

INTOLERANCE



Esther Brookstone
Art Detective,
Book Seven

Steven M. Moore

Intolerance

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Summary

Esther Brookstone, ex-MI6 spy and ex-Scotland Yard Inspector in the Art and Antiques Division, becomes involved in solving a cold case, a murder committed in Ireland years earlier; in thwarting a plot to kill immigrants and refugees; and in a murder case involving a famous Irish author. Her husband, Bastiann van Coevorden, an ex-Interpol agent and now a consultant for MI5, and various others help her in these cases. As one character proclaims, "God help me. She turns up everywhere." Life after Brexit has become very dangerous in the British Isles!

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 here all those expressions appearing in the novel, but I possibly missed a few...or included a few extras from previous novels? And English and Irish readers, 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, discomfort

Auld Reekie—Edinburgh, Scotland

B

barney—verbal skirmish

barrister—lawyer who can participate in a trial

beck—creek, small river

biro—ballpoint pen (named after its 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
duty solicitor—legal representation provided to a suspect by the police or court

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, atmosphere, or mind) 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
nippers--children
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!
solicitor—a lawyer who provides legal representation but can't necessarily appear in a trial
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

Ambreesh Singh = technical staff member at MI5
Bastiann van Coevorden = ex-Interpol agent, currently an MI5 consultant
Caitlin "Kat" O'Malley = ex-Gardai Detective Inspector, currently a Scotland Yard Detective Inspector
David Thackeray = Scotland Yard Detective Chief Inspector
Declan O'Hara = journalist, poet, and fiction writer
Elizabeth "Liz" Wolfe = a fascist professor's estranged wife and a right-wing terrorist
Esther Brookstone = ex-MI6 agent and ex-Scotland Yard inspector, currently a gallery owner
Ezra Harris = Scotland Yard Detective Sergeant
Father O'Brian = Irish priest
Frederic "Freddie" March = duke serving as liaison between MI5 and the Home Office
Jeremy Brand = MI5 terrorist division head
Henry Bolton = Sean Doyle's one-time friend and old army chum
Li-Mei Huang = a young, aspiring writer
Linda Sanderson = Scotland Yard Detective Sergeant
Margaret "Maggie" Bent = Scotland Yard Detective Inspector
Min-Jing Huang = artist, Li-Mei's father, and Ricardo Silva's friend
Nathaniel "Nate" Hardy = ex-Gardai Detective Sergeant, currently a Gardai Detective Inspector
Nina Ricci = ex-nun at an Irish orphanage
Ralph Wolfe = fascist Birmingham university professor and MP candidate
Randall Cummings = a fascist group's new leader who replaces Joe Blake
Ricardo Silva = Brazilian painter
Roberta "Bobbie" MacDonald = American painter and Ricardo's wife
Robert "Joe" Blake = right-wing terrorist and co-conspirator with Liz Wolfe
Robert Winston = MI5 agent
Sara Reilly = Irish sculptor
Seamus = Irish handyman and religious nutter
Sean Doyle = Irish writer and Henry Bolton's one-time friend and army chum

Security Agencies

Irish Republic's national police = An Garda Siochana (Gardai or "the Guards")

British national police = Metropolitan Police ("the Met," Scotland Yard)

British crime agency = National Crime Agency (NCA)

British internal security = MI5

British external security = MI6

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 a copy of the Metropolitan Police with all its divisions and bureaucracy.

National Crime Agency—also created in 2013 to lead efforts against organized crime, including sex and drug trafficking.

MI5 and MI6—created during World War II (the MI stands for “Military Intelligence”).

Preface

In my role as Dr. Watson to Esther Brookstone's Holmes, I take great pleasure in relating more adventures (three of them!) involving Esther Brookstone. They are a bit more prosaic than the previous ones, often seeming like police procedurals, until they aren't; these aren't the usual crimes one might encounter in day-to-day policing. In fact, they troubled me greatly, and fit in well with the title because they show how intolerance can be such a nasty practice some despicable human beings indulge in.

One case herein features a sculptor. I love sculpture and was happy when Esther recovered that Bernini bust so long ago, so this particular adventure also resonated with me on the artistic level, although the crime, like I said, was troublesome.

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.

George Langston
London

Forgetting a debt doesn't mean it's paid.—Irish saying

SAMPLE

Chapter One

Heatherton, County Kildare, Ireland, 1993

Gardai Inspector Caitlin O'Malley didn't speak Gaelic. Her town was east of the Gaeltacht region, and, in Heatherton, not much Gaelic was spoken. Yet she knew enough to understand the curses she heard. Her old man had given her mum and her plenty of lessons about Gaelic curses until he'd frozen to death at the ripe age of thirty-four in the same churchyard as their current victim, her father's pickled state unable to preserve him.

While she had some thin gloves, her coat was too thin for the weather. It served to hide her youthful figure, though. She was barely over five feet and looked more like a frumpy housewife gone to pot after having a few children, not that she wouldn't have minded being in that state of domestic bliss on occasion. Her dark hair tinged with natural red highlights and ice-blue eyes were typically Irish, but those eyes could bore into a suspect and make him look aside to avoid her glare. She was mostly a people-person, though; in her job, she had to be, because the department had no family liaison officers.

"Got a name," said the uniformed patrolman, one of two guards who'd been on patrol in Old Town that early Sunday morning. "Thomas Reilly is the wee lad's name."

She thought a moment. Hers was a small town, but there were enough Reillys around; O'Reillys too. They would be trawling for the little lad's family as well as a search for suspects if a crime had indeed been committed. *Did the boy just wander out, get trapped in the storm, and end up here in the churchyard where he froze to death?* That seemed unlikely. And what had he been doing in Old Town, the old commercial center with its residents mostly old wrinklies without any children?

Fortunately, no one had moved the body, but snow now covered all of it except for the angelic face. They'd be waiting for the pathologist and the SOCOs.

She glanced at the man spewing the profanity, her second-in-command for the small police department's team, the only Crime Investigation Unit in the town. His stomping feet added percussion to the Gaelic complaints about cold and snow. She had to admit it was foul weather. *A dark and gloomy morning instead of night*, she mused, thinking of the stereotypical openings of some of the bad crime novels she occasionally read when the telly had nothing of interest. Of course, it was just past one a.m., so not much beyond night.

"Go inside the church, Nate, and see if you can rouse the priest. I want to know why this child died here, of all places."

"To be closer to God when he packed it in?"

"Get!" O'Malley watched him go, his lean, tall young body probably often earning a few glances from the town's unmarried lasses. *Or even married women?*

Nate was from Cork, generally a warmer climate in winter than Heatherton's, which was why he often complained about the town's, too warm in the summer and too cold in the winter. Being tall and thin, he didn't have much padding against the cold, in fact, and his coat matched hers in warmth if not size. His hooked nose made him look like an Italian count from Rome, as did his shock of disheveled black hair and brown eyes. So far, he'd impressed Kat; he was a damn good detective and a valued partner. Of course, being the only two detectives in town didn't give her much for comparison, but he was much better than her old sergeant, who hadn't hated being bossed around by a woman per se but a lazy lout often

ignoring what she requested. She wondered how he was doing in retirement. *Turning his wife into a nutter maybe?*

She turned back to the guard. "How did you ID him?"

She glanced to where he pointed. The reporter at the front edge of the onlookers behind the police tape waved at her. She recognized the annoying twit but ignored him and said to the guard, "Never trust a reporter." She then saw the SOCOs' van pull up and park. The pathologist wouldn't be far behind. "Call your partner in. Help them set up the tent, and then focus on crowd control. There will be more arriving here, I'm sure. Fortunately, it's before the first mass. I'm going inside too to see how Sergeant Hardy is doing with the priest."

He'd know she was doing that to get out of the snowy cold into a warmer environment, but she didn't have the guard's thick overcoat worn on patrol to keep her warm.

Kat found Nate talking to the priest who was dressed in pajamas, bathrobe, and presumably slippers, and probably a lot warmer than she was, even though the sanctuary wasn't much warmer than outside. She slid into a pew behind them.

The young priest gave her a nod. "Father O'Brian," he said, offering to shake hands.

She shook his and said, "Detective Inspector Caitlin O'Malley, Gardai. Catch me up, Nate."

Considering the size of her town and its police department, it wasn't an impressive title. Despite its distance from Dublin, the town was now considered a bedroom community of the greater Dublin conurbation, and, during the summer months, there were always many tourists milling around. That kept both her team and the police department busy enough that everyone was usually overworked. Budget cuts to the Gardai hadn't helped; Detective Sergeant Nate Hardy was the department's most recent hire, as a replacement, and that had occurred some time ago.

"The good father neither heard nor saw anything," Nate informed her.

The priest nodded. "I was sleeping."

No surprise, thought Kat. She yearned for her warm bed. "Do you know the victim, Thomas Reilly?"

"I've heard of the family by way of town gossip. They live just outside of town near the fens. His parents are atheists, so they're obviously not parish members. They're raising their children as heathens too, I imagine."

Those piercing eyes of hers bored into the priest who squirmed a little. *Too bad!*

In civilian clothes, he might be a better-looking bloke than Nate. His sandy hair and early-morning shadow made him appear like an actor, but Kat couldn't remember who that actor might be. The priest was well-built although only a bit taller than she was, certainly not as tall as Nate. The total package wasn't memorable, though. He might be imposing on the dais, but he wouldn't stand out in a crowd. He'd just be another ordinary chap who was too conservative for his own good.

Kat thanked the good Lord she wasn't a member of his flock. She was a lapsed Catholic, going to mass rarely and only on holy holidays. She had become that way because her mother had been fanatically devout. Priests were supposed to be there to comfort and console in times of need. All too often that only amounted to a little pat on the shoulder or an

indifferent hug along with the words, "It's God's will." She'd found all that inadequate at an early age. She couldn't imagine how this priest could be any different.

"I'll ignore what you said there, Father. Let's stick to facts. There are many Reillys living in our area. Do you happen to know which Reilly family we have to inform about their son's death, which is the key issue here, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Of course."

The look in his eyes told her that she'd made an enemy, but he at least told them where the family lived. She wrapped up the session.

Outside, she told Nate, "It's off to the posh side of town, m'lad. But let me query our favorite doctor first."

Kat watched the pathologist do his Cossack dance around the child's body, poking and prodding.

"First thoughts, Doc?"

"The body's becoming frozen, of course, but COD isn't the weather. There are multiple stab wounds in the torso. You definitely have a murder case, Kat, as you probably suspected. He wasn't killed here, though. Someone staged him, facing the cross like he was found. Quite unusual, and a bit troubling."

Through the tent's opening, Kat eyed the reporter again and groaned. *Just what I need: A sensational murder case!* Her eyes swept over the crowd of rubberneckers. *Who reported the body?* An anonymous call had come into the station. *Could that be the killer wanting the police and the town to admire his work? Was he in that crowd?* Anyone craning their neck trying to see could be the killer. A frisson went down her spine, and it wasn't from the cold.

She had the bad feeling this would be a tough case. She'd had them before, sometimes collaborating with both Gardai plods from Dublin and even Scotland Yard police in London. Success with those cases had allowed her to rise quickly among the ranks, at least quickly relative to the usual pace for a small town's police department.

"Maybe we should see about protecting the rest of the family?" Nate said.

"You think?" She thought a moment as she looked again at the body. "He's a stout lad. Could a priest carry him alone?"

"O'Brian? How 'bout any fervent member of this parish?"

Kat thought of her mother, now in a nursing home with diagnosed dementia. She'd been extremely devout. *What had that got her?*

"I agree that it's most likely the case of a lot of anger unleashed in order to make a religious statement."

"Right on. That's what I'm guessing."

"Let's visit the family. We'll see if they're equally dogmatic about their atheism."

They stopped for a moment for some hot coffee and bacon buttys at an overnight eatery, staying long enough to warm up, and then they continued on their way out of Heatherton. Streetlights had begun to turn off with the first light of dawn as they drove, but the streets were mostly empty. The town would come back to life in about an hour. The day before had been market day, so the pubs were full after that and people would be doing their post-market day lie-ins. *That had been my plan!*

Nestled in the eastern midlands' hills in the southwestern part of County Kildare between Dublin and Cashel just off the M9, the town had no tourists during the winter months, but it was a popular spot for tour buses to stop on their way to Cork during other months so travelers could stretch their legs and tend to their bodily functions or visit the castles. They had all kinds of tourists; some Kat liked, others not so much. Americans looking for their ancestors were okay yet often annoying, but she especially didn't like the English, who always seemed to look down their noses at town folk, many of them English immigrants themselves long ago. *Yet the English tourists adore Irish writers! What's that all about? Some like George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde had actually made a career out of making fun of the English elites.*

"Slow down," Nate said. "There might be some ice on the roads."

She ignored his warning. She was the better driver, after all. He'd damaged three police cars during his brief career in Heatherton, not seriously but enough to enter on his sheet.

She'd called ahead to warn the boy's parents they were coming. She needed to hear their story, and the father would have to make the journey to the morgue in Old Town to identify the murder victim.

Before leaving, she had given one last look at the rubbernecks. The reporter had left, presumably to file a report full of gossip, hunches, and rumors, many gathered from that same crowd. They'd known the boy and his parents were atheists, of course. Her fellow police knew to keep their lips sealed, though.

She'd also noticed the big bloke at the back of the crowd who was tall enough that she could see he was smiling at her. She didn't know who he was but thought he might just be the type to slow down on the motorway to get a good look at the blood and gore from an accident. Such people were more than rubbernecks.

She wasn't looking forward to meeting the parents. She also had a bad feeling about how that would go as well as the more general aggro about the murder case, a premonition that solving the crime and finding the murderer could be extremely difficult.

Chapter Two

Central London, England, 2027

Detective Inspector Margaret Bent had visited the area before. Authorities more commonly seen there were agents from the NCA, for organized crime, or from MI5, for terrorism. There was still enough crime around to keep constables and detectives from Scotland Yard busy, though.

The route to the alley from the tube station had taken her through narrow streets that wound between brooding buildings, once proud structures erected in the last century but now turned into rundown tenements by neglectful and greedy landlords. Maybe the area had improved since Dickens had used it and similar ones to paint in words his squalid pictures of the nineteenth century's industrial revolution's attacks on human dignity, but the prominent color, or lack thereof, was still gray—gray skies hanging over gray buildings with darker gray streaks from soot and other pollutants; residents in the area lethargically moving about dressed in gray garb that once had been the proud whites of ethnic groups that so many didn't consider British.

When she'd turned into the narrow alleyway, she'd been greeted by even more gray. The sky had become only a gray ribbon overhead, forming a claustrophobic and menacing roof over the murder scene. The only thing in the alley had been the pathologist's tent. She'd taken a peek inside upon arrival, nodded at the doctor more so he'd acknowledge her presence than to look at the butchered body, and was on her moby taking pictures of the crime scene for her report by the time her partner appeared and repeated her visit to the tent.

"From his garb, he's another Muslim victim," Detective Sergeant Ezra Harris observed. "Cor blimey, Guv, if that wasn't overkill, I don't know what is."

She glanced at her sergeant, who had ascended to her position when she'd been promoted. "A horrible murder, Ezra. No one deserves to die in that way."

They'd had a rash of attacks over the last few months, most of them involving Muslims. That Brexit us-versus-them sentiment had continued to focus its wrath on anyone who was "different," though, so the uptick was more likely due to the influx of immigrants and refugees into the UK from Syria and Afghanistan. The attackers seemed to be roaming gangs of thugs already angry at society. The police had arrested some of them, but, despite their small numbers, the Yard had barely mitigated the problem. It seemed to be getting worse, in fact, and more organized.

She glanced back towards the street and saw the small crowd, most of the men bearded and the women wearing hijabs, but still probably a mixture of Middle Eastern cultures. She didn't feel threatened. While it was hard to make out the women's faces, the men's expressions were sad. And for good reason. Another neighbor, someone with a wife and family, a hard-working man if he could find work, had been brutally murdered. She felt a bit of helplessness but also compassion and more resolve to bring the assailants to justice.

"We might as well return to HQ, Ezra," she said. "We have to wait to see the pathologist and SOCOs' results, and we have the previous cases still ongoing. That's enough to keep us busy."

"Their only connection is hate," Harris said, an unusual philosophical statement coming from the man often more terse than eloquent. "A lot of angry hate. What's this world coming to, Guv?"

"It's depressing, to say the least."

As her sergeant drove them back, she tried to focus on more pleasant thoughts. She'd recently married the Irish writer Declan O'Hara. They'd had a civil ceremony in London and then the full ceremony attended by all the family in Donegal, Ireland. For now, that trip amounted to a substitute honeymoon. Neither of them had the funds for a more expensive trip, and Declan's family didn't have them either.

So far, she had no regrets, not even for missing out on a honeymoon. Married life suited her, and Declan was a lovable and sane distraction from her intense and insane job. *Most of the time*. She'd met him at the beginning of another case he was innocently involved in. With him in danger, in fact, yet successfully contributing to solving the case enough that he now had the idea that he might be an amateur detective. *A male Miss Marple?* she thought with a smile. One of his crime novels had been helpful in that case, so that perception was somewhat justified.

Most coppers found it difficult to maintain a successful marriage. She thought she could manage to have one with Declan, especially because they weren't coworkers. She'd had her doubts initially, but their chemistry was so good that she'd taken the plunge. *You didn't have to accept his proposal, girl*, she told herself. *You jumped into the nuptial waters with your eyes wide open!* Considering how happy she was when around him, she was glad she'd been so bold.

She'd still often get flirtatious looks from coworkers, though, as well as from thugs who often thought they were God's gifts to women. She'd had to put both of them in their places before and after marriage. With coworkers, the flirting sometimes got out of hand. She supposed her appearance didn't help. Despite her size and temperament, she was what some men might call a stunner. She had tight brown curls and expressive brown eyes. She wore her hair short and had little or no makeup to minimize the flirting, though. A short face made her eyes seem even bigger, and they seemed to bore into suspects as if she were trying to read their minds. They'd often look away. Only the hard core blaggards could resist that glare. In her case, it was genetic. Her mother could do the same.

If standing beside the shorter Bent, as he often did, Harris would look taller than he was. The Cockney man had his rough edges—she also had to put him in his place a few times about racist or sexist comments—but his face now had showed genuine concern for the new victim. The man believed in fair play and represented the best Scotland Yard had to offer in the sense that protecting all of the UK's citizens from criminal elements defined his actions. His impish smile and twinkling eyes might make someone believe he'd bend the rules a bit to achieve that protection; Bent herself did that on occasion.

They'd become a formidable team, hence their promotions.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Ambreesh Singh said after Robert Winston told him to come into the small conference room after his knock at the door.

They were in one of the secondary office buildings that MI5 leased. The Home Office had slashed their budget, a common enough occurrence throughout the UK government now

during the bad economy that continued long after Brexit but because of it. No one could ever satisfactorily explain how leasing office space was a cost saving practice—the buildings' landlords often gouged government agencies—but agents like Singh and Winston were so busy that they didn't have much time to think about it.

Like all Sikh men, Ambreesh sported long tresses buried under the wrap-around turban. His was pale blue and contrasted with his swarthy face and dark, expressive eyes. He wasn't a large man, although bigger than Winston, and only went out in the field if someone needed tech support, and only then in a van marked up with some fictitious company name and logos to make it stealthy. Whether there or in-house, he'd be sitting at instruments and computers, remaining focused yet cool while others might be perspiring from the heat the equipment produced.

Despite his name, Winston was Scottish, not British. Ambreesh and other coworkers believed the wiry man fancied himself to be another James Bond, although he didn't work in MI6. He did look a bit like the last actor to play Bond, a rugged but small working man who just happened to do mostly secret work for His Majesty's national security agency run by the Home Office. His eyes were ice blue as they contemplated Ambreesh, but the Sikh knew they expressed no malicious intent. It was just Robert's way of taking charge of a conversation.

"Have a seat." When Ambreesh was seated, Robert slid a folder across to him. "An FYI. That's a list of recent hate crimes. We're having quite an epidemic here in London and elsewhere. Several attacks have been made against your people."

Ambreesh had become used to the "your people" tag long ago, so he said nothing. He didn't have to like it, and Winston probably had used it without thinking it was racist.

Ambreesh scanned the list. "Most of the names seem Muslim."

"Indeed, most of the victims are Muslim, but the moronic thugs can't seem to tell a Sikh from a Sunni or Shi'ite. Or they don't feckin' care. It seems they attack anyone who they think doesn't belong in the UK."

"But not the Scots?" Ambreesh said with a smile.

Winston's cold eyes managed to twinkle a bit in amusement. "*Touché*. If Scotland ever becomes independent, maybe their hatred will expand to cover me. But they wouldn't like me anyway, considering my job."

Ambreesh, satisfied with his payback for the "your people" tag, almost left at that point, but curiosity got the better of him. He sensed there was more to hear. "Considering we're both busy people, why are we having this conversation, and why are you showing me this list of names?"

"First, because you're a valued employee of MI5, and we want you and your family to be safe. These thugs can lash out at anyone, and, as you'll see in the case descriptions, many don't survive the encounter. Second, we want you to perform your computer magic to see if these attacks are random, or, even if the victims are random, whether they're the work of a group or groups who planned them."

"An organized conspiracy? Like anarchists or right-wing extremists? There are so many of those groups active in the UK now. Their members aren't known for their intelligence."

"But they can organize. Psychopathic people can be intelligent enough to organize other lesser intelligent psychopaths. And the uptick in hate crimes hints at organization. Think of Cromwell's witch hunters."

Winston was referring to a recent BBC fantasy series. "That's myth, at best literary license," Ambreesh said. "Cromwell didn't pursue witches, as far as I know, only British royalty and Irish Catholics."

Winston shrugged. "Maybe a bad example. Call it groups who get organized and take the law into their own hands then. Like the KKK in America."

"They're racists out to kill blacks."

"Just work with me here, Ambreesh. If you can prove these are random attacks, so be it, but we need to find some reason for the increase in their number."

Ambreesh smiled. "You mean beyond the general fact that the world's just going to hell?"

"Maybe a bit more specific conclusion would be in order, yes. And do be careful. Your family too."

Jeremy Brand gestured to a chair after inviting Winston to enter his office elsewhere in the same building. "Is Ambreesh onboard?"

"Good man, Ambreesh," Winston said, nodding. "I warned him to be careful, and he'll be methodical about determining if the attacks are random. Otherwise, I guess MI5 can leave the whole business to Scotland Yard for now."

Brand nodded. He was a taller version of Winston, dressed in a three-piece suit and looking like he might be in the financial industry rather than an MI5 VIP. As head of the agency's terrorism effort, the dapper man's purview included hate crimes in general and the rash of attacks in particular, at least on a national level. They'd managed to offload a lot of the investigations into organized crime onto the NCA, but everyone knew that split had come at a price: A lot of the bureaucracy was now repeated, making the combination even more a funding nightmare for the Home Office. Brexit and the Covid pandemic hadn't helped the situation.

Brand had been in government service longer than Winston. He had started in MI6, running spies into East Germany. He'd changed to MI5 to have a bit more tranquility, but terrorism had reared its ugly head and changed all that, yet it was the primary reason he'd stayed with the agency when NCA was formed. MI5's charter was now to protect the homeland; in that, it had become more like the Americans' DHS. NCA's was more like the American FBI's. But, like those two American agencies, there always seemed to be overlapping areas of concern that often created unnecessary frictions and a few fiascos.

As a consequence, Brand had to watch what was happening in the hierarchy above him. More and more, he relied on Winston to take care of the lower echelons. That brought its own stress because Brand didn't trust Winston completely. The man often was a bit nonchalant about abiding by the rules and staying within the law.

His next question reflected some of that distrust. Brand needed a capable person to rein in Winston a bit if Brand was forced to create a task force to handle the hate crimes.

"Did you find anything more about this Inspector Bent?"

"She's had a recent promotion. That either means she kissed some serious arse, or she's very good. I think it's the latter. She was a DS doing a DI's job for a while, so the promotion was probably deserved."

Brand thought a moment, a frown clouding his face. *Can a woman stand up to Winston?* He realized even the question was sexist, but his own research and a few discreet inquiries had indicated that this Bent's investigation was already somewhat successful, and no one else in the Yard came to having the required experience.

"If these hate crimes continue, we're going to have to create a special task force. That's easily justified. These thugs represent a type of terrorism, after all. The Home Secretary has is suffering considerable aggro about them and is expecting some MPs to start getting nervous too. I can see why he wouldn't want the latter with elections coming up."

Winston smiled. "You might enjoy swimming with the big fish, Jeremy—or should I call them sharks?—but I'm happy to avoid that. And frankly I don't give a damn what the Home Secretary thinks. I say a task force isn't required at this moment."

Brand nodded. Winston didn't mince words. He appreciated that in Winston. That was also a major part of his job description now, to be brutally honest. "I understand your point, but let's get ahead of this a bit. Create a list of names of people you might want on the task force."

"Um, I'd draft this DI Bent, Ambreesh for his technical prowess, and van Coevorden for his tenacity and Interpol connections. That'd be a good start."

Brand made a sweeping motion toward his colleague. "Not now. Off with you. There's no immediate need, as you said. Off with you. But do give it some thought."

Bent arrived home from work exhausted. She knew something was up when there were no leftover savory aromas from Declan's cooking filling their flat. When she was late, he always saved dinner for her. *What's happened?*

She found him staring at the wall in the extra bedroom they'd turned into a study, a glass of Jameson in hand.

"What's wrong, Luv?"

"I saw old Sean again today. We had a nice chinwag, but he's failing. I promised his daughter to keep an eye on him, but it's so depressing to see that brilliant mind eroding away."

"I suppose you chatted on and on about writing, tiring out the old fellow?"

"Despite the generational difference, we do have that in common. Passes the time for him."

They'd met Sean Doyle's daughter at their wedding. She and her family were friends with Declan's, and the daughter had helped Declan's parents organize the wedding events. She'd asked Declan the favor of checking up on her father Sean, now at a nursing home in the London suburbs.

Declan had asked one of the nurses to snap a picture of him and the old chap using Declan's moby. Their smiles had seemed genuine, not posed. Sean was in his wheelchair, wispy hair awry, and looked very pale compared to Declan. The lips had a bluish cast, but as far as Maggie knew, the old wrinklie had no trouble breathing. It was all a bit sad. Sean Doyle was a bit young to be in a nursing home. Other elders were active. It was surprising how differently people aged.

Like many wives of writers, Maggie had learned to live with Declan's whimsical and idiosyncratic behavior. After all, he tolerated the negatives of her job too, the long and often dangerous hours needed to track down criminals and bring them to justice. Although he wrote

some crime fiction, he never asked and she rarely shared information about her crime cases. If they talked about her work, he was more in a supporting role, realizing how depressing it could be for her sometimes.

His sad eyes indicated depression about Sean Doyle. She was depressed by the hate crimes. They would have to cheer each other to get through the rest of the evening.

He ruffled his own hair, something she loved to do as much as he liked toying with her curls. His slouch wasn't typical. The O'Hara men stood and sat at attention as if they were ex-military. Declan's sister was also a copper like their father Michael, so she carried on the family tradition when Declan became a man of letters. Maggie had met her at the wedding, a serious Gardai just beginning her career. She'd been Maggie's maid of honor.

Maggie pulled up a chair, sat, and put her hands on her husband's shoulder.

"That old man hasn't written anything in a while. I'm surprised that your writing has anything in common with his. I understand that you feel obligated, but it's a trip out there to visit him, and you're getting more and more depressed by those visits."

"It's more than just doing a good deed. I feel I can learn some tricks of the trade from that old man. He wrote some really good novels in his time."

"I suppose. They're doorstoppers, though. No one reads six-hundred-page epics anymore. Or do you want to write one of those?"

He laughed and took a sip of his whiskey. "Probably not. But I have an idea for a historical fiction novel I'm bouncing off him during his saner moments: The life of St. Brendan and how he discovered America."

"Um, is that historical fiction because nobody knows whether it's true?"

"It's like the story of the Vikings discovering America—legends lost in the mists of time supported by some archaeological finds."

"And what supports the case for St. Brendan?"

"Not much. He might have discovered America between 512 and 530 AD, nearly a thousand years before Columbus, though. St. Brendan the Navigator is the 'other patron saint' of Ireland, the patron saint of mariners, travelers, and whales. He was born around 489 AD near Tralee. Legend has it that he sailed in an Irish currach to America; that's a boat made out of animal skins. In 1976, a chap repeated that journey just to show it could be done. The archaeological evidence lies in the ancient Ogham script found in West Virginia that suggests an ancient visitor from Ireland was there."

"Seems like you've researched that a bit."

"One has to know the history and legends before writing historical fiction."

"Okay. I'm sorry that Sean is failing and happy that you can still discuss writing with him, but I'm famished. Didn't you make dinner?"

"I need to do some shopping. I got takeaway on the way back from Sean's nursing home. Yours is in the refrigerator. Get sorted while I heat things up for you."

"What kind of takeaway?"

"Curry."

"I'll have a glass of red wine to accompany it then. I had one hell of a day."

Chapter Three

London Suburbs

DCI David Thackeray drove through the gate to the nursing home with his DS Linda Sanderson still toying with her mobile. She hadn't been good company on the ride, and the traffic had annoyed him as well. The nursing home wasn't far from HQ as the crow flies, but far enough to make the late afternoon traffic congestion from everyone heading from the city more than he cared to battle. Budget cutbacks had redrawn and expanded the areas Yard stations covered in Greater London, and the loss of personnel made their workload even worse.

"Put that damn moby away," he said as he backed into a spot in the car park. "We've a crime scene."

"I was confirming something. I thought I recognized the victim's name."

"Sounds Irish. They're as common as flies on dog shite in the UK. Don't leave me in suspense, lass. It had better have something to do with the case."

"I don't know about that. I read some of his novels. Sean Doyle is an author. Um, was."

"I'm guessing that has nothing to do with the case unless some literary critic went too far in his critique. Let's go see if the SOCOs or pathologist have anything for us. I'd like to get home some time tonight."

She glared at him. No worry about her getting home. He probably didn't care about her life outside work. He certainly didn't worry about her on the job. Thackeray only worried about himself. She didn't know how his girlfriend Helen put up with him!

She had been a political science major when she'd decided that the legal profession wasn't all that attractive. She wanted to help good people more directly by bringing to justice the bad people who hurt them. She had entered the Met's fast-track program for uni graduates. Unfortunately, she had ended up with Thackeray.

She'd suffered from her share of the antics of misogynist coppers she had to work with and for, even before him, but he was the worst. It made her job at least twice as hard.

She was a plain woman, not flirtatious at all. She dressed plainly too and didn't use a lot of makeup. Yet Thackeray and others before him would still make their comments, motivating her even more to withdraw from the camaraderie, some of which could have compensated for the misogynistic practices.

She'd been frustrated in relationships too that could have been a welcome distraction from her work environment. There was misogyny outside work as well, and it was exacerbated by males who avoided dating a female copper. With that and Thackeray constantly putting her down, she often wondered how she could change her life for the better.

A uniformed constable was beckoning to them. Thackeray shimmied out of the small official car and took the nursing home's setting in. Well-trimmed hedges and lawns, a one-level building with a fountain in the middle of the entrance walkway, nice shade trees, and the many flower beds would probably assuage any spouse, son, or daughter's guilt about sticking someone inside the place. *Out of sight, out of mind*, he thought.

Some might consider him an imposing figure with his wide shoulders and wide chest. He looked a bit like an old politician out to gladhand the voters because he was dressed better

that the average copper, but his bulbous nose upon which old German-style spectacles perched and his hair parted in the middle only added a comedic flavor to this perception.

He didn't much care what people thought of him. He hitched up his pants and moved towards the constable, leaving Sanderson to catch up.

They followed him around one wing of the building to where the ubiquitous white tent covered the crime scene.

"What's up, Doc?"

Sanderson smiled. At least Thackeray hadn't wiggled his nose.

"I'll be out in a moment."

Thackeray waved the lead SOCO over. "Anything?"

"Lots of stuff around, Guv. Probably a popular place for the punters here, those who can get out of bed to enjoy it. It's probably impossible to isolate any useful DNA and definitely not prints, unless the traces on the victim's body are unique and not his."

"Understood. What did he die of?"

"I'm thinking strangulation, but Doc will have the last word."

Thackeray turned to Sanderson. "Get some more constables out here to canvass the residents and staff. We'll need some serious help with that because the place is huge. Wait for them and get them sorted. I'm going to talk with someone in the administration."

He reversed the route they'd come, returned to the main entrance, and went inside. The place didn't exactly smell like a hospital: Odors of feces and urine were a bit stronger than the odors from disinfectant. The receptionist guided him to the deputy head's office, Thackeray's nose twitching.

"A detective wishes to talk with you about Mr. Doyle, Bonnie," Thackeray heard the receptionist say after she'd left him outside.

"Show him in, George."

The woman met Thackeray at the entrance to her office. "Bonnie Thomas," she said, offering to shake hands.

Thackeray stared at the proffered hand a moment—he was a bit of a germaphobe now—and then offered his warrant card. "DCI David Thackeray, Scotland Yard."

"Please have a seat, Inspector. I understand DCIs sometimes are out in the field, but it seems unusual. I suppose the pandemic changed things?"

"More the resulting reorgs. Economies caused by Brexit, for the most part. Consequently, I now have to do both a DI and DCI's jobs, and my DS sometimes acts as a DI. I guess that's better than being demoted." He smiled and plopped into a chair. "What can you tell me about Sean Doyle?"

"A pleasant old man, he was. He'd taken a turn for the worse recently."

"Strangulation will do that to you."

Thomas frowned. "I meant with his Alzheimer's."

"Any chance it's a mercy killing?"

"Lord God, I hope not!"

"He could have paid one of the orderlies to do it."

"You plods do think the worse, don't you? No one here would want to kill Sean. He was always the perfect old gentleman. Sometimes he resisted getting some exercise or physical therapy, especially when he had ideas for his writing. He was always jotting down ideas for plots, themes, possible characters, settings, dialogue snippets, and so forth in a spiral-bound notebook. There must be a good dozen of them stashed away in his room."

"We'll need to have a look at those. So, no barneys with anyone here beyond that resistance to exercise?"

She laughed. "Complaints about the food sometimes. I'd have complained too. It's sometimes bland and tasteless."

"Being Irish—I assume he is—he must be used to bland food."

"That smacks of stereotyping. Ireland, especially Dublin, is a mecca for ethnic food these days. They're still part of the EU, after all. We're becoming less cosmopolitan, I believe, after Brexit."

Thackeray decided not to argue that. "How long has he lived in Greater London?"

"Most of his life. Came here to work as a journalist and then became a full-time writer. He has several wonderful novels."

"So my sergeant tells me. I don't have time to read. I'm lucky to have time to watch BBC One for the news."

"I understand he did well enough at writing to make a decent living. He also invested wisely. He was here as a private patient, not just your average old pensioner."

"Place probably costs far too much, no matter who you are. Taxpayers always get bilked. Did he have any visitors?"

"Most of his family live in the Donegal area of Ireland. I think he has a daughter there. Recently a young man who knows the daughter started visiting him."

"I'll need his name."

"Let me look it up." She consulted some database on her laptop. "We register all guests, even family. It's a requirement. Ah, here he is: Declan O'Hara."

Thackeray took out his mobile and entered the name. "Telephone?"

She rattled it off. "It's a mobile number."

"We'll give the chap a call, more to eliminate him from suspicion. You never can tell these days."

"Understood. I don't know anything about him, but you might query the receptionist."

Thackeray handed her a card. "In case you can think of anything else important for our investigation. Is there a back way to that little park area where the body was found?"

"I'll show you."

As they walked, Thackeray mentally shuddered as he passed by patients' rooms, thinking he was seeing his future.

DS Sanderson knocked on the door to Declan O'Hara's flat. She was surprised to see who opened it.

"Maggie?"

"Linda! How many years has it been?"

"Too long. I'm looking for Declan O'Hara. We have this as his address."

"He's buying some takeaway on his way home from the pub where he does a lot of his writing. Have you eaten? He always orders far too much. And please come in. What a wonderful surprise! We must catch up."

"I don't want to impose. I can come back later. We're trying to get a jump on an investigation, and since this place is on my way home, I thought I'd stop in."

"What investigation?" Maggie gestured to a wing chair. "What's Declan into now? He's my husband, by the way. We got married a few weeks ago."

"Congratulations. No honeymoon?"

"No money for it and no time because of work. You know how it is with the budget cuts and reorgs, I'm sure. Would you like to have some white wine while you decide if you're staying for dinner?"

"Sure. I'm technically off duty. I was always sorry I lost touch with you, you know."

Maggie had gone to their galley kitchen to serve the wine. She also sent a text message to Declan to bring home extra food.

"I was posted around before I returned to London, so that's partly my fault," Maggie said, handing Linda her wine, sitting, and then raising her own glass to her old friend. "How's your career in the Met going?"

"Still stuck at DS. A bit reluctant to even take the exams. I'm not sure the DCI with whom I work would give me a recommendation yet anyway. He's a bit of a throwback, I dare say."

"I see. I've had a bit more luck. I was playing the role of a DI as a DS, had some successful cases, and they promoted me. Strange that we haven't met since I returned to London."

"London is a big city, and everyone's so busy in the Yard now."

"So...you didn't answer my question. Why do you want to see my husband?"

"We understand he started to visit a man in a nursing home recently. Is Sean Doyle a relative of Declan?"

"Not exactly." They both heard keys rattling in the door. The locks were complicated because Declan had added extra security after some break-ins. "Here's Declan now. He can tell you all about it."

After introductions, the newlyweds insisted that Sanderson sit down to dinner with them. "We'll make it a business dinner," Maggie said with a smile.

Linda thought the curry was excellent and said so. "You must give me the name of the restaurant. Like I told you, Maggie, I don't live far from here. I'm always looking for a good restaurant for takeaway. I rarely have time to cook."

Maggie glanced at Declan. He'd known he'd made a mistake bringing home Indian food for the second night in a row. She patted his hand. "Declan often cooks. He works here in the flat as well as the pub, and he's quite the good chef."

I should be so lucky, Linda thought.

He nodded. "She married me for my culinary skills. So, what do you want to ask me?"

"Do you know Sean Doyle?"

"If you're talking about Sean Doyle, the novelist, the answer is yes. I was just there to visit him yesterday at his nursing home. What about old Sean? He's not in trouble with the law, is he?"

"No, he's dead. He's a murder victim."

Maggie's jaw dropped and Declan spluttered, spraying some curry sauce. "Sorry. My apologies." He dabbed at the mess with his napkin and reached for another. "A murder victim? How? That place has loads of security!"

"Not enough, apparently. He'd gone outside to enjoy the sunny afternoon and someone strangled him."

"My God!" Maggie said. "The murderer must be another patient or caretaker, right?"

"Constables are still interviewing patients and staff, but maybe not. The little park there where he sat is a bit isolated. It could be anybody entering the property from the woods, for example. The back looks onto a wooded area."

"I remember the park. Poor old Sean. Who could have done such a thing?"

Declan looked so mournful and his eyes so moist that Linda hated to continue with her questioning. "I need to ask you, Declan, why did you start visiting Mr. Doyle?"

He told her.

"Seems like you were doing the daughter a favor then. Poor thing, she must have found it hard with her father so far away."

"Brexit and costs made her visits next to impossible," Maggie said. "Will you inform Sean's family?"

"Of course. They'll probably want him buried in Donegal."

"That could be the case," Declan said, although Linda noticed he didn't seem so sure.

"Can I do anything else to help your investigation along?"

Maggie smiled. "He thinks he's Hercule Poirot now that he helped me on one of my cases. That's how we met."

"I should be so lucky. I just meet yobs on my cases, and I have an ogre of a boss who makes my life terribly difficult. But tell me about the wedding. Was it in Gaelic?"

"A mix," Declan said. "There are people in my family who don't speak it, but Maggie thought that going partly traditional would be nice." He blew his wife a kiss. "We were able to steal enough time from her work. We're now in planning mode for our delayed honeymoon."

"When are you going? And where to?"

"Before we were married, Declan was at a gallery event with an artist. Both he and his wife and the gallery owner and her husband made riverboat trips down the Danube for their honeymoons. We thought we might do the same. Neither Declan nor I have visited the continent that much."

"That's odd. My DCI and I know a woman who went on such a honeymoon voyage. Her name's Esther Brookstone."

"She's the gallery owner," Declan said.

It was Sanderson's turn to splutter. She couldn't wait to tell Thackeray. *He thinks Brookstone is out of his life for good!*

Chapter Four

Heatherton, County Kildare, Ireland, 2027

Esther Brookstone and Bastiann van Coevorden had traveled to Donegal to attend the wedding of Margaret Bent and Declan O'Hara, going west from Dublin after taking the Liverpool-to-Dublin ferry, and then heading south around the Emerald Isle through Killarney to Cork, and finally heading north to complete the circle. They'd stopped at the quaint old market town of Heatherton between Cashel and Dublin just off M9, primarily to visit the three castles in the area. It was about sixty-five kilometers southwest of Dublin, more south than west, and nestled in the County Kildare midlands, so they expected to do the rest of the ride to Dublin in less than an hour, hopefully still making the ferry, although that wasn't a requirement.

Esther's London business, *The Masterworks Gallery*, had hosted an unusual event not that long ago where the artist Ricardo Silva talked about his life and art and the novelist-poet Declan had talked about his. She thought that event had been quite successful and planned to do some more like it.

The older couple had decided to take advantage of the younger's wedding invitation to revisit some of Eire's tourist sites and soak up a bit more Irish culture. Fortunately, the infamous Irish weather had decided to cooperate and let the visitors enjoy the kelly-green countryside under bright cerulean skies with only enough clouds to give them character.

Esther and husband Bastiann were distracted by an impressive bronze sculpture in one of the little parks. She didn't have enough space in her gallery for sculptures, and she appreciated and preferred watercolors, oils, and acrylics more, but she couldn't help admiring the statue as she circled it, Bastiann watching her and not hiding his amusement. The statue reminded her of that "Fearless Girl" statue of which New York City was so proud. This one was of a small boy, one with haunting eyes and arms outstretched towards heaven.

They had considered the alternative of an immediate return to the UK to spend time in their castle near Edinburgh after the wedding, with the chance of seeing two friends there who now visited the castle more often than Esther and Bastiann did, especially during the winter months. House-sitters of a sort, yet close friends, Sylvia and Melissa were waiting to adopt a child, so that arrangement might change in the future. Sylvia had escaped from an abusive old Italian long before she met Melissa, stealing a valuable Bernini bust from him that Esther had eventually returned to the Italian government. That had been the closest Esther had ever come to owning a sculpture. *Where would I put one?* Not in her flat, and certainly not in their castle that was also small.

"Probably should be in a churchyard, don't you think," Bastiann said, watching Esther circle, stop, and circle again.

"The sculptor must have enough clout in the town to have this sculpture placed here. I wonder if he's a local." A bronze plate displayed the statue's name, "The Lost Boy," and the sculptor, S. Reilly.

A uniformed constable, who passed by swinging his baton, stopped, and spoke up. "She, madam. Sara Reilly, she is. Famous nationally, maybe even internationally known. Lived here all her life, she has. Made the statue soon after her twin brother was murdered."

"My God!" Esther said. "What a tragedy!"

"We Gardai never nicked the killer either, I'm reluctant to say, so that's more to the tragedy. Sara still lives here, on the outskirts of town in the old family home. Sells some artwork there, she does. Mostly small pieces. She makes her money from the larger ones on commission. A lot of them are very patriotic. The fight for our independence was a bloody one, as you might know. We're proud of our heritage and Sara too."

Esther smiled. The guard, because he was of the Gardai, had probably given that speech to many tourists, had it memorized, in fact. "Bastiann, we must visit her studio. We can't take back anything large, but I'd like to buy something to remember our trip and our stop here."

"Think of the tax."

"Pish-tosh. Consider it part of the trip's cost. Or a substitute for my walking the streets of this quaint and lovely town to shop and bore you in the process. And we might just get away with a wee bit of smuggling to avoid the taxes. You didn't hear that, constable."

The guard smiled. "Hear what, madam? If you like, I can provide directions to Sara's home."

"A nice policeman in the park helped us find you," Esther explained to Sara Reilly as they toured the studio that took up most of the space in the old house now. "We were admiring one of your works there."

The red-haired woman was muscular, and the rubber apron, which was covered with dust, didn't favor her figure either. The lack of makeup made her look plain too. Beneath the apron she had on sweats and trainers. The couple had caught her by surprise. It wasn't tourist season.

Sara Reilly followed them around, thinking the odd couple might be as eccentric as she was, maybe the older woman more so.

The Brookstone woman was tall and angular. She wore her years well, though, and had probably been a lot more attractive in her youth. Sara had already decided her visitor was very observant, though, and curious about all that was going on in the house turned studio. The sharp knife in a drawer of dull ones, not many people could put one over on this old lady.

Her husband was more difficult to analyze. He was much younger, but they were often holding hands, or his arm was around her shoulders or waist. He had an observer's eye as well. He reminded her of someone. *Movie? Telly series?* She watched so little now. She couldn't place him, but the mustache had stimulated the memory.

"It's the bronze statue of my twin brother. He was murdered. The Gardai never found who did it. I mostly work in marble now. Bronze can be troublesome."

"And the SIO for the case? Did he just give up?"

"She. Caitlin O'Malley. In a way, I suppose she had to give up. In her defense, she had a tough case. Our parents, our whole family, we weren't well-liked in Heatherton. Maybe because of that, people didn't collaborate with the investigators."

"Someone in this town must have killed your brother," Bastiann said.

"Especially considering that it was winter. There's not much movement through here at that time. Even this time of year, we don't have many tourists, because the weather can be unpredictable no matter the season. The main tourist season is the summer months."

"Back to the SIO," Esther said. "Could I speak to her?"

Sara smiled. "She moved to London. If she's still with Scotland Yard, I can't see why she wouldn't talk with you, but what difference would that make after all these years?"

"You don't know my wife," Bastiann said. "She's tenacious."

"So was Kat O'Malley. For many reasons, but mostly because of that case, she left the Gardai and found a job with Scotland Yard. My take is that her bosses here were no longer supportive. She didn't want my brother's murder to become a cold case, but it did."

"No one ever does. If the Yard valued her enough to hire her, that's significant."

"She'd helped them with some of their cases here, I believe, up and down the motorway, so her superiors didn't dare give her bad references. Probably glad she'd be the Yard's problem, not theirs, I suppose."

"I'm guessing the whole crime unit didn't resign. Is there someone I can chat with here in Heatherton?"

"Nate Hardy. He's a DI now, but he was her DS. Nice fellow from Cork, so he's not tight with the local plods, or town folk, for that matter. It's always been a small town, so you can live here for years and still be considered an outsider."

"But your family has been here even longer, right? The town folk seem to value you for bringing artistic fame to the place."

"I'm still considered an outsider because I'm not Catholic."

"That seems wrong-minded. Surely there are Anglicans and other Protestants? The Celtic-tiger phenomenon brought diversity to Ireland. You aren't Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim, are you?"

"No, all my family are atheists."

"Oh."

Despite Bastiann's warning about taxes—the UK was no longer part of the EU, so even the Irish VAT was hard to recover and ordinary city, county, and national sales taxes impossible—Esther purchased a small bust, and then they bid the sculptor adieu. As Esther hit the fob to open the boot of her Jaguar, she spotted a huge man two doors down. He'd been mowing the large lawn when they arrived. He'd still been at it but had stopped a moment to stare at her and then smile.

Now there's a large bloke, she thought. *I wonder if he plays rugby*. Esther knew that many Irish were fans of that sport.

After the English woman left with her Dutch husband, Sara relaxed a moment in the frayed wing chair in her sitting room, one of the few rooms not cluttered by her work. It was a good place to take a break from her sculpting, although it looked retro. One reason not to change: It was in their family home, so all the furniture from the previous century provided comfortable memories of her brother and parents. She also preferred to spend her money on a good block of marble or other material than furniture. Given that she entertained so little—few people just dropped in like her previous guests—other priorities went to the top of the list.

She'd broken into the small club of famous Irish sculptors when she received her first commission, a bust of Michael Collins. The Mayor of the Cork County Council had wanted a bust for the council chambers. The thoughtful countenance of the Irish patriot was a huge hit and a symbol of pride all over the Irish Republic.

The bust had been unveiled when Sara was twenty. She wasn't present. Since then, the commissions had kept coming. Despite her reclusiveness and shyness, she'd become famous, at least in the east, Dublin and south. An interview for Dublin's *Irish Times* sealed her fate.

It amused her that the two tourists had been so interested in Tommy's statue. That hadn't been a commission but a donation. She'd never take money from Heatherton's town folk. While she knew very few of them now—the town had grown even more since Tommy died, even as the Celtic-Tiger boom evaporated—and, despite her hermit-like existence, she was more a citizen of Ireland the country than one of her birthplace, a town she still barely tolerated, no matter how many good people it now had or how many newcomers now far outnumbered the original town folk.

It had taken her a while even to begin to recover from Tommy's death. As her twin, they'd been close. As a young child, she played more with Tommy and his friends. Football, bike riding, and skating dominated her playtime, even rugby sometimes, not little tea parties with dolls nor arts and crafts like other little girls. That all changed as the pre-puberty boys shunned girls and Sara discovered sculpting with clay via her pottery creations in secondary.

At the time of Tommy's death, Sara and Tommy were still close, though, each beginning to do their own thing, but also willing participants in a family life she knew from girls' gossip was a hell of a lot better than what some children had. She'd enjoyed that family life. It had changed with Tommy's murder, and it all changed again when the big C took both her parents in the same year. She'd become completely alone and dedicated to her artwork.

After revisiting all those memories, she felt she'd recovered from that surprise visit. She returned to her studio, expecting to never hear from her two visitors again.

Nathaniel Hardy, Detective Inspector, said the letters on the door's half-window.

Esther winked at Bastiann and then knocked.

"I'm not here."

She turned the knob and peered inside, seeing a slender man at his laptop. "Good to see you still have a sense of humor, Inspector." She opened the door wider.

"Who the hell are you?"

Esther approached the desk, offering a hand. "Esther Brookstone, ex-Scotland Yard."

Bastiann gave his version of Esther's greeting. "Bastiann van Coevorden, ex-Interpol."

Hardy now stood. "What am I supposed to do, bow? Sit down and tell me why you ex-coppers are in my office. I'm rather busy."

They put their hands down and sat.

"Kat O'Malley's cold case," Esther said. "Concerning that poor lad, Thomas Reilly."

"Do you have information about it?" Esther shook her head. He frowned. "It's my cold case too. Dead case now, truth be told. Done in by the *Wagon Train* effect."

"Pardon?" said Bastiann.

"Old telly show I watched when I was a child. They circled the wagons here too. If anyone knew anything, they never admitted it. Like someone had stitched their lips together. Nobody gave a damn about the atheists' child."

"Yet they now consider his twin sister the town's most famous resident?"

"She is. They're all hypocritical. There are some good people. A mix of Anglicans, Catholics, and Presbyterians, good people in general, but not atheists."

"Or they just didn't want to admit that someone could be bigoted enough to commit murder?"

"Not an exclusive 'or,' because there are enough bigots and haters here for all of Ireland. Holier-than-thou bigots and haters, in my opinion. Keep that to yourselves. I have to work here. I bite the bullet and protect them all. That's my duty, but it's trying at times."

"You sound bitter."

"Damn right I am! They basically ran Kat out of town when the Gardai didn't support her. It took Scotland Yard to recognize her worth."

They talked a bit more about the case, but Hardy soon lost interest. They managed to make the ferry.

"You're going to pursue this, aren't you?" Bastiann said to Esther on the ferry deck as the boat headed for Liverpool.

"It's quite unfair, Bastiann. I probably can't do much, but I must meddle a bit, just to see what I can do for poor Sara."

"I suppose that'll be a bit safer than some of your other obsessions."

Chapter Five

London Suburbs

It seemed like Ireland had passed its bad weather off to England, although Bastiann couldn't complain much. Southern England's weather was now less extreme than the continent's.

Esther had needed the car that dreary morning, so Bastiann headed for the tube station. He might have done that anyway because the weather would have made a drive into central London probably take longer than going via the underground. By taking the train, he would avoid traffic, arrive in a better mood, and be better prepared for the "important meeting," as MI5 agent Robert Winston had called it. Past meetings' importance was sometimes just a reflection of Robert's ego, so the Dutchman had no great expectations. Deciding to do consulting with MI5 had its many ups and downs, but that activity kept him connected to law enforcement in his adopted country, one he'd acquired by marriage.

As an Interpol agent, he'd often been a man without a country, doing many things, going many places, and working with many other law enforcement agencies, the latter being a sort of consulting as well, because those agencies often did the heavy lifting while Interpol agents provided support and international connections. He'd been well prepared for the MI5 job because of that experience with Interpol, but its focus on the UK had seemed myopic at times.

Considering the weather, which most Londoners seemed to tolerate better than he did, the trip to the office building where Robert, Jeremy Brand, and others from the terrorism unit schemed to keep him busy was high on his list of negatives. Global warming wasn't helping the situation. The weather was more variable now, although the trend in southern England, like the one in southern Europe, was an overall warming, and it made weather prediction more of a guessing game. He wondered if girls and boys in his home country of Holland still received new skates as birthday and Christmas gifts. He'd skated on Amsterdam's canals as a young lad; there were now fewer days for doing that.

But climate change had some economic benefits as well for the Netherlands. *Some Dutch engineers now benefitted from global warming*, he thought with a smile. *Some have lucrative contracts because of their expertise in building modern dikes to keep the rising seas away from valuable coastal properties.*

Every country's response to global warming seemed to be inadequate. Most of that was because global warming's changes in the environment, although more rapid now, still took longer than typical election cycles. Politicians didn't seem willing to commit to any long-term policies for that reason. And the world's many despots, more of them each year, it seemed, just didn't give a damn.

Deciding he should have purchased a paper to distract him on the ride from such weighty thoughts—it was too early to find one left by a previous commuter—Bastiann managed to turn those thoughts to a more personal level, to Esther. He'd enjoyed the trip around Ireland except for the fact that it had ended with her now embroiled in another obsession. He hoped it wouldn't lead to danger for her. Of course, his meeting might lead to something that could involve her, again hopefully not dangerous. Robert Winston knew she was a force to be reckoned with. A recent consulting job with MI5 had put her in danger

through no fault of hers. Could he convince his wife to leave the game and do more travel? He was certainly willing to do that. He owed nothing to MI5, especially Robert Winston.

It had taken him a while to settle down. His early relationship with Esther had been as variable as London weather, just two mature adults out to have a good time and enjoy the companionship. He'd never expected it to lead to marriage, not at their age. There'd been no sharp transition, just a slow realization that they were destined to enjoy their golden years together as a married couple.

Theirs had been a difficult relationship before she had left Scotland Yard and he had left Interpol. Her main residence had been London, his Lyon. Still, that long-distance romance had solidified into something more profound. It had been a strange process for him. She'd been married three times before, he none, so he generally let her take the lead, not that it would have done him any good to try to control the process. She had a mind of her own, so it seemed easier to buckle up and go along for the ride.

Even before their escapades had earned them media attention—more for her than for him, hers including an unwanted BBC documentary—wags in the Yard began to call her Miss Marple and him Hercule Poirot. She'd disliked that nickname more than he disliked his. He had to admit that she was very active, more so than Dame Agatha's famous literary character, who was, after all, only a feeble old lady with the hobby of solving mysteries. And he thought his mustache wasn't enough to identify him with Poirot, or rather the actor who had played him. Perhaps if Christie had teamed up those two sleuths, they would have become even more famous, but both he and his wife thought fame was far too overrated.

By the time he exited the tube station and opened his umbrella, he'd decided that his wife and he needed to talk more seriously about their future. They were just coasting along, avoiding any particular plans. Neither one had fully retired, but he'd certainly enjoyed that trip around Ireland until Esther became distracted by that cold case in Heatherton. They should do more of that...before they no longer could!

The building looked like any office building in the area that might hold a variety of central London businesses: commercial, financial, and legal offices might lease there to be near the seats of the UK's power. Entering the lobby, one in fact saw listed on the building's directory examples of those. They were all relegated to the first three stories, though. The top stories were occupied by an LTD with a bland name designed to be forgotten.

Robert Winston had told Maggie Bent to take only the left lift to that strange company's reception area. As she exited the lift, she felt more aggro than awe. She was heading for a meeting with people she didn't know, her presence at it requested by MI5.

She was given a visitor's badge and reminded again about where she had to go. She took the correct lift to the correct floor, followed the corridor that made the correct turn, and knocked on the correct door.

Robert Winston opened it a bit and peeked out at her. "Inspector Bent. Or should I call you Mrs. O'Hara now? Please come in."

"Maggie is fine," she said, entering and looking around the small conference room. She knew no one but Winston, whom she'd only met via a Zoom conference.

"Both congratulations and introductions are in order," he announced to the group. "Gentlemen, this is the recently married DI Maggie Bent from Scotland Yard. Maggie, the

two men with their backs against the far wall are my boss, Jeremy Brand, on your left, and out technical wizard, Ambreesh Singh, on your right." The two men gave her a nod. "The chap at the far head of the table is our resident duke, Freddie March, our direct liaison with the Home Office." The toff smiled at her and waved a hand; Bent immediately liked him. Winston then put a hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him who reminded Maggie of the actor who'd played Hercule Poirot so many times. "This is Bastiann van, ex-Interpol agent who consults for us now." He offered Maggie a chair next to Bastiann and Coevorden took one for himself at the head of the small table opposite March.

"To begin, Inspector," Brand said, "I should state that more personnel will probably be added to our little group as we delve more into these cases. And now, could you start things off properly by providing a summary of your hate crime investigations?"

She flashed a nervous smile around the group and then touched her forehead with her index finger. "I don't have everything up here at my beck and call, Mr. Brand."

"Understood. And it's Jeremy. We're on first name basis here. I'm sure Ambreesh has downloaded all the details to our own computer system, but I'm just after a summary and any insights you might have that aren't on HOLMES."

So, MI5 has access to the UK-wide police database. Figures. "I see. Mind you, the Yard is just dealing with the Greater London crimes. There are other incidents being investigated by other police forces, including ones by Police Scotland, specifically in Edinburgh and Glasgow." Brand said nothing, so she continued. "Okay. While there are those other incidents, almost all we've registered are anti-immigrant or anti-refugee, and specifically anti-Muslim." She gave a little nod to Singh. "There are also a few Sikh victims too, probably because the stupid thugs confuse Sikhs with Muslims." Singh gave a chin dip to return her nod. "On CCTV, we've often seen what seem to be the same people. They wear those hospital masks as if that damn pandemic were still with us, so it's hard to be certain. We've also seen one tattoo a lot: A swastika made out of lightning bolts. All that leads us to believe that most of these attacks are planned, if not against the particular victims, then part of a general campaign. That's my summary, Mr. Brand—um, Jeremy. The Yard would appreciate any help MI5 can provide."

"We'll work as a team on this one," Brand said. "The Home Secretary wants these attacks to end, so everyone has to pitch in. Bastiann, you looked startled when the inspector gave the swastika's description?"

"While it might not be relevant, in the sense that it's an easy enough and obvious generalization of that Nazi symbol, I saw it before a few years ago. I prefer to talk about that offline."

Brand winked at him. "I believe I know the circumstances, but that happened long ago. Probably no connection, but yes, let's chat about it."

Winston frowned. Maggie noted that the rapport between Brand and van Coevorden seemed to make Winston nervous.

"Esther might argue about the connection," van Coevorden said.

"Esther? Esther Brookstone?" Maggie said.

Van Coevorden gave a little nod and both Singh and Winston now smiled.

"My wife, and the woman who arranged your future husband's lecture at her gallery. One and the same, Inspector."

"My Lord, it's a small world!" Maggie said, remembering Linda Sanderson's similar surprise.

Van Coevorden shrugged. "It seems to get smaller every day."

Maggie met with Singh and Winston after that preliminary meeting to go over more details about the Met's hate crime cases. They then called it a day.

She left the office building MI5 leased with a lot of doubts. First, she didn't like Winston. He seemed like a strutting rooster who maybe thought he was the real James Bond. She'd had that initial impression during their Zoom conference and meeting him in the flesh hadn't changed that opinion.

Second, as far as her hate crime cases went, she thought she didn't need MI5 butting in. She might find uses for their technical support, that bloke Singh, for example, who seemed quite competent, but Scotland Yard and Police Scotland were quite capable of doing the heavy lifting.

Let Brand and his higher-ups coordinate the national effort if they needed something to do with their time. She would focus on the attacks and murders in the London area, cases that needed to be solved to protect innocent people from becoming future victims.

As she entered her flat, wonderful aromas greeted her.

"Are you making up for the last two nights, husband?"

He poured some fruity red wine, approached her, and gave her a kiss and then the glass. "In a way. I know you like lamb chops. Sides are potatoes and sprouts. Lemon bunt cake is dessert."

"I approve of the menu. Do I have time for a quick shower?"

"Of course. We don't want the chops to be too rare."

Later, at the dinner table, he toasted her and said, "Here's to your wonderful collaboration with the spy-chasers."

"Is that what you call MI5 agents in your novels?"

"Sometimes characters call them that. Were they as creepy as I'd imagined?"

"One was; another was a bureaucrat, on first perception, although he might be a good organizer; another could enter a competition with your tech friends; and the fourth was Esther Brookstone's husband."

"You're kidding. Never met him, but judging by her artistic tastes, he's probably not creepy."

"If you get past the fact that he looks like the actor who played Hercule Poirot."

"Um, Brookstone and he could be Miss Marple and Poirot then, although she seems like a spry old bird. Might be about the same age as Sean Doyle. It's interesting how differently people age."

"Think we'll age together well?"

"Luv, we'll age together like a fine wine. Speaking of wine, would you like me to top you off? How about a second chop?"

"Make that leftovers. Who knows whether you'll cook tomorrow?"

"A dagger to my heart, madam. I thought I was forgiven."

"Complete forgiveness requires some passionate love-making."

"Um, I think I can manage that."

Chapter Six

London Suburbs

Thackeray couldn't believe the news from his sergeant. "After that case with MI5 involving China, I thought that I was through with Brookstone, Linda. God help me. She turns up everywhere."

Thackeray's sergeant smiled at him, enjoying his discomfort. "If what you finally told me about that case is correct, she wasn't involved in it."

"That damn Dutchman was, in a big way, so she must have been somehow." He hadn't told her that Brookstone had actually been in danger, almost becoming an innocent victim. His sergeant would have commiserated with the old witch.

"In any case, Sean Doyle's visitor had nothing to do with his death."

"Stay objective, woman. Maybe young Declan planned to steal story ideas from the old man? How's the examination of those notebooks going?"

"Slow. Doyle wrote everything out longhand in tiny, almost illegible script. So far, I've only found ideas for new novels. It's sad to think he won't be able to write them."

"With onset Alzheimer's, he probably couldn't anyway. We need a motive. Who inherits? And how much?"

Sanderson sighed. Thackeray often had the right questions but expected her to find answers to them. She'd learned to ask most of the questions herself. "Not much of an inheritance, David. He signed over the family home in Donegal to his daughter long ago. She'll also receive what's left from his small but shrewd investments and future royalties from his books. That won't amount to much either because the publishers always take the lion's share."

"Besides, she's in Donegal. Hard for her to strangle her estranged papa from there, I dare say. Um, perhaps we should confirm she didn't travel here to London recently?"

"I already did. She helped organize Maggie and Declan's wedding and has been there in Donegal ever since. She lives in the family home, like I said."

"Did Brookstone and van Coevorden return to London right after that wedding?"

"No. They did a bit of tourism. As a consequence, Esther is becoming embroiled in one of Kat O'Malley's cold cases."

"From here or there?"

"Heatherton, so there."

"How'd you find that out? O'Malley tell you?" Linda knew Thackeray didn't like O'Malley, but he respected her. They'd worked together on a few cases.

"Brookstone did. I called her."

"Interesting, but we can't waste time on that. Not our problem anyway. Any other ideas about motives?"

"There must be something in Doyle's past."

"That's mostly been here in England, so it's up to us to find it, I suppose. The Gardai would be useless anyway. They kicked O'Malley out, which was completely moronic. Their loss, our gain."

"She resigned, Guv."

"Because they forced her. Just my opinion, mind you. But onwards. Let's get started with digging into Doyle's background."

"That's not going to be easy," she said, thinking of the limited places where they could find information about that.

He could only nod.

While Thackeray queried HOLMES, the Yard's criminal database, for past incidents involving Sean Doyle, Sanderson trolled other sources. Thackeray found nothing, not surprising because Doyle wasn't a criminal, but Sanderson came up with two items. The first occurred when another author sued Doyle for plagiarism and copyright violation; the court had thrown that case out. The second occurred when a woman sued him for slandering her family; that case had been settled out of court.

"To me, sounds like opportunists who, upon seeing a famous author, think he's making quite a dosh from his royalties and try to steal some for themselves," Thackeray said. "Can we find out how much he had to pay that old witch?"

"Closed records, Guv. It can't be much. He didn't get rich from his royalties, hence the small inheritance. Like I said earlier, the publishers take most of the royalties, and his historical fiction novels can't sell as well as popular genre fiction books that can sell thousands of copies sometimes. After all, his are considered more like literary fiction, long tomes that trace centuries of a famous family's history."

"The book involved in the lawsuit was about the woman's family?"

Sanderson nodded. "That's what she claimed. She presented as evidence some dubious baptismal records and a lot of legend and rumors. I'm guessing Doyle's barrister advised him to settle to end a long, drawn-out court battle that he might end up losing. Doyle was probably exasperated enough from the previous case to follow that advice."

"Who'd think publishing could be such a cutthroat business? And how's that work? Is an author supposed to get permission from living relatives before writing about the family history?"

"I have no idea. I'd think there'd be no problem as long as the novel was complimentary. Didn't Tom Clancy once write a novel about the king when that toff was still just a prince?"

"Who's Tom Clancy? Another feckin' Irishman?"

Sanderson sighed.

Chapter Seven

London, at a Scotland Yard Regional HQ

Kat O'Malley was a bit younger than Esther. *Maybe Bastiann's age?* she thought. They shook hands.

"Thanks for seeing me, Inspector."

"Call me Kat. I looked you up. You've done some good things, Mrs. Brookstone."

"And call me Esther. And that's probably only what's in the public record, but let's call it my good fortune to avoid bashing the media."

"And not divine providence? And that documentary?"

Esther sighed. "I had BBC remove that. I suppose copies are still around. Maybe even on YouTube."

"On our servers, as a matter of fact. Your fame as a modern Miss Marple, which I find a bit unflattering as you probably do as well, is still a popular topic among the old guard. Even a prat like David Thackeray reluctantly respects your successes. It couldn't have hurt your gallery's business, I dare say."

"While David is often an obnoxious twit, he's done a few good things too. And I doubt anyone buys paintings because the owner of the gallery had Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame. That documentary was made without my permission, by the way, so that was bad fortune."

"Like I had with the case of Thomas Reilly's murder. I'm reluctant to talk about it, you know. I suppose Sara Reilly gave you an earful."

"She doesn't blame you as much as she blames the town folk. And Nate Hardy blames them a lot more."

"Nate won't ever understand how they could be so hypocritical. He wasn't born there. It's just human nature, I'm afraid. The town folk can be really nice and a lot more open than some places here in England. The Irish can let bygones be gone sometimes."

"Except for their opinions about the English, which are justified to a large extent. And by hypocritical, do you mean celebrating their famous sculptor while not cooperating with the investigation into her brother's death? The time delay between the two events might explain that. She was still a child when the investigation took place."

"No matter what has transpired, neither Nate nor I can forget the case. My bitterness has been mitigated somewhat and replaced by regrets only because I found a rewarding job here, but he should have transferred to somewhere else too. Everyday he must see people he despises."

"You made a bigger move by coming here and not staying with the Gardai, but didn't you run into the same problems here with the Yard's internal politics so often reeking of misogyny?"

"Not at all. I probably would have at some police HQs farther from the city, but Londoners are more accepting of diversity. The Met values success, no matter which copper achieves it. Here I'm just another copper, not an Irish immigrant. The VIPs don't care where I come from for the most part, as long as I make them look good, and the criminals' opinions don't matter." She smiled. "And I've lost most of my accent, so there's only my name."

"Um, I don't want to waste your time, Inspector—er, Kat—but I need to get to it and ask: Do you think about the case at all? Do you have any ideas about who might have killed poor Thomas?"

"Somebody fanatically religious enough to kill an atheist?"

"Doesn't that make the whole town back then into suspects?"

"Unlikely. It's true that most of the town folk probably disliked the Reillys' atheism, but enough to kill? Especially a little child?"

"It seems that all those stab wounds would indicate uncontrolled rage, supporting your fanatic nutter theory, but I noticed something when I studied the autopsy photos."

"Oh my God, don't tell me I missed something!"

"Maybe, maybe not. Convince me I'm wrong." Esther took a photo she'd folded to fit into her purse and unfolded it. It showed the little boy's corpse on the pathologist's slab. There were red lines drawn to connect the stab wounds.

Kat gasped again. "You've connected the wounds to form a cross!"

"Precisely. A crude Irish cross, if I'm not mistaken. If I'm right, this shows pre-meditation and not uncontrolled rage. Without the lines, it's hard to see the cross, so maybe it's just my amateur artist's eyes finding patterns that aren't really there, like one does with ceiling tiles. I just couldn't understand the need for all those stab wounds otherwise, because almost everyone would have been lethal, poor little bugger."

"Yes, I agree. But premeditation or not, it doesn't prove much beyond reinforcing the idea that the family's atheism was the motive for the murder."

"Did you interview the priest? The murder took place in a churchyard, correct?"

"No, it took place elsewhere; they just found little Thomas's body dumped and staged there in the churchyard. We never discovered where the child was killed. But we questioned the priest several times."

"Did the priest have an alibi?"

"Not exactly. Nate had to wake him. SOCOs found nothing of note in his residence or the church. That search upset a lot of town folk too, not just the priest, many calling us 'the Devil's servants.' But those results support the idea that Thomas was killed elsewhere. And if Father O'Brian had anything to do with Tommy's death, he's already being tortured in Hell. Nate Hardy told me a while ago that he burned to death in a one-car traffic accident."

"Oh my," Esther said.

Late in the following day, Esther met Sara Reilly at the landing for the ferry from Dublin to Liverpool. Before that, she'd made a detour and taken the opportunity to visit Roberta MacDonald and Ricardo Silva in Manchester. The newlyweds were expecting their first child and Roberta was so far along that Esther would never have wanted her friend to travel. They'd sat in camping chairs and drank teas, their chinwag mostly focused on how the baby might change the couple's lives.

Unfortunately, that discussion had put Esther in a maudlin mood. She'd never been married long enough to her first two husbands to plan a family with them, and by the time she'd married her third husband, her Italian count, her time had passed. Such were the vagaries of life. Of course, she and Bastiann had the same option that Sylvia and Melissa had,

adoption, but Esther thought it would be terrible to die before their adopted child even graduated from secondary,

Continuing on the way to Liverpool, Esther had time to reflect on getting involved in Kat's cold case. Unlike the south, especially the counties of Essex, Sussex, and Kent, where vineyards now produced wine comparable to the best from France, the latter now being scarcer, all because of global warming, Esther considered the north still too grubby and industrialized until one passed it by and neared the Scottish border on the way to Roberta and Ricardo's other home in Argyllshire. Manchester was awful, and Liverpool was no exception either, its main claim to fame being where the Beatles had originated. Both cities showed the blight of the old industrial revolution running wild.

She had smiled as she passed a lorry and the driver tooted his horn, but her smile wasn't for the flirtatious driver. Bastiann always enjoyed it when she played the medley of their songs she'd arranged on her baby grand and recorded for automobile rides.

Her Dutchman often criticized her obsessions about righting wrongs. But when good people see bad things occurring, shouldn't the good step up and try to stop the bad when they could?

After all, Declan O'Hara was doing just that, for example, doing the best he could to help track down Sean Doyle's killer. At the wedding, she'd overheard Kate Murphy, Sean's daughter, making her request to Declan during the wedding reception, and now Declan was stepping up to become an amateur detective once again. She doubted he'd have any real success in the heavy lifting—he was too much an amateur sleuth who wanted the real world to provide new ideas for his novels. Sanderson and Thackeray had more experience with murder investigations, but Declan's enthusiasm and connections in Donegal could be useful to the plods, especially Linda, who was more open-minded about suggestions than David.

And Bastiann hardly had the right to criticize her. His consulting work with MI5 was more dangerous than her few obsessions...*until they evolved to danger?* She had to admit that sometimes her obsession to right a wrong could become very dangerous. But she'd rather go out righting a wrong than die as a demented old hag in a nursing home.

As she pulled into the terminal's car park, she'd decided that helping on the cold case was one of those opportunities to right a wrong that she just couldn't pass up.

The two women sorted Sara's luggage and were soon on the motorway in Esther's Jaguar, cruising along towards Birmingham and on their way back to London.

"My first time in England," the sculptor said to end a lull in the conversation. "My UK agent has always come to see me in Heatherton."

"Never left your hometown then?"

Sara laughed. "Sounds like I'm a recluse, doesn't it? I know some of my work has been purchased or commissioned by rich Chinese, Russian, and Japanese buyers, as well as by English and Americans, but I hardly even know Ireland. How are your newlyweds, by the way? Not Roberta and Ricardo, but the two at the wedding you attended in Donegal?"

"Declan's wife, Margaret Bent, is a busy woman in Scotland Yard, so he's the house-husband. Works for him. He's a writer, a poet and novelist specifically, so he's content working at home or in his favorite neighborhood pub."

"I'd love to meet them."

"Perhaps you will. You missed your chance to meet Roberta and Ricardo. Declan and Ricardo did an event at my gallery a while ago." There was another lull as Esther passed several slow lorries. "Kat will join us for dinner. She's busy too, but she wanted to see you again and say hello because she only knew you as a child. I've been going through her old case files. I have some questions for her. You might also have a few."

"A working dinner?"

"The work is for afterwards. I won't let it ruin a good *paella*. Do you like seafood?"

"It's a dietary staple back home, but Irish cooking tends to be a bit bland at times. Mine certainly is. I've never had *paella*. Is it spicy?"

"Not really, but I didn't make it, so we'll see what you think."

"Will your husband join us?"

"I believe he's on assignment in Felixstowe for the day, but I'm not sure. There's a ferry there as well, to the continent, of course. I think they're looking for someone. Um, or was that last week? He's busy too."

"I thought he'd retired from Interpol?"

"He has, but he does a bit of consulting work now. I prefer not to go into details." *Not that I know all of them*, Esther thought.

"So, he won't be working with us?"

"No, just we three. And if we find anything actionable in Ireland, we'll be calling Nate Hardy."

"Ah, our Mr. Hardy, now there's one frustrated copper. Comes around every once and a while to ask if I have any news relating to Thomas's murder. I don't, of course, but he still visits."

Esther smiled. "Maybe he fancies you?"

"Oh my, I hope not. He's almost as old as Kat. He's a DI now."

"Age differences don't matter that much anymore," Esther said. She and Bastiann had ten years between them. "Bastiann and I met him after we talked with you. Yes, still quite frustrated with the case, to say the least."

"I think that's why he comes around. I gather coppers don't like cold cases."

"The only thing good about them is that we haven't put someone innocent in the King's boarding house. We dislike them almost as much as the victims' relatives and close friends."

"Yes, I remember that with Kat."

"Fancy some music? Bastiann often has one or two of his playlists at the ready. It's mostly classical."

"That would soothe my nerves a bit."

"No reason to be nervous. We'll have a bit of a hen party this evening at dinner and then dig into the case files. With three of us attacking them, who knows what we'll find?"

Chapter Eight

Central London

Brand smiled at van Coevorden. The man had proven his worth, so he'd never had any regrets about following Winston and Brookstone's advice about hiring the ex-Interpol agent as a consultant. There'd been times when the MI5 chief would have liked to switch Winston and van Coevorden's roles, in fact.

"You saw that same iconized symbol during that case involving those neo-Nazis, didn't you?" Brand said. "Their symbol for the Fourth Reich they had planned."

"In that bunker in Austria, in particular. And most of them had ID cards with that symbol on them, as if they were Gestapo members."

"It's a stretch to associate these current thugs with them, you know."

"It's still something I'd like to investigate, though. The leaders died in that bunker, but I'm not sure the *Bundespolizei* in Austria and Germany caught all their followers. Am I paranoid, Jeremy? Could there actually be a resurgence, given all that's happened since then?"

"But why here in the UK?"

"They hated England. That ISIS attack was engineered by them, after all. And they indirectly provided the lethal material for those terrorists. Although that cartel leader changed the recipe so it was basically harmless, the original bioengineered virus would have made Covid look like a child's cold."

"Um, but the leader's husband owned a chemical company and her brother a pharmaceutical company. That combination might not be so easy to come by now."

"Agreed. Your comments do nothing to mitigate my paranoia."

"I'll consider that part of your Interpol experience, one reason why Robert wanted you on the task force, but please don't let it distract you from our more immediate goal." Van Coevorden nodded. "Now...on to another topic. I'm a bit worried about Robert's leadership. He's much better as a field agent, so I'm afraid we're making him into a victim of Peter's Principle. Are we doing what's right by letting him lead this task force?"

Van Coevorden considered that charged question a delicate one but then shrugged, not letting his distrust of Winston keep from voicing his objective perceptions. "I'm just a consultant, but it seems that letting the UK's police departments do the heavy lifting is wise. MI5 doesn't have the personnel available to go it alone, correct?"

Brand nodded. "We're spread very thin right now. Otherwise, you wouldn't be a consultant. During this investigation, if we ever need to go up against an armed group, I can provide a few commando teams, but that's limited too. We've always depended a lot on the police and worked with them, but they often resent us and the NCA."

"From my informal chats with Castilblanco, who you'll remember is the NYPD copper, it's the same with them and the FBI and the rest of that American alphabet soup of agencies. And he's a bit more open-minded than his colleagues, as we recently saw."

Brand again nodded, put his palms on the desk, and half-rose. "Okay. Our little chinwag is over. Check in with Maggie, Ambreesh, and Robert and get things moving along. I have some other commitments." He moved towards a chair where a briefcase with a security lock and handcuff ready for his arm sat ready for him.

"With Freddie and the Home Secretary?"

"Good guess. And the PM as well. Freddie and I have to give a status report to those gentlemen about what we're doing. Damn waste of time, of course. They'll only understand ten percent of it."

"Better you and Freddie than me. And I'm sure it will go swimmingly."

"If we don't drown in inanities."

"Got your lightning bolts straightened out?" Winston said as van Coevorden entered the IT room where Ambreesh and Robert sat looking at a computer monitor. Maggie Bent had already left. Bastiann assumed she'd be briefing Scotland Yard brass the next day.

Bastiann ignored Robert's question. "Just bring me up to date."

"Maggie has good eyes," Ambreesh said, bringing up two CCTV videos. "Watch these."

He ran the first video and then stopped it at one frame, and then he did the same with the second. It seemed to Bastiann that four men were common to the two frames, by their eyes, body postures, and body statures and builds.

"Tough to be sure," Bastiann said. "Those four could be the same, but they're not wearing the same clothes in the two videos. That means nothing, of course. But that one—" He pointed. "He's got a prosthetic right arm."

Ambreesh and Robert leaned forward to examine the screen's images better. "How can you tell?" Robert said.

"The sheen. It's in both images. Not natural skin, and a bit too pink. And he acts like a right-handed bloke who's uncomfortable using his left."

Ambreesh nodded. "I think you're right. Can that help us?"

"It helped 'The Fugitive,'" Bastiann said with a smile. He'd used his index fingers to make the quotes.

Robert laughed. "A bit before Ambreesh was born, old stick. Forget that comment, Mr. Singh. Bastiann's remembering an old Yankee telly series from long ago that the BBC picked up and has rebroadcasted several times over the years."

"And a more recent Harrison Ford movie," Bastiann said. "And that prosthetic arm will help us too, Ambreesh. Most people who receive prosthetics are registered in the NHS database. We might need a warrant."

"If civilians," Ambreesh said with a nod. "But they also could be veterans."

"In which case, that's in their military records, which are kept even after they leave the military. We have a lead, gentlemen. I'll contact Maggie tomorrow, but we should get the bus rolling by examining NHS and military databases. She can then have the coppers look for a one-armed man."

"Let's get this out ASAP," Maggie said to Ezra the next morning. "I should have caught it."

"We and others were going blind watching all those damn videos. Five sets of eyes are better than two, Guv. We spotted the same four scrotes who appeared in multiple videos. The blokes in MI5 then spotted the prosthetic. One event catalyzed the other. That's called

teamwork. We now can launch a manhunt for Mr. Joseph R. Blake, ex-soldier and mercenary."

"The last hate crime occurred here in London. I hope he's still here. I'd love to get him in an interrogation room."

"Think he'd grass on his colleagues?"

She thought a moment. "Maybe that'd be more likely if MI5 did the interrogating. With terrorism charges, they might not have to provide a duty solicitor, making it easier for them to break him down. But let's not forget about the other three. Interrogating them too, playing them off against Blake and each other, that might be worthwhile. We need to round up all these yobs."

"Could they all be ex-soldiers?"

"Good question. Ex-soldiers and fellow mercenaries maybe, out to "purify" the homeland. Let's look into that." She waved her moby that still had Bastiann's message on the screen. "We're making progress, Ezra. Maybe hooking up with MI5 will work out after all."

He smiled. "I can always tell when you're moving in for the kill like a she-wolf."

She eyed him. "Is that a compliment?"

"Um, I guess so."

She smiled, knowing he'd never say otherwise. He was a Cockney gentleman. "I'll leave you to get that manhunt sorted."

"Where are you off to?"

"The VIPs of Scotland Yard want a briefing. I understand that the Home Office came down on them. They're passing on the pain to us. The chief, DCI, and I can improve our lot with this new development."

"Good luck, Guv. Better me than you."

Chapter Nine

London Suburbs

The author who'd sued Doyle lived with his son's family in Ruislip, west of central London. The house was certainly large enough to make the whole family comfortable—the sitting room alone was bigger than Sanderson's flat and filled with a home theater that obviated the need of ever going out to a movie. They passed through that and a large library as the daughter-in-law led Thackeray and Sanderson to the old man who was enjoying some sun in the rear garden. "You're lucky," she said in a whisper. "The old bastard's having one of his good days." She opened the sliding doors and let Sanderson and Thackeray pass ahead of her.

"Mr. Jenkins?" said Sanderson.

Thackeray had told Sanderson to take the lead, figuring the old fellow would like a pretty face better.

"Who's asking?"

"I'm Detective Sergeant Linda Sanderson. This is Detective Chief Inspector David Thackeray." She showed him her warrant card; Thackeray flashed his. "We're here to ask you some questions about Sean Doyle. May we sit down?"

He gestured to the other side of the garden table and swung his wheelchair around to face them. "Don't bring tea service, Dotty. I'll be rid of these rozzers soon enough."

"I'll leave you to him," the daughter-in-law said with a smile, doing an about-face and going back inside.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" Sanderson said, ignoring the slight. Jenkins nodded but grudgingly. "We're beginning an investigation and were wondering if you could provide some background information on Mr. Sean Doyle. You were both authors."

"Unfortunately. The Irish are just like Travelers, those gypsies that plague us all the time. I think some of those nomads are Irish, in fact. They can't be trusted. Doyle was like that. Made no difference to me that he became a British citizen. The Liberals allow anyone to do that nowadays. All the foreigners here are ruining the country."

Sanderson jotted down "British citizen," something they hadn't known. She'd known Thackeray wouldn't take notes. He always claimed he remembered everything that was important, but he often depended on her notes to "refresh" his memory.

"Did you two interact socially at all?"

"Why would I have anything to do with the chap? He stole my ideas!"

"I meant before the lawsuit."

"I suppose I can tell you. You'll find out anyway. We'd run across each other at parties and other events. Was always trying to steal the show, he was. Often spouting a lot of blather and twaddle as he beat his chest and told his war stories to impress the ladies. I think the Irish call that blarney. I call it arrogant and self-serving."

"War stories?"

"Was always bragging about when he fought in that war that was no war over the Falkland Islands. The damn Argentines wanted to call them the Malvinas. The Iron Lady put them in their place, she did."

"Um, I'm sensing that you two were on the outs even before that lawsuit. Is that correct?"

"Damn right! He tried to seduce my wife. I put a stop to that. I think the Irish are as bad as the French, Italians, and Spaniards. And for some damn reason, the world loves Irish writers. Just shows you how stupid people can be."

Sanderson couldn't help wondering if that was the kind of thinking that had led to Brexit. Thackeray had been all for that, of course. He'd at least thought it through, claiming that the EU wasn't a proper union and only pretended to be a central government while leaving the problems of individual members for them to handle alone. Because it had started as a trade union, Sanderson couldn't see that it could have been anything else. She didn't discuss it anymore.

"What ideas of yours did you think he stole?"

"Whole parts of his *The Rise and Fall of the Stuart Kings* are too close to mine in *The Stuart Kings of England*."

"And the court didn't agree with you? Why not?"

"You'll have to ask them. Wiggled bastards don't know their arseholes from a badger den. Why all these questions about Doyle? Haven't talked to the yob since my case was adjudicated."

"He was murdered."

Surprise flashed on the man's face, then a wide grin. "And I suppose you plods are stupid enough to think I did it? Look at me." He thought a moment. "When you find his murderer, I'd like to shake his hand. Good day, detectives. You can find your way out. I'll not bother my daughter-in-law for the likes of you two."

"What an old bastard," Sanderson said after they'd entered their car.

"Old feuds never die," Thackeray said. "I wonder if there's any truth to his claim of plagiarism."

"Not likely. Historical fiction is based on fact, and facts can't be plagiarized."

Their next stop was Richmond Park in southwest London to visit the woman who'd sued Doyle for slander. The house was even larger than Jenkins's, a two-story faux-Georgian monstrosity that made Sanderson wonder how much the property taxes were. While newly refurbished inside, the family seemed to be old wealth, so Sanderson was immediately curious about the family's history, especially considering the lawsuit.

The maid showed them into a sitting room and an older woman soon joined them. She moved with grace and took a seat on a small sofa facing the two. Despite her wrinkles, her coif and jewelry made her look aristocratic, reaffirming Sanderson's guess at old wealth.

"Bring tea service, Sally, and some of those little cakes of yours. We must treat our guests properly, even though they're just the police. I suppose you two have some identification?"

Thackeray flashed his warrant card. "DCI David Thackeray, madam. Scotland Yard. This is my sergeant, Linda Sanderson."

"You already know I'm Elizabeth Brown, so let's get to it. Why are you here? The Yard's not collecting taxes for that useless king now, is it?"

From her smile, she meant that as a joke. She was a bit more sociable than old man Jenkins had been.

"We're here to get some background on Sean Doyle, if you don't mind."

"I do mind, but it won't do me any good, I suppose. He was a nice man, but he tried to sully my family's reputation. In his book, *Party Time with Thomas Becket*, he painted the Archbishop as a lascivious ne'er-do-well."

"You're related to the saint?" Sanderson said.

"No. To the Normans on his mother Matilda's side. How could I be related to him? He was a Catholic priest."

"Priests have been known to play around," Thackeray said. "Middle Ages, right?" She nodded. "Especially then. Even the popes. I think one was even a Medici, a Florentine playboy."

"Not the Middle Ages, Inspector. That was the Renaissance."

Sanderson glanced at Thackeray. She was surprised he knew any history at all. Unfortunately, he'd managed to ruffle some feathers with his comments. She tried to compensate.

"I suppose that was when Thomas Becket was at court? An interesting time. It's said that King Henry had him murdered."

"I suppose that's true enough, my dear. I wasn't there, and family legend is mute on the point. But the book cast a bad light on Matilda and her family...my family. I couldn't tolerate that. So, I fought back."

"How?" said Thackeray. "The files are closed to us, so it would be interesting to know how a settlement was reached. Not amicably, I gather?"

"Indeed. That was a long time ago. Why does any of it matter now?"

"Sean Doyle was murdered. You're a person of interest."

"That's just a euphemism for suspect, Inspector." She seemed amused, though. "What a delightful piece of gossip for my bridge club!" She winked at Sanderson. "I didn't kill him. I didn't even know he was still alive. It's all downhill once you're past seventy, isn't it? He was really a marvelous writer, though, and I always thought Sean was a bit like Thomas Becket as he portrayed him."

"In what way?"

"Lewd and lascivious, and Catholic, of course. He enjoyed his conquests, I dare say. I almost succumbed myself. Long ago, before he and I each married. But I couldn't let him get away with damaging my family's reputation. I'm proud of my Norman heritage and proud to be related to Matilda. So, I fought him in court."

"How?"

"I was going to show the public his own sins," said the dowager.

"And what were those?" Thackeray said.

"His daughter was born only three months after he married. Full term, that baby was. He didn't want the scandal, so checkmate. We settled out of court. But I still lost. As part of the settlement, he promised to change the book in its second edition as far as Matilda and her relatives were concerned. He never wrote one, even though new facts about Thomas Becket have emerged."

"How are we going to use any of that information?" Thackeray said during their return to HQ.

"First thing, I'm going to research his time during and after the Falklands War. Comrades in arms often develop close bonds or hatreds that last a lifetime."

"Um, there's that. Not a bad idea. Wonder if the wife's father threatened him if he didn't marry her? That could generate some sour grapes as well. Probably not enough to kill the bloke so many years later, though, even forgetting about how old the father would be." Thackeray hesitated, as if he were going to offer one of his politically incorrect observations. "Sorry, but I have to escort my girlfriend to some silly function. She's receiving some kind of reward for a report about another royal scandal. I'll have to leave you to your research. Let's talk in the morning."

As Thackeray drove away to his function, Sanderson cursed him. She did most of the research work and he took the credit. She wondered if she'd ever get a promotion like Maggie Bent had received.

She entered the building in a foul mood but still motivated to get on with the investigation. She often stayed late, often until she and the nighttime duty sergeant were the only ones present in a lonely suburban police station if no big cases were going on. While Thackeray thought all his cases were big and important, he often didn't give them the attention required to justify that belief.

And extremely lonely the station could become, something she enjoyed more and more because it gave her space and time away from Thackeray to do real police work, the tasks that needed to be done but Thackeray left for her to do.

Her mind turned briefly to Esther Brookstone. Linda wasn't sure what Thackeray had against the old girl, who lived not that far from the station, but Thackeray had rejoiced a few times when he thought he could arrest her for something. Was it just jealousy and resentment that she'd been more in the public's eye than he could ever hope to be? Or some serious barneys when they both worked in Scotland Yard? She wasn't a fan of gossip, but she had to confess that she'd like to know more about their history.

Linda would have liked to be there at the gallery when Declan gave his lecture. He was a charming, intelligent man. Maggie had reeled in a good one there.

That thought brought her back to reality. While it was late, she had some luck tracking down one of Sean Doyle's old army buddies, Harold Greene, the third veteran she tried.

"So old Sean is dead? Henry Bolton and he were best of friends. Comical, really. You'd think two toffs from Cambridge and Oxford wouldn't be so close, one English and one Irish, and Henry wasn't fond of the Irish. Lost his brother during the Troubles. He made an exception for Sean, though, because he was from Donegal, not Northern Island. They'd go pub-hopping and whoring with or without the rest of us. We all fought together in the Falklands as a tight group, though. Made our country proud during the little time we were there. Nearly the Iron Lady's little Vietnam, I dare say. None of us loved her, that's for sure."

"Did they keep in touch after the war?"

"No idea. We mostly went our separate ways. We won the war but lost in the court of public opinion. That's my take. In any case, everyone wanted to get rid of those bad memories. Sticking together more would have kept the sores from healing."

"There were no feuds among you then?"

"Heavens no! Soldiers forgot about who came from where. They had other things to worry about. But if any of us stuck together, it would be Henry and Sean. They were like brothers."

"Cain and Abel were brothers, Mr. Greene."

"Point taken. There could always have been a parting of the ways, I suppose. But I'd wager Henry and Sean remained tight afterwards. It would take something really earthshaking to end that friendship. And, to that point, Henry would probably be your best bet to find more background on Sean. I'll confess I don't know much about either of them."

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Greene. If you can think of anything further that might help our investigation, please call me at this number."

"Will do, sergeant."

Sanderson looked at her watch and decided tracking down Henry Bolton could wait until the next day.

SAMPLE

Chapter Ten

On Route from Liverpool to London

Esther had commented that sometimes she thought her new Jaguar was too comfortable compared to the old one that had been torched by a couple of thugs on a similar motorway. Time passed and the miles flew by as a tired Sara napped a bit with the soothing classical music relaxing her. Considering Esther's planned activities for her stay in London, she couldn't help remembering that fateful night her brother died....

"Where's Tommy?" Sara's mother said. "I need him to help with the market bags."

There was no worry yet. Tommy's activities often led him to lose track of time. And each child thought they had to do more chores than the other.

Both the children were close to the parents. While they didn't experience the town's ostracizing directly, they sensed it and heard about it from their parents. It made their family unit a tighter one, the four against the rest of the world, or at least against the smaller world of Heatherton prejudices the family experienced.

"He went somewhere with Bobby on their bikes. You know how those two are."

"Boys will be boys. It's you and me then to sort the groceries. I need to get dinner started before your father gets home."

"He's working a lot more now, even on Saturdays. What's going on?" Sara followed her mother out to the Rover.

"With his partner in the hospital, he's doing the work of two lawyers. Better than the alternative, lass."

They didn't talk more until the groceries were sorted.

"Could you peel the potatoes, Luv? I'll get the rest of dinner going."

Soon pleasant aromas filled the kitchen and spread throughout their home. Everything was almost ready for Frank Reilly's dinner when he stuck his head in the kitchen entranceway.

"How are my two favorite ladies doing? Besides cooking up a storm to feed the men of the house. Where's Tommy, by the way? I didn't see his bike."

"Getting into trouble with Bobby, I dare say," Mrs. Reilly said. "How was your day?"

"Awful. Too damn busy. Widow Dawson took two hours of my time on top of everything else, coming in to change her will yet again. If Sam doesn't come back soon, I'll burn myself out."

Sara's mother handed her husband a bottle. "You deserve this then. Go find some news and relax. Dinner's almost ready, but we should wait for Tommy a bit more."

Frank looked at his watch. "It's already dark. He knows he shouldn't stay out this late. Perhaps I should go looking for him?" He pointed a bony finger at Sara. "We're lucky you weren't from the same egg."

Sara laughed. She'd often heard that joke, but she always thought it was funny. Her parents had explained to her long ago the difference between fraternal and identical twins when she first began to resent sharing a birthday party with her brother.

"He'll come around," said Mrs. Reilly. "When he does, I don't want a barney with him to ruin our dinner. If he doesn't come around soon enough to make dinner, though, you'll have to look for the little imp."

The phone rang. Sara learned soon enough that the person on the line was Bobby's mother. Frank Reilly went to the sitting room to take the call because there was no kitchen extension.

"I'll call the police," Sara heard him say.

Frank returned to the kitchen. "Some stranger snatched Tommy and shoved Bobby away so hard, he fell and bumped his head on the ground. He was crying when he arrived home. I'm calling the police."

"Where did it happen?" Sara's mother said.

"On that narrow trail by the fens. I guess they can negotiate it with those trail bikes."

Her father had hated the constable from the Gardai who arrived. Sara's mother wasn't too keen about him either. Sara, who was at the top of the stairs listening, heard that in the tones of their voices. The constable's tone was almost insulting.

Why would someone take Tommy and not that little pest Bobby? Sara remembered asking herself.

"Mr. and Mrs. Reilly, I understand your concern," the constable said. "We'll talk to this boy Bobby, but boys will be boys. For all you know, they made it all up. It could be just a prank. The lad will straggle in, I'm sure. Maybe just looking for a bit of freedom? Wanting to be more like the other boys, like the rest of us, is he?"

"What the hell does that mean?" Frank said.

"You not being church folks, maybe he doesn't have too many friends. Could just be a cry for attention."

"I want to speak to your superior. I don't need to hear this bigoted blather and twaddle. Bobby wouldn't lie to his mum."

"'Cause he's a good Catholic lad. Your Tommy might have the Devil in'im."

"Out! Get the hell out of my house!"

"I'll go. We'll give it 'til the morning, Guv, and then maybe we'll look for'im. Evening, Mr. and Mrs. Reilly."

"The nerve!" Sara heard her mother say after the constable left. "What are we going to do, Frank?"

"I'm gone to look for him since the plods won't do it!"

Her father hadn't returned until just before midnight. Both parents and Sara had passed out on the sofa, holding hands and hugging each other.

Early that Sunday morning the call had come from Caitlin O'Malley.

After getting Sara sorted—she'd be in the spare bedroom and would have the use of the guest bathroom—Esther asked her to set the table while Esther put the *paella* in the oven to heat and uncorked a bottle of *Rioja tinto* to let it breathe. The two then sat down to talk about art while they waited for Kat.

Sara's eyes wandered. After a lifetime in the old family house she'd inherited from her parents, she felt a bit claustrophobic in Esther and Bastiann's flat. Of course, there were a lot more people in Greater London than in Heatherton, so housing them all was a lot more challenging. And she supposed the flat had cost more than her house was worth—she understood the flat was once just Esther's, but it probably was pricey even when she bought it.

She liked the layout, though, and could see how one or two people could be quite comfortable in such a flat. And the gracious Esther, probably recognizing her inquietude, was doing her best to make her feel comfortable.

"How did you get into sculpture?" Esther said.

"Let's say I backed into it. I loved doing pottery in secondary, but I found myself sculpting with the clay. It seemed like a logical step to move to bronze and marble, some wood, at least in my mind."

"Are you one of those sculptors who sees a chunk of marble and can imagine the future figure within?"

She laughed. "More or less. That's the key step for me. With bronze and other materials, it's the same. I almost always imagine the figure first, whether real or abstract. More planning's required for bronze, of course. I'm guessing it's the same when an artist stands in front of a blank canvas on an easel."

"Unless they're planning to paint a landscape." Sara shrugged. "The statue of your brother in the park, did it begin that way? Seems like he's reaching for heaven."

"Sorry to disappoint you. I imagined him reaching for our parents whom he'd never see again. They'd passed on before I created that sculpture." Her eyes had become moist.

"That makes more sense, I suppose."

"Tell me how you came to own a gallery."

Esther thought a moment. "That's complicated. Even before I was in Scotland Yard's Art and Antiques Division, I already had an appreciation for art. I had three husbands before Bastiann who were also art lovers like he is. Not creators like you, but they had a healthy appreciation for art. And in my work, there were certainly cases where some knowledge of authentication was often necessary. The gallery seemed something logical to do after I retired with those acquired skills, and now I also restore old paintings as well as sell them."

"More experience with paintings than sculpture, I suppose."

"Um, I saved a classic Bernini bust for the Italians once. I got a nice dinner one evening in Rome for my troubles." She didn't mention that attending that function had almost got her killed. "A few cases in the Met also involved stolen busts and larger sculptures. You'll find most galleries focus on paintings, although you probably already knew that."

"I work mostly on commission. Some municipality wants a statue, or some rich toff is decorating his expensive garden, and so forth. Some of my works are large enough that they might not even get through your gallery's front door."

Esther laughed. "That little bust of Mozart you created now sits in all its glory on my piano, as you can see. I had a plaster one of Beethoven and a 3D-printer copy of that Bernini there once, but Beethoven was always scowling and I got bored with Bernini. You made Amadeus look appropriately roguish, by the way."

Sara glanced at the baby grand. "That's a very nice piano."

"It belonged to a dear friend. I inherited it when he passed on. Before I only had an upright. It takes up a lot of room, but I love the sound."

"The bust might be worth a lot more after I pass on, you know. All my works are unique. One of a kind."

"Oh dear, I didn't buy it as an investment. I collect art because I like it."

The *paella* was a hit. Sara was fascinated by it; Kat, who'd tried it before in some restaurant, opined it was a delightfully different twist on that classic dish. Esther ended the compliments by announcing she hadn't concocted it, instead ordering it from a takeaway place near her flat before heading off to Liverpool to meet Sara. The red wine helped loosen tongues too; Esther said she thought Spanish wines from La Rioja were often unfairly neglected. Now most EU wines were more expensive than the local varieties from England's southern vineyards.

After they cleared the table and put the dishwasher to work, they sat around the table with the case files' boxes perched on two extra dining chairs.

"Where should we begin?" Esther said.

"One group of files deals with what little forensic evidence we have, the autopsy and SOCO's data," Kat said. "Another deals with canvassing and interview data. There's more of that to go through."

"I'll review the forensic evidence," Esther said. "As you know, I've already started. You've already seen it, so I'll be an extra pair of eyes. Sara, I don't think you should do that. You probably should work with Kat."

Sara exhibited a relieved expression and nodded. "Thank you for that. Kat and I can split the others documentation."

They got busy, so much so that Kat and Sara became startled when Esther spoke.

"Did you ever check whether the spurious DNA trace matched any records in Scotland Yard or Interpol's databases?" Esther said to Kat. "I found a note about it."

"Just with the Gardai's main laboratory in Dublin," Kat said. "They found nothing, but I don't think that negative result's mentioned in the case files. We had no *a priori* reason to suspect the trace corresponded to someone outside the country. And it was difficult enough to get the chief to sign off on that Dublin test."

"I see. No local laboratory in Heatherton, I presume."

Kat laughed. "We were lucky to even have a crime unit. That famous Celtic-Tiger economic boom didn't trickle down that much to Heatherton."

"So, let's get it tested now. With the Yard and Interpol." Kat thought Esther seemed hesitant, though.

"Why do you think the murderer was a foreigner?"

"Not necessarily a foreigner. You're here in the UK, aren't you? The murderer might be too. The Celtic-Tiger boom ended. That created more of an Irish diaspora here in England as a result. Maybe even Scotland as well. See what I mean?"

"Understood. What do we do while they process the DNA sample?"

"You and Sara can continue to go over your part of their files. I'm going to make a call. It just occurred to me how I can speed up that DNA test."

"We can do a quick version fairly fast," Jeremy Brand said. "It's not good enough for the Crown Court, but it will be quick."

"Enlighten me. What's a quick version?"

"Let's say it's Ancestry.com style."

"Is it good enough to find a tentative match to work with while a more complete test is being performed?"

"That depends on what's in the databases. Two quickies don't necessarily produce a reliable genetic match, despite what those websites claim. A quicky matching a full gives you something better to work with."

"Please, just do the best you can."

He chuckled. "Not on me, Esther. But our lab techs are among the best, I dare say. I'll get back to you."

After telling the other two about the conversation with Jeremy, who'd been one of Esther's handlers when she was an MI6 spy in East Berlin during the Cold War, something she didn't mention, the three women returned to their chore of perusing the cold-case files.

It was then that Sara who startled Esther and Kat.

"I'm looking through Kat's livery records," Sara said. "I found something odd. One taxi was on duty the whole evening and morning but logged no trips from 12:30 to 2:45 a.m. That's either a long ride for a fare in Heatherton, or a long break when the driver took a nap."

"Good catch!" Kat said. "I never noticed that. God, I feel bad."

"It might mean nothing," Esther said, "so save the remorse for later. Can we find out who was driving that taxi?"

"I don't know how," Kat said, "especially after more than thirty years."

"Maybe the spurious DNA on Thomas was the driver's?" Sara said. "Or could the taxi driver be the murderer?"

Esther thought a moment. "You could be right." They heard keys rattling in the door. "Aha, my prodigal husband has arrived."

Bastiann stopped upon seeing the three women.

"Do we have two guests and not one, Luv?"

"You know Sara from Heatherton, and you knew she was coming. This is Inspector Kat O'Malley, a Heatherton native daughter but currently in Scotland Yard. Nate Hardy told us about her, if you'll remember, and she decided to come right over. We've been working on that cold case."

"Um, I'll just make a sandwich and leave you three to it then."

Esther looked at her watch. "It's late. I don't know about you two, I but I'm knackered. We can't really do anything without the DNA results, whether they point to the taxi driver or someone else. If they correspond to the driver, it's all the more urgent to track him down. Shall we call it a night, ladies?"

"Okay be me," Kat said. "I have to get up early for a court case. And I suppose you're tired from your trip, Sara?"

"Tired but excited. I think we made some real progress after all these years. Three sets of eyes are indeed better than one."

After Kat left, Sara said, "If you two don't mind, I'll take a quick shower."

"No problem for me," Esther said, "and Bastiann will be busy with his sandwich."

Chapter Eleven

Lambeth Neighborhood, London

Blake turned off the telly and smiled at the sound of gunfire outside his squalid flat. *The boys are being careless tonight.* Gunfire might bring the plods. The telly had been loud enough to drown that familiar background sound from the Lambeth streets as well as his next-door neighbor's trumpet playing. Gunfire was just the percussion for that urban symphony that comforted him more than BBC One as long as there weren't any sirens or flashing blue lights.

That chappie with the trumpet was a hulking black man who'd been blinded by an IED in Afghanistan, so Blake took pity on him. Thank the good Lord he hadn't lost his hearing or sight. He had lived to fight another war back home. Of course, that bloke being black made him less of a hero and a patriot, but Blake wrote it off as the British government exploiting everyone, not just blacks, who frankly deserved exploitation.

He belched, farted, and went to fetch another bottle of ale. It had turned out to be a good night for hunting Muslims; as he looked out a window, it was still a good night. A bit of moonlight was still around and now managed to filter in through the dirty pane. His windows had no curtains. His only furniture besides the old cot in the bedroom were an old wing chair with threadbare upholstery, the small table beside it, and the telly, all except the telly found in a nearby tip. He'd lived better in the military. No base commander would have permitted such a sloppy lifestyle.

He thought sometimes he'd over-compensated in exchanging the regimental soldier's life for a chaotic one as a civilian. He'd had no choice, of course. Despite a few times in the brig, he'd received an honorable discharge after losing his limb. He'd left with a simmering hatred for Muslims and found others who shared that hatred.

Their group had few guns. Knives were more common in Lambeth and elsewhere, despite the sounds outside, because of the strict gun laws, but he continued to worry about that gunfire. Some idiot had a gun and would be attracting police who'd swarm to him like flies to an Afghan corpse. He smiled. *If they dared to come around!*

They didn't need guns to kill a Muslim, of course. Tire irons, cricket bats, bobby nightsticks, knives—their arsenal was varied and deadly. Some survived the attacks; most didn't. And it was so damn satisfying to beat the shite out of a raghead. They were all addicted to it.

He was a barrel of a man whose solutions for life's problems usually involved violence. Even now, he could take on two or three men in a fight and win, using martial arts and his natural strength to defeat his opponents. And the scars from bullet wounds and slashing knives showed that he wasn't above using tools to augment his lethality. He was shirtless now, his rippling muscles still evidence for his upper body strength, but he was also nimble on his feet. He once had been the perfect fighting machine. Aging had done little to change that.

He was one of the few in the organization who went beyond mere hatred to develop a more general motive for his current activities: Rid the UK of Muslims, all foreigners, in fact. He'd begun by developing strong ties with other similar groups and organizing them into a patriotic militia. They'd developed a cell structure. Most in a cell didn't know what other cells existed or were doing, only the cell leader. There was a national revolutionary council. He'd recently become a member of that, an important one because too many wavered in their

patriotism. Some old toff in Birmingham was like a sports team's mascot; he foolishly believed he ran everything. Blake would soon take care of him. He was just biding his time. He would make it painless for the old man. He wasn't a Muslim or foreigner, after all.

The trumpet player stopped practicing. It was time to go to bed. He removed his shoes and stretched out on top of the cot, hoping he could catch a few hours of sleep before dawn. He never undressed completely or got under any covers. He had none if the latter, and the first practice he'd learned overseas was that you always had to be ready to confront the enemy. The second was to avoid anything claustrophobic that would remind him of the time the Taliban had locked him up in a sweatbox. He'd choked his guard to death, reached out and found the keys, and escaped, but the days in the box had done a number on him.

Blake awoke upon hearing an unusual noise. The squeaky board on the stairs to his flat! He'd been trained to ignore common noises and become alert with strange ones. That noise could only mean that someone was on those stairs.

He searched on top of the cardboard box that served as a nightstand, brushing away old takeaway cartons and wraps and finding one of his knives. As he reached for the front door, it burst open. He faced a bunch of armed men, their weapons all pointing at him.

"Shite! A bloke can't get any rest around here." He dropped the knife and raised his hands.

Maggie entered the interrogation room with Ezra, nodded to the duty solicitor, a woman she knew, and took a seat. Ezra joined her. Blake, his foul odor of sweat and cheap ale filling the room and overpowering the stink left from previous interrogations, glared at her with bloodshot eyes.

She knew she'd have to remand Blake to MI5. Ezra had already called Robert Winston. While that was sorted, though, she wanted to get a good look at the murderer.

"Mr. Blake, sorry to interrupt your sleep. Or should I say Lieutenant Robert Joseph Blake, ex-Army, ex-mercenary, and current killer of Muslims? This is a preliminary interrogation. I'm known to be a lot nicer than the people you'll soon meet, so you might want to consider taking advantage of that. Should I call you Robert, Bobby, or RJ?"

"I don't give a shite what you call me, bitch. You're probably just another raghead lover I'll have to deal with later."

"Mr. Blake," his duty solicitor said, "you're not helping yourself."

He turned to the woman. "Shut your yap. You're probably one too." She shook her head and flashed a thin smile at Maggie, probably realizing she was wasting her time with Blake.

"I want to show you a few things." She waved her hand. A video ran on the screen at the end of the table. It stopped and zeroed in on four men, one of them looking like Blake. "Exhibit A. You and your three chums. You appear in numerous videos. It wasn't hard to spot that. We want to talk to them too."

"Go to hell."

"What are their names?"

"No comment."

Maggie wondered if the duty solicitor had coached him to say that. It was standard practice and persisted if the interrogator couldn't manage to break through the hard shell most criminals possessed.

"The Muslim you blokes attacked when this video was filmed is dead. Who killed him? All of you? Or just one?"

"No comment."

She waved her hand. Another video, this time showing Blake using just his right hand to strangle another Muslim man.

"This one challenged us too, until someone pointed out you have a prosthetic. I guess you can use it like a vise. Seems to be the case here."

"No comment."

The solicitor was turning green, most likely swallowing back bile. Probably wondering what cruel fate had brought her into that interrogation. *Or maybe she's worried that he'll turn on her and grab her throat as he'd done in the video?*

"Robert, you have anger issues. Do you suffer from PTSD?"

"Don't spew that psycho-babble shite. I've heard enough of it."

Maggie nodded to Ezra.

"I think you're a mental case," Ezra said with a growl. "A blimey excuse of a soldier who kills people for the fun of it. You're just justifying those actions, mate, in that pea-brain of yours, by pretending to be a patriot who will rid the UK of Muslims. Let me tell you, mate, your type is the one we need to be rid of. You're a worthless piece of human shite and a damn feckin' coward. You pretend to be Mr. Tough, but you're just a sniveling little weasel, a boil on the arse of humanity filled with fowl pus."

Blake pointed a finger at Maggie and then at Ezra. "I'll kill you first, you Cockney bastard."

"You're not going to kill any more people, you dumb yob. You'll spend the rest of your life in the king's boardin' house. It's just too feckin' bad that you dropped that knife. Society would've been better served if that SCO19 had turned you into Swiss cheese."

"My sergeant's correct," Maggie said, smiling after having enjoyed Ezra's tirade.

"Unless you help us, you'll never be a free man again. The Crown will show no mercy, and you'll die in prison."

"Damn the feckin' Crown! What we need in this country is a strong man running things, not those snobs in parliament led by that stupid PM. People can't find jobs 'cause they're stolen by all the feckin' foreigners. A strong man would change that, among other things that need to be done."

"Thank you for making that bit of social engineering clear, Robert. We'll send you back to holding now. Later you will go on a little trip. Like I said, your next interrogations won't be so pleasant."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

She smiled at him. "No comment."

As Maggie and Ezra watched the MI5 agents escort Blake out of their HQ, Ezra said, "Our good cop, bad cop act didn't work so well this time, Guv."

"We did the best we could. He's a tough one. A crazy bastard, to be sure, but he'll give even MI5 a tough time, I bet. I'm guessing his chums live in Lambeth somewhere like he does, at least his close associates. We need to do some canvassing. First, though, I'd like to Photoshop some stills from a video. We have Blake's face now, so we'll use it, but we can strip off the masks of all of them using software. We'll ask those we canvass whether they've seen Blake or those three."

"Is that legal?"

"Vice had a case a while back where a pervert had Photoshopped all the clothes off women he'd known at school and sold the pictures with their names and addresses. It was payback for them snubbing him when he was a schoolboy. If the criminals can do it, I certainly can, on the sly, of course. Don't worry. I'll take responsibility if I'm caught."

"I'm in. We'll worry about legalities if we need someone to testify, Guv. Do you think the MI5 agents will break Blake?"

She shrugged. "I don't know Blake that well, but from what I've seen and heard, he's probably been trained to resist interrogations. On the other hand, MI5 agents are probably trained in breaking down suspects, even spies. Roll the dice, Ezra. It's out of our hands. Right now, I'm heading out to lunch. We're meeting Esther and Ricardo for lunch."

"Should I know who they are?"

"Declan and Ricardo, who's an artist, gave lectures at Esther's art gallery before Declan and I started getting serious. I have yet to meet either Esther or Ricardo."

"A toff-style lunch then, Guv, all about art?"

Maggie shrugged and smiled. By toff-style, Ezra meant expensive. She hoped the lunch wouldn't be; besides, she wasn't that hungry after that interrogation.

Chapter Twelve

Central London

Ricardo introduced Li-Mei Huang to Esther, Maggie, and Declan. The young girl, daughter of Ricardo's artist friend Min-Jing, seemed nervous and wouldn't look anyone directly in the eye at first. Esther patted her hand and explained to Maggie and Declan that her father was one of three new artists featured in her gallery.

"They and Ricardo and his wife are the only live artists featured," she said with a wry smile, "and they're all very live wires, I dare say. I do enjoy being with young artists. Keeps me feeling young, you know."

Li-Mei managed a timid smile. When she first met Ricardo, he frightened her. He reminded her of some of the Manchester thugs who insulted Asians and sometimes went beyond insults. Of course, the two that attacked her once hadn't looked much like him. And he and his wife had befriended her father and two other Hong Kong refugees, Chinese artists trying to establish themselves in a new land. She'd grown to admire the Brazilian and his edgy personality.

The two women troubled her more. She'd learned that white women could be just as nasty as white men, even more so. Of course, Roberta, Ricardo's wife, was also white, but it was all about not knowing how people would react. Declan got a pass because he was also Ricardo's friend.

Li-Mei had the slight build of her mother and her shyness. She had the bright eyes and quick wit of her father, though. From her mother she also got her love for reading that had morphed into a love for writing. Her favorite subjects in school were composition and literature, although she excelled in all subjects, making her parents proud. And they were enlightened parents, never supporting that age-old Chinese tradition of giving preference to male offspring long even before escaping from Hong Kong to take refuge in England.

"Are you still working with that sculptor?" Maggie said. "On that cold case?"

Esther nodded. "Progress is being made. Maggie is a Scotland Yard inspector, Li-Mei."

Oddly enough, that perked the girl up a bit. "Good. You can tell me all about police procedures!"

Maggie laughed. "Why would you want to know about them?"

"I'm here to learn from Mr. Declan about writing careers. I want to write mysteries and thrillers like he does."

Declan blushed and then sighed. "Novel writing is like running a marathon. Maybe you should try the shorter races first and then build up to the longer ones?"

"Do you mean short fiction?" Declan nodded. "I thought you just began a story and discovered later if there was enough material for a short story, novella, or novel."

He smiled. "Where'd you hear that? YouTube?"

"Not heard or seen, Mr. Declan. Read. I downloaded and studied a free PDF entitled 'Writing Fiction' from an American author's website."

"Um, I'd like to read that PDF. If you can remember the name of the author, that is, I'll download it too. There's a variety of novels you know, from short ones barely longer than a novella to very long epics that my wife calls doorstops." Maggie frowned. "I'd call those 'iron

man runs' because they're longer than the more common novelistic marathons you see in genre publications."

"Are you thinking of making a living at writing?" Maggie said. She'd asked that very question of Declan months ago. It was easier than the one about children, which she hadn't yet had the courage to ask.

"In some way. Maybe lots of ways? I want Mr. Declan to tell me what the possibilities are."

The waiter's arrival interrupted the conversation.

While Maggie gave Li-Mei company to the loo, Esther queried Declan about how the investigation into his friend Doyle's murder was going.

"Sanderson's doing a lot of work, Thackeray not so much."

"I have some bad history with David," Esther said, "but he's usually competent enough. He just helped MI5 out with a nasty case." Esther summarized what had occurred during the last holiday season. "Maybe the old plod just needs some time to recover. How is Maggie doing with her hate crime case?"

"You seem to know generally what's going on but not the details, Esther," Declan said with a smile. "Maggie was right here. You could have asked her."

"Coppers confide more in their spouses than nosy, old women. And Li-Mei was here as well. She was a victim of her own hate crime." Esther summarized that case too. "Hate crimes are increasing, Declan."

"At least they haven't gone after Brazilians yet," Ricardo said.

She eyed the artist, eyebrows raised. "There are nutters who'd hate that a black or a Hispanic man has become a successful artist and has a lovely white wife and baby on the way. You meet that requirement."

"I-we worked hard for that success," Ricardo said.

"Haters and bigots don't worry about facts," Declan told his friend. "To reply to Esther's question, though, all I know is that Maggie's deeply troubled by her case. Call it right-wing politics gone wild or fascism just doing its usual evil shtick, but I'm also troubled by it, generally speaking. I didn't know about Li-Mei's terrible experience. I'm now motivated even more to help her as much as possible, if Mr. Huang permits."

Ricardo only nodded.

Chapter Thirteen

On the Way to Manchester

Ricardo drove Li-Mei back to Manchester. She jabbered on about writing and Declan for more than an hour, but she was observant enough to realize Ricardo wasn't too interested in writing. So, she moved on to art.

"Why are you such good friends with my father if you're much more into that radical modern stuff?"

"Good question. First part of answer: I can appreciate a lot of art, including your father's eerie landscapes. Second part: My wife also paints those, but in a different style, of course."

"Is she friends with Esther and Declan too?"

"She's never met Declan, but Esther saved her life once."

"Really? How can an art gallery owner do that? Tell me about it!"

"Um, Esther's done a lot of different things in her life. The gallery's just her retirement gig, but I don't think she'll ever retire from her obsessive crusades that often include saving lives, including her own on occasion. And I'm going to let Bobbie tell you all about our particular adventures with Esther."

"When will that happen?" she said, pouting a bit.

"We'll invite you and your parents to dinner some evening. How's that sound?"

"That would be great! I might get material for a novel."

At that moment, a call saved Ricardo from returning to a discussion about writing. Both his moby and the car's no-hands feature blasted their individual ringtones. He hit the toggle on the steering wheel.

"Allo, Luv. How's tricks?"

"My water broke. I'm heading to the hospital."

"I'll meet you there. We're thirty minutes out, twenty if I stomp on the pedal." Bobbie rang off. "That's my wife, Li-Mei. Baby's on the way. Do you mind giving me company to the hospital?"

"How exciting! She's having a baby!"

"We're having a baby."

"True, but men contribute very little to that process."

"True, but it takes two to samba."

"I believe the saying is about a tango."

"Not in Brazil. So, you'll give me company?"

"Oh yes!"

"Good. That'll save me a lot of time. Call your father and explain to him what's occurring. He can pick you up at the hospital."

"We don't have a car, Ricardo."

"Um, yes, I forgot. Okay, I'll either take you home or pay for a taxi after everything's sorted. Just tell your father so he won't worry."

The hospital was busy. Ambulances had taken all the spaces near the ER and more. Ricardo later learned that was because of an earlier terrible multicar accident on the motorway that transit police and EMTs must have cleared before they sailed through. He had to grit his teeth and prowling around among farther spaces in the car park before finding one. He had Li-Mei get out so he could squeeze into it and leave enough space so he could squirm out himself.

"Nice piece of driving," she said.

"Desperate driving. Follow me. We need to run."

They dashed into the maternity ward where he found that Bobbie was already in the OR. That was frustrating enough, but there was no information about her status either.

"Are you a relative?" said the NHS nurse at reception after his inquiry. The big woman frowned at him and then at Li-Mei.

"I'm the father, Ricardo Silva. Li-Mei is a family friend."

"Poor woman. You should be with your wife."

"I was out of town. And who the hell are you to criticize? My wife didn't want me in there. I demand to know her status!"

"Demand all you want, but I'll call security if you don't behave yourself and sit down over there. You have no business barging in here and making demands. The police frown on foreigners being abusive and making demands." She eyed Li-Mei. "Especially Asians."

Li-Mei touched Ricardo's arm. "Come. Sit down. We have to wait."

Ricardo shot one last glare at the woman and went to find a seat with Li-Mei. As he turned, he heard the nurse mutter, "Foreigners!" It hadn't been loud enough for anyone to hear but Li-Mei and Ricardo.

"I should complain to that nurse's superintendent," Ricardo said to Li-Mei once they were seated.

"Please, Ricardo, don't make a scene. We just have to wait."

Min-Jing, Li-Mei's father, had borrowed a friend's car and showed up at the hospital. As he entered the waiting room, his daughter ran to him and gave him a big hug.

"Isn't it exciting, papa? Ricardo's wife's having a baby!"

He smiled. "So, you said on the phone." He shook hands with Ricardo.

"Congratulations. You're going to be a father."

"Who'd have thought, right? I guess the only thing to do now is wait?"

That was what they'd been doing. *A lot of hurry up and wait going on!* The arrival of his artist friend was comforting, though.

"That's correct. The baby comes when he comes."

"Sounds like Zen to me. I guess I'm not able to do much, right?"

"You could have been with Roberta, I believe."

"I'm not good around doctors or their patients in pain, and Bobbie didn't want me to be there." He winked at Li-Mei. "Otherwise, our lunch date would've been postponed. The baby's early, but I still would have had to stay around just in case."

Min-Jing nodded. "They come when they come. Did Bobbie tell you to go to London?"

"We thought it was important that your daughter meet Declan O'Hara."

"I'm so happy she's having natural childbirth," Li-Mei said. "That's generally better for the baby and mother in the long run, correct?"

Her father studied her a moment. "You're learning far too much at that school, little one."

"That's just science, papa."

Almost two hours passed and they were still waiting. Li-Mei paced the floor as if she were the father. Min-Jing and Ricardo talked art. She'd just returned to her seat when the doctor approached the little group.

"Congratulations, Mr. Silva. You're the father of twins."

"What? You never told us we're having twins."

"Um, you never let me do an ultrasound to determine sex. Often twin's heartbeats are in synch early on, or one is too faint to be heard with a stethoscope. It happens. Surprise, surprise."

"Does that mean they're identical?" said Li-Mei.

"And who are you two?" said the doctor.

Roberta's female doctor knew Ricardo, but would she repeat the nurse's comment about Asians? He ignored the challenge in her voice, though, and introduced the Huangs to the doctor.

"Um, to answer this precocious little girl's question, we now know they're identical, yes. They could always be fraternal, even though they're the same sex." She chuckled. "I had a case where there were two sets of twins. A couple on fertility treatments."

Min-Jing obviously wanted to get off the biological topic. "When can we see Roberta and the babies?"

Ricardo, who'd taken a seat to recover from the surprise, spoke up. "Good question. Should have been mine. How are the three doing?"

"They're fine. We'll call you in to see them soon."

"How 'bout my friends?"

"The more the merrier, I suppose. This is a birth ward. Women aren't here because they're sick. It's just a natural process bringing happiness to everyone involved."

Chapter Fourteen

Central London

That afternoon after their lunch and a trip to the morgue to view with Ezra yet another hate crime victim, DI Bent called her friend DS Sanderson for Declan, not wanting to talk to DCI Thackeray. From what Linda had said, Maggie knew his type. She'd been fortunate to avoid much of the misogynistic politics of Scotland Yard and felt sorry for Linda.

"Hello, old friend. Any news on the Doyle case?"

"Early days, Maggie. As usual, Thackeray's dumped a ton of work on me. I wouldn't mind so much if I got some credit."

"So...nothing at all?"

"Very little. We're digging into Sean Doyle's background now, figuring someone had a past grudge against him. I'm trying to track down his best friend from his military service, a man named Henry Bolton. He seems to have disappeared. No death certificate, so we think he's still alive. I'm hoping he can offer some information about people from Sean's past who might have hated him enough to kill him. Oh, and we now know Sean became a British citizen and fought in the Falklands War."

"Interesting. And the two became friends there?"

"Or earlier in the military. Does it matter?"

"Not much, I suppose. Declan made some inquiries to his father about Sean. The two families were close in Donegal; still are, for that matter. Sean was something of a black sheep, though. After Trinity College, he went on to Oxford, and then began his writing career. I'm not sure where the military service fits in. Perhaps after Oxford?"

"I'll have to get to his Oxford days too, but you're right. They were most likely after his military service."

"I know a few coppers in Oxford, so maybe I can help there. Except for his website, presumably run by an agent or other persons, there's not much information on Sean beyond book reviews and publishers' bios. Kept himself to himself, I suppose. Authors are often recluses."

"He took enough time to meet someone and get married. Lived in Donegal for three years and then abandoned his wife and daughter, so the black-sheep description is well earned. A bit of an Irish rake, I dare say."

"Um, Declan didn't mention that."

"Perhaps no one told him. His father, who's ex-Gardai, probably avoids gossip. And families often keep secrets, especially about something like that."

"I'll pass this information on to Declan to bring him down to earth from idolizing Sean. Declan's father probably wanted him to be a copper. His sister is. So, Declan might have considered Sean to be the 'literary father' he never had. Writers are strange characters, you know."

Linda laughed. "Reclusive and strange, and yet you married him. He's a nice chap. I should be so lucky. I really enjoyed dinner at your place, by the way."

"We'll have to do it again soon."

After ringing off, Maggie looked at her watch. She was supposed to meet Declan at his favorite pub, The Golden Goose, which wasn't far from the flat they now shared.

Declan slid into the pub's booth beside Maggie and gave her a kiss. "How's my favorite detective inspector doing?"

She raised her pint glass. "Still recovering from a trip to the morgue. We had another victim."

"Ugh. Was it bad?"

"Awful! There's too much evil in this world. The murder victim was a Syrian refugee who'd only just found employment as a kerb-crawler, but no one deserves to die like she did. I hate cases like this one."

"Don't say any more about it, for God sakes! Sorry I asked. We're here for dinner, after all."

"Because you were too lazy to cook. I guess that makes sense after that lunch. You made a pig of yourself, but I hardly ate. This case really bothers me. You were out and about. Where were you?"

"Li-Mei wanted to chat some more, so we did that a bit before she took off with Ricardo. I'm not sure what I should tell her. She's good about researching things herself. Maybe some more about my journalistic activities, the freelance articles, which allow me to contribute enough to our family finances and help keep us afloat, but that route might be difficult for her."

"Because she's Asian?"

"More because she's a woman. Writing fiction or poetry is comparatively easier, especially if she uses a *nom de plume*, but it doesn't pay well. Journalism can be problematic."

And writers can tell that story too, Maggie mused, thinking about a remake of *Around the World in Eighty Days* she'd watched with Declan back when they were still dating. The heroine had been a frustrated female reporter.

"You just have to say those same things to her and maybe elaborate on them. Shall we order?"

"I'll have what you're having for drinks, but what are the specials? They're usually good and less expensive."

They ordered a pint for Declan and two meat pies. While they waited for the pies, she told him about the conversation with Linda Sanderson.

"Black sheep, uh? Seemed like a harmless old man. I guess my old man is a wee bit stingy with the information he provides. Maybe he'd be more open with you, considering you're Scotland Yard, like Linda. And maybe that's why Sean left the family home to his daughter: Guilt. He never said anything about his wife and very little about his daughter. Guess I wouldn't do well in the police interrogation room, right?"

"Not as an interrogator. You're better at observing things and thinking things through, so no, I wouldn't expect you to be good at interrogations." She smiled. "I don't want you to go playing detective again either. Let Linda and David Thackeray do their jobs and take the risks."

"Can't hurt to help them out a little."

Maggie groaned. "Leave it alone, Luv. I'm too young to become a widow."

"That goes both ways. Your job is more dangerous than mine. At least you don't go undercover." He winked. "Just under covers. If the former occurred, I'd have to drink a lot and eat alone. I've become accustomed to doing that with you."

"For someone who's permanently peckish yet never gains a pound, I suppose that's the most romantic words I'll get at dinner tonight."

"Until we have dessert at home."

SAMPLE

Chapter Fifteen

Birmingham, England

Detective Inspector James Wexler flashed a weak but appreciative smile at his sergeant who was doing an unusually fine job weaving in and around the evening commuters. He soon refocused on the road so he wouldn't get car sick, though. Their lunch at HQ had given him indigestion, so there was always the possibility that he would make a mess in the car, not to mention the effects of the blaring siren and flashing blue lights causing a terrible headache.

He'd made a mental note to say something about the station's food to the chief. The man was rarely present because of his politicking, but he always appeared when there were positive things to report at a press conference, a public appearance where he could take credit for advances made in an investigation. He could only do that if someone else had solved the crimes, of course, and that couldn't be done if they were sick from the shite they served in the station's little cafeteria.

They'd received a report about a violent barney at a local pub and thought nothing of it. Happened all the time; detectives generally let the capable constables handle such droll events. But when the arrested man's photo came through, his sergeant had recognized him as a man who was wanted by the Yard for questioning. Wexler didn't need their fat chief to tell him that it would be a feather in their cap if they apprehended the scrote who was wanted in London.

He again read through the BOLO as best he could, keeping eyes on the road more often than not to prevent the reflux from spewing out. He'd popped antacids back at HQ; otherwise, he'd have been in a lot more trouble. That BOLO had some interesting background on the suspect.

The scrote was an Irish immigrant whose DNA was a match to that found at some God-awful Irish town's murder scene. He'd never minded collaborating with the Gardai, and he supposed the plods in London were even more cooperative with them. And that worked both ways, of course, even with Brexit. The EU no longer linked the two countries, but criminals rarely paid attention to the international boundaries separating the next-door neighbors, so cooperative efforts were still needed and appreciated.

His sergeant made a quick U-turn and then entered the pub's car park, did a three-point, and backed into a space. That almost finished Wexler. He popped two more antacids.

Colm Rafferty hadn't had a good day. Three yobs had beat the shite out of him and stolen his fares early that morning—the beating had been accompanied by lots of anti-Irish curses—a lorry had given his taxi a love tap, and something in the air was making his sinuses and rosacea act up.

He'd returned the taxi to the depot, showed the dispatcher the transit police's accident report so he wouldn't get charged for the bashed rear end and insurance payments could be collected, and walked to the nearby pub, a favorite hangout for punters who'd spewed from the nearby buildings and began congregating there from four p.m. on.

The pub was early twentieth century in vintage, but it was just a port in a storm for Colm because it lacked any charm. They'd try to modernize it with widescreen tellys and the occasional rock group making enough noise that it was even hard to think. They had a few good brews, but also had the ciders and local drinks a lot of the office workers loved, ladies and gents alike. To put a fine point on it, the pub only attracted him because it was a convenient stop before heading home.

Standing at one of the bars and half-way through his second pint—the place was packed—he was eyeing the specials listed on the chalkboard and thinking about an early dinner, when a tippler banged his arm, making him spill some of his brew.

"Watch it, arsehole!"

"Who's calling me arsehole, you Irish piece of shite!"

Oh, not again! "Name's Rafferty, mate, and if you can't hold your liquor, you should go home to your mum to sleep it off."

"My mum's dead."

"Sorry for your loss, but better for her that she can't see what a pillock you've become."

Rafferty was lucky enough to block the first punch, but that was all the luck he had during the remainder of the violent barney, screams and blows equally mixed. He was happy when the uniforms arrived. The drunk bloke might have killed him otherwise.

"Colm Rafferty?"

He looked up from his third pint. The bobby had let him order another one, one for the road, as they say, that road possibly still leading to a night in jail even though Colm had witnesses that had sworn the other chap had taken the first swing. The other bobby was chatting with a cute bird and not much concerned about what happened to Colm. Everyone in the busy pub had relaxed again now with Rafferty's attacker in cuffs sitting across from Colm and glaring at him. Colm toasted the bastard and then turned to the man who'd asked the question.

"'Tis my name. Who's askin'?"

"Inspector James Wexler, Birmingham Police Department." The plod flashed his warrant card.

"Are you going to charge that yob for attacking me? He started it!"

"You can see he's in cuffs. Besides, he's not your worry, Mr. Rafferty. You'll have your own problems, I dare say. They want to have a little chinwag with you in London. But you can sleep it off in our lovely jail tonight." Wexler looked at the uniforms. "I hope you two coppers are going off duty before your dedication to duty wins you a plod-of-the year award. My sergeant and I will take Mr. Rafferty to the station."

Late the next morning, Kat gave a nod to the duty solicitor when she and her sergeant entered the interrogation room, they took seats across from the woman and Colm Rafferty, and the interrogation began. She raised a finger to the tech behind the one-way glass who turned on the videorecorder. She then introduced the parties present and read the suspect's rights to him again. Esther and Sara watched from behind the one-way window, Esther with a smile, appreciating the old inspector's competence.

"How long have you been living in England, Mr. Rafferty? London, specifically?"

"I move around a lot, Guv. Can't really say 'bout London. England for a while, though. Go where there's work, I always say."

"And what kind of work do you do?"

"Lorry driver, mostly. Got the full license."

"And is that what you did back in Ireland? Heatherton, specifically?"

"Always driving, ma'am. Back then, lorries during the week, taxis on weekends."

Kat made a show of studying some notes taken from a file folder. "I see that you were caught hauling illegal goods from Felixstowe to London about three years ago. At the time, you claimed you had no idea what was in the crates. Is that correct?"

"You know it is. You plods tried to nick me for that. You always go after the little fish and forget about the big ones."

Kat ignored the editorializing. "And that's when they took the DNA sample?"

"'Spose they wanted to nick me for somethin' else 'cause they didn't have much success with that first charge. They let me go in any case."

"Just answer yes or no, please."

"Yes. And you're wastin' your time, Inspector, just like back then. My time too."

"Let's journey back through time and space to your life in Heatherton. You were much younger then. Do you remember when Thomas Reilly was murdered?"

Rafferty glanced at his legal representative; she shrugged. "Maybe I do, maybe I don't. Refresh my memory."

Esther knew by Rafferty's expression that he remembered. *Go after him, Kat!*

"Little lad found murdered in a churchyard. That was all over the local news."

He smiled and winked at the solicitor. "I thought I recognized you. You're a lot older, Inspector, but you were in charge of that investigation back then. You must be Irish as well. Always good to meet a fellow countryman. Woman, that is."

"So, you do remember?"

"'Twas a long time ago, but yes."

"Were you driving a taxi the weekend that murder occurred?"

"Probably. That's what I did on weekends then, like I just said. So what?"

"Did you kill Thomas Reilly?"

"No way! You can't pin that on me!" His desperation was apparent. "Never killed anyone. I'm a good Catholic."

Kat smiled. "Okay, maybe you didn't kill the lad. Did you help someone carry little Thomas's body into that churchyard?"

Again Rafferty glanced at his solicitor, who shook her head. "No comment."

"Let me provide some motivation for you so that you'll answer my question, Mr. Rafferty. We have a match for the DNA found on the boy's body to that DNA sample you provided three years ago. That's enough to charge you for Thomas Reilly's murder. There's no time limit for murder charges, either for us or the Gardai."

Rafferty paled and glanced at the solicitor yet again.

"I need some time with my client," she said.

"You have fifteen minutes. Tea or coffee, anyone?"

Outside the interrogation room, Kat sent her sergeant off for refreshments and then conferred with Esther and Sara.

"A well-placed blow, Kat," Esther said. "If he didn't commit the murder, Rafferty'd be stupid not to tell you who he helped. If he didn't help someone—he certainly looks strong enough to carry Tommy's body by himself—then you have the boy's murderer."

Sara wiped away some tears. "Are we close to resolving this?"

"Getting closer," Kat said, patting Sara on the arm. "He's a yob, but I don't think he's a murderer. And that might mean he'll not want to do time for someone else's foul and bigoted deed."

"There's a chance the murderer only offered him money and Rafferty doesn't even know who he is," Esther said, "especially if the murderer was from out of town."

"Then how would he have known my family were atheists?"

"The murderer might have known someone else from Heatherton and decided to do the town what they thought would be a favor," Kat said. "Let me keep poking at our taxi driver."

By the time they reentered the room, Rafferty's demeanor had changed from his initial belligerent arrogance to barely controlled aggro. Kat gave the sign to restart the video recording after everyone sorted their drinks. Rafferty's hand shook as he raised the tea mug to his lips.

"Are you now ready to answer my question, Colm," Kat said, changing to his first name to calm him a bit.

"My client wants to make a deal, Inspector," the solicitor said.

"What kind of deal?"

"Leniency. He had nothing to do with that murder."

"I understand that he's convinced you of that, but I'm not convinced. I need to know what occurred late that Saturday night or early that Sunday morning."

"Understood. Mr. Rafferty?"

He shrugged. "This big bloke flagged me down. Was carrying the little bugger. Offered me a goodly sum to drive him to the church. I helped him put the wee lad in the churchyard, he paid me, and I scarpered. Left the bloke there with the body. That's all there is to it, Inspector. End of my tale."

"And you didn't think that was odd?"

"Not my business. I made more that Saturday night than I'd made in three months of weekends driving that damn taxi. What was odd that he paid with a lot of small bills, like he'd had a dosh under the mattress or sumpin'."

"Did you know that man?"

"Never saw him before in me life. Never seen him since either."

"Can you describe him?"

"Huge fellow my age; hair in a buzzcut, maybe a home trim; tall, hulking, and barrel-shaped, the latter like yours truly, I s'pose. Scar from here to here." Rafferty ran a finger down from the side of his right eyebrow to his chin. "Tuckered out, he was. Couldn't have carried the lad much longer, I dare say. Seemed like he had asthma or something."

"And where did you pick him up?"

"Outside an old warehouse on the edge of town. Warehouse was about to fall down at the time even back then, so it's probably gone by now. I have no idea why he was there with that little bugger. Will I be charged?"

"Not with murder if your story holds up and you keep collaborating. I'd like you to look at some photos of people from Heatherton who had form back then. Will you do that for me?"

"I guess so. Got no choice, I 'spose. You have all that here?"

"You'll be released on your solicitor's recognizance until we do." Kat nodded at the lawyer. "See that he doesn't leave London and that you know how to contact him. You'll both have to come back in."

She nodded in agreement.

SAMPLE

Chapter Sixteen

Central London

MI5 invited Maggie and Ezra to watch Bastiann and Robert interrogate Blake. She'd insisted on extending the invitation to Ezra over Winston's objections. The two coppers from Scotland Yard stood behind the one-way window with Ambreesh, who sat at the computer that controlled the projection of audiovisual records onto the large screen in the interrogation room.

No duty solicitor sat with Blake in that room. For a time before Bastiann and Robert entered, loud Arabian music was piped in, most of it Afghan. The soundtrack also contained sounds of gunfire, bomb explosions, and planes taking off and landing as well as calls to prayer from *muadhans*.

Blake was sitting in a chair in handcuffs and leg irons, staring straight ahead, rigid, sweating, yet stoic.

"Shouldn't we say they're torturing him?" Ezra said.

"They've added terrorism charges," Maggie said. "That gives them a lot of leeway. It's not waterboarding, for God's sake."

"SOP for terrorists of any persuasion," Ambreesh said. "Affecting the suspect's mental state is usually better than any physical torture if one knows what bothers the suspect. I've participated in a few interrogations like this one. I don't think this character is going to break, though. His Majesty's military trained him too well."

"Are Bastiann and Robert any good at interrogations?" Maggie said, thinking of Ezra and her failure.

"Robert is. I don't know about Bastiann. Maybe Robert will be the bad cop, Bastiann the good one."

Maggie winked at Ezra, but they soon learned the two agents had both decided to assume the roles of "bad cops." Ambreesh killed the soundtrack and put a harsh spotlight directly on Blake after the two men entered and took seats across from their suspect. They removed their ear plugs, and the verbal attack on Blake began.

The MI5 agents explained that terrorism charges had been added to Blake's murder and hate crime charges. In the old days, Blake would be hanged, they said, like Nazi agents without trial during World War II. Now Blake would only spend the rest of his life in jail with zero chance of parole after he received his sentence. They warned him what might happen to him in prison.

"You'll be a marked man amongst a rough crowd," Bastiann said, "their members as tough as you are but hating your guts because most of your fellow prisoners will have no love for terrorists. You won't know when the attacks will come or where they'll come from, but believe me, Mr. Blake, they will occur, many times, so many that you might prefer hanging."

"And there aren't enough guards to protect you," Robert said. "They won't be enthusiastic about doing it either if they even bother to do so. You're scum for them as well. Guards and prisoners alike will consider you a traitor to your country, just human garbage that should be tossed dead into a tip."

Blake seemed to ignore their warnings; he only smiled.

"His training is kicking in," Ezra said.

""Fraid so," Maggie said. "No relatives we can use as leverage, Ambreesh?"

"Not a bad idea, but no. We did our due diligence, both here and abroad. No parents nor siblings, no one. He was an orphan, in fact. Mostly homeless in Southwark during his childhood if not in foster homes."

"Plenty of people have had terrible childhoods, survive them, and become good members of society," Ezra said. He touched his head. "Those who don't often are nutters—angry psychotics who hate all human beings."

"Problem is, even if some are nutters, they can be intelligent too. I think Blake is one of those, especially if he's the one organizing these attacks."

"Does this nutter have a girlfriend?" Maggie said.

"Also no. A female mercenary worked with him in Africa, but she was killed in a firefight. Can't use that leverage either."

"It's imperative that we nick those other three, Ezra," she said.

"Won't they just give us the silent treatment too? That's their training. We'd need something to break them down as well."

"When we know who they are, maybe we'll find that, in contrast to Blake, they do have relatives or friends."

"We can't threaten them, Guv."

"Depending on circumstances," Ambreesh said, "we can charge someone like that with aiding and abetting terrorist acts. We've done that before. Sometimes it works because the suspects don't want to see them go to jail."

"Are they ever sent to jail?" Ezra said, looking worried.

Ambreesh smiled. "Usually not. Their freedom is part of a deal."

Taking advantage of Maggie and Ezra's presence at the MI5 HQ, another task force meeting took place. Maggie informed the group of her plan to Photoshop away Blake's collaborator's masks and use the photos for more canvassing to try to find some of the other terrorists. Ambreesh loved the plan.

"I can help you with that. When one uses Photoshop, traces of the tampering are often left unless mods are made pixel by pixel. I can use another software package to touch up all three photos and take out the defects to make them all appear that all four photos, including Blake's, were shot from one very good camera."

"Mr. Singh, I doubt you have to be so super-careful unless some witness is also a photographic specialist."

Ambreesh nodded and smiled.

"Okay, that's a good idea and one plan," Robert said. "We also have some news from Birmingham I want to share. The same woman was seen in in several video records of the hate crimes that took place there." He passed around the table copies of a photo.

"Cor blimey! That's Elizabeth Wolfe!" Ezra said upon receiving his copy. "Her husband's Ralph Wolfe." He looked around the table and saw the raised eyebrows. "Aye mates, the leader of that radical right-wing Free Britain party who almost won a seat in Parliament in the last election and might pull it off in the next."

"This won't help his election campaign," Maggie said.

Robert winked at Ezra. "I remember now. They're no longer together, those two, except maybe politically, and rumor has it that they're getting a divorce."

"That rumor's been around for at least the last two or three years," Ezra said. Maggie looked sideways at him, so he explained. "Mum and her sister are from Birmingham, Guv, so we keep up with local politics there. Wolfe chappie's a wrinklie prof at the uni there. He's fifteen years older than the missus. They say she was once his student."

"Got all that, Robert?" Bastian said.

"So, is she part of the same movement that Blake belongs to?" Maggie said.

"With or without Ralph?" Ambreesh said.

"We can find Ralph more easily than Liz," Ezra said. "You MI5 blokes could then have some more fun putting that old fascist's feet to the fire."

Robert nodded. "Let's pick him up quietly for questioning. We don't want to rock any political boats. With the elections coming up, he's sure to scream foul about any perceived police brutality, true or not."

"Even if it's MI5's," Ezra said, obviously thinking of the interrogation he'd just witnessed.

There were some moments of silence as the task force members studied the photo and Ambreesh passed around his tablet showing Ralph Wolfe's picture. Freddie March then looked around the table.

"If our main business is settled, as an addendum, I'd like to say something in my liaison capacity here," he said. "I talked with the Home Secretary and he wants me to pass on a message from the PM. They want to prosecute Blake and whoever collaborated with him to the max. With the election coming, they can't afford to appear soft on terrorism." He smiled at those gathered around the table, giving an additional wink to Maggie. "I'm not sure I go along with that. There are times when deals must be made to nick everyone involved. Let's call it using a small bait fish to reel in a much larger one. We're homing in on the large ones, but some deals might tighten the charges against them, right?"

Maggie showed no expression. While she liked this old toff, she thought he was wrong. The small fish did the dirty business and the big fish organized everything and commanded them to do what they did. She wanted to reel in all the fish.

In some ways, the duke was a much older version of Robert Winston—urbane, well-dressed in an expensive three-piece suit, hair fashionably coifed and long, and sitting erect but relaxed at each end of the table. That was only outward appearances, though. The duke seemed like a man she could eventually call a friend; Winston didn't have a chance. But in that room, she couldn't let personal distastes control her actions.

The duke's naivete had almost made Maggie smile, but she felt compelled to answer his question. Bastiann seemed to read her mind and beat her to the punch.

"Freddie, we should prosecute everyone to the full extent of the law. We shouldn't ever make deals with terrorists, which is what you're suggesting."

Freddie thought a moment. "I'm not talking about political expediency like the PM and Home Secretary were. But can't we make a few deals to nick all these feckin' fascists?"

"There's no indication that anyone we catch will grass on the others," Maggie said. "Offering deals just makes the government look weak. The PM's party is already considered weak. I'm with the PM."

"I see. Well stated."

His turnabout surprised Maggie. *Had it all been a test?*

Freddie seemed to confirm that as he smiled at Bastiann. "I like this woman. She's going places. Your wife had better watch out."

Maggie could only blush.

SAMPLE

Chapter Seventeen

London Suburbs

The package store clerk felt sorry for the white-haired wrinklie. As he reached for the whiskey bottle in its little brown bag, his big hand shook. *Is he going to drop it on the way home?*

She had no idea where home was, but there wasn't ever any evidence that the chap drove. He'd been into the shop many times before, but she hadn't seen him for a month or two. *Maybe he was sick?*

There was a nursing home only about two miles away, a nice place. She volunteered there sometimes. But he couldn't be living there. They'd never let him out for one thing; and they'd never let him bring liquor in, although she thought some of the residents' guests might smuggle drinks into their loved ones, buying them at the store. *What can a few tipples hurt if it makes them happier with their lot?*

He'd been a bit short when it came to pay for his bottle. She was going to look the other way on that. He didn't seem like the usual habitual tippler, after all. Not an alcoholic. But he'd dug into his old army jacket to find enough coins to cover the difference. The total price wasn't all that much. It wasn't the worst scotch in the store, but it was far from the best. *Will he drink it all tonight?*

She decided that he must live nearby within easy walking distance. *At least he can get some exercise coming to buy his liquor.*

"Whatcha lookin' at, lass?" he said, seeing her focus on the shaking hand.

"My grandfather has Parkinson's too, sir. I'm sorry, but I was wondering if you were under a doctor's care. There's an NHS health center over on Claymore Street."

"Don't have Parkinson's, so mind your own business. I've been here before. You've never said anything like that."

"I worry about all the customers when I get to know them well."

"You don't know me from Adam. You're a pretty little thing, but you're stupid. I've half a mind to report you to the owner."

She blushed. Not like her peepaw at all! *An old grouch, he is.* "Will that be all, sir?"

"All I got money for. Damn government pensions are worthless. You fight for the country and then they throw you to the wolves. It's those damn Labour MPs. Talk a good line, they do, but never deliver to those in need."

"Yes sir."

"Don't yes me, lass." He turned and left the store.

The clerk sighed. Her grandfather and the wrinklies at that nursing home were much better behaved.

The old man struggled up the stairs to his tiny flat over the Indian restaurant. He couldn't stand his landlord, the owner of the restaurant. All those darkies gave him aggro because they were foul-smelling bastards who should have stayed in their own country. *If the Empire hadn't given that colony its freedom, they would have had to stay there!* He could understand why they stank too. The foul odors from that foreign food the restaurant served

permeated his flat from lunchtime on. He'd wake up at night gagging from them, often his malaise accompanied by a headache from that awful music. That swami hellhole was the perfect focus of his blame; he didn't want to think about what else might be the cause for the throbbing pain in his head.

"Parkinson's," the bird at the package store had said. *Little does she know!*

He poured himself a half glass of whiskey and tossed it down. His head was exploding even now from the effort he'd made to go up those stairs. It seemed like the only thing that dulled the pain now was the drink.

"NHS! What do the doctors know? They scare the shite out of you when the best medicine is available at a package store not far away, not at a chemist's."

He glanced at the row of medicines on the shelf to the left of the telly. *All completely worthless!* He held up his hand. It wasn't shaking so much now as the pain in his head lessened a bit. He held up the other hand; it wasn't shaking at all.

They were strong hands, still strong enough to strangle that little bird if must needs. But she was somebody's grand daughter. He wouldn't have minded having a grand daughter to spoil. That had been denied him along with many other things.

He used those large hands to cover each side of his head, including his ears so the swami music couldn't set the pain off again. He'd have to do the whole bottle tonight. This was going to be a bad one.

Chapter Eighteen

London Suburbs

"How was your function?" Sanderson said to Thackeray the next morning. She didn't really care because her boss always arrived at work in a foul mood, but, unlike him, she could pretend to be sociable.

"I was happy to see Helen get her prize, although I have no idea why she received it. Otherwise, we had a free meal of rubber chicken; mashed potatoes with greasy, lumpy gravy; overcooked vegetables; stale bread; a tiny dessert; and weak coffee. Worse, no free bar. Hardly worth my time, I dare say."

"But Helen was happy?" She had to ask that because she really didn't give a rat's arse about Thackeray's evening. In fact, she took joy in his discomfort.

He shrugged and ignored her question. *Either thinking Helen's happiness is irrelevant, or believing it's none of my business?*

"What's new with the damn Doyle case?"

She told him about Greene's description of the Bolton-Doyle friendship. "We need to find Henry Bolton. As Doyle's best friend, he might be able to offer a lot of information about Doyle's past life."

"What if he's dead? He's probably about the same age as Doyle if they were that tight."

"There's no death certificate, so he might be in some nursing home as well."

"Doyle's?"

"I doubt it. The constables screened all the patients and staff there, but I'll confirm. I also want to follow up with Declan O'Hara's father. Remember the old woman who said that Doyle's daughter was born only three months after Doyle married?"

"How could I forget that witch? And it happens. Today they might not even get married. Marriage's just a business partnership for the most part."

"How about companionship?"

"Sure, sometimes. Sex too. No reason to formalize any of that. A lot of people don't bother now."

Like you, she thought. *Men!* "I'm thinking more about Doyle's wife. Where is she now? Was there a love triangle between her, Doyle, and Bolton? And so forth. I can't find much about her either. Declan's father might be able to answer those questions."

"Can't see there'd be any cause for murder in answers to all that."

"Didn't say there would be, but we're collecting facts about Doyle's past."

He nodded. "Say, here's a thought. Maybe the daughter wanted to get even for his abandonment of her and her mum, so she hired someone to kill her father."

Sanderson laughed. "I'm not going to say that to Mr. O'Hara."

"Congrats, Helen. Now the royals can hate you even more. You should have brought your plaque to work to show everyone."

"Put a sock in it, June," Thackeray's girlfriend said. She looked around the open plan space the reporters shared. "Where the hell is everyone?"

"I'm guessing doing lie-ins after that ceremony last night and going out for drinks afterwards. If the editorial cats are away, the journalistic mice will play. Didn't you and your copper join them?"

"David couldn't wait to leave. I actually think he was jealous. I can't understand him sometimes."

"Maybe he's a fan of the royals and didn't want to see you get an award for reporting on yet another scandal. Royal supporters are fewer in number every day, it seems, from the king on down, but there are still some around, you know."

"I'm sure they don't read our paper. Neither does David, but he's not particularly a fan of the royals. He's not a fan of anyone but himself."

"I frankly don't understand why you put up with him."

"He's like an old, comfortable pair of trainers."

"You can trash old shoes in the bin, you know. People do it all the time."

"Um, says the woman who's happily married to a chemist and enjoying family life."

"And also a friend who's telling you it's time to ditch him."

Helen thought a moment. "Maybe you're right."

Michael O'Hara picked up the phone.

"DS Linda Sanderson here from Scotland Yard. I'm a friend of Maggie Bent, Mr. O'Hara. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Any friend of my son's new wife is a friend of mine, so go ahead."

"I understand your family was close to Sean Doyle's, correct?"

"To his family here. Sean abandoned Mary and Katherine, his wife and child. I'm sorry he was murdered—no one deserves to die that way—but a lot of people aren't. Maybe Kate was. She tried to build some bridges by writing a few letters and talking to Sean on the phone."

"And Mary?"

"She passed on when Kate was in her first year at Trinity College, with Declan, in fact. Damn cancer took her."

"I see. Do you know how Mary and Sean met?"

"She was serving in a field hospital during the Falklands War. Met Sean's best friend when he showed up with some minor injuries. I guess she got to know Sean well enough to pick him instead."

"That friend was Henry Bolton?"

"I believe so. Mary and I only talked about all this just the one time, so my memory's a bit fuggy."

"Yet Henry and Sean remained good friends?"

"I don't know. Can't see that it matters. Sean left them to go back to England. He'd become an English citizen before the war, and she was one because she was Welsh. She stayed in Donegal with Kate; he didn't. End of story."

"Except for Katherine, or Kate. Any chance Kate hated her father enough to want to kill him?" Sanderson only asked that question to prove Thackeray wrong.

He laughed. "You're reaching there, Sergeant. Like I said, she built some bridges. The family house was still in Sean's name, and he signed it over to Kate. She and her husband and their children live there now."

"Did she or anyone else from the family go to the funeral?"

"A bit far for them. Same for me, because I'm back in Donegal now too. Declan and Maggie went because they're over there."

"I see. Do you have any idea where Henry Bolton is now? I can't find any death certificate, so I assume he's still living."

"You don't suspect him, do you?"

"No. We're just trying to probe into Doyle's past to see who might be a suspect. He might know of someone who hated Sean enough to commit murder. Sean had a long life. People can accumulate a lot of enemies during that time."

"I'll agree to that. A lot of criminals would be celebrating my death, I assure you. Goes with our jobs."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll ask Kate, but she probably has no idea where Bolton is. I'm not sure she knows about him at all. Can't see any reason for Mary to have told her, to put a fine point on it."

"That's probably right. Still, please ask her. Any other suggestions for finding him?"

"I'd check the obvious first. Sean was in a nursing home, so maybe Bolton is too. A daunting task to track that down, I know. And doesn't the UK government have a list of pensioners?"

Old people, especially veterans, often received pension checks. "I'd probably need a court warrant to get an address to go along with the name, but that's a good idea. My error. I'm not used to dealing with the elderly."

"I understand."

"It's been nice talking to you, sir. You raised a very nice son. Maggie is a lucky woman. Oh, one more thing: Do you happen to know Kat O'Malley?"

"By name only. She was a DI who lived south of Dublin and then went to work in your patch. No bad things about her, all good. Does she have anything to do with your case?"

"No, she's revisiting a cold case now, an old murder case from Heatherton. I thought you might know something about it."

"I vaguely remember it. Some little boy was murdered. What a terrible event. O'Malley sent the details to all Gardai HQs in a futile attempt to develop some clues. Those are hard cases to get over. I hope yours won't go cold. Take care, Sergeant Sanderson."

Later the next day, Michael opened his front door. "Hello, Kate. What do you have there on that plate?"

Kate Murphy nee Doyle laughed. "Some fresh sugar biscuits for you and your wife's dessert tonight."

"Well...thank you. You didn't need to do that. You did enough to help Dotty and me organize Declan and Maggie's wedding. Would you like to come in? We were out in the garden enjoying this fine afternoon. Nice sea breeze keeping things cool too."

"That was indeed part of my plan. I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to ask you some questions about my father?"

"You must join us then. Fair warning: We're replacing tea with lemonade today, I'm afraid."

"That sounds refreshing."

Kate followed him. She bent down and gave her mother's old friend a hug and then took a seat at the table, placing the plate in the center by the lemonade pitcher and glasses.

"I'll get right to it because I left the nippers alone. I found some old letters in a shoebox when I bit the bullet and decided to clean out our attic. Did you know Henry Bolton?"

Remembering the call from Sanderson, Michael was struck by the coincidence. Of course, Sean Doyle's death had probably motivated his daughter to clean out that attic. Sean had lived there with Mary for several years.

"I knew of him. I didn't know him personally. I hardly knew your father. Only once did your mum mention Henry to me. Told me how she met him and Sean in stressful circumstances in the Falklands. I'm a tight-lipped fellow because of my profession, and it wasn't my place to tell you."

"And mum never did. And what you said sounds like an apology when none is needed or expected, Mr. O'Hara. But those letters raised a lot of questions. It seems Henry was furious with my father for stealing mum. Do you think he could have killed my father?"

"I don't even know if he's still alive, but how could that happen? That war occurred so many years ago."

"But Mum says in a letter to pops, when they were still writing to each other, that Henry vowed to get even, no matter how long it took."

"After he abandoned you two, was he still exchanging letters with Mary?"

"I'm not sure abandonment is the right word anymore. Pops wanted the two of us to come and live in England with him, but Mum hated London. That was in the letters, and she often told me that as well, hated London, that is."

"How odd. She was English. Welsh, of course. Not a big city girl, though, which is why she felt comfortable here in Donegal, I suppose."

Kate stood. "I have to go. The children are alone. No telling what they'll get into. Have a good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. O'Hara."

After she left, Michael stood.

"Where are you off to?" Dotty said.

"I need to call Detective Sergeant Sanderson."

Chapter Nineteen

Heatherton, a Few Years Earlier

Everyone in town now called him "that gardener." He knew they often meant by using that expression that he was too stupid to do anything else. He didn't care. Christ and some of His disciples had been lowly fishermen before following Him, hadn't they? And look at the good works those holy men had done! He was a holy man too. He'd done his part in cleaning up the town's unholy garbage. It hadn't quite worked out the way he'd planned, but the results had been satisfying in the long run.

"What are you planting today, Seamus?" the holy mother said during her daily walk around the orphanage's garden.

He glanced at the wheelbarrow. He always had a hard time remembering the flowers' names. "Some annuals. Replacing them every year is a bit more work, but they'll add nice color to the garden." His horticultural exposition ended there. "Our new priest has worked out well, hasn't he?"

She laughed. "Hardly new now."

He thought a moment. "Sorry. I lose track of time. Of course, he isn't. But even the children here like him."

"The older children not so much. They get their hands slapped when I hear them cursing him, the little ingrates. We save them here on Earth, and he saves their souls for their afterlife in Heaven with Christ our Lord. They are lucky little buggers, I dare say, and should be more grateful."

"I suppose. We got a new priest, but I haven't seen any new nuns for a long time." He thought he knew why. *Did she?*

She sighed. "People are turning away from God. Our order gets smaller with every decade that passes. It's a sign of the times. His time shall come again, though, never fear. All we have to do is pray."

"What's that mean, mother, the first thing you said?"

She thought a moment. "Some people just go through the motions, others have false beliefs, and still others have no faith at all. There's a lot of evil in the world now."

"We all have to do our part to fight it," he said.

She smiled and nodded. "You're such a nice lad. I'll leave you to your chores."

The gardener often confessed to the new priest. He never lied, but he omitted a lot. Some things, like details about his mum, were fuggy in his mind and less important memories; others were memories that were clear even in his addled head, but he preferred to not talk about them with a priest.

He liked the new holy man, though, so he confessed some things, like peeing in the orphanage's garden or taking two slices of cake. Those stories made the priest chuckle. *He thinks I'm stupid too!*

It was good that the priest might think that, though, far better than his knowing all the gardener's secrets. *But I'm not stupid!* His mind was just addled from all his mum drank to

cope. Spreading her legs for evil men most nights had made her a lot more addled, and she drank to forget. She had told him that once years ago, tears in her eyes. He hadn't understood the wrongness of all that at the time. Not until he secretly watched the previous priest do his evil deeds.

When his mum died, he was only four. He'd never forget her eyes staring at infinity. He thought she must have been mesmerized by the splendor and glory when meeting their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He'd wanted to see that too, so he finished her drink. It was awful, burning his mouth and throat, but it didn't kill him. He never touched liquor again, even though he still yearned to see what his mum had seen.

How could he tell the new priest about that? About how mum saw the glory of God and neither the priest nor he could. He was a holy man, to be sure, but he could only imagine what his mum had seen, right? *Just like me!* You need to become immortal to see God or the Devil.

Had the previous priest seen the Devil as he burned to death in that car? He knew his mum had seen God when she died. People had to see where they were going to end up, didn't they?

He grabbed his head with his huge hands. *So many thoughts.* He was only addled because there were so many of them, all jumbled together like the football crowds he saw on the telly.

Chapter Twenty

Birmingham, England

Ralph Wolfe was an example of how the words "fascist" and "fascism" had disappeared from the modern lexicon to become the apparently more innocuous words "populist" and "populism." Most leaders, especially in democracies where they had to appeal to voters, were populists in the old sense of the word because they had to be popular to win elections. Even before a certain US president had corrupted the original meaning of the words—or was it modern media doing the corruption?—"populist" leaders were just fascist leaders, and Wolfe was no exception. Despite being a history professor focusing on early twentieth-century political movements, he had never recognized those linguistic subtleties nor considered himself either a fascist or populist. He just believed that extreme conservatism was more efficient and pragmatic than extreme liberalism.

As a politician, he used fascists' techniques, though, creating minority scapegoats for his followers to blame and hate. He just saw that as practical politics. Fundamentally, it was a divide-and-conquer technique that could win him votes, not one that would lead to violence. He admired Hitler but refused to repeat that sociopath's mistakes.

He was of course an amateur compared to that US president, Putin, and Xi, or even lesser satraps like Belarus's Lukashenko, Hungary's Orban, and Poland's Duda had been. Some of these sociopathic psychopaths were clever enough to come to power even in democratic systems, governments with enough organizational flaws and citizen lemmings crazy enough to allow such a "populist" takeover, showing that conditions could easily deteriorate in any democracy. Countries with few or no experiences with democracy and representative government were easier pickings. The UK government, relying more on historical tradition than any written documents spelling out the rules for self-government, represented a middle ground where the leaders could easily dig their own graves by allowing demagogues like Wolfe free rein to spew their bigotry and hatred. And that was his niche, his playground.

He hadn't been clever enough to win a seat in Parliament, though, where he could do more damage. He was a frustrated man, his most ardent followers being the students at the uni who flocked to his lectures. For them and a few others, the gospel of hate he preached reinforced their own prejudices. It contained many contradictory elements—Wolfe, like many fascists wasn't the sharpest knife in the political drawer—but it had resonated enough to make him hope for political success.

Some days he didn't know why he bothered to continue on his quest, though. He was comfortable in academia and loved his second-story flat. A move to London would upset that comfortable lifestyle and throw him together with other MPs he couldn't abide.

In the West Midlands' Edgbaston neighborhood of Birmingham, his flat was close enough to the uni that he could walk to his lectures and tutoring yet far enough away that he had some privacy, something he valued more as he aged. Could he be an effective MP, a man of the people? In the last election, voters had said no, but not by much. A second election might be definitive and seal his feat as only the intellectual leader of the Free Britain party. That might not be a bad thing. He didn't have to rule. He was okay with telling other people how to do it.

Physically he was more like Putin, a slighter figure and less muscular, not a big man like the Chinese and American presidents who had made the world wake up and take notice. A pale countenance, thin lips, and straw-colored hair had led him to avoid a search for a mate outside academia. Students, more susceptible to his politics than his charm, had been fair game; and a few fellow academics had fallen into his web too. He couldn't say he was overly successful at romance, though, and his only love, Elizabeth, had left him. As a consequence, he was now alone, his social contacts now more limited, to the extent that he often looked forward to meeting the cleaning lady on occasion, even though she was a Jamaican nobody.

You're pathetic, he told himself. He decided a sherry would do well to erase that self-criticism. Enough could make it seem incorrect.

He took his sherry to his favorite chair to read one of the historical tomes he loved to peruse in his quiet moments of rest and relaxation. An hour passed and the sherry was only half-finished when the door chime sounded. *Who can it be at this hour?*

"Hello, Ralphie."

Ralph Wolfe stared at his wife's face in the security screen. At faculty and university functions, people had thought he was a lucky man to have such a beautiful woman for a wife. He'd enjoyed that for a time, although he had no use for the academics' opinions in general. He often railed against Labour in his campaign speeches about how the government in general, but especially Labour governments in particular, were destroying Britain. It was part of his Free Britain shtick.

"Are you going to let me in?"

"Why should I? My barrister hasn't finished drawing up the divorce papers yet."

"Um, yes, you should go through with it this time, old stick. I have more important things to tend to than deciding who gets the silverware, though. Let me in and I'll tell you all about them."

He wondered what that was all about. Liz was not above self-aggrandizement. Their fights often had come down to two intelligent persons' egos clashing. He was curious, though, so he opened the door, reset the security system, and returned to the sitting room. She followed him. He gestured to a wing chair he knew she liked.

She was a bit taller than he was and folded herself into the chair after kicking off her slip-on trainers. He noticed she no longer painted her nails. In fact, he thought she appeared rather slovenly—hair in disarray, no makeup, and dirty clothes. Her sweatshirt and sweatpants hid her elegant curves, but from the neck up Ralph could see she hadn't changed as much as he had. If anything, and despite little or no attempt to make herself presentable, she was more beautiful than that first day he'd tutored her in history. Her auburn hair still had that glow, and those fiery green eyes still looked wild and passionate.

He'd always suspected that her passion had always been more about her causes, which were mostly his as well, and not about any lust she'd felt for an older professor. Her walking out on him in a rage had at least suggested that. He still remembered the punch in the belly and thinking he should report her for spousal abuse. That would have made him into a gossip topic in the university halls for months, of course.

It had never come up in the election either. His opponent's argument had been simple, a non-political one, in fact: Did the voters want an ivory-tower academic who lived out-of-touch with common men and women representing them in Parliament?

"I'm willing to be civilized about the divorce. I hope you are too. So...what are these things that are now occupying your attention, Liz?"

"Remember when you tutored me in twentieth century revolutionary movements? Your thesis was that Nazi Germany was a revolutionary movement. You said extremist liberals often lauded Lenin and Mao while ignoring valid revolutions on the right, Hitler's, in particular."

Ralph thought a moment. "Yes, I suppose I might have said that. The problem is that today too many British only think of them all as extremists creating chaos. Our last real revolution here was Cromwell's. It's too bad he didn't succeed. We would have been rid of the aristocracy once and for all, although Puritanism wouldn't have the ideal right-wing revolutionary flavor either, I dare say. Are we going to waste time wallowing in nostalgia?"

"You are truly dense sometimes. I'm organizing a right-wing revolution. Our first step is to eradicate all the foreigners in our country, especially those new Muslim migrants and refugees who are ruining the country."

Ralph frowned. "Not so new, but what do you mean by 'eradicate'?" He feared her answer.

"We're killing them. Organized death squads, Ralphie."

"What?" A frisson went down the old man's spine.

"Aren't you proud of me? You always said we need a right-wing revolution, even if it's a violent one."

"That was political hyperbole. And I certainly wasn't proposing to kill Muslims."

At that moment, the doorbell rang. Ralph returned to the front of the flat and checked his security camera. "It's the police! Out the back door with you, Liz. They can't find you here!"

She was now behind him and showed him a gun. "My new toy. I'll take them all on. How many are there?"

"Too many. This isn't the right way to do this, Liz. Leave by the back door and stairs and live to fight another day."

She glanced over his shoulder at the screen. "Five stupid plods. I'm insulted they didn't send more. And not a gun in sight. I can kill them all."

"I don't know you anymore! Do all the killing you want, just not here. I never want to see you again!"

He saw the anger twist her face into something unrecognizable before she shot him.

The largest rozzar in the group broke down the door after they all heard the shot. "Call an ambulance," he said, the first to see the professor's body.

One colleague did that. Another said, "Is he dead? Who shot him?"

"There might be a back door," said the first. "Go check!"

He'd knelt by the old man and was checking his carotid pulse. "He might survive if we get him to a hospital quickly. Now those agents will have to interview him there."

That occurred the next day when the man who broke down the door, Detective Sergeant Tom Dalton, met DI Bent and DS Harris at the entrance to the hospital.

"No news is good news," Ezra said after they all shook hands. "We see that old Ralph survived."

"A lucky man. You chaps in the Yard think it's the wife? Talk about a bad divorce!"

"Maybe nothing to do with their matrimonial problems." Maggie told him about the task force. She didn't mention it involved MI5.

"Um, those hate crimes aren't our case, but we're all one big, happy family up here. We even hobnob with the NCA on occasion. Shall we go in and see if the old professor is up to an interview?"

"Lead the way."

Ezra seemed nervous as they followed Dalton through sterile corridors permeated with odors of disinfectant and bodily excretions. "Are you okay, Ezra?"

"I don't fancy hospitals."

"Don't blame you, mate," Tom said, "but they're better than morgues. Ah, here we are?" A nurse was just leaving the hospital room. "Is Mr. Wolfe able to talk to us? These are two police from London who would like to question him, DI Bent and DS Harris."

They showed her their warrant cards, and she nodded. "I'll give you fifteen. He's in a foul mood, but maybe that's a good sign."

Maggie and Ezra led the way. Wolfe looked confused until he saw Dalton.

"Mr. Wolfe, how are you doing? I'm DI Maggie Bent from Scotland Yard. My companion here is DS Ezra Harris. You already know DS Dalton from the local Birmingham Police Department. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

"To answer your first one, I'm alive and counting myself lucky. The crazy bitch didn't kill me!"

"Was the shooter your wife?"

"Yes. She's a nutter, a complete psycho. You have to stop her!"

"We agree. She and her friends want to create a Fourth Reich."

"Nothing wrong with that if done properly. Hitler failed to do it properly. And she's failing miserably. Thinks eradicating all foreigners is a logical first step. Where are all the workers going to come from in the new economy? Rome had the right idea but not the appropriate technology. You turn conquered people into workers to keep the economy on an even keel. You can read all about it in my books."

Maggie nodded. She was wondering who was more the nutter, this professor or his wife. She took a tack he might understand better. "We need to punish her for deviating from your plans. Shooting you isn't the way to achieve your goals."

"I'm happy to see you understand, Inspector."

"Do you have any idea where we can find her?"

"England's a big country."

"Are there any properties besides your flat where she might hide out. Even friends' places?"

"Don't know who her friends are now. You plods should have a better idea about that." He thought a moment. "Um, my family had a summer home a bit west of Edinburgh, but I'm sure I never took her there. She would never be able to find it alone. My brother and sister-in-law and their children use it now, although he and I are co-owners. Then there's a fishing cabin near Penrith our father owned and used; I inherited it, not my brother, but we never used

it for fishing. I have no idea why she'd go there. Too far from her revolutionary activities, I dare say." He pointed a bony finger at Tom. "She was going to kill all you plods. She belongs in a straitjacket locked away in a padded cell."

Maggie turned to Tom. "Can't hurt to check out the fishing cabin, right?" He nodded. "Can you tell us how to get to your father's cabin, professor?"

SAMPLE

Chapter Twenty-One

London Suburbs

"Can I help you?" the receptionist at the nursing home said to Declan. "Oh, you're that nice young man who was visiting poor Mr. Doyle."

He had recognized her as well, an older, pleasant, and caring woman whose personality reminded him of his mum's. She took her duties seriously, though. Not just anyone could visit a person at the home; each person was screened.

"That's right. I'm trying to do his daughter a favor by gathering up his personal things that might have sentimental value for her and send them to her in Ireland. I know the police probably took some items from his room. Did they leave anything behind?"

"I think they only took a notebook. Go along there to the director's office just down the corridor. I'm sure she'll okay that and show you where it's all stored."

"Is there much?"

"I don't really know, Mr. O'Hara."

The director gave her permission and showed Declan to a storage room where a large box contained a lot of clothing and footwear as well as some personal items. After she left, he began to sort everything into two piles, one for items Kate might want to have and the other for a donation to charity. Most of the clothes and footwear would go into the latter pile, but Declan decided to be neat about it and shake out and refold the clothes.

When shaking out a red checkered flannel shirt, a scrap of paper fell out. He picked it up from the floor. Written on it was H. B. plus a local address. With his mobile, he googled the address. *Why would Sean have the address of an Indian restaurant?* Declan could understand having its telephone number. The home's residents probably often called for takeaway if they didn't have the full meal plan, especially someone like Sean who was probably better off financially than many residents.

And H. B. didn't correspond to the restaurant's name. *Maybe the owner?* He stuffed the note into his own shirt pocket. He forgot about it until he walked into their flat with Kate's box. *Their flat*, he thought with a smile. It was nice to have someone living there who'd changed it from his flat to their flat now.

As he unloaded wallets, keys, and mobile onto the little table at the flat's entrance, he remembered the scrap of paper. He smacked his head. *Of course, you idiot!* He knew who H. B. was! He reached for his mobile where he now had DS Sanderson on speed-dial.

Henry and Sean had been chums in the Queen's army fighting more for the Iron Lady's desire to use patriotism to buoy up lagging public opinion. They both knew the latter but had enlisted before that PM had probably even heard of the Falklands, neither one knowing what to do after college but both wanting a bit of adventure. They hadn't counted on a war, but it had been a one-sided one. The poor Argentines hadn't had a chance of winning

He remembered one event that had cemented their friendship even more. It occurred before everything unraveled....

"You two came here to fight the *gauchos*, not your comrades," Lieutenant Clarke said. He and others used that nickname for the Argentines, although the people on the islands

weren't all from Argentina—most were from the British Isles, in fact, which Thatcher used to justify her ordering an invasion a bit like her US president friend had done with the Caribbean island of Grenada.

"Sorry, sir," Henry said, snapping his heels together and saluting, although anyone could see he was in pain. "They were insulting our PM, sir!"

"And what's your excuse, Reilly? You're a feckin' Irishman. Are you also some kind of damn mercenary?"

Sean puffed out his chest and saluted too. "I'm a loyal British citizen, sir! And I was just making sure my friend Henry here didn't get hurt."

"How noble of you. Yet he did get hurt, so you weren't much help, were you?" Clarke walked around the two friends, stopped, and got in Sean's face. "Nice black eye to go with your black heart, Irishman. Where did you learn to fight? In a ladies' tearoom in Oxford?"

"No, sir! In Dublin as a wee lad. We lived in a tough neighborhood."

Clarke smiled. "Good. Maybe you can still use those skills to whip some *gauchos* for me." He poked Sean in the chest. "I don't want either of you involved in any more violent barneys. Next time you'll end up in the brig onboard ship."

"Yes, sir!" they said in unison.

"Okay, Tweedle-Dee, take Tweedle-Dum here to the hospital tent and get him fixed up. Get the hell out of here."

They were halfway there when they stopped. Both succumbed to paroxysms of laughter, not being able to contain it any longer. Henry, his squigging legs forcing him to bend over, was slapping his knees.

"Stupid prat! He never asked anything about what the other three blokes looked like."

Sean pounded him on the back. "Probably because he thought they deserved the beating, old stick." Sean looked at his watch. "I'll give you company to the tent, but then I must take my leave. We're going out on patrol."

"Be safe, Sean. I'll be okay. I'm going to find a young nurse there who's a lot prettier than you are."

"Good luck with that."

Henry had been lucky...until Sean had stolen his girl.

The memory of how Sean had gone out on patrol and returned stirred up more bitter thoughts in Henry's mind. He'd always carried with him the last letter received from his brother. He'd written it just before going on patrol in Belfast and mentioned how he'd soon be home. In the letter, he'd also told Henry that he couldn't understand the Irish. The world thought the Troubles were all about Catholics versus Protestants, but what it really came down to was some people wanting their independence from the UK versus those who didn't. None of the combatants were very religious. On the contrary, their cold-blooded killings and bombings were "morally unacceptable."

Henry had liked that last part. It was understatement so typical of his older brother. Was it just morally unacceptable that a sniper had killed his brother when he went out on that patrol? No! It had been cold-blooded murder!

Most likely the sniper was a fighter for independence...and Catholic. But Henry had taken the high road. Sean had been an Irish Catholic but he wasn't from Northern Ireland, not from Belfast.

After Sean stole Mary, though, Henry had begun to wonder. Hadn't the Irish in the south supported the Irish freedom fighters? The former had fought their own bloody war of independence with England, after all. It was clear what their sympathies were.

He'd concluded there might be many reasons to kill Sean. His one-time friend might have even approved of killing a young British soldier, seen as an invader. That would be consistent with Sean's treatment of Mary and their child; Mary was English. While religion had nothing to do with all Henry's history with Sean, it was clear that his one-time friend had become an evil man!

Even as all those thoughts swirled through his diseased brain, Henry realized he hadn't intended to kill Sean. He'd only wanted to confront him, tell him what a bastard he'd been, but he'd lost it when Sean had called him an old fool. Mary and Henry had just started to get serious when Sean decided to make his move on her. The Irishman had charmed her. He was dashing and handsome unlike Henry. She'd made the mistake of choosing Sean, considering that he'd later abandoned her to raise a child alone.

Henry had been irate, but what could he do? Sean got Mary pregnant, and they were off to Donegal. When he learned that Sean abandoned them, his ire turned to rage. Over the years, his vow to get even turned darker, into a dark hatred that expanded to consume him as the tumor spread in this brain.

He'd become intolerant of all things Irish—Sean as well as the bastards who'd killed his brother, almost anyone and everything even remotely Irish. Trying to keep that all bottled up had just made things worse.

He had moved to be close to Sean's nursing home, learning about how it operated and how Sean enjoyed sitting in that little park on balmy, sunny days. He'd plotted and come up with a plan. He'd approached Sean from the woods.

Except for the malignancy in his head, he was in much better shape than Sean. It had been easy to get his revenge, for him, for Mary, for the life Henry had lost and that Sean had thrown away. And maybe for his brother.

He sat on the edge of his bed. He knew he'd have to move on now. The plods were out canvassing and getting too close. Someone in the area, maybe even his own landlord, would mention Henry.

He heard two car doors slam. He didn't have curtains, so he walked to the side of his small window and peered around the frame. Three people had just exited a car and were studying the restaurant. With his throbbing head, he didn't recognize any of them, but he immediately thought they were after him. It was well after lunch after all, and the restaurant wasn't much of a sit-down place either.

He had kit prepared for just this moment. He strapped the canvas bag onto his back and headed for the rear door and the steps that would take him to freedom.

"No way of knowing whether the bloke's in there," Thackeray said to Declan.

They were standing in front of the Indian restaurant with Sanderson wondering if Henry Bolton indeed lived above it. They'd asked inside the restaurant, but the owner wasn't

there and the staff knew very little English. They'd only just found out that the flat above was leased to someone.

Thackeray's glowering face suggested to O'Hara that the inspector thought both Sanderson and he were wasting his time. Declan winked at Linda; she shrugged. She had to be used to Thackeray's moods. He wondered why she put up with them.

Declan had hitched a ride with the coppers who'd decided to visit there on the chance that they could query Bolton about Doyle. He hadn't wanted to spend more time on public transportation again; riding it to the nursing home was a convoluted process. And he also had questions for Henry, more about his friend Sean, of whom Declan wished he knew more.

"Shall we just knock on the door?" Sanderson said.

They climbed the stairs and Thackeray did the honors. There was no answer, but all three heard a door slam.

"I'll break the door down," Thackeray said. "You two head around the block to the back. This bloke's scarpering!"

Declan was the first to see Henry running down the alley away from the building. He pursued, and Linda followed. He led the way, soon outdistancing her. He heard her yell that she was going to the car. He gave a wave without looking back because he didn't want to lose Henry.

Why is the man fleeing? Isn't he Sean's friend? Declan had already convinced himself that somehow Henry had gotten by the nursing home's receptionist and had been visiting Sean, explaining the latter's note to himself that Declan had found. That would also explain why he was living so close to his friend's nursing home. *Friends forever!* Declan thought.

Henry was heading into another park, a municipal one that fronted the same woods. Declan realized that Sanderson had dashed for the car to block Henry on the other side, a smart move. Thackeray was lumbering along behind Declan. While he would catch Henry, there was no chance that Thackeray would catch him. *It's all on me, Sean,* Declan thought.

The old rugger seemed to have wings on his heels, but Declan caught up and tackled him. The crazed old man jumped to his feet, growling like a savage animal and brandishing a large knife. *What the hell?*

The two circled each other.

"Go away! You Irish bastards are all alike! Cromwell should have wiped you off the face of the Earth!"

That told Declan two things: Henry knew Declan was visiting Sean, and the old man hated the Irish!

"Cromwell? Don't be daft, man! This is the twenty-first century, Henry. Why are you acting like this?"

Thackeray caught up to the two but was knackered. He put his hands on his knees and leaned over to catch his breath. During one of the other two's circles, Henry stepped back past Thackeray a bit, grabbed him, and put the knife to the inspector's throat.

"Go away, or I'll kill this blighter. Mark my words!"

Thackeray was no longer so red-faced. He'd recovered enough to give Henry a sideways kick in the knee. The older man howled as Thackeray pushed the knife away.

Declan moved in before Henry could get the upper hand again. Declan punched the big man in the stomach and then landed an uppercut as Henry doubled over a bit. Henry went down. Thackeray held him down with his foot and handed his handcuffs to Declan.

"You have the honors, lad. Put these on him. You caught the scrote."

"I'm still confused about what's going on."

"It's obvious, lad. He must have killed Sean Doyle."

From a block away, Sanderson came running.

"Are you two okay?"

"Always late for the party," Thackeray said.

SAMPLE

Chapter Twenty-Two

Central London

As Kat O'Malley drove home from her HQ, she didn't even think about celebrating how well the interrogation of the taxi driver had gone. They still had to find Thomas Reilly's killer, the man Rafferty had helped carry the little lad into the churchyard. The taxi driver's description of the killer seemed to coincide with Tommy's friend Bobby's, though, as she remembered another interrogation, one with a little boy that was stressful all the same...

"Bobby, can you describe the man?" Kat said.

The boy looked at his mum; she nodded. "I can try. He was huge, with big, crazy, bulging eyes, like the Hulk in the telly series, only not with green skin. Had a big scar on one side of his face. After pushing me, he carried Tommy away under one arm, huffing and pubbing, and then stopped. I thought he was coming back for me. Instead, he told me to go away." Bobby rubbed the knot on the back of his head. "He hurt my head."

"My sergeant can drive him to the doctor," Kat told Bobby's mother. "But one more question: Had you ever seen this man before?"

"In Old Town, I think. One time. He was arguing with the priest."

Old Town was the locals' name for Heatherton center, where the churchyard was.

"Father O'Brian?"

"Yes. I couldn't hear what they argued about. That man was wearing a tool belt. Like my pops used to wear."

"Maybe a utilities worker?" Nate said.

Kat ignored her sergeant's interruption. "Did the priest seem to know him?"

"That's more than one question," the mother said. "You're going to a lot of trouble for some atheists' child, aren't you? They're heathens. I told Bobby repeatedly to stay away from Tommy."

"Mum, his parents are okay, and he was my friend!"

Hope from the new generation, Kate thought.

"School chums?" Kat said. Bobby nodded. He hung his head when his mother glared at him. "Let me say this, Mrs. Bonny: We in the Gardai don't care what anyone's belief system is, how wealthy they are, or where they're from. Our job is to serve and protect all Heatherton's town folk and other people in the area from criminal elements. One person's likes or dislikes cannot play a role in an investigation. Understood?"

What Kat had just said wasn't strictly true—there were plenty of closet bigots in the police force as well—they lived in the town, after all—but not in the crime unit. The woman frowned but nodded her agreement.

Bobby now looked up at his mother again. "I think the priest knew him, Mum. Talked down to him too, like he was being naughty. I thought it was funny at the time, how the priest did that."

"Okay, questions are over," Kat said, seeing that the boy was tired and the mother was losing it. "We should delay no more getting Bobby's health condition checked. Sergeant Hardy will drive you to the hospital. You can go along, Mrs. Bonny. Please make sure they check for a concussion. Nate, meet me at the church."

On her second trip in forty-eight hours to that old churchyard, Kat noticed that now the snow was mostly gone. There was only a muddy and sunken area where Tommy's body had lain. That wasn't what made the churchyard and church look shabby, though. It had looked somewhat better with the snow, of course—everything in Heatherton's Old Town usually did. But the mud mixed with dirty snow melt made the old building look even worse.

Streaks of dark mold darkened the already gray walls, a characteristic of many public buildings and not a few houses in the area. Things inside the church didn't look any better either, she remembered—old, hard pews that needed a new coat of varnish or at least some wax; prayer kneelers that would wreck anyone's knees if they could be lowered to pray, needed repair; damaged hymnals and missives that needed replacing—that all would make attending a mass there an unpleasant experience in her mind's eye. The town was supposed to be economically well off, but its central Catholic church didn't show that.

Father O'Brian wasn't happy to see them. Kat let Nate question the priest about his encounter with the strange man.

"I have no idea what that lad saw, but it wasn't me. And I don't know any hulking man with a toolbelt. Maybe Bobby has an active imagination? Don't the police know eyewitnesses are unreliable? Why would you two believe a little boy?"

"Because he saw the same man kidnap Tommy," Nate said. "And he has a bump on his head for that, possibly a concussion."

"And because Tommy was killed elsewhere and staged here, you're a person of interest, Father. I'm ordering a search of your living quarters, the church, and its grounds."

"You can't do that. This is sacred ground!"

"Don't worry. We'll get a warrant that will even satisfy God. He's not likely to approve of His sacred ground to dump little boys' bodies, is He?"

"Fine. You won't find anything." He no longer looked so smug, though.

"I'd also like to have some more details on your activities during the forty-eight hours around the time of discovering the body," Nate said. "If you wish, we can do that at the station."

Good one, Nate, Kat thought. She didn't like this priest. Whether he was a murderer or not, there were just some people who creeped her out. Or maybe he was just that way when police confronted him? He seemed to be hiding something, though.

While Nate quizzed O'Brian some more, which made the priest more irate, Kat noticed the large man adjusting the anchoring of a saint's statue. That handyman was smiling at Kat. *Why?* A frisson went down her spine because he had a toolbelt. She tucked away her paranoia into the recesses of her brain, realizing that probably half the men in Heatherton had tool belts.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Near Penrith

"Maggie, what do you think?"

Bent smiled at DI Tom Heath. Despite her policy of avoiding personal relationships with colleagues, she'd had a few dates with the man, nothing serious, and they'd remained good friends afterwards, more on an email basis recently because the Lake District was far from her London haunts now.

Although she was back in his patch with its many lakes and mountainous vistas, the fishing cabin sat on a low bluff overlooking an isolated sea inlet; she could see the whitecaps in the distance lit by the sliver of moon. A peaceful setting to be sure, but one that might soon bear witness to extreme violence she hoped to avoid.

At the police station, they had spotted Elizabeth Wolfe on video slinking through Penrith center, one of the areas where CCTV cameras were plentiful at the request of local merchants. The town's population tripled during summer months as hikers, fishing addicts, twitchers, and just ordinary people flocked there for their summer holidays.

There was no vehicle in the gravel driveway that was easily visible along with the cottage from their vantage point. That video record, though, had been enough confirmation for Maggie that the wild woman had fled to the only out-of-way place she knew about, a remote hideaway provided by her husband, the man she'd tried to kill.

Maggie had to wonder what had made Liz go to the dark side. She'd come from an affluent family, her father the developer of many new neighborhoods around Birmingham and her socialite mother, from a family of old wealth, who often appeared in the social pages of Birmingham's major newspaper. Maggie couldn't believe it was all due to old professor Wolfe. The swing from privileged brat to radical right-wing terrorist was a large one and seemed to indicate mental illness, but the woman was intelligent, energetic, and extremely dangerous.

"I'm just a guest here, Tom, an interested observer. What I think doesn't matter."

"It's your pursuit, Guv," said the local SCO19 leader. "To use an expression from those old spaghetti westerns, do we go for 'dead or alive'? Considering what this nutter has done, I don't have any preference. Heath?"

"None. Not from me. Make my day. I'm just wondering if I could ever own a place like that on my salary. I'd surely keep it in better shape. You're our guest, Maggie, so you get to make the call."

"Unless she's acquired more weaponry, she only has the one gun. I have no idea how much ammo she has, though." She shrugged. "She showed no mercy towards her victims or her husband. Five against one seems a bit unfair too, but so what? Go in with guns ready, gentlemen. And for God's sake, be careful."

The SCO19's leader nodded and the team's members moved towards the cottage.

"Just like old times, right Maggie?" Heath said.

She smiled, a smile he'd barely be able to see in the dim moonlight. "As colleagues, yes, but I'm married now, and so are you. Gives it a different flavor, don't you think?"

He shrugged. "Life goes on. What are they waiting for?"

They both then saw the cottage door opening. Elizabeth Wolfe exited, hands raised high.

Why is she smiling? Maggie asked herself.

Jeremy Brand wasn't a fan of the glitzy Home Office building on central London's Marsham Street. He'd been there many times for various meetings. He always felt more comfortable in the older office building that MI5 leased.

He wasn't a fan of the Home Secretary either. The old man had been in the job for a while, but he'd never shown any real initiative or guidance for his underlings. He was lucky to have people who did.

The Secretary offered to be mother, poured, and slid the cup of hot tea towards Brand. He then poured a cup for himself and offered biscuits to the MI5 VIP, who declined, thinking that the old prat was already too overweight to be indulging.

"You know, Jeremy, it's too damn bad it's not like the old days when we could hang Elizabeth Wolfe."

Brand had begun their little tête-a-tête by informing the secretary that they'd caught Liz Wolfe. As expected, that news had put the old man in a good mood.

"We'll go into elections showing we're tough on crime and terrorism," he'd said, "and we've implicated a political enemy and his wife as well. It couldn't get any better, I dare say, unless we could hang the bitch."

"The professor can still run for Parliament."

"Ha! With this result, what are his chances? The woman made old Ralph into the fool of the month, maybe the year! Scandals are always nicer when they happen to our political opponents. Congratulations, Jeremy, in creating a good one."

Never my intention, thought Brand. He didn't voice that, but instead said, "Our task force was quite capable, so it's their success, not mine. I'd like to keep it going."

"Freddie told me you'd say that. I'll approve that request. I'll even ask for a bit more funding if you have good evidence that those clowns are still out there ready to make trouble. We have to put a stop to all that nonsense once and for all."

"We do have evidence for that. We've intercepted calls to and from Blake and will do the same with Liz. They'll be continuing to try to run their organization from prison."

"Um, how do they get mobiles to do that?"

Brand smiled. "We provide them. Indirectly, of course."

"Ha! That's clever. They use them, and you gather useful intel and evidence on the remaining yobs. Good show!"

Blake finished his call and hid the moby under his cot's thin mattress. *Why is Liz changing tactics?* They hadn't even finished step one of their plan to free Britain.

"Exercise time, Blake."

He turned to see the guard at his cell door and then nodded. The chap was okay, an ex-soldier who might have been more sympathetic to Blake's cause in other circumstances. It seemed a contradiction how law enforcement in the UK, with a large population of ex-military types, didn't rise up against the raghead lovers among the government leaders. Some things were just hard to explain. He guessed that's why they needed the well-meaning but

basically useless academics like Ralph Wolfe to make sense of it all for the troops in the trenches.

He'd have to deal with Liz later. They walked him to the yard where others were already exercising. Compared to a Taliban sweatbox, being in an English prison was easy—better food, some exercise, and a stupid little runt who brought him throwaway mobiles so he could continue organizing things outside—all that made life bearable.

"Hey there, Blake, I need to talk to you!"

The prisoner's nickname was Little Jerry. Cellblock gossip had informed Blake that the little twit was irrelevant to Blake's lofty goals. Jerry was doing only two years for breaking and entering, an eejit who'd been stupid enough to believe the owner of a small flat couldn't afford a security system. He was paying for that ignorance. Blake supposed he'd been after drug money or something to hock to get it.

"I don't want to talk to you, Jerry. Let me get my exercise."

Blake began walking his laps around the yard. When he passed Jerry, the pudgy kid joined him.

"Maybe I want to join your movement, Blake," he said in a lower voice, almost a whisper. "I'm a patriot too."

"Shut up, Jerry. You don't know what you're talking about."

"They tell me you've got an organization. Right?"

"I said shut up. Why do you insist?"

"Because you're a feekin' traitor, that's why!"

Blake didn't even see the shiv as it slipped between his ribs.

Brand finished reading the report about Blake's death and sighed. One source of information down. They might have to put Liz Wolfe in solitary now, especially after her trial, although he thought it was likely that her fellow female inmates would be so prone to kill her.

Van Coevorden had been right. No one had expected that little thug capable of killing Blake, an ex-soldier and ex-mercenary, in a prison yard. Brand guessed that the petty thief and addict had surprised Blake as well. Brand had to wonder if someone had put Jerry Wilson up to it. And how had the little twit found out why Blake was in prison? Had Blake tried to recruit some prisoners to his cause? That would have been stupid. But Wilson or someone else had known Blake was awaiting trial, charged with several counts of terrorism.

Winston had been wrong, van Coevorden right. Brand pounded his desk in frustration. He should never have listened to Winston. "Give the bastard a phone so he leads us to others in his group," the man had said. That plan had worked up to a certain point, but Blake should never have been in the general prison population.

Brand reluctantly began to write his own report. He'd have to take the blame. He'd given the go-ahead for the implementation of Winston's scheme. He'd find some way to pay Winston back, though. *And should I give Bastiann more to do?* He's better than Winston, more level-headed and methodical. That man's talents had been wasted in Interpol!

Chapter Twenty-Four

London Suburbs

Henry Bolton sat with his duty solicitor when Thackeray and Sanderson entered the interrogation room. Sanderson had invited Bent and O'Hara to watch behind the one-way glass, and Thackeray had grudgingly gone along with it, avoiding a DCI-versus-DI scrum that even he knew wouldn't sit well with anyone except himself. He was in a snit, though, so he made Sanderson take notes as well as the lead in questioning the old man.

After reading Bolton his rights and introducing everyone present for the benefit of the video record, Sanderson began.

"Mr. Bolton, how long have you been stalking Sean Doyle?"

"Who said I was stalking? Perverts do that to women, I don't."

"It's a gender-neutral term. The evidence we found in your flat—newspaper clippings, book reviews, photos—shows you've been fixated on Mr. Doyle's activities for many years. In particular, about two dozen photos were taken of Sean while he was sunning himself in that little park at the nursing home. Considering those were taken without Mr. Doyle's permission, that's stalking."

"Maybe I hired a PI to do that," Bolton said with a sneer.

"Did you? We'd like to question him too."

"Whatever you found in my flat isn't mine. Someone set me up. Probably that daughter of his. Wouldn't put it past her. All Irish are alike."

The solicitor grimaced. Sanderson winked at her. She had an Irish name.

"Kate Murphy only had contact with her father remotely. We do our homework, Henry. How could she have planted evidence in your flat?"

"She could've hired someone to do that to frame me and kill her father. She probably hated the old bastard."

"As much as you do? I doubt it. She asked an Irish gentleman living here to check on him. You know that because you had pictures of the two chatting in that same little park."

"So, he killed him for the daughter and framed me, like I said. Sean and I were just old army chums. That's it. End of story."

"Not true. It's only the beginning. In the clippings with Sean in a photo, someone had stabbed out his eyes. Did your hatred for Sean after he stole Mary just grow to such a point that you had to kill him, Henry? He had everything you didn't have, a wife, a child, and a successful career. You couldn't stand it anymore, right?"

Henry slammed the table. "Bollocks! I was happy with my life. I didn't care about what he'd become. Sure, it irked me that he walked out on Mary and the little one, but that was Sean, a good-for-nothin' Irishman just worried about himself."

"Would you like to know something about Sean that might change your opinion?"

"No. Nothing will change my opinion about that yob."

"Not even the fact that he'd asked Mary to join him in London? She refused because she was Welsh and hated London."

"What? You're making that up! All lies."

"In other words, even if she'd favored you over Sean, she'd never have lived with you in London either. In a sense, she abandoned Sean, not the other way around. Does that make you feel any remorse for killing him?"

Bolton looked wide-eyed at the solicitor. He then shook his head. "No comment," Henry said, without much enthusiasm.

"He's not going to cave," Thackeray told the other three during a break. "And we've only got circumstantial evidence. I doubt the Crown Court will consider a trial, at least not for murder. We can only get him on resisting arrest and attacking a police officer and civilian."

"You could match the marks on Sean's throat with his hands," Declan said.

"Only in your novels," Thackeray said. "No DNA at the murder scene to match either. Used surgical gloves, according to the pathologist. Anything back about those medicines?" Thackeray said to Sanderson.

"I consulted with the NHS. They'll only reveal what they were treating with a warrant. I looked up some of the medicines. Everything from anti-psychosis drugs to strong painkillers. If he's a mental patient, a warrant judge might think twice about a warrant. And there would be a lot of sympathy for him at a trial as well."

"Okay. Let's give Mr. Bolton the whole forty-eight in the cell and try to get that damn warrant. Sorry to waste your time, folks."

"Not a waste," said Declan. "I suppose you both noticed that he was surprised that it was Mary who resisted joining Sean. Henry would be even more attached to London than Sean was. Except for the Falklands and training, he never left the city."

"We're not exactly in the city here," Thackeray said, "but I know what you mean. Let him stew in that for a while too. Knowing that the wife's choice was only because she hated London means she and Henry could never have a life together here either."

"Do you think that's all there is to it?" Maggie said.

"Definitely. The eternal feckin' triangle. Two blokes fighting over a bird. Even the Greeks wrote about it, and the bard featured it in *Twelfth Night*. Happens all the time."

Sanderson looked at Maggie and Declan and winked. Sometimes Thackeray surprised her.

"We're going to let him go," Sanderson told Maggie and Declan the next day in a conference call.

"No joy with the NHS?" Maggie said.

"We got the warrant and looked at Bolton's records. He's dying of brain cancer. Hardly seems appropriate to pursue the case. He might be dead before he goes to trial."

"But he must be psychotic. Couldn't he hurt someone else, even kill again?"

Sanderson thought Declan's worry was valid. "Our hands are tied. All we can do is keep track of him."

"He has a lot of practice staying under the radar. He could even disappear outside the country. Can you confiscate his passport?"

"I'm not sure that will do any good, but he's probably just going to drink heavily. He's been doing that instead of following doctor's orders with the medicine."

"Okay," Maggie said. "Thanks for keeping us informed."

After she rang off, Maggie turned to Declan. "I know that didn't satisfy you. But you have to realize that Bolton's condition might have led him to commit murder. Even if he didn't have brain cancer, it would be hard to send him to jail. He'd be in an asylum for the criminally insane."

"You're right, of course, but I feel poor Sean isn't getting any justice. I suppose I'd better call Kate."

"Your father too. He'll want to know. In a sense, Thackeray had it right. Mary, Henry, and Sean were a love triangle where all three were responsible for destroying it and each other, although, as it turns out, she came out the better. Three lives destroyed, in a sense."

SAMPLE

Chapter Twenty-Five

Central London

"Any news about the case?" Esther said.

Kat and Sara had met Esther in the little coffee shop near Esther's gallery. It was not only a charming little place but an escape for Esther when she took a break, as she'd done that day. Somedays restoring a painting seemed to be too overwhelming, so a good cup of java was good medicine.

"The trail seems to stop with the taxi driver," said Kat. "I'm floundering a bit now. Esther, are you showing Sara around London to distract her from all this?"

"I'm not a little child who needs to be distracted," Sara said.

Esther knew both women were getting frustrated, hence the sniping at each other. She was too. Three strong-willed and frustrated women could make for a tense situation. Esther also wondered if Sara didn't blame Kat a bit for abandoning the original investigation. That seemed like a stretch.

"Agreed," said Kat with a smile to turn down the heat, "but it is your first time in London."

"We've done a few things." Esther eyed Sara. "You seemed to enjoy today's visit to my gallery more than the tourist sites, though. Maybe we should take in a matinee. London's musical theater is better than Broadway's, I dare say, and many shows start here in London before they go to New York. *Phantom* in 1986 was a famous example."

"Um, I've never been to one. Only local Heatherton presentations by amateurs, but even that's been rare. I'm mostly a recluse, remember."

"Indeed. But something else just occurred to me. How would you like to give a lecture about sculpting? We can't show any real works, of course, except for the Mozart bust I purchased from you, but some history tied in with choosing materials, techniques, and motivations for your own work couldn't hurt your sales, I'd imagine."

Sara smiled. "That would be marvelous!"

"Um, I guess that's settled," Kat said. "London theater and lecturing about art for you, Sara, while I continue to follow a trail that's gone cold once again."

"I knew it wouldn't be easy after all these years. Esther insisted, though."

"Bastiann says I get obsessed with righting a wrong too often," Esther said. "I can't help it."

"No one's blaming anyone," Sara said with a sigh. "Eventually I will have to return to Heatherton, whether the case is solved or not. We all did our best for poor Tommy."

"Hello, Sara. My name is Nina Ricci. I just wanted to say hello. I very much enjoyed your talk. I lived in Heatherton for a while. I left years ago, though, just before your brother died, in fact."

The older woman looked Italian to match her name. Black hair now streaked with gray and little makeup made her look very plain, but a younger version might have been a stunner. Her dark eyes were her best asset. She was shorter than Sara and seemed nervous.

They shook hands. "It's a small world, Nina. I was just a wee lass then too, same age as Tommy, but maybe my parents knew your family. My father was a lawyer, so possibly some members of your family were his clients. What do you do here in London, if I may ask? After all, you know what I do now." She smiled.

"I run a photography studio. I specialize in taking photos and making videos at weddings. Always busy, thank goodness. Less so during the pandemic, of course. I'm not very artistic despite my work, but I love this gallery. There are many around here, but this is one of the best, and Esther and her helpers are always so nice to anyone who wanders in. I do that from time to time to look at the paintings on display. I love the old religious paintings she restores and sells. Can't afford to buy any, of course."

The woman through all that long speech had avoided making eye contact. She was also wringing her hands. *Had the mention of her brother's murder disturbed her?* Sara had played that down in her talk, trying to keep things upbeat.

"Any particular reason you left Heatherton?"

Now the woman blushed. "It's such a Roman Catholic town. Was more so back then, at least. I'm not an atheist like your family members, but I lost my respect for the Church in that damn town."

"Something traumatic happen and they told you it was just God's will?"

Nina looked around the gallery. Most people had left, but a few were still chatting with Esther and her staff. "Perhaps we should sit down somewhere else and talk more privately?"

"Follow me." Sara led her to two chairs back in the gallery and farther away from what remained of the lecture's audience. They sat down. "I guess I can be your priest in the confessional if you like. What happened?"

Nina now smiled a sad little smile. "It's a long story, so I'll be quick. I knew about your family even before your brother was killed. The Mother Superior often talked about having to live among atheists."

"You were a nun in a convent?"

"No, our order ran the orphanage just outside Heatherton. You must remember it."

"I do. My father actually spoke highly of it, saying that was at least some good work the Church was doing."

"I was orphaned in Italy and grew up in an orphanage there. Same order. I became a nun and that order sent me to work in that orphanage in Heatherton."

"I don't know what to say. We were both orphans then, although my parents died some years after Tommy did. But again, if you don't mind my curiosity, why did you leave your order? Was what you were doing so hard?"

"It could be, but I knew nothing else. It seemed to be my duty to God until...until...."

Tears came to the woman's eyes now. Sara patted her hand.

"Take it easy. I know I'm being too nosy. It's been wonderful to see someone from home, though. I must confess I'm a bit lost here in London. I can't wait to get back to my home in Heatherton."

"I-I'll never go back there."

"Why not? It's still a nice little town. Bigger, but maybe that's what makes it nicer. As you guessed, it has changed a lot."

"It was a town that treated your family so badly, even before your brother was killed."

"We let it slide until then. Like I said, my father was a busy lawyer, and our beliefs didn't seem to affect his business."

"That's good to hear. I can't go back because I suppose Father O'Brian is still there?"

"No, he was killed in a terrible single-car accident."

Relief showed on her face, and then she smiled. "I know it's wrong to celebrate something like that, but I can't help it. He was an evil man."

"Excuse me? He was a parish priest. As far as I know, his parishioners loved him."

"That's maybe true. We tend to think well of priests, don't we? Trust them, in fact. But he raped me and some of the other young nuns! After saying mass in the orphanage, he'd select one of us for a 'special renewal of our vows,' becoming 'brides of God' again. He picked me many times. What could I do?"

"For God sakes, you could have reported it to the Mother Superior!"

"We all thought she was in on it. I just couldn't take it anymore, so one night I fled."

"You're sure she knew?"

"No. He was very clever about it, so maybe she didn't."

Sara thought a moment. "Thank you for telling me this awful story. I'll keep it in total confidence."

But that evening at Esther and Bastiann's flat, she extended that confidence to Esther and Kat.

"My Lord, Sara, maybe that priest killed your brother!" Esther glanced from Sara to Kat and back.

"Tommy could never have seen what was going on," Sara said. "He wouldn't have gone near that orphanage."

"Maybe he overheard the young nuns talking in Old Town," Kat said. "The priest didn't like coppers, that's for sure, but it might not have anything to do with Tommy's death. And he's dead, so the law couldn't punish him anyway." Kat thought a moment. "When we interviewed Bobby, Tommy's friend, he said O'Brian was arguing with a big man, the one he described as the Hulk, but not green. The priest denied that ever happened."

"Um, maybe that big man had seen the priest with the nuns 'renewing their vows'?" Esther said. "There were probably workers in the orphanage as well as nuns, maybe even teachers. We should ask this Nina if there was a big, hulking man among them."

"One with a toolbelt maybe," Kat said, remembering more of Bobby's description and the fellow she'd seen in the church while interrogating the priest.

"Let me call her," Sara said. Sara put the call on speaker phone. After a cordial hello, she asked Nina the question, avoiding reference to the priest's abuse to hide the sharing of Nina's secret with Esther and Kat.

"All the teachers were lay nuns who worked with us," Nina said. "Our gardener, Seamus, was a huge man, though. He was very religious and generally good-natured, but a bit slow, if you know what I mean. Like a ten-year-old at times. Does that help? What's going on?"

"I didn't say anything about it in my lecture, but the real reason I'm here is that Esther, the gallery owner, motivated the SIO in my brother's murder case and me to take another look at Tommy's murder."

There was silence for a moment. Then: "I see. You don't think the priest did it, do you? Did you tell them what happened to me and some of the other nuns?"

Esther shook her head.

"No," Sara lied, "but what you said made me tell Esther and Kat to take another look at the priest. It turns out that Bobby, Tommy's friend, described a barney between the priest and a man who might be this Seamus. We need to talk to him and find out what he knows."

"Good luck with that. He isn't very intelligible most of the time. Say hi to Esther. You've made a good friend there."

Sara laughed. "And I'm sure she'll send any wedding business to your studio. We'll keep in touch."

After Sara rang off, Kat said, "Nate Hardy can have a chinwag with this Seamus. It's maybe our last chance to close the case."

"I'm heading back to Heatherton soon. I can brief him about what we've learned."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Birmingham, England

Ralph Wolfe felt uncomfortable at the meeting. It was obvious that Randall Cummings had taken over his wife and Blake's group. The man made Ralph nervous because he looked like he might kill his own mother. He was a bit swarthier than Blake but had been poured from the same mold. An ex-soldier turned mercenary, he wanted to continue with the purge of foreigners from the UK, immigrants and refugees, especially those who were Muslims.

Ralph had been "invited," really a veiled threat that he had received to become the new philosophical leader behind the movement, whether he wanted to or not. He was told that Liz and Blake wanted that, but Ralph wondered how Cummings knew that to be true. He had sweetened the invitation by saying the fascist groups would work hard to make him an MP so they could have another man on the inside.

Wolfe had been surprised about the word "another." It turned out that five persons who were already MPs had sentiments comparable to Wolfe's. While that was pleasing in the abstract, it also made Ralph nervous, primarily because he hadn't known about them.

They'd asked him to say a few words, so he'd trotted out his old spiel about how the far right needed to have its own revolution in the UK to make things better for the country and the world. They ate it up, probably because Wolfe's wife had whetted their appetites for such radical philosophy. Or maybe they'd like anything that justified their hatred of the system and those who weren't Anglo-Saxons?

"What are your plans now?" Wolfe said after a Q&A session. He looked around the circle of hardened faces, thin smiles hiding the scowls of hate.

Cummings spoke for everyone. "Our organization is still intact. The plods might think they shut us down, but we can continue our work despite their efforts."

"The plods probably had some help. I think MI5 is eyeing you."

"Just more stupid plods," said another man, almost growling as he spit out the words. "All complacent and fat toads, thinking they have everything under control now. We'll surprise them real soon."

Cummings glared at his colleague. "Let's not give too much information away to this toff. If they torture him, he can't grass on us if he doesn't know any details."

Wolfe smiled. He recognized the truth in that observation, and he really didn't want to know. And while future torture seemed a bit farfetched if not by them, one never knew how far authorities would go.

"Perhaps I'd better take my leave and leave you to your planning. Thanks for inviting me. Good luck in your important work."

"Thanks for coming," Cummings said. "We needed a cheerleader. Now we move on."

You needed a mascot, Wolfe thought. *That's all that I am.*

That evening Robert Winston showed up at Wolfe's flat.

"I see you got the door fixed," he said to the professor upon entering and taking a seat. He crossed his legs and looked relaxed. "How'd the meeting go?"

Wolfe wasn't relaxed. The MI5 agent was another man who made him nervous. Winston didn't have many people skills.

"I didn't learn any details. I can provide names for the members of Blake's old cell, that's all, which now includes Randall Cummings as leader."

"That's a start." He wasn't about to tell the man they already had some names, but not Cummings. "We have to keep an eye on these prats."

"They're not prats, at least Cummings isn't, and they're very dangerous. Most have a Hitler complex. The far right doesn't need more Hitlers. That's why I went to see MI5."

"And that's why you must be careful. Are you sure they aren't watching you?"

"How could I be sure of that? As a consequence, I want to be sure MI5 is protecting me. If I'm to continue doing this, I need protection."

"Understood. We can't say who of them is watching you, so you won't know if it's Cummings or one of his minions or us, but don't take any chances. If you see someone questionable, call me."

"And if I don't see anyone, from them or MI5?"

Winston shrugged. "Will it matter then? You're walking along a tightrope, Professor Wolfe, stretched between two opposing forces. We won't let go of our end of the rope, but we can't always know what those at the other end will do." Winston thought a moment. "To continue with the metaphors, you have spent your previous life painting yourself into a corner. That's on you. Given these circumstances, you've made the best choice possible."

"One that could kill me?"

"Your wife already showed you how that end of the tightrope can react. I'd say you're a lucky man. For now. Just make sure your luck doesn't run out. We'll help with that."

Brand watched his PA place the coffee service on the table, pour two cups of the brew, and take her leave. He then got up, walked over to the wall unit, and brought back a bottle.

"It might be premature, old stick, but I think a bit of celebratory cognac is indicated."

Freddie March nodded, so Brand poured a bit into each coffee cup. March still added three cubes to Brand's one.

"I don't know if that's an insult to the Colombians or to the French, but do we care?"

"Well put...and this is a secret facility. Neither will ever know. Any doubts about what we're celebrating?"

"None, and it *is* premature." The duke a sip that produced a pleasurable smile. "And I'm not that old, Jeremy, that I can't figure out that you called me in to share more than a celebration. Let's hear it."

"I want more of your opinion on someone. What do you think of Maggie Bent now?"

"Um, all good, I dare say. She's a strong woman and has a good head on her shoulders. She'll go far, already has, if I'm truthful."

"She also wasn't intimidated by Robert or Bastiann. Ambreesh put in a good word for her too."

"Oh? What did he have to say?" Freddie considered the Sikh to be a man of few words and not exactly a champion of women's rights because of his culture.

"He said he could work with her. Coming from him, that's quite a compliment. I've only heard him say that about one other woman."

"Esther Brookstone, I presume?"

"Correct. I want to offer Bent a position with MI5."

"Won't Declan O'Hara present a security problem?"

"We'll need special dispensation like we obtained for Bastiann. Unlike the Dutchman, who has more than proved his worth, or even Esther, Declan isn't an ex-copper, but his father and sister are both valued members of the Republic's Gardai. That should be enough for the Met when they process Maggie's papers for her clearance."

"Okay, consider that resolved. But, unlike Bastiann, she'll be salaried, not consulting. Do you have the funding for that?"

"We will after the elections."

"You're assuming the PM's party will win."

"Of course. How could they not now, thanks in part to Maggie Bent."

"Um, there once was another Maggie called the 'Iron Lady.' Do you think the present one will stick with us and avoid politics? And do you know for sure she'll accept your offer?"

"I don't know. That's the short answer to both your questions. To elaborate on the first, I can't imagine she's interested in politics. For the second, she's recently married. She might want some children."

"You're being a bit sexist, old chap. There are agents in MI5, valued agents who are married women with children, even agents in the field. Let her know that."

"If must needs. And she'll have to discuss it with Declan, which I'm sure will be the determining factor. By the way, have you read any of his books?"

"The novels?" Jeremy nodded; he didn't read poetry. "Can't say I have. Are they any good?"

"I've read two of them. They're entertaining and very clever. He understands the minds of criminals and spies. He could almost be a consultant for Maggie."

Freddie laughed. "Not too surprising, considering his father and sister are in the law enforcement business. The Met might not like it if his fiction seems too real, though."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Donegal, Ireland

Henry Bolton felt that the Irish tipplers were eyeing him with suspicion. He'd entered McCafferty's and liked what he saw, an Irish pub more like a rabbit warren with its nooks and crannies and bars everywhere—lots of good places to hide if must needs. The locals knew he was a stranger, though, someone from out of town and someone therefore untrustworthy.

He was drinking his medicine, the only one that worked for him now. It relieved the pain in his head and gave him liquid courage as well. He would need the latter for what he had planned.

He had come to terms with the mistake he'd made in killing Sean. Mary was the one who'd betrayed them both. He could understand why his old friend didn't want to live in Wales. Henry hated the place. The Welsh were also Celts.

She was already dead, but her daughter, Kate Murphy, would soon join her mother. *That will even the score, no doubt about it!*

"Doing a bit of tourism, are you?" said the publican, putting another Jameson on the bar in front of Henry.

He preened his handlebar mustache a bit with one hand while he wiped down the bar with the other. His brogue wasn't as pronounced as the band members', but there was no mistaking that Gaelic was his first language, not English.

"You can call it that. Thought I might visit an old friend's daughter. You might be able to help me there. Kate Murphy is her name. I was told she lives here still in this fine town."

"We're not like other Irish cities. Dublin's overrun by foreigners, and that famous Celtic Tiger basically shat on us. I've got me job, though, so who cares? Now...let met think a bit on it. Kate Murphy? No. Couldn't tell you." He pointed to a customer sitting alone at a corner table. "I'm not out and about enough—pub here's my whole life—but that old punter might help you. He knows everything that goes on here in Donegal, where everyone lives that are still alive and where the dead are all buried whether Irish or not. People around here say he was raised by leprechauns. He's a good sport about that, though I never heard him deny it. I personally think he's related to the great Turlough."

"Who the hell's that?"

"More heaven than hell. He's a famous bard and harpist from the good old days, you see. That's some of his music playing now while the band's on a break."

Henry nodded. "Good stuff. Just Turlough? No last name?"

"Turlough O'Carolan. Gent's name over there is Alsandair Breandan Carolan. He's a writer or pretends to be. Offer him a drink and he might help you find your Kate Murphy."

"Pour it and I'll do just that." Henry took the drink over along with his own and sat Carolan's on the table in front of the notebook in which the man was writing. "A drink for a fellow writer. My name's Sean Doyle."

The local tippler looked up and eyed Henry. "Been gone for a long time with that London accent, Mr. Doyle. Have a seat." He watched Henry sit down. *Chappie can see my eyes aren't focusing properly*, thought Henry. That was only partly due to the drink. *Feckin' tumor; feckin' whiskey*. And Jameson was one of the better ones.

"I'm A. B. Carolan. You said, 'fellow writer', Mr. Doyle? What do you write?"

"Historical fiction, mostly. My last book was about Becket."

"The archbishop?"

"That's right. Can't say many people read my books. What do you write?"

"Sci-fi mysteries for young adults, but I'm always thoroughly amused when older adults read and enjoy them. Some wrinklies are young-at-heart, you know, and I say, good for them!"

"Um, I don't read sci-fi, sorry. Say friend, the publican said you might help me find my daughter. Her name's now Kate Murphy."

Carolan thought a moment. "I know Kate and her family. Yes, she was indeed a Doyle. You live in Donegal for a while, you get to know everyone. I've lived here all my life."

"Good. Can you tell me where she lives?"

Carolan gave Henry the address. "She's not home now, though. She works afternoons and evenings."

"Where?"

Carolan shook his head. "You shouldn't bother her there. Visit her later tonight or tomorrow morning. Not seen each other in a while?"

"Not for a long time. My fault. Thought it was a good idea to make peace with her."

"Good luck with that, Mr. Doyle. Irish family feuds often go on far too long, so I admire your initiative."

Carolan watched Henry leave and then went to the bar. "Danny, refresh my memory. Didn't I hear old man O'Hara say in here the other night that Sean Doyle's dead?" Danny nodded. "That punter says he's Sean Doyle, looking for his daughter Kate."

The publican looked surprised. "He told me she's the daughter of an old friend."

"Let me borrow your phone. I'm giving Michael O'Hara a call. Something's not right."

Henry took a taxi to the Murphy house. As he expected, there was no one home. Kids still in school ore playing with their chums, mum and pop still at work. A good, hardworking typical Irish family. *And I'm going to ruin their lives like Mary ruined Sean and mine!*

He strolled up and down the street, the few streetlamps just coming on in the late twilight, as if he were looking for an address. The neighboring houses were deserted too. Not seeing any easy ingress to Kate's house in the front that wasn't visible to the whole neighborhood, he circled around to the back of the house, looking for some way to enter. From the back alleyway, he peered past the bins over the well-kept garden to the French doors exiting to it. *Probably from a study or sitting room?*

He went through the gate and walked up to those doors. They were locked, but they would provide an easy way inside. He found a rock in the garden and broke the glass next to the handle, reached in, and unlocked the doors. He was inside.

His head was throbbing again, so he made good use of the sitting room's bar, which contained a bottle of Bushmills. He poured himself a glass and took a seat in a frayed but comfortable wing chair. *Maybe Mr. Murphy's?* It faced the fireplace and the upright piano in the corner. He sighed as he got more comfortable. By the time someone arrived home, he'd be in better shape.

He glanced around the orderly room. *Mary and I could have had this!* He hoped she was looking down and would see what he'd do to her daughter. *Maybe to the whole damn family? The family we could have had, Mary!*

The whiskey comforted him so he dozed for hours, but the sound of keys rattling in the front door awoke him. He sensed movement in the foyer and then footsteps on the tiles. Kate turned on the lights using the switch at the entrance to the room and then froze when she saw him. He stood up and smiled at her.

"Hello, Kate. Do you know who I am?"

Fear etched the woman's face and she paled. Sean's face had looked like that before it turned red and his eyes bulged.

"Henry Bolton! How'd you get into my house?"

"It's not very secure, Luv, but I guess Donegal is small enough that everyone feels safe. Big mistake, right? A friend of yours told me where you live."

"Who told you? He doesn't sound like a friend. My father probably couldn't even have found it, and he lived here for a time. You killed him, didn't you?"

"Your mum killed him. She betrayed him and me."

"You're mad! Get out of my house. You should be in prison!"

He moved toward her. She screamed and dashed to the half-bathroom off the foyer and locked herself inside. He heard her sobbing.

Henry held up his right hand. *Tremors again. Old hands can't be trusted.* He'd have to forego the pleasure of strangling her like he'd done to Sean, this time without the damn plastic gloves so he could feel her die. He went to the kitchen and found a large carving knife. *I'll carve her up like a Christmas goose instead!*

He also carried a wooden kitchen chair back to the bathroom to bash the door in. He'd need several attempts. He felt weak and the chair was heavy. Resting from the second try, he heard a car outside. *Good. I can welcome home some of the remaining family, my other victims! Mr. Murphy would be perfect!*

"Can't you drive any faster, sergeant?" Michael O'Hara had said from the back seat of the patrol car as it sped along, lights flashing and siren wailing.

"Easy, Mike," said the Gardai DI from the passenger seat. "Last thing we need is an accident."

O'Hara nodded. "Bolton's probably going to kill the whole family. The man's mad, Reggie."

"The Yard made a big error in cutting him loose."

"Past history. Declan told me their hands were tied. And Bolton was supposed to stay in England. Somehow he made it over here."

During the remainder of the trip, they'd planned their attack on Bolton and how to do it without harming Kate Murphy. The sergeant killed the lights and siren before they entered the little enclave of modest homes.

"We walk the rest of the way, Michael, stealthy-like," the DI said. "It's better to surprise the man if he's here."

"I'm sure he is. We need to cover front and back."

The DI entered the house from the rear. The DS and O'Hara entered from the front, Declan's father in the lead.

"You're not Mr. Murphy?" Henry Bolton said when he saw O'Hara. He put the chair down and waved the knife. "And you're not going to stop me from doing what I came to do. What I need to do!"

"You're mad, Henry. Give it up. We can get you some help."

"Tell your errand boy to back off." The sergeant had edged past O'Hara and was moving towards Henry, arms outstretched and ready.

"Back off, sergeant," O'Hara said. "You in the bathroom, Kate?"

"He wants to kill me, Mr. O'Hara!" came Kate's muffled voice.

"Stay there, hon. We won't let him get to you. Come on, Henry. Killing more people won't stop that damn tumor from growing in your head, but we can help you with the pain. They'll care for you in a hospice."

Henry shifted the knife in his hand so he could make a downward stab. "I can take you, whoever you are, old man. Just like I killed those *gauchos* when I was on patrol." He moved towards O'Hara, who had no idea what Bolton was talking about and writing it off as the ramblings of a psychotic individual.

The sergeant and O'Hara took two steps back, drawing Henry away from the bathroom door.

It appeared that Henry was ready to make a lunge at them when the DI tackled Henry from behind. The DI got up; Bolton didn't. Instead, Henry shuddered and was still. The DI flipped Henry over. The knife was buried to the hilt in his chest.

"A tragedy all around," the DI said.

The sergeant and O'Hara nodded.

"Kate, you can come out now."

The sobbing woman fell into O'Hara's arms.

Much later that evening, Michael O'Hara entered the pub and saw A. B. sitting in his usual corner, writing in his notebook as was his custom. Michael went to the table, pulled out a chair, and sat down opposite his friend. The old leprechaun looked up at Michael, his blue eyes focusing through thick reading glasses on the ex-Gardai, thick eyebrows raised.

"I want to thank you. We managed to stop him."

A. B. shrugged. "Anything for a friend. You can buy me another drink if your thanks be genuine."

"Mine are always genuine. And so is our friendship."

"So it seems, Michael." He closed his notebook. "I helped you solve a problem, maybe you can help me solve mine. For the first time in my life, I have a bit of what your son Declan might call writer's block. I say it a bit differently: The blarney's failing me, mate. Maybe I should write some mysteries? Not about what just happened, of course. Readers might not believe such occurrences are possible in the real world. But do you have any old Gardai cases you could dust off and sanitize for public consumption?"

Michael laughed. "My son has asked me that on occasion. My answer has always been the same: no. Now he's started to ask his sister."

"And your answers are no because they're just boring tales about police going about their business?"

"No, because it's not good to write about real, evil deeds done to innocent victims."

"They can't all be that bad. This last one turned out for the better."

"The most memorable ones are. And resurrecting them is bad for this old man, as this case will be. How is it that the great-great-whatever of Turlough O'Carolan has writer's block?"

"Temporary problem, I expect. A star child spent one novel of a trilogy finding out who she is. Now she's out among the stars in the next book, and I'm not sure what will happen."

Michael smiled. "If you as the author isn't sure, I'd say you're in trouble. Maybe you should create adventures for her like some of those in *Star Wars*?"

A. B. frowned. "That was all just fantasy and space opera using ideas borrowed from Edgar Rice Burroughs, Isaac Asimov, and old samurai legends, with a lot of Hollywood special effects added. I write real sci-fi."

"Um, is there such a thing? And don't you write for teens?"

"In the writing business, we call them young adults."

Michael nodded. "I see. In any case, they might want a bit more action as well because you set their expectations in the first novel."

"Yes, there was a lot in that first one. It's almost a standard thriller. I was going more for intrigue and suspense in the second."

"Fine. Just don't forget the action scenes."

A. B. mused on that advice a moment. "Um, maybe I should be the one buying you a drink. What's your fancy, Michael?"

"No. My offer's still good. You deserve it. You can treat me later. It might be a long night, so it will be just the medicine I need."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Heatherton, Ireland

Sara Reilly had arrived home to find a message from her London agent on her answering machine. She had two new commissions, both resulting from her talk given in Esther's gallery. She didn't recognize the clients' names—there had been quite a few people in attendance with whom she'd chatted and many not, and she knew no one's name except Nina's—but the prospect of new work set well with her because it would help her get past all the events that had recently occurred.

Tired and dazed, she walked around the old family house. She had the strange feeling that there were now two Saras, the one before the trip to London and the one after. She liked the latter one better, the person who'd found new friends in Esther Brookstone and Kat O'Malley. Of course, she'd known Kat as a little girl. The policewoman had been someone she admired for pursuing an investigation that had gone nowhere back then. Even at that time, she'd known it wasn't the detective's fault. But in London she'd come to know the inspector even better. Both Kat and Esther were older women with obsessive drives to find justice where it seemed illusive.

The house seemed changed too. Before it was just the old family house that had become her art studio, a place that she'd inherited and was more convenient for her work than any other place she could imagine. Now it had reclaimed some of its essence. It was now the Reilly family home, a symbol of a family that had fought prejudice, even hatred, over many years. It also seemed to be waiting for some climax, something that would change everything and give more meaning to her life than her art would.

After getting sorted, even taking care of the pile of mail retrieved from her box, she decided to call Inspector Nate Hardy. He wanted to come to the house—to *interrogate me?*—so she decided, against her better judgement, to let him do that. She offered him refreshments before making her report. The tall, thin man, thinner now with age—he was a decade younger than Kat but older than Sara—always seemed to be hungry. He sipped tea and munched on cakes that she'd had the foresight to take out of the freezer to thaw while she related what had occurred in London.

"I remember the gardener," he said when she finished. "He's still around. We'll bring him in for questioning. Anything else I need to know?"

She thought a moment and then smiled. "Just that I really appreciate what you and Kat have done for me, keeping Tommy's case alive."

He sighed. "A cold case rankles the police as much as the family and friends of the victim or victims, or it should. Maybe we can close Tommy's. After all these years, some progress has been made."

That essentially ended his visit. From her front step, she watched him leave, waving a timid goodbye.

Is Esther right? Does he fancy me?

She realized that losing her twin Tommy had numbed her so much for so many years that she'd become far too reclusive and antisocial. *Maybe it's time to change that?*

"Why are you smiling?" Maggie Bent said.

Across the dinner table, Declan had been eyeing her in a curious fashion. *Is he waiting for me to compliment him about another fine homecooked meal? Perhaps I'm taking such meals for granted now.* She knew that wouldn't be a good thing. Couples who took each other for granted could be headed for disaster later in their marriage.

"I have some news, Luv: Roberta and Ricardo now are the proud parents of identical twins."

"When did that happen? You should have called me."

"I just learned about it, and I'm not completely sure when the babies arrived. Esther isn't either, but she called me with the news while I was cooking dinner."

"Um, that's good news from Ricardo. I don't know his wife Roberta. Is she doing okay?"

"As far as I know. She's a strong woman. She tolerates Ricardo, after all. You'll have to admit he's a bit of a wild man."

"Are your smiles for all that good news?"

"Not exactly. Don't you sense the elephant in the room?"

In spite of herself, Maggie looked around the combination sitting and dining room with its galley kitchen on the side. The flat was comfortable enough for two, although they sometimes got in each other's way. He spent a lot more time in it than she did, although that was split between the flat and his favorite pub. She then refocused on Declan. *He's being very mysterious. Does he have a publisher for his novel?* She knew he was shopping the first chapters and summary around to agents and acquisition editors.

"Considering the size of our little love nest, it's impossible to hide an elephant here, so what are you talking about?"

"There's something we should have discussed a while ago. Do we want kids?"

Maggie straightened, blushed, and took a sip of her white wine that deepened the blush but steadied her nerves. Surprise had also flooded over her face. Although she understood what had prompted the question, why had he taken so long to ask it? She demurred. "Do you want kids?"

He was right. They'd should have talked about it before the wedding. Gone were the days when the expectation was that the woman would stay home and raise the family while the man worked. While she didn't make much even as a DI, she made more than he did, most of what he brought in corresponding to his investigative journalism and some royalties from his books. That might change with time, but now the family economy wasn't that solid. Yet that was just a detail, one of many that had to be discussed. The overriding question for both of them? Were they ready to commit to having children?

"I do if you do. My parents had a girl and boy, and my father was a copper. If they could manage, so can we."

You're reading my mind! Are we already like an old married couple? She laughed. "Forget the practical part. Do you want kids?"

"Yes. But we both need to want them, Maggie."

"I do. My biological clock is ticking. If we don't do it soon, we won't be able to do so latter. I'd like to make a little Declan."

"And I a little Maggie. Good, that's settled."

"No, it's not. I need to talk with this Roberta and get her opinions. She'll have some sound advice for me, I'm sure, and Ricardo's opinions are probably influenced by male bias."

Linda Sanderson handed Thackeray the police report from Donegal and waited for him to read it. He was a slow reader. *Or is he reading more slowly to bother me?* She always wondered if he treated all women like he treated her—that would explain his loathing of Esther Brookstone—or if it was personal in her case. Maybe he was just trying to keep her in her place? He'd always been a difficult man to work for.

When he leaned back in his desk chair and smiled, she became angry, but he spoke before she could say anything.

"Justice is served. Old Sean's killer is dead. Saves the Crown some funds, don't you think? They won't have to pay for a trial and incarceration."

She glared at him and exploded. "You almost got Sean's daughter killed!"

He seemed surprised by her outburst. "How do you figure?"

"You wouldn't assign anyone the job to make sure he stayed in the country!"

"He was a Londoner born and raised. He wasn't a flight risk."

"Events proved you wrong. We were dealing with a very sick man made psychotic by a deadly brain tumor. You had no idea what he might do. I warned you!"

"And I ignored your warning! I don't take orders from you, Linda, or have you forgotten you're just a DS and I'm the DCI? Maybe you should go to work for that Maggie Bent. Oh, that's right. She doesn't listen to Ezra Harris either. That's people in charge doing what they have to do, what's right, and not what some lowly assistant wants. We had no funds or personnel available to maintain a watch on Bolton. You don't have to worry about finances; I do."

"Excuses, always excuses, David, that's all you ever have. You make up these constraints that you rarely follow to justify your decisions and errors. And yes, a transfer could be in my future. I've already put in for one after this latest cockup of yours. And I'll take those damn exams and ace them, mark my words! You'll have to find someone else to ignore and bully."

She felt empowered by that little speech. *I should have done it before!* Thackeray's last kerfuffle was the straw that broke the camel's back. She'd had enough.

"I'll never give you a good recommendation!"

Her glare made him now wither a bit. She put palms on the desk's surface that was always too clean, unlike hers, and leaned into him.

"One from you would be as worthless as shite. As is most anything you have to say!"

She straightened, spun around, and stomped out of his office.

Thackeray shook his head and tried to figure out what he'd done wrong. Maybe the woman didn't belong in the force. They were all too emotional for the job, although he had to admit some of them had useful skills. Even Linda. He wasn't the one to tell them that, at least not all the time. Male coppers didn't need coddling. Why should the female ones?

He took a glass and bottle out of his desk's large file drawer. First, Helen had told him to bugger off when they had a row after he couldn't remember what her prize was for, and now Linda had gone on a tirade over nothing. He was tired of emotional, hormonal women and their feckin' demands. They should never have allowed them to join the police!

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Heatherton, Ireland

Unlike some of the orphans, Seamus loved the nuns. Being nurtured by them as a child had been like having a flock of mums in weird garbs hovering over him. They had educated and made him into the Christian he was, a devout if mentally challenged servant of God. As a teenager, when Father O'Brian began molesting the younger nuns, Seamus had become irate because he couldn't understand how that holy man could hurt the nice nuns.

Seamus couldn't understand many things. His real mum had been an alcoholic and the rot she drank had damaged her child's brain. The nuns had taken him in after she died and protected him. He'd grown up, still addled, and became their gardener, a hard worker who took care of their plants and made the orphanage beautiful for them. He suspected the orphans took all the flowers for granted, but maybe some of the little girls enjoyed them. He'd feared those little girls would become the priest's targets as they got older, though.

Watching the priest have his way with the young nuns after the masses at the orphanage had motivated him to create a payback plan. That atheist boy had only been a tool for the big man's revenge. He decided to frame the priest and was proud of that clever solution because it solved two problems at once. Perhaps the boy's sacrifice would get him into heaven like Seamus, even if he was an atheist? It didn't matter much as long as the priest would go to jail for murdering the child, or he might be hanged and go to hell.

He leaned on his rake and tried once again to analyze what had gone wrong with his plan. He always came to the same conclusion when he could think straight enough to reach it: The priest, with the help of the Devil, had denied Seamus his revenge. Maybe he'd gone to hell after dying in that car crash, and the boy had gone to heaven earlier in spite of being an atheist? But Seamus's plan hadn't worked. He had failed those young nuns.

Maybe that was the way God intended it? Would he ever know?

"Are you okay, Seamus?" the old nun said to the gardener.

"Just tryin' to understand sumpin', Mother."

She patted his arm. "Take a break. The sun's hot. There's some iced tea on the patio table. Come join me."

Joining the old woman for iced tea or tea of any kind was always pleasant, but he wasn't capable of carrying on an intelligent conversation with her. First, she was an intelligent woman, although he sometimes wondered whether she knew what the priest had been doing, or worse, condoned it. Maybe she closed her mind too much to the evil in the world and only worried about her coming encounter with the Lord of all Creation? Second, he was smart enough to know that the orphanage existed at the whim of the Church hierarchy, and those priests wouldn't be happy to have to deal with yet another scandal. That had been a lot for him to work through, but it all troubled him because he believed the Church should come down hard on those on Earth who furthered the Devil's agenda.

Over the years, the gardener had learned about other tools. He learned about motorcars too. He'd kept the nuns' old minibus running so they could participate in market day activities, or sometimes take a few of the smallest orphans on day trips around the area. When he'd seen that Father O'Brian drove a similar van, it had occurred to him to finish what he'd started. He'd been surprised when God in his infinite wisdom saved him the trouble. The transit police had concluded that there was a leak in one brake line that had made the priest's vehicle veer

off the road when he had tried to brake. The Mother Superior had read him that story so he could understand why they needed a new priest to say mass.

Of course, the gardener could have found that flaw and repaired it if the priest had bothered to ask him. He might not have been willing to help the priest, though, so the accident would have happened anyway.

Nate Hardy discovered that Seamus the gardener had once lived at the orphanage but no longer did because taking on more children there had led to a need for his small living quarters that they'd turned into two rooms for eight boys. *Had that put the big man over the edge?* Nate asked himself as they prepared to find the gardener and bring him in for questioning.

Up to that point, Nate only had suspicions. Seamus was a gentle giant well known in Heatherton. No one had ever imagined that he could do anyone harm. Not being from the town, Nate was more objective.

That interrogation could be complicated. First, it wasn't even clear that the man could understand the questions in an interrogation. Second, he could be so scared he couldn't answer. And third, he might not want to say anything that would negatively reflect on people who had given him a chance in life.

Seamus now lived in a small flat in a rundown building that wasn't far from where Bobby said that he and Tommy had been riding their bikes. That was a bit suspicious too. *Did he choose to live near the scene of his crime so he could remember it better? And savor that memory often?* Nate had already requested a mental health professional to be present at any interrogation that might occur. Not exactly a requirement, Nate just liked to dot all the i's and cross all the t's when it came to legal proceedings. To punish a murderer, that was doubly important. They sometimes got off on technicalities.

"What's the plan, Guv?" the Gardai's armed team's leader said to Nate as he eyed the building. "It's a second floor flat with narrow stairs going up."

"Send one of your team to check in back. We're in no hurry, Ben. Better safe than sorry, I say. That hulk could break your back just by looking at you. I want to be cautious for that reason. He'll probably be docile and come with us without any problem."

Ben motioned to two of his men, pointing two fingers at them. "Reconnoiter the back of the building. We don't want this man to scarper. He'd be lost outside Heatherton, and the inspector needs to question him. Call me and tell me what you see."

The first might be new information for the team, although Nate had explained to the squad that their person of interest was mentally challenged. The second was just a reminder about why they were there and why Nate was present.

They waited for the report. By mobile, one of the two in back said there was a rear fire escape but no actual rear exit.

"Okay. Stay there and get him if he tries to come down that way." Ben turned to Nate. "Your call, Guv."

"We go up, single file. Anyone have an extra firearm?"

"No. And you stay behind us, Guv. You don't even have a vest on."

Nate had to admit that there was logic in that statement.

They moved towards the building's entrance. Like in all such proceedings, Nate's adrenalin surge vanquished any fear he might have. And Ben and his crew knew what they were doing.

Seamus had seen the police patrol car and van arrive and watched the commandos jump out of the van. He crossed himself and thought: *The plods always get it wrong. The priest already paid the price for his sins! What more do they want?*

The armed ones seemed deferential to the skinny, tall one. *Maybe he's the Devil's representative? But the others have the guns!*

Seamus wasn't afraid. He didn't have to be. God would protect him.

Everyone seemed to do the Devil's work now; no one did God's. He'd done his Christian duty by using the atheist boy to frame the priest. The plan was the best he could create at the time, yet the Devil thwarted it. *Why did God let that happen?*

He saw the two coppers go around to the back of his building, went to the rear window, and peered out through the dirty pane to see them in the alley studying the fire escape. *They're not dumb.* The Devil had made them smart while God had made Seamus dumb. *That's not right!*

He felt trapped. While he could take the two plods standing under the fire escape in a fair fight, they'd be ready for him if he tried to escape that way. He decided to make his stand on the narrow stairs, taking them on one at a time.

I'll become a martyr, Seamus thought, like St. Stephen, the plods my Saul. But I'll take out some of the Devil's minions before they kill me! Send them all back into Hell!

He felt good about this new plan. His life had started in squalor and with depravity but he would go out in a blaze of glory. *Glory to God in the highest!*

He dashed to a closet and took out an old bicycle chain he'd found. He collected things like that, always thinking they might be useful for fixing something. That chain would now have a use.

He went to the front door and put his ear against the wood. He knew exactly how many stair risers there were from the building's entrance to his landing. He'd count and open the door at exactly the right time. He gripped the chain in one hand, the doorknob in the other.

Seamus, swinging the chain like a wild man with a whip, met Ben as he stepped onto the landing. The squad leader didn't even have time to shoot. Ben fell backwards, taking the colleague behind with him. The big man stepped over and on their bodies and kept going.

Nate saw Seamus moving down the stairs toward him. He picked up that second man's gun that had slid down to the riser in front of him and emptied the whole cartridge. Yet Seamus kept coming, blood pouring from his huge chest.

Nate ducked under the whirling chain and punched Seamus in the chest. That enraged the man, who tossed the chain over the stair rail and grabbed Nate. The DI felt his ribs crack and his breath leaving his lungs, but he managed to unbalance his foe. They tumbled down the stairs. Nate landed on top of Seamus.

"You okay, Guv?" Ben called down to Nate, who was slow to get up.

"Cracked ribs, I think. You?"

"Could be better. I think that damn chain broke my jaw. Thank God for the helmet."

"And thank God this bastard is dead. And here we were only going to interrogate him."

Of course, they were going to do that with caution. After hearing Sara's tale, Nate had been nearly certain that Seamus was their man.

Nate looked at the body. Would they ever have the full story? What had gone through this crazy man's mind?

Nate sat on the first riser and called for EMTs, SOCOs, and the forensic pathologist. They would take a while to sort things, but for him the case was closed. He then remembered someone else he needed to call, someone he felt very close to.

"Hello? Sara? We got Tommy's killer."

Chapter Thirty

Heatherton, Ireland

Sara Reilly sat in her garden sipping her tea, without her usual biscuits. Sweet things didn't seem to match her mood that afternoon.

People often talked about closure when life's events haunted them, but was killing the madman Seamus really closure? His demons had died with him, but hers never would. What had occurred wouldn't bring her brother back. And wasn't Seamus's psychosis just an extreme case of the psychosis many town folk had suffered from back then? Wouldn't a more appropriate closure have been to give them all jail time?"

Was hindering a murder investigation—no, the investigation of a terrible hate crime—deserving of punishment? Seamus was incapable of feeling guilt, remorse, or shame; the town folk could, should, but hadn't. In fact, she believed some even had celebrated that atheist parents had suffered and their atheist boy had died, maybe writing it off as God's will.

Now times had changed. People still might hate, but they were more politically correct and tried to hide it. And few people remembered the death of her brother now, or, if they did, only saw it as something bad that happened so long ago that the town had moved on, and she should too. After, instead of her family being reviled, she was now the town's most famous citizen.

The irony weighed heavily on her shoulders. She sipped some more tea and said, "Tommy, I now believe I know what happened. That's something, isn't it?"

Of course, he didn't answer. Tommy only existed in her mind now. His immortality wouldn't come from a religion that allowed a priest to abuse nuns and encourage a mad man to commit murder. It would come from people remembering who he was and that the people directly responsible had paid for that murder.

Four hours later, she was still in the garden reminiscing. The remaining tea in the pot had gone cold. She wouldn't return to her sculpting that day, even though she was a bit behind on fulfilling her new commissions. She wasn't in the mood to create beauty when the world seemed so ugly.

There was a knock at the front door. She left the garden and went through the house to answer it. She opened the door to see DI Nate Hardy. He didn't look well—a bit pale, in fact.

"I don't want to know any more details," she said, falling into his arms. "It's over."

"But could it be a beginning for us?"

"Come in and we can talk about it."

"Only if you have some whiskey. I have a few cracked ribs, and it would dull the pain."

DI Margaret Bent left the celebration early and headed for home. She'd never been a fan of the traditional pub night when they closed a case, and this celebration had seemed premature, to say the least.

She had no proof, no facts, but she believed many right-wing fanatics were still out there, biding their time but plotting and planning more violent attacks to further their dark agendas. Ralph Wolfe would still run for Parliament, and his wife, soon to be ex-wife, and

others like her and Blake, might eventually get out of prison and create chaos again. New fascists would come along too, as twisted minds looked for scapegoats to blame for their own failures or bought into radical and violent ideologies.

Should I accept MI5's offer? She could fight the nutters better in that role, no doubt about it. Yet it seemed to be a betrayal of Ezra and others in Scotland Yard. She really liked police work too, at least most of the time, and it wasn't clear that there would be enough of that at MI5. And Robert Winston would be there!

Of course, her desire to have a family of her own with Declan wouldn't be easily satisfied working with either MI5 or the Yard, but it was more likely with the latter. She thought he'd be a good father. He had an excellent role model in his own father. As Declan had argued, just because she was a woman, was her current situation any different from Michael O'Hara's when he and his wife had decided to have a family? Declan believed it wasn't.

Could she be a good mother? Or would she be too dedicated to her work? She knew that every modern woman had to consider those questions. It would help that Declan was more a homebody. She knew other couples where that had worked. *All TBD*, she thought.

As if that thought had reached her husband through some strange ESP transmission, she heard the rattle of keys in the door as Declan struggled with the multiple locks. She set her wine glass down on their little dining table and went to welcome her husband home.

DS Linda Sanderson nursed her pint and continued to watch the pub's entrance. She looked at her watch from time to time.

The changes she'd made in her life recently had suited her. With Thackeray, she'd always felt she tiptoed along the edge of a volcanic crater filled with the lava of depression. Now she had a new job, and the chance for a meaningful relationship without being bullied by the DCI would be a plus. The longer she waited, though, the more she thought that such a relationship wasn't going to happen.

I should have known! Reporters only pretend to strike up friendships with plods to have information sources. Or they were like most men, not comfortable dating a policewoman. *Did that ever go the other way, or did women only get the short straw?*

She and Thackeray had done the heavy lifting on the Sean Doyle case, but letting Henry Bolton go had been a disappointment, and Kate's scare a near tragedy. She'd been happy to hear that Bolton hadn't gotten away with murder. Despite his illness, she also thought an insane asylum for his remaining days wouldn't have been a just punishment either. Michael O'Hara's news had been a pleasant surprise, but she knew Kate Murphy would take some time to recover from her ordeal.

While Thackeray wasn't Prince Charming by any stretch of the imagination, he seemed to have a good relationship with his girlfriend Helen. *Why can't I have that?*

She'd refused to date colleagues. The thought of such a relationship ending badly and her becoming the topic of conversations at the water cooler had always made her avoid colleagues who became too flirtatious or forward. And truth be told, there wasn't much romance involved in police work, all too often a gritty business.

But her date finally arrived, waved, and then slipped into the booth beside her, a sheepish grin on his face. "Not the best way to start a date," he said. "Sorry I'm late, but a new

scandal involving an MP was breaking. It's good to see you again, Linda. I sensed some good vibes when we danced those few times."

She'd been part of a security detail for the Lord Mayor at his birthday party. That was rotated among London HQs and was a duty that perhaps justified the name Metropolitan Police for Scotland Yard, although there was only a weak nexus between the two divisions mostly at the upper administrative levels.

"Did you manage to file your story?"

She asked that only because James, her date, had seemed not to have a care in the world. It would be nice to see that hiding behind that effervescent personality was a hard and dedicated worker.

"Of course. The editor loved it, and Carl, my old photographer—you met him—took some great photos. We used the one where the Mayor had cocktail sauce on his face making him look like a vampire who sucks the blood out of the city's citizens. Quite appropriate, don't you think?"

"He'll just write it off by saying that it shows he's a man of the people, just one of us," she said with a laugh.

"Maybe. The rest of the article was even less complimentary."

"Do you always mix work with pleasure, James?"

"Oh, I can dedicate full attention to pleasure too," he said with a wink and a smile. He then turned serious. "Let's put all the cards on the table. I'm a political reporter, not one for social events. And I'm not a crime reporter, so I'm never going to pump you for information. What I'm going to be doing with you is worry. How dangerous is a detective's life?"

She was surprised by his candidness; she also liked it. "Um, don't judge by that mayor's ball, which was very boring, except for meeting you, of course. Generally speaking, I have to be prepared to handle difficult situations, and that often requires quick thinking." The scene where they'd captured Henry Bolton was one such situation still fresh in her mind. "But most police work, while interesting to me, is steady as she goes." She pointed to herself. "This 'she.' I guess that's why we have the nickname 'plods.'"

She wasn't about to mention that she was in limbo, her job situation unsure because of upcoming tests. There'd been two openings for a parallel transfer as a DS. She'd chosen the one where the DI was also retiring soon. That advancement depended on passing the exams. A relationship might make studying for those difficult, but she wasn't about to pass up on James. There had been vibes!

"That's good to know. So...do we do dinner here, or should we go to a nicer place?"

"The food's good here. Let's save the nicer place for a second date."

He laughed. "Sounds like a plan. Let me sort a pint and then we can look at the menu and specials."

Chapter Thirty-One

London Suburbs

"A few pence for your thoughts, Luv," Bastiann said to Esther. He put the bookmark into his sci-fi novel and smiled at her.

They were relaxing a bit together for a change, her activities over for the time being and his consulting with MI5 in hiatus. Like an old married couple, they were just enjoying each other's company. He'd sat down with one of his novels and she'd been playing some of Mozart's lively, early pieces he'd written as a child prodigy. She'd been silent and staring at the piano keys for a few minutes, though, so he'd noticed. She turned to him.

"Will that crazy task force end now that you've shut down Liz Wolfe and Joe Blake's murder squad?"

"No, not MI5's part. Maggie Bent can go onto other things, I presume, if she decides against working for the agency, and probably will be happy doing so, but both Jeremy and Robert want to keep it going. Everyone knows there are still fascist nutters around."

"Who may or may not be prone to violence like Liz and her group."

"Don't worry. I'll be on to other things too. Winston will keep an eye on things and be in charge of new people on the task force. It's mostly watchful waiting now for them. If the elections go well and the economy turns around, the right-wing groups might become less popular and just disappear."

"That's naive and a huge 'if.' Hard to tell. Maggie's quite capable, isn't she?" Bastiann nodded. "Much better than that ass, Thackeray. Linda Sanderson should be the leader in that pair."

"She basically is now. Was."

"What?"

"She asked for and received a transfer. Thackeray will have to find someone else to bully."

"Well, good for her. Bent, O'Malley, and Sanderson will all have a bright future in Scotland Yard, in my opinion. Or wherever they go."

"I agree. Of course, you know that staid organization better than I do."

"It's changed a lot. I was Langston's boss only for a little while, but I had that position because tough coppers thought chasing art thieves was beneath them and mostly suited for women, Langston being a notable exception. I'm especially happy for O'Malley. It's not every day that a copper can close an old cold case."

"Thanks to Sara and your help."

"Whatever. At any rate, the world might be a better place if women like Bent, O'Malley, and Sanderson ran it. I wish them all success." She smiled at him. "And we've solidified or initiated some interesting romances with Maggie and Declan and Sara and Nate."

"I hear that Linda Sanderson's seeing a nice reporter chap too. Is Declan still advising Li-Mei Huang?"

"Ha! She's helping him with his St. Brendan book. He's planning to make her a coauthor if she sticks with it. And that reminds me. I must call Michael O'Hara and ask about this A. B. Carolan character, another Irish writer. Without him, Kate Murphy might be dead."

"Do that while I microwave the takeaway. I just realized that I need some sustenance."

"From that new Thai place?"

"Yes, I thought we'd try it. People say that it's healthier than Chinese."

"Not that you ever worry about that."

Randall Cummings had tailed the Dutchman, yet another meddling foreigner, and watched him enter the building. *So that's where you and the old bird live!* He took a scrap of paper and biro from his dirty shirt pocket and jotted down the address.

He already had an informal file on both Brookstone and van Coevorden, finding most of the details in it from the public domain. He knew that might be only the tip of the iceberg, but what they'd done before and after marriage was impressive all the same, and he'd had no problem with most of what they'd achieved. He'd especially liked thwarting that ISIS attack.

He did have a problem with their group's loss of Liz Wolfe and Joe Blake. He didn't know how much Brookstone had been involved in that cockup—the old woman knew Maggie Bent and that writer chap, so she was guilty by association—but van Coevorden and MI5 had to be taught a lesson. It was time for some revenge. He would make them all pay...eventually. That was the least he could do for Liz and Joe.

He had another distraction, though. The man he owed a lot of money to, another feckin' foreigner, might be after him. He'd sold the drugs and pumped the money in to coffers to help the movement, believing patriotically that a few more deaths from overdoses were well worth saving his country. No one knew where he'd gotten the money. He smiled. *Maybe they thought he'd robbed bank?* Most of their followers weren't very bright. *That's why they're followers and I'm a leader!*

He figured Liz's toff husband was completely useless, but she was still trying to run the movement from prison even after Blake was killed. That crazy bitch's ideas were all over the board, but he agreed with her desire for revenge. He'd bide his time, and it would occur...when Esther and Bastiann least expected it!

He walked back to the underground's station that van Coevorden and he had just exited, whistling the "Colonel Bogey March" from *The Bridge over the River Kwai*. Now those blokes were real patriots, quite unlike the incompetents running Britain at the moment.

"Your dinner is in the fridge," the man in the bathrobe and slippers said to the man hanging up his overcoat and cap. "Put it in the microwave and then come tell me what that SOB is up to."

The first man was a Russian ex-pat, the second Irish. They were a small, formidable team of two with big, optimistic plans. The first was a business genius, who counted both legal and illegal endeavors among his many businesses; the second was a retired bombmaker from Northern Island who'd become very rich partnering with the Russian.

The Irishman estimated five minutes for the warmup time, punched it in, and then walked to the table where the Russian was playing solitaire and drinking vodka.

"I need a proper drink, boss, not your Russian poison," the Irishman said.

"Serve yourself some Jameson and join me then."

After the Irishman took a chair opposite the Russian, the latter said, "Now, what's that rat Cummings up to?"

"First, I'm thinking you might not get a good return on your investment, if anything, boss. He's thrown in with them fanatics. And he's after van Coevorden. You might not like that because you respect that old bird, the Dutchman's wife." The Russian nodded but said nothing, so the Irishman continued. "I followed Cummings all the way to their building. He might be out for revenge for Blake and Wolfe's capture."

"Old Randall's not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, as they say. Tough bastard with some organizational skills, but cheating me shows that he's careless, to say the least. Going after van Coevorden or Brookstone does too. And if you could find him, the police can too."

The Irishman smiled. "I'm better than the coppers. The question is: What do we do about the yob? I could arrange a little accident."

"I'd rather have him pay my money back. Don't these fanatics rob banks or something to finance themselves? That would be better than stealing from me. From us, to put a fine point on it."

"I have no idea. My terrorist days are over."

"And he doesn't seem to be trafficking anymore. Find out how they pay their bills. This city's damn expensive to live in."

The Irishman shrugged. "He probably sold all the merchandise and is taking a little vacation, a bit of R&R to kill Muslims."

"Or he got religion The wrong kind. In the long run, bigotry and hatred aren't profitable and damn right dangerous."

The microwave's insistent beeps ended their conversation.

Chapter Thirty-Two

NYC's JFK Airport

"How far is it from here to Niagara?" Esther said to Bastiann as he was about to return for another suitcase after leaving the first with her to guard.

He halted, turned, and smiled at her. "Why are you asking that, Luv?"

". I'd love to see the falls. We'd have to leave Pam and Rollie and go off on our own, but we could go there for a few days."

"I guess we could manage that. There're no real time constraints for this trip. We don't even have return reservations. And we won't be distracted by a military conference either."

He was referring to the time over the holidays when NYPD detective Castilblanco teamed up with MI5, including Bastiann, to thwart a Chinese spy ring. Their Christmas had been an unusual one, to say the least.

"I have to grab the other suitcases. Be right back."

They had exited the jetway into the new JFK airport terminal. The glitzy new building made Esther remember how drab some of Europe's airport terminals were, including the venerable Heathrow. The Yanks sure knew how to create shiny, new things when they put their minds to it. She worried about their closest ally, though. The US politicians couldn't seem to come together to get anything done anymore. That had become worse with time. What was occurring seemed to make Parliament look good.

Of course, governments came and went in a democracy as fickle voters caused a country to ride the teeter-totter every so often. Maybe that uncertainty was a good thing. It was better than having fascists in charge so that you knew exactly where you stood, namely in deep shite.

She turned off the firehose of political ruminations in her mind as he appeared with the remaining suitcases, another of hers and his. They made their way to the airport's baggage control exit and on to immigration and customs. As they exited into the main terminal, a young woman with a sign that said BROOKSTONE waved to them.

"That's strange," Esther said. "Where are Pam and Rollie?"

Cecilia Castilblanco, that American couple's adopted daughter, answered her question after effusive greetings. "Mom was called in to sub for a sick news anchor, and Dad's still in court testifying. I'm your designated driver."

"It appears that you're well recovered, Ceci," Esther said, and the woman nodded.

"Are you back at your forensics job?"

"Yes, but I have the day off. We should get on the road ASAP. The BQE can turn into a parking lot anytime of day."

They rolled their suitcases out to the curb where Esther and Bastiann waited for Ceci to bring the car around. They tossed the carry-ons and suitcases into the boot and then drove off on the expressway, ending up in heavy local street traffic on the way to Ceci's parents' flat.

Castilblanco arrived first and gave both Esther and Bastiann a big bear-hug of greetings. Ceci handed her father a glass of Shiraz to match Bastiann's; Esther continued to nurse her white, a pleasant Pinot Grigio.

"I assume Ceci told you about Pam." Esther nodded, eyeing him over the edge of her glass. She'd have to remember the red wine. She'd always thought of him as an ale-and-lager chap. He looked at his watch. "Turn on the TV, Ceci. We can catch Pam's newscast."

Esther decided that Pam Stuart handled herself well in front of a camera. Although the woman was still a stunner, Esther was also happy to note that the station had no problem using older women to read the news. She knew that might be hard to do, young or old, knowing you were being watched by millions in the viewing area.

When they cut to commercials, Esther said, "That poor woman will be knackered when she arrives and unable to even boil an egg. Shouldn't we plan to eat out?"

"It's all in the fridge," Ceci said. "I'll put it into the oven, timing it for a bit after she arrives."

Castilblanco laughed. "We've done this before, Esther, many times. Now our son Pedro, he's questionable. He'll try and make it, though. He's interrogating someone right now, so he might be late. But he'll be here if he can. He's always wanted to meet both you and Bastiann."

Esther smiled at Bastiann. "All in the family. And that will give us the opportunity to correct any misconceptions about the adventures we've shared."

That turned the conversation to those adventures, beginning with Bastiann's involvement with Pam and Rollie in saving some European aristocrats from terrorists. Esther's mind wandered a bit, either from the influence of the wine or travel exhaustion. She was happy, though. Happy to be off the plane with a long albeit comfortable flight behind them—they'd flown business class—and eager to finally see more of the US than they had with their brief stopover on their way to Peru years ago. The US was such a major actor on the world stage and such a large country that it was time for her to see a bit more than that.

She decided to shelve the discussion about Niagara, though. Who knew what the Castilblanco family had planned for them?

Esther couldn't sleep. She'd felt the cold hand of Death pass over her, awaking her with a start. Although she wrote it all off as due to a long trip and sleeping in a strange place, that didn't end her insomnia.

She found her robe, slippers, and mobile; left Bastiann to his soft snoring, barely audible above the street noise from outside that made her feel at home; and made her way to the living room where she began to review her text messages. She soon focused on one from Declan O'Hara but was only just beginning to read its attachment when Pam Stuart appeared, rubbing her eyes.

"Time change bothering you?" Castilblanco's wife said.

"Um, you have a point. My old body says it's six a.m., I bet, not three."

"Can I offer you an herbal tea? That often helps me get back to sleep."

"That would be nice."

While the hospitable woman prepared their beverages, Esther returned to Declan's attachment:

Some monks looked east from where the Briton now called Patrick had come. Others, including Brendan, looked west, wondering what stranger lands might exist across the great waters. They must be farther away, he thought. Fishermen had never seen them, and they

ranged far and wide to cast their nets. But Brendan knew that God's creation couldn't be so limited.

Pam handed her cup and saucer. "A long message?"

"A long attachment to a message from a good Irish friend, Declan O'Hara." Esther then had to explain who Declan was and how he'd been involved in some recent events the past months.

"So...he's sent you the beginning of a new book?"

"About St. Brendan." Esther figured Pam didn't need an explanation of who that was; she was Catholic, after all. "He wants me to beta-read the first chapter, whatever that means, to see if it provides a good hook, whatever that means. Would you also like to read it? He's a good writer, although historical fiction isn't his usual genre."

"You know some interesting people, Esther. Of course, I'd like to read it. St. Brendan is one of my favorite saints. Some say he discovered America before anyone else, long before that Viking fellow or Columbus."

Is that Declan's motivation for writing the novel? Esther thought. *Irish pride?* She smiled. *Why not?*

It wasn't clear what contribution Li-Mei had made to that sample chapter, if any, but that had nothing to do with what Declan had asked for, whatever that was. Perhaps a discussion with Pam would help? She knew that the woman had written scripts and produced for some of her station's documentaries. That took writing skills, didn't it?

The two women discussed the novel's long first chapter in some detail after they both read it, and then cooking and serving breakfast became a necessity because the men awoke and sought sustenance.

Later that day, they learned that Esther and Bastiann's flat in London had been bombed. The subsequent fire had destroyed everything. The bombing had occurred at three a.m. New York time.

Note from Steve

You have just finished *Intolerance*, Book #7 in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series. I hope you enjoyed the mystery, suspense, and thrills. Because this novel is a free PDF download, I can't ask you to write a review, but please let me know what you think about the novel. I value your opinions. You can send me your thoughts, questions, and even corrections using the contact page at <https://stevenmmoore.com>, the website you probably used to download this novel.

You might be interested in the following novels as well:

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For descriptions of the above books and many others, please see the "Books & Short Stories" web page at the website mentioned above. You can also find other free fiction there at that website; see the list on the "Free Stuff & Contests" web page (most likely from where you downloaded this free novel). The "Steve's Shorts," "ABC Shorts," and "Friday Fiction" blog archives contain more free novellas and short stories.

And please peruse the preview of *The Klimt Connection* found below after the list of discussion questions for book club members and literary discussion groups.

Around the world and to the stars! In libris libertas

Questions for Book Club and Discussion Group Members

Were you disappointed that neither Esther nor Bastiann were in danger in this novel?

All three cases in this novel are about intolerance. Which one resonated most with you and why?

There's pathos in both Henry and Seamus's conditions. Does that excuse their actions?

Was Kat O'Malley's decision to move from Ireland to join Scotland Yard a good one? Do you think Esther inspired her to revisit the cold case?

What do you think about women in policing? Will Maggie Bent's marriage suffer? Will her and Declan's kids?

Do you think Linda Sanderson made a good decision to apply for a transfer? What do you think her future will be like?

Do you think Michael O'Hara must have been a good policeman in the Gardai?

The future relationship between Sara and Nate will be the reverse of the one between Esther and Bastiann, as far as age differences go. What are the pros and cons for one spouse being older than the other?

There's possible future friction between Jeremy Brand and Robert Winston. Do you think Brand's opinion of Winston is justified?

Who will make a better father? Declan O'Hara or Ricardo Silva? Why?

Have you heard or read about anyone in real life as radical as the fictional Ralph Wolfe or his wife Liz?

What do you think the chances are for Declan's historical novel? Will they depend on the collaboration with Li-Mei Huang?

**Preview of *The Klimt Connection*,
#8 in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" Series**

"Where are you taking us?" Bastiann asked Robert.

Winston turned around from the passenger seat of the SUV. "A new safehouse, old stick. You and Esther will be quite comfortable there, I assure you."

"I hope it's safer than MI5's previous ones," Esther said. "And is that really necessary? What do you think, Eric?"

Eric was their driver. He laughed. "I just go where they tell me, madam."

"We've met before, haven't we?"

"Yes, during a certain beach adventure we had. You have a good eye, madam. I was dressed in body armor at the time. Probably an effective disguise, I dare say, especially that night. This gig should be a lot less stressful for you."

"And therefore boring. Robert, with whom can I lodge a protest? Jeremy Brand? Freddie March? The Home Secretary?"

"Do you know the Home Secretary?" Winston said.

"No, but he probably knows about me, and he'll know, just like Jeremy and Freddie, that I can be an annoying pest. And I dare say the secretary is probably a lot more likely to listen to my protest than any of you three. I have a gallery to run, you know."

"That's nearer to the safehouse now," Bastiann said.

"So, you're in on this?"

"No, I just know where the safehouse is. MI5's decision is as much a surprise for me as it is for you."

"Robert, what do you expect me to do? Have Eric and his fellow commandos guard me at the gallery? That should bring the customers in!"

"Yes, something like that. You'll have a security detail always accompanying you, but they'll be invisible. Right, Eric?"

"Just call me the 'invisible man,' sir."

"Bollocks!"

While Bastiann knew the famous sci-fi tale that gave rise to Eric's description and agreed with Esther's colorful opinion about the security detail, which he assumed would be neither invisible to Esther nor the terrorists, he continued to other matters. "So, we'll have the whole safehouse to ourselves? What about the others on or connected to the task force?"

"Maggie Bent and Declan O'Hara will be there, along with Jeremy and me. Plus staff, of course. Ambreesh and his family aren't considered to be in danger. He's never out in public and always looking at a computer screen."

Esther glared at Winston. "And we'll be in that damn safehouse until we're either killed or we capture this Cummings and his cronies?"

"Not 'we.' Others will go after Cummings and his far-right gang of terrorists. We're out of it, Esther, because we're the ones with bounties on our heads."

"Who put up that money?" Bastiann said.

"Um, I don't know if bitcoin can actually be considered money, but to your question: If we knew who's financing the bounties, we'd be able to act on that information and shut down the whole movement because we believe that same financial source is financing the entire organization, which is a lot bigger than Cummings's cell. And we'd get him as well."

"Good thing the PM's party won the election then," Esther said, "only because they gave him a pass because of the improving economy."

"How does winning the election matter?"

She laughed, mostly at Winston's pretended ignorance. "If the economy had taken a nosedive, election win or not, Cummings and his masters would have a lot more people available to go after us."

Winston smiled. "You have a point." He slapped Eric on the shoulder. "We have a roadblock!"

"I see them, sir. Just blues and twos. They'll let us by. Have your ID ready."

"No, they're not coppers!" Esther said. "They're aiming military weapons at us!"

"Reverse, reverse!" Winston said. "You two get down!" He pulled out his service weapon as bullets pounded into the car's bulletproof windscreen that was not likely to withstand such a barrage of high-powered military rounds for long and already had made it nearly impossible to see.

Eric backed up, using the rear camera's wide-angle view of the street, until he spotted other terrorists moving into position to block their backward progress. His training took hold. "Hold on!" He made a three-point turn and accelerated into a narrow alleyway, clipping a few bins on the sides because it was hard to see his way.

"Other end's blocked too," Winston said, his side of the windscreen less starred. "One car, one driver. Stop!"

Eric slammed on the brakes, and Winston jumped out. He took aim and shot the man through his windscreen. Winston jumped back in.

"Threat removed. You've got an SUV, Eric. That car's a sedan. Push him aside and let's scarper!"

"Works for me," Eric said.

As they continued on their journey, Bastiann said, "Nice piece of driving, Eric."

"And my shooting?" Winston said.

"That was acceptable," Esther said.

Once safe in the house and sipping on hot tea with fresh scones, Esther and Bastiann had time to finally gather their wits.

Eric and Robert had met them at Heathrow and hustled them into the SUV along with their baggage. The pair had returned early to London from a trip to visit Castilblanco and his family in New York City because Cummings or his henchmen had bombed their flat. The subsequent fire had destroyed everything. They hadn't even had time to inspect the ruins because MI5 was in such a hurry to get them to safety.

"I expect MI5 to finance the rebuilding of our flat," Esther told Robert, who was sitting across the table from Esther and Bastiann, sipping his tea and seeming far too relaxed. "You're responsible for the destruction of our home."

"That's going to take a while," Robert said, "no matter who pays for it. They're tearing down the entire building because it's no longer structurally sound."

"My new Jaguar!" She already knew her beloved piano had probably become a pile of ashes. Most other things in the flat were replaceable. Her brothers had all the family pictures and other memorabilia.

"I'm sure the government will set up a secret trust fund for residents' expenses. They've all been temporarily relocated elsewhere as well. And all the vehicles have been towed to safety."

"So, where's my Jaguar?"

"In our underground car park here."

"This house has an underground car park? I saw no evidence for that. Eric parked on the street."

"To use the SUV as a shield if must needs. There was a chance they followed us here. The large garage is well camouflaged. This was a rich man's house, a drugs lord, in fact, who had a valuable antique car collection."

"And here I thought you blokes had really let the election results go to your head, spending the pounds like they're only buckets of water."

Bastiann thought that might still be the case, but he said instead, "Where are the others from the task force?"

"Maggie and Jeremy are at MI5 at work; Declan's most likely upstairs working on his damn novel."

"This situation won't go on for too long," Margaret Johnson said. She'd been standing over by the stairway. Both Esther and Bastiann had immediately recognized her as the woman who'd run one of the previous safehouses, some better called safe flats. MI5 was moving up in the world with the new one. "They'll catch the bastards who set that bomb off. Everyone in the country is looking for them."

"That's comforting, but then what do we do?" Esther said. "Live in my Jaguar in a drugs lord's fancy underground car park? I was in New York long enough to see how some of their homeless live. I don't want that experience." She looked at Bastiann, knowing he would see her tears. "We need a home, Bastiann!"

"We'll have one," he said. "We'll find another flat or even a house like Langston's, and we still have the castle."

"That would be a bit of a commute," Robert said with a smile.

Bastiann glared at the agent. "Not if I stop consulting with MI5." His voice was soft but menacing. "I've about had it, Robert. All I've accomplished at MI5 is to put my wife and me in danger. To hell with it all!"

Esther patted his hand. "Luv, stay with them long enough to find this Cummings first, please. That man wanted to kill us. He was just too stupid to realize we weren't at home."

"Which is why you're here," Robert said. "We've been a bit ambivalent about whether you two were there or not, truth be told. But let's take a breather." He leaned towards Bastiann. "And there's no feckin' way you're going to go after Cummings. Your hands are tied because you have a conflict of interest."

"Go to hell, Robert."

The agent shrugged, winked at Margaret Johnson, and turned to leave but waved a hand and looked over his shoulder. "Ta-ta. Back to the office I go."

"Don't you also have a conflict of interest too?" Esther said.

"Who said I'm working on the Cummings case?"

After he left, Mrs. Johnson took a seat at the table with Esther and Bastiann. "I wish I could tell Donald you two are here." The duo's previous experiences with MI5 safehouses had involved Esther's old friend, Donald Townes, an English mathematical physicist; Johnson and the professor were now in a relationship. "I'm sure he would commiserate. I don't like that

chap either, but he's right. You two are safer here. Maybe you can work on something else, Bastiann? You two will just have to get used to having a security detail around when you're out and about."

Esther sighed. "Do Maggie, Robert, and Jeremy have one?"

"They usually all go into the office together. They work on cases from there."

"Who's running the Cummings investigation?" Bastiann said.

"Some bloke who used to split his time between Felixstowe and Southampton. An American consultant named Hal Leonard."

Bastiann smiled at Esther; she returned the smile. Leonard's skills and professionalism were well known to them. And his involvement was the first piece of good news they'd had in the last few days.

Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgements

This novel's title indicates its major theme and also that it's somewhat a political statement. There's always been hatred for minorities, and political leaders have often exploited this hatred by treating its victims as scapegoats their followers can blame. Hitler and his rabid Nazi cadre were the most demonic practitioners of this tactic, of course; but, in the twenty-first century, we've seen many others, from China to Europe and yes, the US, as the world continues its spiral down into that cesspool of fascism. Demagogues use this us-versus-them politics to create divisions and assume power. (The US began to look like 1930s Germany several years ago, and it appears that Germany's twentieth-century evil might be repeated here in the twenty-first.)

We are living in perilous times when the forces of intolerance long existing in our culture, including our political discourse, and major upheavals are becoming more focused and gaining strength. Just as the forces of climate change create an existential problem we must solve if we are to survive, so do the forces of intolerance. Because these times seem to have made these two statements into hotly debated political ones, I wanted to add a bit of sanity to the discussion by showing in my prose how deadly intolerance can become for modern civilization and how good people can still step forward to halt it. This might not please some readers, but the book is free, so I'd ask them: Why the hell did you bother to download it? And what right do you have to complain if it's free? Of course, I can hope even those readers might reconsider and take this novel to be a warning about how close to the precipice they've gone and how they might take modern civilization over the edge with them.

Religious intolerance and fanaticism disguised as spiritual fervor have often been an excuse for violence against others, often a part of that general "us-vs.-them" psychosis afflicting human populations ever since the shamans of prehistoric tribes created religion. Modern-day manifestations created by modern shamans can be just as brutal and bloody as those in ancient savage populations, even more so because of modern weaponry. The cold case in this story is an extreme example, one where a child is killed because he and his parents subscribed to *no* religion or creed. (That was the excuse for not pursuing the investigation. It only peripherally matters that other evil actions motivated the crazy SOB who murdered the child.) Unfortunately, the intolerance and fanaticism hasn't decreased in modern times; it has increased as the world shrinks because of travel and the internet. People have become worse, not better at accepting others' views and beliefs in general and are more likely to try to force their own upon others politically and violently when those "others" resist, as is the latter's right to do, adding to the violence. This is also part of the over-arching theme of this novel.

The attacks that Maggie Brent and the MI5's task force try to stop are more general than an attack on atheists, even more than an attack on those with different religious beliefs. They represent an extreme manifestation of that us-versus-them sentiment, just anger and rage that aren't necessarily politically or religiously motivated, an anger and rage directed against anyone who's different enough to be used as a scapegoat. Unfortunately, this might be in our genes, bred into us to ensure the integrity of our tribe. Ethics and morality are mental constructs; they can lose the battle to emotional, savage, and tribal emotions. We have far too many examples of this in real life. Trying to fight this tendency should be every decent person's goal.

The parallel story about the author Sean Doyle contains yet another important theme, Alzheimer's and dementia. This theme occurs briefly in *Defanging the Red Dragon* where the duke, Freddie March, must confront his wife's affliction, but I thought it was such an important theme that I decided to include it again. It appears because the novelist-poet Declan O'Hara is asked to check up on Sean, who wrote epic novels of historical fiction.

Declan wants to write a historical fiction novel based on the life and times of St. Brendan. With the bit of history of that saint that I've included, the reader will understand why the saint's name appears elsewhere in my own prose, for example, in the Dr. Carlos stories where *Brendan* is the name of the starship on which Carlos Obregon serves as chief medical officer (again see the list of free PDF downloads on my "Free Stuff & Contests" web page).

Of course, this parallel story isn't all about Sean's health condition. That Henry has become blatantly anti-Irish brings in the theme of intolerance again, an English vs. Irish intolerance that has plagued the Irish people for millennia and fundamentally was the major reason for the Troubles, not Catholics vs. Protestants, as often claimed.

Okay, I'll admit that's all a bit heavy. I'll soften it all by stating that this is more a straight crime novel than any other Esther Brookstone book, one involving three different cases. One can also describe it as a mystery, thriller, and suspense tale (I tend to ignore genre). But it reflects my continued focus on the UK and Ireland's police forces best described as a "British-style mystery" (apologies to Scottish, Welsh, and Irish readers). These shouldn't be considered "cozy mysteries." I've binge-read a lot of British-style mysteries, and they're often gritty police procedurals and a lot more serious than Dame Agatha's pioneering stories (different times call for different tales).

The "Esther Brookstone" series has evolved towards that grittiness because of my binge-reading, but, if truth be told, it all reflects my increased pessimism about how human societies are decaying on all fronts, something I began with *The Midas Bomb*, the first novel in the "Chen and Castilblanco" series. It seems like I can only mitigate that pessimism by creating characters like Esther and her fellow detectives who offer some remaining sanity in a world gone insane.

In one way or another, Esther ties the three aforementioned cases together. The character David Thackeray's observation is spot on: "God help me. She turns up everywhere." Of course, this happens because she is connected to so many people working in different law enforcement organizations. I've purposely given her a respite in this novel in the sense that she's never in real danger, but she participates by using her mental acuity, not bad for a person her age. This makes her more like Miss Marple than she cares to admit, I'm sure. She also stays out of the media's spotlight, although she solidifies her reputation among her friends and colleagues, especially the ones in those organizations.

Husband Bastiann has a more subdued and cerebral role too. Both he and Inspector Bent effectively rein in Winston, even as the coming elections put pressure on the MI5 brass to deliver results. You can debate whether Brand and Winston shot themselves in the foot by adding Bastiann and Maggie to that task force.

For these reasons, I've subtitled this novel "Esther Brookstone" #7. If you missed #6, I can't really blame you. Like all my novels that can stand alone, even in a series, you didn't need to read *Defanging the Red Dragon*, *A Brookstone-Castilblanco Holiday Adventure* (also available as a free PDF download the same way you got this one) to enjoy this novel. #6 will help you understand this novel's epilogue a bit more, though; it's not just the old couple of Brookstone and van Coevorden's decision to travel a bit more and see the world!

Many authors might have previously wondered, and my Irish collaborator A. B. Carolan (wink, wink) has asked, why, with all my British-style mystery stories, I haven't included Ireland. After all, the Irish Gardai is organized similarly to the UK police forces. I came close to writing an Irish crime story in "Poetic Justice," a novella featuring an Irish novelist and poet. (Esther mentions his wedding and he has a parallel story here—see below. He participated in one of her gallery's events, so she was invited to his.) This novel comes a bit closer to solving this problem. I know Ireland about as well as I know England, so it's something to think about. Maybe for a future novel? (And to be fair, you should criticize A. B. more than me! He's Irish!)

One reason to use the persecution of atheists in this novel should be obvious to those who read the previous novels in the series, *Rembrandt's Angel*, in particular: Esther's husband #3, an Italian count, was an atheist. She, of course, is not. As the daughter of a vicar, one might expect her to be both overtly religious and a bit intolerant, but she's above that, which is why she becomes so outraged and obsessed with the cold case—murder is never morally justified and killing a child for his and his parents' beliefs is unconscionable. I hope parallels with intolerance directed against religious minorities in the US will make my readers at least stop and think about this problem.

I have to apologize for recycling some characters. Linda Sanderson and David Thackeray have appeared in previous "Esther Brookstone" novels, but I've given Linda a more important role in this novel, something she fully deserves because she's become Thackeray's brain trust. Maggie Bent and Declan O'Hara had starring roles in the novella "Poetic Justice," and I also owed them a bigger stage. Kat O'Malley is a new character, so faithful readers should have no problem with her appearance. She also builds a bridge between law enforcement in the Irish Republic and the UK, with Michael O'Hara an anchor at one end and Sanderson and Thackeray at the other.

Of course, the main characters here are still Esther and Bastiann. The latter's consulting with MI5 continues to be needed. Just as the FBI in the US often takes charge of hate crimes, I assumed MI5 steps in as they become generalized in the UK. I might be wrong, but I believe Scotland Yard, with all its many duties, can't really focus on nationwide hate crimes. Of course, Bastiann adds an international point of view to help attack this scourge.

So...why is this novel free? I've come to understand that fancy covers and marketing gurus spamming you with their ads don't sell books, so why not reward my readers with another free "Esther Brookstone" novel? TANSTAAFL, of course: you still had to make a few clicks to download the PDF, but most of my readers know my prose well enough that the effort is worth it. That's ultimate writing freedom too. My prose doesn't need to bow to artificial marketing constraints!

Finally, I suppose I should say something about the cover. I just selected some images that made the point that two islands are the settings for the novel. The first image is Ireland's Blarney Castle, something Esther and Bastiann might have seen on their little tour around the Emerald Isle after Maggie and Declan's wedding (before stopping at the fictional town of Heatherton). (Many of my readers might feel that I kissed the famous stone there too many times!) The second image is taken from the cover of *Leonardo and the Quantum Code*; if you look closely enough, you'll see that Esther is looking at Big Ben. The castle and the clock tower are iconic symbols for the two countries and have nothing to do with the main theme of intolerance. My fans will know that Blarney Castle has a double meaning in my writing life: I

met the "real" A. B. Carolan there, so he's a bit more than a fictional character! (Of course, this cover is DIY. If it weren't, I'd have to charge you something!)

Because this novel is 100% DIY, I need to thank only one person here, my wife of many years. I know living with a crazy author can be trying at times, but she's been a constant cheerleader and loving companion so she must be acknowledged in each novel I write!

Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ, 2022

SAMPLE

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:

<https://stevenmmoore.com>. Use the contact page there to communicate with him.