



Volume Three

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Sleuthing, British-Style

Volume Three

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Preface

In Volume One of this series (a Draft2Digital publication available at most online retailers where quality ebooks are sold) and Volume Two (available as a free PDF download like this one), DI Patricia Clarke and DS Logan Blake were featured. This third volume of the series is a bit different. I leave Patty, Logan, and SOCO Sally Gwalchmai to their policing and forensics tasks in Riversford west of Oxford for now and present you with other different British-style crime stories, short fiction in the grand British mystery tradition.

Here you will find more superintendents (supers or chiefs), DCIs, DIs, DSs, DCs, uniformed constables, and even civilians who solve crimes in various regions of the UK. Some of these stories appeared serialized in my blog (see the archive "Friday Fiction") if you're interested in the publishing history...or in any new stories that might be hiding there; others are new to this collection.

Again, my apologies to UK readers. While I've studied the UK's police organizations a lot, the Metropolitan Police (Scotland Yard), Police Scotland, MI5, and NCA, there are bound to be mistakes in my portrayal of policing in the UK. I'm sure other American authors who have written British-style mysteries (examples are contained in the list of series of novels at the end of this volume) have also made a few. UK readers should view our efforts as a celebration of British-style crime stories, i.e. homages to the great tradition initiated by *la grande dame* of British mystery stories, Agatha Christie.

The game is afoot. Prepare to stretch your mind. I hope you have as much fun reading these tales as I did writing them.

Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ, 2022

A Glossary of UK Words and Expressions

A

aggro—aggravation

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

Auld Reekie—Edinburgh, Scotland

B

barney—verbal skirmish

blaggard—scoundrel

bloke—guy

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

C

car park—parking lot

chap—fellow, guy

chappie—fellow, guy

chat up—flirt

chinwag—converse (verb); conversation (noun)

CID—Criminal Investigative Department

copper—police person (man or woman)

D

DS—Detective Sergeant

DC—Detective Constable

DI—Detective Inspector

DCI—Detective Chief Inspector

do a runner—disappear

dosh—money (wad)

droll—boring, irrelevant

E

early dart—leave work early

eejit—idiot, fool, imbecile

F

fag—cigarette

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

fiver—five-pound note

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

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

G

give stick—beat up, verbally or physically

gobshite—mean or contemptible person

gobsmacked—astonished, astounded (a “gob” was a wad of tobacco)

goolies--testicles

GP—General Physician

grass—squeal or rat on (verb)

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
lie-in—be in bed
lorry—truck
- M
- mobile or moby--cellphone
monkeys—500-pound note
MPs—members of parliament
- N
- NCA—National Crime Agency
NHS—National Health Service
nick—steal or arrest (verb); police station (noun)
niggling—trifling, annoying
nutter—crazy person
- O
- old chestnut—adage or saying
- P
- peckish--hungry
pillock—fool
pish-tosh—only a trifle
PM—prime minister
prat—a stupid or foolish person
publican—owner of a pub
- R
- rozzers--coppers
- S
- scarper—see “do a runner”
SCO19—Specialist Crime and Operations group (SWAT group in the US)
scrote—lowlife
SIO—Senior Investigating Officer
SOCO—Scene of Crime Officer (US CSI)
sod—annoying person (noun); deprecate or disparage (verb)
stunner—pretty woman
- T
- Taff—Welshman or Welshwoman
takeaway—take-out
telly—television
tip—dump, junkyard
tipple—imbibe an alcoholic beverage; the imbiber is called a tippler.

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

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

trawl—search

W

Wellies—rubbers for the rain (from Wellingtons)

wrinklies—elderly people

Y

yob—rude or aggressive person

Note: While I try to keep this glossary up to date, I might miss a few words and expressions that I've used in the stories. The British-style mystery novels listed at the end of this volume often contain glossaries for non-UK readers for the same reason I include this one.

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Prodigal Son

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Chapter One

Irwin looked up to see the woman who was calling his name. "Irwin? Irwin Pound?"

He put down his bacon roll, smiled when he recognized who she was, but still had to mimic her. "Devon? Devon Blake? Is that you?"

She held up a finger, turned to the cashier, and paid for her mash-up. She then joined him. She offered him a biscuit, which he accepted, putting it aside for dessert

"What brings you back home to the Lake District?" she said.

"A bit of vacation time. Super suggested it. Insisted on it, to be more precise. I decided to take it here to see how things have changed. It's been a while."

"I'll say, donkey's years. But you found that not much has changed, I wager."

She was correct, except for her. Two years younger than Irwin, that difference was largely irrelevant now. Devon wasn't a pimply and gangly teenager anymore. He'd been like her big, protective brother when they were children. Now pigtails and freckles had turned into dark red, lush curls and the freckles had faded, and she'd become a woman. A stunner at that, to his mind's eye.

He was at a loss for how to begin a conversation. "How's the family?"

"Papa's passed on; Mum's ailing a bit. A natural progression, I suppose, but it makes me sad sometimes."

"Better than losing them in an accident."

He immediately regretted saying that. Her expression needed no words. A driver had killed Irwin's parents in a hit-and-run. Irwin had gone to live with his aunt and uncle in London.

"Yes, that was terrible. Tell me about your life since then."

He was thankful Devon didn't reinforce those sad memories even more. He thought a moment but then opened up to her as he'd always done before when they were children, even telling her about nearly getting killed during his last case, the event that had led to his unplanned-for vacation.

She'd always been a good listener, and he had always liked doing that for her too. So he learned she was now a nurse and had put all those skills to good use while also caring for her mum.

Irwin bid farewell with a promise to keep in touch followed by a hug and kiss to her cheek. He went off to begin his hike. Although "home" was in the Lake District, he'd always preferred hiking in Cumbria's hills and mountains to fishing. His climb that day was one he'd mastered when he was fourteen. It wasn't for amateurs, and he was a bit out of practice. His kit contained plenty of rope, pickaxe, hammer, and pylons; his old hiking boots helped to grip rock ledges slippery with mist and moss.

It turned out he only needed the boots. There was still a trail of sorts above the pub's little village that he'd known well and still could envision in his mind all the time he'd been in London. He headed for his favorite place, an outlook where you could sometimes see from west to east coast if faraway clouds didn't shroud one or the other. There was another outlook about three hundred feet below him, but his special place offered the better view. He felt he could touch the sky as well. A complete panorama revealing a large chunk of Gaia's magnificence.

He'd been there almost an hour enjoying the nearly forgotten vista when a sound behind him was a surprise at that desolate spot where few hikers ventured. He turned to see Devon scrambling onto the ledge. He offered her a hand up to complete her climb.

"There was a time when I'd have prohibited you from making such a dangerous climb," he said, mitigating his reproach with a smile because he was happy to see her and have her share his view. "We could have come together, you know."

She laughed. "I wanted to prove to you I can do it alone now. I've been making this climb for a while."

"Without your mum's approval, I'd wager. She never liked my climbing and discouraged you from doing it too. Maybe the reason I discouraged you?"

"She was only worried that she'll never have any grandchildren; still is. Always afraid too that I'll catch some terrible disease at the hospital, even though she benefits from my nursing skills. I come here from time to time to get away from her, truth be told. I can't afford a nurse for her, so I'm that person, like I said at the pub. A few neighbors help at times with her. And she sometimes visits an aunt and uncle on my father's side."

He nodded. Both her occupation and her dedication to her mother were evidence of a very caring person. "I suppose—"

Irwin was interrupted by a heated exchange of words from below them. Devon and he looked over the precipice's edge at the barney going on between a man and a woman on the lower ledge. The man was older, a bit jowly and with bushy eyebrows; his face was beet red. They could only see the backside of the woman. She had straight red hair, not curled like Devon's.

Both of them were dressed in hiking gear that might as well have had the price tags still on. *Perhaps amateur twitchers*, thought Irwin, spotting the man's binoculars that swung on the strap around his neck. Around Cumbrian lakes and rivers and in the hills and mountains one could often spot birds not found anywhere else in England.

"I will not do that! No way!" Irwin heard the woman say. She then pushed the man over the edge.

"Oh my God!" Devon said.

The woman below moved quickly back to the trail head, descended, and was soon out of sight.

Devon and Irwin reached the lower overlook where the twitcher pair had stood, doing it the fast way by rappelling down Irwin's rope. He looked over the edge and saw the victim's body below draped limply on an outcrop of sharp rocks.

The woman had already passed that spot to the right on her way down. There was no hope of catching her. In spite of her outfit, she seemed to be an experienced climber, careful and methodical, the sign of an experienced hiker.

Irwin checked his mobile. As he expected, there were no bars. Devon's didn't have any signal either.

"We now have a crime scene," he said. "I'll go down and stay with the body. Could you carefully make your way back to the village on the main trail and call the local police as soon as you have a few bars?" She nodded, eyes wide, obviously still in a bit in shock about what they'd

just witnessed. "Your best route is to go back that same way we came up, over to the left from where the woman went down. Be careful."

Irwin moved to his right, cued by the woman's descent. He'd seen the easier route to where the body lay like an offering to the gods of the mountain. Devon watched him, a bit resentful for a moment. *Still acting like my big brother!* She then realized how serious the situation was, berated herself, and headed to her left.

Chapter Two

Almost two hours later, a young man rappelled down from a hovering police helicopter, and Irwin helped him out of his safety harness.

"DS Tim Harding, sir," he said, shaking Irwin's hand. "Also trained in mountain rescues, or in training, as some of the other lads might say. They're going to send down a stretcher so we can hoist the body up. Then you and me will go up in a friendly embrace."

"Let's not waste time then, sergeant."

The operation took place without a hitch. Irwin noticed that Tim had covered the body with a blanket. Irwin couldn't stop staring at it either.

The helicopter landed on a grassy sward in front of a hospital where a large group of people stood waiting.

"DI Robert Mills," said a large, older man who approached Irwin and Tim.

Another handshake. Irwin thought Mills looked familiar.

"There's no real hurry," Irwin said. "The victim's dead. But I suppose your pathologist must examine him."

The helicopter took off again with SOCOs aboard; they would do their forensics magic at the scene of the crime, even though Irwin thought that was an unnecessary risk. He was a witness, after all. *Should I tell Mills that?*

The pathologist's aides carried the victim to the morgue that Irwin remembered was in the basement of the hospital.

Robert eyed Irwin. "Do I know ye, lad?"

Irwin smiled. The old copper had partially figured it out. "You probably don't remember me. You were the constable who confused me with a shoplifter many years ago."

"Irwin Pound?" He nodded. "I'll be damned. Harding, this lad took to climbing like a duck takes to water." He slapped Irwin on the shoulder. "The prodigal son returns to his home base to see how those he left behind are faring?"

"Yes, but not exactly. I'm technically on administrative leave. A bit of a barney in a murder investigation gave me some forced down time."

Robert either didn't want to belabor that point or was too concerned about his own investigation that was just starting up. "You're now somehow involved in another murder. How'd you happen to be on that mountain?"

"Hiking. I'm a witness to that murder. We—I saw it and stayed with the body."

"Good lad. How'd Devon know?"

"I'd just left her at the pub. Didn't have enough signal to reach the station." *A little white lie!*

Robert left that alone too...for the moment. *What had Devon told the police?*

Irwin had already decided not to involve Devon if he could help it. So, once in the valley's substation, as he faced Robert across the table, he wondered where she'd gone. She must have called the police. If she'd gone to the station, would he be caught in a lie if what he told Robert contradicted what she'd told the duty sergeant? He felt no qualms about not involving her. He should be all the witnesses the police needed.

The station was only one of many. The Cumbria Constabulary covered about 2600 square miles with about 200 miles of coastline, all nestled just below the Scottish border. Each station was in a village and serviced many other villages and farms around that. Much of a copper's duties involved sorting domestic squabbles, loaded tipplers, and small-time thievery that sometimes involved stolen farm equipment and animals. During spring and summer months, the population increased significantly with a brisk tourist trade that included many Londoners taking a break from city life. There wasn't much serious crime, so an obvious murder was exceptional.

"Want a mash, lad?"

"A bottle of water if you don't mind, inspector, instead of tea. I just want to give my statement and be done with it."

"About that: I have a few forms for you to fill out while I grab that water and a mash for myself." He pushed the papers towards Irwin. "Fill them out the best you can. The Crown Court might eventually need them if we can find the murderer, you being a witness. A woman did it, you say?"

"Indeed. But let's sort that later. I'll give you a blow-by-blow account, sir."

"Good lad. I'll be right back."

Irwin watched Robert leave the interrogation room and then sighed. It seemed strange to see a murder investigation from the witness's perspective. For all he knew, the old inspector considered him a suspect. And he'd been cleared of that shoplifting charge years ago!

When Robert returned with water and tea, he reviewed the filled-out forms. At one point, he paused and stared at Irwin with bushy eyebrows raised.

"You're currently employed by the Metropolitan Police in London? That's Scotland Yard, lad. What do you do there?"

"A bit of this and that. I'm a Detective Inspector, just like you."

"You're kidding! I didn't make DI until I was forty."

"A victim of my own success, I dare say. And not dying from wounds received in action, which helped my promotions a bit. Attrition and vacancies helped too, I suppose. It's a big city."

"That it is, Irwin, that it is, a busy and dangerous one. A lot more homicides per capita there too, I bet. Good for business, some would say." He laughed. "Well, congratulations, I think. Didn't need you to export a murder to here, lad. But let's get to it. Just tell me your story. Do you mind if I record? Harding's nowhere to be found, and he can't take notes worth a damn anyway."

"Go ahead, sir."

Robert waved a hand, making a circular motion. Apparently a technical aide was assisting behind the one-way mirror.

After Irwin made his statement, Robert walked Irwin to a large open-plan room where the lower-ranked personnel's desks filled most of the available space.

"I'll get Harding to drive you if I can find the prat. Where are you staying?"

"Bradley's Inn on the route into town."

"Ouch. Lots of pub noise below those rooms. Probably a few amorous trysts going on in them as well. Mostly tourists, I imagine, even now. Can't stand'em."

But what would inns and hotels do without them in this otherwise agrarian region? Irwin thought.

"I don't mind the local color. And the noise also reminds me of my little London flat."

"Um, would you consider some collaboration on this case?"

"I'm on forced leave, remember? I wish you good luck, sir, but I came for some R and R. They call it treating my psychological stress."

"I understand. We have the same policy. But keep in touch. And I'll let you know how things are going too."

Chapter Three

Early that evening, Irwin sat on the back porch of the inn, surrounded by cases of ale but enjoying the excellent view of the brooding hills and mountains, the higher elevations now shrouded by clouds as they often were. They offered better vistas than some ladies offering to give him a good time.

A police car pulled up and Robert Mills leaned out.

"My wife wanted me to find you and invite you to dinner Sunday night. Gave me hell for being inhospitable, she did."

Irwin smiled. "Sounds good, sir. I'm already tired of pub food."

"And Bradley's is one of the best, even if it's a tip inside. I'll pick you up at six."

Irwin watched the car drive off, wondering what that was about. He couldn't remember Robert's wife. If he'd never met her, why would she be so insistent? He didn't want to get involved in anything, just enjoy his peace and quiet hiking among his mountains.

Before dinner, he returned to his room and popped a few painkillers. The doctor had said that his knife wound would be tender for a long time. *Did I stress it today during my climb?* That night he'd be having tea with his meal, not a pint. Ale and painkillers didn't mix well.

He knew the Met's policy was a good one. Officers who survived altercations suffered like soldiers on a battlefield. PTSD was an occupational hazard for them as well. He didn't think he had it, but the policy made no distinctions and allowed no exceptions: A few weeks off and then a psych evaluation were standard protocol before going back to active duty. And his super was a stickler for following policy.

He'd taken that superiors' criticism about the errors he'd made well enough because he'd realized the chief was right. Obsessed with nicking the scrote, he'd ignored logic and reason a bit. Even though he admitted to that, he still felt satisfaction that the Crown Court would put the violent fellow away for many years. That would at least give the victim's family some closure.

He tucked into his pub food, using football on the telly to distract him from the same food he'd had the previous evening...and from the pain. The pub didn't have much of a selection, although their food was as good as Mills had claimed.

"Any ID on the victim?" Irwin said, sliding into the passenger's seat besides Robert.

"I've got Toby doing a facial recognition search for him. Prat's not from around here, that's clear."

"No surprise. They looked like—well, like tourists, twitchers maybe. Khakis as new as if they'd just bought them off the rack. Of course, technically I'm also a tourist. Who's Toby?"

"IT intern. Real computer whiz. He's been a useful addition to our IT department."

"Understood." He wasn't going to tell Robert how many IT specialists the Yard had just to go over video footage taken by CCTV cameras in and around London in an effort to be proactive, not reactive.

Irwin received a surprise when they arrived at Robert's rambling white two-story house, complete with its ubiquitous front English garden. Devon and her mum had also been invited. The mother was a bit cranky and didn't seem to remember Irwin, but Devon gave him a peck on the cheek.

"My wife's brother was Devon's father," Robert said in explanation, "so that makes her my niece by marriage."

"We come over every once and a while," Devon said with a smile. "It's good for mother to get out."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here," snapped her mum.

Despite Devon's cantankerous mum—Irwin wished his mum were still around, cranky or not—he had a good time. Devon's being there helped, but everyone made an effort to fill him in on what had happened to old school chums and their parents and relatives. Bobby Richardson, for example, a boy Irwin had a fight with once after he insulted Devon—broke his nose, in fact—was now in prison. He'd gotten drunk and tried to rob a bank. Robert said his defense amounted to stating his girlfriend got him drunk on purpose. The Crown Court hadn't bought it, but he'd be out in a year or so. Irwin was happy he would be long gone when that hothead and nasty sot was released.

Their after-dinner banter was interrupted when Robert had to take a phone call. He stepped into another room to talk.

When he returned, he said to Irwin, "I'd like you to give me some company. Toby has some results, but we've got a skeleton crew on Sunday nights. I need some help, inspector, maybe even in your witness capacity."

Irwin glanced at Devon, who nodded, even though they'd just started chatting a bit more personally about their own old times and possible futures.

"I'll expect overtime pay," he said.

"We'll work it out with the Yard."

Chapter Four

The police substation was mostly dark except for the night sergeant's post near the entrance and Toby's desk in one corner of the main room.

"What do you have for me, lad?" Robert said to Toby, who looked no older than sixteen or so.

"James Talent is the victim's name. He's from Southampton. Popped up on a shipping company's website's personnel list. VP for that company, as a matter of fact."

"What was he doing here so far north?"

"Tourist. Three weeks of vacation. Must be nice to have that."

"I wish I did," Irwin said. "And not the hard way like I got mine. Was he with his wife?"

"Not married." Toby winked slyly at Irwin. "Doesn't mean he didn't have a lady friend along."

"My, how children grow up fast these days," said Robert, taking his turn at winking at Irwin. "Didn't happen to see him at the inn, did you?"

"No, but that's a good idea. We should check places around here where tourists might seek lodging. He had to be staying somewhere, and we now have a name as well as a picture."

"Lots of places and lots of tourists even this time of year." Robert thought a moment. "We'll make a list, ordered in some logical way—maybe customer rankings, seeing that Talent was a VIP and probably loaded—and divide them up between us. I hope you don't mind. That's why I brought you along. I'm a bit shorthanded. Toby, go home now. Time you get your beauty sleep, lad, and I don't want your mum to kill me."

Toby made a face but then nodded. "Yes, sir. Good luck." He handed a photo to Irwin. "Please autograph this, sir."

Irwin took the photo; it was of himself, probably from his Met file.

"Not often we get a DI from London up here, sir. I want to work in the Yard."

Robert frowned; Irwin smiled. *Why not?* He signed at the bottom of the photo with his biro.

"I'll work hard to discourage you from doing that, Toby."

"Um, off with you, lad. And thanks for all your help."

Robert watched the lad go and then eyed Irwin. "Nice of you to do that. He's a clever fellow. Can't hurt to encourage him, I suppose."

"No, sir."

"Stop calling me sir, damn it! Let's get to work, Irwin. We need to make some progress on this case."

They didn't find any lodging having James Talent as guest. Irwin suggested that the tourist might have been staying with relatives and friends. Or using an assumed name. They became busy developing two more lists.

Monday would be a busy day.

Chapter Five

Monday afternoon, DS Tim Harding hit paydirt when he received a call. He rang Mills. The two DIs had dashed off all the way to Penrith to an upscale hotel where the clerk claimed to have a client matching Talent's description. The local television channel had featured the story on the late Sunday and Monday morning's news.

That person-of-interest had turned out to be a traveling pharmaceuticals salesman. Robert and Irwin jumped back in the car and headed back toward the police station. Fortunately the smaller hotel corresponding to Toby's call was in the next village over from it, more like the inn where Irwin was staying, with only eight rooms and no pub.

When they arrived, they examined the check-in log after showing their warrant cards to the woman who ran the place. She seemed nervous, but, like the first establishment, she'd at least called in her doubts about the hotel's guest who seemed to match the picture she'd seen on the telly.

"James Smythe? Sounds like an assumed name to me," said Robert.

Irwin winked at the woman. "She saw past the name, sir."

Robert glared at him. Irwin knew it was for calling him "sir." *But how can I not call him that?* Even though they had the same rank, Irwin respected Robert, who long ago had admitted his mistake in arresting Irwin.

"Have you seen this bloke around here recently?" Robert asked the innkeeper.

"He's still checked in." She thought a moment. "I haven't seen him on my shifts for the last few days, though. There are two clerks here when I can't be. I can ask around if you like."

"No, that's okay. If it's our victim, he won't be around."

She blanched. "He's the murder victim?"

Irwin figured she hadn't followed the story behind the picture. Perhaps the telly's newscast hadn't transmitted all the information? *Young children? Trains?* The inn wasn't far from the small station either, but most trains wouldn't stop, only tooting their whistles as they blew through the village.

"Probably," Irwin said. "Can we see his room? Or do we need to find a judge to get a search warrant?"

"I own this place. I have a policy about visitors' privacy, but in this case, we can ignore it. I can show you Mr. Smythe's room."

She rightly figures the warrant would waste her time as well as ours, thought Irwin. That would rarely happen in London.

"We'll not disturb anything," Mills said, "and we'll ask you and your staff to stay out. If he's our victim, mind you."

"I hope that soon ends so I can rent out the room again."

They followed the owner up to a small room on the third floor. "I'll wait here on the landing," she said after opening the door for them.

With powdered latex gloves and Teflon booties, Mills and Pound searched the room. Toiletries had no special interest for them, but Robert searched through the valise and larger

suitcase while Irwin went through the clothes. Several handkerchiefs bore the monogram J.L.T. The initials obviously didn't match with Smythe. He told Robert.

"Suitcases' initials are J.L.T. too," Robert said. "We'll want to dust them for prints." He then went through the little desk's drawers and then the bin. "Here's something: The name Sara followed by an address and phone number. No town indicated and the exchange could be anywhere in the area. A job for Toby, I'm thinking."

"We're a bit further along at least, Inspector. That is, if Sara is our killer."

"I think we can call in the constables and others helping with the search for now. Mr. Smythe is our victim. We now need to check out this address and mobile number."

"Perhaps he was up to no good," Irwin said, "using an alias. Was he here to kill Sara? Or to blackmail her?"

"A VIP in a major shipping company? Sounds like a stretch. In any case, whoever it was, was angry enough to kill him."

"He could be up to his ears in gambling debt. I had a case like that in London."

"A murder case?"

"An attempted murder case. The target was the man the perpetrator owed money to."

"Ha! Human weakness often rears its ugly head when money is involved. I suppose the prat was lying to his wife about it too."

"No. He was a widower. Nasty bloke, though."

"Can't say the missus drove him to it then." He glanced at the manager pacing in the corridor. "We'd better do a runner before she wears herself out."

They thanked the manager and returned to Robert's vehicle in the nearby car park.

Chapter Six

"Got it!" Toby said.

Tim Harding was soon looking over his shoulder. "Jot that down for me. I'll take it to Mills and Pound."

Tim was a bit nervous as he walked towards his superior's office. It'd been bad enough working for the crusty old inspector; now he had to deal with two. Although Pound was nearer his age and less gruff, the two together made a demanding duo. Of course, Irwin was helping without being paid. *Good of him to do so, but his help sidelines me a lot.*

"Have a seat," Irwin said as he entered Mills's office.

"Got something, lad?" Robert said.

"Town's Penrith where you were. Shall we call the number?"

Robert nodded. There was no answer. The inspector looked at his watch. "The missus signed me up for a mash fest in Windermere. Tim, go with Irwin and check out that address. Don't hesitate to call me. I could use a good excuse to get out of high tea."

"Will do," Tim said, his mood brightening.

Irwin, feeling a bit sorry for Robert and his social life, climbed in besides Tim, who was already at the wheel of the patrol car. He saw himself in the young sergeant, an energetic fellow who was on his way up if life would be fair to him.

"I know the way," he said. "I guess you do too."

"People fished on the lake when I was young, but I was more into hiking. Go for it. Roads have changed, and all that. I'm a bit stressed, if you want to know the truth."

"Didn't count on being roped into an investigation, I imagine."

"I'm supposed to be recovering from a previous one." Tim pulled out into traffic.

Irwin saw the vehicle coming at them before Tim did. "Look out!"

The car crashed head-on into them, airbags deployed, and day turned into night.

"You'll live, Irwin."

He felt a hand pat his, but the voice seemed distant. *Yet familiar?* He opened his eyes to see Devon.

"What - what happened?"

"Someone crashed into your car. There were some witnesses who said a small man in a hoodie ran away from the scene, leaving the hire-car there. Coppers poured out of the station and pulled you two out before both cars caught fire."

"Tim?"

"Banged up a bit more than you are. Broken arm and cuts on his face from windscreen shards."

"I need to talk to him. Maybe he can describe the driver."

"My uncle is with him now. You're staying put until the physician clears you. Tim had a concussion, so you might also have one."

Irwin moved a bit, looking for water on the nightstand. "I think I'm more dehydrated."

"Maybe your mouth is dry, but you were on IV. I just disconnected you. If the doctor gives the okay, you can go. I'll get some ice chips."

She was gone only a moment when Robert showed up.

"Could Tim describe that crazy driver?" Irwin asked.

"Not very well. Said he looked like a young kid with a Man-U sweatshirt, hood and all.

Fake name on the rental receipt."

Irwin thought a moment. "A woman dressed like that might be mistaken for a kid."

Robert raised his eyebrows. "I was writing it off as some lad out for a joyride in a stolen motor. I know what you're thinking, but aren't you being paranoid?"

"I'm helping on the investigation, and I am your only witness. That's maybe two good reasons to try to kill me."

"Okay, I'll give you that. Let me check out this Sara person. That could sort things a bit."

"Didn't the rental clerk ask to see a driver's permit?"

"Not even. And he might lose his job over that, poor prat."

"I want to go with you then."

"Where to?"

"Penrith. We need to find this Sara."

Robert nodded. "I'll ask the NHS pill-pusher if it's okay. I'm going to get hell for having a civilian consultant on this case, so I might as well go all out."

Chapter Seven

Before leaving, Irwin had a call from his superintendent in London—partly a scolding for not relaxing on his administrative leave, and partly expressing some worry about his condition. Irwin wondered how the old man had found out. He asked Robert in the car.

"He's an old army buddy. Small world, Irwin. Had no idea you worked for him, of course. I felt obligated to let him know. He values you, lad."

Robert glanced at Irwin and then back to the road. Robert's hands were white-knuckled on the steering wheel. *Is he imagining our accident?*

"Did he say to tell me I should get off this case?"

"I told him we were short-handed with Tim in the ward, so he okayed it. I had to promise to be your protector."

"You told him my theory?"

Robert laughed. "Didn't say it was yours. He groaned. But there's some logic to it, and so I thought he'd give a little less backtalk thinking it's mine. And be more amenable to lending you to me for a while. Like I said, we're old friends."

"How did you end up here and the super in London?"

"I'm from here; he's from there. We were in a like mindset, feeling compelled after our service to protect our own. He's got the worst of it, in my opinion. Our usual cases around here often reduce to stupid tourists doing stupid things, or locals who become drunk or rowdy. Say, I just thought of something. You know, Tim couldn't imagine climbing up that trail."

"Even Devon can climb that trail."

"Probably not like you can. You have a natural gift for it. I was thinking the Mountain Rescue Team could sure use your skills."

"That would take all the fun out of hiking."

"There's that."

They drove in silence the rest of the way to Penrith.

At that Penrith address, Mills and Pound found an elderly lady tending her front garden. It was nice one that she apparently cared for it a lot. They introduced themselves and showed their warrant cards. She studied Irwin's a bit more.

"Scotland Yard?" Irwin nodded. "My, my, you must be here on important business. We don't get many London plods this far north. Maybe as tourists, but not as cops."

"Do you know anyone named Sara?" said Robert, trying to get everyone focused.

She eyed him with suspicion. "What if I do?"

"She's a person-of-interest in an investigation," Irwin said.

She wiped her hands on her apron. "You'd better come inside." In the dark foyer, she pointed to an open doorway. "Sit in there. I'll bring us a mash and cakes. You can sit anywhere but the armchair over by the fireplace. That's Oscar's."

"Your husband? Is he at home?" Mills said.

"Oscar's my cat. He's out prowling and making his neighborhood rounds now, but when he gets back, he'll be angry if someone's in his chair. Don't have a husband, by the way. Never

did. Men just want you around as a slave to bear their children, and then they become a damn burden when they're old." She pointed a scrawny finger at Mills. "I should warn your wife."

She turned and left, presumably for the kitchen. Mills and Pound entered the sitting room and took seats on a sofa with threadbare upholstery, trying to keep smiles from turning to laughter.

A bit later, the woman returned with tea service for three and tea cakes. "I'm Sara's aunt, by the way, Eleanor Bixby. What's that girl gone and done now?"

"What makes you think she's done something?" Robert said.

Eleanor watched Irwin try a tea cake and smiled as he gave a little sigh. "She's gone several days now. We had a real barney, and she just up and left. That young one can be wild. Can't blame her too much. She just lost her mum, 'twas my sister, and her useless lout of a father deserted the two at a young age."

Irwin had been standing when she'd entered, roaming the small room, examining family pictures. He showed one to the woman. "I'm guessing this is the three of you, you and your sister and Sara?" She nodded even though she was sorting the tea service. "You look very much alike."

"We all sounded alike too. Fortunately, the father's dirty genes didn't affect Sara very much. She's a Bixby through and through, sometimes to my regret."

"Was he by any chance named James Trent?" Mills said.

"Yes. Never knew what became of him, and frankly I don't give a damn. Just confirmed my belief that men are useless, present company possibly being exceptions." She smiled at Irwin but frowned at Robert.

"Do you know if she had any plans to meet up with her father?" Robert said.

"I doubt it, but she might want to give him stick a bit if he ever shows his face around here." She suddenly turned white. "Was he the man who was murdered? I saw that on the local telly station." Both Mills and Pound nodded. "Oh, my. What have you done, Sara?" she asked the tin ceiling. "That's why she's a person-of-interest? You want to question her?"

"We'd like to speak to her, yes. Do you have any idea where she might be?"

"Probably doing a lie-in with some prat she picked up. That's her style. She's one to up her skirt for a pint if the plonker's half-way good-looking. I worry she'll catch one of them diseases."

"And she's not mentioned her father lately?"

"There's a reason she's a Bixby and not a Trent. Her mum went back to her maiden name, so Sara became a Bixby too."

"Once again, can you think of any reason she would meet with her father?"

"Other than to kill him?" Robert nodded. Eleanor thought some more. "I still think my sister's estate's being settled. Maybe that has something to do with it? Damn barristers and solicitors are always mucking up things and dragging their heels to up their fees."

"Is there some reason for the estate not being settled?"

"Not that I know of, except that her mum had quite a bit of money. She was into estate transactions, you know, investing in inns and resorts mostly. Good money in that here in the Lake District if you can find reliable people to run them. Tourists will pay exorbitant prices to be near a river or lake. She started small, but by the end when the big C took her out, she was doing

quite well. Helped me keep this place too, my little sis did. A good-hearted lady who didn't deserve James Trent. Not at all."

Chapter Eight

Eleanor managed to find contact information for the legal establishment handling the mother's estate. The office was in Kendal, another bit of a ride. Mills and Pound ran into tourist traffic, probably mostly park visitors, but pulled into a nearby car park after miles of Robert's swearing in Cumbrian dialect.

Barrister Mark Leam handled the woman's estate, and he happened to be in. The receptionist resisted Mills—Irwin thought he heard the inspector mutter a few more Cumbrian swear words—but then Robert got her attention.

"He can either see us now, or I'll send constables out from the station to bring him in for a wee chinwag. Your choice, madam. This is about murder."

Leam received them, none too happy to be interrupted from doing a crossword in a two-day old *Times* edition. The barrister examined their warrant cards and then gestured towards seats in front of his desk.

"I understand this is about one of our clients. Damn receptionist forgot to say who. Fair warning: Attorney-client privilege means I'm not required to answer your questions."

Irwin glanced at Robert, saw the color rising up his neck, and then tried to head off a confrontation. "We know you're busy. We apologize for the interruption of your important task. I suppose everyone else is in court. Thank you for seeing us, Mr. Leam."

"In court, playing golf, or gone fishing," he said with a thin smile, as if he were making an excuse for his own dawdling. "Junior members of the firm have to pick up the slack. Who's the client?"

"Janet Bixby," said Robert, nodding at Irwin to acknowledge his role as peacemaker...or to compliment him for the barb that the barrister had been oblivious to.

He nodded, and a shock of hay-colored hair fell over his forehead. *Probably doesn't like wearing a wig in court*, Irwin thought. *Do they do that in Cumbrian courts?* He had no experience there because his shoplifting case was settled before it went to court.

"Dead, but still a client. We're trying to sort out her will. It's complicated."

"In what way? Looking for the right words?"

That went by the lawyer too. "Damn fool had more money than God, but she never changed her will. And we can't find her ex-husband. Estranged husband, to put a fine point on it. He disappeared and was out of her life, so she only changed her legal name and never got divorced. Tried to have him declared dead."

"He inherits?" Robert said, now appearing to be a bit more in control.

"Yes, that sod named James Trent inherits if certain conditions are met. The will and the desertion precludes any direct inheritance, but he's still involved. I can't give you any more details because everything's pending and might eventually go to probate court."

"Would it make any difference if you knew he was also dead?"

"It might. Marra, do you have evidence for that?"

The man's eyebrows emphasized that question. Irwin realized they were talking to a local man who wanted to sound like a toff. "Marra," just the local version of "mate," was rarely heard in legal offices, but the man hadn't yet weeded out all of his Cumbrian dialect.

"Didn't your receptionist tell you we're investigating a murder?" Robert said. "Local tellly carried the story."

"That fool twitcher who fell off a cliff?"

Irwin nodded. "He was pushed."

Leam scratched his chin and thought a moment. "I guess he won't be able to meet the conditions then."

"What were those conditions?"

"I might as well tell you now. He had to agree to a conservatorship for his daughter. Janet's sister Eleanor also figures in the will, but Janet, for some reason, trusted the ex more to raise the child."

"What kind of conservatorship?" said Robert.

"Basically running the estate until she reached twenty-five. I believe the daughter's twenty-three now." He sighed. "She's given us no end of trouble ever since mummy dearest passed on."

"Because she wanted everything?"

"On the contrary, because she wanted her aunt to have everything. She didn't want her father to touch any of the mother's money. In a sense, I couldn't blame her for the latter, but you'd think she'd be okay with the old man for the couple of years left."

"Not if she didn't trust him," Irwin said. "Why should she?"

"And all this mess has occurred because the woman was too busy making money to update her will," Robert said. "When did she make it?"

"I believe about ten years ago. I'd have to check for the precise date. The daughter would have been only thirteen."

"Why not make her sister the conservator, considering the circumstances?"

"I don't know. The husband seems to be a cad. We just write in the will what the client wants, as long as it make sense legally. By the way, it was written before I came to work here."

"What do you make of all that?" Robert asked as he and Irwin started the long drive back to the station for the second time.

"That I wouldn't hire Leam to be my lawyer?"

Robert laughed. "I'm talking about the case."

"I know." Irwin gathered his thoughts. "Would Sara have killed her father so Eleanor could have the inheritance? That seems like a stretch. And would Eleanor even want it? Her life seems settled, and she's basically raised Sara without the conservatorship."

"Maybe it wasn't Sara but Eleanor that killed James. They're about the same height. And she could have worn a wig."

"She wouldn't think she needed to. No killer would ever suspect that anyone would be around in that wild spot on the mountain."

"There's that. But find the motivation, find the killer."

"Sara stands to gain, maybe, depending on how the probate court decides, but what does Eleanor gain? And what did James want the killer to do?"

"Were there some other conditions? Janet Bixby seems to have been a smart lady."

"We need to get a warrant for that will. And we also need to find Sara Bixby."

"A few steps forward, and more steps backward. Never seems like a case is easy anymore."

"In the easy ones, there's one victim and a unique suspect." Irwin thought a minute. "I'd like to get a court order for James Trent's financial dealings as well. If he needed money, it changes things a bit."

"He'd use those two years to make some transfers of funds, I bet," Mills said. "Good show." He reached over and patted Irwin on the shoulder. "Sure you don't want to help us out here on a more permanent basis?"

Irwin figured he'd surprise the old inspector. "Let's see how it goes with Devon tonight." Mills glanced at him, smiled, but said nothing.

Chapter Nine

"Let's not talk about work," Irwin said to Devon as they were escorted to their table by the receptionist.

Devon looked more feminine and attractive out of her nurse's uniform and her hiking garb. More formal too. Irwin didn't have much choice. He was still living out of a suitcase and thought that they might not let him into the restaurant because he had no sportscoat or tie, just an old jacket. He was relieved that several male tourists seemed to be in the same boat.

"Works for me. Tell me how exciting living in London is instead."

He shrugged. "Mixed results there, to be honest. There's a lot to do, of course, both days and nights, as far as entertainment goes. I went to a Webber show once with my aunt and uncle. I'm guessing they sacrificed to buy those tickets. It was my graduation present."

"But generally speaking, isn't it busier than here? Aren't you always running on adrenalin?"

"It's exciting sometimes, but I always thought it's probably wiser to mix the slow with the fast. People can do that in Cumbria. It took me a while to adjust to London's hectic pace, and it's taking me a while to adjust back to Cumbria's slower one. The scenery around here isn't manmade and it's beautiful, and the people are more friendly, present company included."

She smiled. "But you're returning?"

"Outside the big cities, positions are scarce. You'd probably have better luck, being a nurse, all throughout the UK, than I'd have. One thing for sure, I'll come back here more, now that it's starting to feel like home again."

"What you say might be true, but I'm stuck here on account of my mum. And I don't think I'd be happy in a big city. Maybe Edinburgh or Glasgow where a short drive takes me to gorgeous scenery that might compete with Cumbria. Argyllshire, for example; we went there on holiday once."

He made a moue. "I often think the best times in my life occurred before my parents died. Exploring Cumbria, raising hell with our group of hellions, sneaking out for a shore party with ale and fish and chips, and so forth. I only became serious in London."

"Young people get more serious as they age no matter where they are. It's called maturing and realizing that there's more to life than fun and games. I suppose that's why most people find someone to share the mature part of their life with."

He laughed. "Always the philosopher. Did you really resent me telling you that you couldn't make some of those dangerous climbs I made?"

"Not for very long," she said with a sigh. "You made me angry about other things too. Like paying too much attention to Mary Barton."

"Mary? What's happened with her?"

"She and her husband have five nippers. She's appropriately a pediatrician, and he's a pilot for British Air. They live in Bristol now."

"Okay. Now tell me why you opted for nursing. I need to test a theory."

Devon laughed. "No wonder you became a detective. I told you about my mum."

He shook his head. "You must have trained for that before she took ill. Here's my theory. In our own way, we both care about people. There's caring for them when they're alive, and there's caring to get them and their families justice when they suffer from violence or death."

"That's a good theory. As good as any, I suppose. But was there one event that determined your choice?"

"My parents' deaths were caused by a hit-and-run driver. I wanted justice for them and got none. I didn't want to become a vigilante, and I had no choice about going to London, but I knew plenty of innocent people had suffered through similar incidents and vicious crimes. That makes my work both rewarding and frustrating."

"Rewarding when you can close a case, frustrating when you can't, I dare say."

"So what's your one event?"

"A beloved vicar. I've never been overly religious, but he was a nice, helpful man in our community. It wasn't long after you left when the Big C took him. I once thought of studying medicine, imagining I could cure cancer, but I came to realize I'm geared more to care for patients rather than working in a laboratory."

"That makes sense. Reverend Mulgrew?" She nodded. "I remember him. I always feared he might be transferred elsewhere. He was very active. My only problem with him was that he told me my parents' accident was God's will. That cliché didn't set well with me."

At that moment, the waiter showed up to take their order. Devon chose a lighter entree; he chose something more substantial because he hadn't had much for lunch. He also ordered a refill of their drinks.

While waiting for their orders, which Irwin presumed would take longer, he continued to catch up more on the people he'd known as he grew up.

Irwin drove Devon to her flat. He felt a bit rueful: It had been a pleasant evening. He'd been able to become acquainted with Devon more, the mature woman more than the young girl, relegating Devon, the freckled childhood friend, to his past. It made him question his future.

It wasn't his near-death experience in the Met that made him consider leaving London. His aunt and uncle had welcomed him into their home, but he'd never felt at home in the capital. After returning to Cumbria, he realized he'd been just going through the motions in London without any particular goals enthralling him.

He wasn't enamored with Devon yet, but he could be. But more than that possibility, it was as if the Lake District was where he belonged. But what would he do to make a living? In the city, cops often left the force to become private investigators of some sort. That might keep him in the business of helping people, but the serious cases were covered by the Met. MI5 generalized that coverage a bit, but he knew nothing about them or how they operated. He just wanted to be a common plod working more at a local level and helping people there.

"I had a great time. The strolling lyre player was a nice touch. Did you understand any lyrics, though?"

He realized Devon was trying to make conversation. He smiled. "I spaced out a bit, wondering about my future. He sang in Irish Gaelic, I believe; the lyre was a harp."

"Oh, so you're into music?"

"A bit. Being a musician is a hard life. I'd bet that fellow has late nights and will be in another place tomorrow night. He was good, but if he becomes too good, the pay still won't match his skills. That's the performing life for you. Not my cuppa."

He stopped in front of the house, exited the hire-car, and went around it to open the door for her.

"You learned some manners in London, Mr. Pound. Want to come in? For a real cuppa, or coffee, if you prefer. Mum might have left some cakes."

He rubbed his stomach. "A bit too much dinner, my lady. The entree would have been enough without the dessert."

"We shared the pudding."

He nodded. "I still didn't need it. I'll be a gentleman. We both need to get up early. I'd love a lie-in with you, though."

She blushed and smiled at his frankness. "There's no hurry. Take your time. But I'm warning you now: I want you. I never wanted to be with anyone else, you know."

Hid turn to blush. "I'll definitely keep that in mind."

He saw her in the review mirror watching his departure. *Marra*, he thought, *I really need time to think!*

Chapter Ten

The next morning at the station, Robert's team began casting a wider net. Sara Bixby was the primary person-of-interest now—not yet a suspect, but someone who might be able to offer a lot of answers to their questions. Because Robert and company had it covered, Irwin called in some favors in Southampton. He'd been on a case there once and become friends with a DCI and a few other plods at that shipping and passenger port.

"We can make it a formal request from the coppers up there, mate," Rory McAdams told him. The DCI's brogue showed his work in southern England was farther from his homeland than Irwin's had been in London.

"Has to be unofficial. I'm here as a guest, you know. Do you have someone who could check the victim's finances on the sly?"

"Thinking that your missing woman felt that her daddy dearest was after her inheritance, are you?"

"That's always a possibility. People with money, want more. And, just because he had money, doesn't mean he didn't want more, although maybe he had some bad habits too—gambling, drugs, you name it. Maybe someone could check on that too?"

"I have a hotshot DS who's closing a case and will have a bit of time to kill while she waits for her promotion to DI. She's like a bloodhound, she is. Brother is too. We have to watch out for these young plods, Irwin, my friend."

He laughed. "That might be how Mills feels about me."

"Say hi to that old fellow. He's one of the good ones."

"I know." Irwin saw the shadow on his borrowed desk. He looked up to see Toby. "Be right with you, lad." The fellow took a chair and waited. After Irwin rang off, he said, "Okay, what can I do for you?"

"We have a CCTV record of her at a rest stop on A74."

"Love those cameras. Sounds like she's heading for Glasgow. Did you check other stops farther along that route?"

"In the process of, sir. Wondered if you knew if she had anyone up there who'd hide her."

"If she's guilty, it's to hide; if not, maybe visiting a relative or friend and oblivious with respect to our search. Let me check with her aunt."

Eleanor Bixby picked up on the third ring. "My second cousin Angus is up that way. Don't know of anyone else from the family she might want to visit—not many left—but she was always secretive about her trysts with questionable men. It could be anyone. Angus is a publican; not the pub's owner, but he runs the place. The Lonely Stag it's called, a bit north of the city."

"Are your people Scotch?"

"Heavens no. We're ex-pat Londoners, Cockneys to be precise. James was always looking even farther south, but most of us here in Cumbria look north, if they're not Vikings gazing across the North Sea."

"I see. Thanks for the information."

Irwin rang off and went to talk to Robert.

"I know a plod up in Glasgow," Robert said. "He owes me a favor. I'll call him. Can you call that damn lawyer and ask him point blank if this Angus is in the will. I can't think of any other reason for Sara to go up there, unless the publican is her new surrogate father."

"I'll do that. I also have some feelers in to a friend in the Southampton area. What would we do without them?"

"If you do this work long enough, you come to depend on friends and a network of questionable blokes who're willing to grass on anyone to increase their dosh. That's how you play the game."

Irwin smiled, nodded, and returned to the common area.

Only moments after he sat, he received a call from Rory.

"Told you that our DS is gung-ho. Your victim was bleeding money. His company forced him to get help with his problem with drugs, and he owed money for bad bets at the racetrack. They've removed him from the payroll now, of course."

"So he wouldn't want his daughter to make life difficult for him in probate. He might even have been thinking of going after the aunt's share too. Thanks. Give your DS a peck on the cheek for me."

"That would get me a good slap or two. We're even now, mate."

"I wasn't keeping score."

"I was." Irwin went silent. "You there? Just kidding, old stick. Good luck with this one."

Irwin called the barrister. The combative receptionist told him he had gone to an emergency meeting in Glasgow. He went to talk to Robert again.

"Um, Sara's headed to Glasgow, and Leam's headed there. Think that's a coincidence?"

Irwin shook his head. "I think your friend there better send someone to check on Angus. I suspect he's in the will too."

"You're thinking we have it all wrong? That she's conspired with the barrister to take all the mother's money. Maybe the story about her making a nuisance of herself at the law office was just a lie."

Irwin now nodded. "Something like that. Or maybe Eleanor's cut is miniscule, and Sara is still fond of her aunt, even though she really doesn't want her to have all the money. The aunt lives comfortably."

"I'll make the call to my friend. You try to call this Angus."

"We'd better warn Eleanor too."

"Do that after warning Angus."

Irwin was getting a lot of exercise with the back-and-forth between Robert's office and the common area. Once there, he called Toby over and asked him to find Angus's contact information. He then called Eleanor.

"Eleanor, you might be in danger, so I wanted to give you a heads up. Do not let Sara or the barrister into your house if either appears."

"What's going on? Did you find Sara?"

"In a way. She's heading for Glasgow now. So is Mr. Leam. I need to ring off and warn Angus."

"I don't believe this! Sara's a hellion, but she's not a murderer! You plods must be thinking she killed her father."

"It's a possibility. We have to sort this out, but it's better to be safe than sorry. I'm going to send two constables out to stay with you until we do sort it. Have them show their warrant cards, of course."

"I guess I'd better get the tea and cakes ready."

Irwin had just disconnected when Toby handed him a note with the publican's contact information.

"Lonely Stag. This is Angus."

"Good I caught you, Mr. Bixby," Irwin said. He explained that he was an inspector from Scotland Yard. "You might have some visitors, hopefully in this order: Some constables from Police Scotland to protect you, and your niece Sara and Mark Leam, who we think mean to do you harm."

"Are you batty? Sara's a relative. She and that barrister friend are doing a holiday getaway to say hi to Nessie. They're stopping in to say hello here. I received their call just before yours. Figured I'd give them some pints and a few sandwiches when they arrive. I'm only here 'cause I'm already on the job, making ready for late afternoon and evening festivities."

"Do you happen to know if you're in Janet's will?"

Angus thought a moment. "Hell if I know. Years ago Janet told me she was splitting everything between Eleanor, Sara, and me, with that lout of a father forced to be Sara's conservator. Heard Janet died but heard nothing about no will, so I assumed she changed it."

"Apparently not. It's possible that Sara wants it all for her and her barrister friend."

"That sounds almost like slander, mate. Do you have evidence for that?"

"For now, it's a theory, but it's better to be safe. Ask to see the constables' warrant cards if they arrive first. In any case, if Sara and that lawyer show up, be careful."

"Okay. Just to be complete, give me your full name, warrant card number, and location." When Irwin gave him the latter, Angus said, "A Yard DI and you're in that poor excuse of a police substation in Cumbria? Why's that?"

"Cumbria is where James Trent was murdered."

There was a silence for a moment. Then: "I see. Damn. Okay, I'll be careful."

Chapter Eleven

Sara Bixby had hated her father, so she felt no loss. He had walked out on her mother when she was a baby. Of course, he'd come back when he needed something from her. It wasn't good enough for him that her mother was dead and could do him no harm. *He wanted to prove paternity to get Sara's inheritance too? Sod that!*

All her life her mum and she'd struggled while that fat cat got rich. *The rich want to get richer, even at the expense of their progeny.* Of course, she didn't know how rich James Trent actually was, but VP in a shipping company? Her mum had ended up well off too, but that was beside the point.

She'd learned he was a twitcher. Maybe someone else had known that? What better way to draw him up the mountain where there'd be a fatal accident! She'd stared at the headlines. There was a witness, some plonker named Irwin Pound. Maybe that prat had sorted things. Otherwise, the plods might try to pin the murder on her.

She'd met Mark at the second rest stop. Once she made a deal with the attendant to park her car there, they continued on to Glasgow. They both thought a good holiday north of the border would relax them a bit before the probate battles began. Why is Eleanor being such a hard ass? And who killed her father? All of this was so confusing. She was lucky that Mark was good at calming her down.

She loved Eleanor who, in many ways, had been more of a mother to her than her own mum. The latter had become distant over time, concentrating more and more on her business interests. Sara thought all that stress might have given her cancer, but maybe that wasn't good medical science? In any case, it hadn't helped after she was diagnosed to have that stress added to that of dealing with the Big C.

"You're quiet."

"Just thinking. You met that fellow Irwin Pound, right?"

"Forget about that. He's a copper too. You'd think he'd be the best witness the plods ever could have, but I guess he couldn't identify your father's killer. I blew them off. None of this is any business of theirs. We're almost there, by the way."

"Thank God. I could use a pint."

Sara greeted Angus with a hug; Mark shook the uncle's hand.

"Not much action here right now," he said. He nodded towards the two at the table.

"Couple of plods there wasting the taxpayers' money, that's all. A few pints to start?"

They nodded, and Angus joined them.

"Is this about Janet's will?" Angus said.

Mark eyed Sara but then smiled at Angus. "Not really. I'm handling that probate case, which will take forever, I dare say, but no, we're just on a holiday together. Nessie beckons. We needed a break from all the Cumbrian intrigue."

"I see. So Janet never wrote a new will?"

"Same one's been in effect since just after Pops left," Sara said. "She never had time. Eleanor basically raised me. You know that."

"Good old Eleanor. She's a strange one, but I guess she's good-hearted." Angus glanced at the rozzers. "I think she'd have killed James if she ever saw him again."

"Not auntie," Sara said. "I know she didn't like pappy. Told my mum so before she married him, my mum would say. Her only failing was being a bit strict with me. Wanted to screen every man I was interested in." She clasped Mark's hand. "I had to get away. She didn't like lawyers either."

"Aye, but we can still toast her," Angus said, raising his mug.

As if that were a cue, Eleanor Bixby entered the bar. The constables sent by Robert's friend moved towards her, but she had a shotgun. She took out both of them and then reloaded, pointing the gun towards the table.

"You've made it so easy for me, Sara."

Bobby MacGregor had decided to visit The Lonely Stag on his way home to see how his constables were doing. He figured Mills had gone down a *cul de sac* on this one. He'd have a few pints with the boys, laugh about it, and maybe call his old friend to give him a bit of lip. But he saw the woman with the shotgun from the window as he came around from the car park.

Mills was nae wrong. *Trouble's a-brewin'*. Then Bobby saw his two constables bleedin' from all over their bodies. *Bollocks!*

His thoughts went into overdrive. He knew Angus well. Could he catch his eye? Between the two of them, maybe they could disarm the old hag. That assumed the constables had been caught by surprise. Angus and he needed to create one for the old witch.

He waved both hands. Angus saw him through the window. He pointed to the door. Angus nodded.

Bobby burst through the door yelling, "The dart master's here!"

Eleanor tried to swing around. It was Mark Leam who smacked the shotgun upwards, spoiling her aim. Then Angus tackled her just like in his old rugby days.

Sara broke down; Mark tried to comfort her. Bobby called his station for backup, pathologist, and SOCOs, while Angus kept his cousin pinned down.

Chapter Twelve

Irwin was allowed to be an observer at the interrogation a day later when the extradition process with Police Scotland was complete. They had everyone but Eleanor Bixby's statement on record by then, thanks to Bobby MacGregor. The four others would be witnesses at the trial, of course. So would Irwin.

Bobby hadn't wanted to interrogate Eleanor. Irwin couldn't blame him. The Scot had the terrible task of telling the two constables' families about their loved ones' demise. That was more motivation for Robert Mills to make sure Eleanor would spend the rest of her life in prison. He scowled at her lawyer, a man he normally respected but considered an enemy at the moment.

Eleanor had confessed nothing. Her short time in jail there and the trip south might have changed her mind about talking. She sat with head tilted down toward the scarred table top. Robert and Tim faced her. Irwin sat in the corner, deciding to say nothing unless asked.

"Eleanor, you can help your situation if you talk," Robert said after informing her of her rights yet again and stating names of those present for the taping. "We know you had your reasons for committing these crimes. If you admit to them and explain them, it will be in the record. Otherwise, you will receive the full punishment for them that the Crown provides."

She glanced at her lawyer. He shrugged. He's probably thinking this was a waste of time. *With five witnesses against her for three murders and two or three attempted ones, he probably thinks hers is a lost cause*, Irwin thought.

"Please be more specific," she said to Robert.

"I can't be," he said. "It's not my decision. It's the Crown Court's. But in cases like this, they consider all pertinent information."

She nodded and began a tale of woe filled with hate and frustration. She'd killed James. She'd been wondering how to do that ever since she'd learned what was in Janet's will, a three-way split between her, Angus, and Sara, the latter via the conservatorship. It had enraged her that her sister preferred James to her for taking care of her daughter. Eleanor had taken care of Janet's brat for many years, after all. She'd then went on to conclude she deserved it all.

James had set things in motion. She knew the lout was only interested in Sara insofar as he could drain all of Sara's assets. He'd even asked Eleanor to help him ensure that the probate went his way. After thinking about it, she contacted him, impersonating Sara, and lured him to that ledge where she revealed herself and killed him.

The next part of the plan was to find a way to kill Sara and Angus. She'd learned about Sara and Mark's little planned holiday in Scotland and suggested they visit Angus and say hi. Her niece had always liked the old publican, perhaps because he was a kindred spirit. Mark Leam would have just been collateral damage in the old woman's plot.

At the end, Eleanor broke down, shedding tears of rage. Irwin knew he was observing extreme mental illness. That might be Eleanor's best defense. She needed a better lawyer to pull that off. *Would it be out of place for me to suggest that to Sara, now sole heir of her mother's estate, to provide such a barrister?*

"So...did you make that suggestion to Sara?" Devon said, putting her glass of wine down and smiling at Irwin, her smile enigmatic as if she'd discovered a secret.

"And she will act upon it. She loves her aunt despite everything that happened. Believes Eleanor needs a good psychiatrist as well and not necessarily time in jail. We agreed the latter would only make her worse right now. Who knows what the Crown Court decides and whether that same mental help will put her in jail after all when she's declared sane."

"Yes, if she gets well, they might still put her in jail. You've done your best." She patted his hand. "And I think it's typical of you. We both care. How is Sara, by the way?"

"Still stunned a bit. She had no idea all this was going on, apparently. I hope that top barrister won't think hiring him is a guilt trip because she did. I told her to blame me in that case. Mark is good for her, I suppose. He might be a slimy lout, but if anyone can bring her out of her funk, he can. That funk occurs a lot when someone tries to kill you, of course, especially when it's someone you love. It has to create doubts about whether that person really loved you at all."

Irwin eyed her as she took another sip of wine, her eyes over the rim of the glass twinkling at him. "I'm going to be a bit bold and make a suggestion for dessert," he said.

"We don't have dessert menus yet. You can't have been here before. This place only opened three years ago."

"I was thinking of dessert at your place. The amorous kind." He smiled. "Isn't your mum at your aunt and uncle's. Up to you."

"That's a good suggestion. We'll see where my mind's at after dinner."

Her enigmatic smile gave him some hope.

A month later, Irwin stepped off the train and saw Robert Mills waiting for him. "Welcome back. Come along with me. That estate lady is waiting for you."

As they drove to the new development not far from the station, Irwin wondered how to begin a conversation.

"I suppose you wouldn't have done it," he finally said.

"Done what? Buy a condo unit when you might need a house down the line. It's always a good investment. In the worst case, you could pay it off just by renting it out to tourists one or two weeks at a time when they come north to play in the Lake District. It's a lot cheaper for them than paying for an inn or a hotel, or going to the Cotswolds, for that matter."

"Nice speech. I meant pulling up stakes in London to take a lower position here."

"Are you blaming me for that. Harry will be retiring in eight months. That's a DI position opening up. Our DCI likes you, lad. And with your background, you're way ahead of any other candidate. Assumes you can stand working with me for eight months, of course."

"Did you give Tim my best?"

"An even exchange from his point of view, but I think he'll get tired of London. Like you, there's too much of Cumbria in that boy. That's it, isn't it?"

"Most of it. I want to see if my relationship with Devon blossoms a bit."

"Take that slow. You both have tough jobs. In a sense, that's good. Couples who see too much of each other can get on each other's nerves."

Irwin smiled. "But the prodigal son still needs to return home, no matter what happens."

Poetic Justice

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Chapter One

The constable was amiable and chatty, but Declan O'Hara only half-listened to the Cockney's rambling discourse after the fellow had taken his statement, especially when the woman approached him. Her grim look matched her business-like attire, a modest power suit one might see in any of London's corporate towers, places Declan avoided if at all possible.

He'd watched her directing two others, a man and woman and presumably lower-ranked detectives like DC Ezra Harris. She apparently gave the stereotypically nondescript plods their marching orders to go knock on doors around the neighborhood. *But what stereotype works for coppers?* His father had looked nondescript once he'd been promoted beyond patrol in the Gardai. Some, especially those who worked undercover, might think that was a plus.

He'd expected one bobby max to arrive and felt a bit guilty but pleased Scotland Yard had sent a whole team. *Maybe because the neighborhood was a bit chichi?* Except for his favorite pub, he didn't fancy it. He certainly couldn't afford to live there.

He'd felt duty-bound to call 9-9-9. He was standing outside the pub, sorting a few lines of poetry in his head and wishing for a fag, when an older woman came out of a building—he thought it was number forty-nine, although it had no number and was only sandwiched between forty-seven and fifty-one, possibly indicating even a more posh residence. A sleek black car drove up beside her, and a bloke jumped out to grab her and wrestle her into the backseat. As it drove off, he memorized the plate number and called the police.

After DS Margaret Bent flashed her warrant card, that was exactly what he told her, mostly repeating his statement the Cockney had already taken.

She had tight brown curls and expressive brown eyes. She wore her hair short and had little or no makeup. A short face made her eyes seem even bigger, and they seemed to bore into him as if she were trying to read his mind. *Good luck in there, copper. It's an overgrown jungle.*

The loose power suit and sensible pumps showed she was a practical woman, valuing comfort over flair. Declan found her simplicity attractive. Other men might not even turn their heads. *Maybe that's what she wants?*

He had met plods like her when his father was more active in the Gardai. They had to be serious and aggressive in the man's world of traditional policing. None of that said anything about their competence, but his previous experience told him that was more likely than not because of that competition.

"How much did you have to drink, Mr. O'Hara?"

"Only a pint to accompany dinner. That's all I allow myself on a weeknight."

"I'll check that with the publican, you know."

He shrugged. *What's your problem, lady?* "Be my guest. His name's Leonard. If he likes you, you get to call him Leo."

"And why were you standing out here on the kerb?"

"Imagining I'd stepped out for a fag."

"Imagining?" She eyed the butts strewn along the gutter.

The area, in spite of being ritzy, apparently hadn't seen streetsweepers lately. Or they couldn't keep up with the pub's clientele, something that must irk those living in the upscale residences.

"I've been clean for almost eight months. I get the craving after meals, so I imagine having one. I hate nicotine gum and the patch, so I went cold turkey." He smiled. "Makes sense if you think about it, especially if you're a smoker."

"I'm not."

"Lucky you."

"No others out here having a fag, imaginary or otherwise?"

"Just me. Early hours. The Golden Goose gets more lively later. At least that's true on the weekends."

"I'll need you to come in and make a statement tomorrow. One last question: What's your profession, Mr. O'Hara?"

"I'm a writer."

"And your employer?"

"I'm freelance. Mostly assignments for several 'zines. I also do a bit of poetry and prose on the side, which doesn't pay well."

One of the canvassing constables approached them.

"We only got a few responses to our knocks, Guv, including forty-nine," he said. "Most tenants are probably still at work. Those who answered didn't see anything. No woman. No car."

"Any comments, Mr. O'Hara?"

"I guess I'm your only witness, Margaret."

She frowned. "It's Sergeant Bent, if you don't mind. We'll take your formal statement tomorrow."

Declan watched her walk off with her constables, including that Cockney master of blather and twaddle, who looked back over his shoulder and winked at Declan.

He interpreted that as a silent declaration: *Imagine working for this demanding woman.* Declan agreed, but he also thought that here was a woman who hid her passion for life to make a go of it in a male-dominated world. He doubted the Met differed much from the Gardai in that respect.

He headed to the tube station to make his way home. He had an article to edit and a poem to finish. The latter was still in his thoughts; the article, not so much. Editing was the worst part of writing, if he excluded the marketing of his novels.

The next morning, after submitting the article about the new border clashes between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, a problem the last PM had created with Brexit—he'd almost passed on that assignment, figuring he might become pigeon-holed as the Irish freelancer—Declan made his way to the nearest police station. DS Bent's card had provided the address, but she hadn't fixed a time. He was hoping to avoid her.

Should I call that a business card? He had none, considering them old-fashioned, but he supposed the Met was run like a business, the profit motive being the number of crimes solved; and it was probably more rigid than most corporations. He didn't see Bent, which suited him just fine. The same chatty constable gave him forms to fill out and sign and then sat him down in what looked like an interrogation room, an unwelcoming space with some AV equipment in the corner, that entire ensemble reminding him of why he'd considered himself lucky to avoid rozzers until then.

He easily filled out the forms. It was the same information he'd given the Cockney for the most part, and he'd practiced the night before because, after finishing the edits on his article and writing out his poem, he'd written an entire scene based on what he'd seen, thinking it might be of use someday in a new novel. He was also already thinking about changing his main character, a male, to a kick-arse female detective like Bent, ice cold and far too serious.

She showed up just as he finished to review the forms, making him think someone had been spying on him. *The Cockney*? He glanced at the dark glass at the end of the room. *One-way mirror*?

She sat opposite him, hair a bit awry with curls like springs, and dressed in a similar suit, light green this time, not light purple. He preferred the light green but would resist telling her so.

After reading his statement, she frowned at him.

"Still sticking to your story, Mr. O'Hara? Sure it isn't taken from one of your novels?"

"Please call me Declan. I did jot it down after the fact and edited it. I collect snippets like that—descriptions of scenes, ideas for characters, plot and theme ideas, and so forth. I'm happy to hear that you researched me. I can give you a free ebook of your choice in return for an honest review."

"I never choose my reading material by looking at reviews. Most on Amazon are useless—nothing but a few lines of no consequence. And I don't have much time to read."

"I suppose looking for that promotion to DI takes a lot of extra work." She frowned again. He knew he'd hit a nerve. "Sorry. That came out wrong." He shrugged. "I know what I saw, DS Bent. Maybe witnesses don't come forward because rozzers don't listen to them? If that poor woman shows up dead, it's on Scotland Yard."

She scanned the papers again. "Mercedes motorcar? And you also remembered the plate number?"

"Your chatty colleague took all that down at the scene. I have a good memory." He tapped his head. "Sometimes I wish I could defrag my hard disk. Lots of useless stuff in there now."

She now smiled. "You do have a way with words, Mr. O'Hara. Let me see if DC Harris checked on that plate. Bear with me for a moment." She soon returned. "Maybe a bit of support for your story: That Nazi car was stolen. Often happens when criminals need a fast and reliable ride."

"I'm surprised your team didn't find anything out in forty-nine. Perhaps they should now check again to see if any tenants are missing?"

She nodded. "Perhaps. That could go a long way to identify the victim as well." She half-stood and offered to shake his hand. "Thank you for being a concerned citizen."

He stood, turned to leave, but stopped at the door, turning back to her. "Could you let me know if you get anywhere on the case?"

"Perhaps," she said again. "Don't press your luck. At the moment, you're more than a witness; you're a person-of-interest and possibly a suspect." She thought a moment while she smoothed down her jacket. "I'm the SIO on this case for now, and others, because we're a bit short-handed. We have to live through our budget's ups and downs. My DI is more a DCI, and I'm more a DI, temporarily. We're very busy, to say the least. Please have some patience. Crime is up since Covid. It's like the criminals hunkered down and are just now waking up, anxious to make up for lost time. Why am I telling you this? Because most people don't understand our plight."

He nodded. "I'm not most people. My father was active in the Gardai in County Donegal."

She gathered up the papers. "How did you become a writer?"

"My mother's the artistic one. Poet and musician mainly, in the tradition of Turlough O'Carolan, I like to think, though not nearly as famous. She plays the harp, of course."

"An interesting pair, your parents. Are they still alive?"

"Yes, but a bit doddering. My father's still somewhat active helping to train new recruits for the Gardai, and my mother's still writing a bit, but arthritis has affected her harp playing. And there you've got the rest of my background you didn't find on the internet."

"I had to research you to see if you're a reliable witness. Most people aren't, you know. I have no interest in your personal life beyond that. 'The bombers no longer maim and kill, but Eire still feels the blight, a victim of the English still, and all the crown's might.' Have a good day, Mr. O'Hara."

He walked out of the room smiling. *No interest?* That verse was from his first published poem that appeared in a magazine the year before he'd graduated from Trinity College. His views had changed somewhat. He'd decided the English were just as much victims of their past as the Irish; that was a more national, or even international, perspective. *It's called maturity*, he thought.

Chapter Two

DC Ezra Harris eyed his temporary boss. "Cor blimey, Guv, that Irish plonker seems like a live one. I read your report. Fancies himself a Flann O'Brien, I dare say."

"That's a pen name, Ezra. You're talking about Brian O'Nolan. And Declan O'Hara hasn't written any plays. Do you have something for me on the case? We need something, or we're going to drop it."

"Old woman in forty-nine says her neighbor on the fourth is missing. A Rebecca Gilby."

"Missing since when?"

"Two weeks ago. Maybe she came home and left again?"

"It's possible. Let's you and I take a look, shall we?"

One day Bent hoped they could forego personal interviews and have videos in every room in every residence of the UK. It would save her a lot of time. Of course, more personnel would be better. She still smiled at the first thought while holding on as Harris turned a corner. Putting those thoughts into words would most certainly cause protests from the far-left. She could see them now, calling it Orwellian. As if Orwell could imagine all the videocams already posted around London. 1984 had passed them by; 2084 might be horribly worse. Winnie had fought the fascists last century in WWII in the UK as well as abroad. She didn't really want a police state in the twenty-first century.

4C at forty-nine was one of three flats on that floor. She took out her tools and knelt to examine the lock. Anyone complaining would have to face her usual and generally accepted argument of probable cause—there might be a body in there, after all. And Ezra never had a problem with it. Latex gloves and Teflon booties were donned before entering Gilby's flat.

It was small and neat but didn't look lived in recently. Three suitcases in the entry hall added to that perception and somewhat confirmed Ezra's suspicion. Their tags had the initials R.G. and Ms. Rebeca Gilby was on several items of mail that had been left unopened.

"Something spooked her." She spotted more evidence for that. She picked up the moby from the floor. "Bag." Ezra offered a plastic bag and sealed it after she dropped the mobile into it. "We'll need Archimedes to do his thing." He was one of their techno-wizards who usually could break into any electronic device.

As she wandered around the apartment, Bent noted that Gilby was a reader. Four books were stacked on the table by a recliner, and several small bookcases were full of popular fiction. She noticed one of the books was a thriller by none other than Declan O'Hara. She didn't believe in coincidences in general but thought that certainly was one. She thumbed through it.

They found nothing else of note beyond the suitcases, mail, and mobile. Ezra bagged the mail too, and they left. By the time they arrived back at the station, she'd forgotten about the book.

Just after lunch, Archimedes approached her. Bent had developed a profile of Gilby, who was a PA for a barrister of some repute, not all his fame good. He'd saved too many criminals a lot of prison time. His only good quality was that he looked a bit like a white-haired Clark Gable. How she loved those old movies!

Alexis "Archimedes" Danielopoulos's tight brown curls nearly matched hers, but his blue eyes seemed to twinkle, as if he were remembering some good jokes. His hours were chaotic, but he'd been in house when she and Ezra had returned.

"Any luck?"

"It's never luck, Maggie." He handed several pages of computer printout to her. "One text message stood out. Someone with the handle Popcorn sent 'Run!' to her. Apparently, she didn't do it fast enough?"

"Can you find out who Popcorn is?"

"Already started the process, but it might take a while. None of my shortcuts worked."

She didn't want to know what those shortcuts were, figuring they were akin to her lockpicks. "Work on that then...in your spare time."

"I don't have any spare time. I gave this priority because it was your request. You kept my secret quiet until I came out."

"'Twas none of my business. I never thought much of that feekin' law anyway. No wonder the one that overturned it is nicknamed 'Turing's Law.'"

Archimedes smiled. "Off the dais, Maggie. It's no longer necessary."

"Thank God. Let me know immediately if you find anything else." She waved the printout. "I'll scan this just in case."

After doing her scan and finding nothing important besides what Archimedes had noted, she added a profile of Gilby's workplace and the partners that ran the legal practice to the case file on HOLMES, the UK-wide database used by the police.

"Chased down where Gilby was," Ezra told her a few minutes later. "'Aruba, Jamaica, oh I wanna take ya...!'"

"So, which one? Aruba or Jamaica?"

"Jamaica. Has a darkie for a boyfriend, the old gal."

Bent stared at Ezra. Many of her countrymen were closet racists. *Is Harris one?* He had to know about Archimedes. She decided to ignore what he'd said for now. "Do you have a name?"

"Ron Babbitt. Has form. One internet handle is 'Babbitt the Rabbit.' Reformed thief turned private investigator. Has handled some investigations for the barristers who employ Gilby."

"Probably where they met. Maybe not pertinent, but we should talk to him."

Babbitt's studio was a tip, especially compared to Gilby's neat flat, but it looked similar in that a valise and suitcase had been dropped in the entrance way. Dirty dishes were in the sink and the trash bin reeked with its overflow of takeout bags, boxes, and liquor bottles. Maggie figured the man hadn't cleaned up before the trip and hadn't time to do so when he returned. *Did he scarper too, only to be caught? Was Gilby's text message from him?* There had been no pic associated, but was he Popcorn in addition to Babbitt the Rabbit?

The search of his place took a bit longer because it was more of a mess, but the only thing she found of consequence was a large framed picture of Gilby on his nightstand, which was an inverted cardboard box. But Ezra discovered some war souvenirs on the top shelf of the man's closet. They included a medal.

"Bloke served in Afghanistan," Ezra said. "I wonder if he knew Prince Harry."

"Bring the box from the closet and bag this picture. I'm going to use the picture to show O'Hara to see if Gilby is the same woman he saw."

"That would give us a good start. Shall I assume we're looking for two missing persons now? How romantic!"

Maggie nodded. "As long as it's neither a romantic comedy nor tragedy." Once in the corridor outside the small flat, she took out her mobile and called Declan. He'd finally be of some use in the investigation.

She rang off with a smile on her face. Ezra had heard her brief words.

"You look like the cat who ate the canary," he said.

"Our Irish bard just invited me for drinks...I think. Now I'll have to find out who Turlough O'Carolan is, damn it."

"Good luck with that. Those Celts have all kinds of folk heroes. Most of them think St. Paddy's Irish when he was really a Briton."

"So you're a history professor now?"

"No, Guv, but my uncle served in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Looking like we're heading in that direction again, I dare say. Johnson really knew how to create havoc."

"Running a country probably isn't easy."

"There's that."

Chapter Three

"Sorry. I can only make it later. I have a reading at an art gallery at two. Can I meet you for drinks after work?"

There was a silence. Declan waited. *Is Bent thinking about it? No respect for the life I lead? Did she think that my suggestion would be too much like having a date?* Finally: "Sure, why not? Pick a place."

He gave her that information, the Aviary in Finsbury Square on the tenth floor of the Malcolm Hotel, a place more upscale than The Golden Goose; a restaurant, in fact, with a good bar and a marvelous view. He'd have to take some money out of the ATM.

As he headed for lunch, he was smiling. Maybe DS Bent wasn't above mixing a little pleasure with work. He wasn't trying to impress her, but he'd just been paid the full contract sum for his article about Irish border skirmishes and wanted to celebrate a bit. Always one to stay focused, though, his thoughts turned to his poetry reading.

He had little hope for any success at The Masters Gallery. The owner had paired him with a better-known bloke, a Brazilian painter named Ricardo Silva. Declan didn't know much about him but thought his own "act" would just be a lead-in for Silva's main attraction. Or the owner thought the artist might stumble a bit and wanted to ensure her afternoon function wasn't a complete loss? She'd probably spent some money on it and time organizing it. At least he'd have free canapes and white wine, although he didn't fancy wine very much.

He hadn't yet visited the gallery, so he didn't know anything about the event's setup either, except he would go first. He left the Tube in what he thought was the general area in central London, entered a coffee bar, and asked the barista for directions after ordering. He'd been led astray far too much in London with street closures and obscure routes through old neighborhoods.

: "A bit difficult to find, mate. I only know because the woman who owns it is more famous than her gallery."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"A while back, she helped thwart a terrorist attack, she did. BBC made a documentary about it. She didn't appear in it, though. Always wondered if she ever got money from Bristol for that. Wouldn't put it past them to stiff her."

"Bristol?"

"Where they made the doc-u. I saw it on streaming after the fact. Good show. One for us against them ISIS bastards."

"I see."

Declan followed the barista's doubtful directions, but he was spot on. He looked at the facade of the gallery. Red brick with windows in white trim, a building like most on the block. But the window was wide enough for him to take in the arrangement. Things had been moved around to create space for an audience and a small dais had been placed in front for the two speakers. Off to the side were two buffet tables. *It'll do*, he thought.

Esther Brookstone, The Master Gallery's owner, turned out to be a gracious host, introducing her guests to Declan and Ricardo as the trio circulated among the small crowd. Two

women from Esther's crew were busy handing out canapes and pouring white wine for those in attendance.

Declan had met Ricardo first, in another coffee bar near the gallery, as it turned out. The painter had been killing some time there, not wanting to be too early for his appointment with Esther. The Brazilian told Declan he leased a large loft in a seedy part of Manchester, although his abstract paintings turned out to be smaller than the large canvases one might expect would require such a large work studio. About all Declan could appreciate were the chaotic patterns and color choices. Not even the titles made sense to him.

Ricardo didn't much care for London, but Esther had helped him secure a solid reputation in the competitive art world. He was thin like Declan but taller. Brookstone wasn't short either, both were taller than Declan, and she was of an indeterminate age. Declan thought Ricardo's tattooed swarthinness and punk hairstyle would fit in nicely at a Manchester United vs. Manchester City football match, whereas Brookstone must have been a stunner as a young woman and looked the part of a patron of the arts.

She reminded him even now of an older-version DS Bent, what the copper might become, at least as the pleasant and affable yet serious woman the detective could be if she put her mind to it. He was surprised to learn that Esther had also worked for Scotland Yard and her husband for Interpol.

Neither Esther nor Ricardo had any problem with Declan's brogue, even on the telephone, but there were enough Irish ex-pats in the UK, especially in London, that made that no surprise. He remembered Bent's Cockney DC. The UK was full of people with strong dialects and accents, and London, at least before Brexit and Covid, had been a cosmopolitan capital, certainly more so than Dublin.

Ricardo winked at him occasionally as they made the rounds and bonded more as artists who had to tolerate toffs with their lorry-loads of money. Declan thought there were one or two critics among the guests too, but he thought that they were there more for Ricardo than for him. And there might be a few reporters as well.

From atop the little dais, Declan surveyed the expectant faces after Brookstone's formal introduction. With his prodigious memory, he would have no problem remembering his own words. He began, concentrating more on varying his volume and making dramatic pauses, turning simple poems into powerful drama. He explained his motivation for writing them, especially those about Irish history and landscapes, but the audience seemed more mesmerized with some poems about northern England and southern Scotland, Cumbria and Argyllshire, to be specific. In these, the landscapes became main characters talking of the regions' history. When he finished and made a bow, there was silence...and then enthusiastic applause.

Declan hadn't been sure what the Brazilian would talk about, but Ricardo had equal success. He spoke about his childhood in Rio's *favelas* and how he'd fled across the Atlantic to England to be free of the oppressive Brazilian autocracy. He then "explained" several of his paintings on display that he said were celebrations of life, love, and freedom. Declan had a hard time understanding what Ricardo meant, but he saw several old wrinklies with their eyes closed, nodding in agreement with his new friend's strongly accented words, as if he were a traveling preacher at a religious revival.

Declan also didn't understand the audience's response, but it rewarded Ricardo with thunderous applause. The Irishman supposed the Brazilian didn't understand the response to Declan's presentation either. They had to at least give the audience credit for appreciating two very different art forms, painting and poetry. Brookstone had engineered a coup with the gallery's afternoon event.

As if to prove that, audience members bought several paintings, some not even Ricardo's, and copies of the book containing Declan's poems, including the ones he'd orally presented; some even bought both, although the price differential meant more books were sold than paintings. The buyers of the paintings afterward arranged for the delivery of their purchases that were far too large to carry; the book buyers carried their purchases out with them. Esther then organized her help to start on cleanup and reorganizing the gallery space and accompanied Declan and Ricardo to the rear of the gallery.

"Ricardo knows I'm not keen on hosting these events," she said to Declan, "but I think this one was quite the success. It's also a first, I dare say: Combining poetry with paintings. My husband Bastiann's idea, by the way. What do you think? Was this worthwhile?"

"It's not just about selling a few books or paintings," Declan said with a smile. "It's about branding. Making ourselves and what we do as creatives known to the public."

"I agree," Ricardo said. "There were two reporters in the audience."

"I saw them. And critics." Esther beamed at them. "That quartet could throw the gallery a few kind words our way too, hopefully positive, but even the negative catches people's attention."

"Going negative would seem to belie the audience's reaction," Declan said. "The applause was more than just polite."

"They at least appreciated the novelty of the situation," Ricardo said. "Good show, mate. You were a tough act to follow. I'll admit I didn't understand much, but English is my second language."

"Mine too," Declan said. "My first was Gaelic. We lived in County Donegal."

Chapter Four

"Sorry I'm late." DS Bent took her chair across from Declan after shaking his hand and was immediately captivated by the view of London at night. "Are you trying to impress me?"

"Just hoping you will help me celebrate the sale of my article for a nice piece of change and the sale of a few copies of my poetry book, although that's overwhelmed by the overall success of that gallery event."

"Congratulations. No saving for a rainy day, eh?"

"If you think I'm a Bohemian, you should have seen the Brazilian painter, Ricardo Silva."

"I've heard about him. Never about you." That hurt a bit, but he made no comment; it was a fact. "What are you drinking?"

"A Southwick's ale, but please order what you want." She ordered a G and T. "I'm supposing our meet here isn't all for pleasure?"

"Pleasure, except for one quick question about my case, that's all." She removed an envelope from her large purse, took a photo out, reversed it, and slid it toward him. "That her? The woman you saw kidnapped?"

He nodded. "Any news about that case?"

"Now we're beyond one question. Let's get past the hors-d'oeuvres, at least. I'm in the mood for bacon. Any recommendations?"

"Broiled asparagus wrapped in bacon?"

"You've been here before?"

"Two invitations from 'zine editors. They were using up their per diem, I think. I came down from up north to meet them here. That was before face-to-face meet-ups went out of style. of course. Here's the waitperson."

They chatted more about life histories and goals until the dinner ended and they waited for coffee and dessert. He then repeated his question. She told him about Gilby and her boyfriend and their disappearances at the same time.

"That's too much of a coincidence. Seems like someone was after them both. They might be dead."

"And here I thought I was the one who all too often is called Ms. Doom-and-Gloom. There are no bodies, Declan."

"Yet, but that's segue to a good question: Why bother to kidnap them if they were just going to kill them? Perhaps they had information someone badly wanted. Have you contacted Jamaican authorities? The country's a commonwealth realm, after all. The King could query the governor directly."

"Writers always have interesting imaginations. Can you imagine King Charlie doing something so plebeian?"

"You know what I mean. Your top cop talks to their top cop. Probably can't get it done otherwise."

He could see that she was considering his suggestion. They were interrupted by dessert.

Through dessert and coffee, the conversation changed to become more of a first-date chinwag.

"Where do you live, Declan?" Maggie said.

By then she had dropped the more formal DS Bent for the evening, although he couldn't remember at what point. He'd taken it in stride he hoped, although she still seemed a bit stand-offish.

"Mostly in public libraries or bookshops."

"I mean your abode, where you sleep."

He hesitated. "I have a flat." He rattled off address and telephone number and told her how to get there from The Golden Goose via the Underground. "I have a combination living-dining room with a galley kitchen on the side which leaves me good space for my music system. I use one bedroom for a study and the other for sleeping. That's all I need."

"No telly?" He shook his head in the negative. "Do you cook?"

"Sometimes. Why all these questions? Planning a rescue mission because I'm a witness? Will they come after me now?"

"Always a possibility. Beyond that, one, your answers assure me you're a reliable witness and not just a crazy, reclusive writer lost in his fantasy worlds. Two, I want to see if your set-up is better than mine. I'm nearer my place of work, but that comes with a lack of space, and I'm guessing the rental fee for my studio is on a par with your place's lease."

"Understood. I'd prefer that you don't live near me, though. You might want to bounce ideas off me about a case at odd times." He said that with a smile, trying to head off a bad reaction. Maggie Bent had a short fuse.

The rejoinder still came. "Don't you really mean I'd crimp your style with your other female friends?"

At least she said other. "I haven't had much luck in that department, to be honest. Some people might even think I'm gay. Even intelligent people often pigeonhole other people in ridiculous ways based on stereotypes. Like, Muslims are terrorists, Irish writers are either gay or sots, and so forth."

"And plods are stupid. I only know of one gay Irish writer."

He raised an eyebrow. "At least you recognize the importance of being earnest."

She laughed. "That's a terrible joke that probably has Oscar Wilde spinning in his grave over in Paris. I should visit Dublin one of these days."

"The west coast and south are a bit more picturesque...and have better pubs. Just my biased opinion, of course. After all is said and done, though, I like County Donegal best. It appears you're well read. I doubt they emphasize that when training plods. My father would consider it a great joke."

"With the graduate entry scheme, one has a shortcut to detective status. I took advantage of that. I was never in patrol."

"I bet you'd look good in uniform." She blushed a bit. "Don't take that as flirtation. My sis looks sharp in her uniform. She hopes to get promoted out of patrol soon, though. I think Da is very proud of her, maybe more of her than me. He's never understood my obsession with writing. He likes my articles, though, a lot better than my poetry and prose. Wanted me to work for *The Irish Times*. I considered it, but here I am."

"I was the middle child, male and female siblings above and below. My sisters are nuns and my brothers are priests."

"Your family must be Catholic too. Did your parents want you to be a nun?" Declan thought that would have been impossible—Maggie was too worldly.

"Mum did. But I wanted nothing to do with that. I wanted to help people more directly, out and about in the community, so I guess I could have been happy as a priest, but the Church is sexist as hell and dominated by old misogynist men...like my brothers! I flipped a coin to choose between EMT and copper. EMT won, so I chose copper to give stick to fate."

"Aha! We're kindred spirits in that sense. Da always said I'd never make good money as a writer, that a life of poverty would be my fate."

"Do you make money as a writer? Beyond what's needed for this repast?"

"Enough to get by, and it's getting better, but I fear writing articles will soon take all my time. One 'zine wanted to send me to a war zone to get background for an article. I turned that assignment down. The Irish had enough war during the Troubles."

"That's picking up again, thanks to Johnson."

"Don't I know it! County Donegal snuggles up against Northern Ireland. Londonderry is too near."

Chapter Five

DS Bent awoke to a pleasant masculine voice saying, "Rise and shine, sleepyhead. You have police work to do."

That was repeated until she smacked the offender, her alarm clock. *Damn thing sounds like Declan without the brogue!*

In the shower, she thought of the nice time she'd had with the Irishman. Mostly nice, anyway. He was a bit holier-than-thou at times. *Maybe too sure of himself? Or he'd let success go to his head.* Still, she was pleased he'd wanted to share that success with her.

As she toweled off, she noticed the pool of water in the corner. *Damn, the shower door is leaking again!* She had a landlord who took forever to fix anything. She'd gone more than a month without a microwave not long ago.

She got the coffee pot going and fixed a bacon-and-cheese scramble using healthy egg whites, pre-cooked bacon, and some questionable cheddar, the latter two not particularly healthy but necessary to make something akin to a good English breakfast. Heading for the entrance to her flat, she opened the door, expecting to find *The Times*. It wasn't there. *Damn, this day is starting off badly!*

She battled crowds in the Tube and made it to work. By that time her euphoric mood in the shower had changed to a foul one. Ezra knew enough to tread lightly.

"I added some notes on Babbitt's past to HOLMES. Not a bad bloke. A bit rough around the edges. It seems he and Gilby were an item. At least that's what the receptionist said at the law office. She thought it was all very romantic and the two lovebirds would get married."

"At their age? We should interview the principal partner there. He might know something."

"That would be Arthur Heathrow. I made the appointment."

"I hope his family weren't the owners of the hamlet and so forth that became the airport."

"I have no idea. Maybe they were toffs in Lords who cut a juicy deal?"

She smiled. Ezra's dry Cockney wit cheered her. Her day was getting better.

"What time's the appointment?"

"Ten. Leaves time to take the Tube. The office's not far from Gilby's building as it turns out."

"And The Golden Goose. God help me. We might as well move the whole team to that neighborhood."

"We could walk, to put a fine point on it."

"And not make it by ten. I need another cup of coffee. Did you happen to notice whether DI Brown was in?"

"Yes and no. In and then out."

"Good. He'll soon be gnawing on my arse about wasting too much time on this case. I dare say, I'm ready to write it off as a Babbitt-and-Gilby elopement."

"If not for that text message."

"Maybe the future mother-in-law was after Gilby and someone warned her?"

"You do have an active imagination."

"And you too sound like my alarm clock, only with a Cockney accent."

She hustled to the snack room, leaving him wondering about the "too." As a detective, he noticed details.

The law offices provided evidence that the barristers charged far too much for their services, and the woman Ezra had spoken with was more standoffish in person than over the phone, as if she were a growling watchdog protecting the property from trespassers. Maggie and Ezra waited for more than a half hour, finally getting in to see Arthur Heathrow, Esquire, at 10:38.

Heathrow reminded Maggie of Cesar Romero in his later years. The only accent he had, though, was a Londoner's, but not Cockney. He wore a spiffy three-piece suit and a starched white shirt. The starched cuffs had gold cufflinks to match his tie clip, and a chain across the vest told her he had an old-fashioned watch in that vest pocket, probably gold as well. She tried to dampen her immediate dislike, for he was the enemy who made it his business to keep scrotes out of jail—rich ones, truth be told, but low-lives all the same—but she needed him to answer her questions.

"You're here to inquire about Rebecca Gilby and Ron Babbitt. They'll no longer be in our employ at the end of the week. Correction: Ms. Gilby won't be. Mr. Babbitt only works with us sporadically, and it's always by contract. They've been on vacation. They must be having a jolly good time, I dare say, because neither one has shown up here when they were expected to do so."

Ezra was taking notes, so it was incumbent on Maggie to lead their interview. "They returned. Rebecca was kidnapped, and we believe Ron was too."

The attorney's only reaction was to blink rapidly a few times. "Um. That's your problem, not mine. It's the first time I heard about that. And only now you're finally getting around to make inquiries at their place of employment? How efficient the Metropolitan Police are!" He flashed a toothy smile.

"There's always a lot on our plate, sir, and many people make our lives in the Yard more difficult. Like when we spend a lot of time getting evidence on a criminal or criminals, and legal services like yours put them on the street to create chaos again."

He spread his hands on his desk. "There's nothing I can do for you, sergeant. Our clients have confidence in us because we know how to defend them from abusive police tactics. That includes applying attorney-client privilege. I'll show you two to the door."

He stood. Ezra stood too, but Maggie pulled him back into the chair.

"Are Rebecca and Ron your clients? If so, why? No one has charged them with a crime."

"We can represent any of our employees if we choose to do so."

"I thought you said they were no longer employees. And that requires some paperwork. I'd like to see it."

He shrugged, sighed, and sat down again. "There's no paperwork. But as one of their employers, I must protect them as if they were our clients. They are valued employees, I might add. Correction: Were. We'll be sending out notices to them soon unless they appear with legitimate excuses for their absence."

"Would you qualify being abducted by one of your other clients such an excuse? Maybe they'd learned too much about one of them? Is someone holding them who's pressuring you or someone else at this firm? Maybe someone who you weren't quite successful in getting them off the hook?"

His smile was fake...more a sneer. "You have a very active imagination. Police creating these absurd scenarios is one reason why our clients need good legal representation. Do you have any evidence that what you said might be occurring?"

"In addition to stonewalling by people like you, yes, we do. And I'll be sure to collect more. 'Good legal representation' like yours shouldn't be allowed in your business." She'd used her index fingers to make "good legal representation" a sarcastic quote. She now stood. "Don't bother to walk us to the door."

As they left, Maggie noticed that the light on the PA's phone came on. Heathrow was already calling someone. He might be a smooth fellow, but he could be in a bit of a panic now. She was sure she was heading in the right direction. She just didn't know where that road would lead her.

Chapter Six

Declan had what the Yanks would call brunch in The Golden Goose, a lot simpler fare to compensate for the expensive meal of the night before. The pub had even adopted the term, probably in an attempt to appeal to residents of its chichi neighborhood.

He thought that the previous evening's expense had been worth it, though, both for getting to know Maggie better and to celebrate his windfall from the article—selling a few books hardly compared to those successes, although the event at the gallery had been a pleasant surprise. And he possibly had two new artistic friends now, Ricardo and Esther.

He couldn't gauge his relationship with the detective, though. She ran hot and cold even with no one but him around. *A complicated woman! But aren't they all?*

As he watched passers-by through the pub's tinted window, he thought he might go to New York one day, a longer trip than Maggie's jump over to Dublin would be. He wondered if that American city would be as expensive as London, not that Dublin was inexpensive anymore. Joining the EU had its positives and negatives for countries' economies.

There were many Irish in New York City. He'd heard that some had even supported the IRA, united with their brethren in their hatred of the British crown. He didn't buy into any of that, though, at least not any longer. That had been a flaw people of his grandparents and parents' generations had suffered from, and his parents had calmed down after the peace accord and Sinn Féin became less revolutionary. He had finished his article by expressing hope that all that had been accomplished wouldn't be lost to the problems caused by Brexit, which he'd analyzed extensively.

He wondered if Esther or Ricardo had any friends in New York. He didn't have many in London, but going to another alien metropolis would seem to require a few local contacts at least. He decided to put those musings aside, folded up his paper, and left the pub, feeling a bit more fortified for some serious writing.

He heard a woman scream before the motorcycle hit him.

He never lost consciousness and was thankful when some passers-by lifted the infernal machine off him. Some nice lady dialed Maggie's number for him instead of 9-9-9. *That motorcyclist tried to kill me!*

The EMTs insisted on taking him to the nearest NHS facility. His paranoia only increased along the way. He only told the doctor in charge of his case how he felt, though, nothing about his suspicions. She was nice if a bit stern.

"Mr. O'Hara, you're one lucky Irishman. You landed first on your butt where there's more padding than your head. You'll have some Christmas colors there in a bit from the bruises, but you have no major contusions otherwise, and no concussion. It's possible you have a cracked rib, though. We'll be doing an X-ray. By the way, there's a policeman waiting to talk to you."

Ezra Harris entered. "My Guv'nor sent me. She's at one of old Charlie's nicks. I got the hospital run."

"Interviewing someone, I hope, and not under arrest."

"One of those barristers' clients, the most recent one who hasn't been freed by them yet."

"Um, I guess you two have been too busy to catch me up."

"Four detectives, as long as the DI allows it. We've made some arguments to keep it going, but they're weak ones, considering results." He eyed Declan's prone form. "Cor blimey, does it hurt, mate?"

"Early hours. I've often felt like this right after a rugby match, though."

"Tell me what happened." Ezra pulled out a biro and notebook.

"Some low-life on a motorcycle tried to kill me."

"Didn't stay around to claim otherwise, I'm told."

"He left me and the cycle on the ground and scarpered. I think it was a he. Smallish fellow from what little I saw."

"Confirms witness accounts. Leaving the scene's good evidence to indicate that you might have been targeted. Tell me more about what happened. A patrolman interviewed one witness who saw the whole thing and claimed you left that pub and walked right in front of the bike."

"Did she say the cyclist scarpered too?"

"She did, as a matter of fact. Even said the bloke revved up his ride just before he smacked into you, probably to maximize the impact. Might just be a warning to you, I suspect."

"For what? Someone didn't want me to publish my article?"

"No. They want you to stop talking to us about Rebecca Gilby."

"Who are they? No satisfaction from her employers?"

"I mentioned the barrister we had a chinwag with; 'twas a real arse. Maggie got the idea of interviewing one of his clients. Probably a waste of time. What pillock's going to grass on his defense attorney?"

"I'm betting you two can read a lot from body language. Won't she know if that bloke is lying? That's something."

"Probably. She already figures the barrister was hiding something. Me too. But now we have something else to follow-up on."

"What?"

"You, mate, the new victim. Like you, I don't believe your little love tryst with a motorcyclist is a bloody coincidence, pardon the double meaning. Let's exercise your great memory a bit and go through everything step by step."

After the DC left, they came and wheeled Declan off for an X-ray. His ribs were okay, just bruised. The similarity with rugby after-effects held true. *Maybe not what the cyclist intended?* Two hours later, he was home.

His answering machine's light was blinking. He was going to have a bottle of cold ale but then decided against it, worrying that it might not mix well with painkillers. He settled for ice water, and then checked the message.

It was from DS Bent: "Call me."

He tried, but it went to voicemail. He didn't leave a message.

He went to his bedroom and found the little book of poems some Russian poet had written—translated, of course, and something would be lost in that translation—but he tried to keep up with other poetry movements in the world. Considering this poet had fled Putin's paradise, the collection could be interesting, which is why he had purchased it.

He only got through two poems and started on the third when he fell asleep.

His mobile awoke him with a text message. He grabbed it off his nightstand, thinking it might be from Maggie.

He read the message: "I hope you got our message from your encounter with the motorcycle. Next time you're dead."

He stared at his mobile for a moment. His suspicions had just been confirmed. It was clear what 'our message' was. The question was why. He wasn't involved in the Yard's investigation of Gilby and Babbitt's disappearance. *Do they think I'll identify the low-life that kidnapped Rebecca Gilby?* He couldn't do that until the Met nicked him, but he'd planned on doing so. It was his civic duty. *Was the text message from the driver of the motorcycle?*

Chapter Seven

Maggie wanted to talk to him at her place of work. That was convenient, because Declan had just had a traditional English breakfast at The Golden Goose as a reward for a mostly sleepless night and to receive some good medicine to work against stress.

He'd visited his father's workplace often enough, so her office was more or less what he expected, although much cheerier than the room where he'd made his statement with all its bustling activity. The large open-plan room with its many desks and computers was busy with plods working on various cases.

She sat at one of those desks because she was only a DS, even though she was SIO for a couple of cases, so she led him back to that interrogation room for some privacy. They sat facing each other.

"Ezra said you seemed nervous, Declan?"

"I was in a hospital because someone tried to kill me. Wouldn't you be nervous?"

She nodded. "I can have patrol drive by your flat once and a while."

"That'd be a waste. We have to find out what's going on. I'm not nervous now. I'm mad as hell."

She smiled at him. "Actually, that's good. You'll be more inclined to help me even more. I notice you said 'we.' Is there any chance your encounter with the mad motorcyclist is unrelated to Gilby's abduction?"

He shook his head in the negative, sending a shock of hair to his forehead that he brushed away. "No, if you're asking me if I have a secret enemy trying to assassinate me. I do believe that Motorcycle Man might be the same man who kidnapped Gilby. It's too much a coincidence if not. But I didn't see his face. He had a helmet on with a dark visor."

"Opinions expressed in your articles and posts on your website's blog are strong ones."

"Mostly not opinions but my interpretations of facts. Here's what happened, and here's why it happened, to put a fine point on it." He gave her a wink. "So you've read some?"

"I was curious. I suspect anyone who reads them will react strongly too, pro or con."

"I'm paid well for the articles. So are many writers. It's all about content these days. No one I know makes a living writing prose and poetry."

"I suppose. But your more—shall we say interpretative?—writings have the flaw that no one has a way of determining whether someone who reacts badly to them will want to kill you."

"You're not helping to cure my paranoia."

She shrugged. "In this case, it's not—"

"—paranoia because it's true," he finished.

They laughed together. He liked her laugh. That moment was soon over, and she returned to business.

"Let me try another tact."

She shoved some stapled papers over to him. It was a list of names.

"What's this?"

"Something I had Ezra create, a list of Heathrow's recent clients, criminals he's got off the hook one time or another, some several times. Do you notice anything unusual?"

He studied the list comprised of five pages of names. The barrister had been a busy man. When he finished, he said, "Seems like there's a lot of Irish names here. Are you suggesting that

Heathrow and his partners are somehow working for an Irish mob active here in London? Does such a thing even exist?"

"Not exactly a mob, but gangs of smugglers. That covers most of the Irish names and some of the non-Irish, I'm guessing. The border problems you've been writing about create many ancillary problems. One is an uptick in smuggling."

"Here to there, or vice versa?"

"Both. Some people on either side don't like the rules put in place because of Brexit and try to work their way around them."

"Just human nature, I suppose. And isn't smuggling more in the domain of customs, not the Yard?"

"Yes, for the smuggling itself, but not for other crimes associated with it."

"Good Lord, this world is complicated."

"And leaders like Johnson have made it even more so."

As the discussion continued, Declan realized that Maggie was grasping at straws. *Did she only invite me in to look at Ezra's damn list?* He wasn't keen on the idea that he might be involved somehow in some smuggling activities via Gilby and Babbitt...and the Yard. He wanted his peaceful life back. *How can I write when I have to look over my shoulder every time I go out?*

Basically she'd forced him to agree to do just that until the Yard made more progress on the case. He thought she might be going down a *cul de sac* and taking her team with her. *Am I supposed to give her company?*

He liked the detective. He would help her as much as he could, but he'd much prefer that she consider other possibilities as well. It wasn't much fun being someone's target!

After their chinwag ended, she told him to wait. She introduced him to Archimedes and left them alone together.

Declan immediately liked the tall techie who badly needed a haircut. He asked to see the text message on Declan's mobile. He spent a lot more time than he needed to read it. *Trying to parse the meaning?* To Declan, that was clear.

"This bloke's got some tech skills, just like the one sending that message to Gilby. Maggie was hoping I could determine the origin of your message. Maybe I can, but I'll need some time. Can I borrow your mobile for a while?"

"I use it for work. It's my laptop away from home. I even read in the Underground with it."

"Probably more powerful than your laptop even. I can lend you a burner."

"A what?"

Archimedes smiled. "Smart phone without sim card. No GPS locator. Might be a good idea for improving your security too."

"What about my contact list?"

"I'll transfer stuff like that over to the burner. Minus this message, just in case. And I'll return your mobile in a few days. Deal?"

"Do you think it will help Maggie's investigation?"

"Maybe. Depends on my luck."

"Okay. Let's do it."

When Declan returned to his flat, he discovered a mailer envelope in the hall entrance way that had been shoved under his door. He picked it up with a tissue from his bathroom and took it to his study, almost dropping it because his hand trembled so much. He placed it on his desk.

How do I unseal an envelope without destroying forensics evidence? He wanted to see what was inside. He snapped his fingers. Returning to his bathroom he found the box of rubber gloves he used to clean both his galley kitchen and bathroom. A few years ago, he'd had a rash on both hands, and the doctor recommended the use of rubber gloves. The rash had disappeared; he'd continued to use the rubber gloves so it wouldn't come back.

Instead of working open the clasp, he used a letter opener to slit the envelope open. Inside was a large photograph. The woman he recognized as Gilby. He assumed the man was Babbitt. They were sitting bound and gagged on back-to-back chairs.

The first question that flooded into his mind was: *Why me?* The second was related: *Why not the police?* The final one was: *What am I supposed to do with this?*

He left envelope and photo on the desk and exited the room to sit on his couch. Fumbling a bit with the unfamiliar mobile Archimedes had provided, he called Maggie. It went to voicemail, so he left a message informing her about the envelope and its contents.

I want this all to end. He wished he'd never seen Gilby's abduction. *Is whoever did it using me as a go-between, a person to funnel information to the Yard. Why not to the SIO herself?* He'd heard from his Da that criminals often liked to gloat to the police.

Any romantic aspirations he had harbored for DS Bent were now fading. *Won't any relationship with her bring more of the same?* He wondered how his mother had managed with his father. Had he only imagined it to be a loving relationship all those years, a delusion hiding a mother's fear about her family being affected by the father's occupation? *A content creator married to a copper?* The more he thought about it, the less he felt good about it.

He was working on his second bottle of Smithwick's when Ezra and the SOCOs arrived.

Chapter Eight

"I think the first thing you should do is take a picture of the picture with your mobile and send it to Maggie. She'll find it interesting. I couldn't manage it with Archimedes's moby."

"Will do. I saw you were careful handling it." Ezra slapped Declan on the back. "Good show, mate. We'll make a detective out of you yet."

He went and hovered around the entrance door, kneeling down and sticking a finger under the crack. "Big enough gap here. Somewhere along the line a previous tenant removed a plush carpet to get to the hardwood floors. Always leaves a gap."

"That would be me. I have some seasonal allergies. Pollen collects in plush carpeting."

"I hear you. Only problem is that someone could come in under the door with a stiff wire and release the deadbolt. It's then a simple matter to pick the knob's lock."

"Good Lord. Were you a cat burglar?"

"You should see Maggie. Her set of picks is top quality. You're one of the smart ones. Most people don't even think 'bout having a deadbolt."

"I can't make that claim. I only changed the keys when I moved in."

He laughed and then shrugged. "Not important, mate. With the gap, the scrote didn't even have to enter."

"Will that photo help the investigation?"

"We'll see. At least it tells us Gilby and Babbitt are together and both victims. Maybe we can get something from the background that will give us a clue about where they're being held."

"But why send it to me?"

"Who knows? Because you're such a lovable bloke? Maybe we'll get one too. Or Gilby's workplace."

"Why there?"

"The Yard frowns on paying ransoms. The barristers might spring for that, though, I suppose. Depends on what Gilby and Babbitt know. Or maybe they have some evidence the scrotes would not want us to have? Use your imagination. You're the writer."

"Maybe the Met is so big they don't know where to send it? I just met a woman who used to be in the Yard, an inspector in the Art and Antiques Division. Have you ever heard of that?"

"Can't say I have. Maybe Maggie has. The bureaucracy is huge. I get your point. You think they're using you as an intermediary."

"You'll need to check, but maybe Heathrow and his lawyer friends aren't guilty of anything?"

"The scrotes would know about them through Gilby, if only recently. I don't know what the involvement is, but I'm willing to bet Heathrow and friends are involved in some way. Maggie showed you the list."

"It was a bit depressing, seeing a bunch of Irish criminals."

Ezra laughed. "For all we know, the rest were Cockneys. Remember Daddy Doolittle."

Declan thought a moment and then laughed. The droll constable had a sense of humor.

Maggie read through the forensics report. There'd been a bit of dust at the bottom of the envelope that turned out to be scouring powder used to clean sinks and stoves that hadn't come from Declan's gloves, which had been out of the box. No fingerprints, no DNA traces.

She asked herself the same question Declan had asked: *Why go through the writer?* Ezra had told her his theory that they didn't know where to send the photo to in the Met. She didn't buy that. And Declan had no connection with Heathrow and his cronies. She saw her whole smuggling theory taking a hard crash landing.

She didn't buy the ransom theory either, but the idea that somehow those who'd kidnapped Gilby and Babbitt were after incriminating evidence the law firm had was likely. Yet why would Heathrow or anyone in the firm feel pressure with the two kidnapped? Could it all just be a big mistake, the left hand of a criminal enterprise not knowing what the right hand was doing?

Early days, she said to herself. *But the DI wants results!* She had to face him in ten minutes. It was time for a cuppa'.

She returned to her desk to find a note from Archimedes. She sighed. She put down her tea, popped a biscuit into her mouth, and then took a sip. She then went to the lift. In the basement, she found the jolly black giant waiting for her.

"Traced Declan's text message. It came from Kensington. Here's the address."

She examined it. It looked familiar.

When she returned to her desk, her tea was cold. She drank it anyway and then pulled the file on Heathrow. He lived in Kensington.

She called the law firm. Arthur Heathrow, Esq., had taken a personal day. She called his home. No answer, no answering machine.

She met Ezra coming in as she was going out. "Just in time. We'll take a little ride to Kensington. You can tell me about Declan as we go."

"Just give me time to visit the loo, Guv."

Maggie saw the body on the sitting room floor. She told Ezra to practice his skills at lock-picking this time. Once in the foyer, he handed her gloves and booties.

There wasn't much blood. She didn't see the wound until Ezra rolled Heathrow over. A hole in his chest told the sordid tale.

"Blood's all in his abdominal cavity, I'd wager. I'll call for a pathologist and SOCOs."

"Now we have a murder case. The DI will be thrilled, I'm sure. After you call for them, do a quick sweep of the downstairs. I'm off to do the same upstairs."

Everything was tidy upstairs. One bedroom was in use, probably the barrister's. A small bookcase mostly contained popular fiction. She noticed one of Declan's novels, *The Case of the Distraught Diva*. The subtitle: *Inspector Robinson, Book One*. Different than Gilby's, which was more recent. He'd published it six years earlier. The cover was a bit sexy, showing a woman's bare leg and foot with a high-heeled shoe.

She browsed through it and then put it back and checked the bathroom. Neat and tidy too. *Was a cleaning woman here at the house this morning?* If so, the SOCOs probably wouldn't find much.

The other two bedrooms had mattresses with bed sheets and covers folded on top, and chests with empty drawers. The main bathroom, in between those two rooms, looked unused as well. She went downstairs.

"Marks on the rug in the study and dishwasher with clean dishes show a cleaning lady was here," Ezra said.

"My same conclusion. No biologicals in the study, I presume. He was shot here in the sitting room. He must have known his killer."

"Because he wasn't shot through the peephole or in the entrance way?"

"Probably opened the door willingly enough and let his killer in. Say, does he have something in his fist. Careful."

Ezra had bent to pry the fingers open. He held up a cufflink. "Unusual design, I dare say." He handed it to her.

"An Irish cross. Probably not his."

Back at the station, Maggie called Declan.

"It's nice to hear from you, Maggie," he said, "but I'm sure this isn't a social call."

"I'd like to have your father's phone number."

"He splits his time between Dublin and Donegal. Let me think. He'd be in Donegal now because a course at the training academy in Dublin just finished. But I'll give you both numbers and the home number. Why do you want to call him?"

"I would probably just get a run-around from the Gardai if I went through official channels. I need a lesson on Irish crime syndicates."

"Can't help you there, but Da probably can. Or knows levers to pull to get you connected with someone who can. Are you looking for someone in a particular place? Irish ports, perhaps?"

"Forget the smuggling. That could just be part of their business model."

"You seem a bit antsy. What's happened?"

"Heathrow's dead. We found him at his home."

"Um, you plods are gathering all kinds of evidence. How are you going to sort it all? You don't think my father's involved, do you?"

"No, of course not. But he's a valuable source of information I have available through you."

He gave her the numbers. "You might get Mum, so fair warning: She's very protective of Da. And her children, for that matter. Thinks he works too hard and that he should retire completely. I tend to back her on that. Man's over seventy now."

"Will she put me through if I mention you?"

"If you do, she probably will, thinking you're my girlfriend. She's always badgering me about how she wants some grandchildren."

"Maybe I'll lead her on a bit. I really need to talk to your father."

Chapter Nine

The conversation with the old copper Michael O'Hara was brief. He wanted to Skype. They used Zoom instead so that Ezra could more easily sit in at his own desk.

"The technological miracles of our age," Michael O'Hara said after they had everything sorted. "What a boon to policing, right DS Bent?"

"Call me Maggie. DC Ezra Harris is with me, as you can see. Call that old Cockney Ezra. We're recording, if you don't mind, and he's taking notes as well."

"Good show. I hope my son is okay. I heard his name bandied about before my wife handed the phone over."

"He's fine. Just a good friend." Maggie said nothing about the motorcycle attack. "Down to business." She held the cufflink close to the computer's camera lens. "Does this mean anything to you?"

"You mean besides that an Irish cross is on most Irish graves and other places, some without religious significance? I'm sure St. Paddy wouldn't approve using an Irish cross in personal jewelry, although it's common enough in necklaces as a souvenir from first communions. I imagine you're asking because it's associated with a crime, though."

"A murder. The victim was gripping it as if it were ripped from someone's shirtsleeve."

"A knifing then?"

"No. Shooting."

"At close range then. I suppose you have plenty of GSR."

"Besides the cufflink, that's our only evidence."

"I see. I need to know more about your case."

She summarized for him. "So...I'm thinking the barristers are mouthpieces for an Irish syndicate."

"I see where you're going. But how would that explain the kidnapping my son was witness to? Or the picture of the woman and the PI strapped to chairs?"

"Working on that, sir. What do you think about the cufflink?"

"There's a few nasty syndicates in Dublin that have been active off and on, but only one uses the Irish cross as a trademark. It started long ago before independence. Family thing, and very anti-English. Sort of like Cosa Nostra being anti-Italian aristocracy. They scrawled an Irish cross on the foreheads of their victims. Still do. My last memory of them was when we had a victim who was an English sailor. His body was floating in the Liffy. Never solved that damn case."

"What's this group's name?"

"No name. We used to call them the Irish Rovers. Not a very good name and an insult to that singing group. Copper humor, I suppose. It's often questionable."

"Can you point to someone in the Gardai who's an expert on this group's recent activities?"

"Once that would have been me. Now I believe it's Sean Fitzgerald. He's in Dublin, of course. I share a pint with him from time to time. Has a scowl that would freeze a cow, so you'd better use me as a reference."

Sean Fitzpatrick reminded Maggie of Leonid Brezhnev, a man she was taught to hate by her schoolmasters. He mumbled a lot, his jowls seeming to get in the way of his speech. He had the same bushy eyebrows and gruff voice too. There was one huge difference: He was a big flirt. That went as far as to lament that the Gardai needed more pretty lasses like Maggie. His flirting with her was a distraction, but she got him focused.

"Those Irish Rovers are like a cloud of gnats: No matter what we do, they just won't go away. Could be your killer is one of their made men."

"Like in the mafia?"

"Irish mafia, but yes. No real Christian sentiments among them. Maybe some go to mass and even confess their sins, but they keep on sinning, lass. It's their way of life. Some even went to America in the 1800s because of the potato famine and had a grand old time working with the Italian mobs in New York. One bad-arse party they had, I'm sure. Just when we think we've eradicated the pests, they pop up again."

"Is that what the Irish means? They're crossing the Irish sea to do havoc here?"

"Johnson drew an imaginary line down the middle of the Irish Sea, thinking that the criminal element would pay attention to it. All that stupid twit did was to make their operations more profitable. Smuggling, drug and human trafficking, the gun trade, et cetera. And they don't like Brits, not at all."

"Even if they're represented by them in court?"

"That in itself is dangerous for the barristers. If they don't deliver, the Irish Rovers might put their arses in a lethal vice. Maybe that's what happened to the Honorable Mr. Heathrow."

"If I send you a list of their recent clients, could you flag which ones are Irish Rovers?"

"I don't have the time, lass, but I'll have one of my subordinates work on it. I'll still expect a tall one from you the next time I'm in London. I'm there a bit too much these days. It seems the scrotes took the end of the pandemic as a sign to go wild."

"That's for certain."

"Do you think his theory holds water, Guv," Ezra said after they bid farewell to the old Irish copper.

"It's a theory. But we still need to find out why Gilby and Babbitt are involved."

"And why Declan O'Hara is."

"Maybe he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"For the bike attack or seeing Gilby kidnapped?"

"Both, I suppose. Gilby's flat in number forty-nine might be the common denominator there. While I go talk to our favorite DI, give Declan a call and bring him up to date."

Ezra winked at her. "Avoiding him, are you, Guv? Seems like he made an effort the other night. You might want to pursue him a bit. Not many men want a copper for a wife, so your options could be better with him than with another plod."

"Doesn't that go both ways? I need to talk to your Olga."

"My Olga's a SOCO. That's different, and it usually means we keep out of each other's business until it comes to quality time between us and the children. That's a compromise that can work."

"I don't know any single SOCOs."

"There are pathologists too."

"Ugh. Perish the thought. And forget about Declan O'Hara except for calling him. I need to get upstairs."

Chapter Ten

Declan hadn't been too happy to hear about Heathrow's murder. *Am I next? What's going on?*

He was happy, though, that his Da had contributed some valuable information to DS Bent and provided a connection to someone more active in the Gardai's crimefighting efforts. *Perhaps I should ring the old man and thank him?* But he'd probably just get his mum, and she'd then be worried about him. He was worried about himself too.

He sipped his Jameson and stared out the bedroom window. The smaller bedroom gave him enough space for an in-home office. He imagined the sergeant's digs would make him claustrophobic. He saw a mother and child from his same building in the little garden area below the window. He could imagine Bent with her child on one of those swings. *Or maybe not?*

The detective was intensely focused. Not self-centered but focused on her work. Ezra Harris was focused too, but the Cockney seemed less intense than Bent. Still, they worked well together. Declan just wished they'd close the case.

He was in a state. He couldn't concentrate on his writing, worrying about what had occurred. He couldn't think about Bent either. Anytime he tried either one, he was distracted by the kidnapping or the murder. Was this what it was like to be a detective?

He supposed the experience would improve his fiction writing in the long run. *Nothing like being able to observe a real crime investigation*, he thought with a smile. He knew that some authors like Michael Connelly had looked for that real-world experience with coppers, but he doubted that Michael had been a tunnel rat like his famous character Harry Bosch.

Of course, he also knew that the adage "write what you know" was blather and twaddle spewed forth by writing tutors who had little actual experience in writing successful stories. How could a sci-fi writer know about ETs? How could a thriller writer know about government conspiracies? Their life experience—people they met, places they visited, and national and world events—might influence a writer's stories, but a lot had to be left to an author's imagination...and the reader's, for that matter.

Those general thoughts led to other more personal ones: *Am I involved in some English-Irish conspiracy? Were Gilby, Babbitt, and Heathrow part of it?*

He tossed down the rest of the whiskey and went to his browser. He googled "Irish Rovers." Most of the information was about the singers who are really Canadian, not Irish. He found nothing about the Irish syndicate.

Of course, you prat, they wouldn't appear in a Google search! You need the Dark Web.

He knew nothing about that underbelly of the internet that criminals and terrorists loved to peruse. But he now knew someone who did.

Archimedes's partner opened the door.

"Who might you be, mate?" Raul Benavides said.

"Declan O'Hara. I spoke to Archimedes the other day. I'm looking for him. Is he here? His boss said he was out, so I thought he might be home."

"Out and about. He went to get takeaway. I'm babysitting. You can come in if you like and entertain Clarissa while I make us some tea. She's teething and in a snit about it."

The two-bedroom flat was neat and tidy except for the toys scattered on the floor. It had a galley kitchen at the front side of the sitting room. A baby girl eyed him nervously.

"Hi there, Clarissa," Declan said with a wave. She smiled and then giggled, rolling the wheels of a toy truck in her small hands.

"We try to give her exposure to boys' toys as well as girls'," said Raul, tracking Declan's gaze. "So she'll have time to determine her gender predilections as well as her religious ones."

"I see." Declan noticed that the counter between kitchen and sitting room was set with three place settings. Two stools and a small child's high chair were on the sitting-room side. "I don't want to interfere with your dinners."

Raul shrugged. "We eat early these days. Archie often has to go back to the office."

"Are you a house-husband?"

Raul smiled. "I guess we both are at times. During the pandemic, I was able to work online from here. I need to go in two days each week now for meetings, but that's flexible, so I adapt to Archie's schedule. And Clarissa's, of course. Doctor and dentist appointments and such."

"So you're also a techie?"

"Not as much as Archie, although I make more money. You'd think the Met would value their IT personnel a bit more. I suppose you have a technical question for him?"

"I guess it could be for either one of you now. I want to visit the Dark Web."

Raul frowned. "That can get you into trouble, Declan. People like Archie in the Met and MI5 agents monitor that now, and it's a dark place to be, so I can't blame them. Criminals and terrorists use computers as much as anyone these days, maybe even more so, and that's where they often congregate." He eyed Clarissa who was now trying to decapitate a rag doll. "Let me get her sorted and we'll take a look. Archie'll soon be back. We can pretend we're internet Musketeers, the Athos, Porthos, and Aramis of technical wizarding."

"Thank you for including me in that famous list, but I'm not that skilled. And who will be D'Artagnon?"

"We'll have to do without him. And DS Dent can be Milady."

Declan smiled. "You don't like the sergeant?"

"She's okay, I guess. She's very demanding but not yet a villain. She helped Archie come out in that male-chauvinist environment the Met has."

"She might agree with you about the male-chauvinist characterization, you know."

"She works him too hard, but it's often Archie's fault. He lets her take advantage. You know the saying: He's a victim of his own success. He also feels obligated, so he puts her demands on his time over others', and then has to work even harder to catch up. I think his job is much more difficult than mine."

"And that is?"

"I work for Google."

Declan smiled. "Considering how the EU is attacking that company, the UK as well, I'd guess your job could be demanding too."

"I don't have to deal with the monopoly-busters. Ah, here's Archie."

Archimedes greeted Clarissa with a hug and a kiss, and then she had a fit when he wanted to put her in the high chair.

Raul made a sweeping motion with one hand. "I'll get her started. Take care of Declan. He wants to search the Dark Web, King Charlie knows why."

Archimedes grabbed two *samosas* for Declan and himself, and they went off to the hall where two laptops were set up on staggered tables. A child's railing made an effective corral for them.

"Pull up a chair. What are you looking for?"

"Irish Rovers. Smugglers, not singers."

"Ah, the infamous cufflink. This could be useful for work. I've already tried, but maybe you can come at them from another direction."

"What would that be?"

"Ireland. I did a hurried search about activities in the UK. They're best known as smugglers. But that old geezer Sean Fitzpatrick told Bent they've been around for a while. Any connections with the IRA?"

"No idea. Maybe my father knows. But that's the general angle I want to check, the Irish side of things. It might tell us something about why I've been threatened."

"Um, have you considered they're going after you for something your father did?"

"Don't go there. A lot of scrotes in Ireland would like some revenge against my father."

"Of course. That's a measure of a successful copper. Let's go at it. While I hammer on the keys, could you check on how Raul's doing with Clarissa? Sometimes looking after her takes both of us."

Declan retreated down the hallway until he saw Raul with Clarissa and waved. The baby didn't see him. She was concentrated on a broken-up *samosa*. Raul smiled and rubbed his stomach without saying anything. *Looks like the child has her priorities straight*, Declan thought.

"All okay," he told Archimedes when he returned.

"We do a lot of takeaway because we're so busy. Probably not good for her or us. We try to make up for it on weekends. There's a barbecue we can use in back."

Not vegetarians then. "With both of you working, it must be hard."

"The good things in life don't come easy. Ah, here's something interesting. Take a look."

Declan read the caption: *Sign up now to join the Rovers' crusade*. A gold Celtic cross glistened below the sign-up icon. The crusade was described above the caption: Plans against Irish traitors.

"Shall we try it?" Declan said.

"Why not?" Archimedes was unsuccessful; he needed a password. The one he'd used to even get to where he was didn't work. It probably came from the Rovers in a round-about way. "I'll keep snooping around." He pointed to the other laptop. "Do you have a website? I hear you're an author."

"I do. I don't check it often, just the email I get from the contact page. I have a strong spam filter for comments to my blog."

"When did you check your email last?"

Declan thought a moment. "Not since I received that threat in a text message. Let me do that." He went to work on the laptop. "Bingo? An email containing basically the same threat, sent to me via my contact page."

Archimedes scooted over. "Let me have the controls, co-pilot." He hammered away at the keys. "Um, this is interesting. The person who sent this is Ron Babbitt."

"He couldn't have done. That photo shows him restrained back-to-back with Gilby. This is weird."

"We'd better call Maggie or Ezra. Let me check on Clarissa and Raul again, and then I'll call the office."

After Archimedes talked with Bent, she asked to talk with Declan. She ordered him to stop playing detective and then rang off.

"What's her problem?" Declan said. Maggie had been on speaker phone.

"She's got a temper. Or she's just worried about you. Doesn't matter. Toning it down and subtracting out the vitriol, it's probably good advice. I know you want to find out why you're threatened. We didn't find out why, but you now know who did it. I can't imagine that Jamaican being an Irish Rover."

"I can't even imagine him sending the threats. He might even be a dead man now."

"Anyone can send messages using that name. I have at least a dozen email and social media accounts, and can open a new one in any name. The internet is a damn overgrown jungle."

Chapter Eleven

DI Henry Abbott looked up at his sergeant. "Close the door and let's talk." He offered her a tea biscuit after she sat. "Here I thought we'd make this a cold case and get on with something more worthwhile. Bring me up to date, Maggie."

She did, trying to emphasize progress. She included Declan's most recent discovery without mentioning him, only Archimedes. Abbott didn't interrupt her until she took a bite of biscuit and sipped her coffee; she'd brought the mug in with her.

"This case is becoming complex. I hadn't heard about the Irish Rovers, but I know Sean Fitzpatrick. We worked a few murder cases together. Good bloke, Sean. What's your plan?"

"I want to have a chinwag with someone in customs, somebody who can point me to a local who's a Rover VIP. Part of the complexity is that I can't figure out what Gilby and Babbitt's roles are in all this. Or Declan O'Hara's, for that matter."

"Maintain contact with him. I know he led you to Sean, but he might be involved in some way at some level. He's Irish. He could be a Rover or a terrorist, you know. The younger generation still harbors bad feelings against the British. It's an Irish tradition."

"I've read a few of his articles. It seems he's beyond that, or more the artsy type now, judging by some of his poetry. He does the articles more to make money, but they have a more global perspective."

"I see. Okay, don't forget Gilby and Babbitt. And with Heathrow's death, we might be able to justify an examination of his files for the cases involving the Irish on your list. I can help you with that."

"Thanks. I'm still SIO for the case?"

"You're doing just fine, and I thank you for stepping up and doing it. I can't take over, even now with the murder. There's just too much to do. Keep me posted on developments. Heathrow might have been an arse for his defense of criminals, but no one deserves to die like that."

She nodded, picked up her mug and the remainder of her biscuit, and left Abbott's office.

Michael O'Hara took a seat next to Sean Fitzpatrick's desk. "Thanks for seeing me, Fitz."

Sean laughed, his jowls shaking a bit. "Anything for a co-worker, old stick. What's up? I had a chinwag with your boy's squeeze. Not much more I can do from here."

"They're not in a serious relationship yet. How'd she seem to you?"

Sean, a father himself, thought a moment, unconsciously combing his bushy eyebrows with his fingers as he did. "She could be a stunner with some makeup, but I liked her, both personally and professionally. Went so far as to aver that police need more like her, good-looking, intelligent women, thinking of your daughter."

Michael nodded. "No ideas about why Declan's been targeted?"

"Early days in DS Bent's case. It might move along now, with the barrister's murder. There's the photo of Gilby and Babbitt too. Should put a fire under the Met's VIPs, I dare say. It's a complex test for Bent. Her solving it could go a long ways towards a promotion. Has Declan talked about her?"

"No, he just told her to use his name when calling me, so I have no direct comments from the lad. I've never had the habit of meddling in my children's lives." Michael saw the smile Sean was trying to hide. "Not much, anyway. Their mum does enough of that."

"Like any good Irish mother does. Do you have any theories about the case?"

"That's the question I had for you, old friend."

"Um, I'm not close enough to the case to have any. It just strikes me as unusual Declan's involved beyond his being a witness. You'd think the Irish Rovers wouldn't bother."

"That has occurred to me as well. He's just another Irish writer."

"Any good?"

"I like his journalistic-style articles. I can't stay focused enough to read his other stuff, the poetry and prose. I guess I'd feel better if he wrote in Gaelic."

Sean laughed. "Always defending the Gaeltacht like an Irish patriot. Makes me happy I studied in England."

"But you came back to Dublin."

"Saint Paddy came back to Ireland too, and he unfortunately left enough snakes around to keep the Gardai busy. Not a dull moment."

"Especially with the Irish Rovers?"

"They've been more active thanks to old Boris, so yes, they cause a lot of heartburn. In every Irish port, at the minimum. The only joy there is that customs and coppers from both countries are working together more. Bent's just the tip of the iceberg. Just yesterday we stopped a drug shipment on the ferry going to Liverpool, arresting some plonker Rovers before they could dump the load into the Irish Sea. We manage to win a few now and then."

"And you and Bent think they're mixed up in this barrister's murder?"

"Most likely scenario, at least from my perspective."

Michael stood and stretched out a hand. "Thanks for the chinwag. Keep me posted on any developments. I'm worried about Declan. He might be a poet, but he is my son."

Chapter Twelve

Maggie assigned Ezra the difficult problem of getting a warrant to access Heathrow's files. The arguments for that might not sway a judge, though, so she focused on something else: Did Babbitt really text and email Declan O'Hara? If he did, was that photo just a fake? Also, why would he chance that the Met would put two and two together and figure out the photo was fake? In summary, what was his game?

This focus all resulted from Archimedes and Declan's sleuthing. She first told Archimedes to try to find more information about Babbitt, on the Dark Web or otherwise. She decided to make a visit to the PI's agency.

A gum-chewing Barbarella with silicone breasts was Babbitt's PA, a woman who was obviously an ornament. She didn't look at all like Rebecca Gilby. And Laurie Lancaster's voice sounded like Eliza Doolittle's before Henry Higgins's speech lessons. She was harder to understand than Ezra.

"Cor blimey, Luv, the Rabbit never tells me what he's about. I thought he was on a case." Maggie showed her the photo. "He's in trouble. I think that's Becky too."

"You know her."

"Casual-like, Luv. Knew he was shagging her." She thrust her breasts forward. "Never could figure out why. I could give him a real good ride."

I bet you could, thought Maggie. "Was he working on a case for Mr. Heathrow?"

"Not recently. Those two old lovebirds went somewhere for a holiday. None of my business."

"Before that?"

"I can't give out that information. Neither Ron nor Arthur would like that."

"So you knew Arthur Heathrow well?"

She smiled. "Of course. You might say intimately." She winked.

"Through cases Babbitt had with that law office?"

"Yes. I guess I can say that. Becky would send work our way that Arthur had. PIs often work with legal firms. Look at Perry Mason's Paul Drake."

Maggie glanced at the telly on the wall clients might watch while waiting. *Does Laurie watch old reruns out of boredom?* "Do you know Arthur Heathrow is dead?"

Barbarella's jaw dropped and she turned white. "No! Cor blimey. When did that go down?"

Maggie ignored the question. "You realize I can get a court order to review Babbitt's last case sent to him by Heathrow. This is now a murder investigation. And your employer might well be the next victim."

Laurie leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "I'm a dedicated employee. I don't bend the rules."

"I can charge you for obstructing justice. Or even as an accessory to murder."

Laurie went white again. "What? I didn't kill nobody!"

Maggie shrugged. "Your choice."

Babbitt's PA thought a moment. "I-I think I need the loo." She went to the filing cabinet and pulled out three files and placed them on her desk in easy reach. "I need to take my time too."

Maggie got busy taking snapshots with her mobile.

"Even with the murder, the judge is being stubborn. Said he was worried that there are other barristers in the firm." Ezra leaned back in a guest chair at Maggie's desk.

"Maybe Abbott will have some luck at higher levels. So let's look at some of Babbitt's recent case files. I graced his PA with little white lies about obstruction and accessory to murder."

"Well done, Guv! Let's see the show. It might be interesting."

"Maybe not as much as Perry Mason." She handed him a stack of papers. "I printed everything out for your reading pleasure. I want two sets of eyes on this to guarantee nothing is missed."

"I need a cuppa'. Want one?"

"Get some biscuits too. This might take a while."

He returned with both tea and biscuits, and they began their homework. Ezra started taking notes; Maggie trusted her memory. She thought of Declan's comment. She wouldn't have minded having him there reading too. He might find nuances that neither Ezra nor she would. She sighed.

She finished first, primarily because Ezra had been taking notes. He looked up and smiled when he was done.

"We have the Irish Rovers connection. Earliest case. The Crown vs. William O'Reilly. Rover who's a UK citizen, smuggler extraordinaire."

"Indeed," Maggie said. "But what does it mean? Did Heathrow's firm win the case or not?"

"Should be easy to check that in the judicial records. Might still be pending, though."

"In any case, Billy O'Reilly's here in the UK. We need to talk to him."

"No light shed on O'Hara's threats, though."

"That troubles me. How could Babbitt send them if he's been abducted with Gilby? But let's take one thing at a time. We need a chinwag with Billy."

The jailor brought O'Reilly into the interrogation room, sat him down in the iron chair, and secured his leg and arm irons. Maggie and Ezra faced him.

"Just what I need," the smuggler said, "more rozzers. What the hell do you plods want?"

"We're not here to entertain you, that's certain," Maggie said. "I'm DS Bent and my companion here is DC Harris. We're here seeking information. We might help make your stay here a bit more comfortable in exchange for it."

"Promises, promises, and mostly false ones. I've heard them all my life. Let's hear what you're offering, lady."

"A private cell, conjugal visits, extra fags," Ezra said. "We can't do much more than that. The Crown Court only allows so much."

"Some candy and popcorn would be nice. After giving me four years here, here's what I think of King Charlie and his feckin' justice system." O'Reilly made an obscene gesture. "And I'd go out of here in a body bag if I grassed on someone."

"Understood," Maggie said, "but no one need know. And it's rather general information we need."

He eyed her. "What about?"

"A name. Arthur Heathrow. Your barrister. Does he have connections with your gang?"

"He's the pillock who screwed up my defense. I'll go after him when I get out."

"That might be difficult," Ezra said. "He's dead."

O'Reilly shook his head. "Obviously I didn't have anything to do with that."

"How did he screw up your defense?" Maggie said. "Weren't the Irish Rovers paying him enough?"

"None of your business." O'Reilly pushed himself up halfway and leaned in to Maggie.

"And I don't know a damn thing about no Irish Rovers."

"What about Ron Babbitt? Rebecca Gilby?"

O'Reilly sat down again. "Babbitt and Gilby work for Heathrow's law firm. I've only had conversations with the woman. Babbitt is a PI on retainer who was supposed to dig up stuff to help my case, like come up with witnesses to say I wasn't anywhere near where the plods said I was. Stuff like that. I'll go after him now instead."

Maggie shoved the photo towards O'Reilly. "Any idea what's going on here?"

He examined the photo and laughed. "Looks like I won't need to take care of Babbitt either. He's in big trouble. I'm sorry 'bout the woman."

"We believe the Irish Rovers have them, and we want to know what they want in return. They must want something. The only body we have is Heathrow's. How do we contact them? They haven't made any demands."

"Bollocks! That's not their style!"

"I thought you didn't know a damn thing about them," Ezra said.

"Okay, okay. But they won't diddle with a good thing."

"Meaning?" said Maggie.

"Meaning Heathrow's firm does a good job for us as far as I know. The Rovers might off Heathrow if he didn't, but Gilby and Babbitt are just hired help. They wouldn't bother with them. And, as far as I know, Heathrow always delivered as best he could. I just don't think they spent enough time on my case, that's all. Fact is, I doubt the Rovers would do him for screwing up my case. I sort of did that by being careless." He looked around at the guard who was playing a video game on his mobile then back at Maggie and Ezra. "That's all that I'm saying."

"So the Rovers are just little angels?" said Maggie with a smile. "Any idea about who might have murdered Heathrow and kidnapped Gilby and Babbitt?"

"That law firm has other clients, some far worse, I 'spect. The Rovers are just Irish businessmen. You hounds are barkin' up the wrong tree."

In the car, Maggie and Ezra sat a bit to let out the tension they'd both carried out of the prison. He opened a pack of pork crackles and offered her some. They both got lost in their thoughts for a few moments.

"Do you think he's telling the truth?" she finally said.

"You're the boss, Guv. What's your take?"

"I believe he is, at least about the Irish Rovers having nothing to do with Heathrow and friends' recent problems. Could that cufflink be a plant?"

"Something to mislead us? Could be. That takes us back to zero, basically. Cor blimey! That could be frustrating."

"That's what this case has been from the start."

"I notice that you didn't mention the messages to Declan or the attack on him. Any reason?"

"That just adds to the mystery, and O'Reilly probably doesn't know anything about that. And we haven't established any connection between Declan and the Rovers. It's almost as if we have three separate and unrelated cases."

"What else could someone be warning Declan about?"

"He does at least provide a bridge across the Irish Sea from Dublin to London."

"At least to Liverpool. Is it possible he knows something and doesn't realize it? Poor bloke's probably involved some way and doesn't even know why. Maybe someone's payback against his father? Or even his sister?"

"They don't seem to be directly involved with the Rovers. Fitzpatrick's the plod with that task now. And, like I said, it's not clear the Rovers are involved in any of this mess."

"If we believe O'Reilly. I found the scrote believable, though."

"Let's return. We can at least rally the troops."

Chapter Thirteen

Declan was echoing Maggie's thoughts. *Am I involved in this mess and completely in the dark about why?*

He thought her focus on the Irish Rovers was one alternative, but Archimedes had shown that Babbitt had sent the threatening email. If the PI was kidnapped, how could he do that? And if the Rovers were responsible for everything, why had they made the email appear to be from Babbitt?

An alternative might be that Babbitt wasn't really kidnapped. *Maybe he was a Rover!* The Rovers might find the Jamaican useful for that part of their smuggling operation involving drugs. Could an Irish crime syndicate have Jamaican members? Babbitt worked for Heathrow's firm, but what if the Rovers also used the PI to monitor the barrister? Had Heathrow double-crossed them in some way, and they ordered Babbitt to get rid of the barrister? Or was something else entirely different going on?

He decided to do some of his own sleuthing. He would start by finding out if Gilby and Babbitt had really gone to Jamaica. He rang Laurie Lancaster, Babbitt's PA. He explained who he was and how he was peripherally involved in the Met's case.

"I just heard from Mr. Babbitt, via email," he told her. "I don't think he was kidnapped. Maybe that photo was fake. I'm betting he's still in Jamaica for some reason. You don't happen to know where he was staying there, do you?"

There was silence in which he heard traffic noise. He also heard her gum-chewing increase as she thought. "I think I saw a brochure on his desk. Let me check. Hold on." She soon returned. "It's Secrets Wild Orchard in Montego Bay."

"Thanks, Laurie. You're a doll."

"You sound nice. Come around and say hello sometime, Luv."

"I will."

He was amazed at his ability to lie now. *Desperation?* He might be telling a few more lies in the future. He called Secrets.

He wasn't surprised that Babbitt wasn't there. Neither was his "wife." But their departure date didn't correspond to their arrival date on that day he'd seen Gilby kidnapped, the same day Babbitt supposedly was also kidnapped. Had they gone somewhere else?

The pleasant island lilt of the clerk continued as she asked him why he was looking for Mr. Babbitt. *Maybe she's more suspicious than Laurie?* Declan smiled. She should have asked him that first.

"I'm trying to trace him. I have an important message for him about a sick aunt. His office manager told me where he'd gone."

"Oh, how sad," the clerk said in her best English accent. "Let me check if he or the missus left a forwarding address." She soon returned with her answer. He used a variation of his lie with Laurie and rang off.

Grand Cayman? He called Archimedes.

Maggie's tech-wizard passed Declan off to Raul. He'd sounded overworked, so Declan didn't mind. Raul was also a tech-wizard. Fortunately Clarissa was in day-care.

Declan was at his favorite pub having a pint and dinner when Raul called. He explained he had a contact in Grand Cayman, at one of the posh hotels there, the Westin.

"Your request presented a bit of a challenge. You owe me a dinner. I like Indian. So does Archie."

"Done, even if your information doesn't satisfy. You and Archimedes deserve it."

"My friend has friends at banks and other hotels there. Here's the name of the hotel and their bank." He rattled off the name of another hotel, Kimpton Seafire Resort, and a bank in George Town. "Could those two be trying to avoid some of the king's taxes?"

"Maybe. I guess Jamaica wouldn't work for what I'm thinking. I'll tell you and Archimedes later if my hunch is correct."

He rang off and took two sips from his glass to settle his thoughts. If his hunch were correct, he still wouldn't know why he was involved, but he could see Maggie interrogating the two lovebirds to find out.

He stared at his moby. He knew it was time to get Maggie and Ezra involved, assuming they'd listen to his theory. They might think it was only the imagination of a novelist, a writer of mysteries and thrillers. That would be their mistake. With his father and sister and contacts they'd provided, he knew how coppers solved crimes...or failed to do so. His stories, even though they were fiction, were constructed to seem real. He thought they were good and hoped one day that book royalties would become a major source of income. If not, he might have to accept some assignments in war zones to keep the 'zine editors happy.

He found Maggie's number in his mobile's contact list and rang her. It went to voicemail so he left a short message for her: *If you're not too busy, give me a call. I have a theory. Declan.*

He knew she might verbally bash him for meddling again, so he was surprised when she walked into the pub.

"I'll have what you have and bangers and mash," she said, sitting down opposite him. "You're treating."

Her way of bashing him? All the same, he smiled. "Good to see you again. Rough day?"

"We talked with an Irish Rover who's in the nick. If we can believe what he said, the Rovers didn't kill Heathrow. I don't know about your threats, though."

"Archimedes traced the email to Babbitt, remember?" She nodded. "His partner Raul helped me trace Babbitt to Jamaica and Grand Cayman. I don't think the Rovers killed Heathrow. I think it was Babbitt, maybe with Gilby as an accomplice."

She mulled that over, her food and ale arrived, and she downed half of the latter. "Okay. While this sounds like a plot from one of your novels, go on while I'm eating." She tucked into her food.

Declan watched her for a moment. She was a dainty eater, but she could tuck away food with enthusiasm. *Maybe she skipped lunch?*

"Okay, I'll admit my theory is farfetched. Babbitt worked for Heathrow's firm from time to time and was sweet on Gilby, and maybe vice versa, unless he was using her. In any case, she found out that Heathrow was aiding the Rovers to launder their illegal proceeds—I'm sure there'll be records of that—and got Gilby to skim a bit of them, that money winding up in their accounts in Grand Cayman. The Rovers found out and killed Heathrow, thinking he was the

culprit. Or maybe Heathrow found out what his employees were doing, so Babbitt killed him. Variations on a theme."

"My Lord, where do you come up with this stuff? Do you smoke dope?"

He smiled. "It fits the facts."

"Except for the fact that it doesn't explain why they warned you to stop meddling."

"Which I wasn't doing. You're obviously aware that I write novels. I try to make my crime stories as real as possible. My lead coppers have been male so far, but that might change."

She pointed her fork at him. "Don't you dare. That's too much reality!"

"Apparently, so was *The Calais Connection* where I describe a French crime syndicate smuggling goods from France, read EU, to England, after Brexit. Their operation all goes south when an accountant in Dover starts skimming some of the profits."

"So someone in the Rovers actually reads?"

"No, either Babbitt or Gilby do."

She almost dropped the fork, remembering the book on Rebecca Gilby's writing table.

"Declan O'Hara, I think you just solved this case."

Chapter Fourteen

The hunt for Rebecca Gilby produced no results; the one for Ron Babbitt did. The DGSI stopped him on the French side of the chunnel, and he was extradited back to London. DI Abbott seemed pleased when Bent told him.

"Half the pair is better than none," he said to Maggie. "Assuming O'Hara's right, of course. Can you give Babbitt some stick?"

"We have enough on him to put him away at least for a bit. I missed one important clue, sir."

"Good that you're honest about it, but what was that?"

"O'Hara's novel on Gilby's reading table."

"Had you read it?"

"No. He's written several." She remembered the book at Heathrow's. "I like to start a series with the first book in the series. When I have time to read. I often don't."

"Same here. We're not paid to read or be literary critics, though. We miss a few things now and then, but usually not for lack of reading. I wouldn't worry about missing that clue."

Why is he being so nice to me? "Shall I outline what we have on Babbitt and Gilby?"

"You had enough to go after the pair. And you put Heathrow's firm in its place, although poor Arthur didn't deserve what he got. The world still turns, and the Rovers still will be around, especially now with the UK outside the EU. The politicians always seem to make our lives more difficult."

"I guess you can read the reports at your leisure. When we bring Babbitt in, do you want to do the interrogation?"

"I will if you don't, but it would be good practice for you, and again I don't really have the time."

"Okay. I'll let you know how it goes, though."

"Please do. If O'Hara's theory holds true, we should make him an honorary member of Scotland Yard."

That's more like it, she thought as she returned to her desk. *Henry reverts back.*

The next day, Maggie and Ezra entered the interrogation room to confront Ron Babbitt. He had defense present, but not one of Heathrow's partners. The Met had provided him with a duty solicitor.

They were still looking for Rebecca Gilby.

"We have gone over Arthur Heathrow's records," Maggie began, after Ezra listed those present and read the PI's rights to him for the video recording. "They show what he must have discovered. Did the Rovers order you to kill him? Or did you and Rebecca do that?"

"I have no idea who the Rovers are? In fact, you're talking nonsense."

"Yet you have an open-ended ticket from Paris to Grand Cayman and money there. I guess a PI does well these days? Is Rebecca waiting for you on that island?"

"I have no idea where Rebecca is. I haven't seen her since we returned from our holiday in Jamaica."

"You mean Grand Cayman." Maggie slid the photo of a restrained Rebecca and Babbitt. The barrister examined it and frowned, sliding it on to Babbitt. "Interesting diversion, the kidnapping. Who hustled Rebecca into that motorcar to make it seem even more real?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She pointed a finger at him. "I think you do, and we have an eyewitness. I have half a mind to set you free so the Irish Rovers can have at you. That would save King Charlie's justice system a lot of trouble. Of course, we'd hold onto your passport so you couldn't leave the UK while we finish up our investigation. We'll let you think about that and confer with your lawyer."

"Think he's going to break?" Ezra said to Maggie outside the room.

"We can only hold him forty-eight hours, and I'm not sure we can take his passport. Maybe MI5 could."

"Cor blimey! Let's not get those blokes involved."

She smiled. "Not to worry. Thanks to Declan, I think we nearly have this case wrapped up. We have enough to charge both Babbitt and Gilby just for skimming that money, even if it isn't money due to be laundered by Heathrow. It's uncanny how Declan imagined this situation in his novel."

"Let's get some refreshments while Babbitt stews in his own juices."

When they returned to the interrogation room, Babbitt was ready to cut a deal.

"My client will give you certain information in exchange for a kind word with the Crown Court," the solicitor said. Maggie nodded. "Go ahead, Mr. Babbitt."

Babbitt placed his palms flat on the table. "First, I don't know who in the Rovers did Arthur in. It wasn't me. He sent word to Rebecca that he'd discovered what we'd been doing. He said as long as we returned the money, he'd forgive us. Apparently the Rovers didn't. You might not ever discover who among them did it, but neither Rebecca nor I did."

"Okay," Maggie said. "Good start, if you're being truthful."

He smirked. "You'll never be able to prove otherwise." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, it was all Rebecca's idea. We'd both had a bad start in life in London slums and tried to hoist ourselves up by our bootstraps. My parents came here when May brought Jamaicans into the country to clean up after the war. Fortunately old Theresa couldn't kick them out later because they'd obtained their citizenship. Of course, your racist UK still considers us foreigners."

"Enough of your sad history and politics," Ezra said. "Get back to the case at hand."

Babbitt glared at Ezra, but then continued. "She'd decided that neither the Rovers nor the law firm deserved all that money. She schemed about how to get some of it."

"So she convinced you to help her?" said Maggie. "Don't tell me you're grassing on her to take blame away from yourself."

He shrugged. "We had a relationship even before all that, so I thought her idea was a good one. We polished it a bit, sorting a few details, but it all turned out to be easy. She was in charge of taking the Rovers' money and laundering it. We transferred it all to Grand Cayman, and then transferred that, minus our cut, into several other private accounts. Eventually that got back to the Rovers, all nicely laundered. The money was mostly from drugs trafficking. Stupid Irishmen finally figured out the beginning amount didn't match the end."

"That's enough to charge the law firm and the Irish Rovers, to my way of thinking."

"Good luck. It will be hard to track it all. We were at the top of the pyramid. It's a whole elaborate structure, designed to hide the laundering by Heathrow, no less."

"With that confession," said the solicitor with a smile, "what will be Ms. Gilby and Mr. Babbitt's charges?"

"Cooperating in a money-laundering scheme for one. Faking some kidnappings and threatening Mr. O'Hara for two others." Maggie turned her attention from the barrister back to Babbitt. "So Rebecca panicked as she read Mr. O'Hara's novel?"

Babbitt shrugged. "She thought that he might see a connection. She planned for him to see her kidnapping but then felt that might not be enough, but, even before that, we went to Grand Cayman after Jamaica to cover our trail. That's why I also threatened the bastard. After creating our little kidnapping diversion back here, we planned to return to Grand Cayman and then get lost in South America somewhere. I thought we'd made it. Damned Irishmen, both the Rovers and O'Hara."

"Who helped stage Rebecca's kidnapping?"

"Fellow from the Rovers. Before they knew what was going on. You plods and the Irishman basically tipped them off, I suppose. Some of them aren't dumb scrotes."

Maggie couldn't say that about Gilby and Babbitt. *But where is Rebecca?*

Chapter Fifteen

Rebecca Gilby noticed that the air was clear enough to see the distant Alps. She thought she might visit them next on her way to Poland and her mum's little village. Friendly relatives would welcome her and her money there, she'd rent or buy a little flat, and then spend time sorting her life and future. Austria was the long way around, though, so she might stay there a while. She'd liked England's Lake District, having gone there on holiday with Arthur once. She thought Austria had one too, on the other side of those Alps.

Ron had been a good lover, but he'd also been stupid and malleable. An emotional person, he couldn't focus and analyze things coldly like she could. She could and would use men like that—she'd done that with Arthur Heathrow.

If she could, she'd pat herself on the back. Her stepfather had said she'd never amount to anything as he thrashed her, often after beating her mum. She raised her glass to the Alps, but the toast was really for her mother. *Mum, I struck a blow for downtrodden females everywhere.*

She was a bit sad about ditching Ron, though. It might be hard to find another lover like him. In fact, it might be impossible to find one in her mum's Polish village; she'd always said that she'd never go back because it was full of gossiping bullies. Rebecca decided she might only stay there a while.

She forgot the Alps when one of the workers tending the vineyard moved along in her direction, retying vines and bending to pull weeds. She could tell he was intensely dedicated to his task, stopping to analyze each vine's situation. *Would he be as intense in bed? Or maybe I'll just admire his arse instead?*

She was now free to do whatever she wanted. Free to forget Ron, Arthur, and the Irish Rovers...all the men she'd duped.

If O'Reilly only knew why the law firm had failed him!

After bidding adieu to Archimedes and Raul, Declan shut the door and then turned. Maggie was already contemplating the dirty dinner plates, glasses, and takeaway cartons still emitting the seasoned aromas of Indian food.

"That went well," he said. "I owed those two blokes. They were a great help. And we celebrated your promotion too."

"I just wish Raul would quit Google and come to work for us. They'd be one hell of a crime-fighting duo." She thought a moment, finding her way through her tippler's fog. "Yes, it was quite a lovely night as long as you forget about their need to Facetime with Clarissa and her babysitter. Thanks for the copy of *The Calais Connection*. Maybe I can understand our case better. Or Archimedes can explain it all to me."

"I'm just happy they got a babysitter. Who knows if Clarissa'd have liked Indian food again tonight? She has a way of expressing displeasure in a loud fashion."

"Just a normal child, I suspect. I was thinking of my poor mum all the time. Imagine. Five!"

"I'll sort the clutter tomorrow. Fancy a nightcap before I call a taxi for you? Or cuppa'?"

"No. It'll take weeks for me to work off this dinner's calories, not to mention your Jameson. That packs a punch. I need to ask a favor of you." She waved a palm over her face as if

to brush cobwebs away. "I'm really knackered. Could I sleep on your couch? I can help clean up that disaster zone tomorrow as a way to pay for my stay."

He approached her and used an index finger to wipe a bit of *tikka masala* sauce from her cheek. "You don't have to sleep on the couch. I have a double bed."

Her only answer was a kiss...a long one that left him breathless.

Constructing a Murder

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Chapter One

DI John Torrance spotted the bobbing torch, but he knew it was DS Jodie Graves long before he could see her. While neither lived far from the Lavender Hill Station, her flat was a bit farther away from the crime scene than his.

"Took you long enough, lass," he called out.

Soon he could make out the shadowy form of the tall and thin woman attached to that torch. She pointed at the mangled BMW lit by spotlights from all compass points.

"Why was I called out of bed to come to an accident scene?" she said.

"Sorry 'bout that, Luv, but it's a murder scene too. I was enjoying a pint at Bickford's when I got the call. It's a murder scene because the driver in the vehicle has a third eye."

She stood next to him now. He sensed her wet hair and freshness. *Does my sergeant shower twice each day?* His mum'd been like that. Clean Jean, Pops had called her. Only Mum showered in the morning, more to wake up, and bathed at night, more to relax after a day of tending to a demanding husband. John couldn't remember when she washed her hair, though. His parents sent him off to boarding school so he wouldn't be in their way. His childhood memories with his parents had basically ended at the age of six.

Jodie glanced at the mangled car again. It had embraced three trees sideways, the side opposite the driver, who was still buried in their shadows; that would be forever.

"How do you know he was shot in the head?"

"She. Alison Goody's her name. Works in commercial estate sales. I'm guessing another motorcar passed her and some bloke shot her through the windscreen. There's a hole in it that lines up perfectly with the one in her head when she was behind the wheel."

"Maybe someone angry about being cut off?"

"I'd wager no. It'd take James Bond to make a kill shot like that with two speeding vehicles involved."

"You mean a professional assassin?"

"At least a better shot than you or I are, Luv. Anyway, the bullet rattling around in her head means it's our case, so be prepared for a long night."

"So many times I have evidence that transferring here from Oxford was a mistake. London has too many murders. It's one a.m., by the way."

"Correction then: We have a long day ahead of us. And it's Greater London. You should see what occurs in some areas. Here we're in the safer suburbs of the conurbation."

"Corrected on two counts. This is occurring too often, Guv."

"Sign of the times maybe. Ah, here's our esteemed pathologist and forensics crew," he said.

"I'm getting too old for this," Doc Needles said as he passed by them.

"You've been saying that since I've known ye, Steve," John said. "And a good morning to you, Jeremy and friends." The last was for the SOCOs' leader and his crew, dressed like they'd just landed on the moon.. "Good you have spotlights; otherwise t'would only be what light we have from the city. 'Twas a dark, moonless night...."

"Oh, shut up," Jeremy said as he passed by them. The two women in his crew smiled and winked at John; Jeremy hadn't.

"How did you arrive here so fast?" Jodie said to her DI.

"Pub o'er the brae there is a favorite o' mine. Highly recommended."

She nodded. "Do you ever sleep?"

"Not on a Saturday night. The Good Lord said to rest on Sunday, so I do a good lie-in then to catch up."

"That's unlikely this morning."

"Occupational hazard."

John opened the door for Jodie. They marched up to the brokerage's receptionist.

"We're here to see your Vice President, Mr. Dilbert Adams," John said.

The woman eyed their warrant cards. "Mr. Adams is very busy right now. You'll have to wait. Please take a seat."

"It's about your president."

"Alison? She's not in on Sundays and Mondays. And we're only open until noon today."

"Not showing properties on weekends then. I'm guessing 'commercial estate sales' means business hours. Wonder that you work on Saturdays and a bit on Sundays."

"Many of our commercial clients can only make it in on Saturdays, so we make exceptions, and we do a bit of tidying up and preparation for the following week on Sunday mornings. Please sit down now."

"Doesn't look too busy, I dare say. And I'm sure Mr. Adams will be interested in what we have to say. Because you were so forthcoming, let me give you a bit of a preview: Alison Goody's no longer with your esteemed organization, so you might need to add a few people to replace her, considering how busy you are."

"What does that mean? Has she been in an accident?"

"Yes and no. Yes, because her sporty little BMW participated in an intimate orgy with some trees." He pointed to a spot on his forehead. "No, because someone put a bullet right here to cause said orgy."

The receptionist turned white and clapped a hand to her mouth. "Ex-excuse me!" She dashed off.

"I guess we'll just have to introduce ourselves to Mr. Adams," John told Jodie.

"You did that on purpose," she said.

"Who? Me? On purpose? You know me better than that."

"Yes, I know you all too well. I'll admit she was a bit uppity."

"A bit?"

He'd already spotted Dilbert Adams's office. Jodie followed him as he led the way past mostly unoccupied desks to two glass doors. One was marked "Alison Goody, President"; the other "Dilbert Adams, Vice President."

John opened the Dilbert door and poked his head inside the office. The man at the desk put down his copy of the Times.

"Good morning to you, sir," John said. He waved his warrant card. "DI John Torrance and DS Jodie Graves to chat with you about Alison Goody."

"I suppose you'd better come in and have a seat," Dilbert said. They did. "Now, what's this about Alison? She's not here Sundays. I'm usually not either. I occasionally cover for one of two agents who usually are, when they can't make it in. It's only a half day."

"We don't fancy working on Sundays either," John said, winking at Jodie. "It's not good to start the week with bad news either. Alison Goody has been murdered, Mr. Adams."

The man looked shocked and in denial, but he controlled himself better than the receptionist had. "How-how did that occur?"

John explained most of what they knew so far. "So, I'm the SIO for the murder case. Do you know if she had any enemies?"

"In this business, one's bound to make enemies, Inspector. Not all sides in a negotiation are happy when a deal is closed. I doubt that anyone is so unhappy with the results that they'd commit murder, though. Could this have all been the fault of an angry driver? Alison was more aggressive on the road than most men, including me."

"It's a possibility," Jodie said, "but not a likely one. The attacker appears to have been a professional shooter."

"I see." Dilbert thought a moment. "I'll have to call a meeting of the board of directors. We need to reorganize in this emergency situation if only temporarily." He picked up his phone and jabbed one of its many special buttons. "Mrs. Weems? Are you there?"

"Your PA is a bit indisposed," Jodie said, glancing at John.

"Wouldn't your board just promote you?" he said.

"Not necessarily. One of them might become temporary president even. In any case, we can't have our boat adrift for too long. We have important buyers and sellers coming in this Friday to close an important deal, for example."

"Just what services does your company provide?"

"While for the most part we represent only one client or group of clients in any deal, generally for the party that wants to purchase a tract of land, industrial buildings, or residential towers, we direct them towards the possibilities and approach the ones chosen in order to close the deal."

"A bit different from buying or selling a residence, I imagine."

"Lots more complicated, and we're usually talking about deals worth much more money. The principle is the same, though: The buyer wants something that meets his needs for as little as possible, and the seller wants to get as much as possible for what he's selling. And a lot of the complexity has its origins in the government's rules and regulations for commercial property sales, which are more complex than those for residences. We lead both sides through that maze."

"For a nice percentage of the deal's value, I suppose," John said.

Dilbert smiled. "Of course. We provide a useful service, but it's not free."

"I suppose legal representatives of both sides are involved as well," Jodie said.

"Ours too." Dilbert now frowned. "The others add to the complexity."

"Appears we'll have a lot of persons of interest," John said, "if not suspects. Was Ms. Goody in charge of organizing Friday's meeting?"

"Yes. I suppose now I'll have to be a fast learner and jump into the fray, taking charge of all that. I'll have to do my work and hers as well. I just can't see the board naming someone who will be able to get up to speed by Friday, assuming I can even schedule a board meeting before then."

"We'll leave you to your woes then," John said, standing.

Jodie left ahead of him. But he stopped and turned back at the door. "One more thing, Mr. Adams." He walked over to the desk and placed several copies of his business card in front of Dilbert. "Could your Mrs. Weems or some other assistant provide me with a list of the people who'll be participating in Friday's meeting in any way whatsoever, and also a summary of what's involved in the deal? Not all the financial details, but the general idea. I'll keep that all confidential, of course."

"I'm not sure that's allowed."

"We can always get a warrant. We need that information for our case."

"Um, do you think that someone involved in that deal is responsible for Alison's death?"

"Our investigation is just getting started. Right now, everyone who works here and everyone involved in past or pending deals is a person of interest." He shot the man a sly smile.

"That includes you, of course."

Chapter Two

"He's a self-centered weasel," Jodie said when asked about Adams. "No expression of sympathy for his boss or her family."

John was at the wheel of the speeding vehicle when Jodie made that observation.

"Many agents are pariahs, lass. I think that's a necessary characteristic of that particular subspecies of *Homo sapiens*. The bigger the deal, the bigger the pariah. Before you joined our outfit, we had a case where a literary agent murdered an author so the scandal would increase royalties for the author's book he was representing. Another weasel."

"Different kind of agent, John."

"Point taken, but same scurrilous subspecies. Scum of the Earth, generally speaking."

"You're stereotyping."

"Am I? Most stereotypes are based on people's experiences. Doesn't mean they're justified or correct, of course. Not all Irish are extreme tipplers, for example."

"And not all Midlands blokes are uneducated and crass, present company excepted."

He chuckled. "I've seen a lot more of society's ugly underbelly than you, lass. Probably biases me. Shall we return to the nick and have a little meeting of the team? This is going to be a big case. I can feel it in my bones."

The team's tasks were many. Two members would use CCTV records to try to identify John's ghost car—the rolling lea on each side of the crime scene hardly allowed a sniper to step from cover and shoot—so everyone liked the idea of another vehicle. Nonetheless, John would ask Jeremy to have some of his team determine if that sniper scenario was at all possible. They would then have to find a suspect with the weapon and appropriate gun skills.

Another few were tasked with questioning the brokerage firm's employees; John wished them luck with the uppity Mrs. Weems. Others would question those on the list of persons who'd attend Friday's meeting. Still others would question any lawyers involved.

Jodie would probe into Alison Goody's background. John wanted to know everything he could about the woman, from birth to death, in case there was someone in her past who hated her enough to kill her irrespective of her business dealings.

He assigned himself the potentially daunting task of looking at other big deals the brokerage firm had participated in. He'd start with the county planning commission, always part of the complexity Dilbert Adams had mentioned.

He wasn't sure what the exact relationship was, but the commission's archivist Kay Lewis was somehow related to him via his mother's side of the family. Those archives were found in the building next to the constabulary. He'd met Kay and learned that at a Christmas party five years earlier. She remembered him.

"You walked into my trap," the tiny, plump woman said with a smile. "You had to kiss me because I steered you under the mistletoe."

John didn't recall that. "How'd I manage that?" he said, thinking of his less-than-limber six-foot-three-inch tall body and her short five-foot one.

"I stretched up and you bent down. Foulest kiss I've ever had, I dare say."

"Um. I might've tipped too much eggnog? Those pack a punch, if you'll pardon the pun. Sugar amplifies the rum's impact."

"There was also a lack of food to act as a buffer. What have you been doing with yourself, cousin?"

"Policing and more policing. You knew I was a copper, right?"

"DI John Torrance, my second cousin from the Midlands. Not the rowdiest copper there that night but able to hold his liquor better than most."

"Eggnog might be the exception."

"I don't suppose you came to my dirty basement here just for a chinwag. Someday I'll die down here, and they'll find me as a withered mummy twenty years later. My staff and I just receive electronic documents now and electronically catalog them. More boring than office Christmas parties, and that's saying something."

"Sounds like you're not happy with your work."

"It's a job. Better than not having one in this damn economy. So, what can I do for you?"

"I'm here because I don't have an electronic connection to your database. HOLMES and other databases, yes; yours, no. I need to peruse documents corresponding to commercial property sales where a certain brokerage was involved, in particular those where their president, Alison Goody, ran the show."

"Oh, I know Alison! How is she?"

"She's dead. Murdered."

He had to bend a lot to catch her before she hit the old concrete floor.

Tea and biscuits brought Kay out of her swoon. Somewhat disoriented at first, she then became embarrassed by all the attention. She saw John over on the side, working with her two aides.

Looking past the handsome EMT, she called out to him, "When you're through with what you're doing, please come here and tell me what happened to Alison."

He waved and nodded his agreement; the EMT patted her hand. "Just relax, ma'am, and drink your tea. You'll be okay. You were a bit dehydrated, and I understand you skipped breakfast?"

"I do that often. Everything I eat adds pounds."

"Your sugar levels might get dangerously low. It's better to eat small amounts more often. My mum's the same way. You might want to see a dietician."

"I suppose. Thank you for your help and patience."

"It's my job, ma'am, and I enjoy helping others. You have a good day now."

Later John approached her. "Sorry, Kay. I had no idea you knew Alison."

"We met at a planning commission party. Her company generally sends someone for appearances' sake. She became a good friend. You men have your drinking mates. She was mine. We commiserated about a lot of things." A sly smile. "Mostly about men who are devoid of understanding."

"Understood. And I understand now you and Alison were close. I apologize."

"No apologies necessary. You didn't know. And the EMT thinks it's all about missing breakfast. Again, devoid of understanding, although he meant well, I suppose. Did you get all that you need?"

"Probably more than I need. Your aides are putting it all on a memory stick for me."

"Public records, but treat them with care." He nodded. "I want you to find her killer, John. I hope those documents will help you do that."

"I'll do my best, don't worry. When you're more recovered, I'll return so you can tell me about Alison. You might have some information that's more valuable than anything we might obtain from the documents. I'll also keep you informed about the investigation, of course."

"Thank you. Want a biscuit?"

He smiled. "Don't mind if I do. I'll take a couple for my sergeant too."

Chapter Three

Back at the station, John called for a team meeting.

The constables sifting through CCTV records had found three possible candidates for the ghost motorcar: a Rover, Mercedes, and another BMW. They only had partial plates due to the bad lighting, but they'd already started identifying their owners because the times more or less matched with the estimated time of the shooting.

Jeremy's two SOCOs had found no evidence in the leas at the side of the roadway to indicate a sniper had been lying in waiting. That didn't surprise John, but he thanked Jeremy and the other two profusely. It must have been a dirty job mucking about in those wetlands.

The three assigned to interviewing employees at the brokerage hadn't come up with anything except that they confirmed he'd been right on warning them about Mrs. Weems. She had grudgingly set up the interviews and had been the last interviewee. Mr. Adams hadn't been working, but John already had an opinion about the VP: weasel, yes; killer, no. The man wouldn't have the courage to kill Alison, even if he poured it out of a bottle.

Jodie had background information about Alison. She'd earned two MBAs at the London Business School, studies that had shown her a bit of the world. She'd spoken French and German as well as English. She had scaled the corporate ladder at the brokerage, competing with Dilbert Adams for the presidency. John took note of that. *Maybe the weasel has motive?*

They took a break after that and then continued with the story of John's visit to the planning commission. He waved the memory stick and assigned the brokerage blokes to read through those records.

"Jodie and I will also have a chinwag with Kay Lewis when she's up to it. She'll add to Jodie's information about Alison. Now we'll be off to the morgue for the doc's big reveal. I'm not expecting anything new there, but you never know."

"Any Torrance-filtering of our persons-of-interest list?"

"Adams is still on it, and anyone who might be found on the memory stick. Kay might give us some joy. Those two talked about men, so maybe she knows about the men in Alison's life? Always look at boyfriends and jilted lovers, lass. Given the circumstances, let's forget the possibility of a random killing for the time being."

"I didn't find any indication of boyfriends, not even in party photos. Her web presence was minimal too."

"Probably mostly on the brokerage's corporate website." Jodie nodded. "That's understandable, considering her occupation. She certainly wouldn't be criticizing clients or employees on Facebook, although they might have loved her to try that."

"Some people do, John. It's amazing what people post these days."

"I suppose," John said as he pulled into the hospital's car park.

The county mortuary was in the basement; he didn't know of any morgue that wasn't in a basement. Steven Needles and his two assistants were suiting up; Jodie and John did too. Most of the rozzers called the doc by an appropriate nickname, Sharp—not to his face, of course.

After the opening ceremonies required for the video recording, Doc Needles examined the exterior of the body, moving around it carefully, almost caressing it with his gloved hands. Jodie and John watched the ghoulish dance.

"COD for this poor victim is clear: A shot to the head. Because no bullet was found at the crime scene, I'll assume I'll find it in her head. TBD on caliber, etc." He raised one arm after the other; rigor mortis had passed. "Old bruises on the arms might be significant. They're present above the breasts too. Restraining and beating likely."

John perked up at that. *Maybe there's a boyfriend...a violent one!* "Any recent sexual activity?"

"Patience, inspector. You're probably theorizing she was in a toxic relationship, but let me finish my external examination.

On and on the autopsy went. They left with a bullet in an evidence bag and the knowledge of an altercation sometime in the woman's past. There was no evidence for recent sexual activity. Were the kill shot and altercation related? John found no joy in the idea that they were independent, but it wouldn't be the first time he'd had a complex evidence trail.

On the way back to CID, Kay called. John pulled into the planning commission's car park instead of the station.

"You said this Kay Lewis is a cousin?" Jodie said.

"Second cousin, she says. Nice woman. Looks strong enough to take you down, lass, so let's treat her gingerly. She might offer a wealth of information to complement yours and what we learned from Doc Needles."

Jodie glared at John for his misleading her as she shook hands with tiny Kay. He winked. They all sat around a table in the basement, it's recesses dark and unwelcoming. The shelves stored boxes of paper records from earlier eras. Maybe a historian's haven?

"I'm not sure where to begin?"

"I suppose you met Alison after her two MBAs at the London Business School?" Jodie said.

"Oh, yes. She was a VP at the brokerage at the time. A bloke there was too. They were competitors, or so she said."

"Dilbert Adams," John said. Kay nodded. "Was it a bitter feud until she became president?"

"Not according to Alison. Mr. Adams botched some important deals that she had to clean up. He knew his chances were slim by then."

"And how can you botch an estate deal?" Jodie asked.

"I have no idea. But Alison always talked about how complex commercial estate sales were, so I suppose there are many ways to make errors. She also said there were often egoists on both sides, and that's not even considering the lawyers."

"Did she ever mention any deals where one side or the other was unhappy enough to have her killed?" John said

Kay frowned. "No. She talked rather generally about her work problems, no specifics. That's understandable, even legally. She followed the rules, John."

"Someone might have become angry when she wouldn't bend them. Change of topic: You told me you two talked about men over drinks. Did she have a relationship? Or had one that ended abruptly."

"She said once that some twit, I think he was among some buyers, tried some moves on her, but she rebuked him."

"We'll need his name if you can remember it."

"I don't think I ever knew his name."

"Anything else?"

Kay thought a bit. "With all our girl's talk, I never learned about any serious relationships. Wait. There was one recently. A reporter. No, a so-called photo-journalist he was. She might have been a bit more serious about him. Worked for *The Guardian*, I believe. She broke up with him about two weeks before the...um...before she was murdered. Brian Osgood's his name. Before the breakup, I think she rather liked the bloke. He got a bit physical, though, so she ended the relationship."

"The fellow have any experience with guns?" John said.

"Um, I see where you're going, but Alison didn't tell me much about his background. He could have been another David Hunt for all I know."

John glanced at Jodie. The NCA was still looking to nick Hunt. Why would Kay know about that gangster?

"Any particular reason you mention Hunt?" Jodie said.

"Reality shows on BBC? Fortunately I've never had to meet the man."

"Did you ever meet this Osgood?" John said.

"No. After Kay's experience with him, I never had any desire to meet him. I consider reporters necessary evils to keep the government honest, John. That includes coppers." She laughed at that.

"I see. I don't want to take anymore of your time, Kay, but if you think of anything else that might help us in this case, ring me."

"Okay. And don't forget your promise to keep me up to date. I want to see someone get life in prison for killing Alison. Too bad we don't hang murderers anymore."

Chapter Four

The photo-journalist came to the door in a tee shirt, Bermudas, and socks. He took their warrant cards, examined and returned them, and beckoned them inside to a sitting room where he took a seat in an old wing chair and indicated a short sofa for them.

"I didn't do it," Brian said before John could say anything.

"Do what, Mr. Osgood?"

"Whatever you think I've done. You two plods didn't show up on my doorstep to congratulate me on my photographic skills."

John gave a little chin-bow. "Which must be considerable, seeing this elegant palace you live in." The flat was a ripe tip.

"Warrant cards don't offer much useful information. You're Scotland Yard, but that covers a lot of territory in the Greater London area. It's a bit like saying I'm a journalist. On my day off, by the way. Where do you two hang out, and what's your business with me?"

"CID at Lavender Hill station," John said. "That's—"

"I know what CID does. And those stations were the baby NCAs before the real one cut off your knees. You only get all the shite cases now."

John ignored the insult, which was perceptive in a way. "We're here about Alison Goody."

"Ah, the beautiful bitch who always had to have her way. A good shag, I dare say, when she was in the mood, but far from being a demure little housewife. I liked that in the beginning, but I then began to think I was just someone she used as a pet to show off at social events." He sighed. "'Course we were both very busy in our own different worlds. I guess for her it wasn't enough to put a restraining order on me. What's she accusing me of now?"

"Nothing," Jodie said, "because she's dead. And you're a person of interest for her murder."

John could tell his sergeant had about had it with the photographer before she even had said that. He was also thinking, *Why didn't we know about that restraining order?* That seemed to be a HOLMES failure, and probably the fault of some copper, social worker, or other public employee too lazy to enter it into the database?

Like probably his sergeant, he'd been studying the unshaven prat, liking less and less what he saw and heard.

"Sorry she's gone. She had some pluses among the minuses. How did she die? Wait! I'm a suspect? 'Person of interest' is just plod-speak for 'suspect.'" John nodded. "I didn't kill her, Inspector!"

"We have information that you two had a real barney and she ended the relationship because of it. That was fairly recent 'cause she still had the bruises. Want to comment?"

"That's why she took out the restraining order. As if I'd go near her after that row. I don't have time for insane bitch-witches."

"Why do you call her insane?" Jodie said. "Our information points to her being a lovely, level-headed person. Ambitious perhaps, but that's not necessarily a bad quality. What did you two have a row about?"

He looked sheepish. "It won't seem important. More for her than for me."

"Try us," John said.

"She wanted more intimacy and commitment. Said I have a roving eye."

"Do you?"

"I guess. I chat up women from time to time; it's part of my job. I need a photo that's more natural, not posed, so I need to make the birds feel comfortable."

"And the blokes?"

"Them too, but that's more along the lines of insinuating we could down a pint together. Know what I mean?"

"No, I don't. I'd never want to drink with you. So...you're saying Alison wanted more from the relationship than you did?"

"Let's not be hostile, Inspector," Brian said with a sneer. "The press isn't your enemy."

"Could've fooled me, at least in your case. You didn't answer my question, so I'll assume the answer is yes. Do you know anyone who might have wanted Alison dead, besides you, that is?"

"I think we're through here," Brian said, standing. "Either arrest me or get the hell out of here!"

"Sit down, Mr. Osgood! And answer my question."

Brian sat. John gave him some time to cool off. "Okay, let me think. Maybe some disgruntled buyer or seller? Commercial estate sales is a cutthroat business, or so she said. She must have made some enemies in all those negotiations. How could she not?"

"She never talked about any, as far as we know. You're saying she did with you?"

"No. We generally talked about writing if a lazy chinwag was on the social menu to complement the shagging."

"Writing?"

"I write some fiction, and she was interested in it. How I made money doing it. She read a lot of fiction for R and R and wanted to write that on the side. I told her she had to come at it from journalism or ad-agency work, otherwise she'd starve. That became a small barney sometimes too. She'd seen some of my writing, which includes a bit of fiction, and wondered why I didn't do more of it." He frowned. "Come to think of it, that's about all we had in common, except for some good times in bed and what led up to that."

"Thanks for being so candid." John now stood, ready to depart. He handed the photographer two cards, his and Jodie's. "Don't leave town, Mr. Osgood. We might need to interview you again. Oh, by the way, where were you early last Sunday morning."

"None of your business."

"But it is my business. You're a suspect now, so your whereabouts at that time is definitely my business. If you have no alibi, that makes you more of a suspect."

"I suppose. Okay. I was with a woman."

"Here?"

"No, at her place."

"Name, address, and phone number, please."

"Rhonda Evans. She's a coworker. Reporter. We'd gone for drinks after an interview and photos for an article. Afterwards we went to her place." He gave the address and telephone, which Jodie wrote down. "Please be discreet. Rhonda's a good bird."

"And you, sir, are a predatory vulture. Good day, Mr. Osgood."

"Not much of an alibi," Jodie said once they'd returned to their vehicle.

He knew she was thinking that Evans might lie for Osgood. "A good one for us, lass. Ms. Evans can name the pub, so we can cross-check anything said by what the publican says, or even the customers. But I don't believe Osgood killed Goody. God only knows what she saw in him, but she did the right thing in ending that relationship."

"Her only serious one, it seems. Busy women working in a male-dominated environment often have problems with relationships. They have to kick males' arses too often."

"That go for policewomen too?"

"You bet."

"Um. Maybe you and cousin Kay should commiserate some. I'm guessing that's what brought her and Alison together. Outside that basement and her aides, I only saw egotistical males in those planning commission offices."

"I don't suppose you've ever seen a session of the House of Lords."

"Only on telly, but point taken."

Chapter Five

The constables assigned the CCTV work had names and addresses corresponding to various vehicles for them when they returned. The Rover's owner lived in Oxford; John would call and ask a DI there to help sort that. The Mercedes was nominally the ride of the owner of a jewelry store in a small shopping mall not far from the station; no joy to be found there because his sixteen-year-old son had borrowed that Nazi-mobile for a date. For the moment, that left them with the BMW registered to a gynecologist, Lauren Gottlieb. It had been stolen.

"That's the killer's vehicle," John said.

"Lot of good it does us," said one DC.

"From the video record, could you determine how many were in it?"

The other DC checked his notes. "Maybe two, unless there was someone in the rear seat."

"In any case, that makes for an easier kill shot if someone else was driving. Good work, lads."

"We need to find that motor," said the first DC.

"No, we need to find who stole it. Let's send SOCOs out to the owner's house. You two can interview the good doctor."

"Right on it."

The SOCOs arrived first at Gottlieb's residence. The Cockney housekeeper let them into the garage where the BMW had been stored. They were hard at work when the DCs arrived. The housekeeper gave them tea and biscuits.

The gynecologist hadn't been at home when the vehicle was stolen. An anxious father had dropped by with his pregnant wife aboard, and all three had rushed to the area's NHS hospital. The housekeeper had been sound asleep Saturday night when all that occurred, waking up to an explanatory note from her employer.

The SOCOs had more luck than the DCs, except for the missed tea and biscuits. Fingerprints were found on the broken lock and the garage door's molding, as if someone carelessly leaned against it to pry the lock open. Those pointed to Mark Lord, head security agent for an internet firm. The prints were on record because he'd served in Afghanistan.

Jodie and John made a visit to Crown Communications, Limited, which had no connection with the king or his family, of course. The coppers already knew the company had a pending deal for new quarters that involved Alison Goody's brokerage. The present quarters were dark, old, and too crowded.

"I guess business is good," John said as they entered the small lobby.

"These companies did surprisingly well during the pandemic, probably because everyone was at home using the internet more than ever before."

"Not us," he said. "Not that we can work remotely." He showed his warrant card to the receptionist whose desk almost blocked the old-fashioned lift, a wrought-iron cage that looked unsafe. He hoped there were stairs. "We're here to see Mr. Mark Lord."

She shook her head. "He's home with the flu."

"The second in command?"

"On vacation in Spain."

"Okay, we'll take our chances with Mr. Lord at his home. Give us the address, please."

"I can't do that. Security rules."

"Mr. Lord's, I presume. So you'll make me find it on the internet along with his phone number and all his background? I won't be using your networks, that's for sure." He turned to Jodie. "Let's go, sergeant. I'll make sure Crown Communications goes on Scotland Yard's black list, their security in particular."

"Wait! Is this about a security issue?"

He turned back. "Are you hard of hearing, madam? We're from Scotland Yard. What do you think?"

She gave him the address.

The CEO of Crown Communications, Clayton Collins, had his perusal of *The Guardian* interrupted by the receptionist's call.

"I thought you might want to know, sir. We just had a visit from Scotland Yard about an internet security issue. Neither Mr. Lord nor Mr. Smythe are here, but I sent them to Mr. Lord's residence."

"What kind of security issue?" he said with a frown, not bothering to ask why the two security chiefs weren't present.

"They didn't say."

He would have to make some calls. The company had some contracts with MI5 and NCA, but not the Yard, as far as he knew.

After almost an hour of trying to determine what the hell the rozzers had wanted, he began to have a bad feeling. He'd mentioned to his VP how their pending closure on a new building for their headquarters was being held up by the brokerage firm. The VP of that firm had been their intermediary at first, using Lord's recommendation, but the seller was unhappy they didn't have as many bids as they'd expected. Clayton wondered about that now.

Was Lord involved in something illegal? His VP had recommended that ex-Army bloke. Clayton had thought, *What could go wrong?* Military experience seemed to be just what was needed for running a good security department if you added the tech lads to the mix.

He called his VP. "Jack, do you remember when I mentioned the holdup on the purchase of our new HQ?"

"Sure do. It's resolved. Don't worry about it."

"How was it resolved? Nothing illegal, I hope."

"Not at all. It's taken care of. Don't worry."

Clayton had a niggling feeling that he might not like how it was taken care of. His VP had avoided his question. He made a call to the brokerage and was routed to its VP.

"This is Dilbert Adams. Hello, Mr. Collins. How's my favorite Irishman?"

"You might be confusing me with the Irish patriot. I'm Jewish. Long story. I was just wondering how negotiations are going for our new HQ."

"We had a bit of a hiccup. I had to take them over. I'm acting president now until we have a board meeting. Sorry about the delay."

"Isn't that unusual? Your president, Alison Goody, was in charge of negotiations. I heard she's quite capable."

"Um, there was an unfortunate accident. I'm afraid Alison's no longer with us."

"I see. Okay. Keep me informed. We really need a new HQ, Mr. Adams."

"Understood."

After Clayton rang off, he became lost in thought. He then searched the internet for Alison Goody and saw the obituary. After reading it, he knew why Scotland Yard had paid them a visit. A frisson went down his spine. He called Scotland Yard; he eventually connected with DI John Torrance.

Chapter Six

Their drive to Lord's residence could have been pleasant; it was a nice day without pollution or fog. The traffic was terrible, though, giving John enough justification to swear like a sailor most of the ride there.

As he parked their vehicle, he received the call from the CEO of Crown Communications. John put him on speaker-phone. Mr. Clayton Collins seemed very disturbed.

"I might be a bit paranoid, inspector, but there might be something illegal going on."

"Sorry I didn't think of visiting you, sir, when we were there. Frankly, we were looking for Mr. Lord."

"I'm afraid he might be involved. We are negotiating a deal for a new HQ with Alison Goody as the intermediary between us and the seller. Was your visit in any way connected to that?"

"'Twas, sir. I'm SIO for the investigation into Alison Goody's murder."

There was an audible sigh. "She was murdered?"

"That's right. Professional kill shot."

"Mark Lord was a sniper in Afghanistan."

"We're here at his place now to ask him about that."

"Be careful. I don't know exactly what's going on, but my VP, the brokerage's VP, now acting president, and Lord might all be involved. You might need a SCO19."

"How do you know about our armed support officers, sir?"

"Don't be daft. I read a lot of crime stories. My favorite fiction, to put a fine point on it."

"I see. We'll be getting back to you, I suppose. Don't worry. We'll be careful with Mr. Lord."

They walked up three flights of stairs to the security head's front door; John rang the bell. No one came to the door. John peeked through a dirty window and saw Lord halfway through a back window and onto the fire escape.

"He's doing a runner!" he said to Jodie. "Go to the back!"

He kicked the door in and ran for the window. But Lord's big frame was stuck. John started laughing.

"Maybe gained a few pounds, did you, after your tours in the Middle East?"

John's only answer was a grunt followed by a few expletives.

Mark Lord and three thugs he'd hired were looking at life sentences, so he grassed on the two VPs, Jackson Small of Crown and Dilbert Adams of the brokerage. The latter two had a plot to get multiple buyers bidding to drive the seller's property's price up and then close the deal, making a tidy amount because they were part-owners of the building owned by a group of investors. The other investors were innocent, and so was Clayton Collins. Alison Goody had suspected something was going on, just like Clayton, but Lord and accomplices had killed her before she could do anything about it.

John told Kay most of the sordid story over tea and biscuits before they went to Alison's funeral.

"I guess money is the root of all evil," she said when he finished.

"Oh, there are a few other sins. Revenge, for example. Osgood'll get five years for playing PI."

"What's that mean?"

"Lord contracted him to keep photographic tabs on Alison. Lord admitted the information was used to chart Alison's favorite route home and other activities, for example, meeting with you. Are you okay?"

Kay had turned white. "Please go on."

"So when Adams called and said she was on her way home late Saturday night, he knew the route. I suppose you can call Osgood's actions greed as well. He didn't get all that much for being Alison's Judas, so I'll state it was mostly revenge."

"Typical. Men who think they're studs and want a harem don't want a woman to send them on their way."

"Some blokes who are studs don't do that," he said with a smile.

"You?"

"Yes, but I'm too old for you, cousin. I do know a nice constable that's a sweet fellow and a dedicated public employee, just like you." He shoved his card toward her, face down. Written on it was a phone number. "Lost his wife four years ago. Doesn't like the idea of using a dating app."

"What's he look like?" she said with a sly smile.

"You're in luck. He looks a hell lot better than I do. Even shaves every day. Give him a call. Say someone in the police department mentioned him, but not me." He looked at his watch. "We'd better move along. Alison is waiting for us to say goodbye to her."

Living on the Third Rail

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Prologue

Lieutenant Robert Sherman swung into the Humvee with his right arm. He cradled his rifle on his lap and nodded to the driver, an American he only knew as John.

"Drop us outside the village, mate."

"Yes, sir. Opposite side from where our guys are, right?"

Bobby couldn't place the accent. US soldiers, their comrades in arms in the hellhole known as Afghanistan, spoke many kinds of English, none of them the Queen's. He thought John's was southern US, but no matter. John's blood was as red as his, and they could both die that day.

About two miles from the village where they hoped to trap some murdering Taliban in a pincer movement to free the village, Bobby spotted a shadowy figure ahead who disappeared behind a berm. John saw him too and slowed.

"Let's stop. Hicks, jump out and see what that bloke was about. Find his arse if you can."

Everyone in the vehicle was thinking the same as Bobby and John: IED or land mine. Either one could provide a nasty welcome to the village.

Hicks jumped out the rear of the vehicle and ran forward. He examined the road and then behind the berm, shaking his head.

"Road only shows the tracks of the American lads," he said upon his return. "They must already be in place. No sign of that local bloke."

"Okay. Let's go, John."

The Humvee lurched forward as John went through the gears. Two hundred yards farther on they hit the IED.

The last thing Bobby remembered before regaining consciousness in a field hospital was the heavy vehicle flying into the air from the force of the blast. He discovered he was without his left hand, although it seemed to still be there, and his left leg hurt like hell.

Chapter One

Months later...

Bobby saw the drunk hassling the pretty nurse and moved in, restraining him. "Call the police," he told her.

The coppers took over when they arrived, the uniformed constable taking away the handcuffed drunk while the detective went somewhere else with the nurse to take her statement. She managed to send a silent thank you his way as they left. He returned to his seat in the waiting room.

He couldn't help comparing the NHS ER to field hospitals in Afghanistan, not all that different than the tents for Covid victims he'd seen on the news when he was over there. His second tour had ended with his injuries, but he had avoided the fiasco that American president had created after the Taliban's blitzkrieg-style victory and chaotic evacuation that followed. *What a mess!*

Afghanistan hadn't just involved American troops. It had been a cooperative NATO effort, with he and his British colleagues trying to sustain that nation-building campaign, a disaster in the making from day one. The USSR's Vietnam had become another American Vietnam, and they had dragged other nations' combatants, consultants, and aid personnel down with them.

He was lucky in a sense. The wound in his leg had healed, only leaving a wee limp. The prosthetic left hand was stronger than his right, although he'd never be able to tie a fly again. He'd have to buy ready-made ones if he wanted to go fishing in the Lake District. Or he'd use live bait that didn't wriggle too much.

"Mr. Sherman? You're up." Bobby followed the older nurse into a small exam room. "What can we do for you today?"

"I'm just back from Germany two days and my stump's itching like hell." He raised his arm and wiggled the prosthetic's fingers at her. "They said it might with the more humid climate here."

"Who's they?"

"The doctors at Ramstein airbase. I was there as a guest in their fancy hospital for a while."

"I see. War wound then. I'll take your vitals and then Dr. Murphy will be with you."

The detective who had taken the first nurse's statement caught Bobby on the way out.

"I probably should get your statement too, sir. I hate to make you go back to an NHS waiting room to do that. If it's convenient for you, could you come to the station? We should take our prisoner in and get him sorted."

"I was going there anyway, DC Brody. I have an appointment with DCI Jack Hardcastle there at ten."

"Oh? Perfect. Either the other constable or I will take your statement if you come in a bit earlier. See you then?"

"I'll be there. Now here's me looking for a late breakfast at Dolly's."

"They call it brunch now. Some idea to attract toffs, I suspect, trying to make the old place a bit more posh. Still the same old menu, though."

Bobby entered the cafe with his bag of medicines, feeling a bit better about his stump's condition. He'd been worried that the problem was some kind of allergic reaction to the prosthetic material, but it had been what the doctor in Germany had warned him might happen: a mold just getting started in the heat and humidity of an English summer. He was surprised to see the nurse he'd saved from the drunk gesturing towards her table.

"I didn't get a chance to thank my hero," she said with a smile. "My name's Elaine Barton, but you already knew that." She offered a hand, and he shook it, all the while enjoying her welcoming smile. "In the ER, we're trained to sort such confrontations, but that drunken prat was damn strong. Sit down. I at least owe you a cuppa or some coffee. Theirs are both good here." He sat, picked up a menu, but gave her his full attention. "Where'd you learn to handle yourself that way?"

"Bobby, Bobby Sherman." It came out sounding to him like Bond, James Bond. *Embarrassing*. He skirted her question. "I know Dolly's from way back. I was hoping they hadn't changed. Actually, I'm having a full breakfast. I've only been back a few days, and I've skipped a few breakfasts at the boarding house, like today's, and have done takeaways for other meals. I think coffee comes with breakfast, unless that's changed."

"That policy still applies. I'll have to reward you in some other way. I saw that Brody hit you up for a statement. Aaron's a nice fellow even if he isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer."

"I know that. He didn't recognize me."

"You mean from before?"

He touched the scar that ran from his right ear to his chin, another wound he'd received on another mission, before the other two wounds and not nearly as bad, considering. "I didn't have this back then, and I didn't have my shaggy head of hair then either. I need a haircut."

"You said you've only been back a few days. From where?"

"Afghanistan, by way of Germany."

"Did you lose your hand to the Taliban?" she said, pointing to the prosthetic.

"Indirectly. They had a nasty habit of planting IEDs when they aren't tending to poppy fields. Now they're running that tip of a country again, or attempting to do that, so one can assume they don't want to blow themselves up."

"Think of the blood and treasure lost over two decades. It all started when I was twelve."

Bobby did a quick calculation. "I'm only a bit older than you, I think, but I might have lost a good job while fighting over there for nothing."

"You were called up?"

"That's me being a weekend warrior because the money nicely complemented my pay in the Met as a DS, until that obligation became quite a bit more dangerous. And once I was over there, I convinced myself to keep at it, thinking we might be doing something positive for the Afghan people. Big mistake in hindsight. They've time-traveled back to before 2001."

His full English breakfast arrived and he tucked in as if he hadn't eaten in days. She watched him with a smile as he turned the plate around just so. He always sorted it so that first things he'd eat were closest, in order of preference, and, as he finished that, he'd turn the plate. In this case, it was fried eggs over ham accompanied by toast and marmalade. He broke the yolk so he could dip his toast.

"Nobody knew what would happen," Elaine said, "especially two decades down the road. Originally the Americans only wanted revenge for nine-eleven; I'm not sure what the UK and other NATO countries wanted."

"The Americans wanted a coalition so it didn't look like they were policing the world alone. Or nation-building. They strongarmed us into participating, along with other NATO countries. Yet they unilaterally bailed out. Too late, and a bit disheartening, to say the least." He eyed her. "But let's change the topic. Did you get sorted with Aaron?"

"Not much to my statement. Painless. The drunk assaulted me and resisted you. Period. He'll pay in some way. The Crown Court isn't lenient with scrotes who assault health care workers, especially during and after Covid. I suppose you missed all that?"

"Yes, but I heard about it, of course. Tough times, I imagine?"

He took a sip of his coffee. *Heaven!* The swill the military served, American or English, hadn't been much of an improvement on muddy water.

"The worst thing was that so many idiots refused to get vaccinated or even wear masks."

"You probably didn't expect anything like the pandemic when you opted for a nursing career. At least I went to Afghanistan knowing what to expect, or thought I did. How did you get into nursing, Elaine?"

"Good paying job, and I didn't want to spend the years of study necessary to become a physician. The ER is as close as I've come. Helen's the head, the nurse who attended you, but I'm second in command now. We've seen just about everything, even wounds like yours from motorway accidents."

Bobby glanced at the diner's clock. "I have to leave. I have an appointment to try to get my old job back." He gulped some more coffee. "Raincheck on my reward?"

"I get off at four. I'll take you to dinner. It'll be eating out, but not takeaway. Pub food and draught ale. I have the graveyard shift tonight, so I need to eat early and a lot."

"I enjoy pubs. I'll be waiting for you on that bench at the entrance to the hospital."

Chapter Two

Bobby arrived early enough to make his statement to DC Brody. The constable led him to an interrogation room.

On the way, someone yelled, "Hey, Bobby Sherman, welcome back!"

"What was that all about?" Aaron said after they'd taken seats opposite each other in a claustrophobic room with a small table and two chairs. Bobby didn't remember it, but things had changed in the station since he'd left: new people and remodeling.

"You probably don't remember me. You'd just started, and I left soon after that for Afghanistan. I used to work here. I hope to get my old job back."

"Um. Bobby Sherman? Name doesn't ring a bell."

"DS Robert Sherman? I sat on the far side of the large open-plan room from you."

Aaron thought a moment. "Aha! Now I remember. I worked for another DI and alongside another DS. That DS is no longer here. Moved to another station and is a DI now. I guess I have to say welcome back too. Maybe we'll be working together. My DI is always complaining about being shorthanded. Is your appointment with DCI Hardcastle?"

"I hope so. I didn't see Jack in his office. We should get started on my statement, though. He's usually on time." In fact, Bobby couldn't remember Hardcastle ever being late.

Aaron was fast enough and thorough at taking Bobby's statement, so the two were able to have a cuppa together in the canteen before he looked for Hardcastle, who'd passed by, stopping only for a wave to Bobby and to grab a bag of crisps.

"I guess he remembers you," Aaron said.

"I'm like a sheep that needs to be shorn, so Jack still has a good eye. I saved his butt once, so he should remember me. He was my DI, after all."

"Um. Yes, I remember that now. I wasn't on his team. Were you one of them who called him Hard-Arse? I was too new to risk saying anything like that."

"I always thought of him as Kojak, with the lollipop replaced by a toothpick."

Aaron smiled. "I heard that he needed that as a pacifier to replace a fag, a bad habit he ended."

Bobby stood. "Good to catch up, Aaron. Maybe we'll get a case a bit more interesting than a violent drunk."

After a few pleasantries, mostly about army life—Jack Hardcastle had also experienced it in Yugoslavia—the graying DCI got down to business. He chewed his toothpick as he looked Bobby over.

"First, let's get one thing straight, Sherman. The Met only has to give you back your old DS post, and that doesn't have to be back here. Can't be, as a matter of fact. No openings. In any case, you need one of our quacks to okay you for active duty. The Home Office doesn't accept some damn American military doctor's determination."

Bobby frowned. "I see. I guess my record working for you isn't good enough?"

Jack shrugged. "Might be for me, but like I said, we don't have a DS position available here. God knows we need more coppers, but the superintendent has budget constraints. He also

tends to follow Met rules, which means you'll have to accept a DS position anywhere in the metropolitan area."

"I might as well join the king's guard then, I guess. Or maybe become a PI. So this appointment today is a waste of time, yours and mine?"

"Could be...unless...." Jack's voice trailed off and he began to hum "God Save the King." He stopped and then laughed at the hound-dog expression on Bobby's face. "You always take things too seriously for your own good, lad. Would you accept my old DI position? It's still open."

"That's not funny. I thought I only could only come back in as a DS somewhere else."

"What I said was that the Met only has to offer you a DS. We can offer you something better. To keep the accountants happy, you'd come in here as a DS and I'd immediately promote you to DI. I'd heard about your being wounded over there in that hellhole. We kept my old position open for you. Need to think about it, Bobby?"

"Hell no! Thanks, Guv. I mean Detective Chief Inspector."

"For you, still just Jack." He stood and the two men shook hands. Jack then patted Bobby on the shoulder. "Everything's already cleared with the super. You'll still have to get our medic's okay, although I'm sure that's only a formality. You're right-handed if I remember correctly?"

Bobby flexed the prosthetic fingers of this left hand. "This is state of the art. I just couldn't do all the British military needed me to do, so I received an honorable discharge."

"You don't have to use a gun even if that were your right hand, just call for a SCO19. And I bet that prosthetic gives you a mean left hook. I heard about how you handled that drunk. Was that nurse worth it?"

Bobby smiled. "Promising. At least I won't be the stereotypical wounded soldier flat on my back and falling for my nurse. I am looking forward to getting back in the dating game, though." He waved the prosthetic hand again. "This might hold me back."

"Nonsense. 'Nough of that talk. You'll be fine." Jack handed Bobby a card. "Appointment for our Hindu quack. Ten a.m. tomorrow. Report here to work afterwards with your papers. One of your sergeants will get you sorted and set up in your new office. Welcome back, DI Sherman."

"You look like the cat who ate the canary," Elaine said as she approached the bench where Bobby had been waiting for her. "Must have been a better afternoon than morning." She sat beside him. "Mine certainly was. Did you get your old job back?"

"Better than that. I got promoted. You can call me Detective Inspector Sherman now."

"I didn't realize you were in the Met. And that's wonderful! Now we have two things to celebrate." She leaned into him and kissed his cheek. "That's an aperitif. We'll take my car. I'm guessing you don't have a vehicle yet."

"I don't even have a flat lined up yet. I have a room in a boarding house. Its best feature is that it's close to my police station. Say..." He pulled the appointment card out of his pocket. "You don't happen to know a Dr. Patel, do you?"

"He specializes in prosthetics, but he's not NHS. For those who can afford him and in a need of a prosthetic, we give them referrals to him. I've cosigned a few of those, all for accident victims, not coppers."

"You don't know him well enough to put in a good word for me, I suppose."

Elaine tapped Bobby lightly in the gut. "From what I saw, you're fit enough. Just tell him about how you handled that drunk. God, they can get nasty and violent sometimes, and they can be incredibly strong. I wonder why the Met is sending you to Patel."

"Probably because of what you said: He's a prosthetic specialist," Bobby said, raising his left hand. "My DCI doesn't seem to trust the American specialist I had in Germany."

Elaine laughed. "Waste of money then. Patel will just confirm that specialist's opinion, I'm sure. Can't hurt to have him take another look at your stump, though." She eyed him. "You ready, DI Robert Sherman? I need a nice pub dinner and ale to accompany it. I'm paying."

"I should pay for my own."

"We can split the check next time."

Chapter Three

Bobby found Elaine's little car comfortable once he was inside, but getting into the old Morris was difficult, for both his size and bum leg that was always stiff that late in the day.

"I'll try to remember to bring some axle grease for you next time," she said with a smile as he made himself more comfortable.

"I'm good. I've been in far tighter places before—tanks, overcrowded Humvees and Jeeps, sitting right-side up or upside down, or in a roll downhill. This is heaven in comparison. Nice to have a pretty chauffeur too and not a sweaty colleague driving."

She was silent until she had to stop for a light. She turned to him, a worried look on her face. "Let's not ruin dinner by talking about any of that. Please. I hate war, even though I love soldiers. They go through hell. I know that, but I don't want to talk about it. Okay?"

"Right. But you won't want to hear about some cases I had with the Met either. Soldiering and policing—that's me most of my adult life. So we have to talk about you. No rings, so you're not engaged or married. Any boyfriends?"

"Not currently. And not for a while, in fact. No time for a serious relationship, to put a fine point on it. I'm an ER nurse, remember?" He nodded. "It's better now. Definitely less hectic than what we experienced during the pandemic. If I'd had that PM as a patient, I might have forgotten the Hippocratic oath."

"Family?"

"Mum's in a Bristol nursing home with dementia. Whole place got the virus. She was one of the few who survived. Pops is gone five years now. Not unusual for people our age. Your family?"

"I'm the youngest of three siblings, the baby that arrived by accident. Our parents passed on, seems like years ago. The oldest sibling, my sister, is a barrister. My older brother's a teacher. They're both a lot older than I am. We exchange holiday cards, and I received something like a 'Get well soon' from my sis when I was in that German hospital recovering. I'm basically on my own."

"So...are we both stupid enough to lose ourselves in our work?"

"I suppose. Sad, huh? Aren't we the glum chums?"

"Here we are. A pint or two will cheer us."

"And the food?"

"It's usually great, and there's lots of it. But if it isn't tonight, we'll just have to toss down a few more pints. We can always call a taxi. I've left my motor here overnight in their car park before. Nobody would bother stealing this old thing. Fair warning: I need an early evening. Graveyard shift coming up, so my limit is two. With more and the food, I'd have trouble staying awake."

He could tell by the way she gripped the wheel and blathered on a bit that she was nervous. His sleuthing skills weren't quite up to determining why. And he couldn't remember the last time he'd had dinner with a woman.

Elaine dropped him at his boarding house not long after dinner. Mrs. Lawton, the owner, was still awake reading one of her romance novels.

"Saw a lovely young lass drop you off, Mr. Bobby," she said, sticking her head out the entrance to her sitting room. She winked at him. "You work fast. Who is she?"

"Just a new friend I met. Sorry I'm late."

The old woman looked back inside, probably at the huge grandfather clock in the back corner of the room. "Not very. Tomorrow I'll try to remember to give you a key so you can come and go as you please. I never want to stand in the way of young love."

"Again, she's just a friend. Good night, Mrs. Lawton. I'll see you at breakfast."

"You missed it today."

"I had a lot to do."

"No problem. I'll credit that. I start serving at seven. Last service by nine. Have a good evening."

Bobby moved up the stairs with a smile on his face. He'd been lucky to find the place. Maybe Mrs. Lawton would mother him too much, but he'd be in no hurry to change lodging until after he was sorted in his new tasks at work. *One thing at a time, Bobby, one thing at a time.*

But should he follow up with Elaine? She'd seemed to imply she was very busy with no time for relationships. He'd be busy too. If anything happened, it would have to occur with both of them skirting around their stressful work. *But other people did that, didn't they?* Time would tell.

He did a bit of a lie-in the next morning, had a leisurely breakfast served by Mrs. Lawton and her son, David, a friendly fellow who reminded Bobby of Aaron Brody, another simple soul. *The world needs more like them.*

He then left for his appointment with Dr. Patel.

The office was located more toward the center of London in a modern skyscraper. Bobby found the suite number in the lobby, 8H. He was impressed when he entered the office.

Definitely not NHS! Bobby couldn't figure out how the Met could afford the doctor's services. *Maybe this is an exceptional exam? How much would the medic charge?* Bobby could imagine several monthly wages.

"Mr. Sherman. This way please." An older nurse led him past the receptionist's desk into a corridor and then on to an exam room. "Please detach your prosthetic. The doctor will be with you in a moment."

When the doctor entered, he reminded Bobby of some characters in *Willy Wonka & the Candy Factory*, an Oompa-Loompa-like fellow with a wide grin and sparkling, brown eyes, but he couldn't remember which version of the movie he was remembering. Bobby regretted making the racial stereotype, especially when the small man turned out to be a serious yet amiable professional.

He examined the prosthetic. "As a child, I read a novel once where the main character had several of these, even some specialty ones with tools. Ever read *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*? It's a sci-fi story by Robert Heinlein. I found the idea of functional prosthetics fascinating, so here I am, ye olde prosthetics expert. I get paid for examining all of you plods, though, prosthetics or not. Just strip to your briefs. I'll take your prosthetic for a moment to examine it. Be right back."

When he returned, Patel waved the artificial hand and said, "They did a fine job. Let me check the stump first." Bobby felt a bit strange as the doctor examined the stump with its

multiple contacts. "Yes, I see how they did it. That must have taken some time, but you should have nearly full functionality. Let's see the leg. Can you stand alone on it?" For another ten minutes, Patel poked and prodded. "You'll have a great left hook." He laughed.

"Someone else said that."

"I'll write on the form that you're fit enough to go out and about and nick all the bad blokes. I'd hate to be a criminal and get in a fight with you. You can dress and go back to the waiting room. The nurse will bring your forms out. Good luck back in the Met, Inspector Sherman."

"Not quite yet, but by the end of the day, I suppose."

Chapter Four

"Welcome back to civilization, Guv," DS Cohen said upon entering Bobby's new office, his hand extended in greetings. "You might not remember me. I was only a detective constable when you were here as a DS."

"Take a chair." When he was seated, Bobby smiled at him. "I do remember you. I just want to meet the whole team one on one, like I said at our team meeting. By the way, first-name basis. I'm Bobby. You're Chaim?" The DS nodded. "How's the nipper?"

He laughed. "Two now, Guv—um, Bobby. A boy and girl. Everyone's fine, thank you."

"Your wife's a pathologist associated with the next station over, right?"

"She works with them usually, correct. I sometimes see her in her official capacity when things get hectic here and old Doc Jepson gets overwhelmed. The Met's just one big happy family."

"Except when it isn't," Bobby said with a smile. "I have yet to see you in action as a DS." Chaim frowned. "Don't worry. We'll work fine together. I know a lot more about being a DS than being a DI, though, so have patience with me."

"You worked under DCI Hardcastle. We all respect him, and he's a great role model."

"I hope to be the same, and I'll be as demanding, within reason...and I will not be overbearing. Please let me know about any problems here at work. I'm a good listener. Any questions?"

"Not now. I'll pipe up when I have them."

"Good. Could you send in DS Wilson?"

By one p.m., Bobby had finished interviewing his new team: two sergeants and four constables making up a team of seven, counting himself. That makeup could change depending on a particular case's requirements. And, on occasion, some DIs ran two teams or more, taking on almost the role of a DCI. For now, Hardcastle was breaking him in with just the one team.

Except for DS Cohen, who had been promoted to Bobby's old position from another station's team, the team was Hardcastle's old one, including himself, the DI now responsible for all of them. He thought it was an awesome responsibility, but a challenge that he gladly accepted.

Because there was no pending case at the moment, he decided to call it a day. It was the perfect time for another pub dinner with Elaine, but he knew she'd be at the ER. A drizzle had started, so he took the Tube to his boarding house. He bought a paper at the exit and used it to cover his head during the two-block walk home.

Mrs. Lawton tut-tutted, took the paper, and gave him a towel. "Find a place in the parlor, Mr. Bobby. I'll bring you a cuppa."

Another guest was there. When she lowered her paper, he saw that she was a woman much younger than Mrs. Lawton but older than Bobby. "I'm guessing you're the new long-time boarder. Mrs. Lawton doesn't take on many, so that's always in demand. In fact, sometimes she's completely full and I have to find somewhere else when I come to London."

Bobby, who had wanted to introduce himself, finally got a word in. "I'm Bobby Sherman. Until I get sorted here in London, I am indeed a long-term guest."

He stood and offered his hand. She shook it, barely touching it. *Does she think both are prosthetics?*

As if she were reading his mind, she said, "I was just admiring your prosthesis. Is that Dr. Patel's work?"

"US Army surgeon's. I just came back from Afghanistan by way of Germany."

"How interesting. My brother was over there. He's a helicopter mechanic. Non-combatant. Home now. He actually met Prince Harry once."

"I was probably there after him then, or just didn't have the opportunity to meet him. I certainly flew in enough choppers."

"That damn war lasted two decades. It was time we got out. Just not in that way, of course."

"Do you know Dr. Patel?"

"I sell medical supplies. His office is just one of many on my list to visit. My territory goes all the way to Oxford where I live. It would be more practical to live in London, I suppose, because most of my business is here, but the city's so damn expensive. I see your tea has arrived. Try the cakes. Mrs. Lawton does a fine job with them."

He thanked Mrs. Lawton who scurried off, sat, and started in. The room was a bit chilly, so the beverage went down well. He finished a cake before continuing the conversation.

"Do you also visit NHS facilities?" he said, thinking of the hospital where Elaine worked.

"NHS buys most everything in bulk and distributes the supplies themselves. I service private practices. I understand the Yard even refers coppers to Dr. Patel, though. He's a bit weird but a very comforting fellow to his patients, I'm sure. Probably charges an arm and a leg, though. Pardon the bad joke."

Indeed. Why does the Met use him? Why not send coppers to the NHS? Did I get special treatment?

"I saw him for this," he said, raising his left hand, "referred there by the Met for nearly a routine physical, though. I'd already seen someone at an NHS hospital about a little problem with it."

"The chap who had my sales route before me explained that he does service members and coppers at reduced rates. Feels it's his civic duty."

"Good for him." *And there you have it, Bobby.*

Bobby thought maybe there was more to that story, though, but left it at that.

While other boarders sat down to enjoy what appeared to be a fine meal—Bobby had only signed up for the breakfast plan and missed the first day because of his visit to NHS—he went two blocks farther down the street to a small Italian restaurant he'd spotted when looking for the boarding house. The owner and his daughter treated him like royalty.

"Not see you before," Luigi, the owner, said to him as he was finishing up an excellent veal marsala.

"I'm staying at Mrs. Lawton's boarding house. I figured my dinner hours would be irregular in my new job, so I didn't sign up for her meal plan."

"Better for you. You can try all my excellent creations. There are also many other ethnic restaurants around here. No guarantees for their quality, though." He pointed to Bobby's mobile on the table. "Just google. You'll see them."

Bobby was just getting used to the new moby. He still had some setup to do.

"Thank you." Bobby held out his hand. "I'm Bobby Sherman, by the way. And you're Luigi...?"

"Luigi Mancini, like that composer. My beautiful daughter's name is Carlotta." He leaned toward Bobby and said in a whisper, "She's my youngest. Not married, if you're interested."

He glanced at Carlotta, who looked to Bobby like how Carmen in the Bizet opera might look. He'd like to see that some day; he figured his CDs didn't do the opera justice.

She was busy polishing glasses at the bar, humming along with the Neapolitan songs playing on the sound system. The old man hardly needed to whisper.

"A lovely woman, but how old is she?"

"Legal age. She just turned eighteen. I need to marry her up to a rich man. My other children already married well."

Bobby didn't like that phrase "marry up." "She's a bit young for me. I'm sure she'll find someone."

"Okay. But keep her in mind. She's like my wife, so probably a fiery lover."

In spite of an effort to control it, Bobby blushed. He then nodded. "Okay. I'll keep her in mind, and tell any of my friends who are looking for a date."

When he paid to leave, Carlotta was all smiles. *Had she put her father up to that little matchmaking exercise?*

As he strolled back to the boarding house, he had to chuckle. He wasn't going to let Luigi's attempts to find his daughter a rich man to marry stop him from enjoying fine Italian food, but he thought he might try some of those other restaurants before returning.

Chapter Five

"All right, folks, we have our first case," Bobby announced to his team the next morning after everyone had sorted their coffee, tea, and various snacks. His gaze swept over the expectant faces. The incident room seemed crowded. He was in one corner. "I'm going to let Liz take the lead. She arrived first and already has her tea. I'll be checking out the biscuits. Liz?"

Bobby watched as she stepped in front of the group, confident in her demeanor. *Good!*

Other personnel who entered Heatherhill Station that foggy morning showed some curiosity about the meeting where Bobby's team had crowded into the smallest incident room used for team briefings. The door had been left open to keep the room from becoming stifling with the old radiator and high humidity. He wondered if they were more curious about the new DI, though, namely him. *Or why I broke with tradition and am calmly sorting my tea and biscuits instead of assuming the obvious role of leader?*

Liz was already at the case board, there because of Bobby's early warning. Chaim had wheeled it in.

"We have an unidentified stabbing victim found in an alleyway. Female, twenty-five to thirty probably. SOCOs and Doc Jepson are on the scene now with uniformed constables on crowd control."

"Any chance it's a domestic dispute?" Chaim said.

"Always that chance," Bobby said. "Go on, Liz."

Liz was frowning at the interchange. "Unless there's some message or a witness's testimony, there's no way to tell," she said. "Let's not go down that rat hole. Shall I continue?"

Bobby, his mouth now full of biscuit, nodded again, more for Chaim's benefit. Either nerves or gung-ho pushiness for the young man. He assumed the others were adrenalized too and anxious to show the new DI their stuff.

"One uniformed constable quoted a shopkeeper as saying that the alleyway was clear last night when he closed shop. We'll know the TOD better after the pathologist finishes his work. COD is clear."

"It's possible she was killed elsewhere and dumped in the alleyway, in which case we'd not know much about TOD," Bobby managed to say. "Let's keep that in mind."

Liz nodded and then shrugged. *I'd better keep quiet*, Bobby thought.

She continued. "I was going to say the SOCOs might be able to tell us if the murder was committed in the alleyway. We shouldn't make any assumptions until the crime scene is cleared, whether secondary or not."

Bobby sensed she was finished with the prelim, so he stood but remained where he was. "Thanks, Liz. After the SOCOs and Doc Jepson finish, let's start canvassing the area. Maybe someone saw or heard something, even if she was dumped there. Chaim, let's you and I tickle HERCULES a bit with any pics we get of the victim, looking for missing person cases. We need to find out who the victim is ASAP. Let's all meet back here at half past three." He didn't have to remind his team that the first days of a murder case were critical.

They all dispersed except for Chaim and Bobby. Before they returned to the common area and he sat down at Liz's workstation, he saw Hardcastle watching from his office window. He was smiling.

Yes, Jack, we're off to a good start. I hope it stays that way.

"I have a hit!" Chaim called over to Bobby.

He got up and peered over his sergeant's shoulder at the computer screen. "No way!"

Chaim had put the picture of the victim's dead face next to another woman's, the first on the left with dead eyes staring, the one on the right with a vivacious smile; the right one was from Interpol, complete with BOLO. The victim's name was Maria Girardi, and she was last living in Italy.

"Our victim died far from home," Chaim said. "Should we inform Interpol?"

Bobby read a bit more. "Maybe the *Polizia di Stato* too. A jewelry heist. Maybe she didn't want to split the jewels with her four accomplices? Did a runner and ended up here dead in an alleyway?"

"Those four would be my first suspects, whoever they are. They could have killed her even if she finally gave them the jewels."

"Call our people back in. We'll have to generalize our canvassing to hotels and boarding houses throughout the city now, maybe throughout the UK. Damn! She entered the country somewhere. We'll need to contact customs too. Trace her steps forward from Italy to there."

Chaim was staring at the Interpol picture. "Pretty girl. Got in with the wrong crowd, I guess."

"You're a romantic. How do you know she's not the leader of that gang and had decided to keep the jewels all along?"

"Her? She looks like an angel!"

Bobby put his hand on his sergeant's shoulder. "Okay, she could have just been used by the gang. One guy goes in with her pretending to look at engagement rings, say. We'll keep an open mind. We now have name and nationality. I outlined a plan. Let's get to work on it."

Interpol agent Wolfgang Lange and Bobby stripped off their autopsy suits. The agent was silent and didn't say anything until they rejoined Liz in the squad car; she'd been in contact with those canvassing. She was also their driver. Bobby took the passenger seat, and Wolfgang sat in the back.

"Damn shame," said the man from Lyon. "A beautiful woman's life wasted."

"We don't know much about her," Liz said. "Your people and the Italians weren't very cooperative. Your turn to share, Agent Lange."

Bobby smiled. Liz could hold her own.

"I apologize. Part of that attitude is due to Brexit. The UK's no longer in the EU. But the Italians were always stingy about sharing data too. And we were a bit silent because of who she is."

"We know who she is," Bobby said. "I don't understand. Is her family important or something? Old Italian royalty?"

"You've put your finger in the sore. She's not really Italian, although she worked in Italy. She went there when her Swiss family disowned her. She gave them the finger and left. The old man is a rich banker. We understand the stepmother was the one who convinced him to give her the boot. He wanted to keep this whole jewelry heist quiet."

"To avoid scandal?" Liz said.

"That, and because he thinks she was coerced. We have no evidence for that."

"Did she run off with the jewels?" Bobby said.

"We don't know that either. Might be the case, though. We need to catch the others and ask them. You folks might want to get MI5 involved."

"Hell, Hardcastle would love me for doing that," Bobby said.

"Jack Hardcastle?" Bobby nodded. "Good man, Jack." Wolfgang thought a moment.

"Let's say that the other thieves are still in the UK. How could we flush them out?"

"They won't stay here if they have the jewels," Liz said. "If Maria could smuggle them in, they can smuggle them out."

Bobby nodded again. "There are many ways in and out of merry old England."

"You're probably right," Wolfgang said.

"But let's suppose they didn't get the jewels," Bobby said. "We can flush them out by saying we found them where Maria was staying. What my team is doing is still a good plan."

"A necessary one," Liz said, "because we have no idea where she was hiding."

"They'll know where, at least the last place, because they found the girl."

"Back to canvassing lodging places and ports of entry," Bobby said.

"There's another possibility. Maria has relatives living here in the UK. An old aunt and uncle live in a castle somewhere. That uncle is her old man's older brother."

"Name and place?" Bobby said.

"I need to contact Lyon for that."

Chapter Six

Before Bobby left with Wolfgang for the castle the next morning, he had another quick breakfast with Elaine.

"You look knackered, Inspector."

"I guess I wasn't quite ready to have an important case right at the start of my DI work. Got to get into it some time, I suppose, but it's been exhausting, and we're just in early days. How's it going with you?"

Bobby didn't want to give her any of the gory details. He eyed her and managed a smile, feeding off her concern. It was nice to have someone worried about him. *This woman is special, but is she nursing me or interested in something more?*

He knew veterans often had relationship issues. Especially in his current line of work, he had to fight depression. *A plod often sees the worst of humanity.* And seeing Maria's body on that exam table was more than depressing. Wolfgang was right. No one deserved to have their life end in that way, especially a vibrant, young woman. *And I was just at the prelim!* He thought about sending someone else for the full autopsy.

"You look fresh, not knackered. In fact, you look good, Elaine." *Should I say that to a woman I hardly know?* Due to Elaine's ER schedule, there was no way to call the previous dinner a serious date. "But I bet the ER is stressful."

"Sometimes it's just routine, which I'm used to handling. It's when we receive cases all at one time that it becomes hectic. That usually involves motorway accidents with multiple collisions, but we had a mass shooting once. And then there was Covid, of course."

They talked about the pandemic a bit, and then he told her about their upcoming trip to a castle. He couldn't give her many details, and he was surprised by her comments.

"I always wanted to live in a castle when I was a little girl. To be married to a prince like Diana was."

"That didn't turn out so well for her, although he still got to be king."

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I have no use for the whole lot. They're leeches who cut ribbons and such to give people their fixes for their addictions to pomp and circumstance, and they call that work."

Those are strong words, Bobby thought, *but she had said them with a smile.* Of course, they echoed his sentiments.

"I never think about royalty much," he said to continue with a more neutral and less personal discussion. "They're like Big Ben or Trafalgar Square, you know: Just sad monuments to the golden age of the once mighty British Empire. I think most people just take them for granted like London's air pollution. I certainly do."

"In a sense, we both work for them."

He laughed. "I doubt our yearly salaries even come close to what they spend in a month. And I'd wager the government spent more keeping our troops in Afghanistan than what all the royals combined spend."

"Doesn't mean I wouldn't like a wee raise now and then," she said with a laugh.

"No I suspect we're like civil servants most everywhere, lost in the lower middle class. I'm just happy to have a job right now, along with that bit of promotion that came with it."

"So tell me about the German bloke."

"He's from Interpol and will be a consultant for the case for reasons I don't want to get into. He's headquartered in Lyon, though, so I suspect he speaks French as well as German and English."

"Ooh-la-la," she said. "Prussian or Bavarian?"

Bobby shrugged. *How do you tell?* "He's from Munich."

"Most likely Bavarian then. That would make him more interesting. I've been looking for someone to teach me the polka."

He raised an eyebrow. "I went out and celebrated my last night at Ramstein airbase trying to dance polkas and Viennese waltzes while drunk. I gave it my all, but I think I need many more lessons. A rather heavyset *fraulein* flung me around the dance floor. Hardly dancing, I dare say."

She thought a moment. "Maybe we can take lessons together."

"I'd like that, but fair warning to your toes if I step on them."

"I want to learn some Latin dances too."

"Are you planning a new career?"

"Heavens no! There's just a certain Met inspector I'd like to dance with."

He smiled. "Now I'm jealous. Who is he?"

"You, idiot! Who knows? You might also be my Prince Charming. Just call me Cinders."

He thought she might be mixing up her fairy tales, but he liked her comments.

"I heard you were at Ramstein," Wolfgang said as they walked towards the castle's entrance.

"I didn't get to see much of the local color," Bobby said, showing his prosthetic.

"I noticed that. Oh well, you can always take a holiday in Germany. Munich's the best place to go, unless you want to float down the Danube and visit Austria as well."

"And I heard you're from there." Bobby smiled at Wolfgang. "*Bundespolizei*."

"Guilty as charged. And I like to promote my hometown."

"To the chore at hand. How did these people get this castle again? They're not British toffs."

"They bought it, I suppose. We don't have that information. Aren't your aristocrats getting so poor with the tax hikes that they're selling off everything?"

"Some have been doing that all along, long before Brexit and Covid. It takes quite a dosh to maintain a place like this." Bobby studied the front door. "I think we have to pull this ring. Careful. Big Ben-like chimes might sound."

Bobby was right. The door chimes sounded from deep within the castle; for the sound to reach them through the solid wooden door, they had to be loud. He waited a bit and then pulled the chain again. He was about to pull it a third time when a tall old man in a butler uniform appeared.

"DI Robert Sherman of Scotland Yard and Interpol agent Wolfgang Lange." They showed him their credentials. "We have an appointment with Mr. and Mrs. Girardi."

"Of course. Follow me, gentlemen."

They were led down a long hall and then into a sitting room that looked like something from Buckingham Palace.

"You may take seats over by the fireplace. Shall I bring you tea service?"

"That would be splendid, my good man," Wolfgang said with a smile.

The tea service arrived before Mr. and Mrs. Girardi: Four delicate China cups; a large matching teapot, with its sugar bowl and milk pitcher; and a plate of cakes.

"Don't get used to it," Bobby told Wolfgang in a whisper.

"They're not English toffs, but they live like ones," Wolfgang said.

Bobby thought it was prudent to wait for their hosts, who soon appeared. After introductions and taking seats, the aunt became mother. She seemed to glide upon a magic cloud of perfume as she performed the ritual, giving everyone tea and then offering the cakes. With the tea, she pointed to the sugar cubes and milk; when it was his turn, Bobby declined the milk and signaled for one cube. She winked at him and smiled.

Is she flirting, implying the one cube was perfect because I'm already so sweet? Or is it all just my imagination? Maybe the years spent in Afghanistan with mostly sweaty, unwashed men had affected how he related to women and didn't permit a close but socially acceptable connection. He thought of Elaine.

But Bobby connected with the pair of Swiss ex-pats. They seemed like nice people, but a police detective had to be more objective. Niceness could always just be a charade. *Let's see if it is.*

Mr. Girardi, who looked like one of the gnome-bankers from the Harry Potter movies, albeit more pleasant, spoke in his soft, gravelly voice.

"And what brings you to Pembroke Castle, gentlemen? Our humble abode isn't the most famous castle, of course, but we welcome you all the same."

Mrs. Girardi winked at them and smiled again. She was much younger than her husband but deferred to him. *She knows her place*, Bobby thought.

"An urgent family matter, perhaps. Have you spoken to your niece Maria recently?"

"Is she the missing person your sergeant mentioned when she rang?" Bobby nodded.

"She's hardly missing then. She's still living in Italy, I presume. Milan, to be precise."

Bobby decided to shake up the bloke a bit. Sometimes shock value was warranted. "I regret that I must correct that presumption. We found Maria Girardi's body in a London alleyway."

"Oh my Lord!" Mrs. Girardi covered her mouth after uttering her first words.

"That is terrible news!" said Mr. Girardi. He looked genuinely sad. "Have you informed her parents?"

"No. We understand Maria and they were estranged." Wolfgang was studying the pair's reactions as much as Bobby. Did he too doubt their concern was authentic?

Mr. Girardi's answer neither confirmed nor denied that. Instead he said, "Maria was always a bit headstrong. She is—was an independent young lady, to say the least."

"Did you know Interpol has been looking for her as one of five suspects who stole jewels in Italy?" Bobby said. "Milan, to be precise."

The husband looked at his wife and then back at Wolfgang. "Lord no! When she was here, she mentioned nothing about that."

"So..." Bobby said, "she was here."

The old Swiss-Italian realized his mistake. "We only try to protect her, Inspector. She wouldn't give us any details, but she was frightened and wanted to hide here for a while. I thought it had something to do with my brother."

"Did she bring any jewels with her?" Wolfgang said.

"Heavens no! She only had a valise. She had so few clothes, in fact, that Anna lent her some of hers, because Maria's the same size."

"So she enjoyed a good relationship with you folks?" Bobby said.

The old man flashed a sad smile. "Much better than the one with her parents. Anna and Marie are—were—very close, and I was her favorite uncle."

"Did she stay here long?"

"I can refer to my diary for the exact dates, but it was about a fortnight."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No, but from the information you have provided, she apparently headed for London."

"Can we see the room she used here in the castle?"

"Anna can show it to you, but the help has cleaned it since then. It's our only functional guest room for now. We're still in the process of furnishing the castle."

Wolfgang waved his hand to indicate the room they were in. "This looks like the original furniture."

"It was refurbished when Queen Victoria was on the throne. Most main floor furnishings date from that time. Upstairs is still incomplete and more modern furnishings will be placed there. Anna?"

"Follow me, gentlemen."

Maria's room looked like one from a modern luxury hotel, all prim and proper but modern and sterile and without any charm.

"The furniture here isn't in the same class of that in the sitting room," Wolfgang said.

Anna, Maria's aunt, had left them alone in the room at their insistence.

"I doubt we'll find anything here," Bobby said. "I can still smell the cleaning fluids."

"I know what you're thinking: This would be a good place to hide the jewels. The castle, that is, not this room, and its grounds. It would take us weeks to search the building and the outside."

"Would she have felt safe walking around the grounds?"

"I wouldn't if I were her, especially if those four others knew she had some relatives living here."

"Do you think they were watching the castle? If so, why not just storm it, take everyone captive, and torture her here for the location of the jewels?" Bobby thought a moment. "They would have committed more murders. Maybe both the aunt and uncle and some of the staff, in addition to Maria." Bobby was eyeing the ceiling vents. He pulled a chair under one and climbed on it to inspect it. "I need a screwdriver. I doubt the staff cleaned these vents."

In the third vent's duct, Bobby found something wrapped in a plastic garbage bag. He brought it down and dumped the contents on the bed mattress. They put on the latex gloves.

There was a dosh that he handed to Wolfgang, who began counting the bills. There were also two passports, a Swiss one for Maria and an Italian one for a baby.

"There's a bit more than five thousand pounds here," Wolfgang said. "Maybe she visited a pawnbroker?"

"For only some of the jewels probably," Bobby said, "if the Italians estimate of the jewels' value is correct."

"Indeed. Who's the child?"

"Lorenzo Girardi. Was Maria married? I didn't see any reference to that."

Wolfgang paused to think. Without a computer, he couldn't access the Interpol database. He shrugged. "We would have discovered a civil marriage, and priests are supposed to register the religious ones. Or she just had a baby without being married. It happens, and if the baby's passport shows the baby had her family name, that's an indication."

"And a priest might have done Maria a little favor and not registered a wedding. It happens. For a priest, God's law trumps civil law. Look how many people are divorced yet still married according to the Church." Bobby tapped the Italian passport. "The question is: Where is the child?"

"With the father? Maybe one of the thieves? I guess we have a real missing person now."

Bobby nodded. *One way to put it.*

Chapter Seven

Wolfgang drove back too—it was his hire-car, after all—so he played Handel, Vaughan Williams, and Elgar, all British music, although Handel had been a German ex-pat. Bobby didn't mind. The low-volume orchestral music allowed him to concentrate on messages to and from his team.

"At my request, Liz is setting up a search of child service facilities," he said at one point.

"You're thinking she turned the boy over to them, official-like?"

"Yeah, I know, it's a stretch. They're also searching for four men with a child. Someone might think that's unusual."

"And unlikely if they split the heist four ways and took off for parts unknown."

"One man with a child then," Bobby said. "I'll tell Chaim. We know who those four are. Finding one of them will be enough if we can get him to grass on the others."

"Considering the small dosh Maria had, she must have hidden the rest of the jewels. If not at that damn Dracula's castle, then where?"

Bobby was distracted by a traffic accident they were speeding by, but he answered soon enough. "I'd wager she has an account in London somewhere. We'll either find the remainder of the money obtained by fencing the jewels there, or the rest of the jewels in some rental box."

Wolfgang laughed. "I wonder how many banks in the Greater London area rent boxes."

"You're just a pessimist. I'm sure Interpol knows which Italian banks have branches in London. Or the Met can find out."

"Um, that narrows it down a bit. I'll get on it at a rest stop. I'm only a bit knackered, but I'm peckish too."

Bobby smiled at the German's use of the British vernacular. *Wolfgang adapts quickly.*

While Wolfgang had a sandwich and crisps with his coffee at the rest stop, Bobby only had coffee, so by the time they entered the metropolitan area, he needed sustenance. He knew they would be in for a long night at the station, so he had the Interpol agent drop him at the NHS hospital.

His timing was a bit off, but Elaine had her coffee break, so they targeted the diner again. After they had their mugs sorted and Bobby had wolfed down half a cucumber and bacon sandwich, it occurred to him to consult with her about the child.

"I need to ask you something."

She eyed him. "I thought you were worried about something. Met related or Afghanistan related."

He remembered promising to avoid the latter, but the former? He had to try.

"The first. In a way. What's the best way to approach child service organizations?"

"You probably have people at your station if not on your team who can answer that. A Family Liaison Officer, for example, should be able to help. Do you have a name for the child?"

He'd never mentioned the child. She was perceptive. He also hadn't thought about FLOs. They were generally used to comfort a victim's family. But Elaine was correct. A victim might be a single or divorced parent, in which case child services would have to be contacted.

"We have the child's name, but it's unlikely the person turning him over to child services would use it, correct?"

"Yes, that's right. Especially if the person holding the child was a criminal. I'm guessing here, but is your murder victim the child's mother? Domestic squabble?"

"No, not exactly. I want to catch the woman's murderers. One might be the father."

"He'd kill the mother of his child? God, some people!"

"Sorry. I didn't want to upset you."

"Children have enough problems growing up in our modern world, but a little one losing his mum is terrible. I'd like to have some children someday, but when I hear about things like this, I wonder if that's advisable."

"An interesting confession. Children would be hard with either of our careers." He saw her surprised glance. "Just saying."

She sighed. "I was an only child. With my prince dream came the idea that it would be nice to have a large brood. Both were only childhood fantasies."

He smiled. "And here I thought I could be your prince."

"Oh, get past that, please. You're making me seem like a reader of romance novels. I mostly read sci-fi."

"Sometimes they're the same thing," he said, flashing another smile. He thought of Mrs. Lawton. Maybe people who read escapist literature were only trying to escape from their hard lives for a time.

Chapter Eight

Finding Maria's bank and account number was easy. Some legal maneuvers were necessary to allow Interpol and the Yard to access the corresponding rent box. Bobby assigned that task to Wolfgang, and they soon had the remaining jewels. That ended the case for the Interpol agent, but not for Bobby and his team. They still had to solve a murder committed on their patch.

But now they knew that the four jewelry thieves were probably still in England. But where? And where was the child? They couldn't close the case without finding them all. The search was still on.

Clearly Maria hadn't wanted to leave the child in Italy. Bobby tried to think like she must have thought. *Would I take my baby, flee the father, and try to start a new life in the UK?* Visiting her aunt and uncle made sense as a first step towards reaching that goal, but the father and/or the other three might eventually make the connection and go after her at the castle. Where had she gone with the child? And was the child now with the father? Maybe the father and his child were also dead now, killed by the other three?

They soon had a break that reversed that question somewhat. A bobby on patrol had stopped for a fag and found three bodies in a rubbish tip not far from the alleyway where they'd found Maria's body. They'd been wrapped in large industrial refuse bags and dumped there. The bags had broken open when other refuse had been added.

"I'm just guessing by the head wounds," Doc Jepson said, "that some other bloke stuck a gun barrel in these fellows' mouths and fired."

The three thieves' limbs were still bound with plastic cinch-straps. Flies were swarming all over them, but especially on their faces, which had been near the bag openings. Bobby couldn't decide if the odors came from the tip or the decaying bodies.

"They've been here for a while," he said. "Since the young woman was killed?"

"Maybe. I'll know better—"

"—when you do the autopsies. I saw that CSI bloke figure out TOD once using fly maggots."

"I'm not a damn entomologist," Jepson said. "I'll pin it down closely enough for you. Be patient. There's a lot to process here."

They now had four murders to solve. Bobby curled a finger at Chaim and Liz. "Back to the station. We'll have a status meeting."

Jack Hardcastle sat in on the meeting, unobtrusively in the back until the end. *Does he want to hear how we'll proceed? Or is he grading me in some way?* Bobby knew the case was a good test of whether DCI Hardcastle's decision to keep him at Heatherhill Station had been a good one.

Bobby waited for Liz to pin the photos of the three new victims next to Maria's on the crime board. "Slight change of tactics," he said when Liz sat and he took the helm. "Let's assume the remaining one from the quartet, Fritz Jaeger, international jewel thief, is still in the London area somewhere and he has their son with him. Wolfgang Lange and Interpol will be looking for

him in the EU, in Holland in particular, and with the exception of Italy, where the police will refocus on Jaeger. We won't worry about the rest of Europe for the time being."

"Why would he stay in London?" Liz said. "He has his son."

"Considering what I just said, I'll assume you mean the rest of the UK. Someone will have to liaison with authorities around the country. Any volunteers?" Several team members raised their hands; Bobby picked a DC, feeling that would give him some valuable experience and free up Liz and Chaim. "Now we need several people to work on CCTV records. Volunteers?" No one liked that job, so Bobby volunteered two other constables with Chaim leading the effort. "Liz and I will liaison with other Met stations in Greater London. Jaeger has to appear somewhere sometime, if only to get food. Assuming he's still here, of course."

"Does he have any relatives in the UK?" Liz said.

"Wolfgang says no, but Interpol could be wrong. We should check that. Did Wolfgang give us a decent photo of the bloke, Liz?"

"He did. I'll get it up on the board after the meeting. Everyone should memorize his face."

Hardcastle stood. "I can help smooth over ruffled feathers as you liaison with other stations. Let me know if you have problems."

"Time to get to work, people," Bobby said. "The manhunt is on."

"And hopefully baby hunt too," Liz said. "Too bad we don't have a photo of the little one."

"He's bound to look like a baby," Chaim said.

Everyone laughed. That broke the tension a little.

As the hours rolled by, Bobby became more and more worried. Had Fritz Jaeger somehow fled the country? Why would he leave without the jewels? He wouldn't kill the baby, would he? He'd leave little Lorenzo somewhere public. The child was his. He'd have to have some feelings for the baby boy, wouldn't he? Lorenzo hadn't been found with Maria, after all, or the three other jewel thieves.

Bobby had lost count of the number of coffees he'd gulped down by the time eleven p.m. showed on the clock. He sent the rest of the team home to get some rest. Hardcastle stopped by his desk on the way out.

"You're not going to do much good here worrying. Follow your own advice. Go home and get some rest."

He smiled at his DCI. "Can't. Lady who runs the boarding house hasn't given me a key yet. She closes up the place at ten-thirty."

"I see. I don't know what to tell you then. Stop drinking the canteen's swill and use your desk chair for a bed. You'll have only the night duty sergeant for company."

"I've closed the door to our area here. He plays Queen all night."

"Good taste, I'd say, but only the 'Bohemian Rhapsody' might let you sleep. On the way out, I'll tell him you're still here and not to wake you."

After Hardcastle left, Bobby went and stared at the crime board so he could go over the whole case. Sometime later, he fell asleep in one of the chairs there.

He didn't stir until the cleaners came in at seven the next morning, soon followed by Chaim Cohen.

Chapter Nine

"Guv, you look like road kill on the A1."

Bobby squinted one eye at him. "I feel like road kill. Say, why do they call you Samaritan? I've heard that nickname bandied about here at times."

"I don't mind it. The Samarian area even now is dominated by Cohens. We're all Samaritans."

"I see. Good ones, I hope. I also hope you don't mind my curiosity. It's not often that I'm that curious about religious history early in the morning."

Chaim smiled. "I'm getting some coffee from the canteen. I'll get you some too. Where's your mug?"

"On my desk. I'll be there when you return. Join me, and we'll bounce some ideas around about the case."

Liz soon joined them with her tea and some biscuits. The two caught her up in the discussion.

"I'd say we're doing all we can to find Jaeger and the child. We don't know where to further canvass. The alleyway and tip isn't where the four victims were killed. Jaeger could be anywhere in London."

"If he's here at all," Chaim said.

"Where would you go?" Bobby said.

Chaim thought a moment. "Somewhere on the North Sea coast where I could take a ferry to the continent, or to anywhere in Scandinavia. Or Ireland, same for the west coast. Anywhere but here."

"Without the jewels?"

"He exposes himself if he tries to recover the jewels," Liz said.

"He might decide that he can always make another jewelry heist in Europe, but he can't do that from the king's boarding house." Chaim led them in a sipping ritual. "I guess it depends on how greedy he is."

"He should pay for his crimes," Bobby said. "Here in the UK, where he committed the most serious ones, four murders."

"Agreed," Chaim said, "but maybe we should announce we have the jewels just to get rid of him. He wouldn't have any reason to stay here if we did that."

"True," Liz said. "But I agree with Bobby. That bastard has to pay."

Soon the whole team was in and they were hard at it again.

After many hours of frustration and many calls Bobby and Liz had made to other stations around the city, his CCTV team came up with the first sighting of Fritz Jaeger. They'd spotted him near the Bridge entering the Underground. They could switch to cameras inside the station.

"Where does that train go?" Bobby said as they watched him get on carrying the baby. "Anyone know?"

"It heads toward Southwark. Lots of stops along the way, of course."

"Let's try to keep him in sight. Should be easy with the baby."

Southwark was the second most dangerous borough in London. They had eyes on the last few stations on the line. They saw Jaeger exit at one near the Guy's and St Thomas Hospital Urgent Care Center.

"Maybe the child's sick?" Liz said.

"We have him!" Bobby said. "Liz, have Hardcastle send a SCO19 unit. The bastard might be armed. Let's go, Chaim. You're driving. The rest of you, keep watch on the area and let me know if Jaeger does a runner."

Normally it would be a forty minute drive even with the light afternoon traffic. Chaim made it in twenty-five with lights flashing and siren wailing forcing people out of the way. Bobby had to hold on as his DS wove in and around buses letting off passengers and lorries making deliveries. He thought Chaim might have taken a few corners on two wheels.

They parked, left the lights flashing, and entered emergency. There was no sign of Jaeger.

Bobby flashed his warrant card to the receptionist. "I'm looking for a man with a sick baby."

"Name?" said the nurse.

"He's probably not using his real name. He kidnapped the child."

She blanched. "I-I think a man came in with a baby about thirty minutes ago. He must be in an exam room by now."

"Which room?"

"I don't know. One of the nurses took them to it. It'd be down the hall here."

"You take the left side and I'll take the right," Bobby told Chaim. He turned to the reception nurse. "Call security and tell them to close all exits."

"We don't have enough security personnel to do that! Not all at once."

"Can't be done from your security office?" She shook her head. A security lapse. "Just do the best you can."

They had each checked five exam rooms causing a few screams and curses when Chaim pointed along the corridor. Bobby looked and saw a man with a baby disappear out a fire exit, which set klaxons blaring.

"After him!" Bobby yelled over the din.

Chapter Ten

As they passed their patrol car, the SCO19 van pulled up. "Tell them to follow me," Bobby said to Chaim. He kept running after the fleeing jewel thief, following him right back to the Tube station.

His bum leg hindered him a bit, but his legs were longer than Jaeger's. The thief didn't take the escalator; he took the stairs instead, two at a time. Bobby's leg was throbbing by that time, so Jaeger was halfway down the platform when Bobby arrived there.

Fortunately there was no train. Jaeger whipped around to face Bobby. He didn't surrender. He kneeled instead, cradling baby Lorenzo with his left arm while his right hand held a knife close to his son's throat.

"I'll kill him if you come near me," he said.

"You don't want to do that, Fritz. He's your child. Maria's child."

Bobby caught a glimpse of one SCO19 member at the far end of the platform with Chaim, the two others at the opposite end. Bobby knew he had to keep Jaeger talking while they tried to get into better positions.

"Why did you kill Maria? You must have loved her."

"I did, I did! She wouldn't tell me where the jewels were. Stupid bitch wanted them all to give her baby the best life possible. She used me."

"And why did you kill the other three gang members?"

"Did that earlier. They were talking about killing us both and splitting Maria and my cut. We got them drunk, and I ended those plans."

He laughed as if that were the best joke ever on the telly. It was the laugh of a deranged person.

Bobby could now see that Lorenzo would be in the line of fire from the SCO19. He'd been inching closer as he and Jaeger had their chinwag.

"It might have been smarter to keep Maria and those three alive. Here in the UK you'll get life in prison. Maybe four times over. Did you think about that?"

"I'm not staying here in the UK. I'm taking my baby and leaving. Do you understand? If you don't give me safe passage, I'll kill Lorenzo, I swear."

"I don't think you will. He's your own flesh and blood. Doesn't that mean anything to you? It must. He's sick so you took him to emergency."

"Sure. It means that Maria's pills didn't work, the stupid bitch! Or she stopped taking them to trap me."

"Yet you let her carry the baby to term."

"She had these romantic plans that we would have a wonderful life together somewhere. When I didn't buy into that, she took the jewels, did a runner and came here. Where are they? I want them!"

At least he'd thought of the child first and the jewels last, Bobby thought.

"I don't know. We're still looking."

He'd lied because he was afraid that Jaeger would lose it if Bobby said they were on their way back to Italy. He studied the thief's position. *Will it work again?* He flexed his prosthetic. *Maybe even easier this time!*

"Then neither Lorenzo nor I have anything to live for."

Bobby lunged, using his prosthetic hand to clamp down hard on Jaeger's arm where the thief's hand held the knife and his other fist to smash into the thief's face. In the battle that followed, Bobby managed to free Lorenzo and push him aside. He continued to pommel Jaeger, even after they rolled off the platform. They just missed the negative rail and Jaeger tried to twist Bobby onto the third positive rail. The thief didn't succeed.

He really couldn't do much, in fact. There was no way he could unclamp that prosthetic unless he killed Bobby. That wasn't happening. Jaeger was soon unconscious.

"Nice move, DI Sherman," one SCO19 member said as he helped Bobby back onto the platform.

"Thanks. Let's get some cuffs on that bastard. And get that baby back to the hospital."

"We'll need to get the man a bit of first aid too. Wouldn't want him to appear at the Crown Court protesting about police brutality, would we? I'll have to remember that move. Guess you figured the poor tot was in the line of fire?"

"I did. And I took down a Taliban terrorist that same way once, without my new prosthetic." Bobby flexed its fingers. "I have a good reach, and my opponent rarely realizes how close I am when I attack."

Epilogue

"As good as an end to this case I could have hoped for," Hardcastle told Bobby later in the DCI's office. "It could have ended much worse, you know. Jaeger could have buried that knife in your gut, DI Sherman."

The team was still partying down in the common area. Bobby figured they'd soon head for a pub. He nodded to Hardcastle and smiled.

"SCO19 had a bad shot, so I didn't have much choice. I wanted to save the baby. Who gets him, by the way?"

"The aunt and uncle called once the case made the news. Baby Lorenzo will have a privileged life with them, I'm guessing. I hope it doesn't ruin the wee lad."

"And Maria's parents?"

"They called too, before the aunt and uncle. They wanted to put the baby up for adoption, so that excludes them from being caretakers, especially here in UK courts."

Bobby sighed. "That figures. It all went downhill when the parents kicked Maria out." He hoped that baby Lorenzo would never have to meet his grandparents.

Elaine Barton smiled as Bobby approached her. "I thought you'd still be with all those reporters," she said as he took a chair.

"My DCI forced me to do a press conference. Imagine that."

She opened her paper. "Ex-Afghanistan Hero and Heatherhill's New DI Saves a Child," she read. "Not bad PR, Bobby."

"Um, I suppose they go into the whole mess as well as my whole life."

"Indeed. You're news, Bobby. Live with it."

"Sometimes it will be good, other times bad. Tonight we'll celebrate the good. What are you drinking?"

"G and T."

"I'll do a light ale." He waved a hand to the waiter. "I'm a bit knackered but also peckish. I hope this place doesn't put a pea in the center of the plate and call it dinner."

"No, they cook up a good meal. I wouldn't do dessert, though."

"Why not? Too much food?"

She looked at him with a sly smile. "I thought I'd take you to my place. Those wounds look like they need some tender, loving care from a qualified nurse. And maybe I'll be dessert?"

He reached out and touched her hand, a smile flooding his face. "Works for me, my lady. I'm not that knackered."

Arms Control

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Chapter One

Alan Galbraith wasn't a patient man, and he was less patient the older he became. He was waiting for a bloke with the bad habit of being late most of the time. If he didn't need information from the prat, he would have gone home to his girlfriend and dinner instead of sitting in a foul pub, nursing a beer. His third one! He stared at the sorry-looking peanuts in the little chipped dish and decided they were a poor substitute for Amanda's homecooked dinners, few and far between because her work schedule was almost as bad as his.

Where Amanda had a full head of red hair and green eyes that made her look Celtic (she wasn't), Alan was balding, a fact that made his blue eyes all the more piercing beneath his wrinkled brow (he had Celtic roots). The Detective Inspector knew he was well past his bird-watching prime, but Amanda didn't seem to mind his ubiquitous slovenly appearance except when they went out. He always tried to tidy up a bit for such events just to please her.

The two had been in a relationship for almost two years. He knew that she might ruin that by asking for more commitment, but so far their intense work schedules had kept that from occurring. Any day now, he supposed she would tell him that she didn't want to play second violin to a copper's addiction to work. Of course, she was as addicted to work as much as he was, running a graphics arts company mostly from her place.

Finally, Ralph Hodges appeared and slid into the booth opposite Alan; he pointed to Alan's pint glass. "I'll have that," the twit demanded.

Alan called for the waiter, asked for another ale, and added two bacon and cucumber sandwiches to the order. "Ye look a bit gaunt, Ralphie, and I'm a bit peckish. Unless you've got something for me, both sandwiches are mine."

"You asked 'bout Sam Duncan of Duncan and Sons Trucking, right, Inspector?"

"I feared you were under the influence when I asked for that, so I'll be pleased you remembered. If not.... What did you do? Find out who makes the king's fancy white shirts instead?"

Ralph laughed. "No, I remembered correctly, Guv. Just got rumors for you, though."

"I can work with rumors. Proof for the Crown Court can come later. Worth the pint and ten quid. We know Duncan's lorries are making a lot of extra trips. Can you tell me why?"

Up to that time, the only form Alan and his team had on Duncan was drunk and disorderly, which had resulted in a night in the nick to sleep it off.

"One rumor is that he's dumping garbage illegally." Ralph shrunk away when he saw Alan's furious scowl. "That's just one rumor, Inspector. Another is that they're moving drugs, 'nother kind of garbage."

Better, Alan thought. "Okay." He gave Ralph his due. "That's useful. Maybe. Can you take a peek inside a lorry for me?" He'd probably need a warrant for that, and judges and Alan didn't get along too well.

"Too dangerous. My friend Herb tried to do that just out o' curiosity, and two of Duncan's drivers gave him stick, they did. He's a guest of NHS now."

Yeah, that figures. Duncan was a thug and only hired thugs. 'Course, even thugs needed work in the bad post-Covid economy. "Did Herb report that to us?"

"You mean to you coppers?" Alan nodded. *Who else?* "Course not. He's not suicidal, Guv."

Alan sighed and eyed the limp sandwich when it arrived—limp cucumbers making the toasted bread limp, which was hard to do with good country bread. He took another sip of lager after trying a bite and decided the rest was too risky. He shoved the sandwich over to Ralphie, who had already tucked in like he hadn't grazed for a while with the first sandwich.

Will my DCI consider a raid? Alan had turned down various offers of promotion to remain a DI, a position he loved. As a consequence, he now had a boss half his age who took few risks. Alan would put it to him like, "Jay, I've got information that Sam Duncan's lorries are delivering drugs." But with that DCI, that mightn't be enough. And with Alan's bad luck, only a few lorries would regularly carry drugs. *And why lorries?*

He'd have to try. He knew Duncan was dirty and up to no good...felt it in his gut.

To Alan's surprise, the DCI agreed to call for a raid. *Maybe I finally won his trust?* Of course, the pillock only worried about closing cases to pad his resume, always looking for the next promotion, so maybe trusting Alan wasn't the real reason. He didn't call out the SCO19, though. Considering what they found, that might have been a good idea.

Three of the seven lorries inspected were carrying illegal merchandise all right, but they carried weapons, ammunition, and bullet-proof vests instead of drugs.

Jay congratulated Alan. *Sure, for him it's still a win!* But the DCI didn't wait long to take the joy out of that.

"Now you only have to discover who are the buyers of those arms. Maybe some ISIS sympathizers?"

"I'll get on that, sir," Alan said, although he'd already thought about that eventuality. The case no longer involved Duncan; it was bigger than that scrote's illegal activities. Alan doubted it involved ISIS, though. Sure, there were ISIS sympathizers in England. One group had even gone to Syria, earning the nickname "Beatles." But Sam's lorries had been headed northeast, from Southampton towards London. Liaison with the Yard might be required. Or, even MI5, if Jay was right. Alan wasn't happy with either possibility.

He went home to his girlfriend Amanda.

The following morning, Alan's sergeant approached his desk carrying a mug of coffee for him along with hers.

DS Judy Benson was almost as tall as he was. She'd introduced him to Amanda and was already the best sergeant he'd ever had. She wore her dark black hair short, framing her face nicely, which was rather plain and without makeup but often showing a comforting smile. Best of all, she was as smart as an owl and just as quick to pounce on a clue as if it were a scurrying field mouse. They often bounced ideas off each other, about cases and life in general. She was his work-Amanda, and Amanda and Alan had often double-dated with Judy and her boyfriend, an interesting quartet to be sure, because there were nearly twenty years' difference between the pairs' ages.

"Late night, Guv," she said, putting the mug on his desk. "You still look knackered."

"And you slept like a baby, I suppose. Your beau is off to Scotland, right?"

She nodded and smiled. "You know, I thought last night would close the Duncan case."

"Might've been closed if the cargo'd only been drugs like Ralphie said. I'll bet the buyers of those weapons will take their business elsewhere now." He took a sip of coffee and smiled at his sergeant. "We're back at square one, lass. We'll get the team together in a bit, but sit yourself down. Let's be creative. How the hell are we going to find out who those buyers were?"

"Beats me. I've got nothing beyond what our DCI said, and I find it hard to believe that ISIS sympathizers were the buyers. They don't need all those weapons, just a few bombs in lorries or scimitar-waving fanatics willing to be martyrs."

"You're a woman with too much imagination. Um. I just had a niggling thought." He leaned back in his chair—it received a lot of punishment as his pounds increased with age. He took another sip of his coffee. "What if we get Sam Duncan to tell us where he keeps paper records for his weapons smuggling? The bloke doesn't know computers from cantaloupes. Said he keeps it all in his head and he's not telling us. Bollocks! The scrote's much too dumb to have much in that hard head."

"You mean, make a deal with him? Would Jay go for that?"

"Maybe. Closing down Duncan's operation plus nicking the buyers would be twice as good for our beloved DCI to achieve his aspirations for another promotion. Keep that in your thoughts for now. Let's see what the team says. They're not shy about voicing opinions even when they're worth crap."

Chapter Two

Both the DCI and team had liked the idea.

It was the second time Alan and Judy interrogated the heavysset Duncan with the bulldog-like jowls. He looked a bit more deflated and weary this time. So did his barrister, an oily, pasty-faced, hawk-nosed arse with beady eyes who was dressed in a striped suit that made him look like a poor imitation of a gangster in a 1930's movie.

Judy went by the book, getting the barrister and his client to agree to a video recording, reading Duncan his rights again, and then announcing for the record all who were present.

Alan thought they might get a bit more joy this time. *We already have him for arms smuggling, although we need to confirm the port of entry for the arms.* That wasn't a big deal. If it came up in the interrogation, well and good, but the detective was more interested in who the buyers were.

"Checked with the VIPs, and they said we can make you an offer, Sam: A reduced sentence if you show us records of who purchased all those weapons and when. Maybe even a sentence cut down to a few years instead of the minimum ten the Crown Court likes."

"Need it in writing," Duncan said.

Judy shoved three copies toward the burly man. "We'd need you to sign them all."

Duncan handed them to his barrister.

"My client and I will need time to study the offer," the lawyer said.

"Got it," Alan said. "You gentlemen need tea or coffee?"

"I already choked on that swill you call tea," Duncan said with a growl. "I'll try your coffee."

"I'll get by with a bottle of water, if you don't mind," said the barrister, probably taking in consideration Duncan's critique yet figuring the coffee might even be worse. It was, but it would provide a good caffeine hit.

"Back in ten," Alan said.

The two coppers filed out of the interrogation room.

"Think they'll go for it?" Judy said as Alan watched her prepare the refreshments.

He didn't mind the cakes, but he agreed with Sam about the tea. He would also make do with coffee, although he knew that was a gamble as well.

"Document's still about minimum sentences, but two years is a lot better than ten. If I were Sam Duncan, I'd go for it."

"Unless the buyers have threatened him already. You know: Grass on us, and we'll kill you."

"And maybe your whole family? Sam's company is still a going concern, and he can run it from jail. I doubt he gives a rat's ass about buyers and their threats."

"Unless they really are ISIS? That ugly head wouldn't look too good atop a pike."

Alan smiled. Judy could be as gritty as he was sometimes.

"I'm imagining a middleman who sells to London gangs. The Yard is seeing more and more guns since Covid. They're coming from somewhere. I'm betting old Sam is the first link in a complex chain. Bringing the weapons in from the south, east, or west coasts for that middleman."

"We're not able to go after all the gangs, but you're looking for the middleman?"

"Yes. And whoever works for the scrote." Alan looked at his watch. "Time to continue our little chinwag."

When they reentered the room, the barrister handed Judy all three copies. "Signed and dated by Mr. Duncan, and initialed by me."

Judy waved a hand to the tech behind the one-way window. "Please state, Mr. Duncan, that you signed these documents with no coercion from us and upon being advised by your legal council to do so."

"I signed without any coercion from you coppers, following my barrister's advice."

"To close the deal then," said Alan. "Where do you keep your records for your little smuggling business?"

"My sister-in-law's place. She lets me use one of her bedrooms as a second office. They're in a safe there."

"Is she involved in the smuggling?"

"No. I pay her rent for that office. Works for me; works for her, 'cause she's a bit cash-poor since my brother passed on. She thinks I'm just doing normal record-keeping there."

"I'm sorry for her loss," Judy said.

"She's not. My little brother was a violent little weasel."

And he's not? thought Alan. "Okay. Let's have the combination to the safe then. We'll also need you to okay a visit to that office since you lease it from her. I assume she'll let us in?"

"If I say so."

Alan sent two detective constables to the sister-in-law's place. They brought back four boxes filled with orders and invoices. The safe had actually been a heavy steel filing cabinet with a combination, like one might find for Top Secret documents at MI5 or MI6, something limited local police funding didn't permit.

He called a team meeting to divide up the paperwork task and put Judy on closing the case with Sam Duncan. He saw the dour man being led out by two uniformed constables who would be taking him to jail. Alan waved and smiled; Sam glared at him. The lawyer just stared ahead. *Probably trying to figure out how to up his fee? Or even get paid?* The barrister had been on Sam's retainer; he wasn't Crown Court appointed, so someone paid for him. *Someone besides Sam?* Alan put that question on the back burner. He didn't trust the lawyer—he trusted very few in the legal profession, especially when they failed at law and became MPs—so Alan would give one of the team the job of finding more about him.

Alan and Jay spent their time deciding on how to proceed once they knew who the buyers were. The DCI wanted to bring in other London stations' teams but mentioned he'd prefer to keep the Yard's special groups and MI5 out of it for now. Before Alan said anything that he would have regretted—Alan hated working with the young ladder-climber—his moby saved him.

"Bad news?" Jay said after hearing a series of nos, yeses, and swear words and seeing bad faces from Alan.

"Sam Duncan is dead! Got to go."

"Wait! How? He just left on his way to jail."

"The two constables taking him are now wounded and in the hospital, but Duncan is dead. I'm heading for the crime scene."

"Okay. Take Judy. I'll handle things here."

While Alan feared the consequences of any help Jay might provide, there wasn't much he could do. "DS Benson, you're with me!" he yelled to Judy as he passed through the open-plan area of the station where most CID members were located.

Chapter Three

Patrol cars surrounded the crime scene on the motorway, their lights turning the fog into a diffuse, blue, eye-watering cloud. Judy and Alan rushed over to the pathologist's tent where they could see his shadow crouching and moving around the still shadow of a body.

"Stay here and sort things with the constable crew," he told Judy as he pulled on the required PPE, more to protect bio-evidence than him. He entered the tent.

"Ah, the inimitable Inspector Galbraith," the pathologist said. "We meet again."

"Save it, Joseph." He knelt and studied the corpse, doing an ungainly Cossack dance to circle the remains while trying to stay out of the old pathologist's way, who was doing his own dance. Sam Duncan looked uglier in death than he had in life, but the man who'd been on his way to jail hadn't deserved this brutal end.

Alan stood, backed off, and watched a bit more, in a slow burn. Now they would have to go through all those invoices again, looking for a potential murderer, someone who had paid Sam back for grassing on them.

His rage wasn't for that, though. It was more in self-incrimination because he knew the deal they'd made with Duncan had caused his murder.

"Can I make a guess at who initiated this, Guv?" Judy said later back in their unmarked car from the station's pool.

"Go ahead, lass. I'm still stewing over Duncan. Hell, they beat him to a pulp. 'Course, if they were ISIS, they could have beheaded him. We'll have to get the sister-in-law to confirm ID."

"Really?" He nodded. "Damn the formalities. Anyway, my guess it was the barrister."

"Maybe. Good as any suspect for now. But Sam probably informed his employees too. Any one of them could've told the arms buyers. One thing is certain: Those buyers mean business." He eyed her. "Sometimes I hate being a plod, lass. Now I'll have to suck up to Jay again so he'll keep me on the case. He's already mentioned bringing other stations' teams onboard, and I wouldn't put it past him to bring the NCA in, just to win some political points."

"And you want the focus to be to nick the scrotes who did Duncan in," she said.

"Damn right! Nothing more we can do here. Let's return to the station to see how the team is sorting all Duncan's invoices."

The DCI sat in on the team's brainstorming session.

"Any joy with Sam's invoices?" Alan said in a tired voice.

DC Hiram Jones fielded that question. "We also got the 'official records' and compared in order to eliminate the legal invoices from the illegal ones in the safe." Alan nodded. *Smart move.* "Most of the illegal invoices not reported to the government are for J&M Enterprises, Limited."

"And there's no J&M, I suppose," Jay said.

"Correct," Hiram said. "All marked paid but not with a stamp and without Duncan's or anyone else's signature. We're guessing that Sam just used those illegal invoices to keep tabs on his illegal activities."

"Which we'd already nicked him for," Judy said.

"Could be material for future blackmail he planned too," Alan said. "Go on."

"We're trying our best now to find out who J&M are."

"Probably no one, just code for someone or some group," Alan said. "I know someone who knows a lot about the illegal arms trade in Europe." He turned to his DCI. "Permission to query him, sir?"

"Who is it?" Jay said.

"Bloke named Hal Leonard. Ex-Interpol agent who now consults with MI5 and DGSI."

"Both of them?"

Alan shrugged. "Guess he's in demand."

"I hate to get MI5 involved," Jay said.

"They might have to be eventually, but Hal's just a consultant. For now, I don't need to go near MI5."

"Go for it then."

"Thanks. Onward. What about wrapping up the Sam Duncan case?" Alan looked around his team's attentive faces.

DC Donna Stevenson fielded that one. "We were making steady progress, but now there'll be a lot more paperwork to do. We'll need a bit more time, Guv."

"Okay. We have one critical problem left to solve still in that regard." He was remembering Judy's comment in the car and winked at her. "How in the hell did whoever killed Duncan find out he'd given up his records to us? Judy's first guess is the lawyer, and I agree with her."

"It just makes sense," Judy said, after which Jay nodded sagely. "The buyers might not have known he even had those invoices otherwise, but the barrister certainly knew."

"I'll let you put the screws to him, lass. Keep me posted. I want to contact my expert on the illegal arms trade."

The Honorable Lester Knowlton, Duncan's sleazy barrister, had decided to keep Judy waiting. She did...for all of five minutes, after which she barged into his office. Just in case he'd forgotten who she was, she showed him her warrant card and sat down in front of him.

He'd been reading the *Times*, but now his white, pasty face had turned bright red. "How dare you barge in here like this! I shall speak to your superiors."

"They will say exactly what I'm saying now: We don't have time to wait for a lawyer's stalling tactics. If you don't hear me out now, I'll arrange for you to hear me out in the same ugly interrogation room you know so well."

The redness faded. "Let's not be hasty, Inspector."

"Detective Sergeant Judy Benson."

"Okay, Sergeant. Why are you here? My client is dead."

"And you made a call soon after you left to give him company on his trip to jail. I'll quote the constable who was with you; you said: 'I need to make a call to begin the appeal process.'"

"Nothing wrong with that."

"Not if what you told the constable was the truth. But it wasn't. Phone records show that it was to a number corresponding to a non-traceable mobile phone. You were calling the arms buyers, weren't you? To continue with what the constable now thought he heard you say: 'He gave up the invoices to get a lighter sentence.'"

Knowlton smiled. "Nothing wrong with that. To appeal, the person I talked to would need that information."

"J&M Enterprises would like to get it even more."

Knowlton now frowned. "You can't prove that."

"No, we can't." She gestured by putting two fingers to her eyes and then pointing them towards the barrister. "But we will make your life hell in any way we can in the future. Do you understand?"

She stormed out of the office. In her car, she called Alan. "He was the one who informed the buyers, no doubt about it. He's a lousy liar. His eyes gave away that he was lying."

"Can we prove anything against him?"

"No, not unless J&M had him on retainer too, and we find out about it. We need to find the arms buyer."

"Good work. See you back at the station. I'm meeting with Leonard."

Chapter Four

"I almost couldn't find this place," Hal Leonard told Alan as he slid into the pub's booth to sit opposite the inspector. "I'm still getting used to driving in London, you know. Even with my GPS, I get lost, especially in the burbs...or detoured by construction the satellites don't know about."

They were about the same age; that meant old as far as coppers went. Amanda had dragged Alan to a party a few month's earlier—he rarely went to such functions because he wasn't any good at small talk—and there the inspector had met Hal. The American fit Alan's stereotype of an old hippy, although his beard was limited to the more fashionable scruff seen on much younger men nowadays. His standard apparel consisted of a polo or Hawaiian shirt, khakis, and trainers. But brief conversations at that party and over the phone later signaled to Alan that the man was no one's prat, and he could be serious without being maudlin.

"Easy to do," Alan said. "Probably doesn't help that you're switching between left- and right-handed driving all the time going from Paris to London and back. How's everything going, mate?"

"Good. *Ma belle cherie* is back on the job, so she's more content; me, not so much. The Chunnel makes the trip easier, but Brexit makes it harder, mostly at the French-EU end. Probably revenge for Brexit. I try to organize things so I have a week with her and a week in London. Not ideal, to say the least."

Alan winked at him. "Aren't Yanks used to long commutes?"

"I haven't been much of a Yank since I was nearly killed in a fire in Juarez."

"You'll have to tell me about that in a less-hurried chinwag over more than one beer. You Yanks do like your guns. Funny how they're your specialty now."

"Illegal ones, and that's probably a segue for the reason of the present chinwag?" Hal said with a smile.

Segue? Sounds like an erudite local. His use of chinwag was also amusing. "You got it. I think I'm up against a dealer, code name J&M Enterprises, Limited. Ring any bells?"

"Yes, but I can't help you much, bro. We're trying to bust them. Hard to do when you don't know who they are. Can't seem to get anyone undercover in the organization either."

"Agreed. 'We' meaning MI5?" Hal nodded. "We've nicked some of the front end of their supply chain. Bloke named Sam Duncan had a cargo-hauling and construction business that delivered arms and ammo to J&M from Southampton to sites in London, the latter being without proof...yet. And don't ask which ones. We're lucky to know the merchandise was destined for sales in London. Shipping invoices for the under-the-table payments aren't specific, and Duncan is no longer alive to give us more details. Doubt he'd have known exactly where in London shipments were destined without the help of the invoices to jiggle his memory anyway. Not the brightest scrote there ever was, old Sam."

"I see. Want to work together? I can convince MI5, especially if you're willing to share data."

"That has to go both ways, mate, and my DCI might not be too keen about too much MI5 involvement. Apparently not too much love there, and he's always looking to glorify himself."

"Young ass on his way up?" Alan nodded. "Know the type. Believe me, MI5 has them too."

"I'll have to work on him. Get back to you?"

"*D'accord, monsieur.* I'll check and make sure my VIPs are okay with it too, not that they can tell me what to do. I just want to inform them so I have access to MI5 data. I already have that with DGSI's and Interpol's databases, the advantage of being a free-lance consultant. You do realize that J&M's probably only a distributor, right? They take orders and then deliver them somewhere."

Alan nodded. "Must be real upstanding business people, eh?"

Hal smiled. He raised his glass. "Cheers, Alan." He knocked down half the glass and made a face as if it were bitter medicine. It was bitter...and warm. "God, I hate your tepid beer!"

Alan and Judy were huddled in planning mode when Jay dropped by. "How'd it go with Hal Leonard?" he said.

"He's basically telling the MI5 brass he's going to work with us, whether they like it or not. Wants a to-and-fro on information, though...just between him and us, of course."

"Sounds like he's a loose cannon."

"More like he doesn't give a rat's ass about inter-agency politics, just capturing the bad blokes."

Jay frowned. *The DCI's no prat. He knows the hidden meaning contained in that statement.*

"Keep me posted. As long as it stays between him and us, I'll be okay with it. Any joy with the barrister?"

"I insinuated he called J&M based on what our constable overheard," Judy said. "I'd wager a good sum that he told them Duncan had cooperated with us."

"Too bad we can't nick him for that." He eyed his two detectives. "Can we?"

"Only if we come at him from the J&M side. When we nick them, they might grass on him." Alan shrugged. "Patience isn't one of my virtues. Yours either, I presume. But we have to be patient. We might be able to make a clean sweep later."

"As I said, keep me posted. I'm off to dinner with the super. Business, though. We'll be talking about an upcoming reorganization."

"Another one?" Alan said.

"Home Office, et cetera, et cetera. They keep making budget cuts. Welcome to my world."

"You can have it, sir."

"Think we'll be hit hard?" Judy said after Jay left them. "I rather like the makeup of our team as it is."

"One can only hope it goes the other way. How many times have I had to steal personnel from other teams for a big case?"

"Too many. But back to reality. How do you want to proceed?"

"We visit with Hal, offering what we have, and he does the same for us. Hopefully MI5, Interpol, or DGSI has a better idea about who J&M might be."

"And what about the barrister?"

"What you and I said to Jay. We can't nick him coming from the Duncan side, but we might be able to do so from the J&M one. For now, let's also consider he might not be J&M's informant. There's a whole cast of characters among Sam's cohorts."

"As well as our own team."

"Yes, unfortunately. Be discreet. Many people knew Sam Duncan. Doesn't mean they knew what he was up to."

"I doubt anyone who liked Sam would grass on him. I only knew him from a few drunk and disorderly charges when I was on patrol. That was a long time ago."

"Understood. As I said, be discrete. And put it on the back burner for now. The barrister is my number one suspect for the leak, but he's on the sidelines for the present. I'm going to need your help working with Hal."

"So tell me about him," she said with a smile.

"Easy, lass. He has a French girlfriend, and she works with DGSE, so she can kick arse." She smiled. "So can I. No, I'm just curious. I don't know many Americans."

"He's more a rogue of the world than any specific nationality...from what I know about him."

That evening, Alan made it up to Amanda. He took her out to a new Argentine restaurant he'd seen on the way to his pub meeting with Hal. She had similar tastes to his and was an omnivore—no vegetarian or vegan extremes for her—so he figured his predilection for a Buenos Aires-style *bife* with all the bread and salad you could eat washed down with red Argentine wine would suit her just fine too.

"What's that they're dancing?" she asked once they were settled. "Looks Latin. Music seems to have a gypsy flavor, so Spanish?"

"A raunchy tango—the dancing's raunchy, not the music. Tangos are sung or played, and you can dance either way, if you're not as old as I am."

"How do you know so much about it?" She was smiling..

She caught you, you fool! "Dated an Argentine bird at college, if you must know. Don't worry." He tapped his forehead with his index finger. "Not nearly as smart or pretty as you are. You know there were women before you."

"We both have backgrounds, Alan. Most people do. But you've never danced with me."

"Not that much with her either. Not good at it, to be honest. Too damn clumsy. I enjoy the music, though."

"We could take lessons."

"In our spare time? We don't have any. You're busy and I'm busy."

Amanda was a graphics artist who did everything from book covers to ad layouts in the Times. She was always on call, and so was he. *Hell, we haven't even taken the time to get married!*

She smiled. "We'd have to make time and be adaptable. Can I buy a package of lessons for us?"

Give in. It's her night. "Okay, but we'll have to be flexible, and not just for the dancing. Either you or I might get a call while doing a tango."

She laughed. "I'm sure we can work it out."

Alan hoped not. Very few things came between them, but he was thinking dance lessons might just do it.

Bread and salad arrived, so they tucked in.

Chapter Five

Alan, now with Judy, met Hal this time midway between the American's flat and the station, at a library of all places. Turned out Hal had a permanent workroom there, passing himself off as a biographer who needed quick access to old books. The librarians didn't ask too many questions; the extra money it meant for the library had dwindled to zero with Covid when the library had been closed for months. Alan guessed that Hal felt good about helping a library get back on its feet.

After introductions, they settled in, Alan and Hal placing loaded legal folders of documents on the table.

"I told Elaine the librarian that I'm interviewing you two because I'm writing a history of law enforcement in England. Just in case she asks."

"Do you know anything about the history of law enforcement in England?" Judy said with a smile.

"Enough to state that the MI in MI5 is probably an oxymoron," he said with a laugh. "Maybe for MI6 too."

Alan thought a moment and then smiled. "That's a good one. So why do you consult for them? MI5, that is."

"When I left Interpol, I became bored. My girlfriend connected me up with DGSI, and an old colleague from Interpol connected me up with MI5. He's also a consultant for them now."

"I see. Both MI5 and MI6 are as stealthy as your own FBI and CIA. Many regular police don't like them much."

"I guess that's part of the history," Hal said with a wink at Judy.

Once secured in Hal's borrowed office space, the Yank covered some background. "We came across the J&M connection from the other end. As you probably know, MI5 and the Yard have a joint counterterrorism task force, not unlike the FBI and NYPD's in New York City. They made a drug bust on a Southwark gang's hideout a while back and found a lot of military-style weapons, ammo, and other stuff."

"And some gang members grassed on J&M?" Alan said.

"Not directly. The leader had a business card with just a name, Randall, and a telephone number. The agents called that number and hit an answering machine that announced, 'J&M Enterprises, Limited, please leave your message at the sound of the tone.' Couldn't trace the location of the phone, though."

"What about Randall?" Judy said.

"Could be man, woman, or ghost, but not likely real. They called again and left a message for Randall like the tape said to do. No call back from anyone named Randall, or anyone else, for that matter."

"So nil," said Alan. "What's with all those folders then?"

"Most of what we have on illegal arms arriving in London," Hal said. "I've detected some patterns. So have others. We think it's because one supplier—middlemen, considering your case—is taking orders and doing the distributing."

"J&M," Judy said in a whisper.

"The obvious suspect. Let's get to work."

When the trio left Hal's library office, Alan noted that Hal just locked the door with a key. "Anyone could break in there and have a go at those documents."

"You haven't met Elaine or her helpers yet. They guard these workrooms like they were Fort Knox. Two librarians are right over there during the hours the library's open." He waved at two elderly ladies who smiled and waved back.

"And when the library's closed?"

"Security people make their rounds. There are valuable archives in the basement and subbasement. National libraries in England are damn secure. Those folders might even be more secure than the crown jewels."

After pouring over many documents with Hal, Alan and Judy had seen the pattern too. At one point, Alan indicated two names and looked at Judy. "We know these scrotes! Should we squeeze them a bit?"

Hal had nodded. "Could work. What's their rap sheet look like?"

Judy had pulled out two of their own folders. "Both have form for armed robbery." She read a bit more. "They used military-style weapons and wore armed vests on their last heist that put them in the king's nick. They've been clean for the last three years. Supposedly."

"Maybe just not caught again," Alan had said. "Let's have a nice little Q&A session with them."

"If we can find them," Judy had said.

That's when they'd called it a day and returned to the station.

Chapter Six

The next day those two upstanding citizens were found and brought in to be interrogated. Judy and Alan grilled them, the DS doing most of the questioning because Alan thought she was better at that, and he was better with observing body language. Hal and Jay watched from behind the one-way mirror.

Doug Priestly and Art Simons glared at the two detectives. *If looks could kill...*, Alan thought. He wondered if they shouldn't be interrogated separately. Doing them together was Jay's idea, but Alan knew they couldn't play one against the other that way. As it turned out, Simons was Priestly's mouthpiece; all Doug gave were grunts and head nods or one-word agreements to Art's answers.

"Have you blokes been behaving yourselves?" Judy began after the standard warning and introductions for the videotape had been made. They nodded like two bubblehead figures. "Congratulations. No form in three years. Been hiding in a cave somewhere?"

"We've gone straight," Art said. Doug nodded. "Done nothing that'd interest you plods. Be nice to hear the reason for dragging us in here. Maybe we'll sue."

"It's always hard to go clean, so congratulations are in order, like I said," Judy continued, ignoring the threat, "but your last crime was unusual. You not only progressed from robbing people's homes, you did it using military-style arms and armor in a robbery. You confessed to your crimes—not a surprise since we had CCTV video records and plenty of witnesses—but we didn't follow up on how you got all that high-tech military stuff. Now we'd like to know more about that."

Alan could imagine Jay turning a bit red in there with Hal. Alan remembered the DCI had handled that case as a DI. It got him a promotion, but he'd still made that error, more of an omission than anything else. *Of course, hindsight is always 20-20*. Hal wouldn't know that history, of course.

"You could've asked us back then. We'd've been willin' to make a deal to shed a few years from our sentence in return for tellin' you."

Their legal representative stared at Art. *Maybe thinking he needed to open his mouth and offer some advice at this point? Like, for Art to keep his shut?*

Judy changed tack. "Did you receive that equipment from J&M Enterprises? Yes or no?"

Alan smiled. He'd seen the barrister's surprise, but, more importantly, the thug's eyes told Alan that the answer was yes; Art didn't even have to vocalize it. Alan turned and winked at the barrister who shifted in his chair.

"No," Art said. "Never heard about no J&M." Doug shook his head in the negative to agree.

Judy waved a hand, signaling a tech who was in the room with Hal and Jay. A CCTV video was displayed on the screen opposite the window; it showed Doug and Art kitting up for the robbery. It had been taken a block away from the jewelry store. The dumb brutes hadn't even seen the traffic camera. The video had been shown at their trial.

The tech froze the video at one point and zoomed in on the two thugs. That made the video more pixelated, but anyone could see tags on the guns and vests. Cardboard boxes could also be seen in their car.

"There were a lot of cameras in London even back then," Judy said. "The equipment you were using was new. Where did you get it? Not at Harrod's, I presume."

"Birthday gifts from mum," Art said with a smile. Doug also smiled.

"Both your mums are dead," Judy said. "And they didn't live long enough to teach you some manners." She halfway rose from her chair, palms down on the table so she could get in Art's face. "We're charging you with dealing in stolen military equipment. You'll be back in jail for another couple of years, at least. Unless..." She sat again. Now she winked at the lawyer. "...unless you want to reduce your sentence by telling us where you purchased that equipment."

Art looked at Doug, who shrugged. The lawyer shook his head.

"We'll give you time to confer with your lawyer."

Judy and Alan walked out of the interrogation room.

"Nice work," Alan said to Judy "You had Art's attention at the first mention of J&M."

"Think they'll fold?" said Hal. "The lawyer's a snake."

"Aren't they all," Jay said. "At least the ones we have to deal with. I think they'll fold, but we won't get much, unless they're still fraternizing with J&M."

Fraternizing? Alan smirked. The DCI was always pulling out the big words that didn't quite fit.

"Okay, let's assume they fold," Judy said. "I'll then follow up by asking if they're still dealing with them. Hal?"

Everyone could see the American was deep in thought.

"They've been clean since the armed robbery," he finally said. "They might be lying low by working for J&M. It's a distribution network. There'll be several warehouses around London, I'd wager, and they all need thugs to run them and get the arms to buyers. I'd like to find just one of those warehouses."

"Interesting idea," Jay said. "The two might know a lot about the J&M operation."

"I'd tell them the deal's off," said Alan, "unless they tell us what they've been doing behind the scenes."

Hal shrugged. "Could work. We might want to find some of that out before talking anymore to them. You can hold them for twenty-four hours, right?"

"Forty-eight, depending on the charges. The case against them right now is a bit iffy, though."

"Let's take a break," Judy said, "so Alan and I can get the lads moving on finding out what Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum have been up to. We got nothing in the few hours we had available, except for that video from the trial, but a whole twenty-four hours or so of digging might turn up more."

"Go for it," Jay said. He waved a hand at Hal. "We need to talk."

Jay turned and headed for his office. Hal raised an eyebrow at the detectives. Alan shrugged.

Once inside Jay's office, the DCI gestured towards a chair and went around his desk to sit as well.

"Hal, how much are your reporting back to MI5?"

Hal thought a moment. *That's a loaded question! Is this fellow guarding his turf? Or is he looking for praise from MI5 that will lead to a higher position?* Hal shifted in his uncomfortable chair that seemed designed to make any discussion with Alan's boss a brief one.

Hal had to second Alan's implied perception of his DCI Jay Mallow. The bloke looked and dressed like a Wall Street banker, all spic and span: coiffed hair with just a touch of gray, thin face that accented his Roman nose, and a twisted smile that seemed as false as that one-term US president's, a born loser Hal had hated so much that he was glad he'd been in Europe during his term. Jay had expensive clothing too: striped suit and vest; watch fob; silk tie on white shirt; and, although Hal couldn't see them, probably tasseled loafers. Here was a man who used his appearance to hide incompetence.

"I did and am doing just what I said: I have the green light from the MI5 VIPs to collaborate with your investigation. I can share what information they have with you folks in regards to your particular case, and they expect that you'll share with them anything you have that's more general and likely more useful in their big-picture investigation. I'm just a consultant for both groups. My only motivation is to help find those in J&M related to this Sam Duncan, particularly his killers. I thought we'd agreed on that?"

Jay spread his palms on the clean desk top. "As long as we get credit for our part. MI5 would have known nothing about how the arms were getting from port to J&M if it weren't for us, and I don't want to turn this station into a branch of MI5."

"I doubt that Duncan was the only transporter nor that Southampton was the only port. There are a lot of ports in England. In Ireland and Scotland as well. Arms traffickers don't give a damn about national and international boundaries."

"That's what you mean by big-picture investigation?" Hal nodded. "Maybe the NCA should be handling that?"

Hal smiled. The National Crime Agency, founded in 2013, was a direct competitor to MI5. The former tended to focus on organized crime; the latter, terrorism, domestic and international. Hal knew agents from both, and thought that maybe the DCI now felt closer to NCA, although both the MI5 and NCA also competed and collaborated with the Metropolitan Police network.

"As an American, I'm not aware of all the ins and outs of British law enforcement institutions or their interagency politics, but MI5 often works closely with the Tinworth Street people...and vice versa. As for the big picture I referred to, there's clearly an organized crime element and a terrorist one. I do have experience fighting the illegal arms trade, and that nexus often exists. We can't fight it without cooperating, internationally, nationally, and locally."

Jay straightened his tie and puffed up a bit. "I just wanted to make a few things clear to you."

"Without Alan and Judy around?"

Jay did a little dip of his chin as an attempt to bow. "I'm running this investigation. Not them."

Like hell you are! "I repeat, Detective Chief Inspector, I only want to stop illegal arms trafficking. I don't play political games as a consequence. You can take all the credit for all I care. Are we done here?"

Jay shrugged. "I suppose."

Hal left, knowing that neither of them liked the other. *Poor Alan! He has to work for that SOB!*

Chapter Seven

At the twenty-second hour, the team came together with Hal and Jay present. They'd discovered that Art and Doug shared a flat, and the two were driving other residents in the building and neighbors in the area crazy with their visitors' going and coming, mostly during late evenings and early mornings. The team also had some grainy CCTV records from a nearby pharmacy that backed up the residents and neighbors' stories. Unfortunately the video quality was too poor to run facial recognition software.

"We'll have to go in with this," Alan said. "Worst case, we let them go and put surveillance on the flat, although they'll probably just entertain their guests somewhere else."

"An old lady in the same building," Hiram said, "gave our artist enough to make a good drawing, right down to a facial scar, mustache, and goatee. Other residents and neighbors saw the drawing and said that person was one of the frequent visitors."

"Still not enough for facial recognition?" said Jay.

"Iffy. In any case, there was no match in HOLMES. That scrote might be a foreigner, or just someone clever enough to be without form. Hal shipped it off to Interpol, MI5, and NCA."

"That will take a while," Hal said. "We won't have anything in time for the second interrogation."

"I suggest we threaten them a bit," Alan said. "Say we've checked and the Home Office wants MI5 to take over their case, and they'd be much better off with us?"

Hal smiled. "That might put a little more pressure on them, assuming they're intelligent enough to know what MI5 is."

"And they might call your bluff," Jay said, "or their lawyer will."

Judy and Alan filed into the interrogation room while Jay and Hal entered the room behind the one-way window once again.

"You've had more than enough time to think about your plight," Judy began. "And we've had enough time to make things worse for you."

"What do you mean?" said the barrister.

"MI5 would like to question your two clients now," Judy said. "They're interested in arms trafficking because of the terrorist angle. They suspect your clients are involved in arming terrorists. We'd love to see them pin that on your clients. They'd be in the nick for a lot longer."

"They can't do that!" Art Simons said. "Buying a few things doesn't make us terrorists. We're as patriotic as the next bloke."

"So..." Alan said with a smile. "Who did you buy the vests and weapons from? J&M or someone else?"

Art glanced at Doug, who nodded. "Okay. J&M outfitted us."

"And you've continued to deal with them, considering all the visitors at your flat. What are you planning? Or are you now helping them distribute?"

"We just socialize a lot," Art said, and Doug nodded.

Alan laughed. "With some rather sinister characters." That wasn't a lie. The witnesses and video evidence hadn't been good enough to identify anyone, but they were grainy and shadowy on the video. The best they had was a drawing! "You can either give us their names, or give them

to MI5. I'd think you'd prefer the first option. MI5 doesn't have to allow any legal representation, so they can do what they want." That was only true for people accused of terrorism, and only in the initial stages, but the scrotes wouldn't know that. Would the lawyer?

"I need a break to confer with my clients," he said.

Time for tea and cakes, thought Alan, *but not for that trio*.

"Any change of opinions?" Judy said twenty minutes later after returning from that break.

"As far as we know, there's only one bloke who's with J&M," Art said.

"The one with the facial scar, mustache, and goatee?" said Judy, taking an educated guess. At least he looked different from the others and foreign, which didn't mean much in England or the UK as a whole anymore. Now both Art and Doug nodded. "What's his name, and what were you doing for him?"

"Helping him outfit customers," Art said. "He threatened to turn us in to NCA or MI5 if we didn't cooperate. We didn't want to go back to prison, so we helped out. Not a bad deal. Paid better than armed robbery, to tell the truth."

As if these two know what truth is, Alan thought. "His name?" he said.

"Ivan Stoyanov. We think he might be Bulgarian." Art looked from Judy to Alan and back. "We helped you out. What's going to happen to us?"

"The Crown Court will take that all into consideration. It can't hurt your case. It's not like you were on the straight and narrow, but yes, you helped us."

"And MI5?"

"We'll keep you here for now." Alan slid legal pads and biros to the two. "Your lawyer can help you edit your confessions. Seems like he's not good for much else."

The lawyer did nothing but glare at Alan.

Chapter Eight

The manhunt for Ivan Stoyanov had success two days later. They brought him in as a murder suspect for arranging the murder of Sam Duncan. A uniformed constable'd spotted him buying liquor in a small shopping center not far from Art and Doug's place. Ivan had thrown a bottle at the constable who had the good sense to step aside. That'd been enough to motivate the young constable to pursue Ivan. Knowing the neighborhood better, the copper took a shortcut. The Bulgarian ran right into the constable's outstretched arms while looking in the expected direction of pursuit. The constable put him down and cuffed him. Alan chuffed the constable a bit by commending him for a job well done.

Judy and Alan entered the interrogation room once again.

"I'm a legal resident of this shite country!" were the first words they heard. "I know my rights. I want to lodge a complaint about police brutality!"

Alan smiled at the bloke's Crown-appointed lawyer. "Better get your client to settle down. He's not helping his cause."

"He says he's not an arms trafficker," the duty solicitor said, examining his nails as if he didn't care.

"We have proof he is. As a legal resident of the UK, he'll be the guest of the king in a maximum security prison for at least five years, maybe more." Alan now focused on Ivan, who'd become very quiet upon hearing that. "That will occur unless you can provide us some useful information. Let's talk about J&M, Ivan. We know you, Art, and Doug work for them...worked, in their case, and most likely past tense for you as well. We want details about their operation."

Ivan sighed. "I'm just a go-between. Those two and others work for me. I don't know much about the details. J&M's organized like a spy network, each layer not knowing much about the one above but everything about the next one down."

"Okay. At your level, you three and others deal with sales to different groups. We want to know who those groups are. We also want to know where the warehouses are. You must store the merchandise somewhere."

"What do I get for telling you all that? I'm not going to grass on someone if there's no quid pro quo, you know."

Alan smiled. *So poetic...and he knows Latin.*

"We'll put in a good word to the Crown Court that I'm sure your attorney can use to your benefit," Judy said. She glared at the lawyer. "Need time to discuss that with your client?"

"Yes, although I believe it's Art and Doug's word against my client's, so there's something to be said for hoping to obtain a complete acquittal in court. The UK shouldn't treat its European workers in this way, especially if they were trapped here by Brexit and Covid."

"Nice little speech, counselor, but hardworking immigrants don't usually work hard at arms trafficking. We're willing to take our chances in court if you insist on that option. We'd go for the maximum sentence in that case." Alan stood. "You can have fifteen minutes alone with your client. I need a tea break anyway."

Almost twenty minutes later, Judy and Alan reentered the interrogation room. "Are we ready for some serious negotiating now?" he said.

The two had decided it was in Ivan's interest to tell them everything he knew. Alan had predicted that. With all his pretended superiority and urbaneness, Alan thought Ivan Stoyanov was just a scared little weasel who had little or no skills to make a decent living. He'd probably

been a criminal in his home country and continued to be one in England. That meant that the UK's immigrant-vetting filters were a bit lax.

Ivan's statements were the snowball that created an avalanche. Now they had to get both MI5 and NCA involved. What they needed was a raid on all the warehouses J&M used to store and distribute their illegal weaponry.

After consulting with the Home Office, NCA suggested that such a raid had to involve multiple law enforcement organizations. The Home Secretary agreed. A group formed from them would meet and hammer out the details.

The "committee" met at NCA's HQ with impressive but discreet security. Judy, Alan, and Jay arrived first and were shown into the meeting room. Hal and Jeremy Brand from MI5 came in next and then Sr. Agent III Karl Schuster, Hal's old boss from Interpol, and agent Denise Fournier from DGSI soon followed. Finally, Lauren Johnson with an aide, both from NCA, entered; she went to the head of the table while the aide took a chair sitting against the wall.

"Let's get to it," Lauren said. "Our goal is to shut down this arms trafficking network. With Stoyanov's information our partners have gathered for us—" She smiled and nodded in turn at Judy, Alan, and Hal, but not Jay. "—we need to plan a raid throughout Greater London. We've done this before with drugs trafficking networks, but this op will have to be a bit different. For one thing, these arms traffickers are incredibly organized. For another, they're probably much better armed than most of us usually are, especially considering the business they're in."

"We have armed units," Jay said.

Lauren glared at him. "Without wanting to be adversarial, DCI Mallow, I'll state the obvious: The Yard's SCO19 units don't have much experience with taking part in a citywide raid."

Jay's face turned red. Alan had already noted evidence for a competitiveness, an animosity even, between Lauren and Jay. *Maybe they have a history?*

"The Yard has more experience with focused raids," Jeremy said, "and so does MI5. I'd like to suggest that we divide up the target sites to take advantage of all the armed units we have available, with NCA directing everything, which the drugs ops give them the experience to do."

Lauren smiled at Jeremy. *A mutual admiration society between two old warriors?* Alan asked himself. Brand and Johnson seemed to be connecting. *Maybe more than professionally?* He smiled. Stranger things had happened in meetings like this, and bad and good past experiences always seemed to be aired. That reduced the effectiveness of most committees. He hoped that wasn't the case this time.

"Agreed. I think this entire committee as it's presently configured should be directing everything, although I want Interpol and DGSI to focus on the international aspect, particularly for the EU. We want to hit them hard on the continent too."

"We also need someone to coordinate in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic," Hal said. "Maybe not against J&M, but there's evidence illegal arms and such here are coming from there as well. I can focus on that with Karl's help. We don't have much time, so we have to move fast." Schuster nodded.

"All that leads to a discussion about timing," Lauren said. "We can't delay. J&M might be on the move now to shut things down if they've heard that Stoyanov is the guest of Scotland Yard."

"Let's hit the phones now," Denise said. "I'll work with Hal and Schuster. What's the drop-dead time, Lauren?"

"Shall we say tomorrow at midnight?" was Lauren's suggestion. The others either said "yes" or nodded.

"We need a name for the op," the pompous Jay said.

Lauren seemed amused by his comment. "Give me one."

"Um. Well, I don't know...."

"OK Corral," Hal said.

"That's what we'll use," Lauren said, "although I hope it doesn't become an event as violent as that one was. Operation OK Corral is now a go. Full speed ahead."

Chapter Nine

NCA had the facilities and experience to set up an ops center quickly, but Alan suspected that MI5 did too. Scotland Yard and the Metropolitan Police's many substations, including his, also had the ability to mount a small SCO19 op, or join forces in a team effort. But Alan knew that only certain egos from the different organizations involved in OK Corral could work together. Everyone on that committee room was qualified except Jay. He'd fortunately left. Alan hoped his superior could keep his mouth shut. In a way, Alan felt sorry for him. This wasn't an action where a copper could bluff his way through it, and that's all Jay was: Bluff.

Alan didn't have time to dwell on those thoughts. They each had a job to do.

They ended up staying the night there, catching a few nods when and where they could. And it took all the next day to get armed units, police and agents, as well as ambulances with EMTs stationed and hidden around J&M's warehouses.

The last thing they waited on was the greenlight from the PM and Home Secretary. Even with the international flavor of the op, they were the only politicians who knew about the raid. The first man had to cancel a courtesy meeting with the king using a lame excuse that might have even made that old toff wonder. After a conference at 10 Downing with the Home Secretary, the green light came a bit after nine p.m. OK Corral was going live as planned.

Alan felt a bit uncomfortable watching the action take place via video in the ops room. He felt like he was a player participating in an elaborate computer game. There were some gun battles, but the J&M organization wasn't as agile as he'd feared. Some scrotes in a few warehouses were trying to load lorries and do a runner, but only a few escaped. Over three hundred associated with the trafficking network were rounded up if you counted those in Northern Ireland. Several suppliers in Europe also were caught; they were even less prepared for operation OK Corral, most of the action led there by Interpol and DGSI, using France's and other countries' armed units.

Alan went home to Amanda completely knackered; from what, he didn't know, because all Judy and he had done was watch video images on the war room's ten screens, some of them even split to cover all the action. It could have been from some BBC drama or documentary as far as he could relate to it.

He got off his train and walked up to street level. Two blocks later, he realized he was being followed. That made him nervous. The top levels of J&M had escaped the net cast by the raid. *Will killing an unarmed copper send a message?* Alan doubted that, but it put a frisson down his spine.

He stayed calm enough, though, even slowing down. He then heard the rush behind him. The knife only nicked him in the shoulder because Alan had spun around. His right fist came down hard on the knife arm, making his attacker drop the knife, and his left slammed into the scrote's jaw. He parked a foot on his assailant's chest and called 9-9-9, then Amanda.

"I'll be a bit later than planned, Luv," he said. "Some crazy bastard just attacked me with a knife."

"Are you okay?"

"A tiny nick. I'm going to interrogate this scrote at the station. He might be connected to the case that's consumed me the last few days."

"I'll go ahead and eat, but I'll save your dinner for you."

"You bet. Ta-ta."

By the time patrol cars arrived, Alan had lost enough blood that he was getting dizzy. The uniformed constables hauled his assailant off to the station. An ambulance hauled Alan to the nearest NHS hospital. On the way, the EMT let him call Judy.

Epilogue

The next morning, Judy and Hal came to see him. He was staring at some mess that pretended to be a solid English breakfast—runny eggs, uncrisped bacon, and burnt toast. It wasn't appealing, so he was glad to have the interruption. Hal grabbed something like a charred twig that might have once been an innocent sausage and then took a chair; Judy stood and shook her head at the food.

"Good old NHS," she said.

"Get any joy with that scrote?"

"He did an Ivan on J&M," Hal said. "That organizations' VIPs hired him to kill you."

"Why?"

"They blamed you for showing the world that their business model was flawed, I guess," Judy said. "We have some of those VIPs in custody now, thanks to the knifeman's grassing on them."

"Um. We lopped off some of the head and tails. One or more of them will lead to the middle. Tell Lauren to make it a clean sweep."

"There's someone waiting to see you," Judy said, "and she's furious with you. We'd better leave to avoid seeing the fireworks."

Amanda was only furious with him because he was in the hospital.

"But Luv, I just might have broken the case wide open."

"And that bastard almost cut you wide open."

"Actually, that little altercation was a bit of fun. I'd been depressed because I hadn't participated that much in the earlier action. Others took away that joy."

"Fine. Let those others be the ones who get cut up. You already have enough scars."

"None that will ever come between us, Luv."

"You're damn right. I have those dance lessons set up."

A Medieval Murder

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Chapter One

Ellie Jones took a deep breath and entered the Morpeth Police HQ.

"Can I help you, lass?" said the constable on duty at the reception desk.

"I'm here to see DI Matthew Lawrence."

"State your business, please. I need a reason. The inspector's a busy man."

"I'm his new sergeant, Ellie Jones."

The constable's gaze swept over her, as probing and intrusive as a CAT scan. She could imagine his more sanitized thoughts: *Tiny black woman with braids dressed in a tee, pants, and trainers. What's this world coming to?* He eventually shrugged. "CID. Second floor. Elevator or stairs just beyond the double doors. They're next to each other."

She held out a hand. "I guess we'll be working together, DC Forsythe."

He stared at the hand a moment but didn't reach down to shake. "I suppose. I'm 'bout ready to retire, so they plunked me up here."

She frowned, turned, and entered through the double doors. She took the stairs to settle her nerves that had not been helped by her encounter with the taciturn constable. At the top, she repeated that she was looking for Lawrence to the first person she saw in the large, open-plan area with a lot of empty desks. Apparently most of the CID police were out on a case. The man was about her age; he had red hair and blue-green eyes. She'd seen a lot of that downtown. They weren't far from the border and Edinburgh.

The young copper jerked a thumb towards the rear of the open-plan area. "Second office through."

After the constable at reception, she didn't bother to handshake. She stopped in front of a door with a frosted-window insert; written on that pane in faded letters was "Detective Inspector Matthew Lawrence." She knocked.

"Don't break the damn window. Do you have my tea?"

She opened the door and peeked in. "I'm DS Eleanor Jones."

Lawrence glanced at his watch. "You're early. I like that. Have a seat."

"Do you need me to fetch tea for you?"

"No, no, Steve's on that mission. Tea and cakes for the three of us." He noticed her confusion. "DS Steve Kirkland, the other third of my brain trust. You'll inherit that duty, whether it's tea or coffee. Aye, here's the lad."

Kirkland looked like a young rugby player. He was at least a good six inches taller than she was. "Sorry, Guv. No milk."

Lawrence frowned. "Always something. This lass is Eleanor Jones, our newest team member. May I call you Ellie?" She nodded. "Ellie, this is Steve Kirkland. He'll show you around when there's time for it. An interesting case has come to us, lass." He winked at her. "I suppose you noticed we're a bit short on staff."

"What's the case?" Steve said after taking a sip and making a face.

"Body found in a downtown alley."

"Not unusual, Guv," Steve said, "but interesting?"

"The man was shot with a crossbow."

"Excuse me?" Ellie said, fearing she might have taken a trip back in time.

Northumberland was a historic county on the east of Cumbria and north of Durham, Tyne, and

Weir. Together with Durham, the area was called Northumbria. The largest city was Newcastle, but Morpeth was large enough to merit a police substation.

Lawrence pointed to his chest. "Iron crossbow bolt right into the heart, lass. Drink up, mates. You can take the cakes with you. Steve, but you're driving. Ellie will fit better in the rear." He winked again at her. "Otherwise, we'd have to borrow the canteen's can opener, assuming we could even get Steve in the back."

She smiled at the big man who responded with a blush.

"Is he always this intense?" Ellie said as they followed Lawrence around a street corner in Morpeth to find the alley.

She felt Steve was deciding how to answer this new sergeant who probably looked like no woman he'd ever seen before, except maybe on BBC. He looked down upon her and then smiled.

"I once thought I could mellow him out a bit by keeping the pints coming. Drank me under the table, he did, and was still hyper afterwards. He drives the pathologists and SOCOs mad. Just watch."

Lawrence didn't bother the SOCOs, though, because they had the unenviable duty of scouring the alleyway for evidence, including its rubbish bins. The DI probably figured that was enough torture for them that morning. But by standing not far from the corpse with his arms folded like some haughty Roman general, he badgered the pathologist while the old man moved around the victim.

"What the hell are you lookin' for, Doc? Toff's COD is that crossbow bolt and TOD must have been less than an hour ago, considering how you're flexing his limbs. I want that damn bolt, by the way. It could have prints or even DNA."

"Aye, that it could, Inspector Lawrence, and it's a first for me. All the more interesting if the SOCOs find the crossbow that shot it. If it's theories you want, marra, mine is that they probably won't. I'd say it was pounded into the bloke's chest elsewhere, and then his killer dumped him here."

Lawrence pointed to the alley's entrance. "My theory is that someone shot that bolt into him from there. What makes you prefer yours to mine?"

"One, there's very little blood here. 'Course, when I open him up in the morgue, I might find it's all accumulated in the abdominal cavity. Two, from the lack of rigor, as you noted, either he was just killed, even more recently than you say, which is unlikely, or he was killed hours ago and the rigor has passed. I can also find that out in the morgue too."

Lawrence thought a moment and then said, "Guess you'd better take him to the morgue then. I still want the damn bolt."

The pathologist wrenched it out. "Here! Take it!"

"Evidence bag," Lawrence called out to Kirkland.

Steve walked calmly to the SOCO's van parked in front of the pathologist's and found one. "What are you going to do with that?" he said as Lawrence dropped the bolt in the bag.

"Give it to the SOCOs, of course. They work a lot faster than Doc does. Four of them to his doddering one."

"Shove it," Doc said.

During the return to the station, Lawrence told Steve to pull into the car park of a bustling cafe. "Good breakfasts here. I think our newest team member might have missed hers."

Ellie was embarrassed. "I had toast and coffee before leaving London."

"That'd be hours ago, lass, and I can't exist on those biscuits we had. A bit peckish myself, I dare say. In our line of work, you have to eat when you have the chance."

Ellie knew that her new assignment would be a lot more laid back, but she had never imagined breakfast stops after a body was found. But the inspector was right: She needed sustenance. She ordered eggs, sausage, and toast; the inspector ordered a bacon sandwich. She was surprised that Steve only ordered toast. He left to get coffee for all of them from the help-yourself urn.

"Lad watches his waistline, Ellie. We spend more time at our desks than exercising, and he has a department physical coming up."

She thought of what she'd ordered. "I suppose I need one even to start work?"

"In due time, but I don't think you have to worry. I figure you burn more calories than you eat. Your DI in London said you're—what was his word?—ah, frenetic. Good recommendation he gave you, lass. Guess you didn't want to go to another station there when you were promoted?"

She stared into his intense blue eyes. "I'll admit something if you don't broadcast it."

"If it'll help me understand you, lass, go for it. I don't talk about coppers' personal lives, but I like to understand what makes them tick."

"I looked through the list of DS openings and picked the one farthest from London. I never liked the city all that much. The few road-trips we had outside the city when I was younger were heavenly, so I always thought I'd be happier away from cities."

"I hear you. Northumberland is an extreme choice, though. More history here than the researchers can keep up with. You've heard of Hadrian's Wall?" She nodded but said nothing; her mouth was full. "Second century Roman construction, lass, from Solway Firth to Wallsend on the River Tyne. And most of this area hasn't changed much since then, I dare say, except for adding a lot more bureaucracy than the Romans could ever have imagined. It's so rural, the Home Office often cuts our budgets. Half those desks in our open area are unused, so you'll have your choice from them. I'd suggest you park it next to Steve, though, so you two can bounce ideas off each other. Ah, here are Steve and our breakfasts."

Steve was juggling three mugs, so the waiter patiently held the three plates while Steve put the mugs in their places. Ellie and Lawrence tucked in, while Steve nibbled his toast and watched her.

"What are your thoughts about the case?" Lawrence asked Ellie after a few bites into his sandwich.

Ellie eyed him warily, took a sip of coffee, and then laughed. "That's the first time a DI asked me for my opinion about a case."

"Because you were only a London DC," Steve said. "You've been promoted. The inspector expects us to have opinions."

"Correct," Lawrence said.

"Okay, I think the pathologist might be right, but that's irrelevant for the moment. We need to know who the victim is and who hated him enough to kill him."

"Any ideas about the latter, forgetting who he is?" Lawrence said.

"Someone who has access to a crossbow bolt, if not a crossbow?"

Lawrence smiled. "Craftily put, lass. Maybe some collector or professorial type, persons interested in medieval history?"

Steve laughed. "Lots of those around Northumberland; a lot of them are tourists."

"I suppose a blacksmith could make a bolt," Ellie said. "Bet there are few of those around too."

"Horse farms need them," Lawrence said. "Someone has to shoe the beasts. You'll find them all through the northlands. Um. Potentially lots of suspects there—blacksmiths, not horses."

"Someone at Newcastle University can identify the bolt," Steve said. "Or the crossbow if we find one."

"I'll leave you to that task, lad." Lawrence winked at Ellie and jerked a thumb towards Steve. "Unlike you and me, Ellie, Steve skipped a few steps on his way to DS using the graduate program. Came here right out of college essentially; never was a uniformed constable." She shrugged, her mouth now filled with tough but savory sausage. "Wasn't Newcastle either. Oxford, right?" Steve nodded, turning red. "Way I heard it, you were better at rugby than calculus, though."

"Never took calculus," Steve said.

"My apologies. Different times too. Just so you two know, although Steve probably already does, I don't care much about your successes or failures before joining our CID."

And yet you just kidded Steve about his education, thought Ellie.

"I only care about what you can do to help the team." Lawrence thought a moment.

"Ellie, I want you to find out who our victim is. Don't forget about HOLMES. Victim might look like a toff, but he could just be a fancy low-life who made someone angry. I'll look into the bolt's origins outside the academic context. Hopefully we'll soon get it back from the SOCOs."

"Prints or DNA on that might help identify the killer," Ellie said.

"I'm not expecting much joy there; was just jerking Doc around a bit. That'd be too easy. This case isn't going to be easy."

Chapter Two

For once, Matt was happy that Doc called, saying the autopsy was scheduled for three p.m. He left the farm where he'd been quizzing a blacksmith. It had been hard going trying to communicate what the bolt was used for—the bloke's Cumbrian dialect was as thick as winter's mud. It was a task that would have been easier if he had the bolt with him. Basically, he'd learned that any blacksmith could make such a crossbow bolt, so they would have to make a list of registered blacksmiths in the area, excluding the one he'd just visited. *Task for a young DC*, Matt thought.

He arrived at the hospital at 2:53 and headed for Doc's basement cave.

"I don't get to initiate your new hire?" Doc said. "You usually don't come to these events."

"She's busy."

"How'd you find that one, by the way?"

"She found me. Had a sterling record in the Yard. Passed her exams, looked for a DS position, and chose our CID 'cause we had one."

"I bet she's Jamaican."

"She's born in London, so she's a Londoner as I see it."

Lawrence didn't learn much from the autopsy except that Doc insisted that the victim had been stabbed with the bolt. "If shot from a crossbow, damn thing would have gone right through him," he'd said. "I wasted a lot of time calculating the force if it was shot from a crossbow. Those damn things are lethal weapons!"

Lawrence passed Doc's comment on to Ellie upon returning to the station. He was sitting at one of the unoccupied desks with his two sergeants.

"My grandparents were Jamaican," Ellie said, "so Doc's partially correct. They emigrated here after the war to help with reconstruction."

"And that ghastly PM bitch wanted to send you all back!" Steve blurted. He saw the expression on Lawrence's face. "Sorry, Guv. I know you don't like to mix politics with work."

"From either side," Lawrence said. He winked at Ellie, something that was becoming a habit. "And I don't believe she was PM at that time. DS Jones, I hope you know we're not racists in the Morpeth CID."

She smiled. "I know. You wouldn't have hired me otherwise." She shrugged. "I observed, though, that mine's the only black face in town, as far as I could tell."

"We're different from London, and Newcastle, for that matter," Steve said. "I bet everyone in Morpeth thinks you're exotic."

"That might be equivalent to 'freaky' in some circles," she said with a smile.

"Not with me. You *are* exotic. Intriguing. A mystery I need to comprehend."

"Should have seen her application's picture, lad. The partly green hair made a statement, it did. Now let's stop with the flowery Oxfordian blather and twaddle. I'll not have it while we're working."

Steve chuckled. "We're going to have dinner, Guv. Coppers' late dinner."

"No, Ellie and I are going to have dinner. I know you'll just eat your usual salad. No problem, lad, as long as the dressing for it isn't your blathering. Let's get everything sorted for the evening and head out."

Chapter Three

The next morning, both Ellie and Steve spent some time at their computers. He was trying to discover which professor at the university to visit; she was trying to find out who the murder victim was.

She had finally searched for "crossbows" and "medieval weapons," topics Steve might already have searched in his quest under "Newcastle University." Her search was a bit broader. The first search term had given her more than she wanted to know about crossbows; the second had given her something quite different.

She was staring at *The Sun's* article about the opening of "The Medieval Faire," an annual event, except for lapses due to Covid, where actors populated a mockup medieval-style village with a duke and duchess, courtesans, friars, knights—there was a jousting contest—and townspeople, food and mead were available to all paying visitors. The actor who'd been invited to play the duke was their murder victim, Arthur Mayhew. He wasn't a local at all.

"I know who our victim is," she told Steve.

He leaned over and read what she had on the screen. "I guess some critic didn't like his performance?"

"He hasn't performed here yet. The fair was to start today."

"Maybe our suspect is the actor who'll replace him?"

"I don't think they have a replacement yet."

"You probably should pay a visit to the organizer of that event."

"Woman lives on the outskirts of Newcastle, probably not far from where the fair will take place. I'd expect she'd be on the fair grounds, though."

"Let's pay her a visit. It's more or less on the way to the university. We'll kill two birds with one trip."

"And send two DS's out of office to do essentially the same thing?"

"Guv's out and about, so he won't know until too late. We can soak up some medieval history together."

"Flip a coin for driver?" He nodded, she won, but then she had to let him drive because she couldn't adjust the seat to her size.

The twenty-minute drive south along the A1 motorway went by fast. They pulled into the fair grounds' car park and found the frantic director trying to get ready to open the next day. They sat around a small table at the rear of a stage made up to look like a castle balcony.

"The show must go on," Sheila Blunt said, to finish her spiel about the fair's delayed opening.

"Ms. Blunt, did you know the police were trying to identify Mr. Mayhew?" Ellie said.

"No. I just assumed everyone knew who he was. Not Sean Connery or Daniel Craig, of course, but he's well enough known."

"Not in Morpeth," Steve said. "How did you learn about his murder?"

Sheila blanched. "Murder? The duchess said it was a transit accident!"

"Perhaps we should speak to that actor," Ellie said, "but later. Why was he in Morpeth and not here in Newcastle?"

"I have no idea. His hotel is here. Oh my, I suppose you'll want to visit his room there? Forensics and all that? I shall call them."

"No, that's all right," Steve said. "Don't bother. You can just give us the hotel's name. So...no idea about what his business in Morpeth was?"

"No, no! I'm now so worried about our event." She seemed panicky and looked like she could cry. "One of our locals will have to be the duke, and on such short notice. I'm so afraid my event will be a disaster!"

Ellie glanced at Steve long enough to roll her eyes. "Is the woman playing the duchess here now?"

"No, I'll give you her address back in Morpeth. She's using the extra day to learn her lines better."

Steve hadn't decided who to contact at Newcastle University among three potential candidates, so they continued on A167 past Nuns Moor and The Town Moor to the university and went directly to the History Department. After showing their warrant cards to the department secretary, who examined them carefully before returning them, he stated their business.

"So, you see, we'd like to speak to Professors Sanborn, Wilson, or Youngman, if at all possible."

"Professor Youngman is consulting with some archaeologists at a dig on the Scottish border, and Professor Sanborn is in Spain, also on a research trip. Professor Wilson is tutoring at this moment, but he should be here shortly." She glanced at the large clock on the wall. "Ten minutes or so. Please take a seat and make yourself comfortable."

Wilson, an avuncular bear of a man, reminded Ellie of Matthew Lawrence when the professor entered. After introductions, he ushered them into his office.

"Didn't know plods were interested in medieval history," he said after everyone was seated, "but there's plenty around here for everyone." His booming laugh echoed a bit. He grabbed his oversized belly. When he recovered, he said, "What can I do for you two?"

Steve went through the case and what they knew so far. "Do you know about the fair where Mr. Mayhew was scheduled to perform?"

"Not much, except that it's a bit of harmless fluff. Completely inaccurate historically, but harmless...and popular. Don't know anything about your murder victim though. Never heard of him, to be honest. Are you sure it was a crossbow bolt? You could take a railroad spike and sharpen it and have the same effect, although it wouldn't be of much use with a crossbow."

"Where could the killer get a bolt, or a crossbow, for that matter?"

"Why, right here in the basement, we have some. Damn crossbows were very lethal once you got them set to shoot. The prod, the bow-like part, is attached to the main frame, called a tiller, and it shoots bolts or quarrels with a lot more force than your typical bow and arrow can. They were used in the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and by the twelfth century had become ubiquitous weapons. In the second half of the thirteenth century, gunpowder started to change everything in war. In any case, there are plenty of artifacts to choose from, so we only have a sampling."

Steve glanced at Ellie and then back at Professor Wilson. "How closely are such weapons guarded?"

"No more than our building itself. There's a nightguard. That's it. My two colleagues and I as well as some of our students know about what's in our basement, but the general public probably doesn't...or even cares, to put a fine point on it."

"Do you make a periodic inventory?"

Wilson laughed. "You're jesting, right? This is academia. You could bury a body in our basement and no one would know until it started decomposing."

"Can we take a look at your collection?" Ellie said.

"Sure. Why not?"

They followed him down two flights of stairs to the basement. Ellie thought it was disorganized, a real tip containing everything from harmless quilts to muskets and crossbows. The latter were off in one corner.

Wilson picked up a crossbow and checked the tag. "This one has 1100 on it. I'd give error bars of plus and minus fifty years to that estimate, but it looks a little more advanced than what might have been used at the Battle of Hastings. That's strange." He'd handed the weapon to Steve and was rummaging around. "It's missing its bolts."

"Did all these crossbows have their accompanying bolts?" Steve said.

"We don't keep them unless they do."

"But there's no string on this one."

"That was often twined oxen hide and rots away, detective. The bolts get a bit rusty, but they're still around. Even the wood on the tiller and prod rots a bit, but all the iron parts endure the ravages of time."

"Do you happen to remember how many bolts came with this weapon?" Ellie said.

He tapped his head. "I'm an academic, but the old head isn't a damn computer. Probably a good half dozen? All the other bows have their bolts."

"It might not be connected with our case," Steve said, "but it looks like someone stole your bolts. Any idea when that might have occurred?"

"I can check with my colleagues, but I haven't been down here in years. I'll have to get back to you on that." He thought a moment. "I feel bad about this. Let me offer to look at your bolt. You said it was hammered into the body?"

"The pathologist said it would have gone through the actor if shot from a real crossbow," Steve said.

"Depends on the range, but he's probably right."

"Eighty to a hundred feet," Ellie guessed, thinking about the alleyway, even though the pathologist had said the victim probably hadn't been killed there.

"So your pathologist is correct. Like I said, the damn things are lethal, especially at that distance. In any case, when you get hold of the bolt, I'll take a look at it."

Back in the outskirts of Morpeth, Judith Allsworth opened the door to see Ellie and Steve holding up their warrant cards.

"Sheila called. You'd better come in."

The woman's small house in Morpeth was clean and orderly except for the sitting room where piles of books on drama, acting, and theater, along with loose sheets of paper, were scattered around.

"Just move things to the floor and take a seat," Judith said. "I suppose you want to know how I knew about Arthur's accident?" Ellie and Steve nodded. "Um. I drove by his crashed hire-car. Some bystanders said the driver was dead. Poor Arthur. He seemed to be a nice man. He had a bit of an ego, of course, like most actors."

"Sheila didn't tell you that he was murdered?"

Sheila gulped. For the second time that day, they'd surprised someone with that. "My, no! So it wasn't an accident? That's what I told Sheila."

"Mr. Mayhew was found dead in an alley downtown. No car involved."

She frowned. "It looked like his hire-car."

"His hotel was in Newcastle," Ellie continued. "Do you have any idea why he was here?"

"I suppose he knew someone here, but I have no idea who that might be besides me." She waved a hand to indicate the messy room. "We'd planned to go over our lines over wine and cheese this evening. I suppose that will be with a new duke now, if at all. No wonder Sheila sounded upset."

They gave her their cards. "If you can think of anything that could help us, please let us know," Ellie said.

"I wish I could. He was such a nice man."

Back in their vehicle, Ellie and Steve looked at each other and laughed.

"Poor old bird was star-struck," Steve said, "over a second-rate actor. How complicated could her lines be? Medieval ladies were present only to be seen and not heard."

"Or his lines, for that matter. While I think the whole fair idea is charming, why Mayhew was in Morpeth or even participating in the fair are the most important questions now."

"The fair might have just been his excuse to be here."

"DI Lawrence is right. This case is complex."

Chapter Four

"Any joy from London?" Lawrence said to DC Bob McFadden.

The whole team had met in briefing room #2, much too small a space for them because it was generally used for smaller meetings. Ellie was comfortable with the cramped quarters; Steve was not.

"Mayhew made a living as an actor without having to wait on tables in pubs," Bob said, "but he was in a couple of flops recently. West End theatergoers can be fickle. He had a good run directing a play in Oxford to make up for those flops. Past his prime maybe? At any rate, his finances are fine, and no bad habits like drinking or gambling. No one seems to know why he agreed to appear at the Newcastle fair, though. All his lines for that performance amount to five double-spaced pages, and some of those are to congratulate the winning knight at the jousting tournament."

That brought forth a few laughs.

"To conclude," said the DI, "we have no feckin' clue for why he was here in Morpeth that night? Any joy finding who stole those bolts from the university, Steve?"

"Almost an impossible task. We're basically left with Professor Wilson's promise to look at the bolt we have when SOCOs are through with it."

"Could he identify it as one of the missing ones?"

"Possibly."

"Speaking of our damn bolt, are you through with it yet, Max?"

Maxwell Heath was the smart leader of one band of SOCOs. "For any biologicals from the killer, yes. We're analyzing the bolt's chemical composition."

"What the hell for?"

"We can possibly get an approximate date for its manufacture. Iron was never pure iron even before steel. Bronze amalgams were often used; early ones were hardened wood. The composition changed over the medieval era and as a function of location. The criteria were light, straight, and with a sharp point. The composition might be useful information for the professor to have."

"Okay. Don't dawdle but also put that at the back of the Aga. I think Wilson is a long shot—pardon the pun—but he might as well take a look...eventually." Lawrence thought a moment. "I want a full canvass made here in Morpeth. We need to know why Mayhew was here. Start with that Allsworth woman's neighborhood, the one playing the duchess. And Max, send your team to Mayhew's hotel room. You might find something useful there."

Ellie had been thinking about the visit with Wilson and his comment about the fair.

"Historically inaccurate," the professor had said.

"Have we checked the props at the fair?" she blurted out.

Lawrence stared at her for a moment and then laughed. "Where'd that come from?"

"What if some props are real, not fake?"

"Um. Interesting question. You're thinking about crossbows. Guess they'd be modern versions. Steel bolts? Carbon fiber? Might be worth another query session with the director."

"No one would notice the difference between a real medieval crossbow and a modern one," Bob said.

"Wilson would. And he said the old ones aren't often in great shape." Steve looked around those assembled. "The props could be modern ones. Can your composition analysis prove that, Max?"

"Between ancient and modern? Maybe, and certainly if the bolt is carbon fiber. The bolt used to kill Mayhew could indeed be a modern one."

"Don't see how that would change anything, except we'd be wasting the professor's valuable time and ours going the medieval route. Ellie?"

"It might mean that someone just ordered it from a catalog. I don't imagine many local stores or online retailers sell crossbow bolts. Definitely a specialty item, so it narrows down the field a lot."

"Tourist places might sell crossbow reproductions," Bob said. "I got a tiny one hanging from my rearview mirror I picked up in Penrith last summer."

"Cumbria, Northumberland, all across the north," Steve said. "That broadens the field. Ouch!"

"Okay, let's not get hung up on that damn bolt," Lawrence said, "or its composition. Let's get movin'. Ellie and Steve, get everyone started on the canvass. I have to meet with the DCI."

Lawrence knocked on Richard Hubbard's door; his knock rattled the window pane.

"Come in, Matt." The DCI had placed his computer desk against the wall like Lawrence had; Hubbard used his more. He swung around in the swiveling desk chair to face Lawrence. "One day you're going to knock that pane out. Sit down. How are things going with the crossbow case?"

Matt sighed. *Everyone has that damn medieval weapon on their minds!* "Early days, Richard, early days. We're just coming up to speed. Took us a while just to find out who the victim was."

"I heard Jones did that. She's working out okay?"

"Keeps Steve hopping. He'll be another Matt Lawrence eventually, but I can only do so much. Good he has a peer now who'll keep him dancing."

Richard laughed. "What an image! Not literally dancing, I hope. He's twice her size."

"And she's a lot more energetic, so it'd be difficult for him to keep up. You have to give us a few days. We're moving along now."

Richard eyed Matt. "Super has an interest in this case."

"Any specific reason?" Matt liked the Chief Superintendent, and Hubbard as well, but he didn't envy them their positions because they had to deal with so much politics and so many politicians.

"Nepotism? Turns out Mayhew's his wife's first cousin."

"Really? Don't keep shite like this from me, mate. I didn't know she was even a Londoner, not that I know much about her or see her that much, discounting holiday functions. Seems like a good woman."

"Same here for knowing her all that well. Her family left London when she was a child, but some relatives remained behind."

"No chance that the ones here were feuding with the ones there?"

Richard laughed. "Takes you to think of that scenario. Yes, dysfunctional families are often a problem. Weird goings-on sometimes. I dislike my father-in-law more than my mother-

in-law, though, but not enough to get violent about it. It looks like the London branch and the Northumberland branch are quite close in this case."

"At least that gives Mayhew a reason to be in Morpeth. We couldn't figure that out, given my hunch the fair was just an excuse."

"Super's wife didn't even know he was here, so a family visit probably wasn't motivation either. 'Course maybe her cousin was going to surprise her."

"I'll not ask her because my gut tells me he was here for some other reason, for neither family nor fair. My theory: He was meeting someone unknown to us and his family, maybe even in Newcastle, and they killed him and dumped his body here in Morpeth."

"That's a bit thin for a theory. No proof, right?"

"All I got for now, Richard. Now, old stick, what's the real reason I'm here? You knew we were just barely on the tarmac ready for liftoff."

The DCI hesitated. "Tradition. Super moved up from this DCI position; I moved up from your DI position. You're next in line. I've submitted my retirement papers, Matt. The super and I think you'd do good work sitting at this desk."

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"No, I wouldn't do anyone any good sitting there, not even myself. Promote Frank. He's more of a desk bloke than I am. I'd go mad doing what you do in that vise between the VIPs and the regular plods. I don't want your job."

"Are you sure?"

"You know I am. And you know I'm right too. Morpeth Police needs me to train these young twits so we old blokes can retire knowing the public's in good hands."

"That's an argument for making you head of police training in the northeast counties."

"No, not that kind of basic training. On-the-job training. Here in the CID."

"Um. Well, think about it. The super needs your decision by next Friday to ensure a smooth transition."

"You can give him my no now or then. When's your last day?"

"End of the month."

"Might want to talk to Frank sooner than later then. He deserves an early warning."

Lawrence smiled. "He might not want the job either. His wife has that long-haul Covid thing. Creates different priorities."

"Maybe Kelly would be a better choice."

Lawrence thought a moment. "I've worked with that Irish lady on a few cases. Either she or Frank would be a better DCI than I could be. Up to you and the super. And take me out of that decision loop. You don't want either one of them to feel like they were only your second choice. That would be a terrible way to start."

"You're a practical man, Matt."

"No, I'm a plod who's no fan of bureaucracy, even when it's necessary. I was your DS. You know that."

"Um. All too well."

Chapter Five

Ellie went with Bob to interview the fair's director again.

"Props? Let me get Ralph to talk to you. I have no idea where he stores them."

Ralph Peterson was a local who reminded Ellie of that Harry Potter character with buck teeth who could morph into a rat, only this little man didn't seem to have an evil bone in his body and was full of humor and pent-up energy. He was bouncing from one foot to the other as if he needed the loo until the director made him sit.

"Crossbows? Um. Yes, got those. Toys, really." He counted on his fingers. "Five. One for each knight, if needed. Rubber swords, jousting poles with thick but discreet pads, and so forth. The props have been around as long as the fair has and I've been in it, I suppose. I was first a page for his liege, the duke. No lines, of course. I was only ten!"

Ellie smiled at his nervousness. "No crossbow bolts?"

"Bolts, bolts? You mean for the crossbows?" She nodded. "No, no. The crossbows aren't real, like I said. They could never fire a bolt."

"Do either of you know why Mayhew would go to Morpeth?" Bob said.

The director shook her head, but Ralph looked embarrassed.

"He invited me and two of the knights to a local pub a bit more along the road to Newcastle. Those three started bragging about exploits."

"Exploits?"

Ralph jumped up and whispered something in Bob's ear and, just as quickly, sat down again.

Bob smiled and winked at Ellie and the director. "We're among grown-ups here, Ralph. Say it aloud. No problem."

"Um. It's embarrassing. Not very chivalrous of the knights at all."

"Okay, I'll say it. Mr. Peterson says that those three were bragging about their sexual conquests, and that Mr. Mayhew was going to Morpeth to pluck some bird's feathers."

"Did he say who the bird was?" Ellie asked Ralph, muzzling her laugh well.

Ralph turned beet-red. "Not directly. Someone named Tricia or Trisha." He said those two names differently because of his teeth.

"Maybe full name Patricia?" Bob said, glancing at Ellie. "Not much to go on."

"We still need to get the name out to the canvassers," Ellie said back in their car.

Upon their return to the station, they had something of a confirmation from the SOCO team that had gone to Mayhew's hotel room: There were empty wine bottles in the bin, remains of a fruit and cheese platter, and a box that had held perfume. The perfume's pungent odor had still hung heavy in the air.

"Any idea who this Patricia might be?" Lawrence said to those of the team who were in house.

"A really close old friend?" Steve said. "Very close." This was followed by a leer.

"Could be some actress he worked with before in London," Ellie said. She'd been thinking about who the mystery woman might be all the way back to the station.

"Pursue that," Lawrence said. "She could also be a kerb-crawler working in Newcastle but living anywhere in the area, Morpeth in particular, for all we know."

"What about the woman playing the duchess?" Bob said.

"Maybe." Lawrence thought a moment. "Let's pursue this carefully. It could become a delicate subject. Be discreet."

Ellie watched her DI retreat to his office.

An hour later, she knocked on his door, offering to get him a cuppa'. "Need to practice, Guv. I've neglected you."

"We've been busy, but okay. Grab some biscuits too, lass. Round up something for Steve too."

"He went to talk to the duchess."

"Just you and me then. Thanks."

After being mother using the dented metal teapot from the canteen, she took a few sips of her own tea and eyed him.

"What's going on, Guv? Why discreet? I never imagined you'd ever want to pursue a lead discreetly. That's not your reputation."

He took a bite out of a biscuit, sipped some tea, and smiled. "You're too good of a detective, Ellie."

"So there's something you know that we don't, something you want to keep under wraps." She shrugged. "Maybe none of my business?"

He sighed. "More related to what I said than anyone else."

"About Mayhew possibly going to see a sex worker?"

"I said kerb-crawler, but same thing basically. That could be a bit embarrassing for someone I might not want to embarrass."

"I'll take that as meaning it's none of my business, as long as it doesn't affect our investigation."

"If there's a chance that it might, I'll speak more on the subject to everyone."

"Understood." She smiled. "And I really did feel guilty about shirking on the tea service."

"Out with you, lass," he said with a laugh.

She took her tea and left the office, knowing those shrewd blue eyes were on her back.

Chapter Six

"Got her!" a DC announced.

They'd requested and received video records from the Newcastle hotel's security department. Three DCs had been going over them.

"Nothing from the facial recognition software, though."

"I have photos of the principal actors who've appeared with Mayhew. Let's try them."

They soon had a name as well as a face.

Ellie had teamed up with Lawrence and Steve with Bob; they were visiting known escort services, figuring Mayhew was a bit too sophisticated for a common kerb-crawler. The first pair had gone to Morpeth; the second to Newcastle.

Such services were legitimate in the sense that their women often only dined with lonely men as if they were on a date, or provided eye-candy for some VIP, who might or might not be married. What went on behind those public scenes was anyone's guess, and the police could do little to stop it unless someone complained or there was violence.

The DS and DI had just left the third such service when Lawrence got the call about the woman the DCs had found.

"Let's pay a wee visit to this retired actor," Lawrence said, "and see what kind of act she'll put on."

"Might just be a harmless rekindling of an old love affair that's not related to our case," Ellie said.

"Or it might not, lass."

When Ellie and Lawrence arrived at Clarissa Davidson's little house on the south side of Morpeth, she was pruning roses in her front garden. She dusted off her hands but blanched at the sight of their warrant cards. Before Lawrence could speak, she pushed him, and he fell over the wheelbarrow. Ellie tried to grab her, but the DS had to dodge a sharp hoe. Clarissa then ran for her parked vehicle. Ellie caught up with her, pushed her up against the side of the car, and put the handcuffs on.

"We need to have a little chat, Ms. Davidson, about Arthur Mayhew."

The woman managed to twist and turn enough to spit in Ellie's face. She screamed expletives continued to destroy the peace and quiet of the neighborhood. Lawrence, who'd just joined the pair, handed Ellie a handkerchief.

"You're not helping yourself, Ms. Davidson. Resisting arrest is a criminal offense. Ellie, let's get this one to the station."

The woman was cursing them all the way to the station and into the interrogation room. Two uniformed female constables restrained her while Ellie, Lawrence, and Steve, who'd just returned with Bob from Newcastle, conferred outside.

"From what I heard among that mix of midlands and cockney swear words, she says she finally made Mayhew pay for what he did to her," Steve said. "Any idea what that's about?"

"Lord knows," Lawrence said.

One constable, her blouse flecked with spittle, came out shaking her head. "She's manic. You're not going to get much if anything rational out of that woman! She needs a sedative."

Ellie eyed Lawrence. "I'd like to make a suggestion on how to handle the situation."

"Go ahead."

"From my experience in London, the best way to handle this is with a psych evaluation. There'll be no quick resolution in the sense that we won't know exactly what was going on, but we're also not mental health professionals. She definitely can't appear in Crown Court this way."

"Um. Good idea. Even so, I think we have our murderer. As Steve says, she basically confessed to killing Mayhew." The big man scratched the stubble on his chin. "Let's get a search warrant and send SOCOs back to her house. I'd like some concrete evidence."

Max's team found it: Three wood and steel crossbow bolts that matched the murder weapon.

"You look sad," Steve said to Ellie as constables hauled Clarissa away in a straitjacket.

"What did Mayhew do to that poor woman?"

"We might never know. She's not coherent. Completely mad, I'd say."

"It might not be anything that would make a normal person want to kill," Lawrence said. "Actors live in a make-believe world. She might have got lost in it." His two sergeants nodded. "We'll probably need to return all those bolts to the university. And I'm ready to wager she was once a student there."

He was right.

Epilogue

"Thanks for seeing me, Margaret," Lawrence said to the super's wife. "I'm sorry for your loss. Your family's loss."

She sighed. "Arthur might have found his true calling with his success in directing that play in Oxford. Directing could have been a second career for him. He loved the theater so much."

"Could I ask a few questions about him? About his relationship with Clarissa?"

"My husband told me she killed Arthur. I'm not surprised she disliked him, but murder?"

"Why weren't you surprised? What did he do to upset her, to send her to such a dark place?"

"He wasn't completely honest with her. They'd both acted in the same play in London, and she fell for him. I can't even remember its title.. In any case..."

"Yes?"

"Does any of this need to go public? The man's dead, for God sakes!"

"What you say to me doesn't need to go public. We have sufficient evidence to convict Clarissa of murder if she's ever declared competent enough to stand trial. I can't guarantee she won't reveal all if that happens."

"Um. Okay. A good barrister wouldn't put her on the stand anyway." Margaret folded her hands in her lap and collected her thoughts. "Clarissa thought their relationship was a lot more serious than Arthur did. At that point in his life, he wasn't sure about anything. You see, inspector, Arthur was bisexual. We kept that a secret, of course, first because of that stupid law against homosexuality, and later because he asked us to do so. I guess Clarissa couldn't live with that, and her rage increased over the years, thinking he'd destroyed her life."

"Two lives destroyed, hers and his. She'll lose her freedoms for life, whether in an asylum or in the gaol. Thank you for setting my mind at ease. I hate these tragic cases. Does the super know about all this?"

"Not all the details. I don't even know all the details. Will you go to the funeral?"

"I'll be there in support of your family, yes. Please pass my sympathies on to all of them."

"I'll do that, inspector."

The Play's the Thing

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Chapter One

The professor thought his lectures helped in the university's outreach program, but he rarely had a large audience at any of them. People had their choice of seats in the mostly empty lecture hall that evening.

One striking woman sitting in the first row had asked several questions that had little relation to his theme that night. The next one startled him a bit, though.

"What if I told you who Hamlet really was?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question. He was a fictional character created by the great bard," the professor said to her. To the other eleven in the audience, he said, "Now, if there are no more questions, thank you for your attention and for coming to this lecture."

He closed his notebook and exited the stage to his right.

The woman was waiting for him as he later left the building. She had a vivacious smile that he liked and was dressed to the nines. Her dark red hair reminded him that there was a lot of Celtic blood in the northlands, although the major cities like Newcastle had all types.

"You don't want to know, do you?"

"Excuse me, Miss...?"

"Rita Henderson." She held out a slender hand.

"I'm Wilbur Dalton, as you know." He shook the proffered hand. "I'm still afraid I don't understand you, Miss Henderson."

"Mrs., actually. I'm a widow." She eyed him. "I probably annoyed you by asking too many questions. That's me being pushy. But you didn't answer the last one. I found that a bit rude."

"But I did. That ill-fated prince was a fictional character."

"There's a castle in northern Denmark. They say that's where it all occurred."

"I have no idea who your 'they' might be, but none of that babble to attract tourists changes my answer."

She smiled and nodded. "That was just a test. Now let me tell you who Hamlet really was, and where the events in the play took place."

"I'm a bit peckish, Mrs. Henderson. I'd like to abandon your problem and solve mine in the faculty lounge, if you don't mind."

"I'll give you company. Treat you, in fact, if you'll only listen to me."

"That's not necessary." He saw her disappointment. "Fine. We'll go to dinner and each pay for our own. And I'll hear your theory."

Wilbur ate and listened to Rita prattle on during dinner, mostly about Shakespeare. She was passionate about her theory. He finally got a few words in when she stopped to sip her coffee.

"Okay, I agree that the northeast, Newcastle and north, isn't far from Denmark. Just five hundred miles or so as the sea gull flies across an angry North Sea. But Mr. Shakespeare was a genius, Mrs. Henderson. He wouldn't confuse this area for Denmark."

She demurred. "You make it sound like quite a trek, but the Vikings were doing it early on. And we're discussing the 1300s, Professor Dalton. Maybe even earlier. And you may call me Rita."

"Um. Your theory is interesting, but we've a time gap of around two hundred years. Why would Shakespeare even know about your Scottish Prince Hammill?"

She smiled. "Because of the Templars. He was one of them."

Wilbur's eyebrows raised. "Shakespeare a Templar Knight? I don't think so. They were hunted and killed on the continent, unless you've swallowed Dan Brown's story."

"Who's Dan Brown?"

"*The Da Vinci Code*."

"Oh, that silly movie. Tom Hanks's hairpiece didn't lie right. And that's not history, professor. Not even historical fiction, which has to have some facts in it to merit the name."

"You can call me Wilbur. Those knights were real, but they were persecuted and killed, probably horribly."

"In order to steal the monks' treasure."

"Monks?"

"The Templars were monks who became famous for fighting the Saracens in the Holy Land."

"Um, not my specialty, to be honest. You might be right about that. But no matter. How did they get to Stratford-on-Avon?"

"They didn't. Not right away. Some were able to flee the continent and settled in Scotland. Robert Bruce, who had his own problems with the papacy, shielded them."

"And Hammill, this Scottish chieftain, was he one of those monkish knights?"

"His father and uncle were. I can see you're knackered, Wilbur." She took from her purse a large key that hung from a leather strap and slid it over to him. "Visit my carrel in the university's library, and you'll see all the evidence I've collected."

Wilbur looked at his watch. "You're right. It's late. Will I see you there?"

"I can't come during the day because I have to work, but I can meet you afterwards. Here? For dinner?"

He smiled. "Okay. Maybe a bit earlier, if you don't mind. I don't have to give a lecture tomorrow evening."

Rita slid into the booth opposite Wilbur.

"Did you look through my notes and other material? I keep it well organized."

"You've done a lot of research. Why?"

"I just want to set the record straight about Hamlet and Shakespeare. Are you convinced now?"

"Hardly. There's so much I didn't get through. I'll revisit your carrel tomorrow."

She looked pleased. "I can see you're interested now. Thank you for that."

"Curious is probably the better descriptive word. Curiosity's what drives academics."

They ate and chatted about other things, now learning about each other's lives. She had an Oxford education that had led to her interest in history and literature. Wilbur enjoyed the conversation and liked her well enough to offer her a ride home after dinner.

They'd just turned onto the motorway when it started to rain, yet some prat tried to pass Wilbur's Rover. He lost control of the vehicle when that passing car nudged him.

Chapter Two

DI Matthew Lawrence could only see the undercarriage of the Rover from his vantage point at the roadside. DS Ellie Jones stood beside him, also studying the scene. She almost seemed like a little girl standing next to her large father.

"Foul night, Ellie. Not a surprise the bloke lost traction."

"Why does DCI Hubbard want us here? Looks like a bad-weather accident to me. They're common enough, considering how people drive."

"Um, he sent Max and his SOCOs here first because he knew the driver, a person who never took chances, especially while driving in foul weather like this. They go fishing together. And now Max thinks it's suspicious because the side of the Rover is damaged, and he believes that's not from the crash. To put a fine point on it, the DCI was right, so we're here because someone ran the vehicle off the motorway into the fells."

"Who's the driver?"

"Professor Wilbur Dalton from the university in Newcastle. He was with a woman named Rita Henderson. They might have been headed towards her house."

"A little tutoring maybe of the romantic kind? Is-was she a young student?"

"Dirty-minded Londoner," Lawrence said with a laugh. "No, they're about the same age, near as I can tell, and I'm guessing that she'd not have needed tutoring in your sense; she was a widow. DCI wants us to treat this as a double murder."

"Even though it might just be an unfortunate accident?"

"We'll see. I'd be prone to think that if it weren't for Max's observation, although it seems the DCI rode with the bloke enough on those fishing trips. I think the two of us can handle this case without Steve."

DS Kirkland was in Aberdeen attending a forensics course for coppers. Ellie knew Steve wanted a promotion. She had just got one going from a London DC to a Morpeth DS, so she was willing to bide her time.

"I've collected some information about the professor and his passenger," Ellie told Lawrence in his office the next day. "Henderson attended Dalton's lecture the night before, and he used her carrel at the library the following day."

"Interesting. The student tutoring the professor?"

"Showing off or collaborating, I'm thinking. We need to determine which one of the three."

"Can we get into that carrel?"

"I'm working on it."

"Might be some clues there, lass," Lawrence said. "I'm going to badger Hubbard for more information about Dalton."

"I'm off to the university then."

Richard Hubbard was on the phone, so Lawrence waited outside his office until the DCI motioned for him to enter.

"You know, Matt, I envy you. You can avoid all the politics and bureaucracy."

Lawrence didn't see much truth in that statement, but didn't say so because the super and Hubbard shielded the lower plods most of the time from the VIPs' whims. "And yet you still stick around."

Hubbard sighed. "I have a masochistic streak, I suppose. But believe me, the fancy lunches and cocktail parties aren't worth it."

"The super's functions, not yours."

"He sends me in his place all too often. Probably fancies all that less than I do."

"You need to go fishing more often, and that's segue to the reason for my visit, which isn't a social one, so don't call out for tea service. One-on-one on a boat in a lake, you must have gotten to know Wilbur Dalton very well. Tell me about him."

Hubbard made a sad face. "Good man, Wilbur. Serious 'bout his work, but funny as hell sometimes. I met him at one of those boring cocktail parties, and we became good friends."

"So those parties are sometimes good for something?"

"In a few cases, I suppose. What can I say? He was an erudite bloke who never once bragged about all his academic successes. Not to me anyway. His students liked him as far as I know. He lost his wife Jean about five years ago and got so buried in his research that it became difficult to convince him to go fishing and relax a bit. He called me when he began his lecture series, saying I should come and learn about the real Shakespeare."

"Did he buy into the theory that William Shakespeare was just a *nom de plume*? You know, an alias for toffs like the Earls of Oxford and Derby or even commoners."

"Quite the contrary. A lot of his research was to prove that the old bard was quite real; he attacked those theories. He was nearly obsessed and almost got me onboard—if you'll pardon the pun—because he was so enthusiastic about that aspect of his research."

"Were any of those scholars who believed William Shakespeare was a fake angry enough at his rebuttals to kill him?"

Hubbard smiled. "Most are dead. They did their blathering before the 1900s. There are a few still living and making noise inside and outside academic circles. Opiniated academic types attack each other through their research and published papers, especially those outside the hard sciences where data's king."

"I'd venture to say literary research is also based on data, or should be. Lots of old musty papers, first folios, and so forth are required reading, at least for the historical end of it. But what about the man beyond the research? Was he suicidal after losing his wife?"

"He had some time with her after the diagnosis that allowed him to get used to the idea she was living with a death sentence. He only drank a bit more immediately afterwards, but he wasn't bitter. NHS took good care of Jean, but she was already stage four when they made the diagnosis. That whole process is enough to make any man drink, I suppose."

Lawrence nodded. "No enemies you know of then?"

"No one who would run him off the road, no. What about the woman?"

"Some constables have already interviewed some attendees at his last lecture. They thought she might be a nutter, considering she was saying that she knew who Hamlet really was. The two met twice at the faculty lounge on campus for dinner. I think he was taking her home after that second meeting."

"Bird who had too much to drink?"

"Neither one of them, according to Doc. Well below the limit. Maybe your friend was just being a gentleman by giving her a ride. Busses are scarce at that hour."

"Yes, he'd do that. Ferried a lot of students around, male or female. Said he liked to know them better to improve his teaching."

"No chance he'd be wanting to get to know someone a bit more intimately, enough to make some other someone jealous?"

"Um...I suppose it's possible. It'd been five years. I told him a few times it was time to get back in the game if he wanted company in his later years. He shouldn't have any problems doing that. He was a pleasant, good-looking fellow. I could even see a student becoming infatuated with that older Sean Connery look if he wasn't in waders or wellies or smelling like fish."

"A man's man despite his profession?"

"Indeed." Hubbard pointed at Lawrence, anger on his face. "I want his murderer, Matt! Do that for me!"

"I'll do my best."

Chapter Three

Ellie finally found a librarian who would let her into Henderson's carrel without Rita or Dalton's permission. Ellie had already confirmed the little research office containing two chairs and a small table was Rita's, but she'd given a copy to the key to the professor, which the library knew about and didn't mind because he was a professor at the university. They only expected a donation from the researcher, and Henderson had already made one upfront.

All the material was in orderly piles, but it was difficult to decide where to begin the daunting task of looking for clues to explain either Henderson's or Dalton's murders. It seemed that the target might have been Rita Henderson. Dalton hadn't even met the woman until the night of the last lecture.

After nearly an hour, Ellie found something helpful, handwritten pages torn from a notebook and containing the beginning of Dalton's summary of Henderson's work:

Rita's thesis is that Shakespeare was a Templar and Hamlet was a Scottish chieftain named Hammill, his father and uncle also Templars. What proof does she have?

The professor had begun a list of items that purportedly proved that thesis, the words "doubtful," "maybe," and "true" following each item. The first two words outnumbered the last one's count, and "TBD" followed the list. It was clear that the professor hadn't considered Rita to be a complete nutter.

Ellie thought the team had several problems to solve before they could get anywhere on the case. First, had someone wanted the professor dead? Second, same question for Rita. It was possible that the nudge off the road from another car, which had turned out to be lethal, was only meant to be a warning—the bad weather had made it lethal. And third, did any of that have to do with Rita's research? All these questions had to be answered.

She thought they could sure use Steve's help to answer the questions. The case was quite complex and involved victims who were into some esoteric activities a college-educated man like Steve could sink his teeth into. But she remembered Lawrence saying that the Oxford graduate had been better at rugby than calculus. Had he been any good at history or literature?

With Steve's absence, some DCs would have to step up and help out a lot. One thing was certain, though: They needed to transfer all the material in the carrel to Morpeth station. Plods couldn't be traveling back and forth to the university all the time to answer that third question.

"Who are you?"

Ellie had left the door to the research carrel open to receive some fresh air in its small, confined space. That nasal voice had interrupted her thoughts. She looked up to see a stern older woman, her glasses hanging amidst some serious cleavage instead of softening her imperious scowl.

"Ellie Jones, Morpeth Police, madam. I have permission to be here as part of an investigation into Rita Henderson's murder. Mr. Eastman let me in."

The woman blanched and plopped onto the second chair.

"I-I expected to-to see Wilbur here."

"He was also murdered."

That finished the job; the woman fainted. Ellie called for an ambulance and then asked the nearby librarian, Phillip Eastman, for tea.

By the time the EMTs arrived, the woman had revived a bit. The librarian had also brought teacakes, and Ellie's visitor had already devoured two.

"Thank you, my dear," she managed to say after the EMTs left. "You were a bit abrupt with that bad news. Nice dreadlocks, by the way."

"I'm sorry about the bad news. I didn't realize you knew the professor."

She nodded. "We'd see each other at academic events. We didn't socialize outside of that."

"Um, I told you who I am. Who are you?"

She'd probably given her name to the EMTs, but Ellie had been talking with another librarian who had no idea who Ellie's visitor might be.

"Grimsby. Alice Grimsby. I teach French literature in the same department as Wilbur. We had a lunch date, and I was to meet him here."

Ellie smiled. The use of the first name and the tone of her voice told Ellie that Alice Grimsby had cared for Wilbur Dalton. That explained the swoon.

"Does that often occur? I mean, lunch dates."

"First time. I jumped at the chance, even if his only motivation might have been to pick my brain about pommeling the Templars in France, which I thought might be the case."

"Is that some recent event? Sports, perhaps?"

"Heavens no! And certainly not recent. I have no idea why he developed the sudden interest." She made a moue. "I guess I'll never know now."

Ellie had a sudden inspiration. "I might be able to help you find out why, if you would like to help us—" She waved at the piles of material. "—find any clues about why the professor was killed?"

Alice's pale face recovered some color. "He was always such a nice man. Alas, I admired him from afar." She leaned towards Ellie across the table, her abundant breasts flattening several piles. "I have to confess I had a crush for him and wanted to tell him I was available, but he still seemed to be grieving for his wife Jean, so I never did. She'd been a lovely person too, but I thought it was time for him to move on. Consequently, I'd love to help you find the person who murdered him, Inspector."

"Sergeant. DS Ellie Jones, remember?"

"Yes, yes. How can I help?"

Ellie waved her hand to indicate all the piles of research notes and material. "We need to go through all of this looking for clues, like I said."

Alice seemed to see the piles for the first time. "Doesn't look like too much."

"Most of it seems very obscure."

"Not for me, Luv. All my research is obscure. It's a bit like Einstein's general theory of relativity."

"I thought your specialty is French literature."

"I was referring to the historical fact that at one time very few people in the world understood Einstein's theory. My research suffers the same fate. It's a bit esoteric. Where do we start?"

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"You heard those handsome EMTs." She popped another teabiscuit into her mouth.

"Probably just a sugar problem. I should have had them measure it. My mind was a bit addled."

But Ellie had seen Alice Grimsby's eyes were red from the tears she'd shed.

"Do you trust her?" DI Lawrence said to Ellie when she returned late to the station and told him about Alice Grimsby.

"By working with her for a while, I got to know her. She has some rough edges, but I trust her. She had a thing for Dalton, the poor soul."

Lawrence frowned. "Enough to be a bit jealous of Rita Henderson?"

"I doubt it. Not enough for murder. She fainted when she heard about the murders. You can't fake that. She was at Dalton's lecture but had to leave early. She also doesn't think Dalton was ready to play the field yet. You know, Guv, some widowers take a while to recover. The older they are, the more difficult it is."

"Um, applies to widows too, maybe even more so. But what you said sounded like psycho-babble to me."

"My two-week course for cops about empathizing with the elderly. I thought once of becoming a family liaison officer."

"Good for me you didn't become a FLO. I'd have had to deal with all that research material with Steve gone. So how'd you leave it with old Grimsby?"

"I gave her Dalton's key; we have Rita's, after all. We're all set, we don't need to lose constables' time in going through that material, and I can help you now."

"You're quite the little organizer, aren't you, lass? Did you learn anything about Templars?"

"I made a copy of the summary sheet Dalton had started. Grimsby looked at it and suggested we have a chat with Charles Babbitt."

"Who's that?"

"President of the Globe Society, a local club with headquarters in Durham."

"Um...quite a jaunt down the road to visit a Durham travel club."

"No, the 'Globe' refers to the Globe Theater in London built in 1599 for Shakespeare's troupe of actors. That's where most of the bard's plays were performed."

"I see. London is even farther away."

"But that local Globe Society is a group of wrinklies who are fans of the bard. They generally meet on the last Thursday of every month except December. Babbitt's another expert on Shakespeare, an amateur and not an academic, and he was friends with Dalton. They both shared a low opinion of those who claim someone else created Shakespeare's works."

"I wonder if he's heard of Henderson's Scottish chieftain theory."

"We can ask him. By the way, some members of the Society fancy such theories, so I wonder if Henderson was a member."

"We'll ask Babbitt that too. And if the prat doesn't cough up a membership list, we'll get a warrant. By the way, was Dalton a member?"

"I have no idea. Grimsby didn't either. He might have been an invited speaker a few times. They usually invite someone to speak at their meetings, according to Alice."

"Ha! Just ask Alice...I think she'll know."

"Excuse me, Guv? Do you know Alice Grimsby?"

"No, lass. I'm a confirmed bachelor, not a rich widower and academic. I'm just recalling one of my favorite songs."

Ellie thought a moment. "That was about drugs, I believe, LSD specifically."

"Maybe, but I like the song, and I liked *Alice through the Looking Glass* when I was a child. That Beatle's song was about LSD as well, and it's still a good song."

"No, I think Sir Paul said it wasn't." She smiled at her DI. "I'll set up an appointment with Babbitt, and I'll see if I can get those two songs on my playlist for you to listen to during the drive to Durham."

"Good woman." He looked at his watch. "And I'm now late for an appointment with our mechanic. He's giving that Rover a very careful lookover for us."

Chapter Four

Harry Reese looked the part of a good neighborhood mechanic who might work from his garage. He was a young bloke with a large mustache, and that made him look older and appear like one of Cinder's footmen after his morphing from a mouse, only his size was wrong. His small body allowed him to crawl into all sorts of places Lawrence couldn't imagine crawling into.

The inspector found him squeezed in between the driver's seat and the rear one, Harry's own rear sticking up. The denims were too low, so the crack in his arse showed.

"That's not a sight I'd like to remember," Lawrence said. "Find anything, lad?"

The man ran the impound lot and serviced the police cars. Lawrence occasionally had him do a SOCO's job by inspecting vehicles a bit more thoroughly. He exited the rover and hitched up his pants.

"SOCOs missed a few things. Some wedged wrappers, mostly, but also this." He dug into the pocket of the denims and handed Lawrence what looked like a tarnished medallion.

"Looks like some stylized image of a building with Latin words around it. *Totus mundus agit histrionem*." Although he figured he'd butchered the pronunciation, Lawrence felt like an old priest upon muttering them. "I hate Latin. Now I have to get that translated. I imagine the greasy print on the back is yours. Can't make out that date."

"No way I'm going to wear that SOCO geek suit crawling around in cars, Guv. That's all I have so far, but I still have to look at the undercarriage."

"Ring me if you find anything else."

"What are you looking for?"

"Tampering. Something that could have turned a nudge into a crash maybe, making the Rover a death trap. I don't know. You're the expert, Harry. And thanks for taking a careful look."

Ellie was tired of Jefferson Airplane and the Beatles by the time they arrived in Durham, especially with "White Rabbit" and "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," which Lawrence had her repeat several times. He also liked "Penny Lane." She killed the playlist and faced him.

"How are we going to work this?" she said.

"Depends on how cooperative the bloke is. At least he's agreed to see us." Lawrence eyed the shabby brick building. "Can't imagine that tip containing a lecture hall."

Ellie laughed. "The audiences are probably small. Dalton's lecture only had a few people, and he's well known on campus. Not like a new Queen concert."

"Say, that Adam's something, isn't he. Sounds like Freddie too. Those are some more songs to add to my playlist."

"Your playlist? It's one of mine. Make your own."

Lawrence thought a moment. "I will if you teach me, lass. You youngsters do a lot more with your mobiles. I was able to google 'totus mundus agit histrionem,' though." He showed her the medallion. "Forgot to tell you Harry found this in the Rover."

"So what's the phrase mean?"

"All the world's a playhouse."

"Um. I thought so. The building is an iconized version of the Globe Theater. We should ask Babbitt about it."

It took them a while to get around to that. Babbitt was a talkative chap and allowed few questions as he gave a spiel about the Globe Society, its purpose, and its activities. And all that had only been interrupted by tea and biscuits where Ellie had to be mother while the Society's president continued to babble on. He finally ran out of steam and allowed them some questions...and that led to the medallion.

"New members of the Society receive that after they're initiated. Silly, I suppose, but they all get into that."

"We found it in Wilbur's Rover," Lawrence said. "Were either he or Rita members?"

"No, Inspector, they were not. And I don't know why one of our members would be in Wilbur's Rover. We're all amateurs, neither academics nor students."

"Maybe you? You're close friends."

"Only acquaintances with a mutual interest. Never rode in it. I occasionally go to Newcastle for lectures at the university, but that's rare. I stay around here for the most part. Some of our members come from as far as Morpeth, though."

"Which leads to my next question? Could we have an up-to-date membership list?"

"Of course. We're not a secret society. I'm afraid I can't give out addresses or phone numbers, though. Society's privacy rules, not mine."

"We can find those easy enough," Lawrence said with a frown.

Chapter Five

Three constables had started going through the membership list. Only two people on the list had been at the lecture, an elderly couple who both loved Shakespeare; they hardly qualified as murder suspects. The attendance sheets for the previous lectures had been destroyed once they'd been compared to the archives to make sure there were no additional names or email addresses to add or change in the university's master list for the lecture series.

Alice Grimsby had then convinced the university to give a copy of that master list to the police, which meant that they'd have to weed out those who'd attended Dalton's previous lectures from those who'd just expressed interest in the lecture series in general.

Neither Jones nor Lawrence had any expectations that going through lists would produce many clues, but it was work that had to be done. She focused on video records from CCTV cameras along the motorway; Lawrence probed more into Henderson's past, starting with her Oxford days. He would have preferred that Steve do that—the DI was always a bit uncomfortable in an academic setting—but Henderson's English literature tutor there had returned his call and invited him to Christ Church, so he went.

It was a much longer trip than the one to Durham—nearly six hours down A1 and M1 through Sheffield, Nottingham, and Leicester—and he didn't have Ellie's playlists. To add more pain to the experience, he had to leave before sunrise and was faced with a return drive in twilight and maybe fog.

The professor's office wasn't far inside the main gate; it was full of pipe smoke but the urbane academic politely ended his pollution production when Lawrence entered. They shook hands and then found comfortable old chairs for the interview.

After a few pleasantries, Marcus Weatherby, who was probably younger than either Dalton or Henderson, certainly not much older, got right to some of the questions the DI had mentioned during the call. "Rita was always struggling to get focused. She had an enormous curiosity. Everything excited her. Some students are like that; others just go through the motions. I prefer the former, of course. I fully expected her to pursue an academic career, but when she married Peter, that expectation vanished. Peter was from Newcastle and returned there to take over his father's business when the old man died. But I'm not surprised she returned to academic pursuits after he passed on. He left her a rich woman, so she could certainly afford to indulge them. Probably a way to cope, don't you think?"

Lawrence wasn't surprised at the little speech that sounded a bit rehearsed. Academics were often known for their verbosity. "You said she had problems focusing, but I understand she was obsessed with proving Shakespeare was a Templar and his Hamlet was a Scottish chieftain whose father and uncle were also Templars. That's being focused, I dare say."

"All new to me. No hint of that obsession when I was tutoring her. Buckshot versus rifle shots, to use a metaphor. Maybe she went off the deep end a bit? There are a lot of nutters out there who say Shakespeare wasn't Shakespeare but someone else because a lowly commoner couldn't possibly know about all the intrigues of court life portrayed in the plays. The play *Hamlet* doesn't have that many court details, of course, but it has intrigue. Who's this Scottish chieftain?"

"Some bloke named Hammill. Seemed like an invented name to me, but I googled common Scottish names and found it. I haven't had the time to delve into it more."

"Interesting." Weatherby thought a moment. "Hammill...Hamlet. But Scotland's not Denmark."

"Literary license? What about the connection with the Templars?"

"That's interesting too. The historical record's a bit fuzzy. Some say the Templars were wiped out in France; others say their survivors came here and were active in the north, particularly in Scotland. Of course, that damn book and movie muddled up everything."

"Which book and movie?"

"Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Historical fiction's only okay if there's some real history wrapped around the fiction. His work is pure fantasy."

"And what about the bard being a Templar?"

"I've heard all kinds of similar stories, but not that one. He was a freemason; he was a Rosicrucian; he was a warlock and all his actors were too; he was a homosexual; he was this, he was that. All poppycock, Inspector."

"In other words, unprovable?"

"As far as I know. All of it."

"And if Rita had proof for her theories?"

"I'd have to see it. She was always a bit more into the history than the literature. And she was extremely intelligent. Maybe there's something to her claims. I'll keep an open mind."

"Wilbur Dalton apparently thought there might be."

"Ah, Wilbur. A good man. A brilliant academic as well. What a loss!"

"You knew him?"

"We presented papers at several different conferences we both attended. Never met him personally. Solid academic reputation, though. Also more into the history behind the literature."

"Any idea why someone might want to kill him?"

"Um, after talking to you, he might have been—what do you call it? Collateral damage, because it seems that Rita approached him to confirm her theories she thought were well-developed. She might have been the real target. You'd be surprised how many nutters get very angry when someone attacks their crazy theories about the bard, or even goes against conventional wisdom about him. I'm a bit like the latter, but not violent about it."

"So we might be looking for a nutter who killed another nutter?" Lawrence said with a smile.

"If we can call Rita's theories crazy, that's one way to put it."

"So I developed a list of the current crazies and their opponents known to Weatherby. We'll have to consider them all."

Ellie nodded. She knew she wasn't as knackered as her DI—it was almost eleven p.m.—and she was alert enough to agree with him: Dalton might just have been in the wrong place at the wrong time when someone struck out at Rita.

"Maybe we can prune our list a bit, comparing it with Weatherby's. I can also contribute to that pruning. We have five candidates for the car that sideswiped Dalton's Rover. All SUVs, and all with the same paint color."

"Any of their owners Shakespeare nutters?" he said with a sigh.

"To be determined."

"Tomorrow, lass. We both need a good lie-in."

"Agreed."

When she was washing up for bed, her mobile's ringtone sounded. It was Steve Kirkland.

"Bob answered when I called this afternoon. Seems you two are becoming literary sleuths."

She gave him some of the details of the case and said he'd picked an awful time to be absent.

"Um. Dodged a bullet, I dare say. By the way, I know Weatherby. Nice bloke. He was very patient with me. I didn't have him as a tutor—literature wasn't my thing—but his lectures were interesting and the Q and A afterwards always entertaining. Best of all, he didn't take himself too seriously like a lot of Oxford dons. I imagine your Dalton was probably like that too."

"More reasons for us to find his murderer."

The next morning, Ellie gathered up notes and visited Lawrence in his office.

"Three of the SUV owners weren't from the area and were headed west to the Lake District," she informed him. "You can't guess who the other two are."

"Suspects by the tone of your voice, lass," he said, looking up from his laptop where she saw he'd been researching Templar history.

She approved of that, of course. Background for a case was important, and, if only to satisfy his curiosity, it would justify time spent if he were called to account for his time.

"Don't keep me in suspense, Ellie. I need some good news."

"I don't know if it's good, but two of the SUVs belong to Alice Grimsby and Phillip Eastman."

"Um, I know the first name. Who's Eastman?"

"He's a member of the Globe Society, that place in Durham we visited. He's also the concerned librarian who let me enter Rita's carrel and helped me when Alice swooned."

"I'd suspect Grimsby more than Eastman then. You said she had a crush on the professor. Nothing more dangerous than a woman scorned, they say."

"Is that why you've never married, Guv?"

"Might be a contributing factor. But, in my private life, I've never had a serious enough relationship that might have led to feelings of scorn. Candidates tend to lose interest when they learn I'm a cop." He seemed lost in nostalgia for a moment. "Jealousy is a possible motive, I suppose."

"And Alice is certainly familiar with the Templars and their part in French history." She didn't want to be convinced of the old woman's guilt, though, not yet.

"I was just looking into that. Those monk-soldiers weren't too popular with royalty back in the day, including the pope and his minions. All about greed and power, I dare say. Think old Alice got caught up in the bloodlust of those times?"

"I'd bring them both in to interrogate them. At the very least, we want to eliminate them as suspects."

"Set that up. I want to finish what I started here."

Chapter Six

Ellie convinced the two to come in willingly, the excuse being to consult with them about historical and literary concerns that had come up for the case, Templars' history in particular. They interrogated Grimsby first.

She blanched when she heard that Dalton had been killed on the same route she'd been on that fateful night.

"I saw the blues and twos and thought it was just another accident. Damn fool drivers don't slow down when the road gets slick with rain, especially after it just begins when it mixes with oil. I was on the way home, of course. I had no idea that Henderson woman lived nearby."

"Why didn't you stop to inquire about the accident?" Lawrence said, now wondering if Ellie's timeline fit Grimsby's trajectory.

"Why would I? I just thought some damn fool got what he deserved. Until Covid, the number of deaths from traffic accidents was always greater than from any other cause. And while I wondered if another stupid fool had died for a good cause, namely eliminating his stupidity from the gene pool, I had no idea anyone had died."

"Did you resent Rita Anderson getting attention from Wilbur Dalton, Alice?" Ellie said.

She frowned. "Um, I see where you're going. What am I supposed to have done, run her and Wilbur off the road and then backtracked so you could catch me on CCTV?"

"We caught you on camera a bit farther along," Lawrence said with a smile.

"Backtracking would have been difficult on the divided motorway."

Alice harrumphed and glared at the inspector. "Grasping at straws now, are you two? But to answer your question, I wasn't jealous of Rita Henderson. I didn't know her at all. I learned about her tête-a-têtes with Wilbur from the librarian. I think he might have wanted to put Wilbur in a bad light by telling me about the Templar issue. I'll admit that made me a bit jealous academically—I know a lot more about Templars than Wilbur does—but he hobnobbed with a lot of students and researchers, and some were females, I suppose. He wasn't a predator. He was a good man, a noble knight himself, to put a fine point on it. And still grieving about Jean in his own quiet and noble way. He looked terribly melancholy at times."

Lawrence wondered if Alice was smartly taking them off on a new direction. "Did you see him often?"

"Often enough to observe what I just said. At department and faculty meetings mostly, although they're so boring sometimes, they're enough to make anyone morose. I think I told your sergeant that."

"You mentioned academic events," Ellie said. "Same difference. You also said they were the extent of your social interactions and you admired Wilbur from afar."

Grimsby nodded, but both coppers saw the tears.

"You also mentioned you heard about Rita and Wilbur's meeting from a librarian," Ellie said. "Mind telling me which librarian that was? There are several working on that floor of the library."

"Phil Eastman, the one who came to my aid when I fainted. There's another very nice man."

Ellie glance at Lawrence and knew he was thinking the same thing she was.

"That will be all, Professor Grimsby," Lawrence said.

"I thought this was some query about the Templars?"

"We've bothered you enough, Alice," Ellie said. "Have a good day."
She harrumphed again and departed.

"I'll need to smooth things over later," Ellie said to her DI after the woman left.

"Worry about that later. We need to put the screws to Mr. Eastman."

The librarian first asked about Alice Grimsby. "I saw her come in ahead of me."

"She's fine, Mr. Eastman," Lawrence said. "We just had a few questions for her...and for you as well. Questions about the Templars. Are you interested in them, Mr. Eastman?"

"I'm interested in many historical things. England has a rich history. Let's say it's a bit more than a hobby sometimes."

"An obsession?"

Eastman shrugged. "I cover a wide area as a reference librarian, so it's difficult to call it that. I have to know where to point readers in their search for historical items. Our collection is quite extensive. Some of our books are even quite ancient and squirreled away in humidity and temperature controlled environments, so I have to screen those readers who wish to peruse them."

"Lots of Templars material, I suppose."

"Not as much as Professor Grimsby would like. She's made many visits to the continent, France in particular, for her research."

"Was that why you told her that Rita Henderson was interested in Templars?"

Eastman shrugged again. "I thought the professor might help Henderson because of her knowledge of the French collections. I'm there to help researchers."

"Had you learned about Rita's interest by finding material for her?"

"We all did. She consulted us all the time."

At that moment, a DC knocked, entered, and handed Lawrence a note. He looked at it, nodded, and smiled.

"Did she tell you she wanted to prove Shakespeare was a Templar?"

"Not in so many words, but I supposed that's why Professor Dalton was interested."

"Tell me, Mr. Eastman, was Shakespeare really Shakespeare?"

Another shrug. "I have my own opinions about that. It's another topic that interests me." Now Eastman seemed a bit more nervous.

"I'd like to hear your opinions."

"Um, I opine he was really Christopher Marlowe. There's a lot of evidence to support that."

"Are you passionate about that opinion?"

"What's this about, Inspector? I thought I was called in for you to consult me about something involving Templar knights."

"Yes, specifically about Rita Henderson's research about Templars. Did you know she was trying to prove the bard was a Templar?"

"No."

Lawrence knew Eastman was lying. He could see it in his eyes.

"I think you did, Mr. Eastman. Did you resent that?"

"Why would I?"

Lawrence took a different tack. "Did you ever ride in Wilbur Dalton's Land Rover?"

"I didn't know he had a Rover." He put his hands on the table and to get more into Lawrence's face. "I think I'm being accused of something. Do I need my barrister?"

"Just a friendly, academic conversation, Mr. Eastman." Lawrence slid the medallion over to the librarian. "Do you recognize this?"

Eastman looked at both sides. "I believe it's the medallion one receives after initiation into the Globe Society in Durham."

"There's a date on it. What does that mean?"

Eastman hesitated, but he finally answered. "I have no idea."

"That's odd. It was the day your were initiated into that society as confirmed by the president, who also confirmed your belief in the theories about Marlowe. Now let's try again: When did you ride in Professor Dalton's Rover?"

Eastman slumped in his chair. "Four nights ago. He invited me to a pint to ask me about the Templars."

"Now see, that wasn't so hard. Did you later run him off the road?"

"Of course not!"

"Methinks the man doth protest too much, DS Jones." Lawrence turned back to the librarian. "It's easy enough for me to find the answer to my own question. I understand your SUV is in the shop to repair a dent and repaint. We halted that process, of course, in order to compare the old paint with what's on Dalton's Rover."

Eastman slumped even more. "I didn't mean to kill him! Or that bitch Rita Henderson, for that matter. I only wanted to discourage them from pursuing that crazy theory."

"Would you now like to call your barrister, Mr. Eastman?"

"I guess not. I don't have one. I can't afford to have one on retainer."

"We can provide a duty solicitor." Lawrence shoved a legal pad and biro towards Eastman. "Or you could just write it all down, son."

Epilogue

Ellie knocked on Alice Grimsby's office door. The old woman opened it and glared at Ellie.

"What do you want?"

"I'd like to apologize for raking you over the coals. It's our job."

"Bollocks! Don't you think I know that, damn it. I'm glad you arrested someone. I'd never imagine in a thousand years it'd be Phillip Eastman. He's such a nice man."

"Who didn't like the idea that Shakespeare was a Templar."

"He'd still be William Shakespeare if true. Come in a moment. I have something to tell you." She indicated a chair and sat in one opposite it. "This discussion might be better over a nice brandy, but I reserve that for home use. And you don't want the tea our secretary makes, Ellie."

"And what were you going to tell me?"

"You volunteered me to go over Rita Henderson's notes. I've been doing so."

"That was for clues. You don't have to do that any longer."

"Ah, you plods will never understand academics. Get them curious about something and they're like a mongrel worrying a bone until its secrets are given up." She smiled at Ellie. "I think Rita was onto something. The Templars led to Free Masonry and all those other secret societies. Shakespeare was not only a freemason, he was the father and founder of the fraternity of freemasons and author of the rituals. If old William wasn't a Templar, he probably admired them. He could very well have based *Hamlet* on an obscure Scottish prince. *Macbeth* actually takes place in eleventh century Scotland, you know. Names became anglicized for the toffs in his audience." The professor laughed at Ellie's expression. "In any case, I might get a publication out of the material Rita left us. I'll acknowledge Rita, Wilbur, and you, of course. There's a lot of material, thanks to all of you."

"So there really was a Scottish chieftain named Hammill?"

"That's a bit more problematic. For those old times, it's a bit difficult to separate mythical legends and historical truth. I have a lot more work to do. Query me in a few years."

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What's in a Game
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Chapter One

DI Matthew Lawrence stood with DS Ellie Jones, looking into the loft. He called it that because he could imagine that some artist might have leased the space, although it did have some old furniture: A large table was surrounded by seven chairs. Three bodies slumped in three of the chairs. The other four looked like they were pushed back in a hurry.

"Messy," Lawrence said. Pathologist Littleton and SOCO Heath were trying to keep out of each other's way as they circled the table. "Card game for seven. Think the other four killed the three victims and scarpered?"

"Kind of violent for a friendly card game," Ellie said. "All the wagers are still at the center of the table. Four hands are face down as if those four had to run to the loo. We should talk to the building's owner."

"Steve's talking to him. I want to first take a look around as soon as Doc and the SOCOs let us."

Steve was DS Kirkland, Ellie's counterpart on Lawrence's team. She was the new member, but she already had two murder investigations under her belt with the Morpeth Police Department. She was hoping this one wouldn't be so strange, although three bodies versus one didn't bode well.

"I'll sort the constables and organize a neighborhood canvass."

Lawrence nodded, although he seemed preoccupied with other thoughts. She guessed a canvass would be a waste of time in the old neighborhood. She'd seen worse as a DC in London, but the residents in this one wouldn't have much use for coppers either.

Lawrence stopped the pathologist on his way out. He knew that Andrew Littleton barely tolerated him and would take his time, no matter how much the DI would try to speed things up.

"Execution style, right?"

"You guess correctly, Inspector." Doc flashed a wry smile. "And I'm guessing the card game was rudely interrupted by it, considering the money and chips still on the table. But that's all you have for now. And you'll be waiting a bit longer for anything more from me. I usually don't get three bodies at once."

"Give me a toxicology report when you get around to it, but what we have is all we need to get started. I think these jobs were gangsters. Hardly makes sense to call them victims."

"Like 'live by the sword, die by the sword'?"

"Something like that. I know who can identify them and confirm my theory."

"Paul won't like that you invade his patch."

"That's too bad. The stench is still in the air. They smoked weed here, and there are traces of white dust. That alone suggests the drugs business might be involved."

"No ash trays, Matt, or other paraphernalia."

"Maybe from earlier then. Artificial courage for a killer."

"Could be. Have a ball, Inspector."

After Doc left for the mortuary with the three bodies and the SOCOs finished, Lawrence didn't look around very much; there wasn't much to see. He'd watched Doc's aides carry out the body bags to the meat wagon and shook his head. *My peaceful Morpeth isn't immune to violence.* He went downstairs to talk to the landlord.

Mr. Patel, the building's owner, didn't look all that troubled. Lawrence thought he might be Hindu, not Sikh, because there was no headdress. Both were ubiquitous throughout the UK because of the historical connections with India, but to Lawrence they all chattered on in a special sing-song dialect that would suggest to most people they were nervous individuals. Patel wasn't; he seemed resigned instead.

He approached the two; Steve had been having a chinwag with Patel, but Lawrence wanted to get his own read on the bloke.

"Mr. Patel doesn't know too much about his renter, Guv," Steve said.

"Kept himself to himself," Patel said before Steve could continue, "as I was explaining to your sergeant. Didn't see him except when rent was due. He's lived here for only two months."

"Did you collect any information about him, more than what's on the lease? Employment and employers, references, previous leases, that sort of thing?"

The owner waved his hand to indicate the neighborhood. "This is my worst property because the neighborhood is a tip. Isn't that obvious? I've had many renters skip out on me."

"Do you report that?" Steve said.

Patel shrugged. "Nothing comes of it." He smiled at Lawrence. "Maybe you plods will pay more attention to three murders?"

"We'll do our best," Lawrence said with a wink at Steve. "I don't suppose you were around last night?"

"Like I told your sergeant, I was at my daughter's birthday party."

"Wish her my best. Could you provide us a copy of the lease? We need the full name. At the very least, we can charge your renter with hosting an illegal card game."

"That's illegal?" Patel said with a smile.

"We usually don't crack down on that, but it's using a private residence as a casino without a proper license."

"Because there was cash on the table?"

"That's the evidence, sir."

Patel shook his head. "I don't think Joel Peterson knew about that casino law. He certainly didn't care when neighbors complained about the comings and goings for the games. Some might have called you plods."

Lawrence only shrugged. The station always had to triage cases.

Chapter Two

"Joel Peterson doesn't have form," Ellie said as she and Steve found chairs in front of Lawrence in his office. "In fact, he didn't exist at all six months ago."

"We think the name's an alias," Steve said.

"Most likely, considering. We need a photo. Anyone got one?" Lawrence looked from Steve to Ellie.

"He paid two months rent with a check," Steve said, "so we have a bank account." He crossed his fingers. "Bank's CCTV?"

"Worth a try."

"I'll get on it." Steve scraped the remaining biscuits off the plate and dropped them into his coat pocket. "Quick lunch, maybe." He dashed out.

Lawrence shook his head. "Lad's too intense. What else do you have for me?"

"Pathologist report: One kill shot for each victim. No drugs in their systems. We've also identified them: Troy Higgins, Richard Jackson aka Dicky, and Arthur Richardson aka Artie, three mobsters Williamson identified. They're gang leaders known to him for their drugs trafficking, according to him. He thinks there might be a gang war going on, a turf battle."

"Paul's probably wrong," Lawrence said, glad he'd avoided the confrontation with the pugnacious narcotics officer.

"Guv?"

"Think about it, Ellie. Those clowns were playing poker together, all as if they were friendly business associates. They've divided up the area and staked out their own patches long ago if Williamson knows about them. If there's a turf war, it's because there's a new yob around who took the opportunity to eliminate all three so he can move in. That's my theory. Let's ask Paul if there are any new drugs being sold."

Paul Williamson and Matthew Lawrence had some history. Lawrence thought Williamson played a bit loose with the rules too often—scrotes beat up, evidence lost or created, and so forth, but nothing so egregious to make Lawrence go to the super. And he just didn't like the little weasel.

"Matt, Ellie. Have a seat. I've studied your case after Ellie posted it, Matt."

Lawrence glanced at Ellie. Maybe she was too quick with getting reports into HOLMES?

"Turns out your case solved some of my problems. I've been trying to nick Higgins, Jackson, and Richardson for something for years."

"Probably careful to have others do their dirty deeds," Lawrence said, "and don't crow too much. Someone will just take their places. And could it be just one person now?"

Williamson thought a moment. "I see how you're leaning. Could be, I suppose: One yob taking over all three territories."

"Wanted to ask you if any new stuff is on the streets not attributable to those three's gangs. That would support my theory."

"Not yet, but it might appear soon if you're right. I'll come at this case from my side then, but you'll solve both yours and my problems when you figure out who killed that trio. I'm

guessing the killer is one of the four who scarpered. They were probably just bodyguards, though."

"Joel Peterson wasn't. He rented that space and turned it into a casino. Private games."

"Find him then, especially if the other three were just bodyguards."

"Name's an alias. We're trying to find out who he really is."

"I don't recognize the name, alias or not. Maybe he's the killer and just let the other fellers run."

"Not a bad embellishment on my theory," Lawrence said, "but why leave witnesses?"

"To take back the word to the gangs; to tell them a new drugs lord is in town and taking over. That suggests I should query the Newcastle lads a bit. In any case, what the hell do you want, Matt? Me to solve your damn case for you?"

Lawrence ignored the taunt. "Soon as we have a picture of Peterson, I'd like you to take a look at it. You might know who he is."

"Will do."

"And keep me posted on drugs sales. There's a vacuum now. Some scrote will fill it."

"And keep me posted on what you find too."

"You don't like DI Williamson very much, do you, Guv?" Ellie said as they climbed the stairs to return to the CID.

He laughed. "That obvious, lass? Doesn't like me either, so we're like oil and water. I'm the pure water because I think he might be a dirty cop. Just between you and me, lass. There are a lot of drugs about and they're killing people, so there's a lot of drugs money around. I can't prove anything, of course. But those three arses should have been in the gaol long ago. I don't like his attitude nor that of his other officers. The NCA should clean it all up. We should chip away at it too. Damn NCA can't do everything."

"While we're waiting for Steve, what should I be doing?"

"First, check on the canvass. I doubt the constables will have anything for us, even if they could get the neighbors talking. Second, hustle up all the information you can on the victims and the other three. If Williamson's right, the three besides Peterson are bodyguards. We need to find them as well."

"And you?"

Lawrence eyed her, as if he were wondering why he had to account for his time to her. He made a face. "I'm to call someone I know in the NCA. Have any dealings with them, lass?"

"The Yard viewed both MI5 and NCA as competition for the most part. As a lowly DC, I didn't worry about politics, Guv."

"Don't need to or should worry about it here in Morpeth either. Part of my job is to shield my people from the bureaucratic music my superiors dance to. That includes asking the NCA some indiscreet questions. They're newer than MI5 but just as reluctant to share, believe me."

"I see. Good luck then, Guv. Think Williamson's people keep HOLMES up to date?"

"Probably as much as we do. And that damn Williamson will make us ferret out the information. That's another problem I have with the bloke."

Chapter Three

The trio of victims all had multiple bodyguards, and all of them had some had pictures in HOLMES as well as names. She printed out the information available, along with more about the victims, to have for future canvasses. Then she started texting the constables who were doing the current canvassing with all the information attached. There was already information to be had from them.

One elderly lady—a neighborhood resident for years and the local gossip monger—had watched Joel Peterson with a suspicious eye. "Lots of strange men going in and out of that place," she'd told the constable. "Saw a young woman leave in a snit once too. Maybe a barney there, a right row, I think."

A lad who delivered takeaway from an Indian restaurant nearby said he'd seen Peterson with the same woman. He remembered the incident because Peterson had refused to tip him.

That was all they had for now. Ellie wondered who the woman was. She rang back DC Bob McFadden who'd interviewed the wrinklie.

"Try to convince her to work with our police artist. We need to talk to that woman."

She had an itch to be out on the street too, like Steve and the constables. She was just starting to peruse media records when McFadden walked in with Eleanor Cartwright. Ellie stood up to greet the old lady.

"Nice dreadlocks, sergeant. I don't have enough hair left to even think about a do like that. You the police artist?"

"No, I work with DC McFadden. He'll show you upstairs where the artist is found. Have a seat, though. I'd like to ask a few questions, if I may."

"Only if you're offering tea. I csme in for the tea and cakes, you know. Bob here promised them."

McFadden smiled at Ellie, who couldn't figure out if he'd charmed her or she'd charmed him.

"I'll see to the tea," he said.

"I'm guessing you've been here before?" Ellie began.

"Lots. Doing my civic duty to eliminate crime in my neighborhood. Doesn't seem to get any better. 'Course it's gone downhill. Lots of unsavory types hanging around now. I've lived there for donkey's years. 'Twas a nice place...once."

"Sorry to hear it's become rundown. I'm guessing you watch out for the unsavory types."

"Not hard to guess that, even for a Jamaican. Lovely little accent. Lost my Mancunian one years ago. I liked Harry."

"Harry?"

"Belafonte. The sexiest man alive, in his prime."

Ellie refocused. "Did you consider Mr. Peterson unsavory?"

"More just suspicious. Some of his visitors looked like thugs, though. And that woman would glare at me like I was dirt."

"Tell me about her. Not a description, which I hope you'll give to our artist. I'm interested in their activities."

"Beyond shagging that witch, you mean?" Ellie nodded. "Seemed to have a lot of people show up all the time. Some just stopped by and left motorcars running and music booming."

Others came and stayed awhile. Either he was more popular than Adele, or he was selling drugs. That's my take on it."

"Or playing cards?"

"I suppose. I assume some of the ones who stayed over might have been playing. That little swami told me that."

"Mr. Patel?"

"I rent from him too. Nice guy for the most part, but he always smells like lamb vindaloo. Spicy odor. I like tikka masala better."

Ellie didn't get much more from Eleanor. After tea and biscuits, Bob took her up to chat with the artist. Ellie returned to her media searches but was interrupted by Steve's return.

"I gave the video copies to the techies," Steve said. "They'll get some stills for us."

When the techs were done, she and Steve decided to send the stills to everyone's mobiles, although she printed enough to pin to their crime board. Bob would also show a copy to the old woman along with the artist's rendition of Peterson's ex-girlfriend.

That rendition turned out to be enough for the facial recognition software. She had form for resisting arrest in Newcastle during a protest against masking requirements during the pandemic unrest. Ellie and Steve decided to drive to Newcastle to Dorothy Swan's last known address. The woman lived in a flat above a liquor store; it turned out that she actually owned the store.

"She went to pick up a case of wine," her clerk, an acne-scarred youth, said. "She won't be gone long. You can wait in her office."

Ellie eyed the rows of bottles as they followed the clerk. "Nice assortment," she said.

"Dotty tries to satisfy all types of clients. She's a bit too high-end for me, though."

Steve smiled at Ellie. She knew what he was thinking: *Is this lad old enough to drink?* Eighteen was the legal age, although adults could buy liquor for those younger in restaurants or pubs. The lad might be sixteen. She wasn't sure leaving him in charge of a liquor store was exactly legal either, but young adults needed jobs just like everyone else.

"Hello," Dotty said when she entered the office. "Jason warned me you'd be here. He's all I can afford, by the way. He's a nephew who needed a job."

"I wouldn't call it a warning," Steve said, shaking her proffered hand after Ellie. Both put their warrant cards away to get down to business. "We just want to talk."

"You would if you hated plods as much as I do. Not you two, specifically, of course. Hopefully you're a bit better than Newcastle Police." She took a seat behind her desk and motioned for them to sit again. "Now, what am I supposed to have done?"

"Do you know Joel Peterson?"

"Knew. Past tense! I broke up with the lout. He liked the rough shag, he did. A little too rough. And he had the roving eye, if you know what I mean, as well as running around with some low-lives, some looking like they might kill their own mothers. It's enough to make a girl swear off men. No offense, DS Kirkland."

"None taken," Steve said.

"So...did you know who any of these low-lives were?" Ellie said.

"Not a clue, Luv. If they were with him, he'd get rid of them quickly enough. I guess if I saw them again, I'd recognize them. In particular, the ones with faces that'd make good Hallowed Eve masks."

Ellie pulled photos of Peterson, the three victims, and ones of about a dozen bodyguards out of her large purse. Dotty pointed at the first.

"That's Joel, of course." She then pointed at another, one of the victims. "Saw that one once. He was with these two." She's pointed to two of the known bodyguards. "I don't recognize anyone else. Sorry."

"Hear any names?" Steve said.

"The first feller, the ugly bastard, was called Artie. Joel was more respectful towards him than the other two. Does that help?"

"Maybe," Ellie said. "When did you see those three?"

Dotty thought a moment. "I guess Joel had a meeting with them. He called them business associates. That was obviously before I broke up with Joel, maybe two or three weeks ago? The whole experience annoyed me because Joel had asked me to meet him at his place at that time."

"Did you know he entertained some of these blokes? Set up poker nights and played with them from time to time, to be precise."

She grimaced. "No. I would have kicked his arse out earlier if I'd known that. My old man was a drunk and had a gambling addiction. Horses mostly. He'd lose a week's wages and then come home and beat the crap out of my mum. I can't stand that type of behavior."

"Do you have any idea where Joel is now?" Steve said.

"Probably shagging some other gullible woman if he's not at home! He's a good-looking bloke as you can see in your photo, so women are attracted to him. Biggest mistake in my life, I dare say."

"Did you know that Joel Peterson is an alias?" Ellie said.

Dotty blanched. "I really am a damn fool! What's his real name?"

"I wish we knew. We'll ask him when we catch him. Anywhere you can think he might be hiding?"

"He was always a bit circumspect, and now I know why. I don't want to know why you want him, though. And he'd better not be hiding in my summer cottage either. We want there once. I inherited it from my father. Only good thing he did after driving my mum to her early grave. Surprised the hell out of me. I think he purchased it for his mistresses. I'm thinking about selling it because it's mostly a tax drain."

"Could we have the address?"

Dotty wrote something on a notepad, ripped off the sheet, and handed it to Ellie. She studied it.

"It's near Penrith. Quite a little journey."

Ellie nodded. She'd put it in her report, thinking it might be worth visiting sometime as the case progressed...or stalled.

Back in the unmarked squad car, Ellie said to Steve, "What did you think about that?"

"Brutally honest, I dare say. She mightn't like coppers, but she despises Joel Peterson. Probably more so now. Can't say I blame her."

"That's my take as well. At least we learned we'll be looking for Harry Stone and Ozzie Holly."

"Think they were two of the three bodyguards present?"

"No. I don't know which one Artie had there, but the other two were probably bodyguards of the other victims. But we can look for Harry and Ozzie to start. Let's go back to the station and try to locate one of them, now that we have some names."

"We might find them here in Newcastle," Steve said. "I have a friend in CID here, DS Barry Waters. We can borrow his computer. Same databases, including HOLMES."

"Lawrence mightn't like us to do that," Ellie said. She was new enough to want to avoid her DI's disapproval.

"Um. He'd probably do the same and approve of our initiative."

"Okay. Give me directions." She knew there were three Newcastle police stations, and she didn't know the way to any of them. Meeting with Steve's friend would at least show her where one was for future reference.

Chapter Four

Barry was a big black bloke as large as Steve. His parents came from Nigeria, and the two giants talked sports for five minutes.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but we're on a mission," she reminded them.

"Um, yes, so we are," Steve said, a bit embarrassed. "Barry and I usually have a chinwag like this over a few pints."

Barry eyed Ellie. "Too much London in the lass, Steve." He now smiled at her. "In the Yard, I used to be as serious as you are, Ellie. We're a bit more laid back here in Northumbria. But okay, what's the gig?"

She explained their mission.

"Um, yes, we can use my computer to see if at least one of those two yobs has a local address. Drugs are sold all over the northeast now, but the VIPs like to congregate here in Newcastle."

"These bodyguards aren't exactly VIPs," Ellie said.

"They're right up there in rank, Luv, because they have other tasks to perform. The chief says to kill someone, for example, and the bodyguard, really the big man's aide, arranges it. They're not the grunts in the drugs armies; they're the colonels obeying the generals' orders."

"You're just full of metaphors, aren't you?"

"I do my best."

After another fifteen minutes, they had an address for Harry Stone, a house on the way back to Morpeth. They stopped there.

"How do you want to play this?" Ellie said to Steve, still annoyed by all the sports talk.

"Ring the doorbell and show our warrant cards?"

"And maybe get shot? You wouldn't last long in London."

"Okay, big city copper. How do *you* want to play it?"

"'Twas I asking you. Barry sent us here, after wasting our time discussing football and rugby."

He laughed, but she was now peering through a dirty window.

"I don't think we have to worry about how to proceed," she said. "There are three bodies on the floor."

He looked in over her shoulder. "Three plus three makes six!"

"My, my, the sports fan just graduated from nursery school." She went to another window nearer the door, broke a pane, and reached in to open the door. She turned and smiled at Steve. "In London, we call that probable cause. Now we can debate whom to call, Morpeth or Newcastle?"

"It's Morpeth's case, our case." He hesitated at the open door. "Think they're the three bodyguards?"

"You were the one who said three plus three. Call DI Lawrence. Whether this is good or bad for our case, he'll want to know."

"I'm not sure this is progress," Lawrence said.

The three were standing outside the open door watching Doc and SOCOs doing their dance again.

"At least we know Joel Peterson, or whoever he is," Ellie said, "is our prime suspect now. This looks like a hit to eliminate witnesses."

"Maybe," Steve said. "But why didn't these three just shoot Peterson when he shot their bosses?"

"Good question, lad," Lawrence said, "and I'll offer up two possible answers: One, these three were in on it and killed after the fact; or two, none of the four were, and someone was hiding somewhere and popped the three mob bosses, and Peterson and these three did a runner before the killer could shoot them. I'm guessing all four not left in that loft knew how to take care of themselves, including Peterson, unless he's also dead somewhere else. Ah, here's Max."

The SOCOs' leader told them the three had been hiding out in the abandoned house. The dirty dishes and cups were in multiples of three and the takeaway bags in the bins had receipts for dinners in multiples of three as well.

"I'll confirm the number," Max said, "by determining that only their DNA and prints are here."

"Which could mean the killer, here with them or not, was careful about leaving traces," Ellie said. "Are we guessing that killer is Peterson?"

"That's you blokes' problem," the SOCO said. He winked at her. "Nice job on that window, Ellie."

"What did he mean by that?" Lawrence said as Max headed for the SOCOs' van.

"I have no idea," Steve said.

Chapter Five

Ellie stayed at the house to organize another canvass, this time of the house's neighborhood, Steve went to talk to Peterson's ex-girlfriend again, and Lawrence returned to the office to mull over all that they had learned. DCI Hubbard visited him.

"Six bodies now," the DCI said. "Looks like this mysterious Peterson is your man, Matt."

"No, Richard, the scrote pulling his puppet strings is our man. There's something I'm missing."

"I'd check with Paul again."

Lawrence frowned. "He's supposed to call me if new junk hits the mean streets."

Hubbard wagged a finger. "Don't trust Paul. He tends to wait for concrete evidence. A few addicts yammering about better stuff won't make him call you. Go see him."

"Okay. Worth a try, I guess. If we can't get Peterson, maybe we can get the puppet master."

"Who might grass on Peterson to broker a deal."

"I don't like deals."

"They can be useful."

"Not to the victims' relatives."

After Hubbard left, Lawrence went downstairs. Williamson wasn't in, but a sergeant was.

"Some new stuff out there," DS Carlson said. "Some dead addicts too. Stuff's a bit purer, so some OD. That usually means a new drugs czar is around. They sell purer stuff to lure old customers and attract new ones, and then they cut the junk more to make more profits. Real entrepreneurs, Guv."

"Any idea who the new czar is?"

"We're working on it. Looks like your theory was correct. Paul told me about it."

"No joy in that. Doesn't help my case. Thanks, Ralph."

Lawrence returned to his office and started to go through the reports for the case. He was trying to remember something, the niggling sensation that he had missed a clue. He was about to head for his favorite pub for a pint when he snapped his fingers. He went back to Ellie and Steve's report about the interview with Peterson's ex-girlfriend.

Peterson had made one trip to Dotty's summer cottage near Penrith. What had made Ellie note something so insignificant? *Good woman!* Right there was her note: *Visit cottage later*. No one had.

He called Ellie first and then Steve, telling them to meet him at the pub.

"We're here for a brain session?" Steve said. He'd arrived first.

"I'll get your salad. We'll wait for Ellie, but I'll order something for her too. You'll be driving, lad."

"Where are we going?"

"Later," Lawrence said, already moving to place an order for two bacon rolls and Steve's rabbit food. He also ordered half-lagers for Ellie and himself and a lemonade for Steve.

After she arrived, she toyed with her bacon roll and chips and watched the two men, Lawrence eating more than he should. Her appetite wasn't yet back to normal after the scene with the three bodyguards, and it was a bit early for her.

In a half hour, they were heading west. Steve had tried to shoot down Lawrence's hunch; Ellie'd liked it. The DI thought Peterson might be at Dotty's summer cottage.

The cottage sat all alone at the end of a lane. While they knew some waterway was nearby from the breeze blowing from east to west, there wasn't much charm to the surroundings. The cottages they'd passed looked as rundown as Dotty's, although hers might be in better shape inside. All of them were on just one side of the lane because a berm, perhaps put there to protect the cottages from flooding, stood tall on the eastern side.

"A bit spooky around here," Lawrence said, "especially in the twilight with the fog lifting."

Steve made a U-turn and parked across from another cottage that was dark. They walked back along the lane. Lawrence led the way to the top of the berm to look down on Dotty's cottage. The fog blanketed the roof, but they could see lights inside.

"Two, no, three inside," Lawrence said before handing the binoculars to Steve. Both sergeants confirmed the count.

"One's Peterson," Ellie said. "I have no idea who the other two are."

"My guess is that they're the new drugs czar and his bodyguard. I'd worry more about the latter and Peterson. That old scrote looks a bit feeble."

"I couldn't tell if any of them have guns," Steve said. "Should we call for a SCO19?"

"We'd have to appeal to the locals. No telling if they'd pay attention to us without one of our VIPs contacting one of theirs. And, considering the probable wait, I don't want to chance those three doing a runner."

"I can let the air out of some tires," Ellie said. "Anyone have a penknife?"

Steve dug into a pants pocket and produced one. "I should do that."

"Not a debate, lad. Ellie's a lot smaller. If she crouches low enough, they'll never spot her."

"And then?" said Steve.

Lawrence thought a moment. "Here's what we'll do...."

Deflating the tires was the easy part; Ellie only punctured the rear tires of the Rover and Mercedes. The next step in Lawrence's plan made her more nervous. She was about to approach the cottage's front door when the three inside came out. She had to hide behind the taller Rover that was farthest from the door.

"When you return," the gray-haired man said to Peterson, "we'll move you down to Durham. I need some more muscle down there, Bruce, and nobody there knows who you are, especially the plods."

"Sounds like a plan," said the man Ellie knew as Joel, not Bruce. "Should I work my way back to Newcastle?"

"No, wait a few more days. Lie low here. Jimmy will make sure everything in the Newcastle area is under control by then."

"No complaints from those three's chums, Jimmy?" Joel-Bruce said.

Jimmy laughed. "A few took a swim in the Tyne. The others got the message."

Ellie heard their unmarked car before the three did. Lawrence drove past them to the end of the lane and swung another U to end up alongside the trio. He leaned out the window.

"Evening, lads. I'm a bit lost here. I want to go to Penrith. Can you help me?"

The man called Jimmy approached the sedan. "Best go—"

The sedan's door opened and slammed into him, knocking him to the ground. That served as the signal for the two sergeants to jump into action.

Ellie ran and dove for the old man, stabbing him in the thigh. Steve, who'd positioned himself behind the cottage as part of the original plan, tackled Joel-Bruce from behind. None of the trio had a chance to go for their guns. While the old man screamed about police brutality and needing a doctor, Ellie removed the other two's guns. She'd already checked the old man didn't have one; she'd left the penknife stuck in his thigh.

"Improvisation just like a good jazz trio," Lawrence said after all three were in cuffs. "Read'em their rights, Ellie, while I ring Penrith for some backup."

"I don't think we need it," she said with a smile.

"We can't take that fancy Mercedes, and I'm not crossing the width of England from coast to coast with these three scrotes, so we'll let Penrith board them for a night or two. We can later extradite them to Morpeth. Paul and his troops can then arrest the combined forces of four drugs gangs."

Epilogue

Back at the Morpeth station the next day, Lawrence had another visit from DCI Hubbard.

"I saw your report...finally. Thank you for being candid. You realize we don't have much on those three musketeers, right? Just what Ellie overheard."

Lawrence shrugged. "I'm counting on a lot of grass from the three gangs' members, if not those of old man Grafton. His Jimmy grassed on Bruce Hedley aka Joel Peterson, and Joel grassed on Jimmy and the old man. I don't know if that'll be enough for the Crown Court, so we'll do a bit more interrogating."

"You took a big risk and almost blew it."

"Our original plan was a good one if the three had stayed in the cottage. Ellie looks a lot more like a lost waif than I do. I had to improvise, and my sergeants picked up on the new riff."

Hubbard nodded with a smile. "All's well that ends well."

Note from Steve

You have just finished Volume Three of the *Sleuthing, British-Style* series. Volume Two is also available as a free PDF download, and Volume One is available as an ebook at most online retailers where quality ebooks are sold. I hoped you've enjoyed these novellas and short stories.

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Note: I try to keep this list up to date—I'm an avid reader—but readers should watch for more novels in each series. Many of these authors are prolific! I don't want to miss their new novels, and you might not want to either. Also, many of the novels listed here contain glossaries of UK words and expressions that complement the glossary at the beginning of this volume.

Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgements

This is my third collection of short fiction dedicated to British-style mysteries. As you can see from the previous list, I'm a fan and have even binge-read complete series of novels written in this style, many of their US authors like me fascinated with the genre. Dame Agatha probably had no inkling about how the movement she started with her tales about sleuths solving crimes would become so popular. She even motivated my "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series in two ways: first, by my writing so many British-style crime stories; and second, by teaming up a younger and more agile Miss Marple-like character (Esther Brookstone) with an equally cerebral crime fighter like Hercule Poirot (Bastiann van Coevorden) to create a twenty-first crimefighting duo to be reckoned with.

Readers invariably ask, so I'll answer the question here: Although I like all of them, my favorite characters in all the tales here (most can be classified as novellas, making this the longest of the three volumes) are the London residents DS Maggie Bent and Declan O'Hara from "Poetic Justice" (I liked them so much they have an encore in my novel *Intolerance*, #7 in the "Esther Brookstone" series) and the Morpeth trio of DI Matthew Lawrence, DS Ellie Jones, and DS Steve Kirkland (three of their cases appear here, including Ellie's introduction to Morpeth policing). In both Declan and Ellie's cases, I might annoy some Brits by pointing out their occasional distaste for ethnic diversity. We should all learn to appreciate what people of different backgrounds can add to our societies. Of course, many in the US do exactly the opposite as well, maybe even more so (a certain ex-president, for example).

Old characters appear here too: Esther Brookstone in "Poetic Justice" and Hal Leonard in "Arms Control" (he appeared in the "Esther Brookstone" series as well as the "Chen and Castilblanco" series, most notably in *Angels Need Not Apply*). That's a nod to them they deserve, and I make no apologies for inviting them to participate in more stories here (even Jeremy Brand, Esther's old handler in Cold War Berlin, has a cameo!). It might sound a bit schizoid, but my characters are old friends who deserve my loyalty.

Other new characters here might receive encores in future novels (like Maggie and Declan). I can never say one story ingredient dominates in my fiction—plot, characterization, dialogue, and so forth—but I think the characters here are some of my best and deserve more story time.

For the dialogue, I'm not quite sure I've mastered the British vernacular—the dialects across the UK are as varied as those anywhere—but there's a lot more direct dialogue in these pages than indirect. (That's less true of my novels, of course, whose length allows characters to be a bit more introspective.) And, probably like any Yank that reads these stories, I was constantly referring to the glossary at the beginning. Shaw once said that America and England are two countries separated by a common language, but that was only partially correct. England itself is separated into various regions separated by different dialects! One could write a whole book about those, I'm sure, but I hope it would be much more boring than these stories!

To finish these notes, I want to thank first of all the authors indicated in the list above who have provided me so many hours of fine entertainment, especially during the Covid pandemic. I also want to thank all my readers who have perused my stories, whoever they are and wherever they might be in this wide world. And most of all, I want to thank my wife who's been a cheerleader and confidant all these years I've been writing. I often say my muses are really banshees with Tasers always on my case to write more fiction, but my true muse is my sweet wife who nobly puts up with this crazy author.

Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ, 2022

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 released five short fiction collections. He has an active blog where he posts opinions about reading, writing, and the publishing business of interest to readers and authors alike.

Steve 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..