



Steven M. Moore

SLEUTHING,
BRITISH-STYLE

Volume Two

Sleuthing, British-Style

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Preface

In this time of COVID, many of us feel safer entertaining ourselves at home. Some turn to streaming video; others to computer games. I read more books.

In particular, I binge-read what I call British-style mysteries—crime stories à la Dame Agatha set in modern times (although some pre-date Christie’s time!). Superintendents, DCIs, DIs, DSs, and DCs go about solving crimes, joined by their pathologists and SOCOs. When the going gets rough, a SCO19 is called in. Coppers from the Metropolitan Police, Police Scotland, and so forth, aren’t generally allowed to carry guns, you know, but sometimes firepower is required because the bad guys have them.

Some of these crime stories are humorous and border on being cozies (not my cuppa o’ tea), but most deal with murder most fowl in a variety of forms, which isn’t terribly funny even when the story is intended to be, à la Moliere and Hiaasen. Others are quite dark, probing beneath our thin veneer of civilization to find the darkness within women and men. They usually make for excellent entertainment (although I’ve been swindled by a few clunkers—unscrupulous authors know they’re popular), but you have to get past the twists and turns of not only the stories but also of our across-the-pond brethren’s penchant for English dialects (and Scottish and Welsh).

I lived in South America for more than a decade, and it always fascinated me that many versions of Spanish are spoken, often within the borders of a single country. I was younger then, and a bit inexperienced, so I thought English couldn’t possibly have such interesting regional variations besides old chap, petrol, bonnet, and so forth. I’ve had trouble understanding Bostonian and Texan sometimes, but it came as a surprise to me that there is such a wide variety of spoken English in the UK and the Irish Republic. Hadn’t Henry Higgins-types managed to reform everyone so they’d speak perfect Queen’s English the same way the *Académie Française* has made French uniform across France? Of course, neither has happened, and regional differences in English are part of modern life that make it all the more interesting.

In brief, I’ve experienced many of those variations of English in the British-style mysteries. I’ve learned to love them as much as I enjoyed the stories. I’d like my compatriots here in America to enjoy them too.

To that end, I thought I might offer some help along that line. You can consider this little book an ad for British-style mysteries. I was daring enough to offer my own, though, because I love writing challenges. So this free PDF, like volume one that was published is more than an ad: It’s a collection of two more criminal cases that take place in merry old England.

In the first volume, I introduced DI Clarke and DS Blake in three short stories as a homage to British-style mysteries. While the following two in this collection didn’t make it to novel status (as readers might have wanted, and I suggested might eventually happen one day), or the self-imposed editorial deadline for that first collection (as a test case for Draft2Digital), I hope you enjoy them.

First, peruse my glossary of English words and expressions. Second, read the stories, where you might find some of these oddities (not for Brits, of course). Third, and at the end, I’ll recommend some British-style mysteries by other authors, even entire series, that I’ve particularly enjoyed. (This list is repeated from volume one.) Some aren’t by UK authors, but they’re similar in style, like my stories in these two volumes. I’m sure their authors won’t mind the free publicity. You can read some corresponding reviews at my website

<https://stevenmmoore.com>. Just go to the blog and visit the “Book Reviews” and “Mini-Reviews of Books” archives (even the mini-reviews are longer than what you will find on Amazon).

Is this a silly undertaking (pardon the pun just used to remind you that we’re dealing with murder)? Probably. Consider it an homage, or one big review of many books. But it’s helped me make this pandemic time seem to pass more quickly. Maybe it will do the same for you.

Steven M. Moore
Montclair., NJ, 2021

UK Words and Expressions

A

aggro—aggravation

Xarse—you guessed it, and a bit stronger than the American version

XAuld Reekie—Edinburgh, Scotland

B

barney—verbal skirmish

blaggard—scoundrel

bloke—guy

blues and twos—emergency vehicles, or patrol cars in general

C

Xcar park—parking lot

chap—fellow, guy

chappie—fellow, guy

chat up—flirt

Xchin wag—converse (verb); conversation (noun)

CID—Criminal Investigative Department

Xcopper—police person (man or woman)

D

XDS—Detective Sergeant

XDC—Detective Constable

XDI—Detective Inspector

DCI—Detective Chief Inspector

Xdo a runner—disappear

dosh—money (wad)

droll—boring, irrelevant

E

Xearly dart—leave work early

Xeejit—idiot, fool, imbecile

F

Xfag—cigarette

Tfecking—not what you think, this just exaggerates or forms a superlative

fiver—five-pound note

Xflat—apartment, not necessarily a floor of a multi-family dwelling

XFLO—family liaison officer (person who comforts family members of victims)

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

Xgrass—squeal or rat on (verb); someone who does it (noun)

H

hire-car—rental car

I

XIron Lady—Margaret Thatcher

K

Xkerb-crawler—prostitute (kerb is curb in the US)

Xknackered—exhausted

L

Xdo a lie-in—sleep late

Xlorry—truck

M

Xmobile--cellphone

monkeys—500-pound note

MPs—members of parliament

N

XNHS—National Health Service

Xnick—steal or arrest (verb); police station (noun)

niggling—trifling, annoying

Xnutter—crazy person

O

old chestnut—adage or saying

P

Xpeckish--hungry

Xpillock—fool

Xpish-tosh—only a trifle

PM—prime minister

prat—a stupid or foolish person

publican—owner of a pub

R

Xrozzers--coppers

S

Xscarper—see “do a runner”

SCO19—Specialist Crime and Operations group (SWAT group in the US)

Xscrote—lowlife

XSIO—Senior Investigating Officer

XSOCO—Scene of Crime Officer (US CSI)

Xsod—annoying person (noun); deprecate or disparage (verb)

Xstunner—pretty woman

T

XTaff--Welshman

Xtakeaway—take-out

Xtelly—television

Xtip—dump, junkyard

Xtipple—imbibe an alcoholic beverage; the imbiber is called a tippler.

Xtoff—someone with an excessive air of superiority; a snob, aristocrat, or member of the landed gentry

trainers—sneakers (US East Coast) or tennis shoes (US West Coast)

trawl—search

W

XWellies—rubbers for the rain (from Wellingtons)

Xwrinklies—elderly people

Y

Xyob—rude or aggressive person

Mr. Gualchmai

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Chapter One

DI Clarke's search for a new winter coat had been interrupted by a domestic squabble.

Constables were taking the drunken bully to arraignment and jail, his family jewels probably still aching from Clarke's well-placed kick; his bruised and battered girlfriend had been taken to the hospital, lucky that her only serious injury was a broken arm; and their two children were under the care of a family liaison officer, pending legal proceedings to protect them.

Clarke usually went into Oxford to shop if she had the time, so it had been lucky for the woman and her children she had decided to hit the smaller local Riversford shopping district first. The DI decided to celebrate one more win against misogynist brutes by enjoying a mash up in a small coffee bar she favored. Usually replete with noisy students from the various colleges at Oxford University, even that far out from the city, the spot was quiet now. Michaelmas term was over and few students were in the area. Some faculty had also made their exodus for the lengthy holiday.

The little café, if the spot with its four little tables and three stools at a counter deserved such an appellation, sat on a narrow side street, yet the locals looked for it. It was mostly empty now, and the street also empty of traffic. It was too early for Christmas shoppers, and the gray, dreary day wouldn't have beckoned to many shoppers at any rate. She liked to shop in those conditions, though. The denser the crowds, the more obnoxious and pushy they became. From her small table, she was in the perfect spot to see the explosion in the building across the street from her. Flames shot out third-story windows as they first engulfed that floor. The conflagration had seemed instantaneous.

"Say, ma'am, you didn't pay," said the waiter as she dashed out the door.

"You arrived quickly," Clarke said to DS Blake. "Aren't you supposed to be scanning those communication records?"

Logan Blake turned a bit red. "I met Sally for lunch. We were just down the street."

Clarke only nodded and continued to watch the flames consume the building. But the brigade soon had the fire under control and carried out three bodies. Clarke recognized the assistant fire chief watching the exodus and moved forward. Blake followed.

"What's the story, Archie?" she asked. "Gas leak?"

She'd recognize those watery blue eyes, fat jowls, and walrus-style mustache anywhere; they belied the man's real conditioning. Huge Archibald Watson was an intelligent man who was strong enough to carry either Clarke or Blake down a ladder on one shoulder.

"Our team is just beginning what we do after any fire, Patty. For now, this looks like an accident. Maybe a shorted electrical wire? Building's old, but fortunately mostly empty. The victims are the building's owner, his wife, and son."

"Tragic," said Blake. "The building is in bad shape. I suppose the other tenants were students. How do you know the older male is the building's owner?"

“Recognized him. Whole family died of smoke inhalation. Only the young lad has any burns. One nearest the apartment’s door, they tell me. ‘Scuse.”

Watson moved forward to meet a tall man who had just exited the building. They conversed a bit and then the fireman returned to the two detectives.

“‘Tis work for you plods,” he said. “Guy, our inspector, tells me the dog found accelerant. The lab in Oxford’ll check out what kind, but you two—or whoever—might as well get started on your investigation.”

Clarke eyed Blake. “We’re on the scene, so let’s assume the boss will give the case to us. Another murder case, sergeant. Your streak of bad luck continues. Let’s get that investigation going.”

If his DI had forgotten about his task of scanning phone records to confirm an arrest in a previous jewelry heist, that was okay with Blake. Constables could do that chore. Before riding back to the station with Sally and Blake, Clarke ducked into the café, found the waiter, and paid her bill, leaving him a nice tip.

“One murder scene where you and your SOCOs aren’t needed,” Clarke commented to the forensics specialist when she returned to the car. “Sorry to break up your date, though.”

“No problem, Guv,” Sally said. “We’d just finished. Logan ate like a pig, as usual.”

“You never know when the next meal is coming along in this job,” Blake said, negotiating a tight turn into a street that was a short cut to the motorway. “Like today.”

“What do you have so far?” asked their DCI when the team came together later.

“Murder by arson,” Clarke said. All eyes focused on the case board where there were only three names. “Building’s owner and his family are the only victims. We suspect most tenants are students who can’t afford to live nearer to the university, so they’re on vacation and weren’t in the building. We’ll have to check that. Don, let’s get a tenant list.” A constable nodded. “Owner’s death would seem to exclude an insurance scam, but Bill, could you see what kind of insurance policy the owner had.” Another constable, another nod.

“Or a plot gone wrong?” said the DCI, who’d seen a few insurance scams in his day.

“Where did the fire start?”

“A reliable witness says it started on the third floor.”

“Do we have that witness’s name?”

“Patricia Clarke,” Clarke said, jerking a thumb towards herself. “I was right across the street. There was first an explosion and then flames. I only saw the latter, truth be told, but they were all on the third floor to begin with. That’s right under the victims’ apartment as it turns out.”

“Accelerant was found,” Blake added. “We’re waiting for the lab’s determination about the type.”

“That could be important,” Clarke said. “If uncommon, where it was purchased or obtained might be an important clue.”

“I’ll go after that,” another DC volunteered.

“We’ll want to learn about any unusual debts the owner might have,” offered the DCI. “Some unscrupulous lenders like to send nasty messages if debts aren’t paid. This might be one that went a bit too far.”

"I'll check on that," Blake said. "It'll dovetail with my other phone records search. We'll see if any threats were made against the victim."

Patty thought a moment. "I'd better see if the victim has a will and if it contains anything interesting."

"He can't be very rich," said the DCI, "making his family live like poor students."

"That building is worth a lot," said a constable. "Any property near Riversford center is. And the family might have had a nice income just from renters."

"Point taken," said the DCI. "Okay, folks, carry on. Let's get this nasty business resolved."

Chapter Two

Blake left his previous assignment to last. The new case was hot; he was motivated to give it a good launch.

He wasn't the best hacker in the Riversford CID, but some competition had disappeared when DC Heath was promoted. If Blake worked at the main Oxford HQ, he probably wouldn't have computer assignments, but it had been something new in his career to try at the smaller substation in Riversford. It turned out he didn't have to try too hard this time.

Among the victim's belongings was a wallet with an ATM card. That led to the man's bank. He called to make an appointment with the manager.

Too many take-away dinners with Sally and lack of exercise beyond hot sex with the Welsh SOCO, justifying the time savings with the take-aways, had made him a bit lethargic lately, so he decided to walk from the substation to the bank.

Upon entering, he would have preferred a longer chinwag with the head teller, a tall redhead with sparkling blue eyes, who reminded him a bit of his piano teacher. She attracted more clients than the others, but she told him where to find the manager. He sat in a tiny back office. When Blake entered, the man was shuffling papers.

After formal introductions complementing their earlier telephone conversation, the manager said, "I've been examining Chick's accounts. Mr. Morton's, that is."

"I'd like a copy of those papers, please, but can you provide a summary. Anything unusual?"

"Yes. The denial of a loan I tried to initiate for him. I feel the bank's appraiser greatly undervalued his building. Chick offered it up as collateral. I just assumed it had been approved because I didn't hear from Chick. It should have been more than enough considering property values here downtown. That's the case throughout the entire Thames River Valley, of course, even in small villages."

"Perhaps I should talk to that appraiser." Blake thought a moment. "You called Charles Morton Chick. Did you know him well?"

The bank manager smiled. "Drinking buddies now, old school buddies earlier."

"Was he an upbeat guy? I mean, did he have a positive outlook on life?"

"More so than most people, I suspect, despite some investments that turned sour. My wife and I often socialized with the Mortons. Some good times there."

Blake nodded. The manager, like many men, was trying to hide his sense of loss and not quite succeeding.

"So he wouldn't be the suicidal type?"

“Chick? Heavens no! He could be a bit dark at times, especially with some of his causes, lamenting government inaction, but he was usually upbeat. Just went with the flow, you know.”

Blake stood and handed his card to the manager. “Let me know if you think of any more information. I thank you for your time.” He scooped up the papers. “And for these.”

As he walked out of the bank, he was thinking that sometimes an old-fashioned walk accomplished much more than pounding a computer keyboard.

“I’m afraid Mr. Benford doesn’t have time to see you right now, inspector.”

Barrister Benford’s PA had more tits than brains, Clarke decided, and probably would treat the VIP’s prospective clients far better than a lowly police inspector. The well-endowed woman was just doing her job, of course, so Clarke ignored her and went around the tiny desk.

“Police business, so I’m sure he’ll find the time.”

She walked down a hall and found a door with *George Benford, Esq.* on the door. She threw open the door and walked into the posh office, forcing a well-dressed man to put down the local paper’s late afternoon edition.

“Inspector Patricia Clarke, Riversford Substation,” she said, flashing her warrant card once again. She took a chair in front of the desk and stared him down. His expression changed from surprise and annoyance to a sly smile.

“It would have been a pleasure to meet you in court, inspector.” He reached across the desk to offer a hand, and she leaned forward to shake it. “George Benford. What can I do for you today?” He held up a finger from one hand and punched his old-fashioned intercom with the other. “Helen, please bring in some tea and biscuits. We have to treat our guest with decorum.”

“Thank you.” Clarke was wondering about the change in demeanor, but plowed on. “I’m SIO for an investigation regarding the death of Charles Morton. I believe he’s a client of yours?”

“You found that out soon enough. Impressive.” He tapped the paper. “I was just reading about Charles and his little family. What a shame. We have had a short-term professional relationship, creating his will. Nice fellow.”

“It’s customary in these investigations to determine who might benefit from the victim’s death. I understand you drew up the will about five months ago?”

“That’s when it was registered. We’d been discussing details for a few months prior to that.”

“It could save us a lot of time if we could obtain a copy of that will to determine who his heirs are.”

“That might be the case, but I can’t. Attorney-client privilege and no official death certificate as yet make that impossible. I’m duty-bound to protect the heirs, you see.”

“Your client was murdered.” Benford blanched. “I’ll ask you to keep that quiet for now. We can formally request a copy of the will because of those circumstances. Any judge will sign that warrant.”

“Indeed. But, as you said, those official steps, required by law, I might add, will take time. You’re a law officer. I’m a barrister. We both have to follow the law, inspector.”

Clarke now realized Benford’s smile was probably a permanent feature when dealing with the public. *Yes, I would like to meet you in court!* She was choosing her next words when tea arrived. Before she could react, he became mother, plopped two cubes in her cup, and handed the steaming beverage to her.

"I generally do only one lump."

He shrugged. "Believe me, inspector, you need the two. Are we finished with your business now so we can enjoy our teatime together? I'd much rather chat about the barney in Commons yesterday. The politicians are going to ruin this country!"

Clarke controlled her anger, shoved the cup back towards the barrister, and stood.

"I'd better get on to seeing that judge." She thought a moment. "Chaps like you don't fool me for long, Mr. Benford. Barristers often make the argument that they'll represent even criminals because everyone has a right to legal representation. The truth is, you do it for the money." She paused to let that sink in. "I shall return with said warrant after letting the judge know you like to waste his time too." She turned to leave.

"Wait!" he said with a laugh.

She turned to him. His eyes were twinkling. *Had she passed some kind of test?*

"Let's compromise, inspector. You don't really need a copy of the will. You want to know who the heirs are."

She remained standing. "And the conditions for their inheritance."

He nodded. *Wouldn't that be the same thing as getting a copy?* she mused.

"Just between you and your investigating team and me, I'll tell you after you sit down and join me for tea. I apologize for the two lumps, by the way, but if you have some cakes as well, will the extra one matter?"

She sat down and smiled. "I accept your compromise for now, and your apology. And I shall enjoy the tea. It's Earl Grey, my favorite."

"Got it!" Blake cried. He then looked around to see his nearby colleagues staring and smiling at him. "I know who the brother is!"

Several constables gathered round to look at the old article from the local Riversford rag. Blake had found it after Clarke called from the barrister's to say the heir was Charles Morton's mysterious brother, now known to be a half-brother.

The article and the few that followed related the story of how Charles's father, Ralph Morton, had kicked his wife and newborn out of the family's home. The follow-up stories dealt mostly with the bitter divorce proceedings. The ex would keep the baby who wasn't Ralph's. Charles would remain with his father.

"We need to find out if Alice Morton is still living," Blake said. "She could lead us to the victim's half-brother."

"Who cares?" said a DC.

"As sole heir to Charles Morton's estate, he's now our prime suspect for the arson-murder."

"So's the mother for being left out of the will," said another constable.

"I know this reporter," said yet another. "Retired, but a friend of my father. Should I call him?"

"Worth a try," said Blake. "I'm going to try to find Alice Morton."

He did...in a way. The mother had died of cancer, and her three-year-old child had entered the foster care system. There the trail went cold.

"James, did you connect with the reporter?"

"I did," said the DC. "He said stop by any time."

“Then grab your coat. We’ll pay him a visit.”

Robert Markey’s home was in the next village along the motorway towards the Cotswolds. A plump woman answered the door. The two detectives flashed their IDs.

“Mrs. Markey?” said Blake.

“Mr. Markey’s housekeeper,” she said with a smile. “He’ll be happy to have visitors, even if you are rozzers.”

They were ushered into a small study with a large window overlooking a well-tended garden. A large man in a wheelchair was staring out the window.

“Mr. Markey?” DC Caine said.

The wheelchair spun around. “James. So good to see you. It’s like seeing your father again. Welcome.”

“I’ll bring some tea and scones,” said the housekeeper with a smile.

The detectives took seats after she left.

“This getting old is a terrible thing,” Markey said. “The PTs do little for me except cause me more pain. How have you been, young man? Married yet?”

“Working on it, sir. This is DS Logan Blake, one of my bosses.”

“Let’s just say we’re colleagues,” said Blake, offering his hand to shake.

Markey’s grip was strong. “I detect a bit of a London accent. Not Cockney, but a Londoner nonetheless. What brings you out to Riversford, sergeant?”

“I came here for some peace and quiet not too long ago.”

“And he’s on his fourth murder case already,” Caine said.

“Brought some London crime with you too, I dare say. But you fellows want to learn about Alice Morton.” He leaned back in his wheelchair and sighed. “A terrible family breakup. There was a lot of gossip about her even before Ralph kicked her and her baby out of the house. He was always an insanely jealous man, unfortunately with reason, although one could hardly blame Alice for looking for comfort elsewhere, but her getting preggers with another man’s baby was the last straw.”

At that point, tea arrived. When the discussion continued, Blake didn’t say much because Markey continued to focus on Caine. Blake understood and didn’t mind. The little cakes accompanying the tea were excellent. He just sipped and munched while listening and observing. The reporter had organized his thoughts well.

In a pause, Caine said, “Did Alice and the baby stay in the area?”

“Moved more west where housing’s less expensive. I lost track of them until I saw her obit. Always wondered what happened to the bastard child.”

“Whose name was?” Caine said.

“Lee Hayley.” Blake nodded. That matched Clarke’s intel. “That’s a junior, but maybe not officially. Can’t say whether his real father ever claimed him, but Alice didn’t want to saddle the boy with the Morton name. Can’t blame her for that either.”

“Did you know her well?”

Markey considered the question a bit longer than normal. “Not through the interviews. She’d changed a lot by then. We were friends in school. Ralph Morton was a friend too. I was even invited to a few holiday dinners before the family imploded.”

“Did Charles like the baby?”

“A lot more than Ralph did, that’s for certain. And Chick never forgave his father for throwing his mother out.” Markey made a sad moue. “The poor lad used to come running here crying after Ralph beat him. The whole incident turned Ralph into an ogre.”

“I suppose that might explain why Charles named Lee as his sole heir,” Blake said.

“After his wife, as the state requires, I presume.”

“I guess he didn’t know what had become of Lee,” Markey said.

“Can you elaborate on that?” Caine said.

“Last I knew, Lee Hayley—or was it Hadley?—had found lodging as a guest of the queen.”

Caine glanced at Blake, who nodded. They would be looking there next.

Chapter Three

Lee Hayley had served a jail term of six years. He was released a little over a year ago.

“Good work,” Clarke said at the next briefing session. “We need to find this Mr. Hayley. Keep pursuing that, Logan and James. I need a volunteer to accompany me. We have an appointment with a bank appraiser.” She looked at her watch. “Tomorrow morning first thing. We need a break. The rest of you should continue viewing security videos from the area around Charles Morton’s building and knocking on doors. It would help if either cameras or people spotted our arsonist. Again, tomorrow morning, first thing. We’ll hit everything fresh.”

Blake returned to his desk and texted Sally. *How about some Chinese take-away? Sounds good*, she texted back. She sent an address. *Pick me up in half an hour. XOXO*.

Sally Gualchmai and Blake had become an item with some hesitation. He’d been a Londoner new to the Riversford area. She was Welsh but called the northlands home. She shared Patricia Clarke’s distrust of men, although Blake’s detective skills couldn’t yet determine why. The SOCO was still mostly a mystery to him, but their relationship was heating up. It was already beyond any Blake had ever had with another woman. And she even understood his love of music!

At that moment, Caine walked by and said, “Hot date? I saw you texting.”

“Szechuan,” Blake said.

“The girl or the food?” Blake frowned. “Sorry. Just me being a detective. I just wanted to say I enjoyed working with you today.”

Caine was new to Clarke’s group. Blake remembered that not long how hard it had been when he joined Riversford CID.

“Thanks. But you did most of the interview. And don’t worry. You’ll get into it soon enough.”

“Logan!”

Sally had gone ahead to open Blake’s flat while he unloaded what he figured was her overnight case and the take-away Chinese contained in several bags of cartons filled with assorted oriental delights. He saw a man approaching her. He put everything down, ran forward, and put himself between the threat and his girlfriend.

Sally's attacker reached for Blake. The detective took him down and hauled out his cuffs. Sally whipped out her mobile. Light flooded the face of the thug.

"Pops? What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, pet. Your gossiping neighbor, you rough lad, said you had a young man you were shagging."

Blake chuckled and helped the fellow to his feet while hoping the violent takedown wouldn't make him the evil boyfriend. "Mrs. Wright spreads stories sir, and at least half of what she says isn't true."

Blake didn't mention she probably didn't hear the other half. The woman was nearly deaf and always had her telly on so loud he could hardly hear his music. Fortunately his keyboard had an earphone jack.

Sally hugged her father. "But why are you here in Riversford?"

"Nuts and bolts. A local company claims they shipped them to me, but I never got them."

"He runs a hardware store," Sally explained to Blake. "Pops, this is DS Logan Blake, my colleague and friend."

"Owen Gualchmai, and pleased to make your acquaintance." The two men shook hands, Mr. Gualchmai a bit tentatively. "I might be a bit sore after that Kung Fu trick you pulled there, young man. Just like in the films."

"Let's go inside, sir. We have plenty of Chinese for everyone." That was true. There were always leftover Chinese, although there might not be so much now with three diners.

Owen thought a moment. "Don't believe I've ever had that. Holiday food?"

"No Pops," Sally said. "More food for plods who don't have any time to cook."

They were soon enjoying their oriental repast with a nice hoppy ale. Sally and her father caught up a bit, and Blake felt a bit like the criminals he interrogated as the man probed his background.

During a lull in the conversation, Owen stabbed a slice of beef and spear of broccoli and savored it. He eyed his daughter who was facing him across the table. She and her boyfriend used the chopsticks that came with the take-away. He used fork and knife, probably wondering why the Chinese, with their thousands of years of civilization had never invented civilized table utensils.

"So you two are an item?"

Logan was pretending not to hear, but he was waiting for Sally's response. The blush rose from below her neck to her face as she considered it, an answer which might be more important to Logan than her father. *What the hell? He wasn't her first boyfriend!*

"Yeah, it's serious, Pops." She eyed Blake; he smiled. "As serious as it can be between two working coppers, I guess."

"Your mother will be pleased. She still wants grandchildren, you know. Boys, to put a fine point on it. We had to stop with you, luv. She wanted the pair, you know." He speared a piece of shrimp and chewed contentedly.

The blush disappeared. "Mum's always trying to control my life. She hates my career."

Owen gestured towards Blake. "Not as dangerous as what he does, I 'spect."

Blake thought of almost dying in the Thames, his head held underwater by a burly thug. Sally's father had a point. SOCOs had the safer job—still dangerous, though.

Chapter Four

The appraiser's office was what Clarke had imagined it might be: a rubbish tip playing the role of a place of business. It was on a side street in a squalid area of town; there was garbage on the street, mostly from some seedy pubs, and a few kerb-crawlers prowled even in the morning. They looked a bit worse for wear, so maybe they were strung out after a busy night, trying to remember where they might find a place to rest their weary heads. She decided it was a place where the ex-Londoner Logan Blake might feel at home—it was as bad as anywhere in the capital, maybe worse if coppers avoided the place.

She was glad she wore trainers because the stairs up to the office didn't seem well-maintained. There were three offices at the top. She knocked on the door with the name Samuel Whiting.

"Door's open," said a gruff voice.

She entered and flashed her warrant card. The badly dressed man gestured to a chair; she sat and found it unbalanced. *Intentional?*

The single office wasn't welcoming to visitors. The furniture seemed secondhand and the threadbare rug was sprinkled with indeterminate splotches, while the cot in the corner told her that the renter slept there sometimes. *Maybe always?* A door at the foot of the cot was ajar, so she could see a half-loo that looked like a rest stop's on some remote road in His Majesty's kingdom.

"I usually don't see any clients here. My work is out and about Riversford and the surrounding villages. Sometimes as far as the Cotswolds."

"I understand," she said. "Gives you some fresh air, at least." She saw the frown. *Good, he got the message about the office! Was that why he panned Morton's building?* "Mr. Whiting, I'm here to talk about your appraisal of Charles Morton's building, like I said on the phone."

"Yeah, well, did you see it before the fire? Morton's flat was okay, but he hadn't kept up the others. Can't blame him, I suppose, what with two or three students in each destroying them. I dare say it's a good thing the whole thing burned. I'd calculated that if the bank ever had to foreclose, they'd spend even more money fixing the place up for sale, thereby losing a lot of money when added to the loan amount. That's my job, inspector: securing reasonable loans."

"The land is prime real estate itself. Did you consider that?"

"You should stick to being a copper. I'm the appraiser here."

The phone rang to interrupt her rebuttal. Clarke wasn't surprised to see it was an older model, its cable probably plugged in somewhere under the desk.

"Excuse me. I have to take this. Might be a job."

While the appraiser attended to his call, Clarke received one of her own from Blake, a text message containing the frontal and side shots of Lee Hayley taken when he had entered prison. Unlike some drivers' IDs, the shots showed a clean-shaven, smiling man who probably could charm many women. Except for the eyes. They weren't smiling. They were a cold blue. *The eyes of a killer?*

A frisson then went down her spine as she turned her attention back to Samuel Whiting, the appraiser. She looked at the photos again. *Samuel Whiting was Lee Hayley!*

“I guess that will be all for now, Mr. Whiting,” she said, standing when he hung up the desk phone. “Sorry to take your time. We’ll be in contact if we need anything else.”

He eyed her. “But we haven’t even had tea yet, inspector. What’s the hurry?”

He came around the desk, grabbed one wrist, and took her mobile from her. She tensed, ready to parry any further attack.

He pushed her down, scrolled, and found the last call on the mobile. “Not a bad picture, considering. I think you need more than tea, madam.”

She partially blocked the blow; otherwise it would have killed her, even though she was sitting down and he was standing. As she fell out of the chair and sank to her knees at the tall man’s feet, unconsciousness came as she figured her time was up.

But Clarke regained consciousness, still in the squalid office. Her mobile was at her side. She rolled over, her head pounding, and called the station. The desk sergeant connected her with Blake.

“General alert for the appraiser Samuel Whiting, aka Lee Hayley.”

“What! Where are you? Did you get the pictures I sent?”

“Absolutely. That’s how I knew the appraiser was Lee. He knew I knew. I’m lucky he didn’t kill me.”

“I’m sending an ambulance.”

“I won’t say no. Make sure the EMTs have aspirin. I’ll take a little nap meantime.”

Blake showed up with the ambulance. Sally and her SOCOs soon followed. By that time Clarke was resting in the desk chair in the appraiser’s office.

“Let’s talk,” she said to Blake.

Her sergeant raised his eyebrow as an unspoken question to the EMT. “No concussion, but she’ll have a bad bruise. She’s lucky. I think he was aiming to crush her trachea.”

“Wasn’t a straight shot, and I deflected the blow. I didn’t react soon enough to take him down and arrest him, though.”

“We’ll get him,” Blake said. He now eyed her. “You have theories?”

“Lee Hayley was out for revenge. He gave his half-brother a bad appraisal so he couldn’t get his loan. Lee then learned somehow that he would inherit Charles’s building if he killed the whole family.”

“Could be a desire for revenge developed all the way back in childhood. With that family history, it’s no wonder the whole family wasn’t crazy.”

“Maybe they were.” She thought a moment. “For now, he’s escaped. We have to figure out where he might hide. Where are those feckin’ aspirins, Jordie?”

Chapter Five

The search for Lee Hayley bore no immediate fruit. The man had been hiding in plain sight as the appraiser, Sam Whiting, but after leaving Clarke with a bashed head and headache, the focus on her assailant turned up nothing. Caine had touched base with the bank manager again; Blake had revisited the reporter. Others had also gone through other futile motions,

including asking all ports and ferries to check departures to Europe or Ireland, a check made easier now with BREXIT requiring more complete immigration and customs procedures.

Clarke seemed knackered; they all were. Blake knew she was angry for letting Hayley scarper. She sent everyone home so they could start early in the morning. Everyone figured the manhunt would have to cover all the island as well as Northern Ireland.

"I'm off early too," said Sally, stopping at Blake's desk. "Want to lend me your wonderful rubbish tip pretending to be a car, or will you drive me? I got a call from Pops. He's bored, so I thought I'd whip up a home-style meal for us. Turns out my irascible mother hasn't been much of a cook lately."

Blake was beginning to regret offering Sally's father a stay in his flat to save the price of a hotel. He took his keys out of his pocket and tossed them to her.

"I'm out of here too in a moment too. Tomorrow's going to be a day from hell."

He soon slid into the passenger seat as she let the car warm up a bit. He said to Sally, "What are you cooking for your men?"

She smiled. "It shall be a surprise."

Owen slid one picture over to Sally. "I know this man."

Blake glanced at Sally and then back at her father. "He's a person of interest in the case."

Owen had wanted to get a feel for police work, so after a fine dinner and against his better judgment, Blake had given the old man a summary of their current case after obtaining a promise to keep everything a secret. Sally had flashed a smile worth gold to the detective, so he'd known she was more than happy with that decision. Or, it might be because her SOCOs had done little work for the case, so she was also curious. Clarke would never know about his lapse, and it was a part of the conversation where Blake could contribute something.

Owen took the picture again and cleaned his glasses. "On second thought, I might be wrong. I thought he could be my old war chum Hayley for a moment."

"Lee Hayley?" Blake said.

"Yes. How'd you know his name is Lee?"

Blake ignored the question. "This man can't be your old war buddy. He's not that much older than I am. He must be Lee Hayley, Junior."

"Could be. Looks like Lee when we were in the army, though. But I haven't seen old Lee in ages."

"Did your old friend live around here?" Sally said.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. In Southington. He grew up there and inherited the family abode."

Blake nodded. He'd never been to the little village just south of Riversford, but he knew about it. Their substation served it and many others, although most had at least one local and very bored constable. He reached for the phone as he winked at Sally.

"I think I now know where Hayley Junior is hiding out," he told Clarke.

The prodigal son had returned home. The address Owen had provided belonged to someone else now. Were they held hostage? Or had Hayley committed one or two more murders?

"This can't turn out well," Blake said to Clarke as he watched the SCO19 get ready.

"He must know we're out here," Clarke said. "Why doesn't he answer the phone?"

Surveillance of the little cottage in Southington had confirmed Lee Hayley was in the house. They didn't know if he was armed, but he certainly was dangerous. Besides the alleged arson and murder of Charles Morton and his family and the attack against Clarke, he had shanked a prisoner while in jail. That charge had been dropped because all witnesses recanted on their statements about what they'd seen. Hayley had led a life of often violent crime after being in and out of foster homes. Clarke had called in the firepower as a consequence.

"Maybe we should try to talk him out of there," Clarke said. "In spite of his crimes, I feel a bit sorry for the bastard."

Blake decided to ignore the double meaning of that word in the case at hand, knowing that there was a third: No one had wanted Lee Hayley, Junior, after his mother passed on, not even his real father. Foster parents all too often took children in to collect government stipends. The son had returned to a home he'd never known.

"I'm telling the troops to move in."

Clarke raised her arm. Blake grabbed it.

"Wait! I have an idea. There's someone Hayley might have heard of. Sally's father."

"Does Hayley Junior even know him?"

"Hayley Junior might not even have met Hayley Senior, but his mother probably talked about him."

"Maybe not fondly."

"Point taken. But it might be worth a try. And she might have mentioned the father's old war chum."

"Okay. But Sally might not like our involving her father in a standoff."

"He'll be safe."

It took Sally about twenty minutes to arrive with Owen. Blake explained the situation. After their discussion about policing, Owen was keen to try to get Hayley to surrender. Clarke showed him how to use the megaphone.

"Lee Hayley, Junior. This is Owen Gualchmai. You've never met me, but your real daddy and me were army chums. Maybe your mum Alice mentioned me? Your father was a good friend o' mine. I don't want to see his son die. Believe me, he wouldn't want that either. Nor your mum. But if you don't surrender, that's a definite possibility. You killed three people with that fire, and all your half-brother did was name you as his heir. He felt bad that Ralph Morton sent you and your mother away. He missed his mother; he missed you. It's time to make amends, Lee. You don't want to die tonight."

Owen looked at Blake and shrugged. Blake nodded and Sally patted him on the shoulder.

"Didn't hurt to try," said Clarke. She raised her hand again to send in the SCO19.

"Wait!" Sally said.

Lee Hayley came out of the house, hands held high. With the harsh police spotlights, Blake could see tears streaming down his face. For once, someone had recognized him as a person.

“Do cases always turn out like this?” Owen asked at the pub where Clarke’s group celebrated yet another successful case.

“This one better than most,” Clarke said. “Lee Hayley will undergo a complete psych evaluation. It should have been done years ago. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an invitation for a late dinner.”

“That’s a first,” Sally said.

“She sounds very sexy with that contralto voice,” Caine said. “Anyone know who’s doing the inviting?”

Blake shrugged, wondering if Caine had a thing for his boss, or just wanted to know more about her and her group. That was always difficult at first. Group members knew things about other group members; they also knew when not to talk about what they knew.

“Probably just a friend. She knows a few academics in Oxford.”

“Nerdy just like you, then,” Caine said with a smile.

Blake needed to change the subject. He already had received enough ribbing about his piano lessons with the statuesque piano professor.

“Owen, I want to compliment you on that fine speech. When you finished, I didn’t know if it would resonate with Lee, but it was a damn good one. You should run for MP in your district.”

“We live in an agricultural zone. I already represent a lot of hardworking farm people who need a reliable hardware store. And I like London even less than you do, young man.” He raised his glass. “Here’s to policing. You people do your very best to keep people safe.” He sipped his ale and then eyed Blake over the brim of the glass. “But don’t ever take my daughter to a hostage standoff again. That’s a terrible place for a date!”

Blake’s face turned red with all the laughter, and Sally was blushing as well.

Patricia Clarke was a bit nervous as she entered the fancy restaurant just outside the Christ Church campus in Oxford. For one thing, she felt underdressed. For another, it was a far cry from the pub she had just left, where rozzers and media flocked to throw down drinks or eat a greasy but delicious meal. Finally, the pumps she’d hidden in the car and put on in the restaurant’s valet car-park, much to the amusement of the attendant, were pinching her feet because the last time she’d worn them was for a date in a place just like this.

She didn’t need the hostess. She spotted him while walking in. *The perfect table. Of course.* A window table on the dais looking out over the Oxford skyline at the jumble of university architecture in campuses dating from the Middle Ages to the present.

“I’m with that gentleman,” she said to the hostess.

George Benford saw her approaching and stood. He removed her new coat after giving her a kiss on the cheek. After taking seats and pouring her some wine, he said, “Rough day?”

“You’d never guess. I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Shall we continue the discussion we had in my office, now that I have the advantage of being on neutral ground?” He said that with a sly smile and a wink.

She liked the invitation to dinner, his mischievous smile, and twinkling eyes. *Handsome old fox!* “I’d rather not,” she said. “First, I already apologized on the phone for my comment. You have to realize that most of my experience with ‘legal representation’ is either in the

interrogation room or at Crown trials.” He smiled again and nodded. “And let’s keep everything on a Patty-George basis. I’d rather not think about our professions either. Just food and wine and a pleasant evening.”

He raised his glass. “And maybe some interesting times in the near future?”

She smiled, raising her glass too. “That’s a possibility.”

Mrs. Blake

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Chapter One

DI Patricia Clarke joined DS Logan Blake in the alleyway. Her sergeant was watching the pathologist and SOCOs go through their routines. Old Doc Olbers blocked her view, so she asked Blake what he knew.

“Young woman, maybe early twenties, or even late teens. Tarty layers of makeup, frilly blouse, miniskirt, and boots.”

“Dressed for a night out,” said Clarke with a nod. “Or she could be a student out to make some extra cash as a waitperson.” She pointed at the scruffy fellow sitting on the meat truck’s tailgate. “Who’s the wrinklie?”

“He was rubbish bin-dipping and found the victim. A bit shaken, I dare say. I’m letting him recover with a cuppa, and then I’ll interview him.”

“Good plan. Meanwhile, let’s say hello to our esteemed pathologist.”

“Good morning, detectives,” Frank Olbers said, still performing his Russian-Cossack dance to find another position from which he could examine the body. “Nothing obvious as to what killed this poor young thing, and the cold air makes TOD hard to determine. I’d guess between when the party ended and when that gentleman over there found her. Come to my own party tomorrow to find out more.”

“Will do.” Clarke decided to ask the important question for any female victim at a crime scene. “Any sign of forced intercourse?”

“None, forced or otherwise. Nothing recent, at any rate. Not a virgin, but that’s not surprising these days. DNA from her assailant might be available elsewhere. Maybe the bins?”

The detectives got more from Arthur Payton, the old homeless man who’d found the victim—not so old really; he just looked old.

“People throw away good food and liquor, officers, so I usually can get by with scraps and drinks people toss into the rubbish bins. Or on the streets, if I’m lucky; there are always litterers.” He smiled at them. Blake noted the man badly needed to visit a dentist. “Not terribly good hygiene, I’ll admit, but what can I do? Anyway, I stopped in my tracks when I saw her arm hanging out of that particular bin. I managed to haul her out and checked for signs of life.”

“Did you check inside the bin? For a purse, mobile, whatever?”

Clarke nodded. Her new sergeant could hold his own now. She felt a bit superfluous.

“I just sat and stared at her for a while, thinking she must be someone’s daughter or girlfriend, and that someone will be missing her.”

“I’ll go tell Sally,” Blake said to his DI. “They’ll need to search all these bins.”

“Her team will just love you for that.” Clarke winked at her sergeant.

After Blake returned, Clarke decide to leave Payton in Blake’s able hands and go back to the station to start organizing yet another murder investigation. Blake had thought there’d be more peaceful policing in Riversford than in London. The town snuggled in the Thames River

Valley in that rural area between Oxford and the Cotswolds, but this would be his fifth murder case in as few months.

She nodded to Sally leaving the alley. At least Blake had a solid relationship with the SOCO as compensation. The two seemed to form a good team, for policing and otherwise.

“Mr. Payton, you said you checked for signs of life,” Blake continued. “Do you have medical training?”

Payton laughed. “You think I left a good job at NHS or sumpin’? I learned to check for life signs in the army. You want everyone to get home, marra, the wounded or the dead, but you help the wounded first. Battlefield triage’s their name for it. I call it looking out for your brothers who’re still alive first. The dead don’t rightly care.”

Blake nodded. His father had probably practiced the same thing. “Did you see anyone else around, or hear voices?”

Payton smiled and tapped his head. “I always hear voices, lad. Some call it PTSD. But there weren’t anyone else around.” He held up his paper cup. “If we be done now, is there any chance I can get another cuppa?”

“I’ll be finished here in a bit. I just need to talk to the pathologist and SOCOs some more, and then I’ll take you to get some real food. I’m a bit peckish myself, to be honest.”

Later Blake eyed the scruffy man across the restaurant’s wooden table that had seen better days. “My father was in the army, you know,” Blake said.

They were at a small dive not far from the murder scene. They both had their tea, Blake had ordered a bacon roll, and Payton was busy devouring a full plate of bangers and mash.

“He didn’t come home.”

Payton stopped mid-forkful and eyed Blake. “Sorry about that, lad. Must have been difficult. Did your mum have to raise you alone?”

“Mostly. Always busy as hell, she was. She became a chef and now owns a few restaurants, but it was hard going at first. I’d hear her crying at night.”

“Those who die have it easy; those they leave behind not so much. She must be proud of you.”

“This job can be dangerous too.” He saw that Payton had finished except for a bit of tea. “Finish that up, and then I’m going to introduce you to a friend.”

“I’m sorted, sergeant. Tea’s cold anyway. Want the rest of your snack?” Blake shook his head no, so Payton wrapped it in two paper napkins and put the repast in a coat pocket.

“We need to know where to find you if we have any more questions,” Blake said, “which is why we’re visiting my friend.”

Payton frowned. “More questions? I’m not a suspect, am I?”

“Heavens no. But let’s say you remember something you forgot to tell us.”

Payton looked at the tin ceiling. “That happens, lad, more lately than before.” He eyed the rest of the tea. “Okay, lead on, DS Blake.”

Greg Bowden was in his usual spot selling newspapers and magazines. He was there from 4 a.m. until the afternoon edition of the local rag arrived. At that time and after selling those papers, he and his son went to work in a homeless shelter where they also resided.

“Logan, Logan, good to see ye, lad. What’s going down amongst you rozzers?”

Blake introduced Payton. “Think you can help this gentleman? He’s another veteran who needs a place to sleep.”

“Sure thing. In fact, I’ll take him there now. My son can close up when the papers are sold and do an errand for me. No problem at all.”

Payton smiled at Blake. “I guess I can trust this man if he’s your friend.”

“You can, Mr. Payton. Greg’s an old friend.” He patted the bearded giant on the shoulder. “I’ve known him since I came to Riversford.”

“All of half a year maybe,” Greg said. “Need the morning press, lad?”

Blake forked over the money. “My girlfriend’s always interested in the royals’ latest scandals. You two can chat it up on the way.”

“Maybe they’re just on the society page today.”

Chapter Two

Although the DCI was at their briefing, he let DI Clarke handle it. He only asked a few questions as she handed out assignments to her group of assorted constables and one sergeant. They made him look good, so why interfere? Clarke had turned out to be his best DI out of three. The other two did their jobs well, but maybe too by-the-book. Like the DCI, Clarke could be creative and intuitive in an investigation. DS Blake had been a good hire too; he could work wonders in an investigation as well and had done so since his arrival in Riversford. The DCI didn’t buy into the theory that it all came from his experience in London. He was just a good copper, a natural. The DCI knew Clarke was worried that he might get promoted. She would lose him then, and so would Riversford—there was no other DI position open at the substation.

“And you’re all thinking, what’s this DI going to do?” Clarke said to finish her organizational brief. She held up a small plastic disk. “Gambling chip. After the post mortem, I’m going to try to find out where it came from. Our victim had it clenched in her hand.”

“Think it’s a message?” said Blake.

“Or rigor mortis,” said a constable, getting a few laughs as well as a glare from the DCI.

“I will find out. Hopefully it tells us who the victim is and where she came from. Okay, let’s get going. This girl has a name and a family somewhere, and we all need to solve this murder case and find her killer. We owe every victim that much.”

Clarke left the Riversford substation deep in thought. The post mortem’s results had been troubling. There had been a small injection site in the victim’s armpit and traces of toxin in her body. She’d been poisoned.

They still had no name for the victim. For her, every murder victim needed help from the police because they had no way to bring their assassins to justice. It was up to coppers like Clarke. She was lucky her DS was motivated in the same way.

She drove to a nearby park, ducked out of her Morris, and soon spotted the dapper old man who was sat on a bench, feeding a few squirrels he rewarded for braving the cold. He placed the package of seeds next to him and pulled his watch fob from his vest pocket to check the time as if he were a conductor on a train. He then smiled at her.

"You're a bit early, my dear. And how are you today?" His eyes twinkled behind his John Lennon-style glasses. After she took her seat, his hand wandered to pat her thigh. "I hear you now are in a relationship with a barrister. How's that going for you?"

Ben Weyland had been her Italian tutor at an Oxford college. He called it "community gossip," but he often knew what was going on in the Thames River Valley's nightlife far better than any copper or reporter. As such, he was a valuable information source when he had the time to meet with her.

"I've only had dinner with him once, and how did you find out about that? The gossips at the station haven't even caught on yet."

"I chat with people and I go places. Dante by day in my college, our college; in his Inferno by night, as it were—no matter where hell might be found. Keeps me young."

"And lascivious." She handed him the gambling chip. "Any comments?"

"Now there's a subject that requires more academic study. In a droll fashion, we could title the study 'Illegal Gambling in the Thames River Valley.' But I only participate in such illicit activities for the mental stimulation, you know."

"And the skimpily dressed women serving the drinks?"

He made a slight bow with his head, an acknowledgement of a well-done parry, or a slight admission of guilt? "Fringe benefits some enjoy, I'm sure. In my case, only as an admirer of the 'divine feminine.'"

"That sounds like *The Da Vinci Code*."

"So much more, my dear, if you can remember back to your Oxford days. And perhaps Mr. Brown stole that phrase from the various movements who used that terminology, much more secular and less violent than he portrayed, to put a fine point on it."

"In any case, are any of these gambling sites near where we recently found a murdered woman?" She gave him the names of the street fronting the alleyway and the two side streets.

He thought a moment. "There are five at my last reckoning. I don't particularly care for them, truth be told. All seedy establishments. They favor poker, there's no roulette, and the blackjack dealers aren't that well endowed. The waitresses are young and lithesome, though."

She showed him the victim's picture taken by Doc Olbers's aide. "Have you seen this one?"

"Yes, but I can't say in which of the five establishments, if any. She might be an itinerant, moving to the gaming salon where she's needed, on any particular night there's gambling going on. These women aren't necessarily permanent employees either."

"No name for me?"

"Sorry, not for your young victim, but I can provide a list of the five establishments' locations when I last visited. Again, not always open for business, and often moving around as well, but in the same general area."

Clarke rummaged around in her purse again and produced pen and paper. When he handed the list to her, she studied it.

"No names for them either?"

"Those are the names of the sleazy function halls, my dear, which anyone can rent in theory. They provide chairs, tables, and a bar area so that organizers only have to supply the gambling equipment."

"I see. Not a surprise, I suppose." She looked at her watch. "I'd better get back. Thanks for this." She waved the pad.

“I think I’ll stay here a bit longer. I do enjoy the fresh air.” Again the hand rested on her thigh. “You can’t go wrong with George Benford, by the way. He’s an unusual fellow and has a sense of humor. And also honor. He actually cares about his clients.”

The DCI approved Blake’s plan when Clarke seconded it. The five illegal gambling sites were raided at half-past midnight, and organizers, their employees, and participants were all locked up to be interrogated, filling all the holding cells at the substation to the maximum. Most of clients and minor employees were soon sent home with only stiff fines. Three of the organizers found their stay at the station prolonged. After a more thorough grilling and despite sycophantic legal representation from barristers obviously familiar with the illegal gambling operations, three admitted to knowing the victim but only one could remember her name.

Clarke left all three in jail just for the hell of it, deciding to max out how long they could hold them without making a formal arrest. All her team met in the wee hours of the morning, minus the DCI.

“After a long night,” she said, “we have a lead. Our actions have led to some success in the sense that we closed down five illegal gambling operations, and we now have the name of the victim. We still have to find out what Jennifer Adams’s background is, and why she was killed.”

“Probably one of those three in the cells killed her,” said a constable. “They all look like scrotes to me.”

“And you look like one too,” she said, getting a laugh. They all looked worse for wear after the long day.

“It could also be someone among the clients and other employees of the five establishments,” Blake said. “They represent more of a problem.”

“We have their names and contact info,” said Clarke. “We can get back to them. Most clients are rightly embarrassed about their gambling habit, I dare say, as well as being found doing it illegally, and would prefer that their husbands or wives remain in the dark. That’s leverage we can use later, if needs must.” She looked around the group. “Let’s call it a night... rather morning. Go home, have a bit of a lie-in, and be back here at ten a.m.”

Blake didn’t need more encouragement. He hopped into his old Morris and headed for his flat. Sally had taken his space, so he parked on the curve at the entrance way to his complex. As he walked towards the flat, he thought about how busy he had been since his arrival in Riversford to start his new posting. Not much peace and quiet...and frankly a bit too much like London.

He felt integrated into Clarke’s team, though, and one great benefit was his blossoming relationship with the SOCO, Sally Gualchmai. But perhaps the Thames River Valley was just too close to the capital?

It’s good to come home to someone, though, he thought as he crawled into bed naked beside his equally naked girlfriend. Their thermostat was acting up, so snuggling was required. He’d have to ask the realty agent who to call for repair, but, with Sally there, he didn’t mind, even though he knew there would be no wild sex that night. Or morning, for that matter. And she’d probably be gone to her own job before he was up and about.

Unfortunately Blake's mobile woke him. The aroma of frying bacon filled the air, an aroma that could wake the dead, or at least the nearly dead like Blake. *So much for the lie-in.*

"Thought I'd catch you before you head off to work," his mum said, her voice on the mobile muted and a bit raspy.

"Want to share a scramble and rashers?" Sally called out.

"Who's that?" his mum said.

"Just a minute, mum. Be right there, luv."

"Are you shagging that Welsh lass, son? Good for you!"

"Mum, please. Give us some privacy, won't you?"

"Only if you're going at her now. Otherwise, tell me all about it."

His mum was always worried he'd never give her grandchildren. He thought she also might live vicariously through his relationships, which had been yet another reason to leave London. He loved her, but sometimes distance became a blessing.

"I'm badly in need of some sustenance. Everything okay with you?"

"Couldn't be better. Leo's here. I might be getting serious about him. Maybe we could have a double wedding?"

Blake groaned. *Leo?* He tried to remember. *Ah, the Italian banker, Leonardo Ricci.* His mum had mentioned the widower who was an extreme example of the adage that a way to a man's heart was via his stomach. Blake hadn't been too concerned about Leo. His mum had her flings, but her true love had always been Blake's father.

"You're sixty-seven, mum. You always said there wouldn't be anyone else but Pops."

"It was hard to imagine meeting anyone who could compare to your father, but I think he would have wanted me to be happy and would have liked Leo. And he loves to make culinary experiments here with me. We sing arias or dance in the nude—"

"Stop!" Blake tried to get that image out of his head. "I'll call you later. Although you might've killed my appetite, I need breakfast before my work day. Love you."

"Back at you, Logan."

She was giggling as she ended the call. *Leo?*

"What did your mum want?" said Sally as Blake joined her. She slid eggs and rashers onto his empty plate. "And what the hell time did you get home last night?"

"Mum just thinks she has to check on me. And we had some success with the case last night. At least we know who the victim is and where she worked."

He told Sally the story between breakfast bites.

"You're looking a bit worse for wear," Clarke said when she stopped at his desk to hand him a coffee. "We have a lot of case work today. Get settled a bit, and then I want to interrogate Mr. Chernoff. I'll have a constable bring him from his cell up to the room. Meet you there in ten. I want to talk to the DCI about the gamblers. He moves in some VIP circles, so maybe he's recognized some names."

"I got your request and the list," the DCI said to Clarke when she entered and took a seat. "I know several people on it. All upstanding citizens who are basically harmless idiots. You have to wonder, why bother? With online gambling, you can play blackjack at home."

“No sweet young things serving you liquor there,” Clarke said, “wiggling their breasts and bottoms.”

He smiled. “Point taken. The ones I know are men. Dirty old men in your mind’s eye?”

She laughed but then became serious. “I’ve no problem with gambling or sexual appetites as long as neither are addictions that destroy families. My problem with men is when they become abusive arses. You know that.”

“Indeed. I did single out one person, though. A surprise. I suppose hypocrisy should be a sin.”

“The vicar?”

“Correct. He preaches for limited alcohol use, love over lust, and the dangers of gambling.”

“Maybe the vicar’s wife drove him to it? But why does that make him differ from the others?”

“Turns out his wife’s sister is married to Ivan Chernoff. Maybe the vicar can tell us more about the brother-in-law.”

“Blake and I are going to interview Chernoff in a bit. Are you suggesting we shake down the vicar first?”

“No. Let me do that. It’s useful information for you and Blake, though. You can tell Chernoff we’ll be interviewing the vicar and their two wives and see what his reaction is.”

“I’d be surprised if he showed remorse or was embarrassed. The vicar might be when you interrogate him. But I’m focused on finding the murderer.”

“Yes, that’s where all our efforts should be directed. Murder is a far worse crime than illegal gambling.”

Blake came in after Clarke and took a seat at the table. Chernoff now glared at them both. He’d waived having a lawyer present, though. His glare soon turned to smugness as the interrogation began.

“Miss Jennifer Adams was waitressing at your illegal gambling site,” Clarke began. “She was murdered. You’re here as her employer, if it’s possible to call you that.”

Chernoff shrugged. “She had mostly a decorative function. I don’t know the woman. We get all kinds. Eye candy to distract the gamblers and keep them asking for drinks and playing, nothing more.”

“Hired help who have to get by with tips they earn serving drunken blokes who pretend to be paragons of virtue,” Blake said. “They must help you paint your bottom line black, what with the minimal cost to your sleazy business.”

“Don’t go high and mighty on me. Online gambling has given us the stick lately. I value the eye candy. My clients prefer live to virtual. You can’t pinch a butt on a computer screen or smart phone, you know. That’s what I offer: Real gambling in the flesh.”

“Do you have security cameras?” Clarke said, disgust on her face.

“I might. I can’t let you have those video files. My clients deserve their privacy.”

Clarke slapped the table, making even Blake jump. “This is a murder investigation, Mr. Chernoff. I can quickly get a warrant for those records. And make your life a bit more miserable for not cooperating.”

“You can try.” Chernoff half stood, palms on the table. “Because we’re done here inspector, I’ll be going now.”

“Sit down!”

Chernoff looked at Blake, who was ready to jump across the table to restrain him. He sat.

“Do you remember when Jennifer left your den of iniquity?”

“I wasn’t paying attention. The bar closes at two. I’m guessing she left soon after.”

“Anyone follow her?” said Blake.

“I already stated I wasn’t paying attention. Are you two rozzers completely deaf?”

“That’s why we want the video records,” Clarke said. “Because you thought so little of Jennifer that you weren’t paying attention to her goings and comings, or how she was treated by your clients. We’re betting someone else was. One of your clients who insists on you respecting their privacy. Is that hard for you to understand, Mr. Chernoff, or are you deaf and dumb?”

“By the way, why do you have surveillance?” Blake said. “Maybe a little sideline where you blackmail some VIPs with gambling addictions? Or the roving eyes their wives might not like?”

“No comment.”

It was Clarke’s turn to half-way stand. “We’ll be back. Stay put. Our constable there in the corner doesn’t even like suspects to twitch.”

Chernoff eyed the burly man who smiled and winked at him while flexing his fingers and making fists.

“What a douche bag,” Blake said to Clarke after sitting a cuppa in front of her.

“A smug one. You—” She looked up as a DC approached. “What’s your problem?”

“The DCI wants to see you in his office.”

Clarke looked at Blake. He shrugged. “Just what I need. Maybe the media is getting to him about this case. For him, patience isn’t one of his virtues.”

Chapter Four

The tall man sitting across from Clarke’s DCI turned and smiled at her.

“Meet Agent Bishop,” said Clarke’s boss, looking about as happy as Clarke.

The tall man nodded but extended no hand to shake.

“I smell a government rat,” Clarke said. “I’m the SIO for a murder investigation. I don’t have time to waste on agents of any type—literary, arts, insurance, whatever—they’re all pariahs.”

“Um, Mr. Bishop is requesting that we release Mr. Chernoff.”

“Immediately,” Bishop said.

“Go to hell,” said Clarke. “He’s a suspect.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Bishop. “The Home Office wants him released.”

“At your recommendation, I’m guessing. And I don’t give a rat’s arse if the king himself wants him released. He’s a suspect in a murder investigation. We just interrogated him. Still are in the process of doing so, to put a fine point on it.”

“Are you charging him?” said the DCI.

“There are gaping holes in his story. We can keep him here for the allotted time while we check them out. And he’s got a lot of form.”

“We don’t care,” said Bishop. “You must release him.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You can claim his cell. Or one elsewhere that’s less comfortable.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” the DCI said. “DI Clarke is one of my best investigators. I don’t think MI5 can do what you say without a hell of a lot more paperwork. Why don’t you let her keep him here until she follows up on the interrogation?”

“Because I don’t have to do that. You people have zero leverage when it comes to national security.”

“I get it,” said Clarke. “You clowns are using him to grass others. Always the same old story. You and your other agents wouldn’t know how to solve a crime if the criminals bit you on the arse.”

The DCI smiled as the agent turned red. “I guess I’ll have to be Solomon here. Patty, if you get evidence on this guy, we can charge him, unless MI5 hides him or takes him out of the country. If he has anything to do with this murder, he will be punished for it, I guarantee it.” The DCI eyed Bishop. “And for your information, Agent Bishop, I have friends in the Home Office with a lot more weight than you have.”

The agent frowned. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that threat.”

“On the contrary, broadcast it anywhere you like and to whomever. All the better, I’m thinking, so that everyone knows what meddlesome plods are in charge of national security. I know your type too, low-level paper-pushers that should be emptying rubbish bins instead of hindering honest policework. I’d love to take you down a notch.”

Bishop stood, his face still red. “I’m going to collect Mr. Chernoff. Just try and stop me.”

“I’m not stopping you, but I’ll register a protest with the Home Office.”

Bishop nodded and left.

“Why are you smiling?” the DCI asked his DI.

“Thank you for the support, sir.”

He shrugged. “Don’t get used to it. But he was an obnoxious prat, wasn’t he?”

“So who was that well-dressed gentleman?” Blake asked when Clarke returned to her desk.

“Some arse high enough in the pecking order that he can make us release Chernoff.”

At that moment, Bishop appeared again, guiding Chernoff by the elbow. After the two left the station, all the detectives, like Blake, wanted to know what had happened.

“We can still arrest Chernoff if we find contradictions in his story. Blake—” Her mobile interrupted Clarke. After listening a bit and then ringing off, she turned to her group. “Okay, back to work, everyone. We have another murder. Basically the same MO. Blake, you’re with me.”

Two hours later the new victim was on her way to the morgue, and SOCOs were still investigating the crime scene. The dead woman had been found at the wheel of an old lorry that was rusting away in a junkyard. The Fred Flintstone look-alike who’d been ready to crush it and end its days on Earth was still shaken when Clarke and Blake left. Blake and a few others had gone to inform and interview both women’s flatmates, something they hadn’t got around to doing with the first victim. The remaining group members, including Clarke, were left staring at the murder board that now had two victims. The silence was oppressive.

“So we have some perverted scrote who makes a move on a waitress, gets rejected, and then follows her when she leaves work and kills her?” one DC said.

“One theory,” Clarke admitted. “The first was a college student trying to make a few extra quid. The second was a blackjack dealer at night, hair stylist in the day. The first was two years younger than the second, but no one could tell the difference even with the garb they wore. At least we know the second’s name and other details right away.” She looked around the group. “Looks like we’ll need to interview some of the gambling customers. Chernoff couldn’t have committed the second murder because he was here. Let’s sort that once we have the results from the search of their flats and interviews with their flatmates.” She now looked at her watch. “Where are—”

At that moment, Blake and others walked in with two women. He asked two uniformed constables to take them to interview rooms and get their statements. They would be the station’s guests for a while.

“Want to give us an update?” Clarke said to Blake.

“SOCOs are still at the flats. I’m thinking too much time has passed, but who knows?”

“And those scratches on your face?”

“Bunny doesn’t fancy coppers,” he said. “Jenny’s flatmate is an escort.”

The others laughed, Blake blushed, and Clarke smiled. “Yet you got her to come in to make a statement.”

He shrugged. “She was worried about Jenny. Now she wants to help find her killer.”

Beyond their statements, the flatmates had nothing to offer in their interviews. After another short meeting, Clarke and Blake ordered the vicar brought in.

The most reverend James Townes, Chernoff’s brother-in-law, seemed nervous. During Clarke’s tea break from chatting with the flatmates, one DC mentioned to her that the holy man hadn’t wanted to lock eyes with anyone at the station. That had been her motivation to bring him in, although Reverend Townes had been on her list for more questioning later.

“Kind of embarrassing, reverend, to bring you in like this for a second time, but let’s get to it. We have a few more questions.”

He shrugged. “As I stated earlier, I like to gamble a bit. I suppose I should try online gambling. It’s been legal since 2005 and probably more discreet, I dare say.”

“I’m told some sites even have live female dealers,” Blake said with a smile. He had no use for hypocrites. “Although you probably prefer the real cleavage to virtual?”

Townes turned red. “I find that insulting. You don’t have to live with my wife. A complete prude that turns off the telly at even the hint of too much flesh from BBC.”

“Now we have that out of the way,” she shoved two photos to him, “please take a look at these two women. You’ve seen the first photo. Do you want to change your statement claiming you’ve never seen the first one in the flesh, and now the second?”

He tapped the second. “The blackjack dealer. I played against her. A good dealer.”

“Let’s assume your eyes wandered a bit from her around that den of iniquity,” Clarke said. “Did you notice anyone else there ogling her?”

“I resent the implication. I was *not* ogling, but there was a tall, thin fellow who organized the gaming night. He watches all his employees. Probably doesn’t want them chinwagging with any of the clients so the house takes more money in.”

Chernoff, thought Blake. *He doesn't want to admit to knowing him!* "Anyone else?" he said.

"Another fellow at the bar seemed to be very interested in my blackjack dealer. Not a real creepy fellow, but he never took eyes off her. Not ogling, I dare say, just frowning. Made me feel uncomfortable. He just seemed to be drinking. White wine, I think."

The rest of the interrogation went downhill from there. After a DC escorted the vicar out again, Clarke faced Blake.

"We need that video footage. I'm talking to the DCI. Getting it shouldn't be hindered by MI5's protection of Chernoff."

"Seems like a good plan," Blake said.

The DCI came through for them. MI5 asked Chernoff to send them the video footage from their surveillance cameras for that evening. The victim Donna Simms had left early...for a gambling night, that is...probably because the gamblers were more interested in other games, not blackjack. The vicar was Donna's last customer.

"He wasn't brought in on our sweep," Blake told Clarke. "We don't know who he is."

"Let's watch him at the bar a bit more."

"There!" Blake said almost five minutes later. "Back it up a bit." Clarke did just that until he said stop. He reached over and expanded the still to show their suspect's left hand that held the wine glass. "First, he's a lefty. Second, look at that ring. It has a crest on it. Let me copy that and do a search on the internet."

"Good catch, but don't bother. United Grand Lodge of England. George Benford has a ring with that insignia, but he's not tall and thin. I'd wager this drinker's an important VIP from around here."

"Too bad we can't apply facial recognition. I think the light's too dim and the face is in shadows."

"George might be better than that software. I'll send him a text message with this still attached."

Peter Houghton hadn't wanted to kill Jenny or Donna. He'd wanted to cleanse their souls and save them from the immoral life they were leading. He'd figured they were young enough to change their ways. He'd grown tired of trying to convert older people—mostly women, of course, but some men too. He'd first thought the vicar might be his next target, but Donna was obviously causing the old fellow to sin. Besides, Reverend Townes seemed to be more interested in his blackjack game than the dealer, in fact.

"Will you need me anymore today?" Dave asked.

Their small Christian publishing company had fallen on hard times, although interest in religion had increased somewhat. Even some Oxford students and professors visited his bookstore from time to time, an encouraging sign to be sure. Dave had shown him as well that not all young people had sold their souls to the Devil.

“Been a quiet one, hasn’t it?” Dave nodded. “Go home to your lovely family, David. Perhaps tomorrow will bring in some interested people. Our recent advertisement still has a few days to run.”

Dave was gone not five minutes when Peter heard the chimes sound at the entrance door to his bookstore. He looked at his watch. Twenty minutes to closing. Maybe this day could be saved? He walked out of the office to see two people, a woman and a man with police IDs displayed. He felt a frisson go down his spine turning into cold fingers that paradoxically made him perspire.

“What can I do for you, officers? Perhaps a history of the Bible? Or a biography of a saint?”

DI Clarke smiled. “Just admiring your ring, sir. A friend of mine is also a Mason.”

He put his hands in his pockets. “That’s nice,” he said.

He started to edge around the man, heading for the front door. DS Blake grabbed him.

“Peter Houghton, you’re under arrest for the murders of Jennifer Adams and Donna Simms.” Blake read him his rights.

Chapter Five

Blake told Sally to drive on to his flat and he’d be there as soon as he could. He had to charge Houghton and gather all the paperwork together for the Crown’s case of Rex vs. Houghton. Clarke had a previous commitment. Besides, it was more his task than hers.

He was tired by the time he walked in through his flat’s front door. He stopped in his tracks upon seeing Sally sitting on the sofa with his mum.

“What are you doing here, Mother?”

“A quick visit. Leo wanted to see if I can expand here. Well, in Oxford, to put a fine point on it. Riversford might be a bit too quiet and slow for my restaurant.”

With the exception of murders, thought Blake. He smelled the aroma of fine Italian cooking and saw the table set for four people. “Um...is Leo with you?”

“That I am, Logan,” said a tall, bear-like man striding from Blake’s bedroom. He had on one of Sally’s aprons. “Your mum thought it might be a good time for us to get to know each other since I’m going to be your new stepfather.”

Blake put a hand on the door jamb to steady himself. “Mum?”

“You look pale, Logan. Poor boy needs some food, Leo.”

Sally stood, walked up to him, and gave him a kiss. “I’ve learned so much about you, luv, from this chinwag with your mum.”

“I suppose,” Blake said, looking at the three conspirators and feeling trapped.

“*Moi aussi*,” Leo said. “And your Sally is a charming lady. Two charming people in one night, luv,” he said to Mrs. Blake. “My cup runneth over. Sally says you nicked another murderer. *Molto bene*. You must tell us all about it.”

Clarke handed one snifter to Benford, sat hers down, and picked up the stereo remote. She put on some soft jazz and took a seat next to him on the sofa. He smiled at her. She eyed him over the snifter’s brim as she enjoyed the aroma of the cognac.

“Simple elegance,” he said. “That’s what I like about you. Nothing pretentious, just elegant. Who’s playing?”

“You’ll never guess.”

Benford eyed the baby grand. “You?”

She shrugged. “I like romantic jazz improv. It’s soft and a mistake just sounds like part of the improv. That would drive other members in a trio or quartet nuts, though.”

“You’re always full of surprises. Your cooking, for example. That paella dinner was the best I’ve ever had, and I’ve had it at several places in Spain. I’m surprised you can find all the ingredients in Riversford.”

“I find them in Oxford. Plenty of international students and faculty there, so there are international grocers. You have to know where to find them, of course.” She took a sip. “I rarely cook, so don’t get used to it. I usually come home nights, kick off my trainers, nuke some leftovers, play the piano a bit afterwards, and finally crash.”

“Seems like you need someone else to make your evenings and life more interesting.”

“Maybe. Are you making an offer? Fair warning. Many men feel threatened by me. Tough old DI and all that, as if I were Harry Bosch.”

“Who’s that?”

“Google him. He’s a tough old LA cop. Fictional cop. I’m a tough, real one. I suppose you don’t read fiction?”

“I mostly read non-fiction, history in particular. Historical fiction occasionally, savoring how an author can fill in the blanks left by historical research. I just finished an interesting one that featured St. John the Divine, written by some obscure American author. I also read biographies and autobiographies.”

She nodded. “Authors obsessed with their own verbiage, I presume.” She waited for his rejoinder as if she were toying with a suspect, but Benford didn’t take the bait. “Tell me, George, why do you employ Miss Cleavage as a receptionist? Is she eye candy for you or for your male clients? I’m sure she annoys the hell out of your female ones.”

He chuckled. “That’s an abrupt change of direction. Another surprise, I dare say. Actually, I employ her for none of those reasons. My receptionist is a single mum. Her boyfriend beat her so badly, he put her in the hospital. I paid for a nanny until she could take care of the child, gave her professional advice on how to restrain the scrote legally, and hired her as a receptionist. My niece is a smart girl but not a very good judge of boyfriends, I’m afraid.”

Clarke frowned and thought a moment. “Sorry. For her, and for jumping to conclusions about you. Is she doing better now?”

“All that happened about two years ago, so yes, she’s much better. She’s living at my place. Her father disowned her when she started seeing the lout. I’ll have you over some time. Her son is a charming little nipper.” He finished the rest of his cognac. “I’m trying to make her parents sign a peace treaty with her. I think the mother is willing, but the old man, my older brother, is a stubborn jerk. Fair warning to you. I have some baggage, Patty.”

She smiled. “And you think a police inspector doesn’t?”

Note from Steve: I hoped you enjoyed these stories as much as I enjoyed writing them. Reviews are always appreciated. And you can connect with me via my contact page at my website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>.

Volume One of this series that contains the first three novellas featuring DI Clarke and DS Blake is available wherever quality ebooks are sold (but not Smashwords, because they were published via Draft2Digital).

You can reproduce and share this Volume Two with family and friends as long as you respect the copyright.

And here's my promised list of British-style mysteries I've enjoyed (you will find some reviewed in the "Book Reviews" and "Mini Reviews of Books" archives of my blog: <https://stevenmmoore.com/blog>:

Daniella Bennett's "Kirby/Landon Series"
Logan Blake's "Det. Tanner Murder Mysteries"
Peter Brassert's "DI Munro Murder Mysteries"
Clare Chase's "Eve Mallow Series"
Clare Chase's "Tara Thorpe Mysteries"
J. M. Dalgliesh's "Hidden Norfolk Mysteries"
John Dean's "DCI Jack Harris Mysteries"
J. R. Ellis's "Yorkshire Murder Mysteries"
Diana J. Febry's "Rural Mystery Series"
T. E. Kinsey's "Lady Hardcastle Mysteries"
J. D. Kirk's "DCI Logan Series"
Carole Lawrence's "Edinburgh Crime Mysteries"
Faith Martin's "Monica Noble Mysteries"
Faith Martin's "Jenny Starling Series"
Faith Martin's "Hillary Greene Mysteries"
Karen Baugh Menuhin's "Heathcliff Lennox Mysteries"
Val Penny's "Edinburgh Crime Series"
Saralyn Richards's "Detective Parrott Series"
Irina Shapiro's "Redmond and Haze Mysteries"

And, in the spirit of British-style mysteries (more so as the series progresses), please consider the following novels in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series:

Rembrandt's Angel
Son of Thunder
Death on the Danube
Palettes, Patriots, and Prats (to be published)

Finally, for mystery/thriller novels written in the hard-boiled style, please consider the following in the "Detectives Chen & Castilblanco" series, tales that begin in Manhattan but often become

national or international stories of intrigue (Esther Brookstone and her paramour Bastiann van Coevorden have cameos in a few of these):

The Midas Bomb

Angels Need Not Apply

Teeter-Totter between Lust and Murder

Aristocrats and Assassins

The Collector

Family Affairs

Gaia and the Goliaths

Around the world and to the Stars! In libris libertas!

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 four short story collections. He has an active blog where he posts opinions about current events, 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: <https://stevenmmoore.com>. Use the contact page there to communicate with him...and to sign up for his email newsletter to take advantage of Smashwords ebook sales only available to subscribers.