turned to face in the direction where they'd come because he didn't have a free hand to cover the kid's eyes. "You're going to have to call that in."

Looking over his shoulder, he saw her bent over the body.

"I think he must have been tortured before he was killed." She stood. "I'm calling the ME and CSU. Let's go back to the street so they won't have to contend with the avenue's traffic."

"Just what we needed."

"I know. Can't be helped."

Eric and the baby left Chen to organize the crime-scene personnel and headed home in a taxi. Chen roused Castilblanco out of bed; he promised to meet the ME at the morgue, so she and some uniforms started to case the area. She didn't expect to obtain any useful information that way, but it had to be done and was part of the routine.

Castilblanco knew his life would become more complicated when FBI agent Rogers made an appearance as the detective was discussing early findings in the post-mortem exam of the victim with Big Tiny, long-time friend and NYPD ME. It didn't help that his friend, who looked like yet another nose tackle, namely Vince Wilfork from that old Patriots dynasty, embraced Rogers in a bear hug. The smaller detective had suffered through enough with Feds meddling in his cases.

"Looks like you two know each other," he said.

"We met when we both were in our first year at Howard," Big Tiny said. "Detective Rolando Castilblanco, meet Special Agent Lou Rogers."

"Meaning FBI Special Agent?"

"That's right, Detective," Rogers said. "And any friend of Big Tiny is a friend of mine. Do you have an ID yet for the victim?"

"We're working on that," Castilblanco said, not wanting to chat about a case that had barely begun. "And too early. Neither Chen nor I have been back at the precinct yet."

"Who's Chen?" Rogers said.

"His work partner," said Big Tiny. "Dao-Ming Chen. Nice lady."

"Okay. Early hours. But I can help you with that ID. I had a man at the crime scene before they took away the body." *Oh great!* Castilblanco thought. "He's Tucker Biggs, NRL scientist. He was here for a joint Australian-US-UK conference we're having."

Naval Research Lab. He could have been involved with a lot of high-tech stuff! "Hence your interest? Do you want the case? We've got enough to do, and I'd rather be doing that than risk having the FBI meddle in our murder case."

Rogers ignored the dig, which made Castilblanco think he might be okay.

"Nope. I just want to know how the victim died, which is why I'm here. Mugging or robbery gone wrong? He was hitting the jazz clubs and bars last night with some drinking buddies and set out alone to walk back to his hotel while the others kept at it, according to them."

"That bit of intel helps too."

Big Tiny was all business, though. "I do miracles, Lou, but I can't work that fast," he said, harking back to Rogers's question. "I just put him on the slab."

Tiny's first words were ones that Castilblanco had often heard from the ME over the years, especially before he received a promotion and started to cover for other precincts and not Chen and Castilblanco's. The current case was only theirs because she and her husband had found the dead man while searching for a taxi at that early morning hour. The police captains thought the two partners might as well stay on the case—he smiled thinking that they'd been roused at that early hour too—given all the problems with budget cuts, the bane of the NYPD's existence for a while now.

"But you've done a quick exam, I'll bet, if only at the crime scene," said the big FBI agent.

Big Tiny sighed. "I haven't had time for a tox screen or other important things, bro, not even an ID until now, but yes, I think I know how he died." He eyed Castilblanco. "Your partner must have noticed?"

"Chen was trying to keep her kid from waking up and seeing a bloody corpse," Castilblanco said. "And, if she did notice, she didn't tell me."

His partner, Dao-Ming Chen, was a woman of few words, unlike his wife Pam. But both gave him grief at times.

"Yeah, kids are a distraction and don't belong at a crime scene. Well, this poor bastard died while being tortured. That's clear enough. Not there in that alley, of course. And I don't think S&M was involved."

Rogers didn't seem to be surprised. "I wonder how much he divulged," he muttered. He seemed to brighten. "Well, good luck on the case, Castilblanco. Keep me posted." He handed the detective a card.

"You're not taking the case? Or bringing in NCIS?"

"Only if you request either one. We have an important technical meeting going on. I need to get back."

"TS stuff, I suppose," Castilblanco said.

"You can call it that."

"So...are you going to give us any hints about who this scientist's killer might be?"

"Sorry. That would give away too much of the TS stuff."

"Figures." *Probably means he hasn't a clue.*

"Sorry about that, Rollie," Big Tiny said after Rogers left.

"Not your fault, bro. That's why I don't like working with Feds. It's hard enough to do our job, and, with the Feds butting in, darn near impossible, most of the time. At least you and I have the victim's name and profession, and clearly he was here for that meeting. Shouldn't be hard to find his hotel either and trace his movements from there. I doubt we'll get to talk to the victim's fellow jazz enthusiasts, though."

"Yeah, good luck with all that, from what Rogers said. I'll text you my full report when I finish it."

"Thanks. And I'm thinking about torturers. What secrets did the victim give up, if any? You'd think the Feds would be interested in that too."

"I'm guessing that neither they nor Chen and you will ever know what information he divulged."

"You're right. But maybe we will when we find who the murderer is."

Chapter Three

When Lou Rogers returned to the Federal Building in the anemic winter dawn's daylight, the director of the FBI's NYC office saw him arrive and motioned for him to come into the director's office. The older man shut the door behind them.

"So...do you think they can handle the investigation without making waves? Castilblanco can become a loose cannon sometimes."

That last comment surprised Rogers a bit. "Seemed like a dedicated pro to me. Out to arrest a murderer, if I'm not mistaken."

The director handed Rogers a file. "Some background on him. You'll see that he sticks his nose in where it doesn't belong sometimes."

"In our cases?"

"And others. On critical ones, he's had some VIPs backing him up. Otherwise, he'd have been up shit creek a long time ago."

"And his participation was prejudicial to those cases?"

"Depends on your point of view, I suppose. Peruse what's in the folder. You'll then understand why I'm warning you to keep a tight leash on Castilblanco. I don't want him fucking up our conference."

Rogers shook his head. "You don't know how strange that all sounds. What if I read what's in this folder and then decide Castilblanco's a national hero? My God, the man was a SEAL in the early days in Afghanistan!" Rogers had accessed a bit of bio info before heading for the morgue. He'd seen the tours as a SEAL in his NYPD file, not his military records. He was sure the director wasn't referring to military service, though.

"Just keep the leash tight, Lou, or I'll sic someone else on him who will. Now get the hell out of my office and do your job."

Rogers went to his borrowed desk in the open-area plan and began reading the contents of the file folder. Before he even finished, he'd made his decision. There'd be no leash if he could prevent it. After all, his home office was in the Hoover Building in DC, and the NYC director wasn't his real boss, so he could just go to hell.

After finishing the reading the contents of the folder, Rogers turned to more important matters, specifically those associated with not "fucking up our conference." He called the NCIS officer heading up security for the meetings about something that had been bothering him for a while about preparation for the US part of the three-part conference.

"I'm a bit worried, Bob," he said. "Everyone, including the barista at Starbucks here across the street, will know there are important meetings going on in the building if you have military going in and out like they did in Canberra. The media will be over them like flies on dog turds."

"Not with the parallel summit going on at the UN between the US, Chinese, and Russian presidents. And so what if a few reporters show up?" There was a pause. *Is he reconsidering his position about the uniforms?* "Reporters aren't going to kill our scientists." *Completely oblivious!* "Which brings me to what just happened: I don't want another killing, Lou, and I want to know why Dr. Biggs was killed."

"And tortured. Surely it's obvious: Other people besides reporters already know an important conference is going on. They've probably known that since Australia."

"While I'm in charge of security, though, I make the plans. The first step is to find Biggs's murderer. We can move on from there and use what we learn to protect the other tech wizards. Work with me on that. Who have you got chasing the killer?"

Lou almost sighed over the phone. He now had to suffer through his second confrontation of the day with an egotistical prick.

"The best man possible. A cop named Castilblanco."

"I've heard good things about him. His partner Chen too. Wasn't he the guy who stopped that terrorist from crashing a cruise ship filled with explosives into Norfolk piers?"

They hadn't been at the end game, but Rogers had just read about it. A terrorist who wasn't really a terrorist had saved the day at the end, with the help of one of Castilblanco's relatives. A prisoner had become radicalized in the pen and tried to wreak revenge when he got out. A real messy case that later prompted some changes at the Virginia Navy base.

"One and the same. He had some help—Detective Chen, for example—but he did a good job. He's done a few other good deeds, both nationally and internationally. And, per your request, he's damn good at solving murders."

"Okay. Just keep tabs on him, though. We can't afford to lose another scientist."

Keep tabs? Another leash! What am I, a dog walker? "Okay. But consider my doubts about the military wearing their uniforms. The Aussies and Brits, especially. They'll stand out far too much and amplify the meeting's importance in the public eye."

"We have to keep them happy. These meetings are important. They were when the pact was established, and they still are. There's still a threat in the Pacific, for your information. You need an international perspective now, Agent Rogers."

With that insult, Lou ended the conversation without even a sign-off. He needed a stiff drink...and it was only seven-thirty, with the first meeting starting at ten.

Chapter Four

Castilblanco decided he'd have breakfast now that the preliminary session with Big Tiny was over. Besides being far too early, he'd learned long ago not to go to them after a heavy breakfast; even a light one often caused him to reach for his Tums. He made a call while he was waiting.

He'd been to the small deli before. They were just putting out some Christmas treats—he saw nut samplers, dried fruit, and assortments of cakes. That didn't deter him from his original goal. He was just beginning his bacon-and-egg repast when Sully, short for Sullivan, maybe an Irish friend and most assuredly a longtime snitch for Castilblanco, settled into the booth across from him. He was a grifter and a drunk; his wife, one hell of a double bass player, had infinite patience with him.

"Wife says hello," the corpulent man said. "How's yours and the cubs?"

"Hardly kids anymore."

Pedrito was doing a similarly dangerous job, Ceci not so much. In any case, they were adults now on their own. He no longer could do much about protecting them from life's slings and arrows.

"Let's stay focused." He hoped Sully was sober enough to do that.

"Sure. What can I do for you today?"

Castilblanco slid across three twenties and the sloppy Irishman with the veined nose pocketed them. "I have a case that might be a mob hit, although I can't see what the motivation might be. It would simplify things if it were and get the Feds off my back. Or simply eliminate it as a possibility." He gave a brief description of the murder and the victim, but not his profession.

"Yeah, cashing in after torture could definitely mean mob. Could be payback for some major transgression against Il Capo. Or outstanding debt. Or it could be a gang thing. Those Central American gangs can be worse than the mob: Make someone horribly suffer before killing him. Of course, someone like Grasso's minions could do the same thing, but you're not likely to find the body."

Castilblanco hadn't wanted to mention the Grasso family specifically. They were longtime enemies. He hadn't dealt with much gang violence; that was handled by a special division of NYPD now and was generally tied in knots associated with immigration enforcement, which also meant Feds.

"Forensics could go either way," he said. "I'm just trying to eliminate what the Feds are worried about."

"Espionage?"

"Probably their concern, yes. They won't be specific, of course. Never are. But a special agent from the FBI was there at the morgue. They might only be doing due diligence, and they might be as happy as I'd be if I can prove it's not spies at work."

"Was the victim under their protection?"

Castilblanco demurred. Sully might be a snitch and alcoholic, but he wasn't stupid. "In a way, but maybe not yet. I'm not sure when that starts."

"No need for me to know, I suppose, and, if you want me to put my ear to the ground to confirm mob or gang violence, that's easier for me." He pointed to Castilblanco's plate. "Looks good. I like my eggs that way too."

Castilblanco took the hint. He slid another twenty across the table. "Spend it on food, Sully, not booze."

"I'm like you. I never drink while I'm working." He winked. "Or having breakfast."

Castilblanco smiled. He was sure the man only ceased thinking about his next drink when he was asleep or getting intimate with his wife.

He stood. "Call me if you find something." He turned and headed out of the deli.

Sully did find out things more often than not. That was why he was his highest paid snitch.

Sully liked to hang out in bars better than restaurants, especially at holiday time when things were often a bit more festive. They often had food more to his liking, and a lot of restaurants didn't serve liquid refreshments that he liked or were too overpriced. He also liked to hang out in those he knew were owned by mob members. He'd nurse a couple of beers for hours and keep his eyes and ears open. He often did it only for gathering general information that might be useful later, but that evening, after a nice siesta, he was responding to Castilblanco's request.

He was in a bar owned by Grasso, the mob boss who'd come up in their conversation mostly because he dominated New York's traditional crime scene. Grasso and his lieutenants knew a lot about other crime in the city as well—knowing the competition, that mobster might call it—and that included knowledge about gang activities too, because now the mobs often worked with the gangs, especially for drug dealing.

That bar had been his first choice. He knew it might be a wasted evening, in which case he'd visit another one the next night. That night he was lucky, though; Gino Preziosi dropped in, now Grasso's number one lieutenant.

The mobster saw Sully, ordered an IPA, and slid into the booth opposite the Irishman.

"What a coincidence. Saw your old lady play last night, Sully, and she hasn't lost her touch with that double bass. I bet she shows a lot more love to it than she does to you."

Sully ignored the barb. "The cops found a body in an alley early this morning. Your guys' work?"

Gino smiled. "I could say, none of your business, because it isn't, but the answer is no. And I know exactly the incident you're talking about because the boss paid more attention to the news report when he heard his dear old friend Dao-Ming Chen discovered the body. You should tell her that she shouldn't have her kid out that late in such a deserted area, even if she's with her husband."

Yes, Gino knew what was going on at the city's underbelly, maybe more so than the cops. He'd have to tread carefully. "I don't know any Chen. Is she a cop?"

"You lie more than that old president, Sully. Glad we got rid of that bastard."

"You voted for the other guy?"

"Sure thing. Why support another capo and his family?"

Sully smiled. He hadn't expected that. "You must be kidding me."

"Nope. Nothing about his policies—he had very few, you realize, unless you call fomenting hate and division a policy. I just didn't like the SOB, his family, and his damn ostentatious piece of real estate on Fifth Avenue."

Takes one to know one, Sully thought. Yet he gave credence to what Gino had to say. He was smarter than the average thug and probably could have made lots of money as a Wall Street banker—he had an MBA or a CPA certificate, something like that—but his ties to the family were too strong.

"So...do you know who might have killed that man in the alley this Chinese friend of your boss found?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Preventative medicine. Thought it might be mob work, and I'm always watching out for my wife. Big's out late, as you know."

"Her gigs are in nightclubs. If you were really worried about her, I'd have seen you waiting to walk her home."

"Uh, I sort of forgot to do that last night."

"Losing yourself in alcohol, I imagine. I think she's there tonight too."

"I'll leave here in time to meet her."

"Give Big my regards then." He pointed to the stein. "Make that your last. She doesn't need to be a widow nor you a widower, but that might happen if either of you suffer the same fate as the guy in the alley."

The bartender brought his IPA, Gino took it, and moved to an empty table where he could watch who entered the bar. Sully finished his beer and left. Two blocks from the bar, he stopped to text Castilblanco:

No evidence for mob involvement. I'll keep looking.

"This is a nice surprise, Sully," Big said to her husband. "Here. You can carry Han."

She'd named her double bass after the *Star Wars* character because she liked Harrison Ford. They had the first three movies on DVD, along with all the *Indiana Jones* movies. The same composer had done both scores, and she liked that music too. Sully couldn't remember seeing any of them all the way through, though, because he usually passed out halfway into any movie.

"What prompted you to give me company home?"

"I was out doing a favor for Castilblanco, so I was nearby. How was the audience tonight?"

"Grooving. I guess the trio is becoming even more popular as people flock inside for entertainment as days get colder. Say, I saw that mobster last night. I forgot to tell you. What's his name? Gino something?"

Big sometimes passed info to him she thought he might use, although she didn't approve of his "occupation."

"I know who you mean. I guess he likes jazz. He didn't say anything to you, did he? No threats?"

"Why would he do that? Anyway, he doesn't scare me. He doesn't look like mob either. Was just sitting there, sipping somethin' and enjoyin' the music. All alone, like some big Yogi Bear enjoyin' the improv."

"He's a lot more dangerous than a cartoon bear. Don't get on his wrong side."

"I don't get on anyone's wrong side who's in my audience. And look at me. I'm not a threat to anyone. And no one would want my body either."

His wife was a tiny woman with a boy's body, hence the nickname, used at home as well as professionally.

"I always do."

Chapter Five

Dao-Ming Chen met Castilblanco in front of Tucker Biggs's hotel, The Dominick on Spring Street.

Years earlier, a demoralized Castilblanco had lost two partners in a row through no fault of his own, and Chen and he discovered their two homicide cases were related. They became partners to solve them. As sometimes happened, to them more than most cops, the combined cases led to something much bigger, including an attempted presidential assassination. Some later cases also evolved that way, but most of their homicides had fewer national or international ramifications, and some still remained unsolved. Their batting average was still better than most teams', though, and they still worked well together, which often confused NYPD's VIPs as well as ordinary people.

Chen was a conservative, the daughter of a rich Chinese-American couple from Long Island; Castilblanco was a progressive, the son of a much poorer Puerto Rican couple from the Bronx. By now, the yin-yang-like crimefighting duo often knew what each other thought and frequently admired each other's special skills.

Castilblanco considered her to be an Asian Mona Lisa because of her enigmatic smile that was consistent with her rarely expressed humor; she was a serious woman. She'd been a diving champion at one time, had participated in a secret experimental Army program involving female special forces long before the Pentagon officially decided to allow women to participate in combat situations, and could have had a career as a runway model for the NYC fashion industry when she was younger. She was unreadable most of the time; he thought that was a useful weapon against criminals and NYPD's VIPs alike. His kids called her Auntie Chen. She was one smart lady; she, her husband, and kid were part of the extended Castilblanco family.

'Smart' included modern tech too; between the two of them, she was much better at that than Castilblanco. She'd found where Biggs was staying without leaving the precinct using only her laptop and smart phone.

"We don't have a warrant to get into his room," she said to her longtime partner after he arrived to find her standing in front of the hotel, shivering a bit despite her winter coat. Global warming now made the city's climate akin to a roller coaster until January when it just became a constant, bitter cold.

"Leave it to me," he said. "The manager will let us in." That was Castilblanco's special talent; he was a people-person, and he could make people think bending the rules a bit in the interest of justice was reasonable more often than not.

He was right this time as well. "I guess it's okay if I give you company," the mousy little manager said, "since our guest is deceased. What happened?"

"That's what we're trying to find out, sir," Castilblanco said. "You can lead the way, but you'll have to stand outside the room. We don't want to mess it up for the CSU. I assume your staff hasn't yet cleaned it?"

"That's right. We're short on staff. They're getting more than minimum wage now, but it's still hard to find good help. And there's a lot of people coming to the city now. Rockettes, ice rink and tree at Rockefeller center, Bryant Park, Macy's windows—a lot of things to attract tourists this time of year."

As if the hotel workers didn't deserve it, thought Castilblanco, ignoring the tourist pitch to go back to the minimum wage comment, which in his opinion deserved to be even higher. But he

knew the little manager wasn't to blame for any personnel problems or the low pay. The hotel's owners probably not that much either. They'd had problems filling positions for a while now. People moved on to better jobs when they were available, and a lot were available after that pandemic, and even at the tail end of it. That was long ago, but problems still remained. People liked virtual jobs better now, jobs where they didn't have to leave the house. And moving away from the city was still in vogue, adding to the virtual-work fad. *How do you collar crooks virtually?* he wondered.

They took the elevator and then followed the manager along the hall to 927, donned Teflon booties and latex gloves, and went inside, the manager performing his perceived duty by watching them like a hawk with those bright, beady eyes.

"Aren't you supposed to wait for your CSU?" he called to them at one point.

"They'll be here soon enough," Castilblanco said. "Be careful about what you wish for. We'll be a lot less intrusive than they are, I assure you. We just need to do a once over to see if there's anything obvious that we can use. Saves time, you know. Sorry 'bout the inconvenience."

The manager frowned but nodded his acceptance of the apology and its logic.

Their practiced eyes searched the room. They only found one thing of interest, a pink business card with blue letters. Chen handed it to Castilblanco. He put on his glasses to study it.

"Seems Mr. Tucker Biggs was looking for some other types of action," she said.

"Maybe. Makes more sense now that he'd leave the group and go it alone." He winked at her. "Want to bet that in his case Candy Kaine wasn't a call girl but a torturer and killer instead?"

"I'm not a gambler. You know that. It's sloppy of the murderer not to visit this room and remove the card, though."

"Probably didn't see the card if he did. You're thinking of a spy's botched cleanup op?"

She nodded. "Yeah, might be espionage, considering who Biggs played with. Candy Kaine might not be real, but I'm thinking that a real woman hands out these cards. She just wasn't there where Biggs thought he'd be meeting her." He put the card into an evidence bag. "We might find prints or DNA traces on this not belonging to Candy or Biggs. Worth a try."

They finished, thanked the manager, and left. Castilblanco would call the CSU later...as if they didn't have enough to do.

The CSIs found one partial and some epithelial cells on the card that didn't match either a woman or Biggs. While that was going on, the detectives tried to chase down the real Candy. The only record they found on file was for shoplifting when she was a first-year student at NYU. That incident had caused her parents to kick her out of their West Side penthouse. Castilblanco wondered if he'd have done the same thing.

"Candy aka Susan Eisenstein had expensive tastes," Chen said. "To satisfy them, she turned to the oldest profession."

"Likely a high-end call girl, though," Castilblanco said, "not your common hooker. Probably politicians and bankers among her clients. I'll turn her case over to Vice, even though she might eventually become another homicide case for us if a spy actually used her as bait. The most important question right now is: Where was Biggs supposed to meet her? Anything from Tucker's smart phone?"

"Wiped. The killer or killers wanted us to take a while to ID him, I suppose."

"Thanks to the Feds for that. It's rare when they help out. Traces on his clothes?" She handed him a computer printout. "Mostly food and liquor spatter, what you'd expect from a night of clubbing. But MSG?"

"A Chinese jazz club?" she said with her thin, Asian Mona Lisa smile.

He smiled too. When he first met Chen, she was always so damn serious, although she'd become a bit too serious in another way with a senator once. Marriage and a kid had softened all that a bit; the husband was an ATF agent, but they both doted on the kid.

"How 'bout a warehouse that supplies Chinese restaurants?"

"Too easy. Couldn't be that easy, Rollie."

"Not so easy. In Chinatown, there must be lots of both."

She nodded. "A needle to be found in a lot of haystacks then."

Another smile...or pride she almost got the adage right?

"We need a search pattern. The victim's starting point was his hotel. Let's forget about where he was found, because he was probably dumped there already dead. Can you bring up a Manhattan map on your laptop?" She did. "So...here's the hotel at 245 Spring Street. Draw a radius to the farthest border of Chinatown and then make a Chinese fan that covers Chinatown."

"You should just learn to do this yourself. You know what has to be done."

"I realize that. I just don't have the time or desire to learn how to do it. Do we have enough detail to see how many warehouses there are?"

"Every restaurant can also be its own little warehouse."

He thought a moment. "Okay, make that restaurants and warehouses, like we said before. We need a list in ascending order of distance from the hotel." She produced the list. "Now we'll have to go out and do the old gumshoe shuffle, my friend. We'll get some uniformed cops to help us canvass."

"It might take a few days to cover them all."

"Can't be helped."

At that moment, Big Tiny called. Castilblanco put him on speaker phone.

"Found some interesting stomach contents, Rollie: Several teabags from a Chinese restaurant. Looks like the victim swallowed them on purpose because there are no signs of forcing in the trachea."

"Is there a name on the bags?"

"Peking Palace."

"Looks like you won't be wearing out your gumshoes," Chen said. "Smart fellow, this Tucker Biggs. He left a message for us indicating where he was tortured and killed."

"Every Chinese restaurant is a little warehouse," he said to acknowledge her small victory. "I'll remember that one."

Except for the out-of-date name "Peking," the restaurant had been modernized. Like many NYC restaurants, it was small and had probably survived via its takeout service during the mostly forgotten pandemic. People tended to forget bad memories.

Castilblanco let Chen take the lead. She could speak to the restaurant's owner in his own language, after all.

"He's going to let us look around in back. They have two storerooms and a walk-in freezer."

"Do we need booties and gloves?"

She smiled. "I doubt it. I'm guessing there have been a lot of workers in all of them since Biggs was here."

"Um, not that long a time, but I get your point. No live animals, I hope?"

"Probably recently dead ones. There's a market nearby. Probably a lot cleaner than that awful one in Wuhan where they say the pandemic began."

"Gloves then, just in case there's nasty bugs around that are homegrown, not from Wuhan."

In one storeroom, Chen found a crate in the corner that looked more like a cage. She asked the owner a question. He'd tagged along behind them.

"He says his kids used to keep the family dog in there," she said. "Let's haul it out and look inside."

"For Peking dog instead of Peking duck?"

He didn't think that joke was supporting stereotypes. Chinese takeout was still a staple in the Castilblanco household. As usual, she didn't smile, so he didn't know if she got the joke.

They spotted a bloody rag and more teabags.

"The pet was injured?" Castilblanco asked the owner.

"No, never injured. Cage old. Don't know how blood got there. New blood."

Castilblanco nodded. "And the tea bags? The dog has afternoon tea like the Brits? Maybe a Hong Kong dog?"

"No. Don't know 'bout that either. No reason bags in there."

"Thinking what I'm thinking?" Castilblanco said to Chen.

"Yes. Biggs was kept here for only a bit. Let's get some CSIs to confirm the theory."

"Tell him we'll need a list of his deliveries around the time Biggs disappeared. Someone took him away from here to torture him somewhere else."

Castilblanco wondered if one of the restaurant workers or even the owner were accomplices. *Something to keep in mind*, he thought.

They returned to the precinct to wait for the forensics data. There were other cases to tend to. After lunch—just a hot dog from a street vendor for him after that late breakfast—he got two calls, one from Sully, who'd found nothing so far, the other from the CSU.

Chapter Six

The leader of the little spy ring had felt the engineer's neck and detected no pulse in the carotid artery.

"He just stopped breathing," said the torturer.

The leader turned on him. "You fool! You said you had experience!"

"I do. He should have talked. He resisted." He shrugged. "He's old, and maybe I got a little too rough?"

"If he's dead, you did; and we won't get any information from him now. We'll have to dump him somewhere to make it look like a robbery gone bad. That will slow down the cops a bit. I'll leave that to you and the other two. We now have one last chance in London."

"Two chances. What about DC? And the others can still infiltrate, just not me."

"Perhaps. I cannot afford to fail three times."

"Don't worry. Our luck will change."

"You don't survive in this game if you depend on luck. If I fail, you and the others will go down too." *And maybe I'll make you three pay for your incompetence even before that!* He turned and stomped out of the warehouse.

As he walked toward a larger street to find a taxi back to his hotel, he thought about how hard it was to do what he did. His masters had no idea; they only saw successes and failures, not the hard work needed. He might as well be working grueling hours in a factory.

He was always amused by how Western literature and film romanticized his trade. That author Le Carré's novels came the closest to describing how difficult it really was. The leader was a fan. Those books had helped him understand the West as well as its dominant language, English, at least the turns of phrase and vocabulary. Practice had made perfect, not just for his English but also for other western languages, so much so that he'd become a valuable agent.

The leader wasn't a big man, but he was solidly built. His nose was wider and his cheekbones more pronounced and higher than the norm seen in his country, hinting at some Mongolian blood in his genetic history. He could be a vicious killer when necessary to complete a mission, but he preferred to be cunning and win not with muscle but with brains. He had risen in the spy service, that part of the vast state security apparatus that worked abroad, bribing, stealing, and yes, killing, in order to harvest secrets for his nation as well as eliminating its enemies.

The first failure had occurred because he was obeying orders, following the plan his superiors had created. *My masters must learn that they cannot bribe their way to power.* He dared not carry that message back home, of course. He still had one conference attendee on the leash, but he had no confidence in the young man.

Instead, he'd gotten creative: He'd developed plans for either New York City or Washington, DC, where the Top Secret talks about the next generation submarine technology would continue to occur before going on to London.

Perhaps it was better to give up on America. As that stupid fellow had said, luck wasn't with them in the US. Both cities were as populated as London, but the British didn't have so many people involved in state security. He wasn't sure that was the reason for the failure in

America—incompetent help was certainly suspect, but they were still part of Plan B. Maybe Plan C was preferable for London.

I really had four chances in three countries. I've failed at two, but I only need one to succeed in one country! He wasn't quite sure about the difference between American baseball and Australian and British cricket, but the Americans often talked about "three strikes and you're out." He couldn't afford that third strike. His career could then end in a most unpleasant manner.

Chapter Seven

The blood was Biggs's type, and the detectives believed the DNA traces on the rag would match his too. Someone had gotten careless. Unless Sully found something, Castilblanco had to assume espionage, if only because Agent Rogers was involved. Either the mob or a professional spy op should have done cleanup, just like Chen had thought about Biggs's hotel room, so the sloppiness might also indicate gang violence. A mugging gone wrong. It happened.

For the espionage possibility, the sloppiness meant that the kidnappers, if not the torturers, were hired help. When Big Tiny's tox screen results came through, it was apparent that Biggs had been drugged twice, once so he would be docile when they moved him from the restaurant to somewhere else, and the second time to get him to lose his inhibitions and divulge information. Espionage jumped to the top of the list.

The list of suppliers for the restaurant was surprisingly small, but each supplier used more than one warehouse and vans or trucks. The old gumshoe shuffle was still required, although the number of places to visit had been reduced, just those associated with the one restaurant. They still got some help. In either possibility, the detectives didn't want to waste time.

They received the call from two uniforms at the South Street Seaport just north of the FDR Drive. While the area had been gentrified a bit in recent years, city commerce was still the main game there. The cops were found at a warehouse that was temporarily not used by one of the suppliers but belonged to them.

"Damn cold in here," Castilblanco said to one of the cops after they arrived and entered.

"No reason to keep it toasty warm, I suppose, just warm enough to keep the pipes from freezing, but not cold enough for Santa Claus, I guess."

That reminded Castilblanco that he needed to get a jump on Christmas shopping. He collected stuff all fall and hid it at the Buddhist center in Brooklyn. His mentor there didn't mind because there was always a gift for him, even though the old physicist was no longer a Christian. Neither was Castilblanco.

"So show us what you found."

The two detectives followed the two uniforms. An area had been set aside in one corner for office space using a partitioning wall—there might have been panes above it at one time, although there was no broken glass. All the desks were shoved against the outside wall. In the center of the area left available there was a tipped over chair and blood on the floor.

"Again, not much cleanup," Chen said.

"I want to speak to someone in management," Castilblanco said. "Someone besides the supplier's employees had access here."

"And one of the employees gave them that access?" one uniform said.

"Probably. The dominoes will fall. Search isn't over, fellows. Good work, but let's regroup and carry on."

They nodded.

At the precinct, they'd reorganized the others too while the CSU worked at the new crime scene, which they probably should now call the torture scene. They'd just finished when their captain dropped by.

Castilblanco was once considered for that job as a lieutenant. He hadn't taken it because he couldn't imagine spending his last days on the force pushing papers and going to boring meetings. He couldn't understand why up-and-coming detectives took the jobs. True policing took place on the streets of the city, not some squalid office in a dark, old building that had usually seen better days.

The captain wanted an update.

"We have three possibilities: A gang or mob killing, or espionage. The Feds are worried about the last, but we'll get them off our backs if we can prove one of the first two. Whoever did the killing was a bit sloppy about it. We're now looking for anyone with a van or truck that delivers to Chinese restaurants."

The captain nodded. "Sloppiness doesn't sound like espionage. But if it's that, what's going on now besides traffic jams around the UN?"

"You tell me. You know the Feds. They never give the NYPD any details."

"They're definitely stingy about it sometimes, except for the joint task force on terrorism. You'd be good at sniffing that out. Any chance that's a fourth possibility?"

"I haven't seen any alerts. Have you, Dao-Ming?" She looked up from her laptop and shook her head. "It's always a possibility, sir," Castilblanco said to the captain, "so let us know if anything comes through about terrorist activity. The city is always a target."

"Will do. Keep me posted. I need to be able to protect you two from federal pressure if they push us too hard, just so you can do your jobs in peace."

He returned to his office.

Castilblanco leaned towards Chen. "Nice change, right? Good to have a solid barrier now between us and them."

She smiled slightly and nodded.

Chapter Eight

"Doesn't look like the sharpest knife in the drawer," Castilblanco said to Chen.

They were studying Len Dawson, a truck driver for one of the suppliers, through the one-way mirror. He had volunteered to come to the precinct and talk with them about Biggs.

"Uniform would probably agree with you there," Chen said. "It hasn't dawned on him that admitting that he hauled a bound Biggs from the restaurant to the warehouse could get him into trouble."

"Didn't he think that was a bit over the top?"

"The fellow who hired him told him it was a joke, that Biggs was just a friend and they were playing a joke on him."

Castilblanco nodded. "Let's go have our little chat with Mr. Dawson."

By the time they finished, they had descriptions of three men. It was possible that there was a fourth because Dawson thought he'd heard someone talking on a phone somewhere else while they put Biggs in a straitjacket and carried him to the truck. Dawson had a surprise for the two cops, though.

"You know, detectives, one of the guys looked like this fellow you call Biggs, the man I hauled in my truck," he said, "and that's why I really bought into the idea the whole thing was a joke. So this fellow Biggs is dead?" Castilblanco nodded. "Not much of a joke then."

They could only charge him with aiding and abetting a kidnapping, technically a felony, even a federal one, but Castilblanco believed it would be a waste of time to charge him with that because he'd simply been bamboozled. He'd leave that decision to others, who might get him as an accomplice to murder as well.

They needed to look for three men now—white, older men, one who looked a little bit like Biggs if they could believe the truck driver.

They left Dawson paging through mug shots under the watchful eye of a uniformed cop. Castilblanco knew that wouldn't be of much use. While the victim was an American scientist, the three had a bit of a foreign accent, according to Dawson. That didn't mean they weren't Americans, of course, especially in New York City.

Given the interrogation and torture of Biggs, though, Castilblanco believed espionage was still at the top of the list. Possibly all three were spies, operatives for some enemy of the West, and torturing Biggs for information had gotten out of hand. He wasn't going to pass that hunch on to Rogers just yet, though. To Castilblanco, the three were just murderers who needed to be caught because they'd killed someone in his city.

While uniformed cops asked around the warehouse area if anyone had seen three men together, Castilblanco watched the comings and goings of attendees at the conference while Chen did the same at the Chinese consulate, both surveillances based on the theory that Biggs's murder was a spy op gone bad, and the Chinese might be behind the spying.

He wasn't just going by the Chinatown connection for the latter, which would be foolish. Rogers had mentioned the conference involved Australia. To Castilblanco, that meant the Pacific, not Europe; and China, not Russia, had been trying to become a power in the Pacific area for a while. He also remembered something about a submarine deal Australia had made with the

US and UK a few years ago, so the conference Biggs was supposed to attend and Rogers was at could be about more developments on that front.

What had turned out to be a good guess was that the conference was in the same building the NYC FBI office was located. That guess also came from knowing that Rogers was involved in conference security. He didn't who else might be involved in security, probably people from both Australia and the UK, but Federal Plaza seemed like a likely location for the conference.

Castilblanco didn't like stakeouts. They were done better alone, like the present one, but they were boring in either case. One had to remain alert although your mind was shutting down from the boredom. He'd once been on a very boring one with Chen's boyfriend Eric, now her husband and father of their child. He might be good for Chen, but Castilblanco considered him to be just a stuffed shirt. He'd received a few promotions with the ATF's recent reorg and was now a VIP in the ATF's NYC office. Castilblanco had never aspired to a desk job, which Eric's probably was now.

Another thing Castilblanco hated about stakeouts was that with age, nature called more frequently, and he didn't like peeing in a bottle and wasn't keen on wearing Depends. That meant one had to limit the coffee, which added to the sleepiness caused by boredom. He'd never have been any good as a PI trying to catch a philandering husband so the wife could divorce him.

There was more to being alone on a stakeout than avoiding a partner's bad habits too: He could eat what he wanted. He'd already munched on Doritos, prohibited to him because of the salt, and was thinking about the little bag of peanuts when he hit paydirt. Across from the federal building at Federal Plaza, he picked out three men taking turns watching conference attendees as they took breaks with visits to delis and coffee bars.

Must be a big group, thought Castilblanco, thinking they'd usually cater refreshments for such a meeting. *Or are the breaks taken long enough for non-US attendees to get a taste of New York City life?* None of the three paid much attention to military attendees or females; only civilian-dressed males caught their attention. And one of the three did look a bit like Biggs.

Castilblanco considered security to be a bit lax. He didn't know to what extent Lou Rogers was involved in it—he'd seen him go in and out a few times—but Castilblanco would have organized things differently. First, those in military uniforms should be in civilian garb like everyone else for such a meeting; otherwise, people on the street might wonder what was going on, especially because some of the military types weren't Americans. Second, the comings and goings had to be problematic if the group was large, which it seemed to be, assuming that everyone had to sign out and then back in if the meeting security at the door was done properly.

Those weren't his problems to solve, of course. He was just an observer from afar. But any reporter might make those same observations, and certainly trained spies would.

His main problem was that his three suspects could surveil those outside too easily and trade off which one was doing it to keep everyone else in the dark about their true intentions. *What are the three looking for? Some other attendees they wanted to interrogate and torture?*

When he spotted the one that looked a little like Biggs again, he followed him. He had to pretend to be just another lost tourist in the Wall Street area when there were several more turns taken with the other two, but finally his target headed for the subway station and took the #1 line north. Castilblanco followed, becoming just another straphanger three cars back.

The suspect got off at the Columbia University stop aka the 116th Street Station and walked north along Broadway, turning east on 123rd and disappearing into an apartment building. The long gumshoe shuffle had made his legs ache. *My exercise for the day*, thought Castilblanco.

He put the address into his smart phone with a stylus using its notebook capability—issued by the NYPD, it had what he still called PDA features—and was wondering what to do next when the ringtone sounded.

It was Pam calling from the NY-Presbyterian Hospital in Queens with the bad news: Ceci was in surgery.

"I'll meet you there," he told his wife.

After they'd talked to the surgeon, his wife had assigned him to Ceci's case, but he couldn't take it because he was personally involved. He reluctantly left Pam with Ceci.

Pam Stuart's adventures in life with her husband had been varied and interesting, to say the least, ever since that night she'd slow-danced with him and he stole her heart, not that she hadn't been interested in the big cop before that. As a reporter covering crime scenes, she had learned to tell the good, well-mannered public servants from the bad, ill-mannered fascist types. She knew her future husband was in the first group from day one.

Because they'd married, she'd become a mother when they adopted two children. Like her husband, she never wanted Ceci and Pedrito to go into law enforcement, but they had, perhaps emulating their father. Pedrito already had experienced his share of close calls, but nothing like Ceci's. *So close, so close, so close to dying!* And she could still take a turn for the worse.

Pam remembered how they'd fought to save the children from their scurrilous birthfather, and how their love had slowly healed the children's psychological wounds. Ceci had been more affected than Pedrito because she was older and knew more about what was going on. Now she was a grown woman who had it all together and a promising future ahead of her. It would have been so unfair for her to lose all that. *And I would have been devastated!*

The whole incident made her feel old. *I am old!* While still doing some reporting, she'd become a victim of her own success. She was often called to substitute for a news anchor, especially on weekends. She also produced some special reports; those had become more important over the years as live TV's local stations, even hers that was in the huge tristate marketplace, tried to compete with streaming video and a plethora of news apps, not to mention cable TV. And her station was like many others now, just a subsidiary of a huge multinational corporation that actually coddled all that competition, making their lives more difficult.

Maybe it's time to leave that world to a younger generation? She'd been working on Rollie to retire, but she hadn't really convinced herself to do so. But she wanted to have free time to travel and do other things. *Does he?* It was time to talk about that.

In the hospital lobby, Castilblanco called Chen and explained the situation.

"So...do we put our first case on the back burner?"

"No. There's an apartment in that building I need to take a look at. I suggest you forget about the consulate and concentrate on Pam's request. I'm on my way back to that building. I'll call Pam and tell her you're looking for Ceci's attacker. I can't, at least not officially."

"I understand. Conflict of interest. I'll need to chat first with the cops and CSIs who were at Ceci's crime scene. And I want to be there when Ceci wakes up in case she got a good look at her attacker."

"Works for me. Do what you need to do." He broke the connection.

He'd taken a taxi down to the hospital; he would take one back to the building his suspect had disappeared into.

After he arrived, he was standing about a block away, wondering again how to proceed. He didn't know which apartment inside the building was his target. He knew security was minimal—there was no doorman, for example, and he could see no videocam—but that didn't seem to help. In fact, if there was a doorman, flashing his badge might be enough to get him talking too much, possibly warning whoever was in the apartment.

He also thought the other two suspects would be coming along soon, so he didn't want to be seen by them. When they arrived, he entered the lobby just in time to see them disappear into the elevator. He watched as the elevator stopped on the seventh floor.

When the elevator returned, he took it to the sixth, went along the hallway and knocked on a random door. A woman with a baby opened it, being careful to keep the chain on. *Good for you, lady! But you really need a peephole.*

"Excuse me. I'm looking for a friend." He showed Biggs's picture to her on his smart phone, not the ME's version but one Rogers had provided. "Haven't seen him in a while. Because I'm in the city, I thought I'd surprise him and say hi."

"That must be Stewart Draper in 705. You've got the wrong floor."

"Thanks. Sorry for interrupting."

Fortunately, the woman hadn't wondered why he didn't know his friend's name, although he had a feeble answer ready: He couldn't remember the surname so thought the picture would help more. The baby had provided a useful distraction. *Sometimes we get lucky.*

Chapter Nine

When the day's meeting ended early, Lou Rogers had time for some R&R to decompress. He decided to spend that free time, which he hadn't had a lot of recently, visiting the Met where there was an exhibition of Chinese paintings going on. He took a taxi from Federal Plaza to the art museum, thinking the bus would eat too much of that precious time.

He skipped the political art—who cared about Mao anyway?—and instead enjoyed the other portraits and landscapes. Both had an ephemeral quality as if life were being seen through a frosted glass window, something that went well with his mood.

He jerked a bit when a woman's contralto voice interrupted his thoughts. "I call it Chinese impressionism."

He'd been so focused on the paintings along the wall in front of him that he hadn't noticed her when she'd joined him there on the bench. He now paid more attention to her. Where his skin was the light brown of a cafe latte, hers was dark ebony, a fact that made her beaming smile stand out. She was studying him as well, her bright eyes twinkling in mischief.

"That's very perceptive," he said.

"Are you truly a fan of Chinese art, or are you just looking to be with people?"

"I never know who I might meet at the Met. A lovely Haitian woman, for example."

"*Mon Dieu!* How did you guess?"

"I was once stationed in France long ago. The women there took pity on this American soldier and spoke English, but it was with a French accent. I deduced you were either Canadian, French, or Haitian. Considering New York is a city of immigrants and the problems that poor country has had, I surmised that Haitian would be my best guess."

"I see. So...you're not here for the art, but to meet women?"

"Oh, I'm very much a fan of Chinese art." *And beautiful women*, he decided not to add. "I've been fascinated by it since college." He offered to shake hands. "Lou Rogers. My home is in Arlington, Virginia now, but I'm originally from the LA area."

"My name is Monique Pierre. I teach art at CUNY. The critique of these paintings I just offered was based on my thesis. Of course, it contains a bit more information than that, but that's a good enough summary for now. What do you do for a living, Mr. Rogers, and why are you in New York?"

He now had to be careful. "I work in security. I'm here for some business meetings. One ended early today, so I thought I'd indulge myself a bit." *Not exactly a lie.*

She glanced at his left hand. He wondered why.

"I told my students about this exhibition, but I've seen none of them here. I'll have to pretend you're one of them. Would you like to hear about that particular painting?" She pointed to the one directly in front of them, a mountain scene, the slopes shrouded in swirling mists. *Why not?* He nodded. "The artist has recently experienced reincarnation."

"Come again?"

"He was quite famous before the Cultural Revolution, at least to fans of Chinese art, during which Madame Mao tried to erase him. She likely succeeded, because he was never heard from again. Not long ago, though, the Chinese strongman, the more benign one before the current president-for-life, Mr. Xi, allowed his paintings to be viewed again by the general public. Of course, they'd been kept hidden all the time before that and not shown for a long time because, for the Chinese government, he never existed, not even in name. That's what occurs

with an autocratic government. Will I make you angry if I say that we could soon have one here if we're not careful?"

"Not at all. I suppose you had a taste of that in Haiti?"

"My parents did. They were lucky to immigrate before the quake and the later events that occurred there. I was born here."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made that assumption."

"No offense taken. Shall I guide you through the other paintings in the exhibition? The museum will soon close."

"And then I should invite you to dinner to repay your kindness."

"So gallant. I accept. Because you're from out of town, should I recommend a place?"

"I'd appreciate that."

Rogers hadn't been on a date for a while. He didn't use social media or frequent popular night spots and dating someone in his same profession had never worked out. His profession didn't leave much time for relationships, and he wasn't the only federal agent whose relationships had fallen apart because of his work. Those who had successful ones, even marriage, had to work hard at maintaining them.

To be honest, though, he just hadn't found the right woman who would motivate him enough to become really serious about a relationship, and now, at his age, romance just didn't seem to matter so much anymore. Of course, he realized that the older he got, the less he would be attracted to any lady looking for a mate.

With all that history, he'd nearly forgotten how pleasant a night out could be.

While the cozy restaurant in Little Italy was a great place, one he'd never have found by himself, he spent more time admiring Monique Pierre than enjoying the ambiance or the food. Her eyes never stopped twinkling, and that silky contralto voice was mesmerizing.

They ended dinner by splitting a cannolo and sipping coffee.

"It's been a lovely evening, Lou, but it's getting late. I have an eight o'clock class to teach tomorrow."

"We can share a taxi. Can I see you again?"

"If I'm in the DC area—highly unlikely, at least in the near future—or you return to New York for some more meetings. But why not? You can call me anytime." She handed him a business card. "That has my office number at CUNY and my cellphone number as well."

He gave her his more discreet card, the one that had only his name and cellphone number.

"Um, I recognize the area code as from the DC area, but you're a bit secretive, aren't you?"

"Yes. Professional paranoia. I work in security, remember? If you come down to DC, call me, and I'll give you my address."

"Does this mean you don't trust me?" she said with a sly smile.

He took back the card, flipped it over, and wrote another number. "That's my office number in DC. If you ever need help with a security problem, anytime, anywhere, please call either number."

"That's still very mysterious. I like that."

Later, back in his hotel room, Rogers couldn't stop thinking about Monique. He'd been waiting all his life to meet someone like her, a woman who was intelligent, vivacious, and with a sense of humor. As fate would have it, he might have had only one wonderful evening with her, a very pleasant dinner to be sure, but so promising. At that moment, he hated his job.

He envied Castilblanco. The big cop had been lucky to find a loving wife, a ready-made family with his two adopted kids, and a rich life that paved the way for him into the golden years of retirement. Lou's bouncing around from foster family to foster family in his youth had created a yearning for such a loving family. Monique had rekindled that desire.

At his age now, life with a person like her would probably be more companionship than sexual satisfaction, but she was an attractive woman, so he couldn't really predict that. He'd sensed some vibes between them.

He wondered if she were a painter as well as an art professor. He'd dabbled sporadically in some art courses for adults at a local high school, learning some basics about drawing, watercolor, oils, and acrylics, but he'd never spent the time needed to develop the required skills Monique's art students probably all knew well, maybe even when graduating from high school.

There wasn't time for much dating nor time for art because the FBI took so much of his time. That was frustrating when he had the time to think about what he was missing. *Am I any different than a Wall Street banker who spends all his time making money?* Of course, no one would ever get rich working for the government, although the benefits and pensions were okay. In the FBI's case, if one lived long enough to receive the latter, and some asshole president didn't fire you before you qualified.

Things were a lot more politicized now. Whatever party was in power, the other tried to prove that the agencies were the opposition's minions...and sometimes that was true, at least at the VPI level. He was sick of that too, and always made him wonder if he should have remained a field agent in LA to stay under the political radar. Somehow one dinner with Monique had shined a bright light on all that, giving him a new perspective about what he was missing.

He vowed to give her a call. It was time his job took second place.

The next morning, Monique's elderly roommate watched her toy with her scrambled eggs.

"You look distracted, dear. You got in late last night. Did you have a hot date that left you yearning for some bedtime with him?"

Monique laughed. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Barb. I'd never want to do that on a first date. Too much chance of it becoming a one-night stand."

"But you wanted to?"

Monique sighed. "Do you remember when I told you I didn't want a relationship with an American black man?"

"I'm Nigerian, you're Haitian, but I still say you're nuts. Remember, I'm the widow of an old Japanese guy. You can fall in love with anyone."

"Yes, you're so liberated. You've been in America too long."

"You were born here. Most people here don't care who you love, especially in this city. So this guy was a macho tough guy who turned you off? I know you don't go for them, white, yellow, brown, or black."

"No, he was very nice. A real gentleman, in fact. A bit secretive, but we had a great evening out."

"You shouldn't expect any more than that on a first date. Just let things develop."

Monique took a sip of her coffee. Barb's coffee was much better than her eggs. Her roomie wasn't exactly a great cook, but they'd agreed from the outset to switch every other week between cooking and dishes.

"What's the problem?" Barb said. "You can tell Auntie Barb. The secrecy? Maybe he's married?"

"I don't think so. No ring anyway. He said he worked in security, which might explain the secrecy. He lives in Arlington, Virginia."

"Essentially DC. What's he doing here?"

"Business meetings."

Barb thought a moment. "I bet he's either a cop or a Fed."

"By the latter, do you mean a government agent?"

"ATF, DEA, DHS, FBI—take your pick. There's a whole alphabet soup of agencies now."

"I hadn't considered that possibility."

"And none of that matters. What really matters is, do you like him?"

"I don't do well with relationships in general, and long-distance ones even less."

"As if you've had a lot of relationships. Guys are put off by brainy chicks. That's why I married a physicist. And we had a lot of chemistry."

Monique smiled. Barb was a chemist.

"He loves Chinese art."

"You mean he says he does to impress you."

"No, from afar I saw him admiring some paintings in the Asian Wing at the Met. He was mesmerized by them."

"For you, he sounds like a keeper then. Move to Arlington or get him to move here."

"I only had one dinner out with him, Barb."

"But it seems like you want to see what's in his pants. Do something about it."

"You're still in the gutter." She demurred. "I'll see if he calls me."

"You should call him, dear. At your age, it's time to be a bit more aggressive."

As she sat on the bus on her way to CUNY, Monique Pierre was wondering if Barb was right.

Chapter Ten

While Castilblanco had tended to business elsewhere, Chen visited the Narcotics Squad at another precinct. Mike and Ceci's forensics results had shown enough traces of drugs to merit the visit.

She knew old Pete Chance from when they worked together as narcos, before she became Castilblanco's partner. The man only needed holstered pistols on each hip to look like a gun-slingin' sheriff from the Old West. *Or a Texas redneck?* His face, not his height, reminded her of a cartel leader, though, a man who had caused her a lot of grief—acne-scarred cheeks from a troubled childhood and the drooping gray mustache would remind anyone of a tough *hombre*. That man in Juarez had tried to kill her; this man had backed her up more than once. His best asset was a quick mind that often led to jocular banter.

"How's that old SOB of a Puerto Rican doing? I heard a couple of his kids are in the force now. Hopefully they can stay out of trouble better than their old man can." Chance was referring to Castilblanco, of course.

"The children are newcomers to the force. Pedro's a narco too, based in Queens. I'm surprised you haven't come across his name."

"Might still be too junior."

"Ceci, the daughter, is a CSI, also based in Queens. She's in a coma." Chen gave Chance a summary of what had occurred.

"That's terrible. Drugs and gang violence are often mixed. Any way I can help?"

"That's why I'm here. Let's assume that Ceci stumbled upon the beginnings of a gang war. Which gangs could those be?"

"Queens too?" Chen nodded. "Maybe that Castilblanco kid's precinct should have taken this case? Why are you involved, based in Midtown?"

"We're on it from the homicide side...unofficially. Using the excuse that it's related to another case...unofficially. That one isn't in our precinct either. Captains get creative when there's a personnel shortage. Although I'd be fine with the Queens narcos' involvement, our bosses also want to keep it as a homicide investigation for now, so I believe we can consult a bit...unofficially."

"Or they're adverse to the bricklayer philosophy." He saw her raised eyebrows. With Chen, he knew one got subtle facial expressions instead of words. "To solve a problem, throw more people at it, like when you build a brick wall. Budgets or bricklayers, we're off the case until some VIP decides we shouldn't be." He smiled. "Doesn't mean we can't help you out...unofficially."

"Where do we begin?"

"I can create a list of gangs active in that area and their leaders. That might help. A warning, though: The gang members can be violent motherfuckers, especially when they're crazed on coke or something. Violent written all in caps. Hacking-people-to-death-with-machetes kind of violence if they're recent immigrants who lied to come in as asylum seekers—there aren't so many of those as one moronic ex-president claimed, by the way—or even second generation and beyond without a family to fit into. In any case, they form savage tribes for basic survival and go after anyone who gets in their way, whether rival gangs or cops."

"Charming. That list will help me. But do you know anything about the particular gang that used that house as their ops center?"

"Heard about the incident, so yes. 'Aztec Lords' they call themselves, although that's insulting some Native Americans. If I remember correctly, they were violent too, but Cortes handled them pretty well, too well, according to some people's opinions. A bit more original than most gang names, but I bet it speaks to links to Mexican cartels. They might even be distributors for one of them, even beyond their territory. Dealers and such."

"And their competitors?"

"Same business model. And you can take your pick from the list. Their tribal territories are often just a few square blocks. but. like I said, they move around to do their business. Their sales territories for drugs cover all five boroughs, thanks to public transportation."

Back at their own precinct, Chen called Pam at the hospital. Ceci was no better but no worse either. She then went over the forensics results again. Ceci's attacker had left DNA traces and fingerprints in the closet and on the stair rails. That did the investigation no good unless they had them on file; they didn't. A probe into the Aztec Lords' international connections seemed to be in order.

Castilblanco had saved Interpol agent Hal Leonard's life once in Juarez. Although he now worked as a consultant for MI5 and DCSI after retiring from Interpol, he also had connections with the DEA. Those connections were better than her husband's.

"What a pleasant surprise!" he said. "Not a call to remember good times in Mexico, I suppose?"

She heard horns and other road noise in the background. "Where are you?"

"London today, Paris tomorrow. Or whatever, wherever, whenever. On stakeout, to be precise. I painted myself into a corner as an expert on the illegal arms trade."

"I see. Do you still maintain connections with the DEA?"

"Probably not as many as your husband."

"I doubt that. Sometimes the ATF and DEA are at odds now. And he's out of town and not callable. You're the default."

"Always good to feel like second best." There was a lapse; for a moment, Chen thought she might have lost the overseas connection...or insulted the man. "Just thinking, dear Chen. Depends on what you want the information for."

"I want to see if a local gang here distributes for some cartel."

"Then Jorge Salazar could be your man, not someone from the DEA. He's one Mexican copper that's not padding his dosh with drug money."

Chen considered that a moment. "You're sounding like a Londoner. Do you have contact info for this man Salazar?"

"He's some bigshot in the Federales now, so I'll give you his home phone and his mobile number."

Chen smiled. Her past contacts with an American artist, Roberta MacDonald, who now lived in Manchester, England, but painted Scottish landscapes, led Chen to understand some of the Brit-speak Leonard now used.

She wrote down both numbers and said her goodbyes.

"Regards to Rollie. And Merry Christmas, from me and Bastiann van Coevorden. Sometimes I work with him. He consults for MI5 too."

She wasn't sure that should have been divulged in a cellphone conversation, but Leonard had already broken the connection, so she couldn't complain to him.

There were times Chen wished she knew more Spanish. Over the years, she had depended more and more on Castilblanco for that. Of course, he depended on her for Chinese, so it evened out in the long run. He was still more a polyglot than she was, getting by in a few Middle Eastern languages as well. Mandarin had nothing in common with those, or with English or Spanish.

She still made the call to Mexico City and managed to connect with Colonel Jorge Salazar. Her day improved when she heard that his English was as good as hers.

"Dao-Ming Chen," he said, sounding a bit bemused. *Is he thinking that he knows me?* Neither Dao-Ming nor Chen were uncommon Chinese names, although her birth certificate said Chen Dao-Ming, following Chinese tradition. "I was just a cadet, but I seem to remember a bloody firefight years ago where our mutual friend Hal Leonard was almost killed. Were you the Chinese woman involved in that?"

"Chinese-American, but yes, that was me."

"*Pequeño mundo*. And what can I do for you?"

She first explained by describing the shooting incident at the gang's house and the attack on Ceci. That tale was detoured a bit by more reminiscing, if recalling bad memories could be called that, but it explained a lot of things about Salazar. That cadet had turned into someone who worked extensively with the DEA to rid Mexico of drug lords and their cartels, an impossible task but a noble one.

She was finally able to refocus on the point of her call.

"*Ya veo, mi señora*. These Aztec Lords might be distributors, although the name might not imply a connection to any particular cartel. How will knowing there is one help with your investigation?"

"It would at least give us something to charge Ceci's attacker with beyond just pushing her to the floor. He could be in for only a short time with that charge. They might even call it a misdemeanor. We want him put away for a long time."

"And the shooters who killed his other gang members?"

"Those too. We'd like to shut down both gangs, to be honest."

She was stretching that a bit—shutting down the two gangs wasn't her assignment; finding Ceci's attacker wasn't either—but she didn't want Salazar to restrict the information he provided.

"I will get back to you. I need to search through our records. Give my regards to Mr. Castilblanco. Tell him I hope his daughter gets better. I'm surprised you all survived that cartel's hospitality. Many people don't."

Chapter Eleven

Castilblanco climbed the stairs because he'd noted that the elevator's bell rang when it opened on a floor. It wasn't a good idea to announce to the person or persons in apartment 705 that someone had arrived there on the seventh. More exercise for tired legs, though.

He walked down the hallway to the apartment and put his ear to the door. He heard a soap opera blasting on a TV, but he also heard some East European language being spoken. That didn't mean too much. The woman on the sixth floor also had an accent, also possibly East European. In the city that never slept, over 800 languages were spoken. He didn't speak very many, but his tours overseas had given him a bit of an ear for languages, enough to know with high probability that what he heard was East European. Sounding a bit like Russian, at any rate. Like German, he knew enough of that language to get into trouble. Same with Korean, which got him laid once in Seoul. That woman now lived in Clifton, NJ! Practically a neighbor for a while.

What to do?

He made a wry smile. *Should I call a social worker?* Some time ago that policy was seriously considered when they were talking about defunding the police. They'd done the defunding, but the idea of using social workers in such dangerous situations hadn't caught on, for good reason: There would be a lot of social workers injured or dead!

He didn't think he had time to be subtle either. He knocked on the door. It opened a bit to show a man's face. *One of the three, as expected, and the Biggs look-alike.* Castilblanco smiled. "Building super. Someone called about a leaky toilet?"

The door slammed in his face. *Maybe he thinks I don't look like the building super?* Castilblanco kicked the cheap door in. It took two kicks around the door handle to splinter that part of it. All three of his suspects were trying to get out a back window and down the fire escape. He nabbed the last one by the belt and pulled him back into the room; the other two got away. He slapped his cuffs on the man he'd caught, the one who'd answered the door.

Castilblanco wasn't sure about what charges he could make. *Resisting arrest? Attacking a police officer?* He hadn't identified himself as such, but that was his prisoner's word against his. And he could claim that he'd been hit by the door. But by now they had DNA and prints from the torture scene they could probably find a good use for. Murder would eventually be the charge!

He also called for a CSU for this scene, which made him think of Ceci and how Chen might be doing in the search for her attacker. He called for a patrol car as well so uniforms could take his prisoner to the precinct for questioning.

While he waited, he grilled the prisoner *in situ* after reading him his rights. But the man, who looked more like Biggs, only heavier, now that Castilblanco wasn't seeing him through a crack in a door, calmly sat on a couch and remained mute, just shaking his head at every question. While Castilblanco considered that a bit of heavy-handed interrogation might be appropriate after what they'd done to Biggs, he controlled his temper. He wanted the SOB in jail, so heavy-handed wouldn't cut it.

The wait took longer than Castilblanco wanted, considering his lack of knowledge and impatience about Ceci's current condition. He needed to talk to both Pam and Chen, but he didn't want his prisoner to overhear any conversations.

The uniforms arrived first. Glad to get rid of the surly and mute prisoner, Castilblanco sent them off quickly.

"I read him his rights," he told them. "He didn't acknowledge that but screw him. Just get him into an interrogation room. Either Chen or I will be in soon to grill him."

Not long after they left, the CSU arrived and Castilblanco explained the situation to the lead CSI.

"You took a big chance," he said.

Castilblanco mulled that over. "You mean that they might have had guns?" The CSI nodded. "It occurred to me they might, but that was also a risk they might not have wanted to take. Getting arrested while possessing illegal firearms and doing what they were doing might have caused some raised eyebrows in the DA's office, if only for their stupidity. Nothing like making the case stronger against them."

"What were they doing here that's illegal?"

"Not here. I've been tracking them all day."

"Um. Guess I'll read about it in the *Times*?"

"Maybe." *But probably not. Not sensationalist enough, even for the Times.* "Say, can I hitch a ride with you fellows back to the precinct?"

"We might take a while."

"That's okay. I want to know what you find."

Now, while he waited for the CSIs to do their thing, he stepped out and went down the corridor to call Chen for an update about Ceci; she didn't want to take time to brief him and suggested he talk to Pam. He did. The prognostic for Ceci had greatly improved. His wife insisted that he now join forces with Chen and keep on the trail of her assailant. He again reiterated that his personal connection with the victim meant that he had to do that unofficially. He suggested that Chen and he change places. She could interrogate his prisoner at the precinct.

"The actions of a concerned father would certainly be warranted, official or not," Pam said. "Your bosses can't object to that, can they?"

"Especially not when they don't know about it. And I'll pretend to focus on the gang that murdered the two other gang members at that house."

He called Chen again and set up a meeting with her for late afternoon at the place where the gang murders had taken place. That would give her time to interrogate the man in custody.

He was soon headed once again the length of Manhattan for the hospital in Queens.
Damn precinct better pay for my cabs!

They were visited in the waiting room by another doctor, an intern, who told them that Ceci might be moved to her private room soon. She was showing even more signs of improvement.

They were interrupted by a visit from Pam's station head, Laura Santiago, so the doctor left. After she hugged Pam and was introduced to Castilblanco, she said, "How's Ceci?"

"Holding steady for now," Pam said. "Thanks for taking time to drop by."

"And how are *you* doing?"

"It's hard, Laura, very hard. She's our daughter. I'd rather die than have her die."

Another hug. "Take care of her, Pam. I've already arranged to cover your work, so don't worry about that." She looked at her watch and smiled at both of them. "Sorry to run, but I've got to get back." Another hug. "Keep me posted, but I'm sure she'll be better in no time."

Castilblanco watched her disappear down the corridor. "Nice woman, but she's a bundle of energy. Too frenetic."

"She always is. One hundred percent dedicated to her job."

Castilblanco sat with Pam for a while, just holding her hand. He'd always been happy at how the two of them had bonded with their two adopted children. As if on cue, Pedrito then dropped by. He was on a case too, but he'd taken time off to check on his big sister.

Pedro Castilblanco was a darker-haired version of his sister Ceci. Unlike his adopted father, he didn't have the physique to use strength as an asset when collaring a perp; like his father, he preferred to use cunning to do that anyway. He hadn't been a cop as long as his sister had been a CSI, but he knew the ropes well enough even before he graduated from the academy. A father with policing experience had helped him a lot, even though the old man had never wanted his kids to be cops.

Both siblings took after their birthmother who'd died of cancer. Their birthfather was in jail; he could never manage to stay on the straight and narrow, so he'd been in and out of the correctional system all his life. Fortunately, he'd lost the custody battle after the mother had passed on.

Castilblanco knew Pedro hardly remembered his birthmother or that custody battle. He had a loving partner now, a loving sister, and loving parents. It must have pained him to think that his sister might die, though. They were a tight family; Hispanics were family oriented, and Castilblanco's extended family was no exception.

Son, father, and mother all sat and worried together until both Castilblanco and his son felt they had to get back to work, the first to find Ceci's attacker, the second to return to his drug case.

Castilblanco had experienced in the flesh the good, bad, and ugly of the decline of his city. As he rode towards that house that wasn't far from the hospital, but a trip still requiring another cab, he couldn't help thinking about it.

A series of incompetent mayors—the "nine-eleven mayor" got far too much credit from Castilblanco's fellow cops, considering that mayor's later record; the anti-carriage horse fool had done a lot more damage than just killing the city's tourist industry, including antagonizing police officers; and on and on. The police often couldn't do their jobs adequately, as career criminals were now coddled by the "bail reform" from a few years ago. Thugs from rowdies who mowed down innocents while racing their cars on the streets of Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island to the violent gangs that received new recruits from Central and South America, claiming to flee the violence there but in fact exported it to the US, all were often back on the street too soon. All that had led to a chaos that made many cops throw in the towel.

The good people of his city, a group including most hard-working immigrants, legal or not, still outnumbered the bad, but the latter group went after the former in so many ways that the police and other first responders had more to do and less budget to do it with. *Maybe Pam is right? Time to retire, Castilblanco?* Ceci's injury suffered while just doing her job could be his breaking point.

Yet he still was motivated to protect the decent citizens of his city, despite the obvious decline in quality of life. *It is what it is*, he thought, recalling his Zen master's lessons. Castilblanco would never have survived as a cop without his guru's guidance when converting to Buddhism, that mentoring still going on. Some priests in the Catholic Church meant well, but that conservative institution—a vote by American fat cats a while back prohibiting politicians who supported a woman's reproductive rights from receiving communion had only been the tip of the iceberg—had offered him very little consoling in his times of need. He could just hear a priest say about Ceci's predicament: "It's God's will." That phrase had always bothered Castilblanco whenever some stupid priest uttered it. His Buddhist mentor had told him instead, "Never let anyone try to convince you, Rollie, that bad things that occur are God's will. That's bullshit. Human beings create their own problems, and too many are out to harm others who become their innocent victims. If that Christian God willfully creates that kind of evil, He's not worth worshipping."

Castilblanco arrived at the scene first, chatted with the uniform on duty a bit but didn't bother going inside the house, and went to have some coffee to wash down some Tums. Chen soon strolled into the little coffee bar and spotted him in a booth.

"Any new information about Ceci's attacker?" was his first question.

"We now know which gang used that garbage dump called a house as an HQ; they're called the Aztec Lords. They've scattered to the wind, of course, probably including the one who attacked Ceci. As usual, they've been involved in turf wars and selling drugs. Vice knew who the gang's leader is, so I thought we might want to question him. Hello from Peter Chance, by the way."

Castilblanco considered that a moment. He needed that Hogwarts professor's pensieve. He'd read those stories to both Ceci and Pedrito. *For later. Let's get focused.* "If we can find that leader. And the rival gang that murdered the two gang members?"

"I have a list of other gangs and their leaders too, in order of likelihood that they'd go after the ones at that house. They all have houses like the one Ceci was in. I guess they're model tenants, paying their bills on time."

He smiled at Chen's attempt at humor. "So...flip a coin? Or roll the dice?"

"We're supposed to go after only the murders of the two gang members. You can't be involved in searching for Ceci's attacker."

"But, in doing so, we might just hear something about her attacker," he said with a wink.

She shrugged. "We need someone to interrogate for that to happen. I'd suggest hitting the first house on my list."

"We'll need backup. We shouldn't do that alone. These fellows will have guns and lots of ammo."

That's when Chen chewed him out for what he'd done at the building. It turned out that the suspect he'd nabbed still wasn't talking—the captain had taken over the grilling from Chen—but that suspect was now charged with torture and murder because the forensics evidence gathered at the torture scene and the apartment building correlated and was damning.

"There's some difficulty there. The DA's office doesn't quite know how to bring someone to trial without having a full name."

"No ID yet?"

"Other people are still checking, mostly with Interpol, but also with a few agencies in other countries too. DHS has no idea how he got into the country, but everyone thinks he's a foreigner. I'll have to inform Special Agent Rogers eventually, but let's first plan a raid on a gang house. If Salazar says that first one is most likely, it's good enough for me."

Chapter Twelve

Pedro Castilblanco often felt he'd risen too fast in the NYPD ranks. Some days, work could be overwhelming. From patrol to detective in a year and a half via some lucky collars, and passing the exams, of course, had taken him to his present position, one which he often thought had made him into yet another victim of the Peter's Principle.

None of that had occurred because of his old man, of course, but he knew some cops he worked with thought it had. His father wasn't even in the same precinct; his father's was in Manhattan, his in Queens. The gossips could believe what they wanted.

Most days he was happy where he was. Every day brought new challenges, learning experiences he figured helped make him a better cop. His father was his role model, of course, but he also had Auntie Chen too. Both cops had mixed results on cases over the years, so they had taught him to celebrate the solved cases and shove the unsolved ones to the back of his mind.

Both Chen and his father had managed to have successful relationships, Auntie Chen with a bit more difficulty. His current relationship with Raul, though, only added to that overwhelming feeling. The Broadway actor had his mood swings. That might be common with actors, especially after that pandemic—Pedro didn't know—but it made his homelife sometimes as difficult as being a narcotics cop. Fortunately, the only drug Raul used was that rare DYI weed stick he occasionally smoked on their tiny studio apartment's balcony.

Pedro wasn't much older than the gang member he was interrogating, seventeen-year-old Fernando Rosa, a member of the Aztec Lords who'd been caught selling hard drugs to schoolkids. Pedro wanted to know who supplied him.

The gang member had both a lawyer and a social worker present. The latter, a pleasant black woman named Dora, looked more bored with the proceedings than the lawyer did, but Pedro liked her better. The lawyer was the usual sleazy ass who took the city's money as a contribution to his earnings and wrote it off as pro bono work. Like his father, Pedro believed the US had far too many lawyers, and when they failed in the legal trade, they ended up in state legislatures and the US Congress.

"Fernando, I'm on your side," Pedro began. "If you help me, I'll help you. Tell me who your supplier is, and I can speak to the DA's office so that you're not tried as an adult even if you are one when you come to trial."

"I'll need to see that in writing," the lawyer said. Pedro glared at him. He backed off. "Eventually. I'll take your word for it now, but I'll hold you to it. It's on the tape, and Dora here is my witness."

Pedro winked at Dora, who was frowning, but he returned his attention to Fernando. "Your supplier can't help you here, but you can help yourself. Tell me who he is."

Fernando looked undecided.

"Give us a minute," the lawyer said.

Pedro left the interrogation room for about ten minutes. When he reentered, he noticed the atmosphere had changed. The lawyer was even smiling.

"Are you ready to name your supplier, Fernando?"

"Bernardo. Bernardo Padilla. He was my supplier."

"Emphasis on 'was'," the lawyer said. "Padilla is dead. But I'll still hold you to that offer." Pedro didn't miss a beat upon learning that. "How did Padilla die?"

"*Un Diablo Verde lo mató.*"

"Why did you say that in Spanish, Fernando?"

"No quiero que este abogado lo escuche."

The kid had said a member of a rival gang, the Diablos Verdes, had killed his supplier, and he didn't want his lawyer to hear that.

"Este abogado representa unos Diablos?" Pedro said, meaning, "This lawyer represents some Diablos?"

Fernando nodded, and Pedro pushed back his chair. "Mr. Green, we have a problem. You represent a rival gang. We'll have to call in some other legal representation for Fernando to avoid any mention of bias in Fernando's trial."

"I represent several gang members from different gangs, not the gangs themselves."

"Fernando apparently doesn't feel comfortable with that. Thank you for coming in."

Pedro now stood and opened the door. The lawyer took the hint.

After he left, Pedro turned to Dora and Fernando. "Please wait here while I arrange for another lawyer. I'll have some refreshments brought in."

After he arranged for the soda and chips, he made two calls, one for another lawyer and the other to Auntie Chen.

"I have a young suspect here who's a member of the Aztec Lords. I think the gang members who killed those other two Lords recently are Diablos Verdes. Were they at the top of your list?"

"They are. Thanks. That helps a lot."

"Pedro just confirmed that we're spot on with the Diablos Verdes," Chen told Castilblanco.

Technically, the raid was for sex- and drug-trafficking violations, and he and Chen had cops from the local precincts' Vice and Narcotics to prove it, along with a SWAT team. Everyone expected trouble. Entering a gang's house was almost as bad as entering a Taliban hideout would have been in the old days; more often than not, gang members were better armed too, especially with the lax gun laws in the South still creeping North, and without any action for adequate gun control and against those law, thanks to the far too conservative judges now filling the court system.

"Got all sides covered?" the SWAT leader said into his mike.

The different leaders of the groups surrounding the house, which included Chen and friends in the rear alley, answered with an AOK one by one. The SWAT leader glanced at Castilblanco, who nodded.

"On the count of three then."

Battering rams were used on front and back doors, and the unavoidable firefight began. The good guys had the element of surprise, though. Some gang members, including female ones, tried to get away through side windows, only to be captured by the cops stationed there.

There were enough arms, drugs, drug paraphernalia, and under-age females for them all to be hauled into the local Queens precinct. As guests of that precinct, Chen and Castilblanco watched the interrogations take place from behind the one-way windows of two interrogation rooms, Chen's corresponding to Vice, Castilblanco's to Narcotics.

Each detective had the police artist's rendering of Ceci's attacker on their phones, but he was the leader of the Lords, not a member of the Diablos. The interrogators could deal with the

Diablos, but the two cops from uptown were looking for that Lords leader, although neither expected to find him among the group of Diablos. He might be ID'd, though, as the Vice and Narcotics cops also made queries about the attack on the two Lords' gang members.

They got the lead they needed: One kid, Pablo Ramirez, probably not more than twelve, caved and broke into tears, saying he was supposed to prove himself by killing the Aztec Lords' leader, Fernando Garces. Brave man that he was, this Fernando had hidden in that closet, as near as Chen could tell, because the other two had only been shot by Diablos to help little Pablo escape. Two of Fernando's gang members had run out of that house, bent on killing Pablo.

A gang initiation turning into a gang war, thought Castilblanco. Central American youngsters, for the most part, importing violence into Brooklyn-Queens streets and other areas of my city. Where are the social workers?

At least they now had a name. Fernando Garces probably had a record too. It would only be a matter of time before they found him.

They stayed long enough to see juveniles separated from adults and females from males, all on their way to different NYPD borough jails, which meant that Chen and Castilblanco showed up late at the hospital to see Ceci.

"Hi there, *papito* and Auntie Chen," she said from her bed. "Guess I gave everyone a good scare, right?"

"Just good to see you up and around, *chiquita*," Castilblanco said. "Where's your mother?"

"Trying to arrange for my discharge."

"It's a bit early, don't you think?" Chen said.

"I'm really getting bored here, and I can recuperate at home as well as here."

"If the docs agree you're stable," Castilblanco said. "You had some serious surgery. Have you been up and walking yet?"

"With both Mama and Mike while you two were off making the city safe for its citizens."

"We're closing in on the lowlife who pushed you," Castilblanco said. "Turns out he's a gang leader, Fernando Garces. Not very macho, hiding in a closet and then attacking you. Even the name of his gang, Aztec Lords, pisses me off."

"Your father has been juggling two investigations," Chen said. "He still has a lot of energy, especially when he's angry." She flashed her thin smile at him.

"Right now, I need some grub, liquid refreshment, a shave and a hot bath." He looked at his watch. "I doubt they'll let you escape by this evening. Tomorrow morning maybe?"

Ceci sighed. "Another evening eating bad food and without the internet and streaming video if I can't go home yet. And tomorrow you two will take me to the apartment and try to smother me with your concern."

"That's what empty-nesters do until there are grandchildren. Your mother isn't hopeful about Pedrito contributing there, so she's going to spoil you until you give her some. Fair warning. Any chances for this Mike having any success?"

"I don't think so, *papito*. He plays on Pedrito's team."

"Just our luck."

Chapter Thirteen

Rogers stopped in at his temporary office in the federal building before the closing session of the conference. The NYC office's director was still there, but Rogers ignored him and went directly to his desk. He wanted to check on the processing of Tucker Biggs's killer. The arraignment was coming up soon enough, and he wanted everything to go smoothly after all Chen and Castilblanco's hard work.

Some twenty minutes later, he glanced up from his laptop to see the director hovering in front of him.

"Working early, I see. What you lack in talent, Lou, you make up for it with hard work. How's the conference going? Ready for DC?"

Rogers ignored the jibe about talent. *The man is an ass!* "Good. I couldn't convince that NCIS fool to tell the military to wear civilian garb, and he was bent on keeping everyone on his good side by letting them have frequent breaks outside, which the Aussies and Brits enjoy to no end. We probably wasted a few half-days allowing that shit, not to mention the obvious security problems associated with getting them all herded back inside. Those three were surveilling all that. That's how Castilblanco tracked Biggs's murderer, sir."

"I saw that in his report that you forwarded me. Still the actions of a loose cannon, by his own admission. Castilblanco shouldn't have been anywhere near our building."

Thank God he thought of it, Rogers mused. "I had a conversation with our national FBI director who's helping the old admiral prep for the meeting in DC. Because Castilblanco can ID the other two, the director wants him to attend the meeting. Castilblanco has the general clearances; we just have to read him temporarily into the special program."

Rogers knew the man before him wasn't read into that program either. *Two can make jibes!* He was rewarded with a frown.

"That seems like an unnecessary expense. Do you think the remaining two would try the same antics? And hasn't that NCIS agent learned his lesson?"

Expense? Rogers at the moment thought the man blocking his morning sunlight was out of his mind. "Our director suggested it, sir."

"Castilblanco might not go, which would be fine with me. His daughter was almost killed. It's a bad time for his family. I wouldn't go in those circumstances."

I bet you didn't even know he had a daughter; I didn't until I checked him out. "All I can do is ask him, sir. Our director will be displeased if he doesn't attend."

"Okay. It's out of my hands anyway. Have a good meeting today to wrap it up here." After the jerk had left, Rogers finished what he was doing, and then he made a call.

That evening, Rogers visited Castilblanco at home. He took a seat following Castilblanco's cue and stretched out his legs, looking like a weary man, but not as weary as Castilblanco felt. *Or is Lou's weariness more a case of boredom with herding a bunch of technical and military types?*

"Thanks for letting me chat with you," he said to Castilblanco. "You've been busy doing a lot more interesting work than I have." *Boredom*, thought Castilblanco. "I'm pleased your daughter is on her way to recovery, by the way."

"And well enough to ID the gang member who pushed her," Pam said, handing each of the men a beer before sitting down with her glass of white wine.

"Good." He looked at his watch. "Thanks for allowing this little visit. I know it's getting late, but I didn't want to leave things until tomorrow, which is another busy day for me, what with the move to DC. I don't want to intrude too long, though, so I'll get right to it: I understand, Rollie, that you got a good look at the other two in that apartment?"

"Not there," Castilblanco said. "They were already out the window and heading down the fire escape." He shifted uneasily in his chair and gulped some beer. *Come clean or not, that is the question.* He decided it might come out anyway at the trial. "Tribeca. Federal Plaza, watching attendees go out and into your meeting. Those three were watching too."

Rogers's expression was neutral. Castilblanco wondered if the FBI already knew that. *Did I put it in my report?* He couldn't remember. *Maybe I should have made a special version for the FBI?* He hated to give the FBI any more info than he needed to.

The detective had guessed that a large conference room in the Jacob Javits Federal Building was being used for those hush-hush meetings whose attendees were military as well as civilian. That would have been a convenient meeting place for the FBI because their NYC HQ was housed in that building, but not so convenient for the USN personnel he'd seen during his surveillance, although they had no proper place in the city. Rogers seemed to ignore his transgression, though. Or maybe he just filed it away as more evidence that Castilblanco and the NYPD didn't always play ball with the FBI or other Feds?

"I understand the one you nabbed didn't say anything, who he is or who the others are, in particular. Why were they watching, do you suppose?"

"Should I leave the room?" Pam said, probably thinking she wasn't supposed to participate in such a confidential discussion.

"No, we're not talking about anything particularly classified, Mrs. Castilblanco," Rogers said. "Good IPA, by the way. Thanks. I needed this."

Castilblanco winked at his wife and then turned back to Rogers. "To your question, it could be to kidnap and torture another scientist. What the hell do I know? Tell me what's going on in that conference, and maybe we'll figure that out. They used good spying techniques, by the way, not grouping together and taking turns on the surveillance. Doesn't mean they're spies, of course, and who can guess who they're spying for if they are?"

"Which brings me to why I'm here. To begin, you still have an active clearance. Why is that?"

"Honorary, for the most part. Chen and I are honorary members of the joint FBI-NYPD terrorism task force—at least 'honorary' is the nice name I give it. For services rendered, I suppose. We're rarely invited to meetings. And maybe my clearances are up to date because I also had a few adventures with 'the captain.'"

Rogers obviously knew the nickname. "The ex-National Intelligence Director?" Castilblanco nodded. "So he would give you a good recommendation if he were still alive?"

"Probably. I think I disappointed him a few times, though. I first met him when he was a carrier captain and I was a SEAL. Doesn't the FBI have all that background on me?"

"Probably. I never thought to ask." In fact, Lou hadn't accessed Castilblanco's military records at all, being more interested in recent activities as a member of NYPD. "But now it makes my job even easier. The FBI director wants you to attend the conference in DC that will be a follow-up to this one in New York."

"What the hell for?" Castilblanco was beginning to think the man didn't deserve that IPA.

"We think those two might try to crash the meeting or at least surveil it. You can ID them."

Castilblanco glanced at Pam. "Sounds reasonable, Rollie. Another instance of you being a victim of your own success, I suppose."

"But Ceci?"

"She'll be okay. You should go. It's just DC, after all, just a short hop by plane."

Castilblanco knew that was probably true. Ceci would be home, meaning their apartment, the next day. Pam had already taken time away from work and could continue to do so. The TV channel that employed her was good about such things.

"Okay, Rogers, as long as you clear it with my bosses. And I might be called to testify against the fellow I nabbed, so you're forewarned. As far as I'm concerned, that's a higher priority."

Rogers smiled. "You don't need to worry about that. Considering Biggs's importance and affiliation, that case will become a federal one and will move forward with only your sworn testimony. He might be in a federal penitentiary before you even pack your bags."

"Without an ID for him?"

Rogers shrugged. "What he did and his corresponding sentence doesn't depend on knowing his name. So they tell me. And I'd sure like to nab the other two, especially if they're spying, as you suggested, which we might be able to do in DC."

Rogers took a taxi back to his hotel, the ride from Brooklyn to south Manhattan lasting long enough to think about Monique and his problems with the conference that would surely carry over to the meetings in DC. Castilblanco was one part of an insurance policy. He needed more parts to counteract any glitches created by the NCIS agent.

He knew security for the meetings was complicated by too many cooks in the kitchen, by FBI and NCIS reps as well as others. The Aussies and Brits had their own security details too, both military and civilian, yet the US players wanted to be in charge, creating tensions.

He longed for the good old days when he was just a simple agent in the LA field office. There had been complex and stressful cases, of course—bank robberies, kidnappings, gun trafficking, sex trafficking, art heists, and so forth—but his work, not unlike Castilblanco's normal day-to-day job, was mostly apolitical back then. Only once had politics reared its ugly head when he was in LA: The FBI director back then, who'd come to give them a pep talk, had been fired. They had to figure out how to get him back to DC.

He smiled at the good memories, but he frowned at the bad. He also frowned when he exited the taxi to see the nine-eleven memorial in the distance. He had a better view of it from his hotel room, but it was visible during the day or night. Had the world begun its final plunge into the cesspool of national and international turbulence when that occurred? He didn't have a good answer to that question, but he thought a nightcap at in his hotel's bar might help him forget it.

Perhaps another IPA?

In the bar, he called Monique just to say hello.

Chapter Fourteen

Castilblanco did get to see Ceci before heading to the airport. He was happy that Pam and he had moved back into Brooklyn from Clifton, NJ. They'd needed a house and yard for their kids when they were younger, but living in that NJ town just off Route 3 had given both of them a bad commute, whether they went in and out of Manhattan by train, bus, or car. Now the modernized La Guardia airport was a lot nearer when he had to take a plane to Baltimore, DC, or Philly. Newark Airport was and would always be a zoo, and JFK was even more for international flights, like Dulles in the DC area.

Pam had brought Ceci home after she was discharged, and they got her tucked in so Pam could begin to mother her aka spoiling the recuperating patient. Their daughter looked comfortable in their study's sofa-bed; the room had been converted from a second bedroom. He'd hooked up their own bedroom's TV for her, although she might graduate to their big-screen smart TV in the living room that had streaming videos and movies he rarely watched. He still mostly watched news and sports, but Pam was into the streaming services, often just to kill time waiting for him to come home. Now she'd have someone to talk to, for a little while at least.

"So you're off to DC, *papito*?" Ceci said.

"Reluctantly. You going to be okay?"

"As long as Mom doesn't get on my nerves."

"Let her baby you for a while. She enjoys it, and we don't see much of you and Pedrito now." His smart phone's ringtone sounded. "Excuse me a moment."

When he reentered the room, he was beaming. "They caught the gang leader who came out of the closet and decked you. In Pittsburgh, of all places. They'll extradite him back here, but that will take some time. Chen's still keen on closing down both gangs."

"Maybe I can help and ID him. Will they do a lineup?"

"No idea. Chen will stay on top of that, so ask her. Try to get some rest." He gave her a peck on the forehead.

Pam was in the galley kitchen already making chicken soup for Ceci. He told her the good news.

"I hope they put that thug away for a long time," she told him. "At least aggravated assault, right?"

"You never know with judges and juries these days. Prisons are loaded, so they don't like to add new boarders anymore. And that bail reform is a bitch. We'll see. Actually, if he's here illegally, they might deport him. Good riddance, I'd say."

"Couldn't he just sneak back into the US?"

"Maybe. Or he could find work with a cartel; he probably has the connections. Who knows? And if he goes to jail, maybe he'll become reformed and become a priest or something. Stranger things have happened."

"Are you off?"

He looked at his watch. "Taxi should be arriving any minute." They both heard the beeping horn. He gave her a hug and a kiss. "Don't baby Ceci too much. She's not a little girl anymore."

She smiled. "She's my little girl, but I'll just pretend I'm only a good female friend, so don't worry."

On the way to La Guardia, Castilblanco went over both cases in his mind. Neither one yet had closure. Although Biggs's killer would be heading to the federal pen sooner than later, no one knew who he was. And who knew if they could put the gang leader in the slammer or shut down the two gangs? A good defense lawyer could argue that the gang leader's attacking Ceci was just self-defense because he mistook her for a member of the rival gang. Of course, Castilblanco wouldn't be giving the little thug's defense lawyer any hints!

His mind turned to the meetings looming in his future. He hated meetings. And these would probably come with oppressive security. He would just be an observer too, trying to spot the other two suspects. That wouldn't be as bad as a stakeout—at least he wouldn't need a bottle or Depends—but all the security types were bound to make him feel uncomfortable because he was just NYPD.

He had to admit the case interested him. What also interested him was what the meetings were about. With all the uniformed military, they had to involve the Pentagon and at least two other countries, Australia and the UK. He didn't have that much experience with either country. Pam and his only vacation in Europe had become a wild one, but it didn't involve the UK, at least not directly. And he'd never been to Australia—the trip there from NYC would be too long, no matter in which direction one flew.

It might be interesting to meet a few Aussies and Brits, though. He knew a few Brits, Esther Brookstone among them. She and Bastiann van Coevorden had finally married, but he'd heard their honeymoon had been as wild as any of their previous adventures. He knew neither of them would be in DC. Lou Rogers would be there, for sure. *Maybe we can share a few IPAs in Georgetown?*

It was fortunate his cabbie was an honest fellow. Castilblanco dozed and didn't awake until the taxi's horn blared followed by the driver's cursing.

"They can say what they want," he said, "but I don't think the traffic's improved here at all."

Castilblanco smiled. The fellow had been a taxi driver for a long time apparently.
DC, here I come.

The National Intelligence Director Bill Easton motioned toward a seat at the small conference table in his office. The FBI director Joe Hamilton pulled it out and sat down, palms on the table.

"We're both tired," Easton said, "so let's make this short. Let me start by saying that we all concluded from the meetings at the UN that China is bent on trying to strongarm us and Russia. No surprise, I suppose. Everyone knew they'd get worse."

"Interesting. I suppose POTUS felt vindicated."

"He did. He's in an I-told-you-so mood. I don't like the idea of teaming up with a fascist Russia to block a fascist China, but we had to do that in World War Two. Back to the enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend era. What's new from that NYC conference?"

"The NCIS security specialist is still an ass?"

Easton laughed. "The old admiral wanted him. Has he done any harm?"

"My man there, Lou Rogers, is fed up with him," Hamilton said. "But actual harm? Maybe not. The press can probably guess something important is going on just from the attendees, though. We'll see how it goes in DC without the UN meeting unintentionally serving as cover for the conference."

"And what's new about our Mr. Biggs?"

"One of the three guys that killed him is on his way to Hazelton. He'll be held there until his trial."

"We can't have another murder occurring again here in DC."

"Understood. We'll be watchful, shadowing people when they're out and about. I've also asked the detective who caught that one guy to attend the meetings here to see if he can spot the other two. I think we're good."

"Good idea. Um, yes, Castilblanco. Good man. The captain thought he was first class. Of course, the captain had a lot of respect for most anyone who stood up to him with a legit gripe."

"Castilblanco did that?" Easton nodded. "I don't know that story."

"Overseas. He went against mission protocol, and the captain ripped him a new one. Castilblanco told him to go to hell because his buddy was still alive when he carried him out to safety. Wouldn't leave him to die alone or be finished off by the Taliban."

Hamilton smiled. "Perhaps that's why our NYC office's director thinks Castilblanco's a loose cannon?"

"I doubt it. Castilblanco and your head man up there have had words in the more recent past, let's say."

Hamilton hadn't heard about that either, but he decided to save it for another day and nodded. "That it for tonight?"

"Enough for me. Let's go home, Joe."

As two agents drove Hamilton back to the Hoover building, he received a call from Lou Rogers.

"I'm heading for the airport, Joe. I'll be there in Crystal City bright and early tomorrow morning for final prep, especially for wiring up Castilblanco."

"It's not very likely those other two will try to crash the party, but it's added insurance to have him there. Once everyone is off to London, our problems here are mostly over, but while they're all here in this town, we have to be watchful."

"We'll be okay. What happened in New York won't be repeated."

"And what's your opinion of Castilblanco?" The director was wondering if Rogers knew the story the National Intelligence Director had just told him.

"Very qualified, but that doesn't matter; he's the only one who saw those two other spies. We have the police artist's renditions, of course, but Castilblanco says there's something wrong with them. He can't put his finger on it, though."

"Maybe he just wants some vacation time in DC?"

Rogers laugh crackled over the phone. "That's a good one! I have the impression he hates DC."

"Maybe he just hates politicians."

"Same difference. Are you heading home?"

"Back to the office to clean up a few things. See you tomorrow."

"Unlikely, but I'll be there to help open the conference."

Chapter Fifteen

After meeting with Rogers the next morning, Castilblanco slipped into the opening session of the conference. As he found a seat, the thought revisited him that he didn't like meetings. As he aged, his patience diminished, and that was what he needed a lot of to get through a meeting now, especially a boring, technical one.

Pam called him "an interesting older man" now, which he considered a nice way to describe his downhill mental and physical slide into retirement. He'd been watching his diet, losing a bit of weight; and his hair was a bit thinner now with some gray at the sides. She liked to call him her "*oso grandote*," or big bear, among other things, good and bad, because he was a big man who never fit well into suits or clothes bought off the rack. He usually had a five o'clock shadow by two or three o'clock, so he often looked a lot tougher than most of the creeps he arrested. His most endearing social skill was dancing to Latin American music as well as any Latino in the city—fast, slow, no matter. He supposed that had to help keep him fit too.

Even though his work attire mostly consisted of sports coat, slacks, shirt and tie, and well-worn shoes, she still liked to dress him up when they went out, even if it was just with the kids. Those slacks and sports coat would still be a mess by a workday's end, and he made good use of those gift ties for his birthday and Christmas because they invariably picked up spatter from fast-food lunches, even if now they were somewhat healthier. His meditation sessions with his Brooklyn Buddhism tutor had mellowed him a bit too and helped him accept the slowdown.

But other things came with age. His rugged body that had been honed into a limber, muscular fighting machine by dancing and the US Navy, had become a lot less limber and muscular over the years as the NYPD homicide detective's erratic schedules, stress, and meals taken on the run at unusual times of the day, took their toll; that was without mentioning the difficulties of raising two adopted kids. He'd had help there, of course, from his TV reporter wife, Pam.

He especially didn't like meetings in DC, the nation's capital; most politicians and lobbyists behaved like morons, some worse than others, of course, and a lot of the former were mostly just failed lawyers that seemed to take it out on their constituents. Even the military VIPs had to play politics to rise up through the ranks. He was glad he hadn't tried to make a career out of the military. Some people from the 'hood had done well doing just that, like General Powell, but for blacks and Hispanics, it was still a rare occurrence.

The towers in Crystal City seemed like a strange place to have the DC conference meetings. At the intersection of the Jefferson Davis Highway and 20th Street South in Arlington, Virginia, though, it was ideally located across the river from NRL and the Navy Yard on the southeast that could be reached via the Anacostia Bridge, and north of Arlington National Cemetery and DC's political power sites via the Arlington Memorial Bridge. The huge complex contained two Marriott hotels and one Hilton, more than enough hotel space for attendees at the meetings.

Meetings in Crystal City, located in Arlington, Virginia, were technically outside DC, but long ago the sprawling Pentagon bureaucracy had overflowed that site and other government facilities as various programs needed more space, so the taxpayers ended up paying for satellite office rentals. For Castilblanco, the only real advantage of Crystal City, though, was that it contained an extensive underground city with an extensive public shopping mall running through the basements of multiple skyscrapers. That allowed lunch breaks that were quick and easy, but

it also permitted snacks to be quickly brought into the conference meetings instead of the long breaks Castilblanco had noted while surveilling Federal Plaza in New York. A major disadvantage was that they'd changed the tower names in 2004; that led to his getting lost at times, so he had to often ask for directions.

He was now listening to one moron, an older military man, not a politician. The admiral was opening the first meeting of the conference sponsored by the Pentagon and the USN. That conference followed the one that had occurred in New York City, but he Castilblanco had no idea what topics would be covered.

The Australian and UK delegation at that meeting also seemed to speak two different foreign languages that tried his patience too. Aussie-speak and Brit-speak sometimes sounded like English, but he had to listen too closely to confirm that was what they were speaking. His headache was getting worse as a consequence...and it was just the first day.

Castilblanco made it through three more days of meetings, largely lost in their technical BS but focused on his assignment.

He'd earned his place in those meetings—was it a reward or punishment?—by being two persons: He'd once been a SEAL, that is, in the USN; he'd also been the detective who, along with his partner, Chen, had found the murderer of one of the engineers involved in the joint Australian-UK-US research program to improve their nuclear submarines. Unfortunately, Castilblanco knew very little about modern submarines...and really couldn't give a damn, which added to his impatience.

If Chen were there, she might have added a calming effect to mitigate his impatience. The first reason she wasn't there was that she was still involved in the investigation of the gangland shooting that had led to his daughter being hospitalized. Chen could be a tigress, so Castilblanco knew she'd kick some ass to keep that investigation moving along. She'd shut down the two gangs. They already had arrested Ceci's attacker.

But he was also certain Chen wasn't there because she was Chinese-American. Even though she had long ago fought in an early test version of the US Army's female special forces, he bet the current Pentagon brass hadn't found her worthy enough to be privy to all those secrets that were being discussed. On the phone, he'd almost told that same bloviating admiral on the dais that first day, the fool who he'd been trying to ignore, to take his "official request" and shove it where the sun doesn't shine, but Chen had convinced Castilblanco that one of them should be there to keep the VIPs honest.

The US government believed one or both of the other two suspects Castilblanco had seen might try to attend the technical briefing because China wanted that new nuclear submarine technology without spending money on developing it. He thought Russia and a few other bad players might want it as well, so there were more international suspects, but who was he to argue with the federal government's geniuses?

He was stuck back in his usual spot, one corner of that Pentagon conference room again, this time behind two big Aussies, big tractor-trailers compared to his smaller van. His situation was a familiar one from trips where he had to ride coach in an airplane: The large men in front of him put his knees in danger, and, like a lot of older fellows, his weren't in great shape anymore.

He wasn't muttering to himself about that, though. One of the Aussies had turned around more than once and glared at him, but Castilblanco had just smiled at the big blond Viking. He

wasn't muttering because he was going crazy with the meeting's slow progress either. *How many have I suffered through in my career?* His mutterings were directed at the FBI agents guarding the door outside accompanied by two burly Marines that had reminded Castilblanco of Ceci's CSI partner who'd once been a Marine.

His last message to them was: "It's hotter than hell in here. Again, I don't see either one of our suspects. And I haven't spotted them on breaks either. I'm ready to bail, fellows. Been nice knowing you."

"Sorry I can't leave with you," the lead agent murmured in Castilblanco's ear. "Check with me outside."

Castilblanco knew the one who said that was Lou; Special Agent Lou Rogers would be waiting for him. While the agent had been wiring him up that first day, Castilblanco had decided he was a bit too small to be Strahan, although he had Michael's toothy smile. That observation hadn't changed Castilblanco's mind that it was better to be on his good side just in case he could tackle like Strahan used to do to Tom Brady.

The big agent was talking to someone on his cellphone, which was okay because they were outside the SCIF where the meetings took place. *Probably a woman? Girlfriend? Wife?* He believed Rogers wasn't married; there was no wedding band on his finger. Castilblanco waited.

Finally: "Thanks for coming and helping out, Rollie," Rogers said putting away the phone.

"You owe me a cold one, bro. Maybe several."

"I'll square things with you in London. Not with a cold one, though. Lager's lukewarm piss there."

"I'm going to London?"

"Only because our suspects didn't show up again today. Maybe they think they blew their chances in the US and hope for better luck in London, but we're asking you the favor again."

"So you're still thinking they didn't get enough of the intel they needed from their victim, whoever the hell they are?"

"He wasn't trained to withstand torture. Engineers and scientists usually aren't. Can't say I am either, beyond basic training long ago, but I suppose you're different, having been a SEAL. Anyway, we know the victim didn't possess all the intel. Couldn't. He would have it if he'd managed to attend all these meetings...at least a summary of it."

"So they've been discussing only part of the plans in Canberra, New York, and here, and the rest will be discussed in London?"

"I guess so. I'm no scientist or engineer, but I figure the eggheads split the technical discussions up between all these meetings just for diplomatic reasons. We have to let the Aussies and Brits think they're equal partners in all of this. Or maybe it was just for tourism?"

Castilblanco flashed a nervous smile. "In any case, wouldn't want to piss them off like we did with the French." He shrugged. "I'm heading for my hotel for meditation and a swim. Let me know my fate later tonight. I have people in New York I need to inform."

"Understood. And will do."

Chapter Sixteen

"Are you ready for the call?" the US president's chief-of-staff George Washington Jones asked his boss.

"I suppose. Their PM is a bit easier to take than that obnoxious king. Good thing we got rid of all that aristocratic nonsense here in the US."

The chief-of-staff smiled. "The Founding Fathers created another aristocracy by creating the Senate. That was basically a gift to those patriots having leftover aristocratic sentiments."

"You have a wry sense of humor, George."

"Who said I was being humorous? The Senate was put in the constitution to prevent majority rule. Since Dubya, it has been blocking legislation that most Americans want. We have plenty of evidence for that."

"One of my predecessors added to that roadblock by loading the courts with tight-ass conservative judges. Originalism, my eye. They're just fascists who don't give a shit about people's rights, or destroying US democracy, for that matter. It's like pulling teeth to get anything done anymore. But enough of that depressing chitchat. Tell me when we're live."

Unlike the US's main competitors, China and Russia, democracy in the West had to have a lot more patience. PMs and presidents couldn't be dictatorial, and good policies and programs often floundered in the long debates about their pros and cons in legislatures and parliaments that often seemed like debating clubs, especially since the turn of the century. Local and regional governments were often worse.

As a young man, POTUS had believed that was all to the good—everyone could have their say. With time, he'd seen the flaw: Representing all those diverse opinions, making sense of them, and getting something positive done was more and more difficult to achieve. No wonder one of his predecessors had set up the original pact with Australia and the UK on the sly. That had pissed off the French, mostly because of the money they'd lose when Australia had agreed to the new and better deal for them.

That predecessor had foresight, though. NATO was the tool to combat Russian aggression; a strong and agile three-country effort in the Pacific, which included modernized nuclear submarines, was the better tool to combat China's aggression. He hoped creating that deterrence would be good enough to stop China's moves toward world domination.

The PM took the call after dinner her time; it was mid-afternoon in the White House, and the American president was smiling. *For lunch he must have had his burger and fries that his wife allowed him once per week*, she thought.

"You know why I'm calling, so let's get to it. Has the prep team discovered anything new?"

"Nothing worth mentioning. We'll be adding to that team soon enough. Together we've put together a good one, once the others arrive in London. We've reviewed your people's bios."

"Old hands, mostly, and they know their business. All carefully vetted, of course. So...you don't expect any more problems?"

"Not particularly, or our man from MI5 isn't telling us about them. You might know your people better than I know mine. The Home Secretary helped me with my choices."

"I have a few more cooks in the kitchen here helping me, but everyone's records speak for themselves. I want a final approval of the upgrade plans ASAP. We need to start deployment on schedule to continue to make China think twice about doing more bullying in the South Pacific, not to mention protecting Taiwan and Japan better."

"Understood. I can only do so much, same as you, to move things along. The Australians are raring to go when the scientists and engineers deliver, but those technical blokes don't like to have their feet put to the fire."

"Most are perfectionists, bless their souls, and not willing to deliver slipshod mods like Chinese scientists do to please their masters. The Australian admiral is key, and he'll come through, I'm sure. Our admiral, who's in charge of the meetings, is an old boy set in his ways. Highly respected, but a bit slow about things."

"The Australian and UK admirals are more the submarine experts. Your man is a generalist, and that's also needed for an effective fleet integration."

"Good point. I guess that's all for this afternoon?"

"I think so. It will all work out, John."

Part Two: United Kingdom

Chapter Seventeen

Esther Brookstone was pleased to see Ricardo Silva again. Roberta MacDonald and Ricardo had tied the knot and repeated the same honeymoon cruise down the Danube she and Bastiann had made, without a murder occurring, of course.

Roberta had always been a bit shy and neurotic. Although American, she had the classic Celtic look with her dark red hair and blue eyes. Her paintings captured the beauty of the wild Scottish landscapes found in the area near her Argyllshire cottage. Ricardo, on the other hand, had dark skin in contrast to Roberta's porcelain. His dark curls, now with a few streaks of gray, added to his mysterious physique, along with his somewhat Asian eyes, high cheekbones, Roman nose, and thick lips, which told Esther there was probably some poor black slave among the Brazilian's ancestors as well as Native American blood.

He never worried about his appearance nor worried about whether anyone liked his paintings. It was a mystery to her why anyone could like them, to be honest. He was like many artists, aloof to publicity and the snobs who would walk around in museums and galleries, hands on their chins and sagely nodding their heads. He'd gladly take their money, but he didn't have to like them. Of course, she felt the same way.

He was tucked into a back booth along the side in that little coffee bar near her gallery, facing the door, so he greeted her with a beaming smile when she entered.

"Restoration and such not stopping you from enjoying a bit of java with me. Must be my Brazilian charm."

She slid into the booth opposite him. "Don't be a conceited arse. How's your better half?"

"A bit knackered. I can't imagine eating for two would tire one out, though."

"I wouldn't know except for the fact that women confide in me more than you, I presume. But, as long as she's under a doctor's care, she'll be fine. I'm happy she's expecting. Biological clock ticking and all that. Are you ready to be a father?"

"There's no training to be either a father or mother. Don't most parents just make it up as they go?"

"Again, I wouldn't know. I think my mother did better than my father. But onward. Why did you want to see me?"

"First item of business: Are we no longer the rage of the art world?"

"Both Roberta and your paintings still get oohs and ahs from people who drop by The Masters Gallery. There are always ups and downs in the art business. It's fall, so visits from tourists are less likely now, but during the holidays people will be buying more, even in this damn economy. Things will pick up again later next year as well." She waited for her coffee to be placed in front of her; Ricardo had ordered it and another one for him. She supposed Brazilians were addicted to the beverage. "You were lucky to catch me. I'm bound for Edinburgh, to my castle, to be precise, to close it up for the winter. I'll have Ophelia keep an eye on it, of course." She saw his puzzlement. "Ophelia is the nickname I gave an old friend who lives up that way. I might also visit Duke Freddie and his duchess on the way up or on the way back. You'll remember him, of course."

"Another old toff with a much larger castle," he said with a smile. "So...on to my second item: I think a little variety would be good for your gallery."

Ricardo's second item surprised Esther. "Do you mean that the variety between Roberta's wonderful Scottish landscapes and your monstrous paintings isn't enough for you?"

The Brazilian's nod to the seasonal cold was a leather bomber's jacket over his muscle shirt. He'd hung it on the back of his chair, so his muscular arms and tattoos were readily visible. Like many Latin men, his eyes sparkled with romance and mischief. Her count had possessed similar eyes. She could see why Roberta MacDonald had fallen for the artist, and she'd worried about that relationship, but it seemed to be moving along just fine. They were successful artists after all, yet still not into a lot of luxuries, leading a simple life split between Ricardo's loft in Manchester and Roberta's little cottage in Scotland.

"I mean, what about some oriental landscapes? I want to recommend a trio of Chinese artists to you; they're having a bit of a rough patch. They and their families had to flee Hong Kong when China cracked down again on those they declared to be dissidents, without proof that they were, of course, and that group included many artists."

Esther could understand those sentiments. She knew Ricardo had fled Brazil because the government there had turned autocratic even before the Covid pandemic and had killed millions by mismanaging the response. China had been autocratic since Mao, of course, and the president-for-life there began the crackdown on Hong Kong years ago too, along with rattling sabers over Taiwan and protecting the PRNK, which was still going on.

"I see. I'd have to study their styles. Are their landscapes as mysterious as Roberta's?"

"Yes, but in a different way." He handed her his mobile. "Slide the pics towards the barista."

She did so, using her fingers to pinch and spread each painting. "Damn phones can't do them justice, I dare say, but they're intriguing, aren't they?" He nodded. "Are you two into Confucius now? What do the Chinese characters mean?"

"I have no idea. Maybe just the artist's signature? But the paintings interest you?"

"Down on their luck, are they? I don't run a charity, you know."

"Roberta's in love with their paintings."

Ha! He probably thinks Roberta is in better standing with me than he is, so he's using her as leverage.

"Your arguments wouldn't hold up in Crown Court, especially because they don't favor refugees much these days. How did you meet these artists?"

"Roberta and I were looking into possible schools. So were they, the two blokes in Manchester, that is."

"Isn't that a bit premature?"

He smiled. "She says she likes to plan ahead, so I humor her."

Esther considered that a moment. "Or she's trying to decide if she wants her son or daughter to be a Mancunian. If I were her, I'd vote for Scotland, if only to avoid the pollution and the rabid football fans."

He shrugged. "There's plenty of time to sort that."

"And the third artist?"

"A close friend of the other two. We all got together on Zoom. That's when I offered to talk to you because they asked Roberta and me how we sold our paintings."

"You're not exclusive to The Masterworks Gallery now."

"But they were impressed because it's a prestigious London gallery."

She believed that was flattery to get what he wanted, but she smiled anyway.

"So...will you do it? Add their paintings to the gallery?"

"I don't really have that much space, as you know very well. Still, Harry could rearrange things and make a row nearer the ceiling if the paintings aren't too large. Hard to tell on your mobile what their size is. The gallery has nine-foot walls, if you remember."

He smiled. "I do. How 'bout showing them for three months? If they don't sell, they can take them home or try somewhere else."

She took out her old-fashioned agenda. "If we go forward with this, I'd like to get them up before the year-end holidays. Do you think that's possible? I'll need the paintings first so Harry can rearrange everything and hang them, and then maybe we can have a little pre-holiday celebration. There'll be people dropping in looking for those last-minute special gifts, I'm sure."

"You won't be sorry. You're a born businesswoman, Esther."

More flattery! "Damn right I am, but don't try to flatter me. When you can, also send me their bios via a text message. I'll use them in my newsletter. I'll also forewarn my crew in the gallery to expect the paintings so I won't feel that rushed up north."

Chapter Eighteen

Klaus knew the mansion's owner and his family had gone to Antwerp for the holidays, a more muted event for the world's Jews who often still took time off after shops were cleared of merchandise. The jeweler had retired, left his business in that Dutch city to his son, and was now visiting with his son's family as the proud grandfather. The staff at the mansion had gone home for Christmas too, leaving the mansion to the holiday frolicking of ghosts from Christmases past.

Klaus figured the old Dutch Jew had a few jewels in the house just west of Morpeth and Newcastle-on-Tyne. *What's a jeweler without jewels?* He'd determined there were never any guards around, so he expected a quality security system and safe. The security system hadn't presented a problem. It took him a bit longer to find the safe.

He'd ambled around the second level, squeaks from his trainers on polished wood floors echoing around the empty house. He expected the safe to be in one of the many bedrooms; it wasn't. The third level contained an attic and servants' quarters, not a likely place for a safe.

So he'd explored the first level. He'd been about to descend into the basement when a niggling thought stopped him. Something wasn't right about the study. He went back to it to take it all in while standing at its entrance. One wall he faced had to the right of the full bookcase shelves with trophies from the daughter's equestrian events; he remembered she now lived in Australia. That seemed to be wasted space if all it was used for was to display a half dozen second- and third-place finishes in a toff's sport where he believed humans had very little to do with winning.

At the end of one shelf nearest the adjoining wall, he found a switch hidden behind a large trophy. He threw it, and half that part of the bookcase moved forward a bit and slid back over the other half farthest from the wall.

A vault, not a safe! He smiled, imagining the jewel cache that awaited his greedy fingers. This heist had taken a positive turn from nicking the formal dining silver to stealing a mountain of jewels.

The lock mechanism was a modern keypad. It would be easier to open than the traditional combination lock where he'd have to use a stethoscope. He took the little electronic device from his kit, a miniature computer, and let it cycle.

Detective Inspector Harold Gregg and Detective Sergeant Tim Shaw watched the SOCOs from the entrance to the study. Gregg was frowning; Shaw's expression was neutral. Both had needed to rise earlier than normal to drive the nearly twenty miles west from Newcastle to the mansion, the largest residence among a few clustered around a small village.

"We'll need the owner to take an inventory," Shaw said.

"Adjuster will be arriving," mumbled Gregg. "I got his number from the owner. The old Jew wouldn't say what he had in there and mightn't even know, but the insurance company certainly will."

With the heavy vault's open door, both thought the thief wouldn't have bothered with searching the rest of the sprawling house. And no one would have a vault like that without something of value to put into it. At the moment, they had no idea what that might have been.

The lead SOCO approached them. "Curious thing about that vault, Guv," he said. "Damn thing is climate-controlled—temperature, humidity, and circulating air are monitored somewhere. I was looking for the controls, but never fear: We'll find out how and where soon enough."

"Maybe via a mobile?" Shaw said.

Like many young coppers, Gregg knew Shaw was addicted to his moby. "Could be a hideaway and not a place for valuables," he said. "Jews could have used them long ago with that madman Hitler. And the way this country's going—"

"Not enough living room for humans," said the SOCO, daring to interrupt. "Probably only to safeguard very valuable things, I'd imagine."

"I can't guess what would require climate control then," Gregg said.

"That's because most police don't place any value on art," a voice behind them said.

Gregg spun around to come face-to-face with a tall woman, old and elegant now, even in sweatsuit and trainers, but probably a stunner when she was young. She looked vaguely familiar: auburn hair—gray dyed out?—fair, even youthful complexion, but with some neck wrinkles, and blue eyes. Had he seen her on the telly? Probably not. He rarely watched BBC shows, although he sometimes caught the news.

Her voice was strong yet melodic, even in that critique. *What the hell did a safe have to do with art? Don't paintings belong on walls?* The rest of the mansion had plenty.

"You're the adjuster?"

"Insurance might be called my hobby, but I usually do my adjusting in other ways. My name's Esther Brookstone. My husband called and asked me to look into this heist. We're friends with the owner."

"So this owner, this Ezekiel Grossmann called your husband, he called you up in Scotland, and you drove down here?"

Brookstone had tucked into her breakfast, saying little before, now even less. Gregg figured she was protective of the mansion's owner for some reason beyond just friendship. Shaw'd already confirmed she was ex-Scotland Yard, once an inspector in the Art and Antiques Division. She now owned a gallery in London.

She took a long sip from her coffee as she studied the DI. "Zeke's an old friend, like I said." She showed Gregg and Shaw her engagement ring. "He gave my husband a good deal on this. A while ago, that was. Bastiann's in Southampton now."

Bastiann van Coevorden. Possibly a Dutch name. Maybe that was the connection with the jeweler? "Into shipping, is he?" Gregg said instead.

Unlike Gregg, Shaw had joined Esther in breakfast, but he was listening to the conversation. Gregg only had coffee and toast; he was getting to the age where he had to watch what he ate. Traditional plod food put the pounds on. Shaw would learn soon enough.

"He and his colleague are chasing some illegal arms traffickers. They're ex-Interpol and now MI5 consultants." She smiled at the two coppers. "Needs must, you know. The elderly must keep busy at something to try to stay young."

Shaw glanced at Gregg, whose slight frown caused by the old woman's impertinence had now turned into a scowl. He was thinking they needed to know a bit more about this energetic

wrinklie and her husband. The north counties were a bit provincial, even Newcastle-on-Tyne, but the rest of the world did exist.

"So this Ezekiel kept valuable paintings in that safe?" She nodded, breaking the yolk so it would flow over her toast. "Could you make a list of them for us?"

"No, but the adjuster can. The vault was specifically designed for the paintings, of course. I understand some were purchased as investments, others were family heirlooms recovered from illegal buyers of paintings stolen by the Nazis. Zeke lost most of his family in the Holocaust as a very young lad. He was in England all during the war, after which he returned to Antwerp. The family had always invested in art. Zeke has carried on with that tradition."

"I see." He really didn't. He had no love for art and hated museums, considering the latter a waste of the precious little time he had off. His wife believed otherwise, unfortunately. "And I suppose you're going to be here annoying us, not letting us go about our investigation in peace?"

"I'll take any abuse from plods for a friend," she said with a smile. "I know you're uncomfortable with that, Inspector Gregg, but why don't we agree to collaborate? Let's just say I have some experience in recovering stolen art."

Of course, they already knew that.

Unfortunately, Gregg also discovered that she had more experience than anyone on Newcastle's police force. He had to listen on the phone to some of the woman's exploits from someone named George Langston at the Yard who had once been her boss. Langston encouraged Gregg to bite the bullet and accept Brookstone's help. He reluctantly decided to do so, although he was sure he'd regret it.

They met again in Newcastle's police station.

"Not long ago, we closed down a large network that trafficked in stolen art," she told him, "among other naughty mischief, but it's still a worldwide problem. Many buyers wishing to own something only their eyes can see create the market for stolen art. Some less selfish and legitimate owners have to pay ransoms to get their valuable artwork returned. With the pandemic, thieves saw art thievery as gainful employment, and that uptick has yet to diminish."

"Do you think the old Jew's paintings are still in the country?" Shaw said.

"Probably. With Brexit, smuggling has become a bit riskier. What's also likely is that our thief has probably already passed the paintings on to someone who will hold...um, let's call it a private auction. We still need to find the thief, of course, to know who that auctioneer is. That's your job."

"Seems like stealing art might not be as common as other heists," Gregg said. "That might make our job easier by reducing the number of possible suspects. I expect you or Chief Langston has a list of known art thieves?"

"Um, you probably won't get off so easily. Because of Zeke's old profession, the thief was probably looking for jewels. He knew exactly when the house wouldn't be inhabited. He's a cat burglar looking for items to fence, and a very good one. He was probably disappointed he only found artwork in that vault, but he had the presence of mind to steal it. If it's in a vault, it's valuable—that was an obvious conclusion."

Shaw was nodding, and Gregg felt a bit embarrassed he hadn't come up with that observation.

"You'll have to cast a wide net for burglars of mansions, from Cumbria to Northumberland, maybe even in the south. It's someone skilled who looks for the big heist."

"Could he be someone just released from gaol?" Shaw said.

"Yes. And someone who's still the guest of King Charlie could know about him, so include all those in your net too."

"And where does that leave you in helping us?" Gregg said.

"I think Chief Langston would probably prefer working more with me than with you. I can get access to all their records and agents. And then there's MI5 and NCA, where I know a few people too. We'll find the thief, Inspector, and then we'll find the paintings for Zeke. We must work as a team."

Gregg's team had met in a small briefing room in Gregg and Shaw's Newcastle station. Gregg was wondering what he was getting into all the time his crew debated and parceled out tasks. The Inspector was controlling, but he didn't think he could control Brookstone. He'd have Shaw find out more about this impertinent woman. That might be a waste of time, but at least he would know where he stood.

Later that day, Shaw entered the office.

"The net for jewel and art thieves is cast. I also have a list of the ones currently in prison. If we eliminate a lot of the petty heists, the list isn't that large, like you implied, Guv."

"What did you find on Brookstone?"

"A bit famous, the old witch is. She thwarted an ISIS attack on London, helped nick a drug cartel leader, and brought down a sex trafficking network. Lots of other information there, but it's mostly classified."

"Um, none of that's about art."

"The sex trafficking network was; they also trafficked in art. And somehow that ISIS attack was involved with a stolen Rembrandt. She brought down an organization that sold fake art to ingenuous cruise ship passengers too and recovered some famous bust for the Italians. I'll leave you a printout."

"You're good with her participation then?"

"I guess."

"I'll confirm it with the super, but I suppose she could be useful."

Gregg hoped not, though. And he certainly didn't want the Yard, MI5, or NCA to butt in.

Chapter Nine

Esther got a hotel room in downtown Newcastle. It wasn't that long a drive down the road to the duke's castle, but there was a chance old Freddie March wasn't there, and Esther didn't want to impose on the duchess. Besides, Esther might be coming and going a lot and couldn't afford the time it would take for a proper visit.

She took tea that afternoon in the hotel's formal dining area. Her first call was to Jeremy Brand, nominally her husband and Hal Leonard's boss, but an old friend from her days in MI6. He was now an important MI5 VIP.

"I just know this isn't a social call."

"So Bastiann warned you I'd be calling?"

"He did. Something about stolen art? What's going on? Another obsession?"

She explained who Zeke was and that his valuable art collection had been stolen.

"Seems like a case that's perfect for you, Esther. So what can I do to help? Unofficially, of course."

"Any way you can correlate trips abroad with known art thieves?"

"Thieves with form leaving the country? You're thinking they're exporting the paintings to EU buyers? A lot harder to do that now after Brexit, but not impossible, I suppose. I can put Ambreesh on it."

Esther nodded. *Good plan.* Ambreesh Singh was a techie in MI5 and also another friend of Esther's. "I rather doubt the thief or thieves would risk that, so maybe a list of the usual suspects too, representatives of sultans, emirs, and what not who have entered the country and might be looking to invest for their masters."

"For an illegal auction? It probably won't be that easy, but I'd include Russian oligarchs, if I were you. All those invest in valuable property, whether real estate or artwork. Before we know it, they'll own Buckingham Palace. They're vultures picking the meat off the bones of a dying UK."

She laughed. "On that cheery note, if you can think of any other way to help, ring me. I'm going to call George now."

"Say hello to that old stick. I have to admire the bloke. He tolerated your antics for so many years."

"And I his. And you didn't?"

"I was younger when we were going back and forth to East Berlin. My patience in a better state back then."

"Back at you. Have a good day, Jeremy."

George Langston, who had taken over as head of the Art and Antiques Division because Esther had hated that post, was her Dr. Watson. He had chronicled some of her adventures. What he hadn't been sure about, he made up. Esther considered that clever of him, but there had been minor errors in what she'd read so far that could be taken as misleading.

Her marrying Bastiann had caught Langston by surprise, though. He and his wife stopped in her gallery now and then to make sure her employees hadn't created any problems when she was away. That gallery and Bastiann's consulting, along with their pensions and savings, kept

them afloat. Her latest adventures were without pay, of course, but she'd done everything willingly, including the work she was currently doing for Zeke and Ricardo. It was smart of Zeke not to trust a private investigator, which many people would have done, but he had never put much trust in authority figures with his family history.

"We have a few cases still open," George said, "but Newcastle police haven't consulted us about yours except to find out more about you. I doubt they have the necessary personnel to track down stolen art."

"Which is why I'm collaborating with them," she said.

"I'm sure they're thrilled about that. Who's the SIO?" She told him. "Yes, I talked with him. Inspector Gregg's a gruff old bastard, but he's competent."

"Hopefully he'll be for finding the thief. That'd be just be the beginning, of course. Could you ask your coppers there if there are any rumors about a private auction?"

"There are always rumors. Eighty per cent at least are false."

"I'm very interested in the other twenty percent."

"Understood. I'll ask around. Good luck up there. We're quite busy now here in London. Lots of robberies recently, even from galleries like yours."

"Do I need to invest in a security guard?"

"That's a lot of expense. Next time I'm there, I'll take a look at your security system. Might be due for an upgrade, and that would be less costly."

"Zeke's was top of the line, and the thief disarmed it and opened the vault."

"Um. A real pro then. That should narrow Gregg's list down a bit, though. Any chance the thief's an import?"

"Meaning not from the UK? That's an interesting idea. Zeke has more contacts in Holland than Bastiann does, in fact. I might have to call Jeremy back."

"Or someone in Dutch security. Or Interpol."

Esther called the Interpol VIP, Sr. Agent III Karl Schuster, Hal and Bastiann's old boss. He promised to develop a list of international jewel thieves for her.

By then her tea was cold. She ordered another pot and some more tea cakes.

After the tea and cakes and exploring the docks a bit for some exercise, she decided to have a late dinner. The hotel had recommended a seafood restaurant on the quay. She'd had it on her list to try, considering where she was and that there was no seafood on the hotel's menu that evening. There wasn't much of a view from the restaurant—fog had blanketed the port—and there weren't many people out and about either—the cold wind was blowing in from the North Sea. But the restaurant had a roaring fire and decent food. Like the hotel, it already had its Christmas decorations up.

She knew it would be hard to work with Gregg. He was old school, and old male coppers were rarely happy having women as equals and even less as superiors. He was probably okay with female sergeants, although his was male, and constables, but he'd want to be in control. She would have to tread lightly, or the old burly and grizzled rozzer would tell her to get out of his life and go home.

She was into dessert and coffee when Jeremy sent a text message containing a list, and George soon followed with another. Both messages said their information was only partial. *It'll keep the old boys here hopping all the same.* George's was a bit more interesting, but both

contained names of jewel thieves in and out of jail. She'd send the locals to Gregg and the foreign ones to Schuster, who hadn't yet responded.

Of more immediate interest was a list of three clandestine auctions with their organizers' names and phone numbers. Of course, the latter wouldn't be registered to anyone, not even the organizer, whose name was probably an alias. She'd attended such auctions. She'd need a fake identity if she attended any on the list. She could become Contessa Sartini once again, for example, although that wasn't a fake name that would protect her identity. It had been a while since she had used it, though, but her third husband had indeed been a count, although that title was no longer officially recognized in Italy.

Unfortunately, her and Bastiann's financial situation was no longer at the level it once was. The castle and the gallery had both drained away funds; the second was now turning a profit, but the castle never would. She certainly didn't have enough funds to participate in three auctions, and the one corresponding to Zeke's paintings, if any did, would require her to cover all of Zeke's art, which would be expensive. *Maybe he'll go for financing that?* She'd worry about that later.

She drove her Jaguar back to the hotel and called it an evening.

Chapter Twenty

The mobile's ringtone sounded at six a.m. Esther cursed but eventually found it in the dark. DI Gregg was on the line.

"I hope this call is important, Inspector Gregg. Did you get the lists?"

"I did. I don't want to know where you got that information, and Shaw is taking care of that. Mrs. Brookstone, we have three known jewel thieves we've brought in and are going to interrogate. Would you like to observe the interrogation? One of them, a Mr. Klaus van Loon, is on one of your lists and says he was trapped in the UK by Brexit, and that we treat immigrants very badly, our present treatment of him included."

"Um. He might have a point there. I have a wonderful handyman working with me in my gallery who's Jamaican and has received some abuse during his life here in the UK."

"Loon's Dutch. Hardly the same thing. The pandemic is over now. He didn't have to stay."

"Where did he live in Holland?"

"Antwerp."

She smiled. *Of course. Did he know about Zeke's business before even coming here?*

"I'll be there by seven-thirty."

"Eight is fine. Grab some breakfast. You wouldn't like what we offer here at the station, believe me."

Is the old boy softening up a bit?

Police stations were often tips, even newer ones. Coppers often weren't tidy, and their clientele even less, especially if they were vagrants or sots. But at least Esther didn't have to sleep in a cell where the stench and muck would be awful. And the small room behind the one-way glass where she stood with a uniformed constable was probably cleaner than the interrogation room that had graffiti on its walls and initials carved on its table.

They made short work of suspect number one. He had a solid alibi for the night of the heist, and she knew the coppers didn't expect he'd lie about something that could be so easily confirmed. Number two was more known for jewelry store robberies, not residences. He'd been in the nick for five and had been freed for good behavior. It wasn't clear he had the skills either. Robbing a jewelry store didn't require much finesse beyond brazen stupidity.

Number three, the Dutchman, interested Esther more. He'd refused legal representation, and she could understand why: He parried all Gregg and Shaw's verbal thrusts with ease, although in some cases he only said, "No comment." He was a cut above the average thief too—suave and sophisticated—making Esther see some similarities with Pierce Brosnan in the 1999 remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Van Loon was like that character, and he had come dressed to the nines in a three-piece suit. *Is jewelry theft that profitable, or did he just receive a nice dosh from the paintings?*

Thoroughly frustrated with the man, the two coppers took a break; Esther joined them in the corridor outside the interrogation room.

"The last bloke is my preferred suspect," she said. "He's educated and might have a technical background."

"We're trying to check on that background." Gregg glanced at Shaw. "Go see if the lads got any joy learning about his history—any form in Holland, for example." After Shaw left, Gregg turned to Esther. "Sorry to get you up so early, Mrs. Brookstone."

"No problem, Inspector. I was a bit knackered, I'll admit, but I had enough sleep. Probably indigestion. My fish the night before was a bit spicy."

"You think he might be the one?"

Thinking I'm having old-woman problems, is he? "Possibly. With that braggadocio, I'd wager he's already been paid for the paintings. Let's make him nervous enough to regret that. I also confirm provenance and restore old paintings in my gallery. Tell him I believe Zeke's paintings were fakes, although Zeke didn't believe me when I told him."

He smiled. "That might make him think the buyer, the one who'll auction them off, will come after him when that buyer learns that. I'll tell your preferred suspect we're releasing your opinion to the media." He eyed Esther. "I like the way you think, madam. But won't that put you in danger?"

"Not if you have some strong, young DC protecting me...on the sly, of course."

From the way Klaus van Loon blanched when Gregg told him the story about the fake paintings, Esther not only knew he'd stolen them but had sold them to an auctioneer who believed them to be real, which they were, of course.

The game was afoot.

Klaus soon learned who Esther Brookstone was. The Masters Gallery was well enough known, had sponsored several important showings, and the owner was a well-known restorer and authenticator of old paintings. He'd concluded that the old jeweler had been scammed; and Klaus, as a consequence, had scammed the auctioneer who'd given him a tidy sum for the stolen paintings, most likely figuring he would make that back ten times over. While Klaus just might kill Brookstone out of revenge sometime in the future, now he'd have to look out for himself first.

They released him. He'd always wanted to see Ireland. He packed, cleaned out his bank account, and headed for the train station. It would take him west to the ferry.

He didn't get very far. A thug backed him up against the wall in the men's loo and showed Klaus the afternoon paper. The headline said, "Fake Paintings Stolen by an Art Thief!"

"Mr. Meadows would like his money back, Klaus. Now!"

The Newcastle Police nicked both of them outside the loo. The thug tried to run one way. He had a knife and was harder to capture than Klaus, who had tried going the other way. Klaus knew it was hopeless, so he turned and held out his hands for the cuffs. He was a bit more comfortable on the trip to the station than the thug whose hands were cuffed behind his back.

Esther arrived at the station a bit after Klaus's admission to stealing the paintings. He said he'd been looking for jewelry; the mansion's owner was a jeweler, after all. He also testified about what the thug had said to him in the loo.

Behind the window, Esther smiled. Klaus probably figured he'd be safer in Newcastle's nick from anyone else the auctioneer might hire to go after him.

Gregg and Shaw began to interrogate the thug. He'd now requested legal representation. They would have to break the two down, thug and solicitor. Would he give up the real name of the auctioneer? Klaus had said he only knew him as Meadows.

The thug's name was Jack Dunn. He had form, which helped the interrogators: A longer term for second offenders was always possible and a threat both Dunn and his solicitor understood. But Dunn was also a stubborn man, and the lawyer had taught him how to say, "No comment."

Newcastle didn't have the number of CCTV cameras that London did, but while Gregg and Shaw went round and round grilling Dunn, who was dumber than van Loon but more difficult because he was stubborn, other coppers were busily viewing video records.

Esther saw a DC call Gregg out of the room. She was sure that meant the plods had new information.

Gregg reentered and took his seat. He smiled at Dunn and slid a photo across to him. "Is this Mr. Meadows, otherwise known as Christian Hilton, auctioneer of expensive, stolen paintings and other artwork?"

"I don't know what his business is."

The solicitor had tried to restrain his client, but it was too late.

"Let the record show that Mr. Dunn indeed knows Mr. Hilton aka Mr. Meadows," Shaw said for the video recording.

Dunn looked dismayed at his lawyer, who scowled at him and shrugged. "The implication, Jack, is that you do know him," the solicitor said, agreeing with Shaw's pronouncement. To the coppers he said, "But my client also implied that he doesn't know what Mr. Hilton does for a living."

"We have Mr. van Loon's testimony that Mr. Hilton ordered your client to threaten the thief in order to recuperate his investment. Is that right, Mr. Dunn?"

Dunn nodded. "I'd just have given him stick, though, not kill him."

The lawyer groaned.

"For the record, just answer yes or no," Shaw said.

The thug said yes. Gregg dashed out. Esther knew they'd now arrest the auctioneer and, with a warrant, would recover Zeke's paintings.

My work in Newcastle is done. I can now go home.

Chapter Twenty-One

Bastiann looked up from his laptop when Esther entered their flat.

"How are you doing, Luv?" he said. "I see that you and Inspector Gregg recovered Zeke's paintings."

"We did, and I'm knackered." She held up a bag. "Tikka masala and samosas."

"Put it on the counter. I'll serve it. Sit down and I'll bring you a glass of shiraz. Californian wine prices have gone up again, by the way."

"More government tariffs, I'd wager."

"Any immediate joy for Ezekiel about the return of the paintings?"

"They'll release the paintings to Zeke when he returns from Antwerp."

"Excellent!"

"And your work?"

"We made progress, Hal and I. Enough to hand off to the NCA for a raid."

"Why NCA?"

"MI5 decided that there were too many local crime organizations involved."

"I see." She smiled. "So you're free for some quality time with me over the holidays?"

"Unfortunately, I have a meeting with Jeremy Brand tomorrow morning."

"Then we'll have to make the most of this evening together. Let me change into something more comfortable. As knackered as I am, I want to celebrate my success up north."

"You deserve that. Doesn't look like you have any dessert. We have nothing here, Luv."

"Ah, but you have me, and I can be a tasty delight."

He couldn't argue with that.

That morning van Coevorden had a call that interrupted his breakfast, time he enjoyed spending with his wife—not quite as much as what they'd done the night before, but all the same important and another plus that their marriage had brought him. And because of all the nocturnal exercise, he was famished and was tucking into the English-style breakfast Esther had prepared with as much gusto as he displayed eating it. He usually ate smaller breakfasts.

He couldn't ignore the request, though. Jeremy Brand needed to talk to him urgently at MI5 headquarters. Bastiann apologized to Esther and was soon in a taxi heading there, leaving half his breakfast behind. *Maybe we should get a dog?*

It was now three days before Christmas, and the last person van Coevorden wanted to see was Brand. He eyed the MI5 VIP with suspicion; he'd hired Bastiann's friend Hal Leonard and him away from Interpol to be consultants, but he used and abused them all too often in Bastiann's mind.

After learning what was so damn urgent, Bastiann said, "I hardly know the man, never actually met him, and I don't think he'll fancy me spying on him."

"It will be working with him and not spying" Brand said. "And no one else here knows him either."

"Hal Leonard does."

"Leonard's girlfriend is French."

"Um, the French are still an ally, last I heard, and she's DGSI. Hardly a security risk, I dare say."

"In this case, she is. Some French are still miffed about the nuclear submarine deal the US made with us and Australia, although the Yanks tried to smooth things over. That leaves you, old stick."

"And Esther."

"She's not associated with MI5."

"But she was in MI6."

"I need you to shadow Castilblanco. Period. Esther can't do it. She's a civilian now with no connections to the Home Office. I might use her to keep an eye on Castilblanco's wife, though."

"Pam's coming?"

"Yes. Just what we need, another reporter in the UK. The two are making a vacation out of the trip, although I doubt she had very much time to plan things. Can't really blame them, I suppose."

Bastiann groaned. "I can just see Pam and Esther shopping at Harrod's."

"Maybe Esther will put Pam to work in her gallery." Brand spread his hands on his desk. "I don't really care what those women do, to put a fine point on it. As soon as Castilblanco identifies either one of the spies, I want to know about it."

Bastiann gave a little salute. "Yes, sir."

"You'd better learn to do that properly with Castilblanco. He's an ex-SEAL."

Bastiann only smiled again. He knew that, of course.

As an Interpol agent, Bastiann van Coevorden had last helped the NYPD homicide detective Rolando Castilblanco on a case when his friend was chasing an American energy executive named Harrington. He well remembered that night in Amsterdam...

Bastiann hated surveillance. Everyone was looking for Harrington, but Bastiann had found where the executive was staying.

He had an informant to thank for that, though. A local one in Amsterdam had noticed an apartment for rent in the suburbs was now occupied without a rental contract. The informant had wanted to spend some nights there with his girlfriend but had hastily backtracked and found a cheap hotel when he saw someone in the place. Van Coevorden paid for that hotel plus a bit more in return for the information about Harrington.

The informant had good eyes and ears, a prerequisite for the job. He'd stayed around long enough to observe the occupant who had stolen his love nest. He described a tall man who spoke mostly English in his phone conversations. The informant didn't speak much English but recognized it. American tourists weren't unusual in Amsterdam, of course, but one living in an apartment illegally was unusual.

Van Coevorden had showed his informant a photo of Harrington. "Could be him," the snitch had said. The Interpol agent was willing to take the chance. Castilblanco would be owing him another favor, not that he knew when he would ever see those favors returned. But he wanted this criminal too. He had nearly died because of him.

After two nights of surveillance, van Coevorden saw a shadow behind a pulldown blind, another coincidental event with its genesis in moonlight at just the right angle passing through the entire apartment from back to front. That confirmed his target was still in the apartment.

He pondered his options. He knew he could take an unarmed Harrington—the man was a VP, not a mercenary. But he might have a gun. The Dutchman didn't even have a vest. He rarely had use for one. Interpol agents could now make arrests, but they didn't make a habit of it. They generally just provided information to local authorities, who did the heavy lifting.

He decided that was the safer route. He preferred being a live coward to a dead hero most of the time. He called for backup from the Amsterdam police, explained the situation, and received the promise of a SWAT team.

By 4 a.m., they were ready. The team leader, a man Bastiann knew from previous arrests, nodded at his men and women and then at van Coevorden. "Ready, Bastiann?"

"Let's get this fellow," was the Interpol agent's answer.

Like many buildings in Amsterdam, this one was narrow. The five climbed stairs just wide enough for one person to the third level and congregated on the landing at the end of the hallway leading to the four apartments. There was a dirty window there overlooking the street in the rear. Van Coevorden could make out that floor's fire escape using dim light filtering in from the street.

The leader nodded to the man who was carrying the battering ram. They all moved forward towards the front street. No way to get around it—the crash of steel against wood would wake any drunk or addict illegally in the building who was sleeping it off, even at that hour in the morning. It would also warn Harrington, not an optimal situation if the man had a gun and knew how to use it.

They entered and took fire. The first two team members fell back, their vests taking the brunt of the slugs from an automatic pistol. Then quiet. *Not bad shooting for a corporate VP.* But van Coevorden remembered the oil conglomerate was based in Texas, an ultra-conservative US state where even nuns probably carried guns. He parodied some lines from a T. S. Eliot poem: *With nuns and guns and fascist trends, this is the way the US ends...not with whimpers and sighs but pleading cries.*

He was then ashamed of himself—he had friends in the US, friends like Castilblanco whom he admired. And Texans as well. Chen had been on a case in Beijing with one just before she returned to Europe to help Castilblanco in that case where a terrorist was kidnapping aristocrats. Foreign accents and dialects had no correlation with good and evil.

He peered inside. They all heard a front window opening.

"Where's he going?" said the leader. "The fire escape is at the end of that outside corridor."

Van Coevorden and the others rushed into the front bedroom. The Interpol agent and team leader peered at the narrow street below now bathed in the feeble light of an approaching dawn. Harrington was sliding down a rope tied to the bed. *Pretty neat trick for a corporate VP! I hate this man, but he's surprising me with his creativity.*

"I have him in my sights," said the Interpol agent. He steadied his hand.

But before he could fire, a shot rang out. Against the dark gray sky and with peripheral vision, he saw a muzzle flash from the rooftop of a higher building down the block. A shadowy figure carrying a sniper rifle skipped across the rooftop and disappeared from sight.

Harrington held onto the rope for a few seconds and then fell two stories. By the dark pool around his head, van Coevorden knew he was dead from the fall if the shot hadn't killed him outright.

You're fired, Mr. Harrington, he thought. The Interpol agent decided it didn't matter who shot him. He was a murderer, and a death sentence had been appropriate.

SVR covering Russian assets? We'll probably never know....

Those were Bastiann's perceptions at the time. He later believed he knew who had killed that American energy executive after the Hungarian spy in a recent MI5 case was shot and killed. He didn't expect to run across that person anytime soon, or Castilblanco, for that matter.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Not long after Bastiann left, leaving Esther to muse once again about whether giving him something to do as a retiree from Interpol by encouraging him to consult with MI5 had been such a good idea, she also had a phone call. Hers was from Roberta MacDonald, Ricardo Silva's wife.

"Are you glowing yet, my dear?" Esther said.

"Thank God the morning sickness has passed. I have no idea why it's called that. It hit me at random times during the day."

"Probably normal. You're under a doctor's care, so everything will be fine."

"There's my age."

"Pish-tosh, lass. Women have babies until they're fifty now. How's Ricardo surviving?"

"Ready to be a proud papa. But I didn't call to discuss babies, which might include Ricardo sometimes. He contacted you about the Three Musketeers?"

"Yes, and Harry told me the paintings arrived. He's rearranging the gallery to display them. We'll have some sort of event before Christmas. I'm going to the gallery today and then on to Christmas shopping."

"You might want to hold off on that gallery event."

"Oh? What's the problem?"

"Immigration. Some jerk in the Home Office's Immigration and Compliance Enforcement--ironic that it's also called ICE--has decided they have to go back to Hong Kong. They'll be deported."

"What? I understood they're refugees, meaning that if they go back there, the Chinese government will probably make them disappear. All their families are here too. At least the immediate families."

"We can't figure out what the bureaucratic problem is. Something about not having the correct papers, I suppose. Any excuse these days, it seems."

"I doubt there can be any papers. They fled Hong Kong and came here as refugees, like I said."

"Frankly, I suspect it's still some of that anti-migrant sentiment hanging around. We even have it in America, despite what it says on the Statue of Liberty."

"I bet if they were computer hackers from the MSS wanting asylum, they'd be welcomed with open arms here. As artists, ICE probably considers them undesirables not worth their bureaucratic efforts."

"Ricardo and I thought you might be able to call in a favor with that duke. He has some leverage in the Home Office, doesn't he?"

"Maybe not that kind of leverage, dear, but I don't know anyone else to contact. Let me give him a ring. I'll get back to you. Hello to Ricardo."

Esther was cursing as she found Freddie March's mobile number and punched it in. She wasn't about to let some bureaucrat in ICE ruin the plans for her event. It was an affront to art as well as inhumane.

"I'm on my way to London, Esther," the duke said. "Big conference going on that your old friend Jeremy wants me around for, God knows why."

Frederic March preferred to be called Freddie. Unlike Esther or Bastiann, he had been born into wealth and royalty and had married some more. He looked a bit like Vincent Price, that old actor, although Freddie was quite gray now. The MP in the House of Lords had made an exceptional career for himself in the Home Office. Esther and he had become close friends only recently, but he was someone with connections she could count on.

Esther wondered if that conference was why Bastiann had left in a hurry that morning. *Too much of a coincidence!* But she'd had enough of MI5 and its sneaking around, even if Freddie seemed to be addicted to it.

"I'm certainly not calling for that," she said.

"A social call then?"

"No, I need a favor." She explained the situation with the three Chinese artists.

"More likely some bureaucratic nobody thinks all Chinese are suspect," the duke said. "I can't do much until I arrive in London and get sorted there. But there are a few people I can call. No promises. I suppose this event is important to you."

"I wouldn't be calling if it weren't. Harry's already rearranging the gallery to hang the paintings."

"Who's Harry?"

"My Jamaican handyman. He's also a musician who specializes in ska, reggae, and calypso."

"Aha! Lovely music, that. Does he play professionally?"

"Yes, he's a member of a band."

"I must take the duchess to hear him sometime."

"Would you focus on my problem, please?"

"I'll do what I said. In fact, the conference is in the Home Office. I'm meeting Brand there, not at MI5. I can't tell you anything more than that. I'll be returning your call as soon as I find out anything about your artists."

"Thanks. Have a good trip."

"The traffic's already getting heavy. I think we're nearing London now. *Ciao*."

Her last call was to the gallery. Anna, one of her salespeople, answered. Esther explained the situation.

"Dorothy and I are just preparing the announcement for the newsletter. Should we hold the press?"

Esther considered that a moment. "Hell no. We're going through with this if I have to put a bomb under the PM to do it."

She then hoped MI5 wasn't bugging her phone. She wouldn't put it past them because of Bastiann's connection with that organization.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bastiann brought Esther along to meet the Castilblancos at Heathrow. She'd also worked with the big Latino copper, albeit remotely, but they both felt like they were friends. He even knew the wife.

"Did you folks have a good flight?" he asked them after introducing Pam to Esther.

Esther shook the woman's hand and studied her and her husband while doing so. She couldn't imagine such a lovely woman pairing up with the big Puerto Rican, but then again people couldn't imagine her marrying Bastiann...or vice versa. For them, people noted the age difference. For Pam and Rollie, it was beauty versus ruggedness. Both seemed to be about the same age, but she was aging a lot better. Pam's hair was still a natural auburn color, like Esther's, but without any gray. Castilblanco's hairline was creeping up his forehead; his hair was cut short, so she believed it might still be mostly coal black, but there was gray around the ears. The stubble on his face might not be normally there, but the long flight could certainly have brought that on—few men shaved on a plane these days.

"Not too bad," Castilblanco said. "Pam upgraded the government-issued coach tickets to first class, thinking of my long legs." He hugged his wife, who just smiled.

"We'll drive you to your hotel," Esther said, "and give you some time to get sorted. But we'll return this evening and pick you up for dinner. You owe me an Indian dinner, Mr. Castilblanco, and you'll be paying for all of us because of your delay—you're on a traveling allowance, after all. The restaurant was recommended by some dear Indian friends of ours, and they guarantee the authenticity of the dishes served."

Castilblanco nodded and gave van Coevorden a wink and a smile. *He knows I have my hands full with Esther.*

"Agreed, Esther. I also owe both of you for some help on past cases. Name the time, and we'll be ready. I'm due for a siesta, though, because I don't sleep well on planes."

Van Coevorden could tell Castilblanco was surprised by the driving arrangements for the trip into the city. Esther took the wheel of the Jaguar with Pam by her side and the men had the rear seat. That worked out well, though, because they could talk about the next day's meeting, although the big bloke's knees pushed against the wife's seat.

"Hell of a way to spend the Christmas holidays," Castilblanco said in a low voice.

"Agreed, but the conference sessions will probably take off for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. We can celebrate the holiday in proper fashion."

"I'm in this against my will, you know," Castilblanco said. The Dutchman could make the same complaint, of course. "There's nothing that says the guys I saw haven't completely changed their appearance by now. Or are weighted down at the bottom of the Hudson or East River."

"I have it on the best authority that all parties, Australia, the UK, and the US, feel better with you here to identify those two blokes if they happen to appear. We received your police artist's sketches, by the way."

"Computer-aided, but I'm not satisfied with the results. I can't tell you exactly what's wrong with them, but something is. No hits here on your databases, I assume? Facial recognition and all that?"

"No. I also perused Interpol's. Jeremy Brand got MI6 and NCA to check theirs too."

"All our alphabet-soup agencies also checked, of course. The killer I caught is a ghost—no fingerprint or DNA records and no documentation. First time we will have a complete John Doe in a federal penitentiary, far as I know."

"He probably got rid of the documentation he used to enter the US. That he's a non-person is interesting in itself, and I'd suppose the other two are as well."

"Will you fellows stop talking about work?" Esther called over her shoulder. "'Tis the season to be merry. Too bad it's so early we can't see the lights. Bastiann, what's the best way to get to their hotel? There's construction all over the place here in the West End."

"You're the Londoner. I only know that the Park Plaza London Riverbank is only half a mile from the Home Office. I've never driven around here, Luv."

"Bollocks! That lorry almost tagged my new Jaguar."

"It's not really that new," Bastiann whispered to Castilblanco. "She totaled the first one a while ago."

"I heard that, Bastiann. I wasn't responsible, Castilblanco. We were run off the motorway."

"Doesn't your new Jag have GPS?" Castilblanco said, with Bastiann appreciating his taking a detour away from a potential argument.

"Yes, but I usually keep it turned off," Esther said. "I find it distracting. Same for the no-hands mobile feature."

"I've called up a detailed map on my mobile," Bastiann said. "Turn right here, Luv, then left. We're almost there."

The hotel was all decorated for the holidays, and the staff seemed full of extra cheer. After getting the Castilblancos registered, Esther and Bastiann took their leave. He moved forward next to her in the car, and they headed for their flat.

At least the hotel had some charm. Most American hotels, especially the big chains, had none. They were all glitz and the worst places to stay outside the US.

There was a bed with a canopy that Pam loved and Castilblanco considered claustrophobic; a small sofa; chair and desk that would serve Pam as a makeup table; and a bathroom with a shower, not a tub. The little fridge had the usual assortment of little liquor bottles; Castilblanco took out two, a whiskey for him and white wine for her, and some cheese and crackers. After celebrating their safe and timely arrival in London, Castilblanco had a short catnap while Pam visited the gift store in the lobby and a few shops around the hotel. When she returned, they FaceTime'd with Ceci and Pedro.

"How are you doing?" Pam asked her daughter.

"My little brother here is driving me nuts, Mama," Ceci said.

They heard Pedro's chuckle in the background. "That's what little brothers do. I haven't done it for a while, so I have to make up for lost time." He appeared in the video frame with a thumb up. "Brits driving you two crazy yet?"

"Not yet," Pam said with a smile.

"No opening presents before Christmas, you two," Castilblanco said.

"You'll never know, *papito*," Ceci countered.

"True. But Santa will. He's preparing his naughty list for next year."

Castilblanco was smiling, thinking that after the call the two might be searching the house for presents. He didn't have to worry about their finding them. He'd made arrangements with his Buddhist mentor and had dropped off all their gifts with him for storage until Christmas Eve. Pam had also called the heads of families in the Castilblancos' extended clan, explaining the situation and wishing them Merry Christmas. He believed all stateside family affairs were taken care of, but Ceci had a surprise for them.

She held up a squirming furball. "FYI: I already have a present. Look what Pedrito gave me! A therapy dog."

"Is that thing toilet-trained?" Castilblanco said.

"He's working on it. He's a rescue dog from a local shelter. A Scottish-terrier-and-miniature-Schnauzer mix. I've named him Rob Roy."

"Don't let that little outlaw tear up our apartment," Pam said.

Castilblanco decided to refocus. "Now...let's hear it: Are you really feeling okay, *chiquita*? We hated to leave you two all alone, especially with Christmas coming up."

"I'm fine. Itching to get back to work, in fact. And the last few years, we've spent time with friends and only stopped in for dessert, so there's no need to feel we're neglected."

"Most important part of the Christmas Day's meal, that's dessert," came Pedro's voice.

"But I was looking forward to more of a family get-together this year because you're convalescing at our apartment," Pam said.

Pedro stuck his head back in the frame again. "Don't worry, Mom. We'll properly celebrate Christmas Day in spirit, or spirits, and then we'll have a blast on New Year's Eve."

"We'll hold you to it," their father said.

"What are your plans going forward?" Ceci said.

"Tonight, we have dinner with Esther and Bastiann," Castilblanco said. "Might be interesting. I've only known them from work. They picked us up at Heathrow."

"That'll be fun," Pedro said, "and maybe a traditional holiday feast? That very British twelve days of Christmas and all that?"

"I've owed Esther an Indian dinner for a while, so that's where we're going. I'll have my Tums ready."

"I like this place," Pam said as the quartet entered the Dishoom restaurant. "I wonder if they have something special for the holidays."

"Well enough decorated, I dare say. I asked Ambreesh Singh for a reasonably priced but comfortable Indian restaurant with authentic food," Esther said. "Brookstone reservation for four," she said to the receptionist.

"It's fairly close to the hotel, I believe," Castilblanco said, "unless I'm completely lost."

"You're correct, but don't feel bad about feeling like you're lost," van Coevorden said. "We're near King's Cross station. Between its traffic and the labyrinth of streets around here, London's not an easy place to get around in. Most people take a cab or the underground."

"You seem to have adapted fairly well," Pam said as the receptionist guided the quartet to their table.

"Bastiann's still adapting," Esther said. "He has to do that for his consulting work."

Van Coevorden considered the appetizers to be a bit spicy for holiday fare, but the Americans tucked in like they were extremely peckish after their long trip. He supposed he would be too. He saw Castilblanco down a few Tums, though. *Old bloke's just like me.*

Pam wanted to know all about their honeymoon cruise down the Danube. Esther kept that all neutral, dwelling on the wonderful places they'd visited instead of Bastiann's murder investigation aboard that riverboat. She didn't mention how that had served as a prequel for a couple of his MI5 cases. He'd accepted Brand's consulting offer after they returned from the cruise.

"I'd like to take a relaxing trip like that," Pam said to her husband, squeezing his arm.

"Our other European vacation didn't turn out so well, right Bastiann?"

"Not for you or your wife."

"We have an expression to describe that, you know: Shit happens."

"Rollie!"

Castilblanco smiled. "How do you Brits say that, Bastiann?"

"Esther's the better authority on the Britons' colorful expressions."

"And we're in a rather formal restaurant, so I'll refrain from educating you, Rollie. Or punching you for being vulgar. Ah, here are our entrées. We'll pass them around so everyone can taste the different curries."

By the time they were finished eating and talking about London and New York, over two pleasant hours had passed. They were all ready to call it a night.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The spy group's leader met with Andrews and Baker, the two-thirds of his team remaining from the original trio assembled in Australia.

"He's here in London," he said.

"He can't identify us if he's dead," Andrews said. "What are you waiting for?"

"That would alert the FBI and MI5 as well as the ASIO, telling them all that they need to increase their security efforts even more. They'd vet everyone all over again. And the replacement plan didn't work so well when Carson wanted to replace the American scientist in New York City."

"Who knew Biggs would resist so much and then die?" Andrews said.

"We should have begun right at the start in Australia with all three we targeted," Baker said. "Then we could have just gone along for the ride."

The leader struggled not to show his ire. He had received enough criticism from his masters; he didn't need any more from these incompetent morons. "That's where they did the most complete vetting, you fool. I discovered that just in time. Replacing one of the Americans in New York City was our best bet after that. We have the technology to modify the FBI records. They have so many security agencies, the left hand doesn't know what the right is doing." He thought he'd done rather well with that old English adage. *Or is it American?*

"So...what are we going to do?" said Andrews.

"We're not going to attempt to replace any scientists right now. The better option is to steal all their plans instead, when this London conference decides what the final upgrades will be. We also have smart people who can make sense out of those plans. I always have a plan B." *Or is it C now?*

Andrews shrugged. "We still get paid, right?"

"In euros. We want you to disappear into the EU, but where and how is your problem, not mine. It should be easy enough to do for you two who have lived there under the radar for so long." He smiled. "Wait here. I need to go to the cashier to get your money, and then you can be on your way. I'll split the other's payment between you two. He won't be needing it."

He walked out of the little room, shut the door behind him, and drew his index finger around his neck from carotid to carotid to signal the guard, who then spoke into his transceiver.

The room would soon be filling with poisonous, odorless gas.

That's all the pay they deserve, the leader thought. *Now let that NYPD detective identify them. Who cares?*

Because he'd had to leave without breakfast, DCI David Thackeray was in a foul mood as he watched the pathologist for a while, but DS Linda Sanderson got most of his attention because he valued his new shoes. His sergeant's pale face told him that she was about to puke. He had to admit the two bloated bodies pulled from the Thames weren't a pleasant sight. *Perhaps a joke would help?*

"Two old gay blokes in a double suicide maybe? Nice romantic touch, I dare say, just like *Romeo and Juliet*."

"That's not funny, Guv."

"It's a theory. An unlikely one, I'll admit, but it's all I have for the moment." *And I thought it was funny!* "Got anything for me, Doctor?"

"Nothing, except to note these two haven't been in the water all that long. Caucasian, which you can see, age to be determined better in my morgue."

"Mob killing?"

"Um, they were weighted down, if that's what you mean—marks on wrists and ankles point to that—but the weights came off. Sloppy. I think they were already dead when they made the big splash. From what I don't know, just not drowning. They floated ashore when the weights came off. Patience, Inspector. I know you have little of it, but it's what you'll need."

"Have your aide send some facial photos to me. Maybe I can get an ID via HOLMES."

"Possibly. The river's so polluted here that few fish were around to take their usual nibbles on exposed skin."

"Send their clothes to the police lab too when you can. Let's find some breakfast, Linda."

"I'll just have tea and toast, thank you."

They drove back into the city.

Thackeray was no prat. He looked more like a rugger with his broad shoulders and thick torso badly filling a suit off the racks that didn't quite fit. He parted his hair in the middle so that his thick glasses made him look like an overgrown bank clerk. One was always expecting his small Hitler-like moustache to crawl somewhere else. He generally was good-natured, though, and a clever fellow when tracking down criminals.

Sanderson was soon turning paler watching him tuck into his full English breakfast—he didn't care—when his mobile's ringtone shattered the morning's quiet of the little restaurant. He looked at the ID on his mobile and reluctantly answered, thinking that he didn't need the indigestion that Esther Brookstone would probably cause.

"Hello, David," she said. "George Langston told me to call you. He's short on personnel right now—art thievery is up, it seems. Waxes and wanes, I suppose, in lock step with the economy."

"Get to the point, madam."

"I was wondering if your nice sergeant could vet three Chinese artists for me. I like their paintings and want to sell some in my gallery. I hope it's not Asian paranoia on my part, but they haven't been in England too long. Hong Kong ex-pats, to be precise, or refugees, if you prefer, supposedly escaping from there with the mainland government cracking down on free speech. Free spirits do tend to speak out, you know."

"Do they have papers?"

"I have no idea. I don't even know what they need."

"Sounds like a job for your husband or Jeremy Brand, Esther. Someone in the Home Office's ICE, to put a fine point on it."

"I have someone working that angle." She wasn't about to tell Thackeray that Freddie March was doing that favor. She didn't think they liked each other. "Bastiann's accessing the databases he has available in his consulting work, as well as Interpol's, but we can't access HOLMES, not privately, at least. I'd surely appreciate the favor."

Hmm. Then she'll owe me one. "Fine. I'll put Linda on. I'm eating breakfast."

He got more indigestion as he ate by noting that the little chinwag on the mobile had caused his sergeant to smile and perk up a bit. *Women!*

Chapter Twenty-Five

The duke's driver, whom some might consider his butler but Freddie March considered an old friend of the family, left March at the Home Office building. He entered, towing his wheeled suitcase behind him.

The building at 2 Marsham Street was fairly new at least compared to many other tips around central London. As often happened, the government hadn't planned well, so the bureaucracy it contained had overflowed to rental spaces, even some beyond greater London. For example, MI5 had its own office building and even other rentals, and Scotland Yard, one of the biggest bureaucracies even with its recent budget cuts, had its own facilities. The meetings would use space on two different floors; the upper had the conference room and the lower small offices and meeting rooms for conference security.

After impatiently suffering through the required security inspection, not for the conference but for the building itself, he left the suitcase with the guards and took the lift to the floor where Brand could be found with the other security types who would coddle the conference attendees. *So much for urgency*, he thought upon seeing the coffee and biscuits. *Brand had his nerve dragging me here before the holidays!*

He'd always been ambivalent about Brand. A lot of MI5 blokes—and Brand had also been in MI6, even Brookstone's handler in East Germany—became fascists as they got older. One had to keep an eye on them. They also had positions where they could potentially do a lot more damage than common folk. He knew Brand was competent enough, but he didn't completely trust him.

He still shook hands with the man, though, and then let him lead the way into a small office and close the door behind them.

"What's this damn super-secret conference about?" Freddie demanded after taking a seat. "And why the hell do I need to be here, Brand?"

Brand, sitting on the edge of a small desk, just smiled. "The Home Secretary wanted you to be here, like I said on the phone. We're going to talk about submarines, and he says you're good friends with the Australian admiral."

"Australians? The only Aussie admiral I know is Admiral Peterson. I haven't seen that old prat in years. We're at the exchange of Christmas cards now, although my wife includes a copy of a newsletter she sends to everyone on her list. She and the admiral's wife are even better friends, from the days he was military attaché here. His sailors call him Sharky, you know." Freddie eyed Brand with even more suspicion. "'Submarines' is a big topic. Having seen all you security blighters waltzing around here, something bigger yet more specific is going on. Enlighten me."

Brand nodded. "I will do just that, after you sign some documents."

He waited while the duke signed eleven sheets of paper within a pile of twenty or more. Some time passed because Freddie read through all the documents with care.

"Okay now, let me come up for breath after almost drowning in all that security blather and twaddle," Freddie said. He winked at Brand. "Drowning in security slime can be hazardous for an old man's health, old stick. And the waters are so turgid, I can't make out why such secrecy is required. So...I repeat: Enlighten me."

Brand briefed March about the purpose of the conference, and then he finished with, "The Secretary wants you to keep an eye on your old friend, the admiral. Socialize with him, take him to dinner or a musical, whatever, but report any oddities."

"Sharky doesn't need a damn babysitter. He knows London. And no one's more trustworthy than him."

"I don't doubt it. You've just confirmed what I've read. But anyone attending the conference could be targeted, military or science and engineering VIPs, in particular. We already had some problems in the US."

Freddie frowned. "What kind of problems?"

Brand told him.

While still puzzled over Brand's request, even wondering how to implement it, Freddie hadn't forgotten Esther's. Before he left the building for his hotel for the evening, he cut through layers of bureaucracy with almost a dozen phone calls, some taking him far beyond London to rural ICE offices, to find the clerk in charge of the three Chinese artists' deportation cases. Luckily for the duke, the young man was squirreled away in a small basement office of that same Home Office building. Marsh knocked on the door labeled "Immigration Compliance & Enforcement—Document Control" and walked in without waiting to be invited.

Malcolm Peebles stood in awe when Freddie introduced himself. "I've heard a lot about you, sir. You're a legend around here. I'm honored to meet you."

The duke feared the lad was going to shake his hand so much that he'd be there until the next coming new year. He was knackered from the trip and the meeting with Brand, so he wasn't in the mood to have a chinwag with an obsequious youth. He finally managed to save his hand and arm.

"Easy lad. Old men are fragile, you know."

"You're not old sir. My grandfather would say you've mellowed like a fine Scottish whiskey."

"Treat your grandpa to a shot then, will you? Or maybe I will if I ever meet him." As a matter of good breeding, Freddie had decided not to explain to the young desk jockey that he'd basically told Freddie that he was old. "I understand you're handling the cases of three Chinese refugee families." He had the names of the artists memorized and rattled them off. "Can you explain why those artists and their families are being deported when they were officially admitted to the UK as refugees?"

Malcolm looked confused. "Um, sorry, sir, but could you write those names down for me?" He pointed to a pile of folders that was about to topple over onto the floor. "I have to handle a lot of cases."

Freddie looked around the drab office, suddenly feeling sorry for the little twit—no windows, humid, dark, with only a banker's lamp perched precariously on his desk. The bloke would be blind in ten years, if not sooner.

"Give me a pad and biro." Malcolm did as requested, and Freddie used the desk to lean on and write down the three names. "Anglicized, of course, and maybe in the other order if they follow the Chinese tradition of surnames first. I don't know Chinese ideographs."

Malcolm nodded. "Let me see if I can find their folders."

They both took seats now, the clerk squeezing in behind his tiny desk, Freddie with knees painfully against its front.

He waved a hand to the pile of folders. "Shouldn't that all be in some computer database?"

"It gets there when everything's mostly settled, sir. And I don't have a terminal, as you can see. Where would I put it? Ah, here are the folders. Correct, three families." He perused the contents of one folder. "This one's not made an appearance to plead their case, so they'll be deported. I suspect the other two have a similar problem."

"Have they been told they need to appear?"

"Um, let me see. No, apparently not."

"Don't you think that should have been done, Malcolm?"

The lad paled. "Somebody must have forgotten to inform them."

"Meaning you? Don't you think you should rectify that problem?"

"I suppose."

Freddie smacked the clerk's desktop with the palm of his hand, causing the stack to topple and Malcolm to jump. "Don't suppose, lad! It's your damn job! You're dealing with people's lives here."

"Yes, sir."

"What papers do they need to present to plead their case?"

"Um, copies of birth certificates or passports."

Freddie pointed his long finger at the clerk. "Let me paint this scenario for you, lad: Suppose you live in a damn fascist country and need to leave it rapidly, or you'll end up being tortured and possibly killed in a government prison, along with every member of your immediate family. Are you going to worry about copies of birth certificates or passports? Especially if you have neither handy?"

"I-I guess not, if you put it that way. But ICE's rules—"

Again, the slap on the desktop. "Damn the rules! Do I have to go to the Home Secretary and tell him that Malcolm Peebles, one of his clerks, has created a cock-up in handling three valid pleas for asylum? A cock-up that prejudicially affects three brave and heroic families who thumbed their noses at the commies?"

"I-I don't make the rules."

Freddie stood, kicking folders aside to do so. "Get your own papers in order, Malcolm. You'll be needing them to go on the unemployed dole, lad, after I tell the Secretary he has to spend his valuable time fixing your cock-up."

Malcolm nodded several times, but he seemed to be thinking twice as fast. "Maybe you could make the deportation orders null and void?"

"How? I don't make the rules either. Not anymore."

"By signing up to be their sponsor. The reason for the law is that the government doesn't want to be responsible for indigent persons here illegally."

"Bollocks!" But thinking about it a bit, the lad was right: The solution he suggested was an easy way out that would cost the duke nothing. He smiled. "You're a genius, Malcolm. Fill out the damn forms for me and I'll sign them. Can't be any worse than all the security forms I had to sign earlier upstairs."

"It will only take ten minutes."

It took almost twenty, but Freddie now had good news for Esther.

"You'll inform the families?" he said.

"I will; it will go out in tomorrow's mail, sir."

"Excellent. Make sure that's done. Gook luck, Mr. Peebles. You're going to need it if you want a future here."

On the way to the hotel, it occurred to Freddie that he knew nothing about the artists. *Aye, lad*, he thought to himself, *there could be problems with them neither you nor Malcolm know about. You'll just have to trust Esther's judgement.*

Chapter Twenty-Six

Min-Jing put down his brush when his wife arrived home to their modest flat in Manchester. He heard her keys rattle and hurried to greet her with a plastic glass half-filled with inexpensive white wine, all they could afford. She deserved it. Their life had improved since leaving Hong Kong, but they were still battling the economic situation associated with that decision. Until they got all their papers, a slow process, they didn't even have NHS health benefits.

His children slept in bunkbeds in their tiny room; his parents slept in another small room, called the "master suite" because it contained the only bathroom; and he and his wife slept on the sitting room's sofa bed, folding it out every night and up every morning. Even with it up, that room was crowded because his easel and painting supplies took up one corner.

Theirs was the plight of many migrants and refugees. Unlike most of those from the Middle East, they couldn't pass for "normal Britons," which brought them stares and even hostility. Some blamed any Asian for the past pandemic; Min-Jing blamed his government that had tried to cover up the plague and its virulence and were still trying to convince the world it had started elsewhere.

I was too outspoken about many things, and my family almost paid the ultimate price.

He hugged his wife and she flashed a tired smile. "Show me something beautiful, husband. I've been cleaning ugly dirt away all day."

He took her to the painting that was nearly finished. She smiled. "It reminds me of home."

"This is our home for now, and thank God for that. Muqin will arrive soon. We should be thinking about dinner. Shall I make a list for our daughter?"

"Keep it simple. No one has time to cook anything complex. I'll get in the shower so my mother can have it when she arrives. She sweats so much in that laundry that I'm always afraid she'll have a heat stroke."

"Enjoy your shower, my love."

He would need one too before he headed off for his night job loading lorries at a warehouse.

Min-Jing's daughter stood patiently in line to pay, her basket filled with a small bag of rice, a few old vegetables, and two pork ribs where the bones and fat probably weighed more than the meat. The old Chinese owner of the store that was only two blocks away from their flat knew the whole family, so he asked how they all were. She bowed her chin a bit in deference to his age and said everyone was fine. *He'll know that was a lie of course, but what else can I say?*

"Let me add a few more ribs to your order. No charge. Growing children need protein."

She gladly accepted his offer and thanked him. As she walked out, she was happy for the moment until the two men blocked her path.

"Look who just got off the boat, Billy. A future slant-eyed kerb-crawler."

"Should we give her a good start in her future profession?"

She tried to go around them and run. That was a mistake. She should have returned to the store. She screamed as the basket went flying and they forced her into an alleyway.

The old man saved her. One of her attackers was tripped up by his own pants, so the other took the brunt of the storekeeper's blow with a snow shovel. He smashed the head of the second one too.

The storekeeper's wife had called 9-9-9. Two bobbies appeared to sort things.

"Well done, Chang. We'll take care of these scrotes now."

Min-Jing and his wife blamed themselves for the incident. Their daughter had made that little shopping trip many times since their arrival in Manchester without any problems. He told Ricardo Silva about the adventure that evening when he called.

"I suppose your daughter is traumatized. I'm terribly sorry this happened. Give her a hug for me. And don't judge all Brits by those two yobs. Esther Brookstone, for example, is a wonderful person. I just received word from her that she's working on your deportation cases. She has connections."

"As a gallery owner?"

"Connections she had before that. I can't go into details. I don't know most of them anyway. With your permission, I'll ask her to give you an advance. That might help a little."

"You're too good to us, Ricardo."

"We artists have to stick together."

"Esther isn't an artist."

"But she often thinks like one. Even better, she's a good friend to have. Her husband isn't half-bad either. I hope you can meet him. She wants to have a holiday event to welcome your paintings to her gallery, by the way. That's something for you to look forward to."

"I will. There was so little in Hong Kong, and here it's been hard too. I'm having problems focusing on my art."

"If your paintings resonate with art buyers, you'll be able to leave your night job. Look forward to that too."

"Thank you for calling, Ricardo, and keeping me up to date."

"No thanks needed. I'm calling your two friends too. We'll get everything ironed out."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

His sergeant texted Thackeray the results of the vetting: The artists were legitimate Hong Kong refugees, although permanent residence still seemed to be in limbo. Fortunately, they had no immediate family still left in Hong Kong. She brought her next results about the bodies pulled from the Thames murky waters to his office in person.

"Guv, what do you make of this?"

He looked at the facial-recognition results. "There must be some mistake. 73% certainty? How can this be? Jeremy Brand needs to know about this." He picked up his phone and was lucky to get the MI5 VIP after a few bounces among lower-echelon personnel who obviously believed a DCI from Scotland Yard wasn't enough of a VIP to talk to the important man. Thackeray's insistence that he knew Brand personally and had important information for him finally got him put through.

"This call better be worth my time," Brand said.

Thackeray sensed the man's impatience by his tone of voice. *Stick it, old man!* "We have two bodies fished from the Thames that facial-recognition software tells us are most likely two scientists with security clearances, Marshall Simpson and Arthur Wick. I can't get any farther than that with what we have available at the Yard. How about some help? You probably have records on everyone from the Pope to Putin."

"I'll get back to you." There was a click and Brand was gone.

"*Deja vu*, Guv?" his sergeant said.

"Damn right! That bastard gave us the run-around before, and I'm betting he'll do it again. He could have at least told me where they work."

"I'm guessing that's classified too."

He nodded and considered that a moment. "I hate to do it, but I might have a backdoor into MI5."

He felt a bit reluctant to make the call because he still hadn't informed Brookstone about the results to her request, but that at least made it easy to ask her for a favor in return. "Esther?"

"The Masterworks Gallery, Dorothy speaking. Can I help you?"

"I know where I called. Is Brookstone there?"

"She's in her workroom restoring a painting. She doesn't like to be interrupted once she's in there. Can I help you, or have her return your call?"

He sighed. "DCI David Thackeray from Scotland Yard here. Yes, please have her call me. Tell her I have the results she asked for."

"I'll do that, Inspector." Again, a click ended that conversation.

Thackeray had no idea who Dorothy was, but the woman seemed a bit distant towards him once she'd heard who he was. *Maybe Esther has talked negatively about me with her employees?* He wouldn't put it past the woman.

"We're going to have to try to trace these fishy blokes ourselves now," he told Linda. "Any ideas about how to do that?"

She brightened a bit. He usually didn't ask for her opinions—a DS was two grades below a DCI, after all.

"They're British scientists or look like them at least. They had to graduate from some university here. They wouldn't be doing classified research in a university."

He conceded that point but wasn't willing to admit it. "Maybe some universities do classified research? Without the left-wing students' knowledge, of course."

"Why don't we just Google them? They might be listed in Wikipedia. Or on social media?"

"I'm surprised you didn't try that. Go for it. But any results you find, while useful for background, won't tell us whether they're missing or not. I have one other person I want to call—just occurred to me."

The duke and duchess's staff at their castle passed Thackeray around more than Brand's MI5 underlings had, but he finally got to talk to Freddie March on his mobile. He just happened to be in London.

"Inspector Thackeray, what a pleasant surprise," the old toff said. "Merry Christmas!"

Thackeray almost said "Bah! Humbug!" He knew it wasn't pleasant at all for the duke. At best, Thackeray could only say that the two respected each other. "It's not a social call." He explained his problem.

"Simpson and Wick, eh? Sorry, old stick, can't say I know anyone with those names. You should call Jeremy Brand."

"He's not available at the moment. I gather you agree it's curious?"

"Um, they say everyone has a doppelganger somewhere in this world, but I dare say the two you fished out of Thames at the same time is a bit extraordinary. As the scientific blokes would say, twice as unlikely. They're probably involved in military research. The real scientists, I mean."

"If they're alive and doing that, isn't there still the question of which two are the real scientists?"

"Um, valid point. I'll get back to you."

Thackeray was now annoyed. On his next call, one received by him, he became even more annoyed. The spluttering pathologist was too, fuming, in fact.

"You've got to do something, David! I can't have MI5 agents barging in on my aide and sequestering two bodies before I even get to examine them!"

"What? Did they identify themselves as MI5?"

"No, they said they were Peter Pan's Lost Boys. Of course they did!"

Jeremy Brand! Now he'll have to talk with me...or else there'll be hell to pay!

"You're here as a courtesy, Inspector Thackeray," Brand told the DCI as he was ushered into the meeting room.

Thackeray, still annoyed by all the security screening, looked around and saw mostly stony glares. Courteous welcome was the last thing he saw in those faces. In fact, he felt about as welcome as Judas at a reunion of Christ's disciples. He recognized the duke—was this meeting the reason he was in London?—and the old toff at least nodded a greeting to the inspector; Robert Winston, an MI5 agent who'd annoyed him more than once; and Bastiann, Esther's husband. But the other two men were complete strangers, whose expressions were at least both ambivalent and full of curiosity.

Winston, as usual, was dressed to the nines. He was shorter than Thackeray; the copper always considered him to be like the little yippy dog who annoyed bigger dogs, although that description didn't go far because Thackeray knew his bite could be vicious. He was usually

overly obsequious with Brand, also a dapper fellow but older, but Thackeray had to give it to the two MI5 agents: They were competent but often far too secretive. Thackeray considered it a miracle that he was allowed into the meeting.

"I think you know everyone here," Brand said, "except for Detective Castilblanco and Agent Rogers."

The two strangers nodded to Thackeray but too quickly to associate them with the names. He'd have to depend on stereotypes. The first name was Hispanic, and one looked that part, but Hispanics could be black. The second was generic, but it could belong to a black man.

"Lou and Rolando, this is DCI David Thackeray from Scotland Yard. David, Lou is here representing the FBI, and Rollie is here for NYPD homicide. Detective Castilblanco had a case similar to yours, just one victim, though. He's identified your two victims as persons of interest in the killing of the scientist Tucker Biggs. We're gathered together to try to figure out what's going on. Please have a seat at the table." After Thackeray sat, Brand continued. "Please understand that anything discussed in this room cannot leave it. The Official Secrets Act is in full force. Now I'll bring you up to date."

"So this Biggs had a doppelganger too?" Thackeray said to Castilblanco after Brand finished his spiel. The big US cop nodded. "If I were you blokes, I'd suspect someone was trying to pull a fast one and get people into the meetings, replacing those three."

"It's possible we didn't pay enough attention to the Biggs look-alike," Castilblanco, "but how we'll rectify that mistake is Mr. Brand's call."

"Indeed," Brand said. "But the crux of the matter is: Who's behind this? Who out of our many adversaries wants to steal our new submarine technology?"

"Worst criminal case there is," Freddie said. "A plethora of suspect countries would be interested in any new technological advances."

"Why not France?" said Thackeray. "That pillock American president had quite a barney with the French over that original deal, if I remember correctly. The French weren't exactly chuffed with the news, you'll remember."

Freddie laughed. "They got over it. A few elections blurred their memories a bit. Both the French and Germans have had to work hard to keep the EU together after Brexit; still are, to put a fine point on it."

"Um, Brexit didn't do us much good either," Winston said.

"Gentlemen, let's not digress," Brand said. "The point is, someone went to a lot of trouble to prepare Freddie's doppelgangers, going as far as using plastic surgery, according to our pathologists."

Thackeray frowned at that. *No wonder MI5 wanted the bodies!* He wondered if their police pathologist would have seen that, given the chance. *Probably.*

"I suspect Russia or China," Castilblanco said. "And isn't China why my partner couldn't participate in this circus?"

Brand bristled. "No one has said that."

"I'm afraid Rollie might be right," Rogers said. "Another pillock president, as you put it, Inspector Thackeray, and a worse one by many measures, fed off Asian hate a lot. People didn't trust the Chinese in many things, from Covid to economic warfare. A lot of that lingers on in our country." He shrugged. "I'm a bit wary of racial stereotypes for obvious reasons."

"In any case," the duke said, "considering the three nations involved in the deal, China is a fourth nation that's the most likely suspect. To dominate the world, their first step is to dominate the Pacific. And they probably want to be free to consider an attack on Taiwan and

Japan with their own navy. That said, I conclude that we successfully thwarted their plan, knowing what we know now. The meetings here will soon be over."

Thackeray admired how the old toff smoothed things over. His experience in the Home Office was evident.

"So how does this help my murder case?" he said. "Or Castilblanco's?"

"I think we can safely say mine is solved," the detective said. "You fished my two remaining suspects out of the Thames. I guess my personal facial-recognition software—" He tapped his head. "—is due for an upgrade. Of course, I didn't get a good look at Simpson and Wick at the DC meetings, or the proverbial bulb would have lit. They're not exactly flamboyant characters either. That would have created a nice—what do you call it, barney?—as well. Is my stay here now superfluous, Jeremy?"

Brand smiled at Castilblanco. "As Freddie said, the meetings are almost over. Once done, you're a free man. Until then, you might be able to help the inspector find the doppelgangers' killers. That result would certainly tell us who tried to organize the penetration of our security. I'd recommend that you, the inspector, Bastiann, and Robert work together on that problem."

Thackeray looked at the ceiling and mentally groaned. *Just what I need!*

"And I'd recommend increased vigilance," said the detective. "Getting rid of the three doppelgangers might mean the Chinese, or whoever's responsible, have gone to a Plan B."

"What's that?" said Winston.

"I wish I knew."

"Merry Christmas, everyone," Brand said as they filed out.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

After the incident in New York City, the FBI had interrogated Marshall Simpson and Arthur Wick, the two electrical engineering professors and colleagues of Tucker Biggs. All three and a few others had been barhopping and night-clubbing that fateful night Biggs died. Before Brand interrogated them again, he read the full report made about that FBI interrogation.

Like many scientists and engineers working on secret projects, all three men had kept a low profile. The Yard periodically reviewed security clearances for UK citizens; they wouldn't have been too happy if Simpson and Wick hadn't behaved in that manner. All contacts with foreign nationals had to be reported, trips outside the UK okayed and reported on upon return, and other requirements needed to be met to maintain clearances.

Living under the radar meant that there wasn't much in the report about their private lives beyond their professions, employers, and close relatives. The report only briefly mentioned their research as well. The focus of the interrogations had been on why Biggs had left the group that ill-fated night.

Simpson had said Biggs was just another fun-loving bachelor looking for a good time. He had mentioned Candy Kaine to Simpson and Wick. The two who were married, their wives back in England, had just wished Biggs good luck for the remainder of his evening of debauchery.

Brand made the call to have them brought into his temporary office in the Home Office building.

The two electrical engineers were adversarial at first.

"This a complete waste of time," Simpson said. "We don't know why two dead blokes look a bit like us, or why Tucker's killer was also a look-alike."

"Could they have targeted him because you two are married?" Brand said.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Wick said.

"It would be more difficult to take your places, at least here in London where your wives know you so well."

Simpson nodded. "That makes sense. But anyone would probably detect that subterfuge. And anyone not actually doing the research would know enough to bluff, I'm sure."

"Which is why they probably tortured Biggs. I just read a bit more about your research, by the way. Are the techniques you use completely unknown to outsiders?"

Wick looked at Simpson. "Well, no, the techniques employed are well known, in general," he said to Brand. "Correlation algorithms of different data streams to increase signal-to-noise ratios have been used for quite a while, in radio astronomy, for example. And spread spectrum techniques, invented by Hedy Lamarr long ago, are used in your mobile phone. Matched filters are used in radar signal processing. And so forth."

"Hedy Lamarr? The actor?"

"The same," Wick said with a smile. "Spreading the spectrum via frequency hopping. World War II stuff. She was Austrian, but she didn't like the Nazis very much."

"I see. So...am I to conclude that your doppelgangers could have enough basic knowledge from unclassified sources to take on your roles?" They looked at each other and nodded. "Okay, that's sorted. Have either of you noted anyone surveilling you in any way?"

"Only conference security people after the New York incident," Simpson said.

"And you?" Brand said to Wick, who glanced at Simpson.

"We both had some twit lurking around our homes here weeks before we left for Australia."

"Oh, right," Simpson said. "We decided it was the same bloke after we compared notes. He had a camera. We thought he was a reporter."

"Did you report it?"

"We did," Wick said, "to Scotland Yard. They didn't seem too worried. You see, we'd won a prize, and they wrote the whole thing off as some science reporter wanting to make a story out of that."

"What was the prize?" Brand said, frowning. Considering who they worked for, that sounded a bit problematic.

Wick laughed. "Nothing to tie your underwear in a knot about. We wrote a new textbook on digital signal processing that has had some resonance among local engineering academics. We're academics too, after all. We lecture and tutor as well as do research, and as often happens, lecture notes became a textbook. Our department loves that sort of thing, though they love the government's research funding even more."

"Was Biggs involved in that textbook project?"

"Only indirectly."

Brand pondered that a moment. It was possible all three had been under surveillance for a while, Biggs in the US and Simpson and Wick in the UK.

After he showed Simpson and Wick out of the office, Brand sat down at his borrowed desk to worry some more about what he'd learned. People had probably been surveilling the research engineers, but that had to occur after their doppelgangers' plastic surgery if the latter were to replace them.

How long had the op been going on? Maybe since the idea of having the joint conferences was conceived? If the answer to that niggling question was yes, it was troubling, and not just for British intelligence.

Brand knew the Home Secretary and the PM were interested in the conferences. They had to be warned about how early the op had been launched. For a few seconds, he stared at the photo of the king on the small office's wall in front of the desk. And about how such a concerted effort was bound to also include other alternative strategies?

It was ironic that herding a group of military brass and their aides along with engineers and scientists had turned into such a complex task. Brand had specialized in counterterrorism, but the Home Secretary had said he wanted his best man on the job. Brand hadn't been chuffed by that, imagining that it was just flattery the Secretary felt was required to convince Brand to take on something no one else in MI5 would want to take on.

Counterespionage was also handled by MI5 within the UK—the agency had begun in World War II with that as its only task—but counterterrorism had become important as the decades passed. And wasn't the assassination attempt on the double agent Skripal and his daughter both terrorism and espionage? Brand had also participated in the op that had thwarted the Russian assassin Sergei Yehontov, not exactly counterterrorism either.

Maybe he was just a victim of a recent success that made the Home Secretary ignore his primary task? Did that explain the Secretary's comment? Brand supposed those questions wouldn't have answers, and that didn't really matter: The Secretary had to be briefed. It would take a while to set that up, especially if the PM needed to be present. Maybe Freddie March could help Brand with the Home Secretary? The duke was a huge asset, if only because of his connections.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The duke and Brand left for MI5's HQ while that other meeting continued with van Coevorden and the others sorting out some plans that hopefully would lead them to the doppelgangers' killers. It was a hell of a way to spend Christmas Eve.

Van Coevorden wasn't imposing. He was short and built like a barrel, a somewhat comical figure with his handlebar mustache that would remind anyone of the actor who'd played Hercule Poirot. Thackeray and most others in the Yard called Brookstone and van Coevorden Miss Marple and Poirot respectively, in fact, although the inspector knew that Brookstone wasn't as feeble as Christie's famous character. She also had a more varied background, as van Coevorden also had compared to Poirot.

Thackeray was surprised when van Coevorden took charge of the meeting. He'd expected Winston to do that. He wasn't an MI5 consultant; he was a full agent. But he was younger than van Coevorden, so maybe that explained things. *Youthful exuberance or professional jealousy?*

After they debated a bit, though, Winston summarized nicely.

"The problem," the MI5 consultant began, "is that we have three scientist look-alikes, but we don't know who they really were."

"I can have Dao-Ming visit the one in our federal pen, the Biggs look-alike, and twist his arm a bit," said Castilblanco, who'd seemed to be lost in his thoughts. "He might try to buy some good will once he knows his buddies are dead."

"Should she tell him that the ones here were killed by someone unknown to us, or that you were able to identify them?" Thackeray said.

"That second little lie might cause him more aggro," van Coevorden said with a smile, "but the first can be spun a bit into a lie too. Let's not say 'someone unknown'; let's say the Chinese. It's a good, educated guess, albeit a stab in the dark, and, if he thinks it's true, he'll be more irate."

"You don't have to be so specific," Winston said. "Just say 'your masters,' or something equally obscure. Let him fill in the blanks and then go on to feel like getting even."

"Assuming all in that trio were friends," said van Coevorden. "And would wanting to get even make him give up names?"

"Might even make him say who his handler was," Thackeray said. "Who cares what their real names are if we can nick the handler."

"So...are we all agreed that Dao-Ming tells Mr. Jailbird the people that hired them killed the two here?" said Rogers who'd been following the interchange with a toothy smile.

Everyone was.

"That's the action to take in the US," said van Coevorden. "What can we do here?"

"I'd expect the handler to have contacts in the embassy, with a cultural, scientific, or military attaché, any of them secretly being also an agent of the MSS, assuming it's China, which is both military and civilian," Winston said. "I'd watch the embassy. The handler will be out and about, but he won't risk using public communications to get his marching orders or report back. He'll physically check in with the embassy, perhaps as a Chinese tourist."

"Doesn't MI5 already watch the Chinese embassy personnel?" Rogers said.

"Do you know how many Chinese tourists come to London?" said Winston. "Some invariably go to their embassy. Lost passports and such."

"So he could be posing as a tourist," Castilblanco said. "If we're lucky, it's the same handler here as in New York."

"And/or Canberra," said van Coevorden. "That's the first place to look: Find some Chinese tourist that more or less moved along with the conferences from city to city."

"That involves Australia, Britain, and the US," said Castilblanco. "I have a friend at DHS who can provide a list for the US. MI5 should be able to get one for Britain. Who can do that for Australia?"

"I have a contact in the ASIO," Rogers said. "I think we now have another course of action."

"The third should be to query people in MI5 about embassy personnel," van Coevorden said. "Robert?"

"Okay, I can do that. My list was a good one. Definitely not the ambassador, but any VIP underling might be the handler of the handler."

"And what do I do?" said Thackeray.

"What you usually do so well," van Coevorden said with a smile. "Chase down witnesses. Anyone who might have seen those two dumped into the river. If whoever was doing the dumping was Chinese, our suspicions about China will be confirmed."

"Dao-Ming and I already tried to chase down witnesses in New York," Castilblanco said. "I'm worse off than you, Inspector."

"Don't you have some friends in the agencies because of the captain?" said van Coevorden.

"Yes, I suppose I can call in some favors there. I did one for them in getting involved in these meetings, after all. Not my cuppa' tea, as you Brits would say."

"So...let's get to it, gentlemen," van Coevorden said.

Thackeray was now glad van Coevorden had taken the lead. He'd been itching to get out of that tiny meeting room and Esther's Dutchman had moved things along.

"I've got a name," Dao-Ming Chen said on the speaker phone to the remainder of the group working late at the Home Office. "Our convict in the pen didn't even know it was Christmas Eve. Solitary will do that to you, I suppose. The name I have is Liu Chao-Xiang. The convict's real name might be Bernard Carson, although that could be an alias. Probably not important. He wouldn't say where he's from, but he definitely talked up a mini-storm because he wants to avenge his friends by taking down Liu."

No honor among spies, thought van Coevorden.

"We can check for Liu's name in travel records at the four conference sites," said Castilblanco, "but I bet he entered each country with a fake name and fake passport. What about a photo from MI5 or MI6?" That query was directed to the Dutchman. "Both might have that in their databases that contain known Chinese spies. It would help us when watching the embassy."

"If he's any good, not likely," said Rogers.

"Can you check with Ashley Scott, Dao-Ming?" said Castilblanco.

Scott was a long-time friend who worked at DHS. They shared databases with the FBI and other American agencies.

Van Coevorden looked at his watch. "I just might make Christmas Eve dinner with my wife. Shall we meet tomorrow, mid-morning? I can't make the afternoon."

Everyone was exhausted, so they all nodded, but not before wishing Dao-Ming Chen a Merry Christmas, what was left of Christmas Eve for her. It was almost eleven in New York City.

As van Coevorden exited the elevator that looked like it might be a relic from the Victorian era, he spotted Rogers in the building's lobby talking on his mobile, the MI5 guards frowning at him. A sign announced, "NO MOBILE USAGE," but they'd probably given the FBI agent some leeway: It was cold outside. He waved at Bastiann. *Probably wishing someone back home a late Merry Christmas as well?* He waved back and exited the door to find a cab.

Freddie March had waited until the day before the conference's opening so he could make a few observations at the first meeting before acting on Brand's request, even though he had other concerns to discuss with Admiral Peterson beyond those of the MI5 agent. That Christmas Eve, he met his old friend in the bar of the admiral's hotel. They shook hands, hugged, and patted each other on the shoulder, a more affectionate greeting than the formal one at that meeting, the only one the duke had attended for lack of patience. The admiral returned to his bar stool, and March took the one beside him.

"I was glad to see that you're still involved," Peterson said.

"Better than being a tour guide at my family's castle. How have you been doing, Sharky? We didn't have the chance for a good chinwag in that damn meeting. Politics down under seems to be a bit chaotic these days. I could see you're stressed. I'll have what he's having." The last was for the barman.

"Always has been chaotic, same as in the UK and US. Politicians don't understand the military, and vice versa. Maybe that's a good thing. Problems often occur when a politician thinks he does understand; or worse, he thinks he knows more than his military, like that crazy president the US had a while ago."

Freddie laughed. "I guess I might be among those crazy politicians, but I was in the navy, so do I catch a break?"

"I'm not talking about you, old fellow. You understood so well that you rarely let me get away with anything." He lifted his glass to the duke.

"And I helped you get away with a few things because our government's career politicians and diplomats believed they understood military matters, but generally speaking, they've never learned, especially about the importance of the Pacific region. That began with Winnie, who didn't do much to stop Japan's advances."

"You're not that ancient, old stick."

"But I'm a student of history. How's Matilda been waltzing?"

Peterson smiled at the abrupt change in direction of the conversation. The admiral's wife's name was actually Matilda. "I should have brought her along. She could have gone shopping with the duchess."

Freddie groaned. "That's one reason I left my wife at the castle. There are others. Let's find a booth. I have a few confidential things to discuss."

"No secrets, I hope?" Peterson said as they slid into opposite sides in the booth.

"No, not really. I wanted to ask you about your mother as well. How's she doing?"

Peterson shook his head. "There are sometimes when I visit her that she recognizes me, but they're less and less frequent. She had Covid and survived, Freddie, but what kind of cosmic irony is it that she has no quality of life now?"

"Alzheimer's is a plague too. I wanted to ask you about her onset symptoms."

"More than the usual senior forgetfulness, more than not remembering where her keys are, for example. At times she'd forget who we were or where she was, go to the mall and get lost—the number of events just kept increasing. Why are you asking?"

"For my wife, the duchess. I'm worried about her. I'm trying to convince her to see a doctor."

"They can't do much for Alzheimer's. There's no cure yet."

"But they can diagnose it, right?" Peterson nodded. "I think she's getting worse. Events like the ones you described and more. Oh, to be young again like that aide you have. The duchess and I have had such a good and fulfilling life together, but I'm not ready to lose her. Not in that way."

Peterson pulled one thread from what Freddie had said. "Crosby? Best aide I've ever had. Completely reliable, to the point where he's competent enough to offer good advice when I ask him for it. He's an ex-submariner too. His father was as well—served as XO under me, in fact." Peterson laughed. "The family business. Yes, it'd be nice to be young again like him and have one's whole future ahead. But I'd never make different choices from the ones I've made."

"Nor I. But I'm talking about physical wellbeing. This getting old is awful, Sharky." Freddie raised his glass now. "To youth."

"To wisdom."

Freddie might tell Jeremy about the bar conversation with Peterson, but he wouldn't mention all the things discussed. The information about Peterson's mother was useful but confidential, and it was clear that the admiral completely trusted his aide. Freddie, a shrewd judge of character, hadn't, so Peterson's approval was comforting.

Chapter Thirty

Mid-morning Christmas Day, Esther had welcomed her Chinese artists to her gallery. Thackeray's vetting and the duke's good news had led to her calling them. Because all were in London, including Ricardo Silva, who'd promised to show up for Christmas Day dinner at their flat with his wife, everyone wanted and agreed to go ahead with the event at the gallery, which Esther wanted to do too because postponing until the new year would put it into the post-holidays dead time.

It was still an unusual time to have an event. There wouldn't be many late shoppers out and about, but she believed that might be a good thing. A more private celebration might suit her shy Chinese artists much better. And she knew none of the three were Christian, so it was just another day for them.

One reason Esther was excited about promoting them was that she thought Xi's China was now more a danger to world peace than Putin's Russia. Neither one of those bastards were saints, of course, but China's regimented society reminded her too much of Orwell's *1984*. That author was going after the old USSR, and she'd done her part against them too; but decent people in the world needed to go after China now—what they'd done in Hong Kong and were planning to do to Taiwan was unconscionable. She felt promoting the Chinese artists was the least she could do to thwart the Chinese hegemony, her small blow for democracy.

Ricardo introduced them to her. Their paintings had already been hung by Harry James, the gallery's able handyman. She would need to learn to associate each artist with his painting in case anyone inquired about one of the paintings later on.

The artists all bowed to her and then shook hands western style.

"You honor us by showing our paintings here, Mrs. Brookstone," said the shortest artist, "especially during your special holiday time here in England. And thank you so much for all your help. We will never shame or embarrass your friend who has now become our families' sponsor."

She laughed. "It's just Esther, good sir, and you will honor me more with a commission, because I'm sure all your paintings will soon be purchased. The Masters Gallery has arrived at the point where word-of-mouth adverts are more than enough. Of course, I announced this event in my newsletter, stating that all of you are featured artists here." She smiled at them, all lined up from short to tall and clearly embarrassed by all the attention. *Or is it the elf hats they were embarrassed about?* She didn't know if she could explain their significance. "Now, please, let's celebrate while you tell me more about yourselves. I only have the brief bios that we included in the newsletter. Don't tell me any real secrets, of course, but gallery visitors will surely ask in the coming days."

One admitted he was actually born in Macao, but his parents moved the family to Hong Kong when he was three. The other two were born there. All three had children and extended family in England now. Two had made their home in the Manchester area, where Ricardo lived most of the time with his new wife. Another, the youngest, lived with his family in the Birmingham area. None lived in London, which they all considered far too expensive, which was probably true enough. All three wives worked in more or less menial positions to keep their families afloat; so did their parents.

They were all shy yet amiable fellows and quite happy to share champagne and appetizers with Esther and her staff and the few customers who ventured in. Ricardo willingly

participated in that too. Harry had even provided a playlist of Chinese music, although he'd mistakenly included a few songs by that old BTS Korean boy band, which everyone but Harry considered hilarious. Esther had to explain that Harry had an excuse: He liked a wide variety of music but only performed ska, reggae, or calypso. He redeemed himself by including a few carols in the playlist that he sang in his raspy, Harry Belafonte-like voice. Esther's Harry was chuffed, though, when the smallest Chinese artist, who barely came to Harry's shoulder, said, "I loved your rendition of 'Little Drummer Boy.' That sprinkling of calypso does wonders for that song."

Later, one of the artists, Huang Min-Jing, shared an interesting but sad story. He'd been scheduled to deliver two paintings for an exhibit of young artists at the M+ art museum in Hong Kong. MSS agents arrested him and confiscated the paintings. He was beaten and not given food or water for two days and then released. The paintings were never returned. But the tale didn't end there. A few weeks later, friends of Huang and his wife were invited to a Communist Party official's soiree where they saw the paintings proudly displayed in the VIP's lavish study. When they asked the functionary's wife about the artist, she said he was dead.

"Did that convince you to leave?" Esther said. She wondered if the incident in Manchester might have made him think that leaving Hong Kong hadn't been such a good idea, but at least most British, all but a few fascists, would also be appalled by that incident, so she wasn't about to mention it.

"It certainly added to my angst. Maybe they wouldn't have bothered me and my family anymore, but I didn't want to take the chance."

"Those were good and brave friends to tell you that," said Ricardo.

"That friend was a journalist," Huang said, sadness in his voice. "He and his family couldn't escape from Hong Kong."

"What happened to them?" said Anna, Esther's saleswoman, her eyes wide.

Huang shrugged. "No one knows. They're among the many who have disappeared. Human rights in China are non-existent. It's been that way for a long time, but Hong Kong avoided the atrocities until the British returned their colony to the Red Dragon."

Ricardo nodded at Esther. "Now you understand why I left Brazil. You English don't know how good you have it here."

"Most of us," Esther said, "are complacent about that, I'll admit, yet a scurrilous few would even like to see some form of autocratic government here too. Let's celebrate that you all are here, safe, and enjoying the freedom of expression. Cheers."

She couldn't help eying the third artist, the fellow from Birmingham. He'd looked more than troubled by Huang's tale. *Is he remembering something even worse?* She knew the young artist and his family had arrived a bit later than the other two families. She imagined all three families had gone through hell in Hong Kong, and then they had to arrive and get sorted in England, basically starting with nothing.

It was only fair that the UK would welcome refugees from their old colony. Britain had made a lot of mistakes during the old days of colonialism—Hong Kong, India, the Middle East, and others. Of course, it would be fair to add America to that list. Most British ignored those mistakes that had led to a lot of pain and suffering in the colonies and after when they struggled after independence to find their own way.

Much later, Esther walked into their flat still euphoric about how well the event had gone, considering all the preceding immigration aggro. All three paintings had already been sold to people who happened to walk into the gallery during their little celebration, late shoppers looking for an unusual gift. All the Chinese landscapes had snow in them, so they matched the season even for anyone without much artistic sensibility. She'd asked the artists for three more paintings, to be delivered, if possible, early in the new year.

"Seems like you're in a good mood, Luv," Bastiann said, looking up from his laptop.

"Um, it's Christmas. We'll have Ambreesh and Ricardo and their families arriving soon for dinner. Reggie too." She sniffed the air. "How long has the bird been on? I'm surprised Reggie remembered."

Her upstairs neighbor Reggie Fox was an arrogant toff who looked down his nose at most people, priding himself on his appearance and spending far too much time in pursuit of the ladies. The French professor would spend his last days as a lonely bachelor, she was sure, but he was addicted to the conquest and frustrated that Esther hadn't succumbed to his charms, Bastiann having easily won that contest.

Reggie had a key to their flat because he was in charge of bringing in mail when they were both traveling. He'd agreed to put the turkey in the oven early that morning; she'd left it ready for him.

Esther knew Castilblanco and his wife Pam, of course, rather well after their nice dinner, so her husband introduced her to Special Agent Lou Rogers from where all three men were sitting at the dining table studying something on Bastiann's laptop. *Another guest for dinner?* She hoped the bird was large enough and that her other guests would bring large side dishes. When Reggie arrived, she'd have him socialize with Pam. Esther had a huge meal to sort.

But she couldn't help herself. She looked over Bastiann's shoulder at the screen.

"I know that man," Esther told them. "He was at a lecture on Chinese art I attended at the Chinese Embassy about two months ago." She'd just realized that Ricardo's three artists had piqued her interest because of that lecture. *The short-term memory goes first, old woman!*

"Does he work for the embassy?" Bastiann said.

Esther searched her memories. "Sorry, I can't remember his name. Those names are hard to remember. But his title was 'science attaché.'" She smiled at Bastiann. "Does that have a double meaning like 'cultural attaché'?"

He nodded and returned her smile, knowing the reference she just made was to her MI6 past. The two others didn't need to know that. "Sometimes. I'll check with the Home Office. Someone will know who he is."

"If he's with the embassy," Castilblanco said, "he might be how they're getting the plans out if they're planning on stealing them. Maybe some thumb drives in a diplomatic pouch?"

Rogers nodded. "Hard to stop that." He smiled at Esther. "I've heard a lot about you from Bastiann, Esther, but I didn't know you were interested in Chinese art. I've been a fan for years. I was just at an exhibition in New York."

"Understand your enemy and all that? Long ago, the Chinese were sailing the seven seas in ships that made those in Queen Elizabeth's fleet look like bathtub toys, I'll have you know. But to be honest, I'm trying to branch out a bit in my gallery. I just sold three rather nice, mystical Chinese landscape paintings there, painted by some artists introduced to me by our friend Ricardo Silva. I ordered three more on commission."

"Then we have something to celebrate."

They had more than enough food for dinner. While Esther liked Castilblanco better than his cold partner Chen, although she had to admit that she didn't know Dao-Ming that well, she liked Rogers too. He livened things up a bit with his quick wit and pithy jokes. It was also good to see Roberta again—the baby bump was showing now. Their flat's sitting room was crowded, with all the chairs for the dining table in use, but when it got too stuffy, she cracked open some windows.

Just before dinner, Ambreesh and his wife and her neighbor Reggie made an appearance, and things got even more crowded. Esther and Pam Stuart showed off their limberness by sitting on floor cushions. Not to be outdone, Ricardo followed their cue, parking beside his pregnant wife who preferred a chair from the dining table for her aching back.

"There were a few flakes," Ambreesh had said.

"London never has the snow I enjoyed as a child," Esther had commented. "Scotland is even worse, unless you like all that white mess with the cold. That's why we close our castle in winter."

One topic at dinner was a cultural comparison of holiday traditions around the world. Even the New Yorkers, the Castilblancos, had different traditions than Rogers, who was originally from California, and yet they were all from the same country. The big New York cop also had some Jewish relatives who celebrated things a lot differently too.

Not all the Christians had the tradition of a Christmas tree, for example. Esther and Bastiann's small artificial one—she refused to kill trees for decorative purposes—was almost hidden by the gifts that were piled around it; Esther hoped no one had gone overboard, because it was the thought that always counted. She'd had a few extras hidden in the closet and had found two ties that would serve as gifts for Reggie and Lou.

After-dinner chitchat separated the diverse group into smaller ones, with Esther circulating among them like a good hostess, keeping drinks flowing right through the buffet dessert, the manner of serving that chosen to postpone clearing off the table, although some sat with their coffee and dessert there to minimize the balancing act required. The night started drawing to a close, of course, when people started to leave.

Singh had offered to take the Castilblancos and Rogers back to their hotels, so the five were the last to leave. While the two wives helped Esther begin the cleanup—it would most likely go into the next day—Castilblanco, Rogers, Singh, and van Coevorden talked shop.

"If you were to make improvements on a sub," said Castilblanco to Singh at one point, his speech a bit blurred, "what would you do first?" Van Coevorden looked nervous, so Castilblanco added, "Hypothetical question, Bastiann. Talking sci-fi a bit. You're a sci-fi fan, right? Esther told me."

"Why the sudden interest in submarines?" Singh said. "Where did that come from? They're not much good for anything, you know, when you need boots on the ground. Not many platoons fit in one. And you Yanks probably have all the latest tech, cornering the market, as it were."

"Maybe, but I wouldn't know about it. I was on a carrier when I was at sea."

"The floating cities," van Coevorden said, trying to divert the discussion. "What was that like?"

"Like public housing in New York, although those people are often illegally packed into small spaces whereas sailors have volunteered to be mistreated," Castilblanco said with a smile.

"Exploitation by the landlords might be comparable, you see. And God help you if your bunkmate snored. Most of that real estate's for planes and choppers, although, come to think of it, they had some nifty equipment aboard the carriers just like the subs do." He winked at van Coevorden. "Even more of it. The carriers have sonar, same as subs, and ESM capabilities as well."

"ESM?" said Singh.

"Electronic support measures. The operators can sniff out the enemy above and below the sea surface. Of course, I'm about thirty years behind the times with the tech. You fellows are probably a lot more up to date. Same for Lou here."

Singh detoured Castilblanco's questioning as well, nodding to the big FBI agent. "What's your story, Lou?"

"Same as Rollie's, more or less. Marines, LA cop, then FBI, first in LA, then in DC."

Singh laughed. "Briefest bio I've ever heard. And here I am, just a techie. Never shot a gun in my life."

"You fellows are needed more and more nowadays," Castilblanco said.

"And the UK has a better gun policy than the US," Rogers said, "so you should give thanks you're living in the UK."

Pam Stuart, who had probably overheard some of the conversation, decided to interrupt by putting her hands on her husband's shoulders. "You've had enough to drink, Rollie. Time to let our good hosts get some rest. Are you ready, Ambreesh? Your wife is, but Bastiann can always call a taxi for us and Lou."

Van Coevorden blessed her observational capabilities.

"I'm a bit knackered myself," Singh said. "My wife can drive us. I wouldn't want to get pulled over by a transit cop. Hard to explain that to my employers."

"Especially to Jeremy Brand," Esther said with a smile, now behind her husband imitating Pam's shoulder-massaging position.

After everyone had departed, Esther took Bastiann's hand. "Come along to bed, my Flying Dutchman. I'll do the rest of the cleanup tomorrow."

Chapter Thirty-One

"Are you going out?" Esther said upon rolling over and seeing Bastiann dressing. "It's the day after Christmas. It'd be a nice day for a lie-in, Luv."

"Work to do. We're beginning our surveillance."

"Whatever for? That man I spotted on your laptop?"

Bastiann smiled. "I can't talk about it."

"It's either that Jeremy or Robert. They're ruining our social lives."

"Everyone went home for Christmas Eve and Day. Your holiday dinner was a smashing success, Esther."

"I don't think Lou or Rollie liked the pudding."

"Probably just watching their waistlines. They're both hefty fellows."

"On Christmas? No one diets on Christmas."

Bastiann shrugged. "There was a lot of food and drink before dessert. And we still have lots of leftovers. We'll be eating them forever. In lieu of breakfast, I'll do a snack later on this morning. I'm still stuffed. No reason why you can't have a good lie-in, though."

"I might go into the gallery later to see if they sorted everything there after yesterday's function."

"I'm glad that went well."

"Those Chinese artists received the best present of all. They get to stay here rather than go back to China to be tortured and killed, thanks to Freddie March."

He finished dressing, gave her a kiss, she turned over, and he left, knowing that finding a taxi might be difficult the day after Christmas. But other public transportation would be running.

"We've spotted your spy leaving a Chinese restaurant," an MI5 agent announced over the com. "Please advise."

"Keep him in sight," Winston said.

The net cast in Greater London shrunk. They now had Liu under surveillance. They would stay on him, moving their video van to record his movements from different angles in order to build a case against the spy, not only for spying, but also for deportation. Trying him would require capturing him, of course, but they'd wait and bide their time.

The surveillance would go on at least for the day.

Back at the conference, it was lunch break. All details for the submarine upgrades had been settled, so further debates would be about scheduling their implementation.

A young man sat at his computer in a side room next to the meeting room.

"Go get some lunch, Ben," the conference organizer, the old USN admiral, said.

"In a moment, sir. I'm working on my report. As a submariner myself, I have some observations that I want my boss to consider."

"Good man. You Australians are gung-ho about these upgrades, I know."

"Oh, yes sir! It's as exciting as when the original pact was approved, I'm sure. And, considering Australia's strategic location, we'll be using these upgrades a lot."

The admiral patted the fellow on the shoulder. "Patriots like you, son, will be essential to protect democracy in the future."

He turned without a goodbye, ready for his own lunch and leaving the "patriot" to begin loading the upgrade plans onto a solid-state drive.

"Who's that?" Castilblanco said to van Coevorden.

They were all staring at different monitors in the MI5's surveillance van. Other MI5 agents had been shadowing Liu and concluded something was going to happen when the spy's stroll ended in a park and he sat on a bench, unfolded a copy of the Times, and began reading it. The field agents had called for the surveillance van, that masqueraded as a heating system and repair vehicle, to move to the park.

They had just seen a man with a briefcase and small belt-pack tourists often used sit down on another bench about ten meters away from where Liu sat with his paper. The new arrival took the belt-pack off, pulled out a small pair of binoculars, and studied the bridge in the distance like he was a tourist.

They all studied the newcomer.

"Looks familiar," Winston said.

The newcomer had walked to the bench with a purposeful stride as if a broomstick were up his back. He was young with a full head of blond hair. They couldn't see his eyes, but he was clean-shaven. He looked to be about Winston's height, not a tall man at all. In general, he looked like any other young Briton, and certainly not Chinese.

"Just like any tourist," van Coevorden said. "And if Liu is pretending to be one, he's not doing a very good job of it. Put the new bloke into facial recognition anyway."

"Wait!" Castilblanco said. "He's leaving and he left the belt-pack on the bench."

"That has to be the hand-off," said Rogers. "But not to Liu?"

"Let's see if Liu picks it up." Winston leaned into his monitor. "He's getting up. Now he's heading away from both benches."

"Not a hand-off," said van Coevorden.

"Okay, people," Winston said to the field agents stationed around the small city park after making his mike hot, "let's tail Mr. Liu once again. We'll stay in the van until further notice from you."

"Skateboarder!" Rogers said.

They watched as a man on a skateboard bent towards the bench as he scooted by. He grabbed the belt-pack.

"That's the hand-off!" van Coevorden said.

"Get all three of them!" Winston told the agents in the field. "Do you read me?"

They got no one. Winston ordered facial recognition to be used on the skateboarder as well. "Let's send all the video records we collected to both offices," he said.

Nothing more happened with Liu during the hours that followed, so their surveillance ended. By the time they'd given up and returned to the Home Office building, the facial recognition results from MI5 HQ were waiting for them.

"The belt-pack bloke is an aide to one of the Australians, Admiral Peterson. That's why he looked familiar. His name is Ben Crosby. We don't know who the skateboarder is." Winston

looked around the little group that was back in the same little room at the Home Office. "Maybe that wasn't a hand-off to the Chinese?"

Castilblanco laughed. "Right now, Liu Chao-Xiang probably has all the new specs for the submarine upgrades, assuming Crosby had access, of course. We should have a little chat with him to confirm that, don't you think?"

"And give Jeremy Brand the bad news," said Rogers.

"What do we know about this Crosby?" van Coevorden said, "beyond being Admiral Peterson's aide?"

Winston began reading from his laptop: "Born in Sydney, 1995. Engineering student at the uni there, joined the navy after graduating. Three years a submariner, following papa's lead. The father served with Peterson, so it was probably easy for the admiral to choose the son to be his aide."

"Could the father be involved?" Rogers said.

"I doubt it," Winston said. "He's retired."

"Stating the obvious," Castilblanco said, "someone got to him, and I think his name might be Liu."

"It would be interesting to know how," van Coevorden said.

"There's a list of possibilities," Rogers said. "Greed, lack of advancement, overbearing father—feel free to add to the list."

"Overbearing father?" said Castilblanco.

"Mine was a damn bully, always quick with the belt. Getting even for that could take many forms."

"Did you get even?" Castilblanco said with a smile.

"Damn right I did. Showed him how to live right and not be a prick."

"Let's get back to the problem at hand," van Coevorden said. "Who's going to tell Brand?"

"I'll tell Brand," Winston said "You three get the arrest process started. We can't let Crosby get away too. I'd like to nick all three and play them off against each other in interrogation."

"Crosby will be leaving the country if he's been collaborating with Liu," Rogers said. "We'll have to act quickly. I'm betting the skateboarder is a local, though. Maybe Liu was only there to oversee his handiwork, not completely trusting amateurs?"

"We already have alerts out all over the country for Liu," van Coevorden said. "It won't matter much to have them watch for another two blokes."

"The Aussie will blend in better," said Castilblanco with a smile. "Looks perfectly English compared to Lou and me. With the hoodie, hard to tell what ethnicity the skateboarder has. Let's hope the facial recognition can work through that."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Liu Chao-Xiang entered the Chinese restaurant lost amidst the vast London conurbation, gave a nod to the owner washing glasses behind the bar, and made his way to the rear past the kitchen to a storeroom. Ben Crosby stepped out to meet him.

Liu was careful. The Australian looked desperate, so there was no telling what he might do. *Can I calm him down?*

The Chinese spy often had to deal with amateurs, and Crosby was certainly in that category. He liked the young man who was smart enough that he could be a good spy with grooming. Gathering intelligence for Beijing depended on finding those who ignored the warnings that came with security clearances, especially when attending top secret conferences: Beware of strangers and trust no one. Whatever the reasons, people fell into their traps, mostly for money but often just for the adventure. The Americans did it to the Russians and Chinese, and Russia and China returned the favors. It was a chess game where the pieces sometimes ended up destroyed. That could be Crosby's fate, as it had been for the doppelgangers, who had a bit more experience.

"They're after me," Crosby said to Liu. "Somehow they found out about our little scheme."

"Can't be helped. And it wasn't a little scheme, Ben, but a large and very important one. Our mission was a partial success, never fear. You did good work. You will receive the rest of your reward."

Crosby brandished a knife. "Don't even think about doing to me what you did to your three stooges, throwing Carson to the wolves and killing the other two. In fact, you damn well better find me a way to get out of this damn country now, or you're not leaving here."

Liu smiled. "My, how the little pup has grown into the snarling dog that turns on its master." He knew there was some danger; Crosby had gone through basic training, after all, and probably knew how to use the knife.

"I trusted Carson a lot more than you. And your track record is hardly good. How many people have you killed in your sleazy spy life, pal?"

"Not even the MSS knows that," Liu said, flashing another nervous smile. "Let's be pragmatic, Ben. Our work is done now. We both should return to our normal lives."

"What normal life could I now have?"

Liu shrugged. "You made your choices. From my viewpoint, you made the right ones. You can even return to Australia after things settle down a bit, although I'd disappear into one of the larger cities, like Melbourne or Sydney, and stay away from Canberra and navy people,"

"Not a bad plan, but my first priority is to leave the UK. How will you set that up?"

"I already have."

Liu explained the plan. That seemed to calm the Australian.

Crosby had loved the idea of submarines as a child, hearing everything about them from his old man. He was enthralled when he served on one, just like his father had. That submarine had been one of the old diesels, but he hadn't cared—he'd been living his dream.

What he hated was his father's convincing Admiral Peterson to take him on as his aide. Instead of a future in a submarine, hopefully moving up to be a captain someday, he'd become the admiral's slave, a personal assistant who was the invisible man always lurking in the shadow of the great admiral.

Sure, that had brought him a promotion and a bit more money from the Australian navy, but it also meant a lot of work; buried in that drudgery, he'd seen little chance for more advancement and a return to his life in the deep. Scuba diving in the Great Barrier Reef couldn't compare to gliding so far below the waves.

I had to make them pay! It wasn't so much for the money, although that first installment got him out of debt. It was simply payback to a country that had destroyed his dreams.

Wu Huiz-Hong, the science attaché at the Chinese embassy, looked up from his desk as his secretary showed the spy Liu Chao-Xiang into his office. The spy winked at the lovely secretary as she left.

"Nice fringe benefits, Wu. Does your wife know?"

"They have surveillance outside. Were you careful?"

"Of course. I took off my old woman's disguise before coming to your office. I'll put it back on again when I leave." He plopped into one of the comfortable chairs in front of the desk. "So it's done. I won't say it's been a wonderful time working with you, but it's over with now. Have they got what they needed from the hard-drive?"

"That will take some time. The skateboarder has received his reward. They assure me the weights won't come off this time. You should get rid of Crosby too. We don't need the West to question any of these people."

"Sorry. I won't do that. Crosby might be useful to us in the future, so I've created an escape route for him."

"Without my permission?"

"I don't need your permission, Wu. I have some direct connections to our security personnel in Beijing, the military arm of the MSS, to be precise. They're quite helpful in attending to my requests."

"I'm the one who made this coup possible."

"You think you did, and you might have claimed that to a few bureaucrats back home, but I'm the one who completed the mission. People in Beijing who count know that. The people in real power in the MSS know that you're just another bureaucrat who happened to learn about the conferences at a cocktail party. I did the heavy lifting, as the Americans say."

"I won't forget this, Liu."

"I hope you don't. Otherwise, I might have to remind you in a very unpleasant, lethal manner. Just remember, if I'd wanted to kill Crosby, he'd be dead by now. The same goes for you. Have a good day, Wu."

Liu left the office, smiling. If British security was after him as well—he was sure they'd noticed him on that park bench—Crosby's escape route could be his as well. *I always plan ahead.*

Liu didn't know where his next assignment would take him, but he had no firm plans for retirement beyond his secret bank account hidden from his Chinese masters. While he hated the West, he had to admit he liked its easy if imperialistic lifestyle; he also had enjoyed his tourist-

like journey from Australia to the US and on to the UK. China would eventually dominate them and the rest of the West in everything, if it didn't already, but they always seemed to have secrets worth stealing. And people like Crosby made it so easy.

Wu, on the other hand, was just a stupid bureaucrat. Liu had no use for bureaucrats, for those in the West or China. Xi was the worst example, a foolish old man who was full of himself. They were even running Russia into the ground, of course, a country where China's fascist capitalism based on sound ideology had never taken hold; instead, Putin had morphed the country into a bad copy of the old Cosa Nostra.

He sighed. The world was going to hell. He'd have to be careful he wasn't dragged down with it.

Chapter Thirty-Three

'Twas the day after Christmas, and Esther had closed her gallery early because the city's center was dead. Only Harry had been there—the others had the day off—so she considered it only fair to send him home early too; and then she decided that her latest restoration project could damn well wait. She gave a little salute to the Chinese paintings; she had agreed to put some better frames on them for the buyers, but that could also wait.

She set the alarm system and locked up. That made her think of Langston's comment: *Do I need a better security system?* Somewhere she had a recent inventory, but it didn't include Roberta and Ricardo's additions nor those Chinese paintings, just the older Renaissance and pre-Renaissance little-known works by even lesser-known artists, some a lot more valuable than the modern paintings after she'd restored them. She'd have to invite Langston in and get his opinion.

Bastiann was off doing something with that MI5 gang of his, which probably now included Castilblanco and Rogers, so after she arrived home, she tidied up the flat a bit more out of boredom. In the midst of that chore, Ophelia, the alias for the woman who was checking on their little Scottish castle now and then, called to wish her Merry Christmas. Sylvia Bassett had a checkered history, but she had seemed to get her life straightened out and had settled into domestic bliss with her partner, Melissa Davidson.

"Everything okay up there?" Esther said.

"You had a squatter in the castle."

"Oh my. I'd put in a security system if I thought the local plods would ever respond to an alarm. Did he steal anything?"

There wasn't much to steal there beyond Bastiann's electronics. An old Aga might bring some dosh for a thief if a collector bought it—it would have to be cleaned up—but Esther considered it to be hardly worth the trouble. She learned long ago the stoves weren't quintessentially British; some Swede had invented them.

"No, but Melissa discovered him washing himself on your bed."

"What? That's gross!"

Sylvia laughed. "It was a handsome prince, a white tomcat. Tame as anything, a real purr-baby. We took him home with us and later to the veterinarian. He's in good health but without a chip, so we're keeping him. Melissa named him Snowflake."

"I'll have to meet him next time I'm up your way," Esther said with a chuckle. "Did he have any cat-girlfriends who will miss him?"

"He's neutered, so someone owned him. Melissa and I think that someone just dumped him on the main road, and he found his way to your castle."

"Little bugger had good tastes, now that we've made it a nice and cozy getaway. Does he put Melissa and your plans on hold?"

"We're still waiting for all the legalities to be sorted. The paperwork for adoption isn't easy. And then we'll be waiting for a baby who will probably be Chinese because parents there in that crazy culture only want male babies, and their horrible government has an even stricter quota on family size now."

"So you'll have Snowflake to spoil while you wait."

"That's what we plan to do, yes. Look, I have to go, Esther. Please say hi and Merry Christmas to Bastiann."

The call from Sylvia had put Esther's boredom on hold—chores didn't call for much creative thought—but now she needed additional distraction. She decided to get some sheet music and play her piano for a while.

On the piano above the brass plate with the name of its previous owner, one of her ex-spy partners in East Berlin, several Christmas cards stood on end as if asking her to play some carols. *A bit too late for that.* One made her smile, though. She'd sent the old priest and Bastiann's dear friend who lived near Lyon a photo of Botticelli's painting of St. John, St. James, and their father, all fishermen before throwing in their lot with Christ. Sergio Moretti, one of her Berlin handlers, had taken the photo shortly after the Uffizi Gallery hung his gift to them on a wall. The priest had used it to make Christmas cards. That reminded her to query the Vatican after New Year's Day to see if they'd taken any action on exploring St. John's tomb. Finding it had been quite the adventure that had put her and Bastiann in grave danger.

After that distraction, she couldn't concentrate on the music with all the old memories niggling at her brain. The brass plate invariably made her think of that old scoundrel Jeremy Brand and her adventures as an MI6 spy. Brand had participated in some of those before Sergio. The one that came to mind was when they were trying to extract a young East German scientist, her very first extraction from East Germany...

"That's all she had to offer?" Jeremy's colleague in West Berlin said, via coded message to Walther, the East German intermediary between the UK's West Berlin consulate and Brand embedded in East Germany along with Esther.

Jeremy frowned. *That prat in the consulate doesn't care about our lives; he just wants useful intel.* "Asylum effort risky. No way to determine if intel is useful," Jeremy told Walther to send in return.

"Worth the risk. We might have to extract our asset too. She'll at least need a new hairdo."

Jeremy now smiled. With every deep dive into East Berlin, Esther required a new identity and a new dye job. For him, it was a glimpse into what life might be like with a harem, although he knew just one Esther would be enough for him to handle.

"Inform later on extraction reqs. Decision solid about target?"

"Can use him no matter what. Onward."

Jeremy had never set up an extraction before, although he'd been at the spy game longer than Esther. Now he might have two to do, counting her. If they extracted the scientist, the Stasi would go after anyone they could find who had been in contact with him. Of course, both Esther and the young scientist would be in danger as well.

When he received the final plan, he didn't like it. The East Berlin train station was out—too many Stasi guards and dogs looking for East Berliners wanting to flee to the West, which was the next Berlin stop. They'd be looking for the scientist, in particular. The Stasi had recently also cracked down on lorries carrying goods to and from East Germany, mostly to, the goods destined for Communist Party VIPs, and supposedly returning empty to the West because the workers' paradise produced no goods of interest to the West. Opportunities to use those options came and went, but because they were too risky at the time, they'd come up with a different plan.

It was a bit much to ask of a novice spy and a young scientist. So much of the plan depended on luck, and none of those involved had any experience in extracting personnel. That all increased the risk level, which would be high even in the best of circumstances.

He had to admit there was a personal reason for him to worry. He rather liked Esther Brookstone, admired her bold attitude towards life, and understood her obsession for doing anything she could do to hurt the Soviet regime.

He couldn't let his feelings get in the way of his task, though. Despite his desire to keep her safe, they both had jobs to perform, thankless jobs in many ways, because Britain's leaders expected their spies to do their duty with no public recognition of their sacrifices.

He couldn't help considering what a relationship with Esther might be like. Maybe that would come later when they passed their batons to others in this strange race for world domination. No, domination was the Soviet goal. Stopping them from achieving it was the UK's.

Days later, a BBC crew climbed into a helicopter. Their job, filming a major news event in East Berlin where East Germany's leaders had wined and dined their Russian masters, was over. The Russians had asked for that coverage; UK leaders had convinced BBC to give it to them. The Russians had considered it good propaganda showing the world how well their satellite countries were coddled and protected, although everyone knew the Kremlin's iron fist squeezed them dry for Mother Russia.

Blood from stone, thought the pilot, saluting the BBC lads already aboard as he swung into the cockpit. He knew that the ride to the border would be dangerous. Some trigger-happy Stasi might decide to shoot them down. That would create an international incident the Soviet leaders wouldn't particularly like, creating a public outcry exacerbated by the fact that the East Germans had invited the BBC, ordered to do so by the Russians.

"Easy with that equipment!" one BBC photographer called out to the Stasi poking at the cargo under the helicopter. "If you break anything, you pay for it!"

The Stasi finally gave their permission to leave, and the helicopter took off, flying low during most of the short journey. Upon landing in West Germany, the BBC crew was picked up and taken into the small terminal at the heliport. No one in the terminal saw the black van pull alongside the chopper, presumably to load the television equipment stashed underneath.

"Can I shed this damn parachute now?" Esther said to Jeremy inside that van. Two agents were helping her and the scientist out of the duffel bags where they'd been hiding among shredded newspapers.

He smiled and nodded. "I'm glad you didn't need it," he said.

Esther was home safe, for the time being....

Okay, old girl, maybe it hadn't happened quite that way. She smiled. She wasn't above fantasizing a bit. As far as she knew, the calm and collected Brand had never been more than a close friend and colleague. Unlike Sergio Moretti, her other handler during the Cold War who more openly had a crush on her, especially after her count had passed on, Brand had never spoken to her about his feelings. Yet she had turned a few heads among Stasi agents, so it wasn't a stretch of the imagination that some of her male colleagues in MI6 had developed some romantic sentiments towards her as well. And all that time in East Germany, she'd been more or less a flirt in her role of young and vivacious *fraulein*.

Maybe it's the music? Chopin could make anyone feel romantic. Bastiann, we need some personal time together! Damn MI5!

Their door chime rang. Esther rose from her piano bench, walked over to the intercom, and said, "Who is it?"

"My name is Ben Crosby. From the meetings. I need to talk to your husband, Bastiann van Coevorden. I'm Admiral Peterson's aide."

She had no idea who Admiral Peterson was, but she flipped the deadbolt, opened the door slightly, but left the chain on.

"He's not here, young man. Frankly, I have no idea where he is. I can try to call him for you."

He pushed hard against the door, breaking the chain and sending Esther reeling. That's when she saw the nasty knife in his hand and knew she was in trouble.

"You have a car, Mrs. Brookstone. I checked in the car park. You're going to drive me to the west coast."

"If you say so. I suppose you'll kill me once we arrive at your destination?"

"Not for me to say. I have an appointment to keep at the shore. I've got some transportation lined up."

"What's going on?"

"Just shut up and do as I say!"

"You can't be more precise about your destination? Ferry ticket to Ireland? Boat out of Bristol, perhaps?"

"Stop guessing." He waved the knife. "I'll direct you as we go."

:"Um, an Australian accent, so Peterson and you are probably in the Aussie navy. What have you done, Mr. Crosby?"

"None of your damn business! Let's go!"

"I need my purse and keys."

"I'll follow you while you look for them."

She often left them in unusual places, often different ones, especially when she was in a hurry, like the night before to get Christmas dinner ready. It was a good thing the flat wasn't that big. She found the keys on her nightstand. She must have put them there the night before and didn't even see them when she took sheet music from the small bookshelf under the drawer. She pondered that for a moment and then left the flat's keys there, hiding that from Crosby who was standing at the bedroom's door.

Reggie Fox, looking a bit worse for wear from the previous evening's festivities, had fortuitously just returned from somewhere when they exited the lift into the building's underground car park.

"Hello, dear Reggie. Please tell Bastiann I'll bring Chinese takeaway home for later on. Probably fish—they get fresh fish every day, so it melts in your mouth--so have him cool some white wine. I must drop my friend here off at King's Cross station."

"I hope that wasn't some kind of code," Crosby said as they got into her Jaguar.

"Of course not. If anything, it will help my husband remain calm when he doesn't find me at home. Don't be such a prat." *The twit has forgotten about breaking in. That and the house keys should alarm Bastiann a lot more. If not, there's the hidden message in what I told Reggie, if the pillock can properly relay it.*

"Just drive, madame," he said, flashing the knife again.

She'd mentioned King's Cross to Reggie, hoping that Bastiann would remember what had occurred there. She now thought that had been a mistake. She hadn't told him many details, only that she and the CIA agent had chased the Hungarian assassin working for Russia in an attempt to avenge her old friend's wife. That was probably the worst of her clues because Bastiann had a lot on his plate and hadn't been directly involved in that chase. Worse, if he did remember the

incident, he might become confused and believe that Crosby was taking her on a train ride to somewhere.

Oh well, old girl, you did your best. Let's hope this ends as well as that chase ended.

She had almost everything worked out by the time they hit the avenue en route to the motorway: Crosby had done something horrible and was wanted by the authorities. It must all have something to do with that conference that brought the Castilblancos to London.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Bastiann did expect Esther to be there when he arrived. It was a small thing, but he rather liked coming home to someone he cared for. He hadn't that most of his life. He was surprised to see the broken chain and was about to call the police when Reggie Fox dropped by.

"Hello there, van Coevorden. Quite a bash last night, I dare say. You two do know how to throw a good party. I saw Esther down in the car park, by the way, and she told me to give you a message. She just took some young fellow to King's Cross. Train, I guess. No idea who he was. She didn't bother to introduce me to him. She's coming back with takeaway. What happened to your door chain? Old bird have a tantrum?"

"I don't know. What exactly did she say?"

"That's more or less all there was. Oh, and that the takeaway would be Chinese, probably fish, so you should cool some white wine."

Bastiann was puzzled. While he could eat fish, he never did when eating ethnic Chinese food. And all their white wine was already chilled. *What's going on? Did Crosby or Liu show up here?*

"Can you describe this young fellow?"

Reggie had focused on the clothes, of course, and said that the fellow's suit was wrinkled and tie askew. He also said he had blond hair.

Bastiann thought: *Chinese, fish, and a fellow that might look like Crosby.* "Excuse me, Reggie. I have to make an important call."

"Cheers, then, old stick. Have a good evening. I plan to. Just had a tutoring session, and the lady needs some extra help."

Bastiann nodded. Normally he would rebut with some sarcastic remark—Reggie didn't act his age and believed he was God's gift to women—but Bastiann soon had Winston on the phone. "Crosby has Esther. If she gets hurt, twice is too many times, Robert."

He was referring to previous cases where Winston had put Esther in danger. Not that she wasn't quite capable of going after Winston alone, but Bastiann had still felt the need to tell him he was treading on thin ice.

"Any idea where he's taking her?"

"She's probably being forced to drive him. Our upstairs neighbor met them in the underground car park."

"You didn't answer my question."

Bastiann repeated Reggie's version of Esther's message and then continued: "'Chinese' might symbolize that Esther knows who he's working for. Hold on. Let me check something." He wanted to check the menu for their usual Chinese takeaway restaurant that was in Esther's nightstand drawer. He found it and also Esther's house keys. She'd never leave the flat without them. "'Fish' might mean she suspects a Chinese ship or submarine. Liu might have provided Crosby with an escape plan. Maybe Liu will use it too. Esther and Crosby might be headed for the coast. The question is: Which one?"

"If it's a Chinese sub that's picking Crosby or Liu up, there's a lot of coastline to cover."

"East coast is closer, but neither one is too far if they go straight in either direction."

"Then we have to cover both directions. And up the coasts and to the south."

"'Fish' might also mean a ship, like I said, maybe a freighter docked at a port. Southampton, going southwest, is the closest port, at 77 miles; Bristol, going due west, is the

next nearest, at about the same distance; and there are several ports on the eastern coast where freighters from China often dock."

The UK was one big island, so there were smaller ports along that island's shores. Ports for ships, but any coastal area worked for a submarine. Bastiann doubted that Brand and his team could cover them all. There wasn't the manpower, and there wasn't time to mount an all-out search either.

"I can easily cover two ports by proxy, Newcastle and Southampton. Otherwise, it's all on you, Robert. Just do what you can. I'm going to question Reggie some more after I do my small part."

"Let me know if you find her. I'll do the same."

Bastiann knew an Inspector Reston who ran the NCA office in Southampton; Hal Leonard and he had just collaborated with her to prepare a sting operation there that went after arms traffickers. From Esther, he also knew about Inspector Gregg in Newcastle. He chose to call Reston first. Not only did he figure that she'd be more pleasant to deal with than Gregg, but he also already knew her.

"I'll get the local plods involved too. I'd forget about submarines here at the port, but we can check passenger ships and freighters. We don't have the usual number here now because of the holidays, thank goodness. A belated Merry Christmas to you and Hal, by the way."

"Thank you. The same to you and your family. My best Christmas present will be to find Esther alive and well." He rang off.

Esther had described Gregg as a gruff old man who was competent enough. He came across that way on the phone, both gruff and efficient, the last after a bit of mental meandering. He listened patiently as Bastiann explained the situation.

"So you're the bloke who was brave enough to marry her? She mentioned you when she was here."

"Her fourth husband, to put a fine point on it, so she collects the brave souls. Please, if we may, can we stay focused? I'd like to ask you the favor of checking the ships at your port."

"The day after Christmas? You're assuming that Aussie who kidnapped her is set on leaving the country. He could just lie low and keep her as a hostage."

"I doubt it. And he might kill her first and then hop on a ship to escape."

"That woman can get into a lot of trouble, can't she? I'll see what I can do. There's bound to be some lads still on duty, but I'll wager most are still home with their families. And the ones who aren't won't be thrilled to go out in this feckin' cold."

"Thank you, Inspector. I owe you a favor."

"I hope I never need one from MI5. I'll let you know if we find her. Keep me posted too."

Bastiann sent photos of both Esther and Crosby attached to text messages for Reston and Gregg.

Gregg had made a valid point. Getting people to act on the day after Christmas would be difficult anywhere in the UK. He hoped Winston could be more persuasive. He also knew more people in the country than Bastiann, who wasn't native to the UK. That might be a handicap that would doom Esther.

He went upstairs to talk to Reggie Fox some more.

When Reggie threw open the door, he was in pajamas and slippers.

"Expecting someone else?" Bastiann said.

"Maybe. You look like you're upset. Want a drink? I have a nice cognac."

"I just want to grill you some more." He plopped into a wing chair.

"I'm working on a nice ale until my...um, student, arrives. So I can offer you that too."

"I'll have one of those instead of the cognac. I need to keep a clear mind. How did Esther appear to you?" Bastiann said when Reggie placed a glass and a bowl of mixed nuts on the table in front of him.

"She's always a bit cool towards me, so I dare say she looked completely normal."

"You must tell me exactly what she said."

"Um, I have a confession to make. I don't listen very closely to what women say. I focus on other things."

"I'm sure. But this is important."

"Um, let me think." He grabbed a handful of nuts and washed them down with sips of ale. Bastiann was losing patience. "Um, yes. Something about the fish being really fresh. Ah, that's it. She said it's so fresh it melts in your mouth. I'm sure she meant after cooking."

Bastiann said nothing; he was too deep in thought. Finally he had it and smiled. He might be wrong, but Esther's whole message seemed like a coded one, so what else could it be?

"Avonmouth," he said in a whisper.

"The fish in the restaurant is from there?" Reggie said.

"Excuse me a moment." He returned to the outside corridor and called Winston again. "I think she was telling me she was headed for Avonmouth, that Bristol port. Or its vicinity. Maybe just a guess, but it's something more concrete."

"That would narrow it down nicely, if true. We'll focus on that but keep searching the other possibilities. I'll keep you posted."

"Is Esther in some kind of trouble?" Reggie said when Bastiann returned to take his seat.

"She might be." He grabbed some nuts. "Might be my only dinner tonight. Thanks."

Reggie nodded but looked at his watch. "Sorry, old stick, but I'll have to eject you in fifteen."

Bastiann downed the rest of his ale. "Understood. Have a good evening."

He got up and left Reggie's flat.

Brand and Winston worked hard to get the search for Esther and her captor organized. That involved obtaining the Home Secretary's blessing. Police departments all over England had been alerted, even Police Scotland, in case the two were headed there. Remote stations in the British Isles that were still operating had also been notified. MI5 and NCA agents around the UK had been drafted to participate in the search too.

Winston thought van Coevorden's clue about Avonmouth and the seaside around Bristol might be a good one, near enough for Esther and Crosby to get there in around two hours.

"Can we depend on local police departments' SCO19s and NCA's armed agents to take care of the rest?" he said to Brand.

"I believe so. At any rate, I only have two counterterrorism tactical groups I can deploy. Where should I send them to do the most good?"

"Avonmouth and Felixstowe. Send them in helicopters. They'll get into place faster than any of the others, who will take a while to get sorted and into search mode. The helicopters can search from above and cue the commando groups that parachute down if they spot anything."

"That's going to cost a lot more."

"Damn the cost! Do you want Crosby or not? And do you want to save Esther?"

Brand shrugged. "She might already be dead, but the Home Secretary wants Crosby. I do too."

"And the Secretary gave you *carte blanche*!"

Brand nodded his agreement.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Take the M4 motorway west," Crosby said as Esther negotiated streets and curves after leaving her neighborhood behind, making her think her guess about Bristol couldn't be that far off. She'd only been there recently to protest a documentary the BBC studios there had made about her role in thwarting an ISIS terrorist attack; they'd made it without her permission.

"Again, what's our destination? I'm not that familiar with our west coast. I grew up in Hull."

That was a little lie: She was discounting the holidays taken on the west coast with her three previous husbands and a previous trip to western Ireland, but she wanted to turn on her GPS. She didn't know if Reggie had passed on her message to Bastiann, or whether he'd understood its double meaning, but, whether he had or not, maybe he could use the car's GPS to track her Jaguar.

"Just stay on the M4 for now." She still reached for the GPS toggle, planning to plead ignorance about how to get on the motorway. "No GPS! We'll find our way okay. You can turn it on when I say you can, when we're nearer to where I have to go."

That killed that idea. She hadn't dared toggle on the no-hands mobile feature—that would have led to the car and her mobile to have a noisy little chat as they synched up. *What use is technology if you can't use it in an emergency.*

Once on the motorway, Crosby turned on the radio and found a classical music station, sighed deeply, and leaned his head on the seat rest.

"Why are you doing this, Crosby?" she said softly, in respect for the music, not him.

"Doing what?" His eyes remained closed, but he smiled.

"Whatever has made you threaten me with a knife in order to leave London in such a hurry. Are you really an admiral's aide?"

"Of course I am, and I'm a damn good one, although I never received any recognition for it. And my mission is now complete. All I need to do now is escape from this damned country!"

"And betray your own?"

"What do you know about it? Australia's fallen over an economic precipice due to its incompetent governments, worse even than yours, and yet it pretends to be an important player in a Pacific alliance. What a bunch of shite! All the western democracies do is create economic chaos, time and time again, proving a strong man at the helm of a strong government is required to get things properly done."

"The whole world's in a bit of an economic downturn. Everyone's more or less in the same boat."

"Says the woman who has her own castle."

"You seem to know more about me than I know about you. Do you have parents who are still living?" He nodded. "Then think of the shame you'll be causing them: Their son, Ben Crosby the traitor."

"Oh, shut your yap!"

After that, Esther drove in silence for a while, not wishing to turn Crosby's rage into something more lethal. He might not want to drive because he was tired, but he certainly could have managed without her, which meant she was potentially a hostage. He didn't sleep, but his eyes were closed. She understood he was under a great deal of stress, but she couldn't feel sorry for him.

She almost wished he would drive. She didn't like driving at night. Thankfully the M4 was well lit and there was no fog. The miles rolled by. Every once and a while she spotted the CCTV cameras and slowed down a bit to make sure they got a good glimpse of the Jaguar. It was a habit many drivers had to avoid fines, so Crosby wouldn't suspect, or want transit coppers on their tail, for that matter. She hoped all the cameras were working.

Much later, Crosby became energized. "The junction with M5 is coming up. Go south toward Avonmouth. Near there, you can turn on your damn GPS because my escape route becomes a bit complicated."

He lapsed into silence again.

She smiled. *Good guess, Esther.*

Esther frowned as they passed the turnoff towards the harbor. *Not the port then.*

Crosby was studying the car's GPS display now. "There's an exit coming up. Take it."

They were soon on a winding road and then onto two more. Her dashboard compass said they were heading due west now.

"There's a turnoff to a small beach ahead. Take it."

It seemed like he didn't need the GPS anymore.

"There's a tiny car park at the entrance to the beach. Park there."

"What now?" she said after parking, trying to stare through the darkness to the ocean. Somewhere straight ahead was the southern coast of Ireland. "Are you waiting for someone?"

"Yes, we wait. Stop your blathering and relax. It might be a while."

"I'm a bit peckish. Got anything to eat?"

He reached into his coat pocket, took out two health bars, and handed her one. "Are you religious?"

"That's too personal a question."

"A reasonable one, considering your next-to-last husband, some Italian count, was an atheist."

Again, he has too much information! "I might be a believer, but I don't practice. Do you?"

"Of course not. I just wanted you to know the significance of that bar."

"And what might that be, pray tell?"

"It's your last supper. We can't leave witnesses."

So not a hostage. "We'll see. Like you said, we have some time."

She calmly peeled back the wrapper and took a bite. *Not half bad.* She looked at the brand. *I'll have to remember that.*

Some time later, there was a knock on her window. She saw a Chinese face, the nose pressed against the glass, and another auto now at the far end of the car park. Crosby got out, but the Chinese man said to get back in. The newcomer took a seat in the back. She noted he was unarmed, but now she had two threats to face instead of one, the two strong enough to overpower even her, especially when one had a knife.

"Who's the woman?" the Chinese man asked Crosby.

"Van Coevorden's bitch. She was a useful hostage, and her car provided me a nice ride here. A lot more stylish and comfortable than that old piece of junk you drove, I'm sure."

"Fool! We'll have to kill her."

"I already told her that. Don't get your shorts tied in a knot."

"I gave you an exit plan. You should be thankful and obey me."

"Look, old boy, you can preen and take all the credit you want once we're in China. I got you the damn plans, remember? You should have provided me an escape route to begin with. What happened to your famous planning?"

"Things happened too fast."

"Yeah, I know. Would have been nice to know who you really are, though. Wu, Liu. All your damn names seem to rhyme. I hope you've received your vaccines. Submarines can have tight quarters. I've served in them. I don't think China's are much different than Australia's. For all I know, the one that's coming still has Wuhan's air in it."

"That city isn't a port. And stop your babbling. We have to watch for the signal."

Esther took all that in, realizing that her message to Bastiann had been as good as she could have made it. *But was it good enough?*

Is it my time to die? Even not counting her MI6 adventures or those after she retired from the Yard, fate had been kind to her. She knew she'd led a charmed life, or many more lives than those allotted to the proverbial cat. *Will Sylvia and Melissa spoil theirs? I need some loving now.*

Fate had been fickle, though. She'd lost her first three husbands. They'd passed on before her of multiple ailments, so fate hadn't been kind to her in that sense. Their faces flashed through her mind and then faded into the mists of memory to be replaced by the face of her Dutchman. Their relationship was different: Her first three hadn't shared any dangerous adventures with her; Bastiann had, at least the later ones. Now he had a more dangerous job than he'd had with Interpol, but she was still in danger as if she were the MI5 agent, not him.

She couldn't fault her husband, of course. She'd thought he might be bored after retiring from Interpol, so she'd suggested to Jeremy Brand that he hire Bastiann as a consultant. *Was that a mistake?* She might be doomed to suffer the same fate as Donald Townes's wife Dorothy, a dear friend who'd been an innocent victim of someone trying to steal Donald's research.

In fact, the parallels are startling! She was sure that Crosby was on the run because he'd stolen some secrets. It bothered her that she might never know what they were or why he'd done it, or why she'd probably die because of his actions.

The waiting ended. Esther was the first to see the twinkling light on the ocean's horizon, but she didn't tell the other two. When Crosby saw it, he brandished the knife again.

"Out, old woman! They've come for us." He seemed relieved. "Don't worry. I'll make it quick. We have to go through a thorough basic training after enlisting."

She exited the car and stood by the door. He came around the front, the Chinese man following him. When they passed dead center in front, she hit the alarm button on her key fob. The headlights and taillights started flashing, and the horn blared and alternated with a siren moving up and down through several octaves. The two were momentarily blinded, and Esther dashed off into the brush and tall seagrass at the side of the car park. She didn't get far, though.

In the dark, she could only make out the dark form, a shadowy threat, and part of that shadow corresponded to a rifle. *Military-style automatic*, she thought. She weighed her chances against this new foe. *One on one, but he has a gun.*

The alarm stopped, so she could hear what he said. "Quiet, Mrs. Brookstone!" came the hissed whisper. "We're getting into position. Come with me."

They moved closer to the boundary between beach and vegetation determined by a tall berm about half her height. She felt much better now, and even more so when she heard the whump-whump-whump from a helicopter that reminded her of that first extraction in East Germany. A loud megaphone warned the two from the car and any scrotes on the beach to freeze and put up their hands. That warning was answered by gunfire.

"SCO19 from the Met?" she said to the stranger.

"MI5, madame. Can you shoot a gun?"

"Damn right I can!"

He handed her a pistol, a Walther PPK. She smiled at the irony. *Maybe he thinks I'm Jamie Bond, a female 007?*

"Stay here hiding, low behind the berm. But if anyone who comes along threatens you, don't hesitate to shoot."

"Understood. Good luck!"

"We'll have no problem, madam."

Her curiosity got the better of her. Because the beach was now lit by a sweeping searchlight beam from the helicopter, she had a front row seat to watch all the action from the brush and tall grass at the top of the berm.

With the spotlight, Esther could see that it was a beautiful little beach. The violence of the current scene she hoped would be brief seemed to insult what nature had created over so many centuries—the expanse of white sand met by whispering breakers; the soft breeze blowing in from Cork and across the Bristol Channel, keeping the submarine's dinghy near to the shore; and the scudding clouds, adding character to the night sky by reflecting the distant lights on the horizon of Avonmouth Harbor.

She jerked when a rocket from the helicopter took out the dinghy. The two in that boat who'd been shooting at the helicopter were surely dead now. She then spotted Crosby with his hands held high. *Such a brave man! Where is that Chinese scrote?* When two others from the dinghy fell wounded onto the sand, the remaining two also surrendered. *No problem indeed!*

Seeing that the firefight was over, she came out of hiding. She walked towards Crosby with a purposeful stride. He was covered by an MI5 commando who couldn't stop her as she slapped him upon reaching him.

"That's for your poor parents, you bastard!"

The commandoes had brought a medic with them for obvious reasons. They insisted that he check Esther over. Walking to their van parked between her Jaguar and the other car to be poked and prodded, she noted yet another body bag. She supposed that was the Chinese fellow.

The medic confirmed that she was in good health before attending to the other wounded, two of the Chinese who'd come ashore in the dinghy. A prisoner van for the healthy ones and two ambulances would haul them all away.

"There must be a submarine at sea," she said to the man talking on a satellite phone.

He stopped talking into the phone long enough to say, "We preferred to avoid an international incident, madam. Sinking their submarine would have certainly caused one. The Home Office will discreetly mention something to the Chinese government, to be sure, and perhaps set up a prisoner exchange through diplomatic channels."

"Keeping this all out of the press, are we?"

He only nodded and handed her the phone. "Your husband wants to talk to you."

"Are you all right, Luv?" Bastiann said, his voice sounding strange over the phone.

"Crosby doesn't have whatever he stole, Bastiann. I don't think the Chinese fellow did either. It must be at the Chinese embassy."

"You figured out a lot, Luv. The spy Liu is dead and the man he bribed in custody. A good catch, I dare say, but I'll repeat: Are you okay?"

"A bit stressed out. And if there hadn't been two, I could have taken Crosby. He didn't even have a gun, just an ugly looking knife. Actually, the Chinese bloke had no weapon at all. Imagine. Two criminals obeying our gun laws!"

"I know. Answer my question completely."

"Don't be such a bore. I'm just knackered. Stop your blather and twaddle. Why were you so late, by the way?"

"Trying to chase down whatever Crosby stole. As you suggested, we had to assume he'd already passed it on. How'd you guess it was China?"

"China or Russia, what's the difference? Crosby was a traitor who did whatever he did for money, I'm sure, not for any ideology."

"But your message mentioned Chinese takeaway."

"There were those suggestive images I saw on your laptop before Christmas dinner. And Crosby said upfront that he'd been in the meetings that you and Castilblanco are attending, and that he was some Australian admiral's aide. Australia means Pacific, which hints more to China than Russia. I could have been wrong. But who the hell gets Russian takeaway? You might not like fish, Mr. van Coevorden, but I hate *borsht*!"

Chapter Thirty-Six

Brand eyed van Coevorden after he finished talking with his wife. "Seems like she's okay. Are you?"

"I feel better, yes. I suppose MI5 interrogators will put the screws to Crosby?"

"They will. MI6 wants in on the act too, for obvious reasons. He doesn't have whatever he stole, but he possesses important intel. I guess he figured we'd have surveillance on public transportation, so Liu helped him create an escape plan. His escape to the shore wasn't planned very well, I dare say, by him or Liu, who probably planned most of it, if only the connection with the submarine. Crosby knew about you and your wife and got creative, I guess, in order to have an easier trip, or possibly using her was a hostage, an insurance policy. In any case, I'm happy everything turned out all right for Esther." Brand flashed van Coevorden a smile. "Now we have to get Wu if we can. We're sure he's also connected to MSS."

"For all you know, he's the one who planned all the murders. Thackeray needs to step up. Diplomatic immunity doesn't cover murder, not in the UK."

"Then we should help the good inspector, don't you think? He's coming in soon. Your little group is being reconstituted after your holiday recess."

"What recess? And Winston?"

"He might be a little late because he's cleaning up after that beach incident. All that action might have awakened a few people in the area, but it was necessary to make sure your wife wasn't harmed. She's okay, but are you?"

Van Coevorden wondered why Brand was so insistent. *Did Winston tell him about my threat?*

"She won't be too happy that your commando leader will drive her back to London. Her Jaguar is like a family pet. Hers. She doesn't even like me to drive it."

"Even the new one?"

Van Coevorden just smiled.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

DCI David Thackeray wasn't pleased that they expected him to prove Liu or Wu—he couldn't keep the damn Chinese pillocks straight—had ordered the murders of the two victims they'd fished out of the Thames.

"Do I have this correct? You can't do anything to get him out of the embassy without a murder charge?"

Castilblanco, van Coevorden, and Winston all nodded. Rogers looked embarrassed. *For them, or for me?*

"Um, that's a fine kettle of fish. Why not just let him rot in the embassy? Or wait until he comes out and nick him?"

"We don't have solid proof that he had anything to do with Crosby and Liu," van Coevorden said. "Liu could have been just using his name." They'd learned that Crosby knew Liu as Wu.

"Liu was sitting on that bench. He was also on that beach. You know he orchestrated the whole thing. And he's dead. End of story?"

"And he was following the conference from country to country," Castilblanco said. "All circumstantial evidence for the murders, David. You know that. But we think he needed that contact in the embassy, so we'd like to get something on Mr. Wu as well."

"Okay, Mr. brilliant NYPD homicide detective Castilblanco, can you make any feckin' suggestions about how to do that? I'm flummoxed. We've canvassed the area. No one saw anything that night."

"They would have brought the bodies to that little park in a van or an SUV," Castilblanco said. "Doesn't London have CCTV cameras all over the place?"

"That little tip of a park had two, but one was pointed in the wrong direction and the other wasn't functional. And now you'll be asking about the approach streets. Every damn street in the vicinity is an approach street! Draw a radius around that park and you'll have at least one hundred cameras, I'd wager. Who can check them all?"

"Between the transit coppers, the Yard, and MI5, we should be able to cover it," van Coevorden said with a wink at Castilblanco and Rogers.

"Fat chance we get all that help," Thackeray said.

"Freddie March and Jeremy Brand can twist a few arms in the Home Office. And an order from the Home Secretary can't be taken lightly. We can even get the NCA involved."

"Um, okay. That might produce some results. Would the van or SUV have diplomatic plates?"

"Probably not," van Coevorden said. "And it's probably unmarked or a hire-vehicle. That's better than a diplomatic plate if we can determine what agency was used."

"Maybe. Let's do it then."

In a video from a camera five blocks from the little park, a transit copper who'd been encouraged to help out spotted the van. The young man was quite pleased with himself, even more so when software could zoom in and unblur the rear plate that didn't have its required

lighting but was visible enough in the moonlight with enhancement. The van turned out to be a hire-car leased to T. S. Eliot.

"Cute," van Coevorden said. "Maybe Liu liked *Cats*?"

"Let my team find out who this Mr. Eliot is," Thackeray said, oblivious to van Coevorden's reference, either because he was extremely focused or because he was an uncultured ignoramus. Van Coevorden hoped it was the former. In a way, he liked David Thackeray, even though Esther considered him a prat.

"All yours," Castilblanco said with a smile. "Bastiann and I can meet Esther and Pam for lunch now. We've been neglecting our wives with all this crap going on."

"Where will those ladies be shopping?" said Winston.

"Harrods, I think. Any good places to eat around there?"

"I know a few," van Coevorden said. "Not to worry."

Rogers ducked out of the meeting too, leaving Winston to fine tune the search with Thackeray. *Probably not a good idea*, van Coevorden thought. The two mixed like oil and water. He considered them both competent, but he'd never call them friends. At least Brand and Winston had redeemed themselves a bit by saving Esther.

Van Coevorden wasn't sure lunch with the two women was such a good idea either. They might be chattering like magpies about shopping when he could care less, especially after just finishing Christmas shopping not that long ago. He was sure Castilblanco would be of the same mind.

While the van was a rental, the leasing agency had its own CCTV as part of its security system. Wu Huiz-Hong, not T. S. Eliot, had rented it. The picture was damning. Moreover, they hadn't detailed the van for another lessee yet. SOCOs were pouring over it. Winston took off; Thackeray also left to oversee evidence collection from the van.

The man from Scotland Yard and his detective sergeant watched the forensic team do their thing. "An unmarked van headed in the river's direction? That's our best lead yet."

"Good idea getting the transit plods to pitch in and help, Guv," Sanderson said.

"That's why I'm a DCI and you're a DS, my dear." He hadn't mentioned to her that it had been a MI5 and NCA collaborative team effort as well, and that he'd texted a still from the video to Winston to get Wu's ID confirmed. It was better to keep her in the dark. That avoided questions.

"You seem to be fixated on this Chinese fellow who rented the van. Are you assuming he used it to carry the bodies to the Thames?"

"Problem is, Wu might have just got the van for Liu's use. We need something to tie him to their murders. Let's hope our forensics team finds that."

The lead SOCO approached them. "Lots of traces, Guv, including blood."

It took a while, but the traces led to both Liu and Wu. Some also matched a Caucasian who had form in the Yard's records. They identified his prison picture with the missing skateboarder.

That started a dredging operation. The skateboarder's body was found. Given that Liu had fled with Crosby, that meant that Wu was connected to the skateboarder's murder.

Thackeray snapped his fingers when he heard the news. "By Jove, we've got him!"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Wu tried to pressure the old ambassador into legal action against the UK government to prevent MI5 from arresting him, but the ambassador would have none of it. He'd already queried Beijing and was following orders. Besides, diplomatic immunity didn't trump a murder charge.

Whereas Wu looked like a military man with his buzz cut and bearing, not a scientist at all, the ambassador looked like he could be an old monk who was hiding away in some mountain temple to avoid Chinese authorities. He hadn't been in the march with Mao—that was too long ago—but he was certainly more a true Communist than either Wu or that old president-for-life and strongman in Beijing; President Xi, like Putin, was simply an old-style strongman who used the communist ideology to justify oppressive control of his people and violence and murders against them.

When the ambassador spoke, his voice was soft, raspy, and menacing.

"They don't want an incident, and neither will the British," he said. "When will you people at MSS learn that western security is good even if western democracies are mostly chaotic?"

They verbally wrangled for a while longer, but Wu knew it was a lost cause. They would hand him over to the British authorities, and he would soon become another Chinese patriot like Liu who was sacrificed for the greater good, which was really determined by Xi. After all, they still had the solid-state drive with all the plans for the submarine upgrades, both hardware and software. Wu could rest easy knowing that. He believed he would be remembered a lot more than Liu for his patriotism.

The embassy's security turned Wu over to MI5 agents outside the compound. He was treated with respect but not gently. He knew many weeks of interrogation awaited him. *Can I resist?* He hoped there would be a prisoner trade, although his future in Beijing would be more difficult than any in the UK. *It would be nice to die at home in Shanghai, though.*

He recognized the building when they arrived. MI5 HQ. *Will the interrogations begin today?* He steeled himself mentally. The British interrogators couldn't be nearly as bad as MSS ones.

One agent helped him out of the car. He stood tall and stretched while staring at the plain building. *Had MI5 been lucky? What had gone wrong with Liu's plans?* Maybe he could ask that.

He never saw the man on the scooter. He only felt the bullets rip through him.

The MI5 agents returned fire, but they didn't hit their mark as the scooter zigged and zagged away from them. Although its rider had a gun, he didn't shoot back at the agents. He seemed unsure atop his scooter as he disappeared from sight. Finally, the driver turned into a side street, ran it up on the sidewalk, and dashed away to where a car waited for him.

He jerked off the helmet and tossed it and the gun into the back seat.

"You have your revenge, my love." The Chinese man kissed his wife.

"I couldn't imagine a better use of the proceeds from the sale of your art, husband. We have to get rid of the gun and the clothes now. They'll be looking for you, so maybe we should burn everything."

"Won't burn well. We'll bury everything in some secluded spot. The scooter will tell them nothing."

She started the engine but didn't pull away. "That man had to pay for raping me, right?"

"Yes. We both can rest easier. We now can have a good life here and forget about that terrible monster. And our homeland's problems. I have no regrets about what I did. I did it for you."

"I know."

She drove off back towards Birmingham, not that long a drive. He put some music on. The hire-car had a good sound system.

As they drove north along M40, the artist slept. He awoke when his wife pulled into a rest stop. He saw that she was crying.

"I have done wrong, husband."

He reached for her and hugged her. "Don't say that. You were his victim."

"But the revenge I wanted was wrong, and it doesn't make me feel much better. And I made you into a killer. We took justice into our own hands."

He let her go and stared out the hire-car's windscreen at the people entering and leaving the busy shop, those leaving often carrying coffee and snacks.

"That monster would never have faced justice for what he did to you here or in China. Sometimes one has to make one's own justice. Huang should have executed those two monsters who attacked his daughter too."

"No! All that's wrong. It's barbaric!"

"What that monster did to you was barbaric! I don't want to hear anymore about this. We must get on with our lives."

She found a tissue in her purse and dabbed at her eyes. "I suppose." She eyed the visitor center. "We might as well use the loo." She patted his arm. "Could you drive afterwards? I need some rest."

"Of course. I'll get you some snacks. They might even have your favorite fiber bars. You need to eat for two, you know."

Fury distorted her face. "I can't raise his child."

"You have no choice now. It's too late."

"We'll give it up for adoption. Otherwise, it would be like having the spawn of the devil living in our house."

"Okay. Adoption's a possibility. Let's talk about that later. We need to get home to our family."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Brand, who still felt a bit knackered from all that had gone on, had to go to a secure room to read the message that had come in. It was from the old USN admiral who'd organized the technical meeting:

Here's my final summary: Our engineering gurus put their heads together and came up with improvements to both hardware and software that will be three times better than what was planned for in the meetings' discussions. They also caught and corrected a few critical errors in what remained of the original upgrades. Thanks for all your help. Details follow.

Brand smiled. The message to him was only a copy of the missive sent to only a few VIPs in the Australian, UK, and US delegations, as well as to those countries' leaders. Most of the MI5 team, including Winston, van Coevorden, Castilblanco, Rogers, and Thackeray weren't copied. Brand would have to leave them guessing about whether the Chinese had succeeded in stealing the plans. They had, of course, but now those plans were superseded...and also apparently defective if not worthless.

Sometimes you can win at this game in strange ways.

His job was essentially done. The prosecution of Crosby and the Chinese captured at the beach would be someone else's problem. He suspected that the latter might quietly be used in a prisoner swap, maybe even for prisoners in Hong Kong deemed more valuable than Freddie March's artists. He wanted no part of those decisions.

His last action would be to figure out what kind of reprimand the agents who allowed Wu to be assassinated would receive. That was tricky. They weren't completely to blame. He and those above him, including the Home Secretary, had never expected that the Chinese might want to or could tie up loose ends so quickly. The assassination had been professionally done, so he didn't doubt the assassin was a Chinese agent. *Probably sent by the MSS to the country like Liu. That's not a win*, he thought. *It would have been nice to grill Wu.*

Admiral Peterson saw Crosby's parents as soon as he exited the gate. While not surprised, he didn't know what to say to them. All that they'd been told was that their son was being held by the UK's MI5, but they'd probably made their old conclusions, especially the canny old father.

That father immediately confronted him. "How could you let that happen, Sharky?" said the old submariner, who'd been Peterson's XO long ago.

Now the admiral knew what to say. "Sean, he made his own choices. I had nothing to do with those choices."

"He was your aide and with you all the time. How could you not see what was going on, whatever it was, and put a stop to it? He would have listened to you. You were his role model."

"The only clue that I had was that he considered Reality Winner one of his heroes. What she did might be considered patriotic. What he did can't be. No way."

Peterson was referring to the woman in the US who'd released an NSA Top Secret document proving Russian meddling in America's 2016 election. She'd been unfairly persecuted, but her actions still had been against the law.

"I'm not sure what he did, but that's insulting. My boy served you well."

"I don't think so, considering what he did. I don't understand why he did it, but he went astray somewhere along the way. That's all I can say."

"Empty words, Sharky."

The man spun on his heels and stomped off. His wife watched him go for a moment and then turned to the admiral.

"I'm sorry, Joe. He needs to blame someone, anyone but Ben. He didn't know about the gambling debt."

Peterson's bushy eyebrows raised. He hadn't known about that either. Although it probably wouldn't have made any difference if he had—even if he'd loaned Crosby the money to cover it, the young man would have just gambled again—he now had the duty of informing MI5 about it. They were still trying to make sense of everything, and it wasn't clear that Crosby would talk.

"I'm sorry, Helen. I truly didn't know. I just expect people to do their jobs. I can't solve every sailor's personal problems, even though I know, just like many civilians, they have them. We do our best in the navy, but our mission comes first."

She smiled a thin, sad smile and then nodded, but then the tears began. "I know. Were the conferences otherwise successful?"

"I believe so. Threats to democracy are more sophisticated now, so we have to be more sophisticated too. Let's hope it's enough sophistication that democracy in our world can survive."

Lou Rogers had rescheduled for JFK instead of Dulles after last talking with Monique. He hated flights across the pond going either way, especially in coach, but he had the good fortune of having the middle seat empty on his return trip.

The movie was some fluffy rom com, so he began reading the book he'd bought in his London hotel's gift shop, which turned out to be a sci-fi mystery for young adults. He got into it, though, because it was about some kids and a mutant cat on a much-expanded International Space Station in the future. The author was Irish, but he'd taken some dead guy's first edition and rewrote and reedited it.

Rogers had been fascinated by the idea of space travel when he was a kid, although he figured a black kid from Watts could never become an astronaut. The idea that in the future the ISS might become a hub for interplanetary space travel was intriguing. That diverse gang of kids made him smile because it reminded him of his group of black and brown *amigos* on his high school football team. And the cat who could do calculus gave him a chuckle too.

"Interesting book?" said the man in the window seat.

"Better than I thought it would be." Rogers looked across at the man and saw the collar.

"Sorry, father, but probably not for you. It's sci-fi."

The older man smiled. "I like sci-fi. It's a basically harmless way to point out human beings' problems and allow us to study them in a neutral context."

"That's very perceptive." Rogers stretched out a hand. "Lou Rogers."

"Declan Rafferty, Lou. Do you live in New York?"

"No. DC area. I'm meeting someone there, though. You?"

"My parish is in Caldwell, New Jersey, but I live in Woodland Park." He gave Rogers a card. "If you ever need my services."

Rogers handed him a copy of the same card he'd given Monique. "I'm in the security business as well, which you'll probably never need." He pointed to the cabin's ceiling.

As he continued to read, though, he wondered about that priest's offer. Monique was probably Catholic; he was a lapsed Catholic. He chuckled and then looked at Father Rafferty, who seemed to be napping. *You just never know.* He smiled. *Don't be naive, Lou. Monique will probably just become another failed relationship.*

He'd finished most of the book by the time the plane landed. He saw Monique Pierre as soon as he exited from his gate at JFK. They walked toward each other and gave each other a tentative hug when they met. The hugs became kisses.

"First time I've ever been courted via cellphone," she said after they stopped tasting each other's coffee.

"I've been looking forward to this meeting since I left for DC. I'd like you to show me your favorite spots in New York City."

"Um, I was thinking you might be more interested in some other sights." Her hands followed the contours of her body. "I'll have to admit that your calls built some anticipation."

"My hotel or your place?"

She laughed. "I have a roommate, an older female professor. Rent in the city is expensive. For now, I suspect that your hotel is the better choice."

Rogers waved goodbye to the priest as they recovered his suitcase.

In the taxi, her hand wandered to his crotch. "I'm a little out of practice, Lou. You'll have to be patient with me."

"I am too. We'll take it slow."

As they rode along, Lou was thinking that Esther Brookstone and Bastiann van Coevorden were two examples of how a late marriage can be fulfilling for each partner. He'd have to tell Monique about them. Maybe a return trip to London was in order, one just for tourism. It was better to take in that city's tourist sites with a lovely companion.

He'd also have to tell Monique about Esther's new artists. If they visited London, they might even be able to afford some of their paintings before they became too popular.

"This is the first time I've been interviewed for a position by nobility, Mr. Marsh," the smiling woman said after taking a seat across from the duke.

Maureen Galbraith removed her hat, sitting it upon the table beside her chair, and leaned on her large umbrella that could easily have been used as a cane. Her red hair and twinkling greenish-blue eyes hinted at Irish ancestry, and her smile was welcoming.

"You can call me Freddie, widow Galbraith."

"And you may call me Maura. Do I pass muster?"

"You do."

He smiled. The woman had reminded him of Julie Andrews as Mary Poppins as she approached him in the hotel lobby. With all her references, especially those from the duchess's doctors, this woman seemed exactly the person his wife needed.

"Nobody can tell me how fast my wife's quality of life will deteriorate, Maura, but it's already notable. I hope you have patience."

"I do, as you must as well. My experience over the years tells me that the disease's rate of progress wildly varies. My husband's was rapid; your wife's could be much slower. It's good that you're proactive, though."

"I can afford to be, to help her as much as I possibly can. And, believe me, I'd give away all my wealth to save her."

"Of course. You realize that this meeting isn't definitive, right? I must meet the duchess at home in order to make my final decision to work with you on her care."

"I realize that. How do we approach that?"

She smiled. "Discreetly. Does she have a maid?"

Freddie shook his head. "No, and that's how I first noticed her decline. She was always so careful about dressing, choosing exactly the right clothes so carefully for each occasion. Not so much anymore."

"If I accept the position, we'll say I'm her new maid. You can present me as a New Year's gift for her. Will that be acceptable?"

He shrugged. "I hope so." He looked around the lobby that was mostly empty at that time. "I'll be checking out of the hotel later. Will you ride with me?"

"That would save me the cost of a train ticket and cab, so yes."

"Shall we pretend you're from London?" He knew very well the duchess would be querying Maura about her background, so she couldn't pretend to be a local, something the duchess could easily check.

"Heavens no! I sometimes lapse into my Penrith accent, not Cockney. Just say you hired me from an agency and I'm there for the final interview where I must have the duchess's approval for my appointment. It's hard enough for me to keep the lies straight. She'll be better off thinking she still runs the place, of course." She looked around the lobby too. "I will meet you here?" He nodded. "At what time?" He said three p.m. "I will return then with suitcase in tow, just in case I'll be staying at your castle. Adieu, Freddie."

He watched her go, the song "A Spoonful of Sugar" flooding his mind.

Chapter Forty

The Castilblancos, Esther, and Bastiann rushed to the airport only to wait. Heathrow was busy everywhere. *More than normal*, van Coevorden thought. He saw his American friend eyeing the departures marquee.

"Let's find some seats," he suggested. "Your flight's not even up yet."

They found four chairs, two facing two. *Now to kill some time without talking shop.*

"Was Heathrow named for some famous dude?" Castilblanco asked, obviously of a like mind.

"Not quite," Esther said. "Like Avonmouth and Newcastle-on-Tyne, the name's just for a location. The airport was named for the village that used to be here."

"And the first two?" Pam said.

"Avonmouth is like Stratford-on-Avon, from Shakespearean fame. Avonmouth is at the mouth of the Avon river, Newcastle is on the Tyne river."

Castilblanco smiled. "Americans are all over the board, but a lot of places there are named after people."

Van Coevorden, not to be outdone and maintaining the focus on trivia, said, "There was an old American bloke who owned a bookstore in Austria." He winked at Esther. "A fellow from someplace called Visalia. Turned out that the person who named the town, a Nathaniel Vise, had a wife named Salia."

"I know who told you that," Esther said, "and it's not a very believable tale, I dare say."

"We have a lot of Indian names too," Pam said, "although I probably should say Native American names. Your friend Ambreesh wouldn't recognize them."

The trivia conversation took Esther and Pam elsewhere, and the two men lapsed into silence until Castilblanco said, "Ah, first call." He jumped up. "We'd better say our goodbyes, Pam."

Van Coevorden stood too and shook Castilblanco's hand. "Rollie, it was good to see you here in better circumstances than those so long ago on the continent." He hugged the big cop's wife. "You too, Pam. I've never forgiven myself for letting those terrorists kidnap you back then at the airport."

"Too long ago to matter, Bastiann," Pam said. "And I never blamed you."

Esther hugged them both. "And it was wonderful for me to finally meet you two. I'm sorry Christmas was a bit hectic."

"You gave us a scare the day after," Castilblanco said. "I now know I shouldn't have been too worried. You're a lucky man, Bastiann."

"You are too. And Esther always seems to manage to get out of trouble," van Coevorden said. "Of course, she always manages to get into it too."

She punched him playfully on the shoulder. "In all this time here, you two never were able to take a tour of my gallery. Or visit our castle. We have to invite you back so you can do that." She paused and then extended her offer. "Maybe Detective Chen and her husband and child as well? Chen Dao-Ming might like to meet my newest artists."

"What about seeing Roberta MacDonald again?" Bastiann said. "She and Ricardo will be new parents by then, I'm sure, so you could babysit the children of both couples."

"Heaven forbid!" They all laughed at Esther's horrified face.

"And you two should also come and visit us in New York sometime," Castilblanco said. "You'd feel right at home in Manhattan, Bastiann. The Dutch used to own it. There's Amsterdam Street up by Columbia University, the Harlem Meer in Central Park—both Harlem and Meer are Dutch words, I believe—and you might remember that terrible train wreck that occurred some years ago at Spuyten Duyvil."

Bastiann smiled. "I suppose you like that last place name?"

"An appropriate name for sharp curve, I dare say. Spittin' Devil!"

Esther laughed. "We'll think about it. We're not getting any younger, you know."

"You're ageless, my lady."

"And still susceptible to flattery."

"We'll keep all these invitations in mind, right Rollie?" Pam said. Esther nodded her agreement.

Castilblanco shrugged. "For our future tourist visit here, we'll see what Chen and the precinct captain say. She's been holding down the fort, so some time off would do her good; and I'm sure he's just itching to make my life difficult again. It's good that both our kids are working, although Ceci's probably watching her back more now. They'll be taking care of their old parents soon enough, but we might be able to squeeze some travel into our senior years." He eyed the gate. "We'd better go through, Pam. Our flight might actually leave on time."

"Ever the optimist," she said, smiling at all those present.

They all hugged again and Esther and Bastiann wished the travelers a safe journey.

Back at their flat, Esther and Bastiann were in relaxation mode. She handed him his wine spritzer and took a seat beside him on the couch. He draped his arm over her shoulder.

"I know I'll never get anything from Jeremy Brand or Robert Winston, so I'll ask you, dear husband: Who killed that science attaché?"

"I honestly don't know, and neither does MI5, although some guesses are being made, I'm sure. That was a big error made by the agents bringing him in for questioning."

"Didn't Jeremy or someone consider that China might want to clean house, to get rid of anyone who knew anything about their spy operation?"

Bastiann took a sip of his spritzer. "We shouldn't talk about this, you know."

"Not even about what happened to me. I was there!"

"You can't talk about that either. Winston will come by tomorrow to have you sign some papers. The Home Secretary wants to keep the Red Dragon's involvement out of the news as much as possible."

"We defanged that Red Dragon, didn't we?"

"It will just generate more teeth from the fire within. There will be other battles before we win the war. China has moved up in my list of enemies above Russia now, your old nemesis. It's basically three against two now, as far as what the conferences were about. NATO isn't much of a player anymore, according to some pundits, at least in the Pacific. That's not classified, so I can say it."

"Hell, Bastiann, you're even talking like an MI5 agent now."

"Will you still love me?"

"Careful what you wish for."

Unlike the trip across the pond from the US, Castilblanco couldn't sleep on the return flight. He was also at the age where his inner clock was upset going either way. He opened his eyes and saw Pam watching him.

"What?"

"I was thinking about Ceci. Do you really think our daughter learned her lesson?"

"To be more careful?" Pam nodded. "Yes, but she also has a job to do. She's our daughter, and we trained both her and Pedrito to have a good work ethic. I never wanted them involved in law enforcement, but that was their choice."

"Nor I, but they had you as a role model."

"And you were a crime reporter. Kids' parents do all sorts of things. Doesn't mean the kids have to do the same things. But we can't make them do what they don't want to do and shouldn't try. Our kids could have done anything. They're both intelligent. They chose to do what they're doing."

She nodded. "I remember talking to other parents when they were in secondary school. I'd hear Jane is going to be this, Jack is going to be that, because the father or mother was doing it. Or parents vicariously enjoying their kids' athletic success. Same thing, as if sports meant all that much."

"You don't have to pass any qualifying exams to be parents. It's a wonder that there aren't even more disastrous consequences."

"New topic: Esther and Bastiann are nice. I did enjoy the visit, especially Christmas Day's dinner."

"Me too, except for the pudding. I'm sorry I was distracted with those meetings. I had a job to do too."

"I know. I was talking to Roberta MacDonald and Esther about their riverboat cruises. Would you like to do one of those? Maybe with Chen's family? It could be fun."

"As long as there's no murder onboard like on Esther and Bastiann's trip."

"A one-of-a-kind, I'm sure. We do need to travel more."

"Maybe. After we retire?"

"Which I hope is soon. People wait too long all too often."

"I suppose. Here comes the flight attendant with refreshments. Probably nothing more than peanuts and a soda in coach, but I'll take it. Of course, the soda will make me pee."

Notes from Steve

You've just finished reading *Defanging the Red Dragon*, a Brookstone and Castilblanco adventure. I hope you found it entertaining. Because this is a 100% DIY project, I hope you don't mind me asking the favor of letting me know about any errors or questions you might have—just use the contact page at my website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>.

Other related mystery/thriller novels you might want to peruse are:

"Detectives Chen and Castilblanco"

The Midas Bomb
Angels Need Not Apply
Teeter-Totter between Lust and Murder
Aristocrats and Assassins
The Collector
Family Affairs
Gaia and the Goliaths

"Esther Brookstone Art Detective"

Rembrandt's Angel
Son of Thunder
Death on the Danube
Palettes, Patriots, and Prats
Leonardo and the Quantum Code

And, if you like the idea of free fiction (who doesn't?), please check out the "Steve's Shorts," "ABC Shorts," and "Friday Fiction" blog archives at <https://stevenmmoore.com>. And, of course, there's the list of other free PDF downloads on my "Free Stuff & Contests" web page where you found this novel.

Finally, watch for "Esther Brookstone Art Detective," Book Seven (yes, I'll count this one as #6, although Chen and Castilblanco also star). My tentative title is *Intolerance*. Here Esther discovers that a murder of a child artist in Ireland has become a cold case, and, you guessed it, she becomes obsessed with solving it. Coming soon...and it might be free as well!

Around the world and to the stars! In libris libertas!

Questions for Book Club Members

This novel can be classified using multiple genres, mystery, thriller, suspense, and sci-fi (the last is found in the advanced submarine technology not described in detail, for obvious reasons). If mystery, did you find any twists? If thriller, what parts thrilled you most? If suspense, what parts were the most suspenseful?

In this novel, I've presented some new characters. One major one is FBI Special Agent Lou Rogers. He's a complex man. Do you find him interesting? Do you think he and Monique have a future?

While Freddie Marsh has less of a role in this novel, perhaps the more important one is that of a spouse dealing with a partner's Alzheimer's. Do you know anyone who's suffering from the disease? Is he handling the duchess's illness the best he can?

Several other characters are recycled here from my previous novels (see the above list). Among the ones you remembered and detected, which do you like best? Which do you like least?

Another theme in this novel is the threat of China and the blame-game against Asians for the Covid pandemic. I've tried to show that blaming a nation's people for their government's mistakes and policies is wrong. Did I succeed? In answering this, include a discussion of the moral ambiguity of the one Chinese couple's revenge.

Is Esther Brookstone more art connoisseur than art detective? How much is she like or unlike Christie's Miss Marple?

Compare Bastiann van Coevorden with Jeremy Brand, David Thackeray, and Robert Winston. Who's more the typical copper? How much is Bastiann like Christie's Hercule Poirot?

Who are the best sleuths, Chen and Castilblanco or Brookstone and van Coevorden?

The holiday theme winds in and around a plot that's not always bubbling with holiday cheer. Name some instances.

Does this novel succeed in tying two series together? Debate the pros and cons of doing so.

Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgements

I hope you didn't feel swindled when you finished what you might have considered the sixth novel in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series. It's an experiment...and not really your standard novel! You have just read two intimately related novellas, in a sense, for a lot less than you'd pay for most novels these days...namely nothing!

I used the subtitle "A Brookstone-Castilblanco Holiday Adventure," and that might have misled you, but I didn't put "Esther Brookstone Art Detective, Book Six," did I? I thought about that and maybe adding "Detectives Chen and Castilblanco, Book Eight," in order to have more truth in advertising, but I settled on what I used as sufficiently suggestive if not altogether truthful.

Esther and Bastiann don't appear until Part Two, and there, although these are two distinct novellas, they and Castilblanco come together to tie together the two series. Some readers might remember that Esther and Bastiann have cameos in several novels of the "Chen and Castilblanco" series, and Chen and Castilblanco have a few in the "Esther Brookstone" series, so this combination is nothing really new. The four detectives weren't entirely strangers.

I'll now hedge a bit on that two-novella description. Each part contains two or more parallel stories as well. In Part One, we have the main story about Chen and Castilblanco finding the murderer of the engineer Biggs, but we also have the story about bringing Ceci's attacker to justice. The latter allows you to learn a bit more about Castilblanco's family (just in case you didn't read "The Phantom Harvester," another free download). Dynasties are common in cop families, and generally in many first responders' families as well.

In Part Two, we have the main story about thwarting attempts to steal submarine secrets, but we also have the ones about Esther's first Cold War mission to get a scientist out of East Germany, her helping a Dutch jeweler recover his family's paintings, and her assisting the three Chinese artists. And that excerpt about Bastiann's encounter with the energy executive reflects on his skills and mettle.

What's the big picture? Sleuths often have to live in chaos in a major investigation; other cases or personal problems can occur. I even thought of calling this novel *A Lesson in Chaos Theory* for that reason, because it's something civilians don't often think about: Real-life investigations often become complex as detectives and agents juggle many things. They are human beings in stressful situations. In this novel, doing it all during holiday season made it even more difficult.

So...what motivated me to play this game? The answer might surprise you: Admiration for Isaac Asimov. In the extended *Foundation* series, he brought the robot novels and the *Foundation* trilogy's novels together in a masterful tour de force. I don't pretend to have created such a masterful stroke here, but I wanted to have some fun putting all my sleuths together, so here we are.

I also wanted to contrast American and British life. That means a celebration of the similarities as well as the differences. The Esther Brookstone novels became increasingly like British-style mysteries, motivated by my binge-reading of British-style mysteries during the pandemic (I wrote quite a few short fiction pieces in that style too). Putting Chen and Castilblanco and Esther and Bastiann together was therefore both a challenge and a lot of fun.

As the pandemic appeared to wind down in the US, the American president surprised the world (and France!) with the accord between Australia, the UK, and the US, to share nuclear

submarine technology. I wanted to explore the possible consequences of that accord as well. It wasn't hard to imagine that the Chinese would become worried about future developments. Nuclear subs with nuclear-tipped missiles are the stealthiest deterrent the West can deploy to stop world domination, which is China's goal. That sets the geopolitical stage for this story in two parts, one taking place in the US and the other in the UK.

This novel is also about diversity. Chen and Castilblanco reflect the diversity of New York City, which is often called the "crossroads of the world"; Monique, Lou, and Ricardo represent the diversity of the Americas, in general; and the Chinese artists, who Ricardo and Roberta champion, as well as Harry, show London and England have had to come to terms with diversity as well. All this should be contrasted with the intolerance towards diversity in China as the Red Dragon persecutes religious minorities like the Uighurs, practicing ethnic cleansing with the latter. You can be sure any apparent demonstrations of tolerance toward religion and minorities in Africa and South America, for example, are only motivated by business interests. The Chinese communist regime is as intolerant as the Nazi one was.

I expect some readers to consider this novel experimental fiction. Guilty as charged! Every book in the two series was an experiment and tying the two series together is one as well. Because I don't write fiction to become rich (that's not easily achieved these days), and I have no aspirations to make the NY Times's bestseller list (which probably would require that I write the schlock the Times's critic love, motivated by authors desiring to make tons of money), I feel free to experiment. I still think my stories, experimental or not, are entertaining and sometimes profound (for example, *Son of Thunder*, the second novel in the "Esther Brookstone" series), so readers not so dependent on the arcane NYC publishing circus might enjoy my stories more. If they don't, they have many other books to choose from (the Big Five publishing conglomerates flood the market with them).

Another criticism I expect is, "Hey, this novel is just an advertisement for twelve others!" They'd be referring to references to the four sleuths' previous cases described in the two series. It's true; they're buried in the prose. However, they're more for readers who haven't read all those novels, a bit of backstory about the illustrious careers of these sleuths. That's in fact done so readers don't have to read any of the previous books, in other words, to allow this novel to stand alone.

And let me point out that no one really has any right to protest. This novel, this experiment of mine, is free. Anyone can download this free PDF and read it! (I hope that deters piracy, by the way. Some of my novels have suffered from that. Good thing I don't have to make a living writing fiction, right?) Copyrights never mean much when it comes to free, of course. I've been giving away short fiction for a while, but someone might be more inclined to publish this complete novel as their own. If so, I'll be sure and try to come back from the grave and haunt them!

That's another part to this experiment in fact: Many authors to entice readers into reading their series make the first novel in a series free, or, at least, offer it a greatly reduced price. So I decided to turn that upside-down and offer the last Brookstone and Castilblanco adventure as a freebie. I don't know whether it will entice readers to read both series, but it's worth trying.

With all that's going on in this novel, you'd think that it would be longer than the others in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series; it's not. This is partly due to the "hard-boiled" style of Part One, a characteristic of all the "Detectives Chen and Castilblanco" novels, but it's also due to the overall fast pace. I was forced to add a few narrative sections just so I could catch my breath every so often, in fact. Flash fiction, no, but, either I'm getting too old, or this novelistic

marathon presented more of a challenge than normal. (That feeling might also be explained by my writing a lot of short fiction recently.) In any case, I hope you could just sit back and enjoy the race.

So...who are the best sleuths, Chen and Castilblanco or Brookstone and van Coevorden? For those readers who haven't read both series, this is an unfair question: This unusual novel hardly provides enough information to answer it! All members of this crime-fighting quartet are smart as well as experienced. In the cases considered in previous novels, they all deserve kudos. (I mostly ignore their failures—everyone has those—but I assure readers the sleuths learned from them.) I'll leave answering this question to readers. (See the previous list of questions for book club members to consider.)

This novel is entirely DIY, so my main acknowledgement is for my wife of many years, about two-thirds of them spent tolerating the ups and downs of living with a crazy author. She's been a constant cheerleader, though, and a wonderful, loving companion. Other authors should be so lucky.

Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ, 2021

About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the US and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but postponed that dream to work in academia and R&D as a physicist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the US, for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley.

Steve writes sci-fi, mysteries, and thrillers, short fiction, blog articles, and book and movie reviews. He has written many novels, including four for young adults under the pen name A.B. Carolan—his list of works includes six series. He also has published short story collections. He has an active blog where he posts opinions about reading, writing, and the publishing business of interest to readers and authors alike.

He and his wife now live just outside New York City.

You can learn more about Steve and his writing at his website:

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